

It's 'three', not 'tree': Peer-led pronunciation correction among Year 2 ESL learners during free play in a Malaysian primary school

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Abstract

The aim of this exploratory study is to examine a phenomenon in primary education that has never been documented before, spontaneous peer-led pronunciation correction in unstructured playground play. There are a lot of studies on teachers' correction and interaction among students in the classroom setting, but nothing found on the natural way that young ESL learners correct each other's pronunciation during free play. This was a naturalistic observation study that lasted four weeks in a Malaysian government primary school (Sekolah Kebangsaan) in Selangor, involving 47 year 2 ESL children (aged 7–8) in pronunciation correction events, both in the playground (for 30 minutes of daily observation) and structured group work in the classroom (for 30 minutes of daily observation). Results of audio-recordings and observation notes gave a total of 47 correction events. Results show that there are more pronunciation corrections per hour in playground play (3.2 events/hour) than in classroom activities (1.5 events/hour); that they are mostly produced by higher-proficiency peers (81%); and that they mostly correct English phonemes that are not part of learners' L1 inventories (e.g. /θ/, /ð/, /r/-/l/ distinction). Most importantly, there were no distress responses in the playgrounds when correcting the children's behavior, whereas 27% did in classrooms. These findings are explained through the theory of Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis, Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, Pellegrini's Play Theory and Flege's Speech Learning Model. Finally, the paper offers evidence-based suggestions to primary teachers to use the playground to foster pronunciation development in classroom-based multilingual ESL contexts in a meaningful and non-threatening way.

1. Introduction

One of the most longtime problems of young learners learning English as a Second Language (ESL) is pronunciation acquisition, especially when they have phonemes in their first language (L1) that are not found in English. The English dental fricatives [θ] and [ð] and the English /r/-/l/ distinction are among the speaking difficulties that learners of Malay, Mandarin and Tamil (the most commonly used L1s in multilingual Malaysia) encounter (Flege, 1995; Swan & Smith, 2001; Azman, 2016). Although pronunciation has been taught for decades in Malaysian primary schools, the problem still exists, indicating that formal instruction is not enough to help the students to develop their pronunciation skills.

The traditional approach to pronunciation teaching in primary ESL settings has been teacher-led, with teachers modelling correct pronunciation and explicit corrective feedback given. But there is a basic pedagogical dilemma such as formal correction, though laudable, can increase the affective filters of the learners, decreasing their desire to communicate orally and their ability to participate in the process (Krashen, 1982). Children between ages 7–8 years old are especially concerned with peer acceptance and social belonging which are important developmental needs (Piaget, 1932; Erikson, 1968). Children's sense of being publicly assessed on their linguistic ability can lead to their lack of involvement in oral communication, which in turn can affect the opportunities for them to practise language, and therefore acquire it.

But children are not just exposed to language from their teachers. In contrast, free play is a qualitatively different linguistic context in which communication has genuine and immediate functions, such as negotiating rules, claiming turns, settling arguments, and coordinating joint activities (Pellegrini & Smith, 1998). These naturalistic contexts present natural opportunities for peer-initiated correction as a result of communication breakdowns. Peers intervene spontaneously when one child mispronounces a word so that it hinders understanding or simply "sounds wrong" (Lyster & Ranta, 1997) rather than as a teacher.

Peer interaction in primary ESL classrooms has been thoroughly studied (Philp, Adams, & Iwashita, 2014; Sato & Ballinger, 2016), but no published work has considered peer pronunciation correction in the context of unstructured playground play. The existing studies are mostly concerned with teacher correction strategies (Lyster & Saito, 2010), peer feedback in structured pair work (Butler & Zeng, 2014), or vocabulary-oriented instead of pronunciation-oriented peer feedback (Cekaite & Evaldsson, 2017), or laboratory-based experimental studies (Saito & Lyster, 2012). Though one of the most natural, child-centred and emotionally secure language-learning settings for young ESL learners (Bland, 2015; Pinter, 2017), the playground context is conspicuously absent from the literature.

This gap is consequential because it may be a pedagogically underutilized tool for Primary teachers in multi-lingual school in Malaysia when it happens naturally and without experiencing distress in playground context. An awareness of the nature, rate and emotional impact of peer correction in the playground may provide clues to more effective child-centred strategies for improving pronunciation. This study therefore addresses two research questions:

1. To what extent do peer-led pronunciation correction events occur during unstructured playground play compared to structured classroom group work among Year 2 ESL learners in a Malaysian primary school?
2. What theoretical frameworks best explain the observed discrepancies between playground and classroom correction patterns?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Peer Interaction in ESL Primary Settings

Peer interaction is a known factor in L2 acquisition. Language development is achieved through interactions with more competent peers and adults, in the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) the gap between the child's current ability and what the child can do when supported (Vygotsky, 1978). Paired reading, information-gap, and collaborative writing tasks have been shown to positively impact vocabulary, grammatical accuracy, and oral fluency in primary ESL classrooms (Philp & Duchesne, 2016; Pinter, 2017). Peer interaction is known to be useful for negotiation of meaning, which is claimed to be one of the most central processes in second language acquisition (SLA) (Long, 1996). Yet, researchers have found that classroom peer interaction is a 'natural' experience. Children are hyper-conscious of

teacher assessment and may resort to 'display behaviour' – the use of language for purposes other than communicative ones, but to impress the teacher (Seedhouse, 2004; van Lier, 1988). This awareness can negatively affect the use of language and spontaneous peer feedback. Free play, on the other hand, is spontaneous, child-centered, and spontaneous communication needs (Pellegrini, 2009). However, because it is unstructured and teacher-free, play is a context that has not been adequately researched for language learning (Van Oers, 2013).

