AB Journals

British Journal of Contemporary Education

ISSN 2997-3198 • Volume 6, Issue 3, 2026 • pp. 1–18

RESEARCH ARTICLE Received: 6 Aug 2026, Accepted: 14 Sep 2026, Published: 2 Nov 2026

Enhancing Communicative Competence in English through Play-Based Language Activities: Implications for English Language Teaching in Basic Schools

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Abstract

This study examined the extent to which play-based language activities improve learners' communicative competence in English and explored teachers' and learners' perceptions of their contribution to English language learning in basic schools. The study adopted an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design guided by the pragmatist paradigm. The quantitative phase employed a one-group pre-test–post-test quasi-experimental design involving 45 Basic Seven learners selected through census sampling. The qualitative phase involved semi-structured interviews with two English language teachers and 10 purposively selected learners. Data were collected through a communicative competence achievement test and interview guides. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics and paired-samples t-test, while qualitative data were analysed thematically. The findings revealed that participation in play-based language activities improved learners' communicative competence in English. Teachers and learners perceived the activities as enhancing vocabulary development, oral communication, pronunciation, confidence, classroom participation, collaboration, and motivation to use English in authentic communicative situations. The study concludes that play-based language activities are a valuable pedagogical approach for developing communicative competence in English. It recommends that English language teachers integrate structured play-based activities into classroom instruction and that teacher education programmes strengthen teachers' capacity to implement play-based pedagogies effectively.

Keywords: Basic Schools; Communicative Competence in English; English Language Teaching; Learner-Centred Pedagogy; Mixed Methods; Play-Based Language Activities

How to Cite: Addae, A. (2026). Enhancing Communicative Competence in English through Play-Based Language Activities: Implications for English Language Teaching in Basic Schools. British Journal of Contemporary Education, 6(3), 1–18. https://doi.org/10.52589/BJCE-NKNCAX

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INTRODUCTION

English has become one of the most widely used international languages and serves as a major medium for education, science, technology, commerce, diplomacy, and global communication (Richards, 2022; UNESCO, 2023). Consequently, proficiency in English has become essential for academic achievement, professional development, and lifelong learning. In Ghana, English serves as the official language and the principal medium of instruction from the upper primary level through tertiary education. Since most subjects are taught through English, learners' ability to understand and use the language effectively has a direct influence on their academic performance across the curriculum (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2018; National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NaCCA], 2020). This recognition informed the development of Ghana's Standards-Based Curriculum, which emphasises the acquisition of competencies that enable learners to communicate effectively, think critically, collaborate, and apply knowledge in real-life situations (NaCCA, 2020). This suggests that one of the major goals of English language teaching is the development of communicative competence. Communicative competence refers to an individual's ability to use language accurately, appropriately, and effectively in different social and cultural contexts. Hymes (1972) introduced the concept to emphasise that language learning extends beyond grammatical knowledge to include the ability to use language meaningfully in real situations. Canale and Swain (1980) further explained communicative competence as comprising grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence. More recent perspectives have also highlighted that effective communication involves interactional skills, negotiation of meaning, and the ability to use language confidently in social contexts (Kong, 2024; Kumaran, 2017; Sitanggang et al., 2023). Therefore, English language instruction should not only focus on vocabulary and grammatical rules but also provide learners with opportunities to practise speaking, listening, and interaction with others.

The importance of communicative competence is reflected in Ghana's Standards-Based Curriculum, which promotes communication as one of the key competencies learners are expected to develop. The curriculum encourages teachers to adopt learner-centred approaches that involve active participation, collaboration, creativity, and problem-solving rather than relying solely on teacher explanations and memorisation (NaCCA, 2020). Through such approaches, learners are expected to become active users of English who can express ideas, participate in discussions, and communicate effectively in different situations. However, achieving this goal remains a challenge in many basic school classrooms where English language teaching is often dominated by traditional approaches that emphasise written exercises, grammar instruction, and examination preparation (Tekyi-Arhin, 2023). Such practices may provide limited opportunities for learners to engage in authentic communication and develop confidence in using English orally (MoE, 2018). The limited opportunities for meaningful language interaction suggest the need for instructional strategies that create engaging environments where learners can practise and apply English in practical contexts. Effective language learning requires learners to actively participate, interact with peers, and use language for purposeful communication (Kong, 2024; Sitanggang et al., 2023). Approaches that encourage collaboration and social interaction are particularly important because language develops through meaningful engagement with others. Therefore, there is a need to explore teaching approaches that move beyond conventional methods and provide learners with enjoyable and interactive experiences that support communication development.

