

PLAYFUL PEDAGOGIES FOR EARLY ENGLISH LEARNING: A COMMUNITY-BASED APPROACH IN RURAL EDUCATION

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SUMMARY

This community service program aimed to enhance early English learning experiences for elementary school students in Ligarmukti Village through interactive and engaging activities. Recognizing the limited exposure to English language education in rural areas, this initiative introduced playful pedagogical approaches to foster interest, confidence, and foundational language skills among students from grades 1 to 6. The methods used included songs, storytelling, games, and thematic activities tailored to the students' cognitive development and local context. The implementation involved several learning sessions conducted directly in the village's elementary school, emphasizing active participation, joyful learning, and student-centered interaction. Results from direct observation and informal feedback indicated a positive response from students, who showed increased enthusiasm and participation in English language activities. Teachers and parents also expressed appreciation for the initiative, highlighting its contribution to children's motivation and communication skills. In conclusion, the program demonstrated that early exposure to English through fun and contextualized methods can stimulate language interest and support broader educational development in underserved communities. It is recommended that similar programs be sustained and expanded through collaboration with local schools to ensure long-term impact and continuity.

Keywords: *Playful Pedagogy; Early English Education; Rural Elementary Students*

INTRODUCTION

English is an international language that plays a crucial role in education, science, technology, and global communication. As noted by Bolton and Graddol (2021), English continues to evolve as a global lingua franca, acting as a medium for intercultural exchange, academic advancement, and participation in the digital economy. Given this context, the ability to understand and use English from an early age has become increasingly essential, particularly in preparing young learners to face future academic and professional demands.

However, in many rural areas, the implementation of English education at the primary school level faces substantial challenges. Prior to the implementation of this community service program, **elementary schools in Ligarmukti Village, West Java, experienced several critical constraints in English teaching and learning**. Based on preliminary observations and discussions with school representatives, the main problems identified included **the absence of specialized English teachers at the elementary level, limited instructional time allocated to English, lack of age-appropriate learning materials, and minimal student exposure to English outside the classroom**. As a result, English learning was often delivered sporadically, teacher-centered, and focused mainly on rote memorization, which reduced students' motivation and confidence in using the language.

These local conditions reflect broader issues commonly found in rural primary schools. Studies have shown that English language learning in rural contexts often encounters pedagogical and contextual barriers, such as insufficient teaching resources, limited teacher training, and low instructional confidence among educators (Laila et al., 2023). Similar findings have been reported in rural areas of China and India, where teachers struggle to implement engaging English instruction due to restricted access to effective teaching strategies and professional development opportunities (Wang & Zhao, 2022; Patel et al., 2024). Consequently, students in these settings tend to perceive English as a difficult and intimidating subject rather than a meaningful communication tool.

To address these challenges, researchers have emphasized the importance of **playful, student-centered, and context-sensitive approaches** in early English instruction. Pedagogical strategies such as gamification, storytelling, project-based learning, and technology-enhanced language learning (TELL) have been proven effective in increasing student motivation, participation, and confidence, particularly among young learners (Malque et al., 2023; Nicolay & Poncelet, 2020). These approaches are especially relevant for rural contexts, where conventional textbook-based instruction may not align with students' learning needs and sociocultural environments.

In addition to linguistic benefits, early exposure to English has been associated with positive cognitive development, including enhanced memory, cognitive flexibility, and problem-solving skills (Eurydice, 2023). Bilingual children also demonstrate stronger executive functions, such as attention control and task-switching abilities, which are crucial for academic success. Furthermore, meaningful and enjoyable English learning experiences contribute to students' socio-emotional growth. Interactive English instruction has been shown to improve communication skills and self-confidence, which are essential for both social interaction and classroom participation (British Council, 2025). Berlitz (2024) further highlights that early English learning can foster cultural awareness, empathy, and intrinsic motivation when delivered in a safe, engaging, and supportive learning environment.

