How can we use play to teach English?

This is the transcript for Series 3, episode 6 of the TeachingEnglish podcast. You can find out more about the words highlighted in the transcript in the show notes for this episode.

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

play, students, English, activities, classroom, teachers, teaching, learning, language, children, talked, playful approach, ELT, fun, young learners, learn, game, playful, assessment, work

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Teaching English with the British Council

This is episode 6: How can we use play to teach English?

We'am: Welcome to this episode of Teaching English with the British Council. In this episode we'll be talking to Elly Setterfield, a young learner ELT specialist, and Wei Mao, a PhD researcher on play in ELT. Chris, do you have any experience in using play to teach English?

Chris: Yes, I think play is a crucial component of creating positive classroom atmosphere, but also it can be used directly for developing students' language and competence. So one game I often enjoy using in the classroom, it comes from a, it was on a TV programme I used to watch when I was very young. It's called Mallett's Mallet. Mallet is a big hammer, OK, and his name was Timmy Mallett, this guy, and he had this big plastic hammer, and it was a word-association game. I say a word and then you have to say a word that's connected to that word, and we keep on going. Shall we give it a go?

We'am: Let's do that.

Chris: OK, so I'll start. OK. Coffee.

We'am: Tea.

Chris: Cheese.

We'am: Mou—

Chris: I just hit you with my imaginary mallet. OK, shall we have another game? Best of three? OK, you start this time.

We'am: Light.

Chris: Heavy.

We'am: Dark.

Chris: Black.

We'am: White.

Chris: Red.

We'am: Blue.

Chris: Green.

We'am: Tree.

Chris: Bark.

[Sound effect of We'am being hit with the mallet]

Chris: Best of five?

Chris: So let's hear from Elly.

We'am: Welcome to the podcast, Elly. I had a look at your blog, which was really interesting, and it showcases a variety of creative teaching methods. Can you maybe share how you initially became interested in integrating play into English language teaching and what impact maybe you have seen on your students' engagement and learning?

Elly: Sure. So, I think actually play was kind of my first avenue into the world of English language teaching. I started working at summer schools for students who were learning English as a foreign language, based in the UK, and before I realised that teaching was something that I was interested in and actually wanted to do, I was working on the activities programme side of things. But I realised that those types of activities, although they were the fun side of the programme really, were actually opportunities for the students to really use the language and actually for it to have a practical purpose. It was something that meant that they could actually interact with each other and they could work out for themselves what language they thought would be useful, would be relevant, rather than necessarily just following the syllabus that the teacher was using and the course materials that they were using. And so then when I trained to become a teacher, it was something that I was always quite interested in, just seeing how I could incorporate elements of that. What could I do in my classroom that would maybe be a little bit different, but would actually give my students real reasons, real opportunities to use the language? And of course to make it fun and engaging for them as well. Because I think, ultimately, if – certainly with teaching young learners – if you ask them 'What do you want from your English classes? What do you want your experience to be?', a lot of them, what they really want is to have fun and to have a good time. That is, for them, the most important aspect of it.

We'am: Maybe you can define to our audience what play is in the broader sense.

Elly: Play is something that I think is actually really difficult to define. The idea that I really like is the one that has been come up with by The Lego Foundation, who have done a lot of work into play as it's used actually in formal education, as well as obviously in a more traditional sense of what we think of as being play. And they've come up with six different categories that define what they think of as play. And those are that it's something that's joyful; it's something that is fun, that you enjoy doing; it's meaningful; it's something that's actively engaging, so you're involved in what you're doing, you're not just passive, you're actually taking part in an activity; it's socially interactive, so you've got interaction happening there; and also it's iterative, it's something that can happen again and again, it's something that can be repeated, it can evolve, it can kind of take different routes depending on when you're doing it, who's taking part and how it's happening. And the reason that I really like this kind of collection of ideas, I guess, as a definition, is that it makes you realise that play is actually quite a big thing. It's not just one specific type of activity.

