



**JALT SPIN Student
Research Symposium**
2025 Proceedings



JALT SPIN Student Research Symposium Proceedings

Editor

Philip Nguyen
Chukyo University

Associate Editor

Natsuho Mizoguchi
Nagoya University of Foreign Studies

JALT SPIN Committee

Committee Chair

Natsuho Mizoguchi

Committee Members

Chelanna White
Aquanna Ishii
Philip Nguyen
Shuyi Li
Karmen Siew
Emily Choong



Articles

- ❖ Integrating Play into Japanese EFL settings: A Practice-Oriented Reflection, ALT and After-School (*June Ha Kim*)

Message from the Editor:

I am honored to share the 2nd proceedings for the JALT SPIN Student Research Symposium.

Our mission as JALT SPIN Committee is to support all students in their journey about academic research, educational opportunities and career paths, mentorship, and much more. We aim to provide a welcoming community where students can connect, share with each other, and acquire the guidance and confidence they need to achieve their academic goals.



I would like to thank my JALT SPIN committee members, especially our committee chair, Natsuho Mizoguchi, for her unwavering support and dedication. Her guidance and encouragement have helped bring this committee to new heights; we are truly grateful for her leadership.

I am also very excited about what the future holds for the JALT SPIN Committee as we continue to grow, support students, and create new opportunities. Thank you to everyone involved for your continued support, time, and effort in making these initiatives possible. Finally, a heartfelt thank you to all of our presenters and participants whose presence and passion make our online events meaningful and successful. I am truly grateful to be part of this experience and this wonderful community.

Warm regards,

Phil Nguyen
JALT SPIN Committee Member



Integrating Play into Japanese EFL settings: A Practice-Oriented Reflection, ALT and After-School

June Ha Kim

Abstract: This practice-oriented paper explores the concept of ‘play’ in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning environments in Japan. Drawing on experiences as an Assistant Language Teacher (ALT) in public elementary schools and as an English instructor in after-school childcare programs (*gakudo*), the paper examines how different educational contexts shape learners’ engagement with English. While traditional Japanese EFL classrooms often emphasize rote memorization and textbook-driven lessons, some learners (especially younger students) may struggle with motivation and engagement under such structured approaches.

Play-based learning offers an environment that encourages enjoyment in learning, curiosity, and meaningful communication. Through games and interactive activities, students can develop communicative language skills while also building confidence, cooperation, and creativity, which are valuable beyond the classroom. This paper further argues that play is not only practical and instrumental for young learners, but can also be beneficial for older students by creating low-anxiety spaces that encourage participation and risk-taking.

By connecting personal teaching narratives with wider pedagogical perspectives, this paper shines a light on how incorporating play can transform EFL learning environments into spaces of active learning. Implications for classroom teachers, ALTs, and after-school practitioners are discussed, including practical suggestions for integrating play as an important component of English education in Japan.

本稿は、日本の外国語としての英語（EFL）学習環境における「PLAY」の役割について、筆者の公立小学校での外国語補助教員（ALT）および放課後児童クラブ（*gakudo*）での英語指導経験をもとに考察する。教育現場の文脈によって、学習者の英語への関与や学習態度がどのように形成されるかに注目する。従来の日本の EFL 教室では、暗記中心の教科書主導型指導が重視される傾向にあり、とりわけ低年齢の学習者にとっては、こうした構造的なアプローチのもとで学習意欲や関与を維持することが難しい場合がある。

遊びに基づく学習である「PLAY」は、学習に楽しさや好奇心をもたらし、意味のあるコミュニケーションを促進する学習環境を提供する。ゲームや物語、双方向的な活動を通じて、生徒は言語能力を育成するだけでなく、教室の外でも重要となる自信、協調性、創造性を身につけることができる。本稿では、遊びが低年齢層にとって実践的かつ有効であるだけでなく、より高い年齢層の学習者にとっても、不安の少ない学習空間を創出し、参加や挑戦を促す点で有益であることを論じる。

