Degree Thesis 1
Bachelor’s Level
The Role of Play

A literature study on playful learning in the early elementary EFL classroom

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Abstract

Young students learn through active and playful encounters with their environment. *The Curriculum for Compulsory School* (Lgr11) states the importance of play in students’ active learning. The aim of this thesis is to investigate the role that has been ascribed to play in research on early English language learning. The main questions address how play can be used to promote language learning in the early primary English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom and other methods teachers may use that benefit students’ language development. The method used for this thesis is a systematic literature review with a qualitative approach. Six studies were included in the analysis. The analysis shows that playful methods of teaching can help the teacher to develop students’ English skills. Research has shown that playful encounters during language learning help students feel more motivated and dedicated to learning a foreign language. The results indicate the importance of the teacher having knowledge regarding what is being taught, how it is supposed to be learned, and why it is meaningful for the students in their own personal language development. Based on the thesis results further research is needed to understand the teachers’ methods of teaching English as a Foreign Language in the early primary classroom.

**Keywords:** English language learning, second language learning, play, games, Elementary school, EFL, Elementary school, Elementary teaching, and Class Activities.
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1. Introduction

In Sweden, learning English is considered important and is generally taught from early primary school. *The Curriculum for Compulsory School* (Lgr11) states a number of teaching areas such as “daily life”, “words and phrases” and “songs, rhymes, poems and sagas” (Skolverket, 2011a, p. 33), but indicates that the methods on how to teach are chosen by the teacher. At the same time, it is through language that human beings think, communicate, and learn (Skolverket, 2011a, p. 32).

Lgr11 (Skolverket, 2011a) mentions that in a classroom, there are different individuals with different needs, skills, abilities and backgrounds that the teacher must keep in mind when teaching (p. 10). Lundberg (2011, p. 9) emphasize that teachers should involve all students regardless of their needs or backgrounds and Pinter (2006) states for this to be possible the teacher needs to be equipped with the ability to modify his or her teaching methods, matching the students’ abilities to comprehend. Teaching methods change, are disputed, and new methods are suggested as the pendulum swings between different theories of education (pp. 5, 15-16). This thesis is connected with two theoretical areas, the sociocultural- and multiple intelligence theory, which will be further explained in section 3. Since teaching methods might differ between different locations and schools, it is important that teachers are aware of different theories of education. Lgr11 (Skolverket, 2011a) argues that it is therefore of importance that the teacher is aware of how creative activities and games could be essential components for students’ active learning in the early years of primary school (p. 11).

Over the years, I have developed a great interest in how the English language is taught as a foreign language in Swedish schools. Through my teaching experience, I have become more aware of the difficulty for teachers to reach all students and to help them become active participants in the English language classroom. One of the main challenges I have noticed is the difficulty some teachers have using English as the primary language during teaching. It’s not just the challenge of speaking the English language verbally, but also using the correct grammar and syntax when teaching students. This could be a cause rooted in the fact that many Swedes do not usually speak English in everyday life. Lundberg (2011) states that language is primarily learned through using it and it is of great importance that teachers motivate and encourage their students to be orally active in the English language classroom. If not, it could lead to weaknesses in students’ language development (pp. 14-15). With the curriculum directives in mind, and with knowledge of the philosophy of language the teacher gets a chance to create and meet students’ linguistic development in a positive way during the students’ contact with English as a foreign language.

1.1 Aim and research questions

The aim of this thesis is to explore the role of play in the early primary English classroom and how it can keep students motivated to learn English as a foreign language. The intention is to see how play is used by children and if the method of play, can encourage and motivate students to develop their English language learning.

The following research questions have been chosen:

- How can play be used to promote language learning in the early primary EFL classroom?
- What motivational methods using play can teachers use to enhance students’ language learning?
2. Background
In this section, relevant information from previous research and the Swedish national curriculum is presented.

2.1 Definition of terms
The following terms are used throughout the thesis and are therefore clarified in this section to facilitate reader understanding.

2.1.1 English as a Foreign Language (EFL)
According to Pinter (2006), the term English as a Foreign Language (EFL) refers to English learned as a subject in school where students have little or no opportunities to primarily interact and practice their language skills outside the school (p. 166). Sandström (2013) argues that in Sweden this is not necessarily the case, because many students encounter English daily through television, books, games, the Internet, and so on (pp. 93-100). Yet, as Pinter (2006) suggests, EFL is generally considered to be more appropriate than ESL (English as a Second Language), since English is not an official language in Sweden (p. 32).

Lundberg (2011) mentions that in order for students to develop linguistic confidence, it’s necessary that teachers are fluent in English, so that the students can get a good relation to EFL (pp. 12-13). Children are most receptive to language when they are 6-7 years old, that it is why Lundberg (2011) mentions the importance of starting with the English language as early as possible, while the interest and motivation for language development are at its best (p. 127). According to Lundberg (2011), it seems necessary that all students have to be exposed to the core content in Lgr11 (Skolverket, 2011a) before they end third grade (p. 31). Pinter (2006) refers to the importance of giving students in the EFL context an environment where they can get ample of opportunities to practice the English language, and be motivated and encouraged to use and learn English. This is required to help students that live in a non-English environment and have limited opportunities to practice English outside of school. Allowing students ample opportunities to practice the language can make them enthusiastic towards language learning and encouraged to use and learn English (p. 32).