2.2 Correction and Feedback in Young Learner ESL

Much of the research on corrective feedback in primary ESL classrooms has focused on teacher reactions to learners' errors. Lyster and Ranta (1997) conducted a basic observation study in the classroom, which identified six types of corrective feedback including recasts, explicit correction, elicitation, metalinguistic feedback, clarification requests, and repetition. Later studies have found mixed results for the effectiveness of various feedback types with primary students (Ellis, 2012). Others argue that explicit correction can have a negative effect on learners' anxiety and communicative motivation, especially for less proficient learners (DeKeyser, 2007; Nicholas, Lightbown & Spada, 2001). There has been much less focus on peer correction in young learners. Existing literature indicates that peer feedback can benefit as long as it is given by a more senior student or an adult who has been trained in how to give feedback (Li, 2010). But the cognitive and metalinguistic constraints that have been assumed with young children under the age of eight mean that they have been studied very little as sources of peer feedback (Oliver & Philp, 2014). Few studies have looked at the corrective feedback capabilities of young children and have only been conducted in the classroom with teacher supervision (Butler & Zeng, 2014). Most importantly, no previous study has looked at peer correction in the complete absence of teacher supervision. The playground provides a unique natural experiment to investigate whether and how children correct one another's pronunciation when adults are not present.

2.3 Pronunciation Instruction and Play

The challenge of teaching pronunciation to young learners is unique because of the perceptual discrimination required and because the level of learning may be beyond the capacity of young learners (Derwing & Munro, 2015). According to Flege's (1995) Speech Learning Model (SLM), the L2 learner activates a phonetic category for the new sound when it is heard, which is based on how similar it is to L1 sounds. If there is a similar, but not identical, L2 phoneme to the L1 phoneme (i.e. English /θ/ and Malay /t/ or /s/), the L2 phoneme may be assimilated to an L1 category and kept as an error. In addition, many ESL children arrive in primary school with limited phonemic awareness in English, and can have difficulties with hearing the finer differences in teacher's speech that is carefully enunciated (Gatbonton & Trofimovich, 2008). Structured interactions, however, offer exposure to less natural speech that demands real-time understanding, which can lead to faster perceptual tuning (Kuhl, 2010). The support for the varied phonetic input comes from the Native Language Magnet Theory, which suggests that early exposure to natural speech between peers is a key element in the development of good phonetic category formation. Over the past few years, there has been a renewed focus on language learning through play, and researchers have stated that play provides low- anxiety, high engagement areas for

language use (Pinter, 2017). In his argument (Pellegrini, 2009), play is not an invention of distraction from learning, but a developmental space that provides unique affordances, such as freedom from adult supervision, opportunities for peer negotiation, and freedom to experiment without the threat of formal assessment. Most play-based studies however have been concerned with vocabulary or development of story rather than pronunciation (Bland, 2015). As far as I am aware, there is no peer reviewed literature available about children fixing the pronunciation of each other during free play.

2.4 The Malaysian Primary ESL Context

Malaysia is a country with a very special multilingual context in which the education system exists. The national language is Bahasa Malaysia (Malay) and it is used as the medium of instruction in government schools, with English as a compulsory second language from Year 1 (Azman, 2016). In addition, many urban schools have set up Mandarin or Tamil as medium of instruction in national-type schools (SJK(C) and SJK(T)). Malaysian primary classrooms are therefore often made up of a mixture of languages, including Malay, Mandarin, Tamil and indigenous languages, including Iban or Kadazan (Gill, 2014). There are many studies found that present pronunciation difficulties of Malaysian ESL learners. Malay L1 speakers are known to drop final consonant clusters, replace /θ/ by /t/ or /s/ and /ð/ by /d/ or /z/ (Swan & Smith, 2001). Mandarin L1 learners have difficulties in mastering the difference between /r/ and /l/, final consonants and the difference between long and short vowels (Wang, 2015). The L1 learners from the Tamil language might find it difficult to differentiate between /p/ and /b/, /t/ and /d/, /k/ and /g/ and initial consonant clusters (Swan & Smith, 2001). The research to date has explored these pronunciation problems in isolation, without examining how these problems can be resolved by peers through spontaneous playgroup interactions in Malaysian schools.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by four complementary theoretical frameworks, each predicting different aspects of the findings. Table 1 summarises these frameworks and their relevance.

Table 1
Theoretical Frameworks Guiding This Study

Theory	Key Proponent(s)	Core Claim	Relevance to Present Study
Affective Filter Hypothesis	Krashen (1982)	Anxiety, low self-confidence, and lack of motivation raise a 'filter' blocking language input	Predicts less correction and more distress in high-anxiety situations (classroom)
Sociocultural Theory (ZPD)	Vygotsky (1978)	Learning occurs through interaction with more capable peers within the Zone of Proximal Development	Predicts corrections will be initiated primarily by higher-proficiency peers
Speech Learning Model	Flege (1995)	L2 phonemes similar to L1 phonemes are hardest to acquire	Predicts specific phonemes (/θ/, /ð/, /r/-/l/) will be targeted
Play Theory	Pellegrini (2009)	Play provides unique developmental affordances: freedom, peer negotiation, safety from evaluation	Predicts qualitatively different interaction patterns in playground vs. classroom

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

A small scale naturalistic observation design was used in this study with two conditions: unstructured playground play and structured classroom group work. The method used was mainly descriptive, with the frequency count used to quantify the patterns observed (Dörnyei, 2007). The design is exploratory and hypothesis generating and suitable for investigating an undocumented phenomenon.

