



**Structured Playful Activities for Enhancing Communicative Competence Among EFL
Learners in Upper Basic Education**

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Abstract

This research evaluates the effectiveness of structured playful activities for enhancing communicative competence among EFL learners in upper basic education. It focuses on how role-plays and language games; can enhance the motivation, confidence, and fluency of the students in English. The study takes place in a public institution located in Manabí, Ecuador, with a sample of fifty tenth-grade students and three English teachers. A mixed-method approach is applied, combining interviews for teachers and a pre-test and post-test apply to students to collect both quantitative and qualitative data. These instruments will help identify students' attitudes and perceptions toward playful learning, as well as teachers' views about its effectiveness in communicative competence. A pre-test is used as a diagnosis of the academic performance, after which structured play strategies is applied. Subsequently, the post-test is carried out, which will serve to measure the effectiveness of the intervention. Results show that

structured playful strategies create a more dynamic and engaging environment where students feel confident to participate and express themselves in English. Furthermore, the integration of playful methods enhances linguistic competence, social interaction, creativity, and motivation. In conclusion, structured playful activities are an effective teaching strategy that innovates within the classroom, facilitating the teaching process for both the teacher and the student, especially when the goal is to develop communicative competence, as they generate meaningful links with the class content, developing empathy, confidence, and assertiveness in self-expression.

Keywords: playful activities, roleplay, communicative competence.

Resumen

Esta investigación evalúa la efectividad de actividades lúdicas estructuradas para mejorar la competencia comunicativa de estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL) en el nivel básico superior. Se centra en cómo los juegos de rol y los juegos del lenguaje pueden potenciar la motivación, la confianza y la fluidez de los estudiantes en inglés. El estudio se lleva a cabo en una institución pública ubicada en Manabí, Ecuador, con una muestra de cincuenta estudiantes de décimo grado y tres docentes. Se aplica un enfoque de métodos mixtos, combinando entrevistas a docentes y la aplicación de un pre-test y un post-test a los estudiantes para recopilar datos tanto cuantitativos como cualitativos. Estos instrumentos permitirán identificar las actitudes y percepciones de los estudiantes hacia el aprendizaje lúdico, así como las opiniones de los docentes sobre su efectividad en la competencia comunicativa. Se utiliza el pretest para diagnosticar el rendimiento académico de los estudiantes, tras lo cual se aplicaron estrategias de juego estructuradas. Posteriormente, se lleva a cabo el post-test, que servirá para medir la efectividad de la intervención. Los resultados mostraron que las estrategias lúdicas estructuradas crean un entorno más dinámico y participativo donde los estudiantes se sienten seguros para participar y expresarse en inglés. Además, la integración de métodos lúdicos mejora la

competencia lingüística, la interacción social, la creatividad y la motivación. En conclusión, las actividades lúdicas estructuradas constituyen una estrategia de enseñanza eficaz e innovadora en el aula, facilitando el proceso de enseñanza tanto para el docente como para el alumno, especialmente cuando el objetivo es desarrollar la competencia comunicativa, ya que generan vínculos significativos con el contenido de la clase, fomentando empatía, confianza y asertividad al momento de expresarse en otro idioma.

Palabras clave: actividades lúdicas, juego de roles, competencia comunicativa.

Introduction

Communicative competence is essential for students, as it directly influences their ability to interact, express ideas, and participate actively in class. Many students face difficulties speaking in English due to traditional teaching methods that prioritize written exercises and grammar over oral practice. This focus often leads to low confidence, limited participation, and reduced motivation to communicate in a foreign language.

Structured, playful activities are an effective strategy for improving English language learning, as they encourage creativity, motivation, and active participation. Employing this as an academic strategy permits students to grow communicative competence while learning in an enjoyable and meaningful way. They provide an effective way to overcome these challenges by creating an engaging and interactive learning environment. Through games, role-plays, language games, and collaborative tasks, students are encouraged to speak freely, experiment with language, and enjoy the learning process. These activities strengthen communicative competence. They also enhance motivation, confidence, and social interaction among learners. Structured playful activities support emotional expression, teamwork, and intellectual growth. As a result, students receive an integral educational experience (Gallegos & García, 2022). Playful

learning not only enriches language acquisition but also turns the classroom into an active space for communication.