Chris: And I think one of the challenges, as I see it, more widely in education, but in English language teaching particularly – in a previous episode, we talked about assessments – and lots of standardised assessment internationally, but also lots of assessment within national education systems, is very formal. It is very grammar focused, vocab focused, etc. So even though if you were to describe all of those things that you've just said, as a pedagogy, there should be very few teachers who disagree with any of that. But it's that mismatch between how we should learn and how students are assessed.

Elly: I do think that it is a real challenge. I think it's something that we as teachers definitely face as well. I think, for me, what is helpful – and certainly what I've always tried to do in my own classroom – is trying to just think of it as a different approach to the material. So it's still possible to cover the same content, it's still possible to meet the same language targets, but just taking a different route to get there some of the time. And I think it's important to recognise as well that we don't necessarily have to be taking that approach and doing that kind of really playful learning for everything. But it's another strategy that we can use. It's another kind of element that we can have in our toolbox, so to speak.

Chris: The actual word 'play' I think is unhelpful. If we call it communicative, interactive, socially focused learning, no one would have a problem with it, but it's, yeah, the assumption that play is what you do when the bell goes outside and then learning is what you do in the classroom.

Elly: Another thing that comes from the theory of talking about play is the idea that play is actually a spectrum. And at the one end you've got free play, which is the kind of thing that I think we often think about when we talk about play. And then at the other end of the spectrum, you've got actually stuff that is much more teacher-led and teacher-initiated, but you're still taking that playful approach. We can be anywhere on that spectrum. And we don't necessarily need to be in the same place all the time.

We'am: You mentioned also that we can adapt what we have in our resource books. I've had a look, for example, at your website. There's this game, Spider, where you add another flashcard. And it's, it's the same as flashcards where they repeat the words, but when they see this card, they run away or they start again. So it's just simple, but it does motivate them. Perhaps you can mention some activities that you think have worked for you or it can work for anyone.

Elly: One of the very first things I did, but that I think I will always remember just because it was something that made me think 'Oh, this actually can work!', was using a drama game with my students. When we

were using it, we were practising vocabulary for different emotions, so they were thinking about things like happy, sad, angry, those types of adjectives. And in this game, you have two people, and they have a question and a response, which can be anything at all. It doesn't matter what it is. I asked my students to suggest a question and an answer to that question. So it could be something as simple as 'What's the weather like today?' 'It's sunny.' They're trying to think how, as well as thinking about gestures, body language, facial expressions, as well as tone of voice. So how do I say this? You know, what's the weather like today? It's sunny. But how do I, how do I communicate that as though I'm really sad about it, for example, or how do I communicate it as though I'm really excited or I'm really angry. I remember they actually asked to play that again and again and again on quite a few different occasions. And once we'd started doing it with emotions, it was a case of they wanted to do it with other things. They wanted to try and do it with jobs, for example, and try and think 'How would, how would a teacher say this? How might a doctor say this?', for example.

Chris: And what's really interesting about that, Elly, is like when you say your students wanted to say it in a different way, according to different professions, they're learning about genre, there. You know, people are gonna say 'Well, you shouldn't be doing playing', blah, blah, blah. But actually, it's an interesting and fun way to learn about genre, which is often quite a difficult or sort of, quote, unquote, 'boring' topic to learn in the classroom.

Elly: No, definitely.

We'am: And do you see the role of play evolving? Or maybe changing?

Elly: I think it's something that I hope we're going to see more of. I hope it's something that more and more people are going to come on board with, and it's going to become more widely spread, because actually there is so much research that says that play has got a real benefit to learning. It is actually something that is really going to help our students. It's not just a fun, extra activity. I really hope that we see assessment evolving in line with the research and actually play being taken more into account in the ways that we do assess our students.

Chris: And do you think there's more that could be done, for example, with gamification as well of learning?

Elly: Yeah, so gamification, it's the process of adding game-like properties – so things like scoring or like a type of competition – into an activity and using that to then engage and to motivate learners. And I think that is definitely a really valuable way of getting our students involved and also introducing these elements of play into our classroom.

Chris: One of the other maybe advantages I see using play is that it can help students kind of explore language in a way, and that's something often teachers say 'Oh, we find it difficult. They don't want to say anything. They just stay within the structures and the vocab that they know.'