One approach that has gained recognition for promoting active participation and language development is play-based learning. Play-based learning refers to instructional activities where learners acquire knowledge and skills through purposeful play experiences such as games, storytelling, role-play, songs, drama, simulations, and collaborative tasks (Parker & Berry, 2022; Tekyi-Arhin, 2023). Although play is often associated with enjoyment and recreation, research has shown that guided play can support important educational outcomes when activities are intentionally designed to achieve specific learning objectives (Kong, 2024; Sosthene et al., 2024; Weisberg et al., 2016; Zosh et al., 2018). Through play-based activities, learners are provided with opportunities to explore ideas, express themselves, negotiate meaning, collaborate with peers, and develop confidence in communication. Studies have demonstrated that play-based learning contributes positively to language development. Pyle and Danniels (2017) reported that play-based pedagogy provides opportunities for learners to develop communication skills, social interaction, and problem-solving abilities when teachers provide appropriate guidance. Similarly, Weisberg et al. (2016) established that guided play combines learner interest with educational goals, allowing learners to develop knowledge and skills through active engagement. Zosh et al. (2018) further explained that learning through play supports creativity, collaboration, motivation, and deeper understanding because learners are actively involved in the learning process. These findings suggest that play-based language activities provide an effective means of enhancing learners' communicative competence in English. The relevance of play-based language activities is consistent with the expectations of Ghana's Standards-Based Curriculum, which advocates learner-centred and experiential approaches to teaching and learning (NaCCA, 2020). By incorporating activities such as role-play, language games, storytelling, and group interactions, teachers can create classroom environments where learners practise English naturally and confidently. Such activities may be particularly useful in basic schools, where learners require frequent opportunities to communicate, experiment with language, and learn through interaction. Despite the potential benefits of play-based learning, limited empirical attention has been given to its role in improving communicative competence among learners in Ghanaian basic schools. Existing studies on English language teaching in Ghana (Agbevivi & Adogpa, 2022; Agbevivi, 2022; Badu et al., 2022). have largely focused on areas such as reading comprehension, vocabulary development, writing skills, and general instructional practices, with less emphasis on how play-based language activities influence learners' ability to communicate effectively. This creates a contextual gap that requires further investigation, particularly within the basic school setting where foundational language skills are developed. Therefore, this study seeks to examine the implications of play-based language activities for the development of communicative competence among learners in basic schools. The study aims to provide evidence on how structured play activities can support learners' speaking, listening, confidence, collaboration, and effective use of English. The findings may contribute to improving English language teaching practices in Ghana by providing teachers with practical strategies that align with the learner-centred principles of the Standards-Based Curriculum.

Statement of the Problem

The development of communicative competence is one of the principal goals of English language education because learners require effective communication skills for academic success and lifelong learning (Richards, 2022; UNESCO, 2023). Ghana's Standards-Based Curriculum similarly identifies communication as one of the core competencies expected of all learners (NaCCA, 2020). Despite these expectations, many learners in Ghanaian basic schools continue to experience difficulties communicating effectively in English. Reports by the West African Examinations Council consistently indicate weaknesses in learners' oral

expression, vocabulary development, comprehension, and written communication. These persistent challenges suggest that many learners are not acquiring the communicative competence envisaged by the curriculum.

Research indicates that teacher-centred instructional approaches continue to dominate many English language classrooms, thereby limiting learners' opportunities to engage in authentic communication (Kong, 2024; Sosthene et al., 2024; Richards, 2022; UNESCO, 2023). Conversely, studies have demonstrated that play-based language activities including educational games, storytelling, role-play, songs, dramatization, and collaborative tasks significantly improve learners' communication skills, motivation, confidence, and classroom participation (Pyle et al., 2020; Parker & Thomsen, 2021; Howard et al., 2022; Zosh et al., 2022). However, while the value of play-based learning has been widely discussed in international literature, limited attention has been given to its application within the Ghanaian basic school curriculum context. Existing Ghanaian curriculum documents emphasise learner-centred and activity-based approaches, but there remains a need for more empirical evidence on how play-based language activities can support the development of communicative competence among basic school learners (MoE, 2018; NaCCA, 2020; Tekyi-Arhin, 2023).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the extent to which play-based language activities enhance communicative competence in English and to explore teachers' and learners' perceptions of their contribution to the development of communicative competence in English. The study also discusses the implications of the findings for effective English language teaching in basic schools.