The communicative competence of students of upper basic education analyzed, the motivation while participating in structured playful learning strategies, and classroom speaking activities. During the execution of this study, it was observed that students impose limitations on themselves when speaking English. When communicative competence is developed through structured playful activities, following a script or adhering to rules often restricts students' organic communication. For this reason, educators should consider the potential lack of flexibility in their academic planning when developing a strategy.

Based on the above, the following research questions have been formulated for the execution of this investigation: What significant differences in oral performance emerge between students exposed to structured playful activities and those following traditional instructions?; What are the characteristics of structured playful activities that hinder the transition from receptive understanding to spontaneous oral communication?; What are the limitations of structured playful activities for developing communicative competence in upper basic education students?

The present research evaluates the effectiveness of structured playful activities for enhancing communicative competence among EFL learners in upper basic education as it differentiates between improved academic performance when educators use structured play-based activities and when they follow traditional, pre-established guidelines.

In conclusion, structured playful activities contribute to communicative competence development; this study seeks to provide practical guidance for professors, improve students' communicative abilities, and promote more interactive and enjoyable English lessons within the educational institution.

Literature Review

Communicative Competence

In the initial years of life, the development of oral skills, especially communicative competence, is a fundamental pillar in the learning process, as it allows for the expression of ideas, emotions, and thoughts, as well as social interaction in their immediate environment.

Flores-González (2022) mentions that oral expression plays a vital role when learning a foreign language, being an oral skill that presents more challenges; in this article, the sample demonstrates low proficiency in this area. In response to this problem, explore strategies such as role-play to increase oral expression in a virtual learning context.

Role-play is a strategy that promotes the motivation allowed the students to enroll in a favorable environment that empowers the use of English in a real context. (Romero-Guardilla et al., 2020).

Numerous educational experiences have shown that through role-playing, dramatizations, songs, puppetry, and group dynamics, children can significantly improve their communicative competence, provided that there is appropriate teacher guidance and a favorable environment for expression. This author emphasizes that contextualizing structured playful activities is vital for their successful application. In other words, if the teacher does not consider the specific needs of the student group, implementing these activities is not feasible. (Zambrano-González et al., 2025).

Extending this perspective, communication in education can be significantly enhanced through structured playful, and pedagogical activities, which help children engage actively and meaningfully with learning content. Incorporating interactive methods in education programs for young learners encourages participation, understanding, and practical application of knowledge.

Developing communicative competence in students: creating scenarios where students interact, explain, and collaborate through games or guided activities, learners can practice speaking in a natural context, improving fluency, confidence, and the ability to convey ideas clearly. (Saliba et al., 2020).

Mora Torres, Y. (2024) states that improving communicative competence is closely linked to the implementation of playful activities, provided these strategies have a suitable context and planning basis. And although time constraints may limit these types of strategies, the instructor should organize their teaching schedule, adapting it to use more disruptive activities that promote communication among students.

Structured Playful Activities

Ornelas (2021) revealed that improving communicative competence is beneficial through the use of guessing games, moreover students are motivated because the game is attractive and ludic; for that reason, they are receptive to the incorporation of games in the English classes.

Play serves not only a recreational function, but also a pedagogical one. Constitute an instrument that promotes the acquisition and strengthening of communication skills through exploration, creativity, and symbolic interaction (Troncoso et al., 2022).

Johnston et al (2022) state that students, especially adolescents, who are the focus of this essay, learn through play. Structured playful activities like role-playing allow them to relax and express themselves more freely and confidently, thereby building the confidence to express themselves in another language, developing with effectiveness communicative competence.

Nevertheless, in many educational contexts, with limited resources or traditional curricular approaches, structured playful activities tend to be underestimated, without being fully utilized as academic strategies for the development of oral language. With this premise, it is

evident that there is a gap between children's communicative needs and the opportunities the education institutions to support them, which can negatively affect their future academic performance (Pindo & Bracho, 2023).

Vygotsky, one of the classic authors in educational themes, manifested that play functions as an educational mediator that encourages cognitive and linguistic development, placing children in scenarios that develop meaningful communicative competence. In this background, the need arises to reconsider traditional pedagogical practices in the learning process, integrating intentional playful activities that foster the development of oral skills (Loja & Quito, 2021).