2.1.2 Play
According to Silvers’ (1999) research, it is emphasized that play exerts influence on children’s motivation and interests in doing things in daily life. When it comes to learning English as a foreign language, play could have a fundamental role in enhancing English learning capabilities. It can help them overcome shyness and insecurity while being active during English lesson. Incorporating play in regular EFL, using active, natural, process-oriented and enjoyable activities such as games, songs, and rhymes could help students feel motivated and able to participate in English with their classmates on a playful level (pp. 63-69).

Silver (1999) defines “play” in relation to six criteria: intrinsic motivation, concern with the process rather than product, take control of the activity by the children themselves, nonliterality, freedom from externally imposed rules and active participation (p. 64). The first criterion is about how play should be fun. Silver (1999) argues that if a game is thought of as fun, the student will feel motivated to continue with the task. It is more rewarding to feel the joy of performing the act of playing than to obtain a specific result. The second criterion ensures students’ motivation to see the result occur without the need for specific requirements of ulterior motive and thus can achieve results at their own pace per their own feelings (p. 64). The third criterion emphasizes that students are free to decide how the game should be developed to help promote self-confidence. Silver (1999) argues that in that way the students
take control of the activity themselves (p. 64). The forth criterion describes how Silver (1999) has seen many instances where children (up to age of 13 years) engage in fantasy play with their peers with sociodramatic plays (p. 65). The fifth criteria mention the use of games functions as a component of play. Silver (1999) mentions how spontaneous play consists of children’s freedom to control the activity. Silver (1999) argues that play should not be constrained by the limits imposed by a formal set of rules and that it should be possible to include games as a characteristic form of play (p. 65). The last criterion focuses on how play involves the active engagement of the participating students and helps to develop intellectually, physically, mentally, emotionally, and social skills. Silver (1999) argues that play helps to motivate students to explore their environment (p. 66).

Gray (2013) argues that by allowing children to use play, they can explore and observe the world around them. Play and exploration is a natural way for children to understand how things function (pp. 278-282). Pinter (2006) highlights that it is of great importance that teachers think of playful methods such as role-play, songs, rhymes, games and a great variety of materials when teaching young learners (pp. 32-3). Gray’s (2013) research mentions that if teachers permit children to use the strategy of play to learn, it could facilitate healthy development and a desire for lifelong learning (p. 282).

2.2 Motivational teaching methods
This section will discuss the importance of motivational teaching methods and tools.

Pinter (2006) states that teachers should be mindful when choosing one method over another and should differentiate according to the students’ needs and preferences. Teachers often notice that children enjoy different activities individually. Teachers should consider that all students are different and need a variety of ways of learning as well as different strategies to be motivated learners (pp. 20-24).

Lundberg (2011) emphasizes that the teacher is the students’ linguistic and communicative role model, therefore, it is important that the teachers be comfortable speaking English, and that the teachers not put too much emphasis on their own linguistic mistakes. A teacher who uses various strategies, such as body language, facial expressions and visual aids, can create a communicative classroom climate in which students feel comfortable and motivated to use the English language. Lundberg (2011) states that when students see their teacher is speaking freely, they are more likely to use English and become an active participant in the classroom (pp. 60-61). Lundberg (2011) emphasizes that in order for students to feel confident to use English, they need to be engaged, interested and motivated. This requires a variety of strategies, methods and materials to promote students’ willingness and desire to learn English as a foreign language (pp. 59-64).

Dörnyei (2001) notes that there are many different strategies for teachers to choose. However, in order to keep students engaged, the students must be motivated. Motivation involves delight and joy about something you do. It can be explained as the driving force and the ability to capture attention, increase concentration and accelerate task orientation. Motivation drives the students’ desire and willingness to learn a foreign language (pp. 5-11). Lundberg (2011) also mentions that it is important that the students can understand the content of speech or text, rather than be able to explain what every word means. When students are learning a language, the teacher should aim for them to learn it where the main objective is to make students want to use the language by interacting with others (pp. 14-15). According to Dörnyei (2001) maintaining students’ motivation is key and there are several variables such as interest, mood, and expectancy of success, which can explain why a student is willing to interact in the classroom activities or not (pp. 9-11). Dörnyei (2001) describes some of the most important motives for students to be active in the classroom. If students do not see or
feel that they are learning new things and facing new challenges in their language development, their motivation might decrease. In addition, their attitudes towards language learning may not be positive. Unfortunately, one cannot say that a specific strategy will function in all classrooms over the whole world. Strategies are something the teacher must understand and be willing to try and find new valuable methods to motivate the language development of their own specific students. Although one cannot say that one strategy is more successful than another, play has been an important role in why and how students are willing to learn something new (Dörnyei, 2001, pp. 9-14).

Sandström (2013) explains that many students enjoy playing with language, exploring the linguistic world, experimenting with words and making an emotional connection through their own experiences. In practice this could entail storybooks, songs, and rhymes. By approaching the teaching of English in a playful way, teachers can help students become more enthusiastic. This could encourage them to interact willingly. By using play as a teaching method of English language learning, the teachers can encourage the students to express themselves and speak in English more frequently, building their confidence. If one listens carefully, one will hear that the students might use words related to food, easy phrases, colors or numbers. Therefore, it is important to bring foreign language learning to the students’ level. By introducing vocabulary in a playful way, one can help children develop a lifelong desire to learn (pp. 37-48, 93-95).

