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PRE-UNIVERSITY TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS ON PLAY-BASED PEDAGOGY IN THE CLASSROOM

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Abstract

The purpose of the study was to identify the pre-university teachers' perceptions on play-based pedagogy in the classroom context. Six pre-university teachers from a local college participated in a qualitative study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect the data. The data was further analysed using thematic analysis. Our results show that pre-university teachers have incorporated play-based pedagogy into their teaching to a certain extent. The emergence of positive emotions such as motivation, engagement, collaboration, enjoyment, fun, and happiness was the reason why teachers viewed playing as important for learning. On the other hand, students' feedback, relevance and effectiveness of play-based pedagogy were three of the main concerns raised by the teachers. A reference guideline such as module which comprises the types of playful techniques, recommendations, and case study reports was deemed necessary by the teachers in order to improve the implementation of play-based pedagogy. The implications of the findings for the use of play-based pedagogy in higher educational practice are discussed.

Keywords: Play-based pedagogy, playful learning, play in higher education, play-based learning

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INTRODUCTION

Play-based learning is usually associated with early-childhood education. In early-childhood education, play-based learning or learning through play is associated with whole-child educational approach that promotes curiosity, self-efficacy, innovation, motivation and cognitive skills¹⁹. In spite of its numerous positive advantages, there are limited empirical studies or research about play-based learning in adult or higher education learning. Most of the scientific literatures emphasized the importance of play for children. The growth rate of adult playful learning literature is always lagged behind²³. As George Bernard Shaw once said: “*We don’t stop playing because we grow old; we grow old because we stop playing.*”, The importance of play shall not be underestimated as it is vital for creativity, relationship-building, and problem solving²⁴.

According to Malaysian higher education blueprint 2015-2025, college graduates are expected to possess the 21st century skills in order to increase their employability¹⁷. Previous research examining the learning approaches of Malaysian students revealed that Malaysian students were not acquainted with deep or intrinsic learning approaches as they prefer superficial rote learning to pass the examinations²⁸. Most colleges in Malaysia place heavy emphasis on formal evaluations whereby students have to cope with in-class tests and public examinations such as A-level examination and Sijil Tinggi Persekolahan Malaysia (STPM) examination, which tend to promote superficial learning²⁵. Norgard, Whitton, and Toft-Nielsen¹⁸ raised the concern that such instrumental linear learning progression might eventually create a culture in higher education characterized by fear of failure, avoidance of risk-taking, focus on outcomes, extrinsic motivation, and goal-oriented behaviour.

Not limited to only Malaysia, the needs to revise the traditional teaching pedagogies have been a mainstream topic in the field of higher education globally⁹. Sander et al studied first-year university undergraduates to investigate university students’ expectations of teaching. It was revealed that the majority of the students did not want formal lectures and did not hope for formal lectures to be conducted²². In other words, students in the present day prefer to be engaged and included as part of the learning process. However, most of the teachers still employ traditional teaching methods as their primary teaching method.

In the few investigations of play-based learning in higher education, Melamed summarised the relationship between playfulness and learning as relational, experiential, metaphoric, integrative, and empowering. Melamed posited that women with playful attitudes are better learners as they displayed the five qualities mentioned above¹⁶. In his study to explore play and learning in the adult and higher education classroom, Tanis reported play fosters positive affect in the classroom and encourages students to attempt and take risks. In addition, Tanis’s findings also revealed that there was an increase in engagement and understanding if the instruction was conducted in a playful and ludic environment²³. Whitton highlighted the positive construction of failure, support for learners, and the development of intrinsic motivation as the pedagogic rationale to embrace playful approaches in teaching and learning in higher education^{26, 27}. Patrick Bateson asserted that the primary benefits from play are the pleasure and fun that a playful play can provide².