筆者の教育実践と、関連する教育学的視点を結びつけることで、本稿は、遊びを取り入れることが EFL 学習環境を能動的な学びの場へと変容させる可能性を明らかにする。さらに、専科教員、ALT、放課後教育実践者に向けた示唆を提示し、日本における英語教育において遊びを重要な要素として統合するための実践的な方法を考察する。

June Ha Kim is currently in graduate school at Akita International University, enrolled in the English Learning Teaching Practices program. He was previously an Assistant Learning Teacher in northern Japan for five years and has a Bachelor' of Arts in English from the University of Illinois, Chicago.

Introduction

In English elementary classrooms in Japan, teachers can easily find themselves facing the possibility that their carefully planned lessons fall apart due to a variety of factors, leaving the class in chaotic disarray. With young learners, even seasoned teachers may have difficulty regaining control, especially when students have low motivation to study. In these circumstances, teachers must consider how they can design lessons so that students look forward to them and remain motivated to learn, even if everything does not go smoothly. One approach teachers should consider integrating into their lessons is “play.” While teachers traditionally provide corrective feedback to students, it may not always be the most effective way to ensure the student has actually learned from it. Students have their own learning journey and, when given group tasks, can also help their classmates who might be struggling and can assist the teacher with scaffolding techniques. Students who are proficient in the L2 language can provide each other with more effective CF that can help bring the struggling students closer to reaching the target norm.

While “play” may initially sound counterintuitive to traditional classroom instruction, research suggests that it can be crucial for encouraging student engagement, lowering affective filters, and supporting both linguistic and cognitive development (Harvard Graduate School of Education [HGSE], 2023; Shin et al., 2021). This is not exclusive to young learners. Play can also be effectively used with junior high school students through adults. It can promote creativity, provide social interaction in class, and create spaces for students to use language in meaningful contexts (Samuels, 2022). Using play productively as part of English instruction should not be seen as a distraction but as a potential pedagogical tool for language teachers.

The purpose of this paper is twofold: first, to discuss “play” within the context of researched works regarding language learning methods and child development; and second, to illustrate how play can be applied to EFL lessons. This practice-oriented paper draws primarily on my experiences as an English teacher in a Japanese after-school child-care program (*gakudo*), while also reflecting on my prior work as an Assistant Language Teacher (ALT) in public elementary and junior high schools to provide contextual contrast. The contrast between these roles highlights the importance of integrating “play” in language teaching. For example, in formal classroom settings, classes were often structured around a prescribed curriculum, defined authority roles, and strict time limitations. In comparison, after-school programs lack most of these features. However, play can still be used not only as an engagement strategy but also as a framework for rethinking language pedagogy across both formal and informal settings.

Background

As an ALT, my experiences were shaped by the Japanese public school system. In elementary schools, 3rd-grade and 4th-grade classes were considered “foreign language activities,” while 5th-grade and 6th-grade classes were more structured lessons. Once students reached junior high school, English classes became even more rigid in design. The schools and the board of education adhered closely to the curriculum designed by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT), which left little room for innovation, especially beyond elementary school. English activities in elementary schools were designed to introduce basic vocabulary, phrases, and cultural awareness, usually team-taught with a homeroom teacher (HRT), a specialized language teacher (*senka*), or a Japanese Teacher of English (JTE). As these classes adhered to a traditional Japanese classroom structure, both students and teachers held strong expectations of discipline, decorum, and behavioral norms. In this context, ALTs often served as models of

native English speaker pronunciation and functioned primarily as T2, occasionally as T1. They are also informally positioned as “cultural ambassadors,” a role that aligns with the “exchange” component emphasized in the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme (Jardon, 2018). To this end, this would involve introducing aspects of English-speaking cultures either through presentations or activities (for example, of a holiday in their home country), responding to students’ cultural questions, and promoting intercultural awareness.