2.3 The Swedish curriculum
Lgr11, *The Curriculum for Compulsory School* (Skolverket, 2011a), introduces the subject of English by stating that the “teaching of English should aim at helping students develop knowledge of the English language and of the content areas and where English is used”. The focus of the Swedish curriculum supports the formulation that instruction should aim at general communicative skills, confidence to speak and use English, and understanding cultural phenomena. All teaching should provide students with knowledge in English and of the conditions and environments in which the language is spoken (p. 32).

Lgr11 (Skolverket, 2011a) describes play as important in helping students gain knowledge during early school years (p. 11, 32). In the commentaries to the curriculum in English, (Skolverket, 2011b) it is stressed that in 1st thru 3rd grades, the focus of English education should be built on the communication in everyday life and living. To approach the English language, one could use games, leisure activities and/or music (Skolverket, 2011b, p. 13).

Börjesson (2012) also refers to the importance of the teacher aiming for providing students with all-round communicative skills. According to Börjesson (2012) it is known that some people learn faster or slower than others. Therefore, the teacher should provide students with communicative skills so the students can feel comfortable while using the English language and that their English knowledge will increase (p. 19). Börjesson (2012) emphasizes the starting point for learning English as a foreign language is a good learning environment: one which gives the students the ability to believe in their own linguistic ability, encourages them to dare to use the English language and not be afraid of making mistakes. Börjesson (2012) says when students feel safe, they could become motivated and feel positive to interact using the English language. Börjesson (2012) states that linguistic ability is about having courage and the will to use a language (pp. 1-2). This is also something that Lgr11 (Skolverket, 2011a) mentions as some of the fundamental values and tasks of the school. Students should be given a wealth of opportunities and creative activities so they can become motivated and feel courage and are willing to interact (pp. 11-12).
3. Theoretical perspective
In this section two theoretical views connected to this thesis will be explained below.

3.1 Sociocultural theory
Säljö (2012) writes about the sociocultural theory and mentions that it is based on the work of Vygotsky (1978), who stated that children learn through language-based social interactions. The sociocultural theory explains how people assimilate knowledge and understand the world around them through two different types of tools: linguistic and material (pp. 186-187). Linguistic tools are shaped by human traditions which have developed and changed continuously throughout life (Säljö, 2012, p. 188). Säljö (2012) mentions that knowledge is transferred through educational processes that are created in the transfer of socializing with other people (p. 196).

Through language exchanges, students learn to organize thoughts and construct meaning for further knowledge. Pinter (2006) posited that teachers who understand the concept of language exchanges can provide many opportunities for students to work together. By structuring the classroom environment and the learning experience to promote student interactions, teachers ensure that students engage in discussions and negotiate their evolving understandings and interpretations of text with peers (pp. 10-13).

Siegler, Deloache and Eisenberg (2011) mention that by interacting with other children and adults in a playful way, a child’s understanding of the world in which they live is deepened. The authors (2011) explain that the sociocultural theory emphasizes that a child’s knowledge and language skills will develop when given the opportunity to interact with others. By using the strategy of play, one is adding something familiar to a child’s normally private speech, which can help them dare to participate with others while their language knowledge develops in an unconstrained way (pp. 160-161, 244, 506, 540).

3.2 Multiple intelligences
Siegler et al. (2011) writes about the Multiple Intelligence Theory of Gardner (1983). Multiple intelligence is a theory that is based on the premise that there are eight types of intelligences: linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, musical, naturalistic, bodily kinesthetic, intrapersonal and interpersonal. Gardner’s (1983) first intelligence identifies students learn best through language and interaction. The logical-mathematical intelligence identifies that students need a structured environment to better understand and identify the given problems. The third intelligence refers to the ability to identify the visual world accurately, the ability to detect similar patterns and learning through pictures. The fourth intelligence refers to learning through tones and phrases of music. The naturalistic intelligence is defined as an intelligence that shows how students can understand the world around them. The sixth intelligence, bodily kinesthetic, is explained by use of the body language, acting and movement can be of importance for students. In school students can get the chance to work alone or in pairs. Students that are of the more intrapersonal intelligence, prefer to work alone. The last intelligence mentioned by Gardner (1983) identifies the opposite of intrapersonal intelligence. Students with a more interpersonal intelligence can learn better together with others or by working in pairs (Siegler et al., 2011, p. 321).

Dörnyei (2001) refers to Gardner’s (1983) theory that learning a foreign language can be taught in the same way as any other school subject. The teacher only needs to help the students understand that the English language is not just a curriculum topic, but also something that is and can be useful in their lifelong learning (pp. 13-15). According to Pinter (2006), by adapting the multiple intelligence theory to the English teaching, the teacher could make it possible for all students regardless of how each student learns, to show their abilities and be an active part in the classroom. Pinter (2006) argues that through the Multiple
Intelligence Theory, students’ differences are considered and can ensure that teaching is meaningful for all students (p. 13). Although Siegler et al. (2011) mentions that the Multiple Intelligence Theory is not backed with as much evidence as other traditional theories, Gardner’s (1983) theory is important to use in order to understand how instruction can help students build on their abilities and how the teacher can motivate them to learn willingly (p. 322).