Based on the findings presented in the previous paragraph, it is evident that play-based learning can be beneficial to students learning. Judson summarized 6 reasons to play in higher

education. In her elucidation, play-based learning aids brain development, improves remembering power, enhances abstract thinking, assists content mastery, supports brain health, and fuels creativity. In addition, Judson also suggested 6 ways to play in higher education. She advised the facilitator of the classroom to be a story-teller, be humorous, be actively engaging in simulation, be courage to play with mental images and analogies, be open to consider the many-sided possibilities to introduce a topic, as well as to engage in role-play or perspective-taking play¹⁴.

Despite many advantages that follow, play does not receive the level of acceptance as it is supposed to, especially in the field of higher education. To cope with the increasingly more structured syllabus that requires the reproduction of an expected outcome, drill practice is the dominant teaching method in higher education¹³. As the students become older, the proportion of time spent playing in the formal education has been lessened. When the class is no longer fun and attractive, numerous disadvantages ensued. For example, excessive highlight of academic excellence may leave the students in the endless cycle of drill practicing and doing repertoire repetitive exercises without seeing the connection to the real world. This incapability to connect knowledge to real world event could disinterest students in terms of their learning motivation and level of enjoyment. Such phenomenon is more omnipresent in the higher education, especially at pre-university level, where students' grades become one of the most important attributes which their future universities will use to assess the students' potential abilities.

Play-based pedagogy is an understudied teaching pedagogy, especially in the higher education. This study aims to investigate college teachers' perceptions of play-based pedagogy for learning and teaching. It is important to understand teachers' perceptions because teachers play a crucial role in choosing and implementing teaching pedagogies for their students. Based on the review, the study shall provide us a better understanding of teachers' concerns to embrace play-based pedagogy in their practices.

In the present study, we focus on the perceptions of teachers on play-based pedagogy in the classroom context. Teachers' perception on pedagogy refer to the thoughts teachers have about the teaching pedagogy, which are determined by their background knowledge and life experiences¹². It is important to understand teachers' perception because it has a direct association with teachers' approaches to teaching⁷.

Before the interview, we did not define play-based pedagogy for the teachers, as we were interested to understand teachers' definitions of play and wanted to see if they had implemented such play-based pedagogy in their practice. The following research questions guided our study: 1) What is the teachers' understanding of the role of play in the classroom context? 2) What are the teachers' perceptions on play-based pedagogy as an appropriate practice in their classroom and what factors influence those perceptions? 3) What supports will enable educators to implement play-based pedagogy more fully as an appropriate practice?

METHODOLOGY

Pre-university teachers' views on play-based pedagogy were explored through semi-structured interviews in this study. Semi-structured interview is useful to obtain detailed information about perceptions and opinions for a small scale research⁸. In addition, it allows room for a discussion with the interviewee rather than a straightforward question and answer format¹.

A group of 6 pre-university teachers from a private college in Johor Bahru, Johor, Malaysia were interviewed. These teachers are teaching various pre-university programs such as Cambridge International A-levels examination (A-level), Australian Matriculation program (AUSMAT) and Monash University Foundation Year Program (MUFY). Convenience sampling was employed to select teachers who would be willing to participate in this study.

At the beginning, the researcher prepared the interview questions based on the research questions. Then, field experts examined the interview questions and provided feedback, their recommendations were considered. After that, the researcher conducted a try-out. Then, the interview questions were adjusted and the final version of the interview questions were created. Prior to the interview, the researcher explained the purposes of the research to the participants. All participants were asked to sign a personal permission form before the interview. The interviews were conducted in the available classroom at the college. Each interview had the approximated length of 12 minutes.

After the interviews, the researcher transferred the audio-recorded interviews to the computer from digital sound recorder and transcribed the recordings. To ensure anonymity, researcher assigned code names to each participant's recording. To ensure validity and reliability of the data gathered, we asked the participants to provide feedback and confirm the accuracy and completeness of the transcripts. Analyses were conducted using thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke provided a six steps comprehensive thematic analysis guideline, which comprises: 1) familiarizing with the data; 2) generating initial codes; 3) searching for themes; 4) reviewing themes; 5) defining and naming themes; 6) producing the report⁴. To increase the dependability of our findings, themes were examined by field experts, before they were later revised during the report producing stage.