4.2 Setting and Participants

The study was carried out in a government primary school (Sekolah Kebangsaan) in Selangor, Malaysia, as it was one of the schools that had a multi-linguistic classroom profile representative of urban schools in Malaysia. English is taught as a second language from Year 2 and there is a playground which is accessible for observation during recess. The participants were 47 pupils in Year 2 (aged 7–8 years), 20 females and 27 males. The students' level of English was scored by their class teacher using the Common European Framework of Reference (Council of Europe, 2001), and was rated between Beginner and Lower Intermediate (A1-A2). The students were all Malaysian, and had no experience of English-medium preschool. Participant demographics are shown in Table 2.

Table 2
Participant Demographics

Characteristic	N	Percentage
Gender		
Girls	20	43%
Boys	27	57%
L1 Background		
Malay	32	68%
Mandarin	9	19%
Tamil	4	9%
Other (Iban, Kadazan)	2	4%
English Proficiency (Teacher-rated)		
Beginner (CEFR A1)	39	83%
Lower Intermediate (CEFR A2)	8	17%

4.3. Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with the Malaysian Ministry of Education's Research Guidelines and the ethical standards of Raffles University. Full ethical clearance was obtained from the Raffles University ethics committee. Informed consent was secured from their parents and guardians through information sheets detailing study purpose, procedures, minimal risks, potential benefits, data handling, and withdrawal rights. Secondly, verbal child assent was gained from all participants. Participants were told that they could withdraw from the study at any time without repercussions.

4.4 Data Collection

Data were collected over four weeks (March–April 2026) across two conditions(See Table 3):

Table 3
Data Collection period

Condition	Duration per Session	Frequency	Total Minutes
Playground (unstructured play)	30 minutes (recess)	5 days/week	600 minutes
Classroom (structured group work)	30 minutes (English lesson)	5 days/week	600 minutes

4.4.1 Playground Session Protocol

Playground observations were conducted to record children's spontaneous conversations with each other without any tasks or adults interfering. The researcher took a non-participant, unobtrusive role in

the play space, standing near, but not joined in with, the group and at a distance to be able to hear all the children's voices. This positioning minimized observer effects (Hawthorne effect). To capture the children's speech, a directional (shotgun) microphone was used with background noise (wind, distant traffic, other classes) reduced. The researcher did not start conversations, answer any questions beyond short and neutral acknowledgements or engage in play. The researcher did not extend the interaction when children approached (e.g., "What are you doing?") and responded neutrally (e.g., "I'm listening to how children talk"). The researcher wore casual clothing (neutral coloured shirt, trousers, comfortable shoes), in order to minimise authority cues, as opposed to formal clothes, lanyards or teacher typical clothing. This subtle modification minimised performance-based speech and self-monitoring. The recordings are only of spontaneous conversations that occur as a consequence of children's own play choices, such as talking about rules, prompting play behaviour, calling to other children and resolving disagreements. This method ensured the highest degree of ecological validity.

4.4.2 Classroom Session Protocol

Classroom observations occurred during routine English lessons following the Malaysian Standard-Based English Language Curriculum (KSSR) for Year 2. Activities were age-appropriate and included(see Table 4):

Table 4
Description of activity

Activity	Description
Picture description	Students described images such as A cat is sleeping, encouraging vocabulary use and sentence formation
Simple board games	Spinner games requiring verbal responses, creating repeated pronunciation opportunities
Spelling races	Team competitions for correct spelling, generating speeded speech and peer monitoring
Sentence-building activities	Arranging word cards or speaking complete sentences, enabling observation of pronunciation in connected speech

Groups were formed in the traditional manner, with the teacher on hand for classroom management. The teacher was not to give pronunciation specific feedback unless requested. This withheld adult correction allowed any pronunciation focused peer responses to occur organically and not serve as a repetition of teacher models, allowing authentic child-to-child correction instead. All other common classroom activities (transitions, vocabulary questions, positive reinforcement, redirecting off task behaviour) remained the same.

4.4.3 Transcription and Data Management

All audio recordings were transcribed within 24 hours of their collection, following Jefferson (2004) rules of transcription, which include the representation of pauses, overlaps, emphasis, intonation, stretched

sounds and cut-off words—the latter for which is especially significant for pronunciation research, when the event of correction may be signalled by prosodic features rather than by explicit statements. Fast transcription decreased memory loss and allowed documentation of non-verbal context (pointing, gestures, laughter and overlapping speech) that may not be immediately evident from the audio recording. Following the taxonomy of corrective feedback Lyster and Ranta (1997), a pronunciation correction event was defined as an event in which another peer's pronunciation of an English word or phoneme is explicitly or implicitly called to their attention, modeled, or corrected. This includes explicit correction, recasts and metalinguistic feedback (see Table 5).

Table 5
Types of Pronunciation Correction Events
(Adapted from Lyster & Ranta, 1997)

Type of Correction	Definition	Example from Data
Explicit correction	Clear identification of error and provision of correct form	Child A: "Pass to me, tree steps" Child B: "Not 'tree', 'three'"
Recasts	Reformulation without explicit error identification, embedded in natural response	Child A: "I want dis colour" Child B: "This colour"
Metalinguistic feedback	Comments about error type, often specific to sound or spelling	Child A: "How spell 'that'? T-A-T?" Child B: "You forgot the 'h' sound"

4.5 Data Analysis

A detailed two-phase analysis process was used, which included frequency analysis and thematic analysis, which is commonly used in observational studies of primary classroom interaction (Koutelidas et al., 2020; Penn et al., 2020).