Research Questions

The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. To what extent do play-based language activities improve learners' communicative competence in English?
2. How do learners and teachers perceive the contribution of play-based language activities to the development of communicative competence in English?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored on Social Constructivism that explains how learners acquire language and develop communicative competence through active participation and meaningful social interaction. Social constructivism argues that learning is fundamentally a social process in which learners construct knowledge through interaction with teachers, peers, and their learning environment rather than receiving knowledge passively (Vygotsky, 1978). According to the theory, meaningful learning occurs when learners actively engage in collaborative activities, communicate with others, solve problems collectively, and receive appropriate guidance from more knowledgeable individuals. In English language teaching, social interaction is considered an essential mechanism for language acquisition because learners develop communication skills through authentic interaction with others. Mercer and Howe (2012) argued that classroom dialogue enables learners to co-construct knowledge while developing reasoning and communication skills. Likewise, Lantolf et al. (2020) explained that sociocultural interaction promotes language development by allowing learners to negotiate meaning, receive feedback,

and internalize linguistic structures through collaborative learning experiences. Play-based language activities strongly reflect the principles of Social Constructivist Theory because they provide learners with opportunities to communicate, negotiate meaning, solve problems, and collaborate during learning. Activities such as role-play, storytelling, language games, dramatization, simulations, debates, and group discussions encourage learners to construct language knowledge through interaction rather than memorisation (Pyle et al., 2020). Howard et al. (2022) similarly observed that guided play encourages learners to communicate confidently, exchange ideas, and develop higher-order thinking skills while interacting with peers. Recent empirical evidence continues to support Vygotsky's theoretical assumptions. For example, Zosh et al. (2022) found that guided play significantly improves learners' communication, collaboration, creativity, and critical thinking because learners actively participate in meaningful learning experiences. Likewise, Parker and Thomsen (2021) concluded that playful learning environments encourage sustained learner engagement, enhance language interaction, and improve communicative competence through authentic classroom experiences. Within the Ghanaian educational context, the Social Constructivist Theory aligns closely with the philosophy of the Standards-Based Curriculum, which emphasizes learner-centred instruction, collaboration, communication, creativity, and critical thinking (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NaCCA], 2020). The curriculum expects teachers to organise learning experiences that actively involve learners in constructing knowledge through participation rather than relying solely on teacher-centred instruction. Therefore, the use of play-based language activities provides an appropriate instructional approach for implementing the curriculum while promoting communicative competence among learners. The Social Constructivist Theory is therefore highly relevant to this study because it explains how play-based language activities facilitate English language learning through interaction, collaboration, and guided participation. It provides a theoretical explanation for why learners develop stronger communicative competence when they actively engage in meaningful communication with teachers and peers.

Communicative Competence

Communicative competence refers to the ability of a language user to employ language appropriately and effectively in different social and communicative situations. It goes beyond knowledge of vocabulary and grammatical rules to include the ability to express ideas clearly, understand others, respond appropriately, maintain conversations, and adjust language according to the context and purpose of communication. Lomotey (2021: 99-100) argues that while grammar and vocabulary are important, they are insufficient. Effective communication requires 'knowing what to say, how to say it, and how to avoid misunderstanding, considering the topic, context, and participants'. In the Ghanaian educational context, communicative competence is particularly important because learners operate within multilingual environments where English interacts with several Ghanaian languages. Consequently, effective English language teaching requires learners to have opportunities to use language meaningfully rather than merely memorising grammatical rules. Recent Ghanaian research indicates that communicative competence is closely associated with learners' opportunities to participate actively in communicative classroom activities. Wasila and Owusu (2024), for example, examined the communicative competence of pre-service teachers at Tumu College of Education through group oral presentations. Their study demonstrates the importance of participatory activities in providing learners with opportunities to practise oral communication, express ideas, interact with others, and develop confidence in using English. In Ghanaian classrooms, the development of communicative competence is also influenced by the extent to which teachers employ learner-centred approaches. Kpeglo (2024) examined teachers'

perceptions of communicative language teaching in Ghana and highlighted the importance of instructional practices that provide learners with opportunities to use English for meaningful communication. This is particularly relevant because learners may possess knowledge of grammatical structures without necessarily being able to use the language appropriately in real-life communicative situations. Thus, English language instruction needs to provide opportunities for learners to speak, listen, interact, negotiate meaning, and respond to authentic communicative situations. The multilingual nature of Ghana further makes communicative competence an important concern in language education. Ghanaian learners often move between English and one or more Ghanaian languages in their everyday interactions. Omane et al. (2023), in their study of language pedagogy in Ghana, emphasised the importance of innovative approaches that promote language learning while recognising Ghana's linguistic diversity. Their findings suggest that classroom practices should create environments in which learners are actively engaged with language and encouraged to participate rather than simply receive information from teachers. Communicative competence also involves confidence and willingness to participate in interaction. Learners may understand what they want to communicate but remain reluctant to speak because of fear of making mistakes, limited vocabulary, or anxiety about peer evaluation. Participatory activities can reduce these barriers by creating opportunities for learners to practise language in supportive environments. The group oral presentation approach examined by Wasila and Owusu (2024) is relevant in this regard because learners have opportunities to work with peers and practise expressing ideas before communicating them publicly. The development of communicative competence is therefore not limited to formal oral English lessons. It can be promoted through classroom activities that require learners to cooperate, negotiate meaning, listen to one another, ask and answer questions, and use language for authentic purposes. This has important implications for basic school education in Ghana because learners need English not only to pass examinations but also to participate effectively in classroom discussions, social interactions, future employment, and wider society.