Pinter (2006) argues that the teacher should encourage students in the early school years to enjoy the reading experience. For example, teachers should ask the students to recapture the lived-through experience of reading through an artform such as drawing or dancing. Pinter (2006) mentions that it could support the child’s own interpretation of the text, and the teacher can be attentive to each individual student’s way of learning (pp. 13-15). Siegler et al. (2011) says by drawing on Gardner’s (1983) theory, the teacher is aware that students have stronger and weaker aspects of their multiple intelligences and different ways of learning, as in both individually or as a group. Siegler et al. (2011) explains through the Multiple Intelligence Theory all students in a classroom could get motivated and feel that they can use their abilities by being creative, social and active in the English language classroom. By keeping Gardner’s (1983) theory in mind, Siegler et al (2011) states that each student is given the chance to show their strengths and weaknesses in a great variety of strategies that are based on a person’s multiple intelligences (pp. 321-322). Gardner’s (1983) theory brings focus to the importance of different individuals in a classroom environment, and why the teacher should have knowledge how to maintain a learning development for all students, regardless of their different ways of learning. Siegler et al. (2011) says by using and keeping the Theory of Multiple Intelligences in mind, the teacher could understand why and how some students are not able to understand what is taught in the classroom, and how to create a suitable learning environment to increase the students’ development and understanding (pp. 321-322).

4. Material and Method
This section presents the methods used to collect data to carry out the aim of the study. It also describes the selection strategies, method of analysis and the ethical considerations which were taken.

4.1 Design and selection strategies
The nature of the study is a systematic literature review. This means that the study is based on a systematic and structured search for research, which is then examined and finally compiled into the results of this thesis (Eriksson Barajas, Forsberg & Wengström, 2013, p. 28).

The process began with searching two different databases, ERIC and Google Scholar, as well as Skolverket’s website, for relevant books and peer-reviewed articles. Further database research was conducted using the archives of scientific journals. During the search process, student theses were deselected, since they are not considered to be peer-reviewed research. However, in accordance with Eriksson Barajas et al. (2013, pp. 62-63), they have been used as sources of inspiration at the beginning of this research process.

During the search process, it was necessary to further define the research aim and search questions to find relevant data. After this, the number of hits decreased to 60-70 and the abstracts were read to seek relevant sources. The most frequently used search words that were combined in the search for relevant peer-reviewed research were: English language learning, second language learning, play, games, Elementary school, EFL, Elementary school methods, English (second language), Elementary teaching, and Class Activities. Swedish search words were used initially in the search process, but it was difficult to find relevant sources for my
thesis topic. Therefore, I decided to focus on search words in English in order to find relevant sources for the aim of this thesis.

Eriksson Barajas et al. (2013) states that a systematic literature review aims to combine previous research related to a specific topic. With Eriksson Barajas’ et al. (2013) directions in mind, the focus of this thesis was on research that is not older than from year 2000. However, one resource is from the year 1999, but it was considered to be a source that brings relevant information to the topic. In order to find reliable and updated sources of relevance for this thesis, the author has tried to select articles that are peer-reviewed. By peer-reviewed it is meant, sources have gone through a peer review process to make the work more reliable (p. 31).

The database search from ERIC and Google Scholar provided the most relevant research. Eriksson Barajas et al. (2013) explain by relevance it is meant that search words were quickly read to get an overview of how suitable the articles were for this thesis. Even though a great variety of search words were used and combined, a sufficient number of relevant sources were not found in the database search (pp. 188-189, 192). Most searches resulted in many articles, which meant that the hits had to be separated into groups. The first method to organize the articles was by selecting the peer review option so that only reviewed articles were displayed. This limited the outcome slightly, but there were still many results left. To find relevant articles, a random release was initiated by first seeing if the title could be consistent with the purpose of the essay and questions. If an article seemed interesting, the article's subject headings and summary was read to see if it was still relevant to this thesis. By relevant articles, it is meant articles that were considered to be appropriate for the purpose and questions of this thesis. In order to systematize the articles and see if they met the criteria for this study, a relevance assessment was used in the form of two checklists, which can be seen in Appendix table A2 and table A3 (Eriksson Barajas et al., 2013, p. 188, 192). In the end, six articles met the criteria and were saved to be read in its entirety. The articles that remained interesting for the essay were saved and written down on the list for approval by the supervisor. The same selection process was consistent throughout the article search. On the recommendation from my supervisor, a search process was conducted in the archives of two scientific journals: American Journal of Play and American Journal of Education. Thereafter, the reading and analysis along with the writing process began. The goal of this study has been to understand, rather than explain the topic. To meet Eriksson Barajas’ et al. (2013) guidelines, this study has used a qualitative approach, to open up a greater understanding of the specific topic, rather than focusing on quantifiable data (p. 43, 53).

4.2 Analysis
Larsen (2009) describes the qualitative research approach as a method with the aim to understand and not explain. Therefore, the analysis was conducted as a content analysis (p. 22). The content analysis of this thesis was undertaken in five steps. First all relevant data was sorted in different computer folders as well as on an external hard drive. A document was created to update and organize the sources, thus nothing would get misplaced or lost during the study. Second, all six sources were read two times and relevant sections were marked. Third, the marked sentences were divided into two different documents, depending on whether they answered the first or the second research question. After everything had been organized, the sentences were analyzed to find common patterns and themes. Finally, the sentences were rewritten and placed under the relevant subsection, and care was taken to make sure that no relevant data was left out of the analysis (Larsen, 2009, pp. 101-102).