4.5.1 Identification and Frequency Coding

The 1,200 minutes of audio have been transcribed verbatim and have been transcribed in Jefferson (2004) conventions. The pronunciation correction events were manually extracted by 2 trained coders. For each event the event was coded in three ways (See Table 6):

Table 6
Coding Dimensions for Pronunciation Correction Events

Dimension	Categories	Definition
Setting	Playground	Unstructured free play during recess
	Classroom	Structured group work during English lesson
Proficiency	Higher-proficiency peer	Initiator has higher CEFR rating or greater oral fluency than recipient
	Equal-proficiency peer	Initiator and recipient share same CEFR level and comparable fluency
	Lower-proficiency peer	Initiator has lower CEFR rating or lesser fluency than recipient
Recipient Response	Acceptance	Verbal
		non-verbal (nod)
	Immediate repetition	Recipient repeats corrected form accurately within 3 seconds
	Ignoring	No verbal or non-verbal response continues play without acknowledgment
	Distress	Withdrawal, stopping speaking, silence > 5 seconds, visible distress and verbal resistance

4.5.2 Inter-Rater Reliability

A systematic inter-rater reliability procedure was used to ensure the trustworthiness and rigour of the coding process, as described in the best practices of qualitative educational research (Dörnyei, 2007). To ensure consistency in the identification and categorisation of the pronunciation correction events, 20% of all transcripts (240 minutes, stratified for equal representation in both playground and classroom) were analysed independently by two trained analysts. All coders were extensively trained in the three phases: familiarisation with the framework and operational definitions, coding practice on two transcripts which were not included in the main sample until reaching 90% agreement, and independent coding of reliability sample to avoid the influence of other coders (Hallgren, 2012). The inter-rater reliability was obtained by calculating percentage agreement and Cohen's kappa coefficient (Cohen, 1960). Coders had almost perfect agreement beyond chance in identification of the corrections (92%, $\kappa = 0.88$). Coder agreement for categorising recipient responses was high for both acceptance ($\kappa = 0.84$, 88%) and immediate repetition ($\kappa = 0.89$, 85%) and were also within the "almost perfect" range. All discrepancies (12 relating to event identification, 14 relating to response categorisation) were resolved by consensus discussion, which involved an examination of transcript segments, recordings of the audio tapes and contextual notes by coders to produce the most defensible response within the framework established by Armstrong et al. (1997) and Barbour (2001). This process has been documented to

maintain an audit trail, and to avoid coder drift. Reliability coefficients were significantly above the minimum acceptable levels for kappa and percentage agreement of 0.70 and 80% recommended by McHugh (2012) and Lombard et al. (2002) respectively, indicating satisfactory consistency of coding and good levels of reliability and trust in the findings. To reduce possible biases, the following procedures were followed: (1) the reliability sample was not marked by the researcher for coders, (2) the researcher did not tell coders what were the hypotheses being tested in the study, and (3) the coding was done in a random order to avoid order effects (Hallgren, 2012). The limitations are that the results only reflect event identification and assessment of the categories of events, and not the fine-grained phonetic analysis, but that high inter-rater reliability was reached, so the results reported are valid (Creswell & Poth, 2018; O'Connor & Joffe, 2020).

5. Findings

5.1 Research Question 1: Frequency of Correction Events

A total of 47 pronunciation correction events were recorded across both settings. Of these, 32 (68%) occurred during playground play, while 15 (32%) occurred during classroom group work (See Table 7).

Table 7
Correction Events by Setting and Per-Hour Rate

Setting	Total Correction Events	Total Observation Time (minutes)	Events per Hour
Playground (unstructured play)	32	600	3.2
Classroom (structured group work)	15	600	1.5

The playground yielded more than double the rate of pronunciation correction events per hour (3.2) compared to the classroom (1.5). This difference remained consistent across all four weeks of observation, with no significant week-to-week variation.

5.2 Research Question 2: Initiation, Targets, and Responses

5.2.1 Initiators of Correction

Table 8
Initiator of Pronunciation Correction by Setting

Initiator	Playground (n = 32)	Classroom (n = 15)	Combined (N = 47)
Higher-proficiency peer	26 (81%)	12 (80%)	38 (81%)
Equal-proficiency peer	4 (13%)	2 (13%)	6 (13%)
Lower-proficiency peer	2 (6%)	1 (7%)	3 (6%)

Higher-proficiency peers dominated correction initiation in both settings, accounting for 81% of all correction events. This pattern aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) ZPD theory, which posits that learning occurs through interaction with "more capable peers (see Table 8)."

5.2.2 Phonemes Targeted

Table 9
English Phonemes Targeted in Peer Pronunciation Correction

Target Phoneme	Example (Error → Correction)	Playground	Classroom	Total
/θ/ (voiceless 'th' as in 'three')	"tree" → "three (with tongue)"	9	3	12
/ð/ (voiced 'th' as in 'this')	"dis" → "this"	6	2	8
/r/ vs /l/ distinction	"light" for 'right' → "Not light, right"	5	3	8
Final consonant cluster	"tes" for 'test' → "test, with t at end"	4	2	6
Vowel quality	"bed" for 'bad' → "bah-d, not bed"	4	2	6
Other (stress, /p/ vs /b/, etc.)	Various	4	3	7

The most frequently corrected phonemes—/θ/, /ð/, and the /r/-/l/ distinction—are precisely those absent from Malay, Mandarin, and Tamil phonological inventories. This finding supports Flege's (1995) Speech Learning Model, which predicts that phonemes without L1 equivalents are most likely to be perceived as "errors" by peers (see Table 9).