Play-Based Language Activities

Play-based language activities refer to instructional activities in which learners develop language knowledge and skills through purposeful, enjoyable, interactive, and developmentally appropriate play (Tekyi-Arhin, 2023; Yee et al., 2022). Such activities may include language games, songs, role play, storytelling, puzzles, matching activities, word games, dramatic play, and other forms of structured or guided play (Tekyi-Arhin, 2023). Kong (2024) indicates that rather than treating play as separate from learning, play-based approaches integrate educational objectives into activities that encourage learners to interact, explore, communicate, and solve problems.

The relevance of play-based learning has received increasing attention in Ghanaian education. Omane et al. (2023) investigated play-based pedagogy within the Ghanaian language context and found that play-based pedagogy has potential for enhancing language-learning outcomes. Their study, which involved 300 participants and used observations, focus group discussions, and interviews, concluded that play-based pedagogy can contribute to an engaging language-learning environment while supporting linguistic diversity and learners' interest in language learning.

Adams et al. (2024) similarly reviewed play-based pedagogy in Ghanaian basic schools and reported that play-based approaches have important implications for teaching and learning. Their review situates play-based pedagogy within the Ghanaian educational environment and

highlights its potential to support learner engagement and holistic development. The study is particularly relevant because it demonstrates that play-based learning is increasingly being considered within Ghanaian basic education rather than being viewed solely as an approach applicable to early childhood settings. Play-based language activities can provide learners with opportunities to use language naturally. For example, a language game may require learners to ask questions, describe objects, explain answers, follow instructions, or interact with classmates. Similarly, role play can place learners in simulated real-life situations in which they must use language to achieve a particular communicative purpose. Such activities can therefore create a connection between language knowledge and actual language use. This connection is important for communicative competence because learners need repeated opportunities to use language in meaningful contexts.

Evidence from Ghana also provides support for the broader educational value of play-based approaches. A 2024 evaluation of Right to Play's Enhancing Quality Early Education project reported substantial improvements in early literacy in participating Ghanaian schools, with early literacy scores increasing from 29% at baseline to 66% at endline. The reported gains included children's abilities to identify letters and sounds and understand aspects of writing mechanics. The project was implemented in collaboration with Ghana's Ministry of Education, Sabre Education, and Innovations for Poverty Action across the Volta, Greater Accra, and Northern regions.

The Ghanaian evidence further suggests that play-based approaches can influence not only learners but also teachers. The 2024 Building Teachers' Capacity to Enhance Early Learning Through Play-Based Approaches in Ghana and Sierra Leone report examined approaches to strengthening teachers' professional development in play-based pedagogy in collaboration with Ghana Education Service's Early Learning Division. This indicates that successful implementation of play-based language activities requires teachers to understand how to design and facilitate activities that combine enjoyment with clearly defined learning objectives. Play-based language activities can also provide a supportive environment for learners who are reluctant to participate in conventional language lessons. Games and collaborative activities can reduce the formality of classroom interaction and encourage learners to communicate with peers. In this environment, learners can practise vocabulary, sentence construction, pronunciation, listening, and oral expression repeatedly without the interaction feeling like a conventional test. This makes play particularly useful where the instructional objective is to increase learners' opportunities to use language.

Empirical Review

Empirical evidence suggests that play-based language activities can support the development of learners' communicative competence by creating opportunities for interaction, language practice, collaboration, and self-expression. In Ghana, Omane et al. (2023) examined play-based and inquiry-based pedagogy within the Ghanaian language context. The study found that play-based pedagogy promoted learner engagement and created a more interactive environment for language learning. The findings suggest that play can provide learners with opportunities to use language meaningfully rather than simply memorising language structures. Similarly, Adams et al. (2024) reviewed play-based pedagogy in Ghanaian basic schools and reported that play-based learning supports communication, collaboration, creativity, and social interaction. These outcomes are relevant to communicative competence because learners develop communication skills through interaction with peers and participation in shared activities. However, the study was a literature review and did not directly measure changes in

learners' communicative competence. Evidence from the Partners in Play (P3) project in Ghana also demonstrates the potential of play-based approaches to promote active participation and interaction among learners. The project emphasises experiential and participatory learning in which learners engage with peers through educational games and activities. Such interaction provides opportunities for learners to practise listening, speaking, turn-taking, responding, and expressing ideas. The reviewed studies indicate that play-based language activities can contribute to communicative competence by increasing learners' opportunities to speak, listen, interact, collaborate, express ideas, and use vocabulary in meaningful situations. However, existing Ghanaian studies have largely examined play-based pedagogy in general rather than specifically measuring its effect on communicative competence among basic-school learners. This gap provides justification for the present study, which focuses specifically on the contribution of play-based language activities to the development of communicative competence.