Elly: Definitely, yeah, I think what I mentioned about my sort of early experiences of using play in the classroom, that was definitely something that I found, as I said, my kind of, I think a lot of my entry through it was to do with kind of doing drama-type activities and role plays, and giving my students kind of a different role to play was really, really helpful in that it increased their confidence It increased their willingness to try things that they maybe wouldn't have done as themselves because they weren't themselves. They were playing this, this different role, using language that they maybe wouldn't have used, trying out phrases and expressions and things like that. So I think, yeah, I do think play is really helpful in

terms of developing those language skills. And although I've mentioned that to do with activities that are more kind of drama based, I think it's also the case in, in other activities as well, where we mentioned things to do with gamification. If we have our students doing a quiz-type activity, for example, where they are the quiz master, they are asking the questions, or one of them is in charge of the scoring, for example, then we're giving them that kind of role that takes them out of themselves and gives them the opportunity to, to really be more confident, use that extra language.

We'am: If you were to give just one tip for our community of teachers about using play in the classroom, what would it be?

Elly: I think my tip would be to try it. To find as many different ways that you can think of that you can include elements of play in your classroom and try them out. A huge amount of it is experiment-based. It's people thinking 'Oh, I'm going to see what happens if I do this. What about if I do this differently?' If it doesn't work, that's fine. Try something else. I think, as well, just taking that element and being a bit playful with it yourself. Taking it as the opportunity for you to have fun, for you to do things in a new way, to maybe look at things in a new light as well can be really valuable.

We'am: That's a really nice tip, being playful as a teacher as well. Thank you so much, Elly, that was great.

Chris: So one of the things I was most struck by in Elly's interview was when she talked about those six types of play, using The Lego Foundation's definition: joyful, fun, meaningful, actively engaging, socially interactive, iterative. I was just thinking our game of Mallet's Mallet at the start of the episode, We'am, had all of those characteristics. It was joyful, certainly for me. It was fun. Was it fun for you, We'am?

We'am: It was fun.

Chris: Yeah, OK. Meaningful? Did you learn something? What did you learn?

We'am: Not much. I mean, for it … you can learn vocabulary.

Chris: OK. Actively engaging? Yes, it's very active, not passive. Socially interactive? Sort of physically interactive as well.

We'am: Yeah, 'cause you need to stay alert.

Chris: And it was highly iterative. We kept repeating it again and again and again and again …

And I think it's useful to have that definition, because I think sometimes people think play is something that should be separate from learning.

We'am: Yeah. And one takeaway from the discussion is the spectrum of play. It ranges from free play to structured and more teacher-led activities. And this flexibility, it allows teachers maybe to adapt and fit that within their curriculum. For example, you can use drama to teach vocabulary for emotions.

Chris: Exactly. And sometimes it can be hard to put words to those sorts of feelings. So actually doing the feeling, showing that and linking it to the actual word that you're teaching is highly effective.

We'am: Yeah. And it's also important to align this with the assessment methods. Play can enhance engagement and learning.

Chris: When do students learn best? Well, one thing is when they are actively engaged. You know, that's when they learn best and are most effective. Games should be meaningful. Play should be meaningful. It shouldn't just be something that is separate from the learning. It's using play to learn. I don't think anyone would disagree with the idea of lessons being joyful and fun. If students want to be in the room, if they're enjoying themselves and they're feeling comfortable, they're feeling safe, they're learning more effectively. Socially interactive – language is a skill which we use with others. So, you know, it's teaching that, it's helping with speaking and listening from an assessment perspective. And that iterative – it's something we've talked about a lot, that idea of task, repetition, doing the same thing again and doing it slightly differently, learning from that. So all of these things, yes, they involve play, but, yes, they also help teachers teach more effectively for assessment.

We'am: Yes, because through playing you automatically encourage students to think critically and to solve problems. So activities like role plays, storytelling and creative writing prompt students to use their imagination to express themselves in new ways.

Chris: Exactly. And using their imagination helps them get out of that sort of safe talk, which we've discussed before, that they are experimenting with language, trying new language out, not just staying within what they know, because they're not going to develop.