In order to systematize and explain the search within databases and the scientific journals, a table such as Table A1 below was used.
Table A1: Search matrix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Search engine</th>
<th>Search words</th>
<th>Hits</th>
<th>Read</th>
<th>Used</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The search matrix is presented in the Appendix (Table A1). The search word combinations that ended up with zero hits are not included in the search table. To clarify whether the sources fulfill the criteria for this study, a relevance assessment and a quality assessment in the form of checklists was used. These two tables are also presented in the Appendix (Tables A2 and A3). A presentation of the texts that were included in the analysis is given in Table 2, in the results section (Eriksson Barajas et al., 2013, pp. 188-192).

For a study to be a qualitative study, Larsen (2009) points out that it should fulfill certain requirements for validity and reliability. Validity is about how valid and relevant the study is to the specific topic. It can be a connection concerning the theoretical and the operational definition of the topic (pp. 40-41, 80). Reliability indicates the accuracy of a research study, which is reliable when the process and information has been treated in an accurate way. When other researchers can do the exact same research, and get the same results, the research is considered to have high reliability (Larsen, 2009, pp. 41-42, 81) The selected articles are relevant to the aim and questions for this thesis. All forms of results and conclusions are reported in the results section to minimize the risk for guidance toward a predetermined direction.

4.3 Ethical aspects
Eriksson Barajas et al. (2013) describes several aspects that should be considered in order to make this thesis as reliable and objective as possible. It is of great importance that the researcher is critical and only uses peer-reviewed theses and articles. Secondly, the references must be presented in an accurate way so that other readers can quickly look up the references and read more about the specific topic. (pp. 69-70). Eriksson Barajas et al. (2013) points out the importance that cheating and dishonesty may not occur in process of writing a thesis. This means that the author must not distort the results or confuse the reader to orient himself to a predetermined direction (p. 69). Eriksson Barajas et al. (2013) states that all literature from the articles has to be presented as it is considered unethical to exclude literature that does not fulfill the criteria and does not answer the research questions (p. 70). The use of findings has been important for the thesis in order to give it variation and to receive more certainty when answering the research questions.

5. Results
In this section, the results of the literature review will be presented.

5.1 Presentation of articles
The Appendix (Table A1) presents the search process for texts that form the basis of this analysis. In Table 2 below, a presentation of the six articles or studies chosen for this literature review are listed in alphabetical order with a brief description of each one to provide clarity of this study.

Table 2: Presentation of primary sources
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Grade / Age of children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

5.2 Results presentation

This section presents the results of the analysis. The principles that guided this study for a qualitative research approach were the different criteria’s that are described by Larsen (2009, pp. 22, 101-102). The section 4.2 Analysis has been a base for this thesis. To clarify and facilitate reader understanding through the results of the analysis, different subheadings that are based on the research questions of this study emerged during the analysis. The first
Early foreign language learning

5.3 Early foreign language learning

5.3.1 Meaningful language learning
Three of the chosen studies emphasize that meaningful language learning takes place through varied teaching methods. Gray and Feldman (2004) state that to make English foreign language learning effective and meaningful for students, teachers need an understanding in what context students are willing to learn and how their second language development works (pp. 126, 133-140). Lundberg (2007) agrees with Gray and Feldman (2004) and argues that students in early primary school, compared with students at an older age of 11-12 years old, have a greater ability to absorb new information if they are taught in a meaningful and enjoyable way. According to Lundberg (2007), this could be because students at younger ages are more curious, interested and have a desire to learn (p. 151). According to Lundberg (2007), it concluded that songs, rhymes, storybooks, and puppets could have an important role for students’ enthusiasm toward the English subject during the early years in their foreign language learning. Lundberg (2007) based this fact on the results of her study that showed when younger students are introduced to play when learning, they feel motivated and their ability to absorb the language increases (pp. 159-161). The study by Porras González (2010) also indicates the importance of students being surrounded by meaningful, interesting and logical input for them to get the possibility to become successful learners in early foreign language learning (p. 106).

5.3.2 Students language learning in collaboration with EFL
Lundberg (2007) emphasizes that teachers should use foreign language teaching in the early years of school. In that way, the subject does not feel strange or difficult for emerging language learning students. English teaching at an early age should not aim for students to be proficient or have a great vocabulary. At an early age, it should be about taking advantage of the ordinary and enjoyable approach young children feel towards language learning (pp. 159-160, 162). Lundberg (2007) mentions that a relaxed and playful approach to learning the English language in the early years, with focus on the students’ imitative ability, could be the solution for students to achieve successful language learning in the school environment (p. 178).

Gray and Feldman (2004) exemplify in their study that young students willingly participate in teaching when students are attracted to activities that are developed in a playful way. The study shows that when students are presented with playful encounters such as games and role-play, they can feel enjoyment and the desire to learn is awakened (pp. 138-139). The study also posits that by maintaining a safe and communicative classroom environment where interaction and the enthusiasm in using the English language could help stimulate students in their language development (pp. 140-142).