METHODOLOGY

This study was underpinned by the pragmatism research paradigm, which supports the selection of research methods that best address the research problem (Biesta, 2022; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Morgan, 2022). Pragmatism was considered appropriate because the study sought to determine the effectiveness of play-based language activities in enhancing learners' communicative competence while also exploring teachers' and learners' experiences of the intervention. Guided by the pragmatist paradigm, the study adopted a mixed-methods research approach, specifically an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The quantitative phase involved the administration of pre-tests and post-tests to determine the effectiveness of play-based language activities in improving learners' communicative competence. The qualitative phase followed the intervention and post-test to explore teachers' and learners' experiences, perceived contributions, benefits, and challenges associated with the use of play-based language activities, thereby providing explanations for the quantitative findings during interpretation. The integration of the two datasets enhanced the comprehensiveness and credibility of the findings (Johnson et al., 2020; Tashakkori et al., 2021). The quantitative phase employed a one-group pre-test–post-test quasi-experimental design to assess learners' communicative competence before and after the implementation of the intervention (Ary et al., 2019; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The qualitative phase involved semi-structured interviews with English language teachers and selected learners to explore their experiences of using play-based language activities during English lessons. The target population comprised all English language teachers and learners of Winneba Methodist "B" Basic School. However, the accessible population consisted of two (2) English language teachers and all 45 Basic Seven learners, as this was the class in which the intervention was implemented. A combination of purposive and census sampling techniques was employed. The school was selected purposively because preliminary classroom observations and discussions with the English language teachers revealed learners' difficulties in oral expression, vocabulary use, and confidence during classroom interactions. The two English language teachers were purposively selected because of their direct involvement in teaching English and their familiarity with the learners' language needs. All 45 Basic Seven learners participated in the quantitative phase through the administration of the communicative competence achievement test and learners' questionnaire, thereby ensuring complete participation and minimising sampling bias. For the qualitative phase, 10 learners were purposively selected to participate in the interviews. This sample size was considered adequate because thematic saturation is commonly achieved within six to twelve interviews (Guest et

al., 2006; Patton, 2022). Data were collected using a communicative competence achievement test and semi-structured interview guides for teachers and learners. The achievement test was administered before and after the intervention to assess learners' vocabulary development, sentence construction, oral communication, listening comprehension, reading comprehension, and functional use of English (Ary et al., 2019; Fraenkel et al., 2019). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the English language teachers and selected learners to explore their experiences, perceived contributions, benefits, and challenges associated with the use of play-based language activities. The validity of the instruments was established through expert review by specialists in English Language Education, who assessed their clarity, relevance, comprehensiveness, and alignment with the study objectives. Their recommendations were incorporated into the final versions of the instruments (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Fraenkel et al., 2019). A pilot study was conducted in a basic school with similar characteristics to refine the instruments and improve their suitability for the main study. The internal consistency of the learners' instruments was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, which yielded a reliability coefficient of 0.84, indicating good reliability (Taber, 2018). Standardised administration procedures, including uniform instructions, testing conditions, and scoring criteria, were maintained during the pre-test and post-test to enhance the reliability of the achievement test (McMillan & Schumacher, 2021). Ethical approval was obtained from the appropriate educational authorities, and permission was secured from the headteacher of the participating school. Informed consent was obtained from the teachers, while learner assent was obtained for all participating learners. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study, assured of voluntary participation and their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained through the use of pseudonyms and secure storage of the research data (BERA, 2024). Data collection began with the administration of the pre-test to establish learners' baseline communicative competence. This was followed by a four-week intervention during which learners engaged in structured play-based language activities, including educational games, storytelling, role-playing, dramatization, songs, vocabulary games, collaborative speaking tasks, and language simulations. At the end of the intervention, the post-test was administered. Subsequently, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the teachers and selected learners. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) and a paired-samples t-test to determine whether the difference between learners' pre-test and post-test scores was statistically significant (Field, 2020). Qualitative data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2022) six-step thematic analysis procedure. The quantitative and qualitative findings were initially analysed independently and subsequently integrated during interpretation by comparing and relating the results to provide a comprehensive explanation of the effectiveness of play-based language activities and participants' experiences of the intervention.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Research Question One: To what extent do play-based language activities improve learners' communicative competence in English?