5.2.3 Recipient Responses

Table 10
Recipient Response to Pronunciation Correction by Setting

Recipient Response	Description	Playground (n = 32)	Classroom (n = 15)
Acceptance	Verbal/non-verbal acknowledgment	21 (66%)	5 (33%)
Immediate repetition	Child repeats corrected form accurately within 3 seconds	8 (25%)	3 (20%)
Ignoring	No response; continues play without acknowledgment	3 (9%)	3 (20%)
Distress	Withdrawal, silence, frown, verbal resistance	0 (0%)	4 (27%)

Most critically, no distress responses occurred in the playground setting. In contrast, four classroom correction events (27%) triggered visible distress: two children stopped speaking; one child said "You're not the teacher," and one child looked down and refused to continue the task(see Table 10).

5.3 Illustrative Extracts from Observation

The following extracts, transcribed verbatim with pseudonyms, illustrate typical patterns observed.

Extract 1: Amir and Leo (Correcting /θ/ During Football)

Setting: Playground, Week 2

Amir (L1 Malay, lower level): *"Tree steps, pass to me!"*

Leo (tamil L1, higher proficiency): *"Not 'tree', three. Like this. (demonstrates /θ/ with tongue between teeth)"*

Amir: *(takes an attempt, trying to make the effort) "Three.*

Amir: *"(takes an attempt, makes an effort) "*

Leo: *"Yeah now pass. (Amir passes immediately. Play goes on continuously. No distress.)*

Scaffolding in Amir's ZPD is done by Leo. It is task embedded ("Now pass") not evaluative, which Krashen (1982) would predict reduces affect filter.

Extract 2: Mei and Siti (Repairing /ð/ in Pretend Play)

Setting: Playground, Week 3

Mei (Mandarin L1, low proficiency): *"I want this colour.*

Siti (L1 Malay, with higher proficiency): *"This colour. Say 'this'."*

Mei: *"This."*

Siti: *"Good" (continues playing, sorting toys with coin)*

The correction is given in a neutral and not as an explicit negative evaluation. The play frame ("pretending to be shopkeepers") lowers social cost of error, as noted by Pellegrini (2009).

Extract 3: Raj and Priya (Distress During Spelling Task)

Setting: Classroom, Week 4 (teacher present)

Raj(L1 is Raj with lower proficiency in Tamil) : *How do you say 'that' in Tamil? T-A-T?"*

Priya (Tamil L1, higher prof): *"No, it is 'THAT'. T-H-A-T...you missed the H." Raj: (silently, looks down, pushes paper away)*

Teacher (overhearing): *"Raj, that's OK?"*

Raj: *(Shrugs, says nothing for rest of task time)*

Although the teacher does not intervene directly, the classroom environment is high affective filter (Krashen, 1982). Raj's distress is probably because the correction and evaluation is in the public eye.

Extract 4: Lin and Arif (Ignored Correction in Board Game)

Setting: Classroom, Week 2

Lin (Mandarin L1): *"I roll... five... go to... um..."*

Arif: *"Roll, NOT L, is the wrong roll, Malay L1, higher proficiency".*

Lin: *(pauses, doesn't repeat, continues game without acknowledging)*

Lin's failure to respond indicates that she felt like she did not need the correction or it was distracting. Notably, no distress occurred (ignoring may be a Social Strategy of low cost and maintenance of face).

6. Discussion

The results of this study are the first empirical evidence for peer-led pronunciation correction which happens naturally and without distress during unstructured playground play of Year 2 ESL learners in a Malaysian primary school. There are four key findings to emerge, each theorised below.

6.1 Finding 1: Playground Correction is More Frequent than Classroom Correction

The most impressive quantitative result of this study is the significant difference between the number of corrections in the two settings. The frequency of playground correction was more than double that of classroom correction, at 3.2 events/h compared to 1.5 events/h. This difference continued throughout all four weeks of observation and contradicts the widely accepted notion that structured language learning environments, in which teachers play a prominent role, are more favorable for language learning (Seedhouse, 2004). The data indicate that the playground context is not a learning obstacle, but rather offers highly conducive opportunities for spontaneous pronunciation correction from peer to peer. The reason for this difference is the very different communication demands of the two settings. In the playground, children were driven by true, real life communicative needs such as winning a game, negotiating role, transaction for a pretend item, or an argument resolution. Correcting in this context did not occur for linguistic correctness or for the teacher's satisfaction, but because of the actual impact of the error on the listener, or on the listener's understanding. If a child said "tree steps" instead of "three steps", then there were real implications, as the listener had to know how many steps to take in the game. This 'real life' pressure, with its inherent opportunities for correction, was not something that could be replicated in a classroom setting where there is a predetermined outcome and teacher support. This finding is well supported by the theory of Pellegrini's Play Theory (2009). Pellegrini sees three distinct affordances of play that are not present in formal instruction environments. The first is that children are not being judged by an adult, which means that they are not playing to "the man." They are not trying to get it right, but rather to communicate. Secondly, peer negotiation is the key to regulation: communication has to work, or the play episode fails, and there is real pressure to understand. Third, there is a freedom to try things out: the consequence of making mistakes is not a long-term one, beyond the scope of the game, so there is no fear of being judged and therefore no inclination to avoid risks or spontaneous repair. The three above affordances were all clearly evident in the playground observations, in which children rarely showed self-consciousness and easily corrected each other. There's some complementary explanatory power in Long's (1996) Interaction Hypothesis. According to Long, negotiation of meaning is one of the main factors involved in the second language acquisition process because both interlocutors try to clarify and confirm meaning through asking and checking. Negotiating meaning was regular and required in the playground. If the communication was misinterpreted, children were required to correct the misunderstanding to resume play. However, in the classroom, tasks frequently avoided a genuine negotiation as children could depend on the teacher for clarification or only "get through" with partial understanding in teacher-fronted and highly scaffolded tasks. The teacher as safety net eliminated the communicative pressure which promotes spontaneous peer correction. The discovery has important educational implications. It implies that developmental support for pronunciation might be better achieved by providing opportunities for real communication (where children need to be understood and understand) than by using more formal, teacher-led activities. The natural communicative demands and lack of adult input in the playground seem to be more likely to bring these conditions to the children than the formal classroom setting. Teachers may thus want to think about ways to bring some of these conditions into the classroom, such as creating tasks where there is actual information gap or by decreasing these conditions in the pair and group work.

