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AI and Play-Based Learning in Early English Education

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) and play-based learning to enhance the motivation and vocabulary retention of young children learning English as a second language. Conducted under the Delfin program across early childhood education centers in Colima, Mexico, and Villavicencio, Colombia, this research aims to identify effective AI techniques and game elements that foster language acquisition among three- and four-year-old children. The study uses Buddy.ai, an AI-powered educational tool, to provide personalized lessons and interactive activities designed to engage and support young learners. This report presents findings from the Colima case, as the study of Villavicencio will occur once the researcher returns to Colombia. The research highlights the potential of AI and game-based learning to transform early childhood education. The findings underscore the importance of innovative educational technologies in creating engaging, adaptive, and effective learning environments, paving the way for future advancements in language education for young children.

KEY WORDS:

Artificial Intelligence, Play-Based Learning, Early Childhood Education, English Language Learning, Educational Technology

RESUMEN

Este estudio explora la integración de la inteligencia artificial (IA) y el aprendizaje basado en el juego para mejorar la motivación y la retención de vocabulario de niños pequeños que aprenden inglés como segunda lengua. Realizado bajo el programa Delfin en centros de educación infantil en Colima, México, y Villavicencio, Colombia, esta investigación tiene como objetivo identificar técnicas efectivas de IA y elementos de juego que fomenten la adquisición del lenguaje en niños de tres y cuatro años. Utilizando Buddy.ai, una herramienta educativa impulsada por IA, el estudio proporciona lecciones personalizadas y actividades interactivas diseñadas para involucrar y apoyar a los jóvenes estudiantes. Para este informe, presentamos los hallazgos

del caso Colima, ya que el caso Villavicencio será explorado cuando el investigador regrese a Colombia. La investigación destaca el potencial de la IA y el aprendizaje basado en el juego para transformar la educación infantil. Los hallazgos subrayan la importancia de las tecnologías educativas innovadoras para crear entornos de aprendizaje atractivos, adaptativos y efectivos, allanando el camino para futuros avances en la enseñanza de idiomas para niños pequeños.

PALABRAS CLAVE:

Inteligencia Artificial, Aprendizaje Basado en el Juego, Educación Infantil, Aprendizaje del Idioma Inglés, Tecnología Educativa

Introduction

The rapid advancement of artificial intelligence (AI) technologies and integration into educational settings has opened new avenues for enhancing the learning processes (Ng et al., 2021; Kewalramani et al., 2021). This study occurred in a daycare center in Colima, Mexico, and will take place in Villavicencio, Colombia, under the same circumstances. AI and play-based learning approaches are the axes of the research used to analyze the characteristics of teaching English vocabulary among three- and four-year-old children. The motivation behind this research stems from the unique challenges faced in early language education, particularly in maintaining engagement and ensuring vocabulary retention among young learners. By leveraging AI and interactive play, this study aims to explore innovative methods to address these challenges.

The significance of this research lies in its potential to revolutionize early childhood education through the integration of AI and play-based learning. With a growing body of evidence supporting the effectiveness of personalized and adaptive learning technologies, this study seeks to contribute to understanding how these technologies can be applied to enhance language learning outcomes for young children. A coherent expectation of the study is that the findings provide valuable insights for educators, policymakers, and technology developers, paving the way for more effective and engaging educational practices.

The primary objective of this study is to investigate how artificial intelligence (AI) and play-based learning can enhance the motivation and vocabulary retention of three- and four-year-old children learning English as a second language. The research aims to identify specific AI techniques and play elements that most effectively promote language acquisition in this age group. The study also seeks to compare the outcomes of these interventions across different educational settings in Mexico and Colombia, providing a comprehensive understanding of their impact and adaptability.

Literature Review

From the perspective of Artificial Intelligence in education, AI is recognized for its potential to emulate human cognitive functions such as perception, learning, and prediction (Solanki et al., 2020; and Ayuso & Gutiérrez, 2022). Besides, the evolution of AI since its recognition as an academic discipline in 1956 has seen significant advancements, especially in the educational sector (Russell & Norvig, 2016), and its implications in education can revolutionize early childhood learning by providing personalized and adaptive learning experiences (Su & Yang, 2022 and Zhang, & Aslan, 2021).