To answer this research question, learners' communicative competence was measured before and after the implementation of play-based language activities. The intervention consisted of storytelling games, role-playing, language songs, vocabulary games, picture description, and collaborative language tasks conducted over four weeks.

Table 1: Comparison of Learners' Communicative Competence Before and After the Intervention

Test	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pre-test	40	48.62	8.74	17.69	39	<.001
Post-test	40	76.85	6.18			

Source: Field Work, (2026)

The results presented in Table 1 indicate a remarkable improvement in learners' communicative competence after the implementation of play-based language activities. Before the intervention, learners obtained a mean score of 48.62 with a standard deviation of 8.74, indicating relatively low communicative competence accompanied by considerable variation in learners' performance. Following the intervention, the mean score increased substantially to 76.85, while the standard deviation decreased to 6.18. The increase in the mean score demonstrates that learners developed stronger communicative competence after participating in play-based language activities. Likewise, the reduction in the standard deviation suggests that learners' performances became more consistent after the intervention, indicating that the activities benefited learners across different ability levels. The paired-samples t-test was conducted to determine whether there was a statistically significant difference in learners' communicative competence before and after the intervention. The results revealed a statistically significant difference between the pre-test and post-test scores, $t(39) = 17.69$, $p < .001$. Since the p-value is well below the conventional significance level of .05, the null hypothesis was rejected, indicating that learners' communicative competence improved significantly following the intervention. This finding suggests that the intervention was effective in enhancing learners' communicative competence and supports evidence that instructional approaches providing opportunities for active interaction, language practice, and meaningful communication facilitate the development of communicative competence.

The improvement observed may be attributed to the interactive nature of play-based instruction. During the intervention, learners actively participated in storytelling, language games, role-playing, vocabulary competitions, and collaborative speaking activities, which created authentic opportunities to practise English in meaningful contexts. These activities encouraged learners to communicate confidently while simultaneously improving their vocabulary, pronunciation, sentence construction, listening skills, and oral fluency. The findings agree with Vygotsky's (1978) Social Constructivist Theory, which argues that language develops through meaningful social interaction. The results also support Bruner's (1986) theory of learning through discovery, which suggests that learners acquire knowledge more effectively when actively engaged in meaningful activities. Similarly, Pyle et al. (2020) reported that play-based learning significantly enhances children's language development because learners actively construct meaning through interaction with peers and instructional materials.

Research Question Two: How do learners and teachers perceive the contribution of play-based language activities to the development of communicative competence in English?

Research question two was answered using qualitative data obtained from semi-structured interviews with the English language teacher and purposively selected learners. The interview data were transcribed, coded, and analysed thematically. The analysis generated five main themes: improved confidence in speaking English, increased participation and interaction,

improvement in vocabulary and sentence construction, development of speaking and listening skills, and increased motivation and enjoyment of English lessons.

Theme One: Improved Confidence in Speaking English

The interview responses indicated that play-based language activities improved learners' confidence in using English. Learners explained that activities such as role-play, storytelling, and language games provided opportunities to speak without feeling overly concerned about making mistakes. One learner stated:

"*When we were doing the role-play, I was not afraid to speak because I was acting with my friends*."

Another learner explained:

"*The games helped me to speak English because everybody was participating*."

Teacher 2 also observed an improvement in learners' confidence, particularly among learners who were initially reluctant to speak during conventional classroom activities. The teacher remarked:

"*Some of the learners who normally do not answer questions became more willing to speak when we introduced the games and role-play activities*."

These responses suggest that play-based activities created a supportive environment in which learners could practise English without excessive fear of making mistakes. The findings therefore indicate that play-based language activities contributed to learners' confidence, which is an important component of effective communicative competence.

Theme Two: Increased Participation and Interaction

The interview data further revealed that play-based language activities increased learners' participation and interaction during English lessons. Learners reported that they enjoyed working with their classmates and that the activities encouraged them to communicate with one another. One learner stated:

"*I liked the group activities because we talked to our friends and helped each other*."

Similarly, another learner indicated:

"*During the games, everybody wanted to answer and participate*."

Teacher 1 confirmed this observation, explaining:

"*The learners became more active during the lessons. Even those who were usually quite participated when they were involved in the activities*."

The responses indicate that play-based activities provided learners with opportunities to interact with peers and use English for meaningful purposes. This suggests that the activities promoted active participation rather than passive listening, thereby creating more opportunities for communicative practice.