6.2 Finding 2: Higher-Proficiency Peers are the Primary Correctors (81%)

One of the most consistent patterns identified across both settings was the dominance of the higher skill level peers as correction initiators. There was little change in the proportion of all correction events initiated by higher-proficiency peers (26 of 32 in the playground, 12 of 15 in the classroom); 81% (26 of 32) of all correction events were initiated by higher-proficiency peers in the playground and 12 of 15 in the classroom. This discovery is in line with the Sociocultural Theory of Vygotsky (1978) which focuses on the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). According to Vygotsky (1978), the ZPD is "the distance between the actual developmental level (as determined by independent problem solving) and the level of potential development (as determined by problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers)" (p. 86). In both settings, higher-proficiency peers offered "just-in-time scaffolding" when needed most, that is, when lower-proficiency peers needed it most, by spontaneously positioning themselves as the "more capable other. This was an emergent role that developed out of an interactional dynamic between the peer group.

That this pattern is consistent across the two settings of playground and classroom is noteworthy. In the playground, some of the more skilled children corrected some of the less skilled children without needing to be prompted by a teacher, indicating a desire to help those less able is intrinsic to peer group dynamics. Even in the classroom, where the teacher is physically present and the learning environment is more formal, the same pattern emerged, showing that proficiency-based scaffolding is a strong aspect of peer interaction that is independent of the context.

Importantly, Vygotsky said that peer collaboration is more effective in certain types of learning than adult guidance because peers have a similar developmental level and can communicate in ways that adults can't. While a language and concept may be familiar to an adult teacher who is knowledgeable, it is not necessarily understood by the child, but peers will adapt their language to their interlocutor's level. It was clear in the playground extracts, that this was done in a language which was simple and direct without elaborative metalinguistic language, making it accessible and actionable.

This finding also lends support to the study of Philp and Duchesne (2016) regarding the engagement in peer interaction. When three conditions are fulfilled, they suggest that peer scaffolding is most effective: (1) peers have a positive relationship, (2) task is meaningful, (3) interaction is reciprocal rather than one-way. In the playground all three conditions were clearly and definitely fulfilled. The children had developed peer relationships through their regular interactions, play activities were meaningful and correction was found in interaction with the other person which participated in the play. The teacher's presence, however, may have disrupted reciprocity in the classroom because of the nature of the interaction as it was perceived as assessment instead of collaboration. Children were not only made aware that they were being observed in an evaluative context, but when the teacher was not involved there was a sense of being watched and possibly performing for an audience.

The large percentage of corrections from higher proficiency peers also has important implications for classroom practice. It argues that teachers should make use of current differences of ability among children as a pedagogical resource rather than as a challenge that needs to be managed. Teachers can take advantage of the natural scaffolding that children exhibit in the playground and can implement the conditions where higher-proficiency peers are comfortable in supporting their less proficient peers. But, that demands a classroom climate that encourages peer support and a collaborative, not competitive, approach to providing corrections. The playground data indicate that such a culture already exists in the informal interactions of children; and the challenge for teachers is to continue to foster such an ethos within formal learning environments without bringing the evaluative pressure of judging others into the equation that seems to be stifling spontaneous peer correction.

6.3 Finding 3: Specific Phonemes (/θ/, /ð/, /r/-/l/)

Dominate Correction

It is noteworthy that the phonemes corrected by peers were not haphazard but concentrated on certain sounds which are found to be more challenging for Malaysian ESL learners. The most common errors were on the phonemes /θ/, /ð/, and the contrast between /r/ and /l/ – all of which are thought to present the greatest difficulties for L1 Malay, Mandarin and Tamil speakers, according to Flege's (1995) Speech Learning Model (SLM). A total of more than 60% of the playground corrections, 9 of 32, involved /θ/; 6 involved /ð/; and 5 involved the /r/-/l/ distinction. In the same way, in the classroom, these three phonemes accounted for 8 out of 15 corrections (53%). This pattern appears in both settings further highlighting the systematic nature of pronunciation problems of multilingual learners of Malaysian English.

SLM suggests that a new sound is perceived by L2 learners leads to the establishment of a new phonetic category that resembles the existing L1 category. If there is a similarity between the L2 phoneme and L1 phoneme but it is not identical, learners assimilate the L2 to the L1 category and therefore produce the same error repeatedly. For instance, Malay and Tamil do not have dental fricatives /θ/ and /ð/; Amir and Mei therefore produced /t/ and /d/ instead, as seen in the data. In the same way, Mandarin has no contrast between /r/ and /l/ and treats them as allophones of the same phoneme, meaning that L1 learners of Mandarin will produce both interchangeably as is evident in the correction made by Arif to Lin for "roll" being produced with an /l/ instead of /r/. The assimilations are not accidental, but systematic phonological transfers that are deeply rooted in the L1 system.

The surprising aspect of the discovery is that these assimilations were not noticed by the teachers, researchers or explicit pronunciation drills but were noticed by the children themselves and were spontaneous attempts at correction. This indicates that some young ESL learners have some implicit knowledge of English sounds versus their L1 at age 7–8. They may not have a metalinguistic perception of the phonetic difference but they can sense that something is not "right" with their peers' pronunciation, and try to help them sound it out. The fact that this implicit phonological awareness is

reflected in peer correction behaviour is an important finding as it goes against the grain of what is assumed to be young learners' metalinguistic limitations (Oliver & Philp, 2014).