5.4 Promote language learning – how?
In the section below, an explanation of the teachers’ role and different teaching methods will be presented that could lead to different outcomes in foreign language learning.
5.4.1 The teacher

*Teachers function as role-models*

Lundberg (2007) emphasizes when one teaches, it is important to be aware that students look up to their teachers. According to her it is shown that in the early years, the teacher plays an important role for students to feel a desire and willingness to learn. Lundberg (2007) argues that it is through the teacher the students can get inspired, and their curiosity and interest in the English language could awaken (p. 169). Gray and Feldman (2004) also highlight how students look up to their teacher, and state that once teachers allow students to participate in activities and interact with others, students gain ideas and greater understanding about their own lives (Gray & Feldman, 2004, pp. 135-137). Lundberg (2007) mentions that students in the early years can learn through listening to their teacher, therefore, the teacher is one of the main factors in promoting an interest in language (pp. 192-193).

*Variety of teaching methods*

Lundberg (2007) mentions that for English foreign language learning to be meaningful, enjoyable and interesting to students, the teacher should be aware of different teaching methods. Different teaching methods can include songs, rhymes, games, storytelling and interaction with others. Lundberg (2004) argues that the teacher should consider this before teaching, so that the teaching could facilitate the students’ language development (p. 173). According to Porras González (2010), the teacher should select the suitable strategies and materials so the students will be encouraged to learn in a meaningful way. A classroom filled with a great variety of possibilities for students to express themselves in the English language will make English language learning meaningful, interesting and, most of all, awaken the desire of a lifelong language learning while having fun (Porras González, 2010, pp. 105-106).

5.4.2 Interaction as a tool

In the study of Gray and Feldman (2004), the value of interaction in the classroom, between students as well as students and teachers is mentioned. The authors describe such interaction as something that can facilitate students’ educational development. Gray and Feldman (2004) say if students get the opportunity to frequently interact with one another through different activities, it could help students keep their motivation and interest for lifelong learning (pp. 138-141). According to Lundberg’s (2007) empirical study, the teacher that carefully selects different materials and methods to appeal to multiple senses in the classroom could make the students’ encounters with the English language easier (pp. 192-193).

5.4.3 Games and other activities

According to Porras González (2010), students in the early primary school can learn English as a foreign language better through joyful playing of playful games, songs and role-play. Porras González (2010) argues that if teachers teach in an unconstrained way, the students can feel relaxed and comfortable while learning English (p. 102). According to Porras González’s (2010) study, students can be encouraged to interact in English with classmates and teachers if they are allowed to use games, songs and role-play activities. The study shows that through joyful playing, students both individually and in a group setting increased their communicative, social and thinking skills in a non-stressful way (p. 102). Porras González (2010) posit that when students can use well-planned pedagogical games such as the ones mentioned above, a door opens for them to create and play with the English language in a confident and stress-free environment (p. 102, 105).

*Using games in the EFL classroom*

Yolageldili and Arikan (2011) describe using games in the foreign English language classroom as something that could be effective, provide joy, and relaxation to facilitate
language development in several ways. According to their study, students can be encouraged and feel secure while being creative and interacting with others through games (pp. 224-225). Yolageldili and Arikan’s (2011) study demonstrates that many teachers in the EFL classroom find that games provide children with an opportunity to understand the environment, things in life, and gain new knowledge in a playful way. According to their study, Yolageldili and Arikan (2011) argue it is important that the teacher introduces children in the foreign language classroom to games, to provide the younger learners with meaningful, motivating and natural activities that could encourage them in their language learning (pp. 224-227).

Yolageldili and Arikan (2011) mention the importance of using games as a pedagogical resource in the language classroom so young language learners can interact with the language in an active, meaningful and creative way. However, the teachers must be conscious of using games in a pedagogical way, that is, the games should have a meaning and achieve a purpose. Hence, it is important that the teacher is aware of why to use this method, and why to use this game (pp. 226-227).

5.4.4 Online games
Goto Butler, Someya and Fukuharas (2014) conducted a study that included an online game referred to as Jido-Eiken. According to Goto Butler’s et al. (2014) study, the use of online games can help young learners/development, when it comes to English language learning. Through their findings, Goto Butler et al. (2014), could identify some game features as being attractive and having an effective impact on the students’ motivation. The authors mention that the teacher should be aware of when using online games, it should give the students enough challenge to awaken their curiosity. Elements that give the students control over the outcome in the game are beneficial. Goto Butler’ et al. (2014) study found that multiplayer games can motivating even if the other players were computer generated because of competition and unexpected outcomes (pp. 272-273).

Students motivation
Lundberg (2007) emphasizes the importance of a relaxed and playful approach to the English language in the early years. According to Lundberg’s (2007) study students can feel more secure and become stimulated while using their leisure English knowledge when playing computer games on vacation and in communication with others outside of school. Lundberg (2007) mentions that it is important that teachers are aware of what he or she can do to make English a pleasurable subject, where students can be motivated to get involved and desire to communicate in the classroom. Lundberg (2007) posits by welcoming children’s leisure English in the foreign language classroom, the teacher might prevent English from being a difficult subject. Instead, teachers can initiate lifelong learning in an enjoyable and positive way while learning English as a foreign language (p. 157, 178).