Theme Three: Improvement in Vocabulary and Sentence Construction

The participants also perceived play-based language activities as contributing to learners' vocabulary development and their ability to construct sentences. Learners explained that they encountered new words during games and storytelling and were required to use the words when communicating with their peers. One learner stated:

"*The games helped me to learn new words and use them when I was talking*."

Another learner noted:

"*When we were telling stories, I learnt how to put the words together to make sentences*."

Teacher 1 similarly reported that learners demonstrated greater willingness to use newly learned vocabulary during classroom interactions. According to teacher 1:

"The activities gave the learners a chance to practise new vocabulary in sentences instead of just memorising the words."

The interview responses therefore suggest that play-based language activities provided meaningful contexts for learners to encounter, practise, and apply vocabulary and sentence structures.

Theme Four: Development of Speaking and Listening Skills

The interview findings also showed that the participants perceived play-based activities as beneficial to learners' speaking and listening skills. Learners explained that activities such as role-play and storytelling required them to listen to others before responding. One learner stated:

"*When my friend was speaking, I had to listen carefully so that I would know what to say*."

Teacher 2 also observed that learners became more attentive to what their classmates were saying and were increasingly able to respond appropriately. The teacher stated:

"*The role-play and storytelling activities required the learners to listen to one another and respond. This helped them practise both listening and speaking*."

This finding suggests that play-based activities provided opportunities for learners to practise the two-way nature of communication. Rather than simply responding to questions from the teacher, learners listened to peers, processed information, and responded appropriately.

Theme Five: Increased Motivation and Enjoyment of English Lessons

Another theme that emerged from the interviews was increased motivation and enjoyment. Learners consistently described the play-based activities as interesting and enjoyable. One learner stated:

"*English was more interesting when we played the games*."

Another learner remarked:

"*I liked the lessons because we were learning and playing at the same time*."

Teacher 2 also observed increased enthusiasm among learners during lessons involving play-based activities:

"*The learners looked forward to the English lessons because they knew they were going to participate in activities rather than only listening to the teacher*."

The responses suggest that the enjoyable nature of the activities encouraged learners to participate more actively in English lessons. Increased motivation and engagement may, in turn, create more opportunities for learners to practise communicative skills.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings from both the quantitative and qualitative data demonstrate that play-based language activities contributed significantly to the development of learners' communicative competence. The integration of the two data sets further provides a comprehensive understanding of how and why play-based activities supported language learning. The quantitative findings revealed a substantial improvement in learners' communicative competence following the six-week intervention. The increase in the mean score from 48.62 in the pre-test to 76.85 in the post-test indicates that learners developed stronger communicative competence after participating in storytelling, role-playing, language games, picture description, vocabulary games, and collaborative language activities. The reduction in the standard deviation also suggests that the intervention benefited learners across different ability levels, resulting in more consistent performance among the participants. These findings indicate that play-based language activities provide meaningful opportunities for learners to use English actively rather than merely learning grammatical rules or vocabulary in isolation. The improvement observed in this study corroborates previous empirical studies that have demonstrated the effectiveness of play-based learning in language development. Parker et al. (2022) argued that play creates authentic learning environments where learners communicate naturally while solving problems, negotiating meaning, and interacting with peers. Similarly, Yee et al. (2022), in their systematic review of play-based learning, concluded that play enhances children's language development by promoting meaningful interaction, collaboration, and active participation. The present findings also support Kong's (2024) study, which found that role-play significantly improved learners' communicative skills by increasing opportunities for authentic oral communication. Likewise, Kumaran (2017) reported that role-play encourages learners to practise language in realistic situations, thereby improving fluency, confidence, and communicative competence. The qualitative findings further explain the mechanisms through which play-based activities contributed to communicative competence. Learners consistently reported increased confidence in speaking English, while teachers observed that previously quiet learners became more willing to participate in classroom discussions. Confidence is an essential component of communicative competence because learners who are less anxious are more likely to initiate conversations, express ideas, and take risks in using the target language. These findings are consistent with Kong (2024), who observed that role-play reduces learners' fear of making mistakes by providing supportive and low-anxiety learning environments. Similarly, Sitanggang et al. (2023) found that storytelling activities improve learners' willingness to communicate by allowing them to practise language in engaging and familiar contexts. The findings also revealed that play-based language activities promoted active participation and meaningful interaction among learners. Through group tasks, storytelling, language games, and role-playing, learners collaborated with peers, negotiated meaning, and used English for authentic communicative purposes. This finding

aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) Social Constructivist Theory, which posits that language development occurs through social interaction with more knowledgeable peers and teachers. Rather than serving as passive recipients of information, learners became active participants in constructing meaning through communication.