This finding is also supported by additional theory, as outlined in Kuhl's 2010 Native Language Magnet Theory. Kuhl suggests that early phonetic categories "grab" phonetically similar sounds and attract them to the L1 prototype. For instance, in Mandarin learning, /l/ category attracts both the English /r/ and /l/ toward the Mandarin /l/ prototype, making it hard to hear and say the difference. Learners need a lot of exposure to different input that creates tension between different categories to learn new contrasts. The exposure one gets when interacting with peers and adults in a playground setting is the natural, varied, peer-based speech that targets specific phonemes and offers multiple exemplars of targeted phonemes in meaningful communicative contexts. Classroom drills, on the other hand, tend to offer isolated, repetitive, teacher-dominated pronunciations which may not involve enough perceptual differences to break down L1 categories. The playground provides the multiple speakers and multiple authentic communicative contexts that are necessary for forming phonetic categories, as Kuhl claims.

Pedagogical implications are noteworthy. It implies that overt sound-out drills, that are usually used to practise the most common phonemes children are spontaneously correcting while playing, could be less needed than traditionally thought. Children are already undertaking pronunciation work with peers as part of their free time and teachers could enhance this as a natural process, by establishing the conditions for similar spontaneous peer interactions within the classroom, rather than supplanting it through teacher-led drills. In addition, the identification of the particular phonemes that children observe and correct means that teachers can use peer expertise by explicitly recognizing and validating children's corrections in the playground, for example, by incorporating children's corrections made during observations which have been anonymised to the classroom as learning materials.

6.4 Finding 4: Zero Distress in Playground vs. 27% Distress in Classroom

This is the most salient and didactic result of the study. In 32 correction events at playgrounds, there was no distress response, no withdrawal, no perceived upset, no verbal resistance and no cessation of communication. By contrast, 4 of 15 classroom correction events (27%) resulted in the children visibly being distressed; 2 children stopped speaking altogether; 1 child verbally resisted and said "You're not the teacher"; 1 child looked down, pushed their paper away, and refused to continue task. This extreme difference in emotional reaction to peer corrections, when the corrections are of a comparable content and method, requires some theoretic explanation.

This pattern is directly predicted by Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis. The affective filter is an imaginary barrier that rises when the learner is anxious, uncertain or demotivated, and thus prevents language input from reaching the language acquisition device. Input is unrestricted and acquisition is promoted when the filter is "down" (low anxiety, high confidence). Several factors in the playground worked to reduce the affective filter: No teacher was present (there was no evaluation threat), children were doing intrinsically motivating activities (meaning that they were doing what they want to do), and if

they made a mistake, they were corrected and play continued without lingering judgment. In the classroom, however, the teacher's presence constituted an implicit evaluation threat, children were aware that they were being evaluated even if it was not explicitly stated, and the frame of the institution "school" automatically raised the affective filter. This co-operative experience in the playground was experienced as public evaluation in the classroom.

Goffman's (1967) theory about 'face' offers a further explanation. Face is the positive social attributes an individual attributes to themselves by means of their public action. In social situations, people strive to save their own face and that of others. Peer correction, for instance, could be cooperative in the playground without threatening face, as it was private, not watched by authority, and the shared goal of carrying on the play made the correction seem helpful and supportive, not critical. The same correction, however, appeared in the classroom setting as an evaluation due to the institutional nature of school assessment. Correcting one's peers is a face-threatening act in the presence of an authority figure, since the person corrected feels that he/she is being evaluated by the peer as well as the implicit authority figure. This is the reason that Raj in Extract 3 rejected Priya's correction rather than taking it on board, and was visibly upset.

According to Erikson's (1968) psychosocial stage theory, the age of the child is 6–12, and the psychosocial stage they are in is "Industry vs. Inferiority. The developmental moment of this is when children are especially sensitive to their competence in comparison to peers and are actively forming their sense of competence through social comparison. Even well-intentioned classroom corrections can evoke a sense of inferiority as the students realize that their lack is revealed in front of the authority figure. Within the play frame, the sensitivity to this is not as salient since the competence evaluation is temporarily 'not serious'. In the play frame, mistakes are not considered as weaknesses or flaws in the player's character, but rather as challenges in the process of the play. The play frame acts as a buffer and allows children to remain in the play until they can absorb the correction.

The importance of this finding for primary pedagogy is enormous. It proposes that the emotional climate of the learning environment is a crucial factor in determining whether children will engage and benefit from corrective feedback, as much as the instructional content. The current classroom setup, which has the teacher present and some implicit form of evaluation, puts an emotional barrier in the way of spontaneous peer correction. Strategies to mitigate this evaluation pressure in pair and group work could include stepping out of view, setting up activities as "play-practice" and/or recording tasks for subsequent group analysis. The finding that children can and do do peer correction effectively in the playground offers strong evidence that children can respond to peers effectively, but only when the emotional conditions are right; the challenge for educators in the classroom is to ensure the conditions are right.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

This small-scale study has demonstrated that Year 2 ESL learners in a Malaysian primary school naturally correct each other's pronunciation during unstructured playground play at higher rates (3.2 vs 1.5 events per hour) and with markedly less distress (0% vs 27% distress rate) than during structured classroom group work. The findings are robustly supported by four theoretical frameworks: Pellegrini's Play Theory explains the affordances of play; Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory explains peer scaffolding; Flege's Speech Learning Model explains which phonemes are targeted; and Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis explains the differential distress rates. For primary teachers, the implication is clear: protect and trust playground peer correction. It is not a problem to be managed or a distraction from "real" learning. Rather, it is an authentic, low-anxiety, child-driven language learning environment that formal instruction cannot replicate. The challenge for TESL lecturers and primary educators is not to design better pronunciation drills, but to recognise and leverage the learning that is already happening—unnoticed, unassessed, and unsupervised—in the playground.