Some authors affirm that, when considering Play-Based Learning, playing is essential in early

childhood education. It promotes engagement, motivation, and cognitive development (Piaget, 1951) because it integrates educational content with playful activities, making learning enjoyable and effective for young children (Zhao, 2023). Combining AI and PBL, or integrating both, offers a unique approach to early childhood education (Su & Chu, 2023). AI can provide real-time feedback and personalized learning paths, while PBL ensures that learning remains engaging and motivating for children. Additionally, studies have shown that AI-powered educational tools, such as Buddy.ai, can significantly enhance vocabulary retention and motivation among young learners by using interactive and playful activities (Buddy.ai 2024., Vartiainen et al., 2020 and Baidoo-Anu & Ansah, 2023).

It is essential to consider the implied challenges; while AI can transform education, data quality, teacher training, and data privacy must be addressed (Zdravkova, 2022). The ethical implications of using AI in education must also ensure responsible and practical implementation (Su & Yang, 2022 and; Su et al., 2023).

Relevance to the Research Problem:

The primary research problem addressed in this study is *the need for more knowledge and deepening our understanding of maintaining engagement and ensuring vocabulary retention among three- and four-year-old children learning English as a second language* (Lin et al., 2020 y; Chen et al., 2020). The authors affirm that traditional teaching methods often struggle to keep young learners motivated and actively participating in their language-learning process. This study investigates whether integrating AI and play-based learning can address these issues by providing personalized, engaging, and interactive educational experiences.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, utilizing a multiple case study design to explore the implementation and effects of AI and play-based learning in early childhood education (Stake, 1998; and Yin, 2024). The qualitative approach allows an in-depth understanding of these educational interventions' interactions, experiences, and outcomes (Creswell, 2014; Denzin & Lincoln, 2017).

This report covers part of the research conducted in an early childhood education center in Colima, Mexico, which is case one or the Colima Case. Participants included three- and four-year-old children enrolled in English language programs at these centers. These sites were selected based on their diverse educational contexts and willingness to integrate AI and play-based learning into their curricula.

Following ethical guidelines for research involving human participants, ethics approval was obtained from the daycare [Estancia Infantil]. Informed consent was also collected from the caregivers or persons responsible for the children involved in the study. The participants' anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout the research process, ensuring that all data were handled with strict adherence to ethical standards.

Research Questions

The main question was: *How does using AI-powered educational tools influence vocabulary retention in three- and four-year-old children learning English?* In addition, there were two subsidiary questions: What is the impact of play-based learning activities on the motivation and

engagement of young English learners? How do the educational outcomes of AI and play-based interventions differ between early childhood education settings in Mexico and Colombia?

Research Objectives

For better coherence with the questions, the main objective was *to analyze the effectiveness of AI-powered educational tools in enhancing vocabulary retention among young learners. The specific objectives were to describe the impact of play-based learning activities on children's motivation and engagement in language learning. A third specific objective is to compare the educational outcomes of AI and play-based interventions in early childhood education centers in Colima, Mexico, and Villavicencio, Colombia, once the second part of the research concludes.*

Data collection was through participant observations and analysis of educational tools and materials. The AI-powered educational tool Buddy.ai delivered the children with personalized lessons and interactive activities. The AI-powered educational tool Buddy.ai was selected for this study due to its specialized design for early language learners. Unlike other AI tools, Buddy.ai focuses on gamified, interactive lessons tailored specifically to young children, offering age-appropriate language activities that are engaging and effective. Its ability to personalize lessons and adapt to each child's pace of learning made it a suitable choice for the objectives of this research. This tool delivered personalized lessons and interactive activities to the children (Buddy.ai et al., 2024).

Observations focused on children's interactions with the tool, their engagement in play-based activities, and their vocabulary retention. The non-participative notes in the field note instrument provided additional insights into the implementation process and the perceived impact of the interventions. Data were analyzed using ChatGPT under the principles of the Grounded Theory analysis of Charmaz (2014) to identify critical patterns and themes related to the research objectives (Saldana, 2015).