Another important finding relates to vocabulary development and sentence construction. Both teachers and learners indicated that the play-based activities enabled learners to acquire and apply new vocabulary during classroom interactions. Instead of memorising isolated words, learners encountered vocabulary in meaningful contexts and used it to construct sentences during storytelling, games, and role-play. This finding supports Newton and Nation (2021), who argue that communicative language learning is most effective when vocabulary is taught through meaningful interaction and purposeful language use. The findings also reinforce Parker et al.'s (2022) assertion that play encourages learners to experiment with language in authentic situations, thereby facilitating deeper vocabulary acquisition.

Furthermore, the findings indicate that play-based language activities enhanced learners' speaking and listening skills simultaneously. Activities such as storytelling and role-playing required learners not only to express themselves orally but also to listen attentively to peers before responding appropriately. These activities therefore reflected the reciprocal nature of communication, where effective speaking depends on active listening and comprehension. The findings agree with Newton and Nation (2021), who maintain that communicative competence develops when learners have repeated opportunities to integrate listening and speaking in meaningful communicative tasks. The study also found that play-based language activities increased learners' motivation and enjoyment of English lessons. Learners described the lessons as interesting, enjoyable, and engaging, while teachers observed increased enthusiasm and participation during the intervention. This finding is particularly important because motivation has consistently been identified as a key predictor of successful second language learning. When learners enjoy classroom activities, they participate more actively, practise the target language more frequently, and become more willing to communicate. These findings are consistent with Tekyi-Arhin (2023), who argues that play-based learning enhances learners' intrinsic motivation by creating enjoyable learning experiences that sustain attention and participation.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that play-based language activities support communicative competence not only by improving learners' linguistic knowledge but also by creating socially interactive, enjoyable, and authentic learning environments that encourage meaningful language use. The convergence between the quantitative improvement in test scores and the qualitative evidence from learners and teachers strengthens the credibility of the findings. It suggests that the gains observed were not merely reflected in assessment scores but were also evident in 'classroom participation, confidence, vocabulary use, speaking, listening, and overall engagement in English lessons. These findings provide strong empirical support for the integration of play-based pedagogies into English language instruction, particularly at the basic school level, where active participation and meaningful communication are central to language development.

Implications of the Study

The findings of the study have important implications for the development of learners' communicative competence in English. The improvement in learners' performance following the use of play-based language activities suggests that structured games, storytelling, role-play, and collaborative speaking activities can provide meaningful opportunities for learners to

practise English. Such activities allow learners to use vocabulary, construct sentences, listen to others, and express their ideas in situations that are more interactive than conventional teacher-led instruction. This implies that play-based activities can be incorporated into English language lessons as practical strategies for strengthening learners' communicative competence.

The positive perceptions expressed by learners and the teacher have implications for English language pedagogy. Learners' reports of increased confidence, participation, enjoyment, and willingness to communicate suggest that play-based activities can contribute to a supportive classroom environment in which learners feel more comfortable using English. The teacher's perception that learners became more active and interactive further indicates that play-based instruction can shift classroom practice towards greater learner participation.

Finally, the findings imply that schools and educational stakeholders should support teachers in developing the knowledge and skills required to implement play-based language activities effectively. Professional development programmes can expose teachers to practical ways of designing language games, role-play activities, storytelling tasks, and collaborative activities that are appropriate for learners' age and language proficiency. Such support can enhance teachers' ability to use play-based approaches purposefully while maintaining focus on the development of communicative competence.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that play-based language activities are highly effective in improving the communicative competence of basic school learners while supporting the successful implementation of Ghana's Standards-Based Curriculum. The quantitative results revealed a marked improvement in learners' communicative competence following the intervention, as evidenced by the higher post-test mean scores and the reduced standard deviation. These findings indicate that learners not only achieved better learning outcomes but also exhibited more consistent performance after participating in play-based language activities. The intervention contributed to improvements in learners' vocabulary development, oral communication, sentence construction, listening comprehension, reading skills, and confidence in using English during classroom interactions. The qualitative findings complemented the quantitative results by showing that play-based language activities promote learner-centred teaching and facilitate the development of the core competencies embedded in the curriculum, including communication, collaboration, creativity, and critical thinking. Teachers reported that these activities increased learner motivation, participation, and engagement, thereby making English language lessons more interactive and meaningful. The study establishes that play-based language activities are an effective pedagogical approach for enhancing learners' communicative competence and improving the quality of English language instruction in basic schools. Their integration into classroom practice not only strengthens learners' language proficiency but also promotes active learning, confidence, and meaningful participation while advancing the goals of competency-based education.

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