RESULTS & FINDINGS

The findings of this study were based on the research questions. Based on our findings, we observed three emerging themes from this data: Reasons for playing in terms of importance of learning; teachers' concerns towards play-based pedagogy and learning resources for educators.

Reasons for playing in terms of importance of learning

Based on our findings, teachers understand play in the classroom as activities that will induce the feeling of fun, happiness, engagement, and enjoyment. Our results infer that play-based pedagogy has the potential to train the teachers to be effective teachers with great enthusiasm. Teacher enthusiasm is considered as one of the most crucial characteristics of effective teachers. As defined by Qin Zhang, an enthusiastic teacher engages students to participate, sparks the curiosity of students with excitement and enjoyment²⁹.

When the participants were asked to explain the meaning of play in the classroom context, all participants related play to the activities which they conducted in classes. In participant A's remark "...play to me in classroom means I will probably conduct a game or any sort of activity to make the class more fun and lively..." Participants D and F stressed on the importance of enjoyment while playing. To them, play induces further positive emotions such as engagement, fun, and happiness. In general, this group of teachers expressed the same understanding of play as Tanis claimed in his research that play encourages higher level of engagement and better understanding²³.

The participants stated the reasons for incorporating play in terms of importance for learning based on their experiences with the students. Participant E, who used mobile devices and kite-making as the playful tools, he reported

"...play should be associated with young adults but not just children because the expectations of students nowadays are very different. Students tend to learn better when they actually have fun and traditional method simply does not work as efficient as last time..."

In addition, teachers also mentioned that they observed higher students' engagement after play-based pedagogy had been introduced. As participant B outlined "...actually they feel more interested when they are playing the games, they actually would demand, ask for more games like these...". On top of that, participant D also added "...we can find there is a higher level of enjoyment when they requested to have another game again...".

Participant D, who used mobile applications to conduct game, noted the emergence of extrinsic motivation which he stated "...they (the students) will be motivated but with the rewards...". However, none of the other interviewees mentioned the use of rewards as the incentives given to the students upon completion of the playful activities.

Our findings also show that teachers have already begun the implementation of play-based pedagogy in their classes to a certain extent. This was due to the teachers' involvements in college-wide program such as Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) and iPad pilot projects. As reported by teacher E "...I have started experimenting a few other methods mainly being the committee member of the Bring Your Own Device...". Overall, teachers expressed high level of acceptance towards play-based pedagogy as this teaching method promotes students' active engagement and participation. Role-play, game-play, object-play, and storytelling were among some of the different playful techniques which teachers reported that they had used in their classes.

Teachers' concerns towards play-based pedagogy

Based on the responses collected, teachers pointed out that students' feedback, relevance and effectiveness of play-based pedagogy were the major hindrances to the implementation of play-based pedagogy in their classes.

Free-riders, or students who showed little to no interest to play-based learning is one of the issues which the teachers reported as a challenge during the implementation of play-based pedagogy. Free-riders who hardly participated the play-based learning and the lack of interests shown by the students could demotivate the teachers to employ play-based pedagogy again in

their future lessons. As pointed out by Han & Yin, teachers' motivation is highly related to students' responses and teaching effectiveness¹⁰. Such negative view presented by the students may inhibit the further implementation of play-based pedagogy in their future classes. Participant D attributed the cause of apathy towards play-based learning to students' past experiences or students' non-competitive characteristics.

In addition, our results also show that teachers who were teaching A-level program were more conservative on the implementation of play-based pedagogy as compared to teachers who were teaching Monash Foundation Year Program (MUFY). A-level program is a 100% external examination-based program, whereas MUFY is an internal and external examination-based program. It is not surprising that direct instructional teaching method is the preferred teaching method for an exam-oriented program. As exam questions solving and rote learning are considered as the more relevant learning methods in order to finish the syllabus and pass the exams^{3, 21}.