Main Findings

The study explores the impact of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Play-Based Learning (PBL) on the motivation and vocabulary retention of young children learning English as a second language. The research focuses on early childhood education centers in Colima, Mexico, under the framework of the Delfin program. Here are the synthesized findings:

Enhanced Vocabulary Retention: Buddy.ai, an AI-powered educational tool, significantly improved children's vocabulary retention compared to traditional learning methods. The tool's interactive and personalized approach kept children engaged and facilitated better learning outcomes, especially when there was close and friendly teacher support (Bronfenbrenner, 1987).

IS1: Demonstrated good interaction with the technology, managing the iPad provided for the activity very well - Worked in a very receptive manner and showed a good understanding of English by comprehending the dialogues given by the AI. - At the end of the trial period with the AI, they did not want to stop and wished to continue the activity. | Good interaction with technology, Receptivity, and comprehension of English, High motivation to continue (Filed Notes; Subject 1, Day One)

Increased Motivation and Engagement: Play-based activities, integrated with AI, boosted children's motivation and sustained their interest in learning English. The engaging nature of the

activities and the interactive feedback provided by the AI tool contributed to higher levels of participation and enjoyment. A key point to increase motivation and interest is the role of the teacher as a facilitator (Ge et al., 2021).

ISI: Presented with a positive attitude, though a bit shy. – Understood the AI's operation and followed the instructions for the activity. – Was willing to collaborate and maintained a good attitude. – Received help from the classroom monitor, who assisted in answering questions that were not understood. – Despite not having a good level of English, showed interest in learning and understanding what was presented (Filed Notes; Subject 4, Day One)

Comparison of Educational Settings: Although the findings from Villavicencio, Colombia, will be explored later, the initial results from Colima suggest that AI and PBL (Play-Based Learning) have the potential to work effectively in different educational contexts. The flexible nature of the AI tool allows for its use in various settings, accommodating diverse learning needs and preferences. While promising, these preliminary findings require further research to confirm how well these tools function across diverse educational environments. Fomichov and Fomichova (1995) reinforce this potential by grounding it in the principles of artificial intelligence theory.

Challenges and Considerations: Despite the positive outcomes, the study also highlights challenges in implementing AI in education. These include the need for high-quality data, adequate teacher training, and addressing data privacy concerns. The study emphasizes the importance of fully addressing these challenges to leverage the benefits of AI in early childhood education. Vartiainen et al. (2020) affirm that training is essential in early learning scenarios, especially when using AI.

Based on the findings, the study proposes the following: firstly, an integration of AI and PBL in Curricula. Schools and early childhood education centers should consider integrating AI and play-based learning activities into their curricula. These tools can provide personalized learning experiences that cater to the individual needs of young learners, making education more engaging and effective, according to Sweller (1988) and Paas and Sweller (2010). Secondly, Teacher Training and Support implies that teachers should receive adequate training on using AI tools and integrating them with play-based learning strategies to ensure successful implementation. Ongoing support and professional development are crucial to help educators adapt to new technologies and methodologies.

Conclusions.

The study's main findings indicate that integrating AI and play-based learning significantly enhanced vocabulary retention and motivation among young learners. Children who participated in the AI-powered lessons showed marked improvements in vocabulary acquisition compared to those who engaged in traditional learning methods. Play-based activities boosted engagement and sustained interest in language learning, making the educational experience more enjoyable and effective. The comparative analysis revealed that while both educational settings benefited from the interventions, certain contextual factors influenced the extent of their impact.

The study concludes that AI and play-based learning holds great promise for enhancing early childhood education, particularly in the context of English language learning. The findings underscore the importance of incorporating personalized and interactive educational technologies to cater to young learners' unique needs and preferences.

Importance of Findings

These findings contribute to the growing knowledge of applying AI and play-based learning in early education. They highlight the potential of these approaches to transform traditional teaching methods, offering more engaging and effective ways to support language acquisition in young children. These findings are coherent with the sociocultural and constructivist approaches as well as with the theories of language learning and the learning process mediated with technology (García, 2020; John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996; Jonassen, 1999; Lantolf & Thorne, 2009; Mohamed, 2024).