We'am: And this is also a life skill, because you're teaching them communication, empathy, adaptability. I found play really useful also in contexts that are very harsh, where students need kind of a break from reality and to have fun.

Chris: So you've used this in Palestine?

We'am: Yes.

Chris: Could you give an example of kind of how your students responded when you were using some of these activities or play activities, games within your, your classroom?

We'am: They always want a play, or it's like they come for this, for the play and games that I include, which is within the curriculum and within the target language we are teaching, but it's, it's simple things that does not require adaptation of material or anything. It's just a strategy that you follow. I think there is a misconception sometimes of play that you need to play as in a child who's playing, but that you integrate a strategy that makes those six aspects appear in the class.

Chris: Absolutely. And I think children, young people are primed for play, you know, they are ready to do that, so we're kind of linking them to something they're already naturally going to do anyway.

We'am: Yeah, as long as there is noise in the class, I think this is good.

Chris: Again, it's that good noise, bad noise. You know, we can have good chaos, bad chaos. It's about if it's under control. Absolutely.

We'am: Our next interview will be with Wei Mao, a PhD researcher on play in ELT.

Chris: So, Wei, what impact does play have on students' engagement and learning?

Wei: Play is like breathing for the child. Play is the child's way to know and explore the world, and it definitely includes English learning, especially for children who start learning English as a second language

at a very early age. Unlike adults, who have specific goals to learn English, for example finding a job or getting a certificate, young children, especially preschool children, they don't have a purpose and motivation to learn English, so they don't understand why they should learn English. They even don't have a sense of score. They don't know they are expected to gain a high score in future primary school. That's where the fun factor comes in, where the play comes in. Play can spark young learners' interest in English through playful activities. Students, young learners use English with their hands, mouth and bodies. And more importantly, there's no pressure, no test, no fear of messing up, no worry about mistakes. And sometimes mistakes, they are just a part of the game. Mistakes sometimes even spark giggles, you know, and the more interest and motivation to continue learning English. Play also promotes a greater peer interactions, fostering an environment where children naturally take on the roles of both learners and teachers. It's like a mini melting pot of language and culture all bubbling away in the classroom. This is what we cannot imagine in a traditional teaching classroom.

We'am: Very interesting. And how does a playful approach to teaching English differ from more traditional methods, especially in terms of student interaction and language retention?

Wei: Thinking back on my own experience learning English, it was a traditional one. The teacher always played a central role in the classroom, doing all the talking, explaining words and concepts and leading activities that always are about cramming in grammar rules and memorising vocabulary for exams. So there was not too much room for us, the students, to really get involved or explore on our own. And for sure we could gain high scores in tasks, but when it came to actually using English, it was a whole different story. As an English learner myself, to be honest, I struggled to speak English fluently and confidently for a very, very long time. However, in a playful classroom, instead of just sitting there and soaking up information and knowledge like sponges, students actually get to roll up their sleeves and dive into English through games, role playing and hands-on activities. Speaking English becomes natural components of learning as students have to work together to solve problem, express ideas and negotiate meanings. Play also helps enhance language retention as students can play around with English in real-life situations. And they have the opportunities to practise those language and knowledge again, again. More importantly, adding playful elements to teaching, we are turning English learning into enjoyable activities that students want to do, rather than the tasks they have to do. I want to share my recent research. I have been looking into the use of digital play to support English learning at home. It was fascinating to witness how technology can facilitate natural and spontaneous learning. One parent's just told me how her three-year-old child started spouting off words about seasons and weekdays. She hadn't even taught her son those words directly. So essentially, although traditional lessons may yield short-term academic success, a playful approach by focusing on getting students involved, talking to each other and having fun, teachers can create a vibe where learning English just naturally falls into place.

Chris: Can play be used only with younger students or is it relevant for all ages?