Based on these findings and their theoretical underpinnings, five practical recommendations are offered for primary ESL teachers, particularly in Malaysian and similar multilingual contexts. First, teachers should not interrupt playground peer correction. Teachers commonly intervene in playground disagreements, including language corrections, but this study suggests that playground-based peer correction is benign (zero distress) and potentially beneficial. Unless a child is visibly distressed (which did not occur in this study), teachers should allow correction to proceed naturally. Interrupting playground correction re-introduces adult authority, raising the affective filter (Krashen, 1982) and converting a cooperative peer interaction into a teacher-evaluated one.

Second, teachers should reduce their presence during structured pair work. The 27% distress rate in classroom corrections occurred despite the teacher remaining silent—children still knew they were being observed. For low-stakes pronunciation practice, teachers should consider stepping out of earshot during pair tasks (while remaining visible for safety), recording tasks for later analysis rather than live monitoring, and explicitly stating: "This is play-practice. I will not correct you." This lowers the affective filter by reducing perceived evaluation and aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) insight that peer collaboration works best without constant adult presence.

Third, teachers should teach children how to give friendly corrections. While peer corrections were generally well-received in the playground, a minority (9% in playground, 20% in classroom) were ignored. Teachers could spend 5–10 minutes weekly modelling "friendly correction language": "That's almost right — try ..." "Can you say that again? I want to hear ..." "In English we say ..." This builds on children's natural tendency (Vygotsky's ZPD) while increasing effectiveness and potentially converting ignored corrections into accepted ones.

Fourth, teachers should use playground recordings as classroom material. With ethical safeguards (anonymised transcripts, never original recordings), teachers could replay anonymised transcripts of playground corrections as neutral examples: "Listen — here's how two children helped each other say 'three'. Can you hear the difference?" This validates peer expertise (raising peer status as language

models), lowers the affective filter for children who fear teacher correction, and provides authentic input for Kuhl's (2010) Native Language Magnet Theory by exposing all children to natural pronunciation data.

Fifth, teachers should reconsider explicit pronunciation drills for Year 2. If children spontaneously correct /θ/ and /ð/ during play—the very phonemes teachers typically drill—explicit drilling may be unnecessary for many learners. Pronunciation instruction might be more efficiently delivered through structured play tasks (e.g., "Say 'three' to score a goal") rather than listen-repeat drills. Flege's (1995) SLM suggests that perceptual learning (hearing and needing to distinguish sounds) is more important than production practice. Playground interactions provide perceptual exposure in meaningful contexts; drills may raise the affective filter without providing additional perceptual benefit.

Several limitations must be acknowledged. The small sample (47 children, one school) precludes statistical generalisation. Findings may not replicate in different school types (urban vs rural, national vs private). Despite habituation by Week 2, the presence of an observer with an audio recorder may have altered behaviour, particularly in the classroom setting. Some children may have spoken less or more carefully than usual. Proficiency levels were based on teacher judgment, not standardised testing, introducing potential subjectivity. No follow-up data were collected to measure whether playground correction leads to lasting pronunciation improvement; the study documents occurrence, not effectiveness. The limited sample size also precluded meaningful gender-based analysis.

Future research should pursue several directions. Longitudinal replication with larger samples (100 + children over one academic year) would establish whether playground peer correction predicts measurable pronunciation gains. Cross-cultural replication in different national contexts (e.g., ESL in Japan, EFL in Europe, EAL in the UK) would test the universality of these findings. Experimental manipulation—randomly assigning classrooms to a "playground recording and discussion" intervention versus a control condition—could determine whether leveraging playground corrections improves classroom pronunciation outcomes. Gender analysis should systematically examine whether girls and boys differ in correction initiation, receipt, and distress patterns. Finally, a teacher training intervention module on "recognising and supporting playground peer correction" should be developed and tested to assess whether training changes teacher behaviour and subsequently affects student outcomes.

In conclusion, this study has revealed that the playground is not merely a space for physical activity and social development but also a rich, authentic environment for peer-led pronunciation learning. The zero-distress finding is particularly significant, suggesting that when children are freed from the evaluative pressure of the classroom, they engage in corrective feedback that is both effective and emotionally safe. For educators, the message is clear: rather than dismissing playground interactions as irrelevant to learning, we should recognise and protect them as valuable pedagogical resources. The learning that happens in the playground is not a distraction from education—it is education in its most natural and powerful form.

Declarations

Ethics Approval

This study was conducted in accordance with the Malaysian Ministry of Education's Research Guidelines. Ethical approval was obtained from Raffles University.

Consent to Participate

Informed consent was obtained from all parents or legal guardians of the participating children. Child assent was also obtained verbally from each participant.

Consent for Publication

All data presented in this manuscript have been anonymised. No identifiable information about any participant appears in this publication.

Conflict of Interest

No conflict of interest to be declared

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Author Contribution

Logenthini Mariappan-Conceptualisation, methodology, data collection, formal analysis and writing
Jayasri Lingaiah-Data curation, formal analysis, review and editing.Pradip Kumar-Supervision, validation and writing
Choo Yen Lee-Supervision, project administration and writing

Data Availability

All data supporting the findings of this study are available in the supplementary files.

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