Integrating play into the educational process significantly enhances the communicative competence of learners; playful learning environments foster respect, active collaboration among students, and overall playful learning plays a vital role in strengthening essential interpersonal and cognitive abilities within educational settings (Andreopoulou & Moustakas, 2019).

Structured playful activities are intentional strategies that use play to reach academic objectives. According to Vela et al. (2024), playful activities enhance communicative competence, provided they are implemented with technique in the academic plan. The use of structured playful activities permits the development of the English language within a functional and social context. Thus, children do not only learn to speak but also to communicate.

Incorporating playful activities is not only a motivational strategy but also a practical tool to strengthen communicative competence in the classroom. According to Morocho-Cevallos et al. (2025) assert that structured playful activities are an instrument in contemporary education, promoting student motivation, active participation, and the development of cognitive skills. Games allow students to express themselves, interact, and practice language naturally.

Edwards (2021) observed classrooms that include playful centers, many of which lack purposeful connections to language development, and emphasized that while progress has been made in creating engaging environments for young learners, there is still a strong need for more structured conversations during read-aloud and center time to foster students' oral language growth. Furthermore, purposeful play not only captures the attention of the students but also transforms oral interaction into a natural and enjoyable part of learning, strengthening fluency and communicative confidence.

Another important aspect is the dramatic play that has proven to be an effective strategy to develop communicative competence in early education, especially through the use of role-play strategy. According to Rajapaksha (2016) indicates that children improved their communicative competence when they participated in dramatic play activities, especially when they played roles such as doctor, teacher, or parent. Furthermore, playful interactions provided a safe environment where students could experiment with language without fear of making mistakes, which encouraged more frequent and natural conversations among peers. It has been relevant because, through role-playing, students of higher basic education have the opportunity to express ideas, use new vocabulary, and practice conversational structures in meaningful contexts.

Developing life skills through structured playful activities is becoming an important focus in education, especially for children and adolescents. Playful learning allows students to explore ideas, make decisions, and communicate with others while learning in an enjoyable way; participative activities, such as games, sports, or artistic expression, help learners strengthen social, emotional, and cognitive skills through interaction and experience. Structured playful activities can promote critical thinking, curiosity, and confidence by encouraging students to communicate and reflect during learning experiences (Poquet et al., 2023).

Playful learning can remain beneficial for students even beyond early childhood education, offering creative, hands-on, and engaging learning experiences that lead to better academic outcomes. Although play becomes more structured as students grow older, studies have demonstrated that play-based approaches can still align with rigorous academic standards and promote motivation and understanding among teenagers; furthermore, when educators apply play in the classroom, students feel like little children (Johnston et al., 2022).

According to Reffalleo et al. (2024) incorporating playful activities is like an icebreaker in English Language Teaching (ELT) plays a significant role in creating an engaging and supportive classroom environment, contributing to communicative competence. Games, short stories, or interactive questions help reduce student anxiety and boredom while encouraging communication and participation. These activities positively influence students' self-confidence in speaking by fostering a friendly atmosphere and building trust among peers.

Linnavalli et al. (2018) emphasized that active engagement in an artistic experience helps students differentiate sounds and words more effectively, which supports later communicative competence abilities.

For the educators is important to increase pedagogical experiences integrating structured playful activities to develop communicative competence. Professors can integrate specific sessions focused on the most difficult part of competence. Furthermore, integrating moments of linguistic reflection after recreational activities will facilitate the transition from spontaneous to conscious learning, ensuring that gamification is complemented by the development of technical language (Sanabria Moncada, 2025).

In summary, the literature demonstrates that playful activities enhance communicative competence, providing students with the tools to express themselves in another language.

Incorporating these strategies into the teaching process helps students be more open to the feedback provided by the professor, thereby fostering meaningful learning.

Methodology

The purpose of this research was to evaluate the effectiveness of structured playful activities for enhancing communicative competence among EFL learners in upper basic education, as a pedagogical resource to develop communicative competence in 10th-grade students of upper basic education in a public school located in Manabí, Ecuador. This study is concurrent in nature and was validated by three experts in the field of education.

The methodology is based on scientific research with a mixed method and quantitative and qualitative methods. The inductive–deductive method is used to examine how structured playful activities influence the communicative competence of the students.

As a quantifiable instrument, a pre-test and post-test were applied to 50 students, which consisted of two groups: an experimental group made up of 27 students and a control group made up of 23 students, facilitating the comparison of student performance before and after the planning of structured playful activities.