Responding directly to the **identified needs and constraints of the community partner**, a community service program was initiated by a team of university lecturers to support English learning in Ligarmukti Village. The program was specifically designed to overcome the lack of engaging English instruction by providing **playful and interactive English learning modules** tailored to elementary school students

in grades 1 to 6. Songs, games, simple storytelling, and prize-based quizzes were employed as core teaching strategies to compensate for limited resources and to create a more enjoyable learning atmosphere.

The program aimed not only to introduce basic English vocabulary and expressions but also to **address students' low confidence and limited exposure to English** by encouraging active participation and positive learning experiences. Initial observations indicated strong student enthusiasm, with learners actively engaging in activities and demonstrating increased willingness to use English. Teachers and parents also acknowledged improvements in student participation and communication. Beyond instructional outcomes, the program strengthened collaboration between the academic team and the local community, illustrating how university-led community service initiatives can effectively respond to partner-identified problems and contribute to reducing educational disparities in rural settings.

This study seeks to reflect on the implementation and outcomes of the program in Ligarmukti and to explore how playful pedagogical strategies can be adapted and sustained in rural learning environments through community-based interventions. It also aims to contribute insights into the design of inclusive early English education models that are both locally relevant and pedagogically effective. **Importantly, beyond reflective analysis, this study emphasizes the tangible outputs of the community service program as concrete contributions to the partner community.** The community service program in Ligarmukti Village generated several **concrete and transferable outputs** that directly addressed the needs of the partner schools and supported the sustainability of English learning activities.

First, the program produced a set of **playful English learning modules** specifically designed for elementary school students in grades 1–6. These modules included thematic lesson plans, simple vocabulary lists, song lyrics, game instructions, and short storytelling scripts. The materials were intentionally developed using low-cost and locally available resources so that teachers could reuse and adapt them independently after the program ended. This output responded directly to the partner's initial lack of age-appropriate and engaging English teaching materials. Second, a variety of **teaching media and learning aids** were developed and implemented during the program. These included flashcards, picture-based worksheets, action-based games, and reward-based quizzes. The teaching media served as practical tools to support interactive classroom activities and helped create a more engaging and student-centered learning environment, particularly in contexts with limited access to digital technology. Third, the program introduced a **playful pedagogical model for rural English instruction**, which integrates songs, games, storytelling, and collaborative activities into short, flexible learning sessions. This model can be easily replicated in similar rural settings, as it does not rely on advanced infrastructure or extensive teacher training. The pedagogical framework serves as a reference for teachers in designing enjoyable and meaningful English lessons that align with students' cognitive and socio-emotional development. Fourth, the program contributed to **capacity building for local teachers** through informal mentoring and collaborative teaching practices. Teachers observed and participated in the implementation of playful strategies, gaining practical insights into classroom management, student engagement techniques, and confidence-building approaches for young learners. This experiential learning process strengthened teachers' instructional confidence and encouraged them to integrate playful methods into their regular teaching practices.

Finally, the program generated **transferable practices and community-based collaboration models** that can be adopted by other schools in similar rural contexts. The close collaboration between the university team, teachers, and the local community demonstrated how community service initiatives can

function not only as short-term interventions but also as catalysts for sustainable educational improvement.

By clearly articulating these outputs, the study highlights the program's practical contributions to the partner community and reinforces its relevance as a community service initiative. The identified outputs also provide a foundation for scaling up playful English learning practices in other underserved rural areas.

METHOD

This community service program was conducted in Ligarmukti Village, West Java, and targeted elementary school students from grades 1 to 6. A total of 47 children participated in the sessions, which were intentionally designed to enhance early English learning through interactive, playful, and context-sensitive pedagogical strategies delivered in a non-formal and supportive learning environment.