Goto Butler et al. (2014) mentions that even if online games are shown to attract students in their learning, one cannot suppose that one game will attract all students in an effective way. The teacher needs to ensure that games used in teaching are important for the students’ language learning and that they are age-appropriate to the cognitive demand and curiosity of the group that one is teaching. According to the study of Goto Butler et al. (2014), it is important that teachers consider their choices when using computer games in the English classroom. It might attract students’ interest towards the subject, but might not always give an effective outcome on their language learning (pp. 273-274).
5.4.5 Stories as a tool

According to Porras González (2010), it is important that the teacher ensures that English teaching is meaningful, enjoyable, and arouses an interest among the students. The author mentions that students who have stories read to them in English, could find the subject more interesting, enjoyable, and memorable when taught in combination with playful encounters. Porras González (2010) argues that when teachers read stories out loud, one should use the strategies of connecting illustrations and written text with questions. The study of Porras González (2010) showed that the acting out of stories in this way can be meaningful to students. The author mentions that the students can get stimulation and form hypotheses about the story, predicting what will happen, get sequencing and exercise their memory. Porras González (2010) refers to stories read out loud with these types of strategies, where the written text is combined with pictures and questions, as a central role to play. Then students are activated to be involved in what is read in an interesting and enjoyable way, while exercising their memory (p. 103). Porras González’s (2010) study shows that students become stimulated by hearing the stories read aloud, and motivated because they were involved in the reading process (pp. 101, 105-106).

Lundberg (2007) stresses the importance of teachers listening to students’ interests, previous knowledge and ideas regarding their language teaching. In order to motivate language learning in the early primary years, these thoughts and ideas should be taken into account by the teacher (p. 172). Porras González (2010), also emphasizes that knowledge about students’ needs and interests can help teachers make good pedagogical decisions. According to Porras González (2010), if the teacher lets students be involved in choosing the type of literature to be read or what games to be played, the teacher considers what is meaningful to the students and in that way learning is made interesting and enjoyable (p. 101).

According to Lángs (2009) study, the more books that students have read to them in English, the more likely both active and passive abilities could be developed. Láng (2009) mentions when using books in teaching, one allows students to hear the language aloud, which could make them actively involved in the outcome of the English lesson. Láng (2009) argues that children’s literature can serve as a valuable authentic teaching method that could give students several opportunities to become active participants in their English development (pp. 52-53). According to Porras González’s (2010) study, she states that children are considered natural learners and can have an ability to absorb language when activities are familiar and enjoyable to them. Porras González (2010) says by using storybooks in the EFL teaching one could make the foreign language learning more interesting, amusing and natural to the students. Porras González (2009) mentions that it is ideal to use stories as a tool in the language teaching. This could help students become successful in their language learning development (pp. 105-106).

6. Discussion

This section presents the result discussion, followed by a method discussion.

6.1 Result discussion

The aim of this thesis is to investigate the role of play in early English language learning. Six studies/articles have been analyzed, with the following research questions in mind:
• How can play be used to promote language learning in the early primary EFL classroom?
• What motivational methods using play can teachers use to enhance students’ language learning?

6.1.1 In what way does play promote language learning in the early primary EFL classroom?

The analyzed studies all seem to assume that motivation through enjoyable and playful activities is key for foreign language learning. In that respect, the theoretical framework becomes a lens through which to analyze the studies and to see the assumptions they make. Even though the analyzed studies are from different countries, they were written at different time points and approach the topic in different ways, results were surprisingly similar. The various authors in this study agreed that the use of play can promote language learning in the early primary classroom. In some studies, and in the Curriculum for Compulsory School (Lgr11), a playful approach in the classroom could be through songs, rhymes combined with movement or by introducing games into the classroom in order to promote early language learning (Skolverket, 2011b; Siegler et al., 2011; Lundberg, 2007; Skolverket, 2011a; Sandström, 2013). Therefore, the conclusion was made that in order to motivate younger students in their English language development, it could be advantageous to use play to promote the will and desire for a lifelong learning.

Several studies have emphasized the importance of children learning through being active participants in an environment where they can interact with others in a creative way (Láng, 2009; Silver, 1999; Dörnyei, 2001; Börjesson, 2012; Lundberg, 2011; Yolageldili & Arik, 2011; Gray & Feldman, 2004). Silver (1999) referred to play as something that works like a fundamental equalizer between the students and the English language (pp. 63-69). By introducing different kinds of play in the early primary EFL classroom, students can feel motivated, enjoy themselves and desire to learn more (Sandström, 2013; Gray, 2013; Lundberg, 2007; Pinter, 2006). Play, in language learning, also enables the shy and insecure students to be active during English lessons (Silver, 1999; Börjesson, 2012; Porras González, 2010).

The Sociocultural Theory by Vygotsky (1978) and the Multiple Intelligences Theory by Gardner (1983) underline the multimodal benefits that come with the integration of songs, rhymes, storybooks and puppets combined with good language opportunities to support language learning in the early years. Arguably, there are some similarities between these two theories: the Sociocultural Theory describes the importance of a structured classroom environment, and the Multiple Intelligences Theory emphasizes the importance of creativity and variety when learning a foreign language. Both theories state the importance of interaction with others. Through interactions, one can be active and present skills which one has developed (Säljö, 2012; Siegler et al., 2011; Pinter, 2006; Gardner, 1983; Vygotsky, 1978; Lundberg, 2007).