In contrast, a *gakudo* presented a very different teaching environment. These after-school programs primarily serve elementary school students, provide childcare services, and offer enrichment activities rather than structured lessons. While some programs are publicly funded, private ones may offer additional educational options for parents and students. Unlike formal classrooms, *gakudos* prioritize care and play without the restrictions of a government-mandated curriculum or strong classroom authority. Staff members are often not licensed teachers, and schedules remain flexible. Given this context, children may resist further study after school, as they often view *gakudos* as spaces to relax and play.

When I first began teaching in the *gakudo*, I struggled to transition from the structured environment of public schools to a largely unstructured learning environment. This forced me to adapt my pedagogical strategies and rethink how I introduced English to learners who did not want their after-school experience to resemble traditional schooling. While my ALT role had not required much focus on classroom management, my after-school teaching experience demanded that I balance maintaining order with creating engaging lessons. This situation ultimately laid the foundation for exploring “play” as a pedagogical tool.

Challenges in After-School EFL Lessons

Teaching English in a formal classroom and in a *gakudo* each presents unique challenges. In Japanese classrooms, students usually comply with classroom rules and cultural norms, accepting the main teacher’s authority and viewing studying as a necessary part of school life. In a *gakudo*, however, English activities usually occur after their packed school day, and children tend to associate lessons with the formal schooling obligations. As a result, teachers frequently encounter resistance to structured lessons, and maintaining engagement can be difficult without considering an appropriate approach to how learning activities are framed. My experience working in the *gakudo* included challenges such as:

- Motivation: Varied widely; while some children were eager to show off their English knowledge, others were openly resistant to participating in lessons.
- Attention span: Often limited. Children frequently distract each other. Ongoing activities or even just their surrounding environment; remaining seated for extended periods was challenging.
- Behavioral challenges: Some children refused to participate, disrupted activities, or expressed negative attitudes toward English and lessons in general.
- Existing English skills: Learners demonstrated varying levels of proficiency, making it difficult to design lessons that built on shared prior knowledge or consistently throughout each student.

- Support from staff: Many staff members lacked confidence in their English ability and therefore deferred responsibility for planning or leading English activities.

These challenges made traditional EFL instruction difficult, particularly when using worksheets or rote memorization, which often failed to engage students. Inconsistent attendance further compounded the difficulty, as it was hard to build lessons sequentially. These circumstances pushed me to explore how to introduce elements of play into learning opportunities, rather than relying solely on traditional classroom approaches.

“Play” As a Concept

Play can be defined as a spontaneous, enjoyable, and intrinsically motivated activity that allows students to explore, experiment, and interact with their surroundings (Hōkago Jidō Shien-in Nintei Shikaku Kenshū Kyōzai Henshū Iinkai, 2024). Rather than being bound by rules, it is led by imagination. Educational research has supported the value of play in learning. Shin and Crandall (2014) have noted that young learners acquire language more effectively when lessons include meaningful and engaging activities. The HGSE (2023) in their practitioner-oriented publication describes integrating play into lessons as a way to encourage the joy in learning, spark imagination, and support taking risks within a safe environment. Furthermore, Shin et al. (2021) further discuss how game-like activities enhance motivation and participation. This can make language learning enjoyable rather than a burden for students. Put together, these perspectives suggest that play supports language learning, not simply by trying to increase enjoyment, but by creating conditions where learners are wanting to participate, take risks, and use language meaningfully without the fear of failure.

The benefits of play are not just limited to young learners. Samuels (2022) discusses the importance of play for middle school students as well, noting that chances for playful learning usually diminish as academic demands increase as they advance in grade. Multiple research suggests that opportunities for lessons or activities integrating play tend to decrease as students advance through the school system despite their benefits. Samuels (2022) notes this trend among middle school learners, while Bakkegard (2024) argues that older students benefit from play as it provides a safe space for experimentation and risk-taking. For teachers working in either or both formal and informal educational settings, these findings suggest that play should not be viewed as inappropriate for older learners, but rather as a flexible pedagogical approach that can be adapted to different ages using a variety of styles and learning environments.