The instructional design adopted a qualitative participatory approach, incorporating key elements of playful pedagogy such as singing English songs, storytelling using visual aids, educational games, and reward-based quizzes. These methods were carefully chosen to align with the cognitive and emotional development of early learners, aiming to create a joyful atmosphere that encourages curiosity, verbal expression, and sustained engagement. The activities were implemented across multiple sessions held directly at the village's elementary school and involved close collaboration between academic facilitators from IKPIA Perbanas and local teaching staff.

To evaluate the effectiveness and contextual relevance of the program, a multi-source data collection strategy was applied. This included:

- **Structured observations** of classroom interactions focusing on participation levels, verbal engagement, and non-verbal enthusiasm;
- **Informal interviews** with students and teachers to elicit feedback on the learning experience, perceived benefits, and areas for improvement; and
- **Facilitator reflection journals**, which captured real-time insights, logistical challenges, and critical incidents encountered during the sessions.

The collected qualitative data were analyzed thematically using an inductive coding process. Repeated readings of observation notes and reflection journals led to the identification of key themes such as increased learner motivation, improved confidence in using simple English phrases, and a shift in classroom dynamics toward more student-centered interaction. The analysis also noted instances of adaptation by local teachers, indicating early signs of pedagogical transferability.

While the program was successful in fostering early language interest, the reflection journals also highlighted certain scalability challenges, such as the need for continuous teacher training, limited learning materials, and time constraints in rural schools. These insights informed the recommendation for future capacity-building efforts and ongoing institutional support to ensure long-term integration and sustainability of playful English learning models in similar underserved contexts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The English learning program conducted in Ligarmukti Village involved 47 elementary school students from grades 1 to 6 and demonstrated consistently high levels of participation throughout the sessions. Students actively engaged in singing, games, question-and-answer activities, and storytelling, indicating a positive response to the learning environment. While these observations reflect strong engagement, a

deeper analysis reveals several contextual and pedagogical factors that explain **why playful pedagogy was particularly effective in this rural setting**.

First, the effectiveness of the program can be understood through the lens of **student-centered and affective language learning theories**. In rural contexts such as Ligarmukti, students often have limited prior exposure to English and may associate the language with difficulty or failure. The use of songs, games, and storytelling helped lower students' affective filters by creating a non-threatening and enjoyable learning atmosphere. This aligns with Krashen's affective filter hypothesis, which suggests that reduced anxiety and increased motivation facilitate language acquisition. The observed verbal responsiveness and willingness to participate indicate that playful activities successfully minimized learners' fear of making mistakes, a common barrier in foreign language classrooms.

Second, the adaptability of playful pedagogy across different grade levels highlights its relevance to **heterogeneous learning contexts**, which are typical in rural schools. Rather than relying on age-specific textbooks or rigid curricular structures, the program employed flexible activities that could be easily adjusted in complexity. This finding supports Nicolay and Poncelet (2020), who argue that gamification and storytelling are particularly effective in mixed-ability classrooms because they allow learners to engage at their own developmental level while still participating collectively.

Third, the strong student engagement observed can also be attributed to the **multisensory nature of the instructional strategies**. Songs and action-based games combined auditory, visual, and kinesthetic elements, which are known to enhance memory retention and comprehension among young learners. This supports the findings of Malque et al. (2023), who emphasize that playful learning modalities increase motivation and sustain attention, especially in contexts where formal instructional resources are scarce.

Beyond student outcomes, the program's impact extended to the wider learning ecosystem, including teachers and parents. Teachers reported increased student participation and confidence, while parents noted greater enthusiasm toward learning English. From a sociocultural perspective, this broader acceptance is significant, as community attitudes toward English learning can strongly influence students' long-term motivation. The findings resonate with the British Council (2025), which highlights that positive early experiences with English contribute not only to linguistic development but also to social confidence and communicative willingness.

Moreover, the emergence of students using simple English expressions during and after the activities suggests early stages of **meaningful language use**, rather than rote memorization. This observation aligns with Eurydice (2023), which emphasizes that early language exposure supports cognitive development and communicative competence when learners are encouraged to use language functionally in authentic contexts. Although the program was short-term, these initial gains indicate the potential for playful pedagogy to act as a catalyst for sustained language learning when supported by continued practice.