A pre-test was applied before the execution of the structured playful activities; this was measured through a Cambridge rubric. A post-test was applied that allows to analyze with the same rubric of the effectiveness of structured playful activities as a strategy and its interference in the development of communicative competence and academic performance of the students.

Subsequently, a semi-structured qualitative interview was also conducted with three English teachers, documenting their perspectives on advantages and challenges of using playful strategies to improve communicative competence.

During the pedagogical intervention the sessions were implemented during the two-trimester of academic year, with eight sessions held each term. Structured playful activities were used as the core of the communicative skills necessary for academic progress.

This study is considered fully viable because of the accessibility of the educational context, the availability of participants, and the low-cost nature of the materials required for its implementation. School authorities and teachers will express openness to collaborating with the researcher. The playful activities designed for this study, such as role-play, will require only basic classroom resources, making their application feasible within the institution's existing infrastructure.

Results

Table 1.

Comparative results of the pre-test and post-test in tenth-grade students in the control and experimental groups

	EXPERIMENTAL GROUP	CONTROL GROUP	EXPERIMENTAL GROUP	CONTROL GROUP
Note Range	Pre-test 10°A	Pre-test 10°B	Post-test 10°A	Post-test 10°B
4 – <5	0	1	0	0
5 – <6	12	6	0	1
6 – <7	15	15	0	7
7 – <8	0	0	0	10
8 – <9	0	1	15	3
9 – <10	0	0	6	1
10	0	0	6	1
TOTAL	27	23	27	23

Note. Data were obtained from the pre-test and post-test administered to tenth-grade students.

Analysis: Pre-test and Post-test

The results show the effectiveness of using structured playful activities as a strategy for improving communicative competence in tenth-grade students of upper basic education. It is evident from the pre-test that the students in the experimental group perceived an improvement in their academic performance compared to the students in the control group. Llacsahuanga et al. (2024) state that roleplay is a playful strategy that motivates students to use the English language by having them assume roles in different contexts, linking language practice to everyday realities.

Initially, in the pre-test, the data show no outstanding grades. After feedback and the use of playful strategies such as role-play, there is evidence of improvement, with 15 students achieving higher academic performance than the control group.

Caro (2024) mentioned that low academic performance among students must be addressed through strategies that comply with innovative implementation requirements and adopt a participatory approach, turning students from passive to active participants in English learning.

Regarding low academic performance, the data show that without the use of playful strategies, the trend towards low academic performance is maintained; in contrast, the experimental group, where it showed a notable improvement, since 15 students who remained in the average range after the playful strategies went to the outstanding range, which shows a positive trend that benefits this type of strategy.

To conclude the analysis of the tests, it should be mentioned that they were structured using a Cambridge Assessment English (2019) rubric for the A2 level, which ensured fairness in the evaluation of the groups. The students' academic performance improved when using structured playful activities, not only because of their use but also because the professor

employed a contextualized tactic. In other words, the success of structured playful activities will depend on the educator planning the implementation of these strategies.

Analysis of the interviews

Breton (2025) indicates that students experience social anxiety when speaking English, a condition that diminishes both the quality of their participation and their motivation to utilize the language during the learning process. The educators who participated in the structured interviews for this study concur that: *The management of errors—both in orality and syntax—constitutes the primary barrier to using English oral expressions in public contexts.* The execution of communicative competence in English generates psychological barriers for students who self-impose them when expressing themselves in another language, such as fear of mockery; the fear of not pronouncing words correctly; In general terms, the fear of spending an embarrassing moment in public contexts that students must overcome to achieve successful learning.

The linguistic limitations create difficulties for students to talk in English confidently. For the reason that they do not get enough exposure to the language, their vocabulary and practice are limited. Professors mentioned that students rarely use what they learn in another context despite the school, so there is a need for new teaching strategies to improve English instruction.

Méndez and Gómez (2018) argue that using games in the classroom helps students improve their English speaking and encourages them to use the English language outside the classroom. Structured playful strategies make teaching and learning easier. The interviewees reported employing role-playing, vocabulary games, group competitions, word searches, memory games, and guessing games. For this study, playful activities like role-playing activities will be analyzed. Regarding these, the educators asserted: *The students and I enjoyed role-playing; I gave them a specific theme, and they started to let their minds fly, using the basics and the advanced ones, which I most often do through acting or riddling activities, to catch their*

attention and participation. The evidence shows that structured playful strategies help students feel less insecure when speaking English and improve their communicative competence.