Applying “Play” in EFL Teaching

In my after-school teaching experience, embracing play helped shift my fundamental approach to teaching. Instead of centering on lessons and achievement landmarks or feedback, I looked for opportunities to take advantage of the playful environment of the *gakudo* and designed activities to match. Effective strategies included:

- Task-Based and Content-Based play: Activities, such as treasure hunts or business card-making projects, utilized meaningful tasks while incorporating easy, natural, and meaningful English. The students could see English as a tool rather than a chore. By integrating English within meaningful tasks, students are able to use language purposefully rather than focusing on correctness, which in turn, reduced resistance and increased their willingness to participate.

- Adapted Total Physical Response (TPR): TPR activities were often modified to accommodate students with varying physical abilities. This ensured that physical ability was de-emphasized and that cooperation and effort were rewarded. As a result, adaptation allowed students of varying physical abilities to participate without anxiety. This encouraged inclusion and focusing on communication and cooperation over performance. 1-6
- Learner autonomy and discovery opportunities: Students were encouraged to explore English in their own way. Using familiar phrases through games, puzzles, or storytelling, students were allowed to find English they understood in their own terms and ask about English they were unsure about, emphasizing curiosity. 7-10
- Positive reinforcement: Celebrating small victories was encouraged. Lessons were designed focusing on effort rather than accuracy. This helped students build confidence and motivation. 11-13
- Utilizing schemata: Activities were designed drawing on familiar themes, such as seasonal events, video game or anime characters they already knew, as well as English phrases they already knew. This helped make students feel that the language was accessible to them. 14-17

An example of a lesson included a business card exchange role-play situation. While the children were largely unfamiliar with the concept, they were able to understand the idea of introducing themselves to a new friend and connect to the phrases associated with the situation. Even if the students had difficulty with the phrases or were resistant to participating, they were all able to make their own custom business card, with English written on it. The students were praised for being able to write English and design their own business cards, even if they were unable to participate in the role-play. 18-24

Applying play beyond young learners can be helpful for junior high school students in the form of role-play using new English phrases and concepts from their textbooks, as well as reintroducing phrases and situations they learned in elementary school, with an updated junior high school context. They can explore concepts they have learned and reflect on their own English learning journey and how much they have learned, providing motivation to continue learning. Samuels (2022) notes that teenage students still enjoy playful activities such as using Play-Doh or arts and crafts. 25-31

Reflecting on my previous experience as an ALT in junior high school, many students appeared hesitant to speak or take risks in English once lessons became more focused on their tests. It can be theorized that structured role-play and playful re-engagement with a familiar language can provide opportunities for students to use English more freely, re-connecting with language they had encountered in elementary school. 32-37

Implications for EFL Teachers 38

Integrating play into EFL instruction can offer several important implications for teachers across different educational contexts. This includes formal classroom settings and informal learning environments such as with a *gakudo*. Instead of viewing play as a separate or optional entity from learning objectives, teachers can reconceptualize play as a pedagogical stance or tool that prioritizes engagement, experimentation, and emotional safety. These implications highlight how play can support both learners and teachers in meaningful ways: 39-45

• **Motivation and engagement:** Playful approaches can transform English learning from feeling like an obligation into a chance for exploration and self-expression. By framing learning activities as games, challenges, or creative tasks, students can be encouraged to participate without the fear of failure or anxiety. This is especially beneficial for learners who tend to resist traditional methods due to anxiety, low confidence, or repeated experiences of perceived failure in their classes. Play can reduce that pressure and allow students to engage with English at their own pace, which can increase willingness to communicate and motivate over time.