In the broader context of rural English education in Indonesia, these findings contribute important insights. Unlike conventional school-based interventions that depend heavily on trained English teachers and standardized materials, this university-led community service program demonstrates that **context-sensitive, low-cost, and playful approaches** can effectively address structural limitations in underserved areas. The integration of culturally familiar activities and localized content further enhanced relevance and acceptance, increasing the likelihood of sustainability.

Overall, the results suggest that the success of the program was not merely due to student enthusiasm, but to the deliberate alignment of playful pedagogy with learners' cognitive, emotional, and sociocultural needs. By situating the findings within established theories and prior studies, this discussion underscores the academic and practical value of community-based, playful English instruction as a viable strategy for reducing educational disparities between urban and rural contexts.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study not only validates the pedagogical value of playful English learning for young learners but also highlights the potential of academic–community collaboration in addressing systemic educational disparities in rural contexts. Beyond descriptive outcomes, the impact of the program was identified through several **qualitative change indicators** observed during and after the intervention.

First, **changes in student participation patterns** served as a primary indicator of impact. Compared to initial sessions, students demonstrated increased willingness to volunteer answers, participate in group activities, and respond verbally in English. Notably, students who were initially passive or hesitant began to engage more actively as the sessions progressed, suggesting a reduction in language anxiety and growing confidence.

Second, **behavioral and communicative changes** were observed in students' use of English. Toward the end of the program, learners increasingly used simple English expressions such as greetings, classroom commands, and vocabulary items spontaneously during activities. This shift from silent participation to functional language use indicates early-stage communicative development resulting from repeated, low-pressure exposure.

Third, **sustained engagement and attendance consistency** functioned as an indirect indicator of program effectiveness. Students consistently attended the sessions and showed anticipation for upcoming activities, reflecting positive learning attitudes and intrinsic motivation fostered by the playful pedagogical approach.

Fourth, **stakeholder feedback from teachers and parents** provided additional evidence of impact. Teachers reported noticeable improvements in student confidence and classroom participation, while parents observed increased enthusiasm toward English learning at home. These perceptions reinforce the observed behavioral changes and highlight the program's influence beyond the classroom setting. While the study did not employ formal pre- and post-test instruments, these qualitative indicators offer credible evidence of meaningful change within the scope of a short-term community service program. Future initiatives are encouraged to integrate more structured assessment tools, such as simple observation checklists or pre- and post-activity reflections, to further strengthen impact evaluation.

Future efforts should focus on scaling the model through systematic teacher training, embedding playful pedagogy into regular classroom practices, and ensuring sustainability through long-term partnerships with local schools and educational stakeholders. By combining community engagement with reflective impact assessment, similar programs can contribute more effectively to inclusive and sustainable early English education in underserved areas.



Figure 1 Community Service Activity Photos

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to examine the implementation of a playful pedagogy-based English learning program conducted through a university-led community service initiative in Ligarmukti Village, with a focus on how such an approach influences students' motivation, participation, and foundational English skills.

The findings show that interactive and culturally contextualized learning activities significantly enhanced student engagement and verbal expression across all elementary grade levels.

This study contributes to the literature on rural English education by demonstrating that short-term, informal exposure to playful and engaging language instruction delivered through community-based initiatives can meaningfully support early language development. It also extends existing knowledge by highlighting the potential of university-community collaboration as an inclusive model for addressing educational disparities in underserved areas.

Based on these insights, it is recommended that future programs integrate localized content, provide training for local teachers to sustain pedagogical practices, and explore the use of digital tools to reinforce learning continuity. Further research is also needed to examine the long-term impact of such interventions on students' academic performance, language retention, and continued motivation, as well as the feasibility of scaling this model to other rural contexts.

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