6.1.2 What methods can teachers use to enhance students’ language learning?

The analyzed articles did differ in how they suggested the teacher could facilitate students’ language development. But eventually, the researchers agreed on the importance of knowledge of different methods, materials and facts being used while teaching their classes (Lundberg, 2007; Porras González, 2010; Gray, 2013). It is also mentioned that the teacher should feel comfortable in what he or she does, to be able to motivate students’ in their English learning. If the teacher feels insecure, he or she may not be able to design creative lessons to allow for maximum student interaction. (Lundberg, 2007; Dörnyei, 2001).

Lgr11, the Curriculum for Compulsory School (Skolverket, 2011a), states the importance of how teaching English should focus on the student’s language development in the English...
subject (p. 32). To make this possible, the teacher should present different strategies and materials to make their language learning motivational and meaningful (Porras González, 2010; Lundberg, 2007). In order for the students to have the relevant tools to work with teachers need to develop their pedagogy in how and why to use different strategies. (Yolageldili & Arikan, 2011; Dörnyei, 2001; Gardner, 1983; Siegler et al., 2011). Siegler et al. (2011) refers to the Eight Multiple Intelligences of Gardner (1983) because it is important to differentiate in the classroom (pp. 321-322).

There are many ways mentioned regarding why using play can promote learning (Lundberg, 2007; Láng, 2009). But it has also been highlighted how important it is when one is using play as a pedagogical resource in the language classroom. The teacher should be aware of why he or she uses a method. Is it age-appropriate? What is the purpose with it and could this method be used in a creative, meaningful way for the students? (Yolageldili & Arikan, 2011; Goto Butler et al, 2014). Regarding other methods that teachers can use, the findings of this study concluded that it requires a variety of knowledge, regarding material and methods for the language development to benefit from what is thought. The other methods mentioned were all united with the role of play. So, the main conclusion of this study is, even if a method is used through play, it still requires the teacher to have the knowledge on how to make the purpose clear. If that is the case, one can be able to benefit students’ language development in a greater variety and enjoyable methods through their school time (Lundberg, 2007; Yolageldili & Arikan, 2011; Gardner, 1983; Siegler et al. 2011).

6.2 Method discussion
The approach chosen for this thesis is a systematic literature review. This means that the study is based on systematic and structured research, which is examined and finally compiled into the results of this thesis. The boundaries were based on further definition of the research aim and search questions to find the most relevant data. Previous research had to be published after the year 2000 to ensure quality. The study was carried out over a period of ten weeks, which was the source of stress. This might have affected the results and validity of the study. For example, the studies could have been read more thoroughly and the searches that were done for this study could have been more extensive and other search words could have been used. In the end, with more time the searches could have been done with other keywords and with a more comprehensive structure, which might have led to another result and improved validity and reliability of this study.

7. Conclusion
This study has investigated how play can promote younger students’ language learning in a classroom environment. The importance of play is stressed in the Curriculum for Compulsory School (Lgr11). Through games and creative activities, the teacher can help students gain knowledge and develop all-round communicative skills (Skolverket, 2011a, p. 11, 32). In the commentaries to the curriculum (Skolverket, 2011b) it is introduced, that the English education in the early years can aim at using games, leisure activities and/or music. The focus should advantageously lie on communication in everyday life and living (Skolverket, 2011b, p.13).

Most of the analyzed data (Siegler et al., 2011; Lundberg, 2007; Sandström, 2013; Silver, 1999; Dörnyei, 2001; Börjesson, 2012; Lundberg, 2011; Yolageldili & Arikan, 2011; Gray & Feldman, 2004) indicate that incorporating play in regular English teaching can help students feel motivated and participate in the English classroom. My conclusion after writing this thesis and reading the articles is, that if teachers allow students to use play, they could overcome the shyness and insecurity that some students might feel while during English
lessons. Through meaningful, interesting and encouraging methods teachers can facilitate the students’ learning process. When teaching is carried out in an enjoyable setting, students can feel safe in the classroom environment, and are more likely to interact with others. They will also be more likely to be receptive to new knowledge acquisition as they realize that they are learning a new language in a creative and playful way (Silver, 1999; Säljö, 2012; Siegler et al. 2011).

It is of great importance that teachers are aware of methods and strategies to promote students’ language learning. The author indicates, that in the end the teacher should base his or hers decisions on elaborate pedagogical considerations, to stimulate students’ motivation and desire for a lifelong learning. Since teaching methods change, are disputed, and new methods are suggested as each day passes by, further research with the same focus and for a longer amount of time is needed. For the next thesis, an observation regarding how teachers teach English, what strategies and methods are used to promote language learning in the primary EFL classroom is considered. To get greater understanding in why teachers teach in one way or another, interviews would be of great interest. By this means, research might also open for new discoveries and result in concepts for improved English teaching in the early years of school.
References


## Appendix

### Table A1: Search matrix

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<th>Used</th>
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<td>24</td>
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<td>Skolverket</td>
<td>Swedish curriculum for compulsory</td>
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<td>American Journal of education</td>
<td>Peter Gray</td>
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Table A3: Relevance assessment checklist before reading results.

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<th>Study or Article</th>
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<th>Is the study or article about teaching methods to promote language development?</th>
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<th>Is the study or article about English language learning?</th>
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