Taking part in playful activities helps students feel more confident speaking English, makes learning more enjoyable, and improves their speaking skills. Teachers' participants said that *these activities boost student engagement, build confidence, and create a positive classroom environment.* Since professors should continue to seek new structured playful strategies to help students become more fluent in English and develop the communicative competence.

Discussion

Academic gamification strategies, like structured playful activities used in the classroom, are the subject of debate when compared to traditional teaching methods. Educators manifested that structured playful strategies transform the teaching process into a dynamic one, whereas when traditional methods of repetition and memorization are used, the teaching process is more linear, limiting the student to merely receiving information. With structured playful strategies, the student develops knowledge and is an active participant in the teaching process.

The results demonstrate the effectiveness of using structured playful activities; the test results show a 50% improvement in students' academic performance when analyzing the trend in their grades. This supports the premise that educators should use gamification to innovate the learning process. This approach optimizes learning by transforming it into meaningful learning experiences that extend beyond the classroom, in contrast to traditional teaching methods that fail to contextualize the material being taught. In support of this authors such as Rosario (2024), asserts that the use of structured playful activities like, role-playing has a direct and significant impact on improving communicative competence in English because this strategy assigns students a role, which allows them to apply the new concepts they have learned to real-life

situations they encounter in their daily lives; in contrast to the traditional education proposal that bases teaching on memory and repetition.

Seemanath & Watanapokakul (2024) state that despite the benefits of play-based strategies, educators must consider the time needed to balance traditional teaching methods with play-based strategies that strengthen student attention, motivation, and participation in the learning process. In other words, they should not be used in isolation but rather as a combination to ensure that students develop the skills and competencies required to communicate in English.

Granizo (2025) asserts that the foundation for implementing play-based strategies is sound planning. It is the educator's role to act as an observer, guiding the group in an orderly fashion to ensure the strategy is executed effectively. In the investigation is evident that the key to successful implementation lies in contextualization and planning. If the strategy arises randomly, it lacks relevance in the teaching process; conversely, if it is framed within a student's need to more easily develop a skill, it becomes more valuable. In the case of communicative competence, the field research for this study shows that these activities are effective in improving and motivating students to express themselves confidently in a second language (L2), which represents a significant advance. In addition to language development, they also foster soft skills such as confidence and empathy among peers.

Rojas & Rodríguez (2025) in their research identified that English classes taught using traditional methods based on memorization and repetition are limited in terms of student attention, active participation, and knowledge retention. For this reason, it is important implemented structured playful activities differs from traditional teaching methods in many ways, rather than being used in isolation from one another, they should be used in conjunction to create an educational process that is more effective and impactful. This study demonstrates that structured play-based strategies are effective for teaching English, but they must be

complemented by traditional methods. For example, without memorization, vocabulary acquisition, which is essential for communicative competence, is impossible. In other words, traditional methods and play-based activities should not be used in isolation; rather, it is the educator's role to extract the best from both methods to benefit the teaching process.

Conclusions

To conclude that by using structured playful activities in the teaching process, students are able to express themselves more easily in English. This strategy builds their self-confidence, which is vital for developing communicative competence in another language. The educational process cannot be a linear one tied to traditional practices; it must be a dynamic process that adapts to the changes faced by today's students. Therefore, implementing these structured playful activities that contextualize the content helps students apply what they learn beyond the classroom. Traditional methodologies must be combined with innovative strategies, such as those mentioned in this work, to address a dichotomy. While they are indeed opposites, each depends on the other for a successful educational process.

Finished structured playful activities help the teenagers become more receptive to new knowledge; they do not simply absorb information to pass tests and earn grades, but instead become active participants in their own learning process. Through the findings of this research, it is evident that structured playful activities are an effective teaching method that allows students to acquire knowledge through gamification, turning the acquired knowledge into meaningful learning and strengthening essential skills to achieve fluency in a second language. For educators, structured playful activities are more than just an innovation; they constitute an effective tool for students to develop their communicative competence, as they motivate them to acquire knowledge beyond the mere memorization of words.

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