As participant A mentioned "*...my A-level students, they are exam oriented..., so some students who really want to study only, they don't prefer play..., For another program MUFY, since their syllabus is designed in such a way, so for that program I have no issue.*"

Participant C also shared a similar opinion as participant A, which she reported "*...it is difficult to conduct play-based learning for an A-level class.*" Participant F indicated that timing to implement play-based pedagogy should be carefully considered as A-level students' grades are highly dependent on the external examinations that they would be sitting. Participant E raised his concern on the frequency of play-based pedagogy should be used in view of the length of the syllabus that is to be covered.

On the other hand, play in adulthood is often associated to unproductivity and waste of productive time^{5, 11, 20}. Our data also revealed that a few teachers viewed play in adulthood as ineffective teaching and learning methods. In particular, they expressed the concerns over how to link the play components to the program syllabus, especially when there is only limited time to cover the syllabus.

Participant C, who had tried role-play with her students, expressed her concern over the effectiveness of play-based pedagogy. In her words, she said "*...I actually think it is not very effective, because the students focus on having fun only, they didn't actually achieve learning. They simply imitated what we (teacher) had done in front of them in the past during role-play.*"

Participant F asserted that one of the challenges to implement play-based pedagogy is how to associate the play components to the syllabus. He further stressed that the teachers should not forget what the students were supposed to learn while the students were happily enjoying the play activities.

Four out of the six participants mentioned that they would consider switch their teaching style to traditional teaching method if they received discouraging feedback from the students after the implementation of play-based pedagogy. Participants E, and F, however, discussed their approaches to minimize the negative feeling expressed by the students because of the implementation of play-based pedagogy. Participant F added "*...even though there is only a*

minority group of students who didn't show interests at play. But the students may affect another student, so we need to handle that group of students properly..."

Learning resources for educators

All of teachers claimed that a reference guideline such as module which documents the examples of effective play-based activities and case study reports would be a useful support for their future implementation of play-based pedagogy in their classes. The advantages of using modules in teaching have been outlined by Choo and Marina. They claimed that the content, objectives, and skills are clearly outlined in the teaching module, therefore teachers could focus on organizing, inspiring, and encouraging students to partake the learning activities. As a result, effective teaching can be achieved ⁶.

Participant E suggested the compilation of play-based activities for the purposes of future reference. On top of that, he added that the advantages and limitations of the compiled activities shall also be added as case studies. As a result, such reference will be more useful for the readers as it provides different play-based pedagogies that may fit into different scenarios. Participants A, D and F also agreed that a properly documented module with specific scenario descriptions is helpful to implement play-based pedagogy across different subjects and different programs. Specifically, as participant A mentioned "...if it (*the reference module*) is well documented, it will be easier for us to share across the programs and across the subjects."

In addition to a reference module, participant C also wanted to have demonstration lessons of play-based pedagogy related teaching approaches. Participant B wished the reference module can be in electronic version, to allow easier searching and referencing.

CONCLUSION

This research has several limitations. First, the number of teachers participated in the current study was small and they were all from the same pre-university department. Second, convenience sampling method was employed in this study. In a future investigation, the college teachers across different departments such as pre-university, diploma, and degree shall be interviewed in order to understand their perceptions towards the play-based pedagogy. In addition, to increase the generalization of our result, we shall increase the number of interviewed participants ¹⁵.

In conclusion, while our study has shown that pre-university teachers have started to incorporate play-based pedagogy in their teaching, it also reflected the challenges that teachers were facing due to insufficient supports and resources. Based on these reasons, future research shall focus on providing a module that comprises the documentation of play-based pedagogy activities as well as case study reports. Teachers can use the reference module as a reference guide or as a search for reinforcement activities that fits into the purpose of their teaching, to achieve the objective of play-based learning, to immerse the students in the elements of fun, enjoyment, active engagement, and to mitigate the fear of failure.

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