• **Flexibility across various contexts:** While *gakudo* environments naturally prioritize play, similar elements can be adapted in more structured classroom settings without taking away from curricular goals. Even within rigid schedules or textbook-driven lessons, teachers can incorporate playful or gamified elements such as role-play, movement, storytelling, or even task-based activities. In this regard, ALTs are especially well-positioned to contribute creatively. They can bring alternative teaching styles they experienced and can complement the authority and structure provided by their T1 or main teacher. Through play, ALTs can help bridge the gap between communicative language use and prescriptive lesson content.

• **Teacher collaboration:** The effectiveness of playful learning can be enhanced when teachers and support staff collaborate. In *gakudo* settings, when staff cooperate, it allows for flexible activity design and shared responsibility for engagement. In traditional school contexts, the collaboration between ALTs and Japanese teachers enables lessons to balance structure and creativity. Multiple teachers can provide varied language models and interaction styles. This helps students relate to English through different personalities and approaches. Collaborative reflection also allows teachers to refine activities based on student responses, potentially making play more intentional and pedagogically grounded.

• **Applicability for all:** Play is not limited to young learners and can be meaningfully applied across age groups. For older students, playful activities such as role-play, creative projects, or low-stakes simulations can create safe spaces for experimentation, particularly for learners who have become risk-averse due to exam pressures or accumulated negative experiences. Teachers themselves also benefit from playful pedagogy, as observing students' curiosity and creative problem-solving can inform future lesson design. Through play, teachers can rediscover flexibility in their practice and remain responsive to learners' needs.

Conclusion

The transition from working as an ALT in formal school settings to teaching in a *gakudo* environment emphasizes the pedagogical value of play in language learning, regardless of environment. Experiencing the contrast between structured, curriculum-driven classrooms and the flexible, student-centered atmosphere of *gakudo* demonstrates the importance of adaptability and creativity in EFL teaching. These differing contexts revealed that play is not a distraction from learning, but a means of reframing study as an engaging and meaningful experience.

Reframing play as a pedagogical approach encourages teachers to focus on student motivation, emotional safety, and learner agency alongside linguistic objectives. When lessons emphasize effort, curiosity, and exploration, students are more likely to take risks and view English as a useful tool rather than an arbitrary academic requirement. This perspective is particularly valuable in EFL contexts where the students' exposure to

English is limited and anxiety can hinder participation.

Play should therefore be embraced as a fundamental component of English pedagogy for learners of all ages. Whether in a *gakudo*, a public or private school classroom, or even adult language education, play can encourage confidence, create motivation, and support meaningful engagement and lessons with language. For EFL teachers in particular (especially those working with ALTs or in informal learning environments), integrating play offers a practical, adaptable approach to enhancing both teaching practice and students' language-learning experiences.

References

1. Bakkegard, R. (2024, March 26). *Reintroducing playful learning in high school*. Edutopia. <https://www.edutopia.org/article/playful-learning-high-school>
2. Harvard Graduate School of Education. (2023, May 17). *Embracing learning through play*. <https://www.gse.harvard.edu/ideas/usable-knowledge/23/05/embracing-learning-through-play>
3. Hōkago Jidō Shien-in Nintei Shikaku Kenshū Kyōzai Henshū Iinkai. (2024). *Hōkago jidō shien-in todōfuken nintei shikaku*. Chūō hōki.
4. Jardon, A. (2018). *The JET program experience through the eyes of alts: a narrative inquiry* (Doctoral dissertation, Thesis). University of Kansas. <https://kuscholarworks.ku.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/a22410ad-6347-4dfd-9887-4be657af9a47/content>.
5. Samuels, C. (2022, November 22). *Play is crucial for middle schoolers, too*. The Hechinger Report. <https://hechingerreport.org/play-is-crucial-for-middle-schoolers-too/>
6. Shin, J., & Crandall, J. (2014). *Teaching young learners English: From theory to practice*. National Geographic Learning/Heinle, Cengage Learning.
7. Shin, J. K., Savić, V., & Machida, T. (2021). *The 6 principles for exemplary teaching of English learners*. TESOL Press.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of JALT, SPIN and/or the editor(s). JALT, SPIN, and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.