Practical Uses and Further Research

The practical implications of this research suggest that educators and policymakers should consider integrating AI and play-based learning into early childhood education curricula. Future research could explore the long-term effects of these interventions and their applicability to other subject areas and age groups. Additionally, further studies could investigate the features of AI tools and play activities that contribute most significantly to learning outcomes, providing a more detailed framework for their effective implementation.

Main Limitations

The study acknowledges several limitations related to the geographical and institutional contexts and the research process. For instance, the geographical and institutional contexts, due to the research, were conducted in specific educational settings in Colima, Mexico, which may be different from other regions or countries. The findings could influence the local educational practices and cultural factors unique to this area. Another area for improvement is the knowledge area and research process since the study focuses on early childhood education and the specific use of AI and PBL for language learning. The scope of the research is limited to this context, and the findings may not be directly applicable to other age groups or subject areas. A final limitation is the duration of the study, considering that the application of the research was under the framework of the Delfin program, which provided seven weeks for data collection. This relatively short duration may limit the ability to observe the long-term effects and sustainability of the interventions.

Main Implications and Impact

The findings of this study have significant implications for early childhood education and the integration of innovative educational technologies, for instance: 1. *Educational Benefits*. The study highlights the potential of AI and PBL to enhance vocabulary retention and motivation among young learners. These findings suggest that incorporating these technologies into early childhood education curricula can provide personalized and engaging learning experiences. 2. *Policy and Practice*. Educators and policymakers should consider the benefits of AI and PBL in creating adaptive and effective learning environments. The research supports adopting these tools to address the unique challenges of early language education. 3. *Future Applications*. The study proposes the integration of AI and PBL into educational curricula, along with adequate teacher training and support. This approach can help create more effective and enjoyable learning experiences for young children, paving the way for future advancements in language education.

Further Research. Future studies should explore the long-term effects of these interventions and their applicability to other subject areas and age groups. Additionally, research should address

the specific features of AI tools and play activities that most significantly contribute to learning outcomes, providing a detailed framework for their effective implementation.

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- a) Introduction:** This section describes the context where the research was carried out, the reason why the research was carried out, and the importance of the study.
- b) Purpose:** Here the writer states and explains the research objectives, intentions, questions, or hypothesis.
- c) Research method:** In this part, the author mentions and justifies the research approach and method that were selected, briefly describes the subjects, the context, and the research procedures, as well as the instruments that were used for the data collection.
- d) Results:** Here, the writer presents the main findings, the degree to which the research objectives were reached, and the answers to the research questions.
- e) Conclusion:** This section presents the main conclusions, the importance of the findings, considering the contribution to the theory, the research area, or professional practice, and suggesting practical uses of the results, as well as possible applications for further research.

3. Body of the article:

- a) Key words.** Five, in English and Spanish.
- b) Introduction:** It presents the research topic area, and the research topic, mentioning if it is descriptive, explanatory, evaluative, correlational, interpretative, etc. Also, it emphasizes the research problem.
- c) Literature review:** It presents the main terms, concepts, theoretical claims or principles, models, etc. analyzing and discussing the ideas presented by the main authors who have studied the topics related to the research or study presented. The references should not be more than 10 years after their publication, except from those classical research works.
- d) Research methodology:** It describes the research approach: qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods.
- e) Describe the research method:** case study, phenomenology, action-research, classroom research, longitudinal research, transversal research, experimental research, cause-experimental research, etc.
 - Describe the **data type** (describe and justify the data base, universe, or sample, etc.)
 - Characterize the **subjects** (describe the participants in the research).
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 - **Instruments** (describe the research instruments used to collect information and data).
 - **Data analysis** (explain the way the data was systematized and analyzed).
- f) Main findings.** Synthesize, present, interpret, and argue the most significant results found and the proposal, if the case of developing one.

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- g) Conclusions.** Describe the main conclusions generated from the answers to the research questions.
- h) Main limitations of the study** (related to the geographical or institutional context, or knowledge area and the research process).
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- 8 to 15 pages containing text (from 3000 to 5000 words approximately)
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