Wei: The simple answer is yes. While play may look different among different age groups, younger children are often observed to play along, and older children get into more group play. I'm really into this idea called the Play Continuum that two Canadian researchers, Pyle and Danniels, came up with. It basically breaks down different types of play based on how much control the kids have. It goes from free play, where the children have lots of control, to learning through games, where we teachers guide the play activities more. We're integrating play activities in our teaching. We have to figure out how much freedom to give children. For the younger ones, leaning towards free play usually works best. But for older children, a more teacher-led approach, such as collaborative games structured with educational objectives, may be more effective. Now here's the tricky part. When teaching students whose English lags behind their

cognitive abilities, such as those who start English learning in later grades, finding that age-appropriate and linguistic suitable play activities can be very tough. If it's too hard, they will get frustrated. But if it's too easy – I mean, the play, the game – the students will get bored. So in this case, the play must be structured and guided by teachers. We could break down tasks into manageable steps and be willing to adjust our plans based on ongoing observations of student progress and feedback.

Chris: OK. So what tips would you give teachers for incorporating play into their English language teaching?

Wei: Classroom dynamics could be a real maze to navigate: a big class, limited time, safety concerns and discipline. In a big classroom, it's tough to maintain a balance between having fun and fulfilling learning objectives. It's better to break kids into smaller groups. This way we could give each group a bit more attention and keep everyone engaged. And regarding safety concerns, when talking about games that involve running, jumping and chasing, we have to make sure nobody gets hurt. And don't forget about discipline. Imagine this: we have got a group of kids running wild with excitement during play, emotions are running high and, before we know it, a mini wrestling match is breaking out. So keeping the peace while still letting kids have fun, we have to establish clear expectations for behaviours during play. Incorporating play into classroom is difficult, but despite the challenges, it's totally worth it.

Chris: I like how Wei talked about the importance of making mistakes and how mistakes can be a valuable learning tool.

We'am: I taught, once a week, a young learner class and it was a shift. You cannot explain things as an adult, so they don't understand that language.

Chris: How did you respond to that, We'am? How did you change your pedagogy?

We'am: Just grading it to the level of their thinking is helpful. Like, you can ==strike a superhero pose== when you teach young learners, and it gets their attention. Just come to the class and say 'Hello, I'm your superhero today!'

Chris: And did you use to do that sort of superhero pose?

We'am: Yeah, I was ready to do anything …

Chris: Could you show us? You can see this in the show notes.

We'am: Yeah, with these things, you just a strike a pose and you pretend that you have that energy to teach them, and then I think the play aspect comes naturally with children. But just having an idea about different, maybe, kind of activities that can work with young learners, in a playful way, is good.

Chris: One thing Wei also mentioned was about reducing the barrier between formal learning and play. She talked about the example of one child who'd learned words for seasons and so on through an activity, and I think that's, for younger learners, that's really, really important. We shouldn't set up those artificial barriers between play and learning, and here you play, here you learn. Blending the two together seems to me a really sensible approach.

We'am: Yes, and I think that line for children is kind of blurred. So I think there's plenty of opportunity these days to expose children to the language, by using maybe play-based learning activities. It provides parents with ideas for playful activities that they can do with their children at home.

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Chris: Something else I found interesting that Wei said was how play should be seen more as an approach, rather than as a kind of a specific set of time or a specific activity, and if you treat play like an approach to language learning, it means it can be used across the board with young students, but also with adults as well. You just change the way in which you're using play.

We'am: Yeah, and with younger or less experienced learners, you can do more directed or guided play and providing structure and more scaffolding opportunities. I think as students grow older, they might engage more effectively with the collaborative or exploratory kind of play, which can offer them greater autonomy and opportunity for self-directed learning.

Chris: Yeah. The key thing really is for teachers to have play as a mindset. It's kind of, it's in their thinking. And then that, that can be done in different ways with different contexts.

We'am: Yeah, I've seen more adults actually enjoying play than young learners. It's about waking up that child inside of them.

Thank you for listening. In our next episode, we will talk about 'How can we integrate critical thinking into English language teaching?'

For episode 10 of this series of Teaching English with the British Council, we're inviting you, the listener, to share your questions with us. Please visit the TeachingEnglish Facebook page to ask our three experts any questions which you might still have about the world of English language teaching.

We'am: I've got a question.

Chris: Yes, We'am?

We'am: How can we access this?

Chris: Well, you can go to the show notes to find the link.