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PLAY-BASED LEARNING IN TEACHING ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION TO YOUNG LEARNERS: A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY IN A FOURTH-GRADE CLASSROOM IN NORTH LOMBOK, INDONESIA

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Abstrak

Pelafalan merupakan komponen pembelajaran bahasa Inggris yang kerap terabaikan di sekolah dasar, padahal berpengaruh pada kejelasan komunikasi dan kepercayaan diri berbicara. Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi penerapan pembelajaran berbasis bermain (play-based learning) dalam pengajaran pelafalan, jenis aktivitas bermain yang muncul, serta tantangan dan peluangnya. Studi kasus kualitatif deskriptif dilakukan di satu kelas IV sekolah dasar negeri di Kabupaten Lombok Utara, Nusa Tenggara Barat, dengan melibatkan satu guru bahasa Inggris dan 20 peserta didik yang dipilih secara purposif. Data dikumpulkan melalui observasi dua sesi pembelajaran pada 15 Juli 2026 menggunakan daftar periksa yang diadaptasi dari tipologi bermain Edwards (2017), wawancara semiterstruktur dengan guru dan lima peserta didik, serta dokumentasi, dan dianalisis dengan model interaktif Miles, Huberman, dan Saldaña. Ketiga kategori bermain Edwards (bermain terbuka, bermain bermodel, dan bermain berkerangka tujuan) teramati pada seluruh 10 indikator observasi, ditambah pola pembelajaran sebaya yang tidak tercakup dalam tipologi tersebut. Kelima peserta didik yang diwawancarai melaporkan bahwa permainan menebak gambar membantu pelafalan mereka. Guru melaporkan peningkatan motivasi dan partisipasi, tetapi juga keterbatasan waktu, perbedaan kemampuan, keterbatasan kosakata, kesulitan mengelola kelas, dan rasa malu sebagian siswa. Karena berbasis satu hari observasi dan persepsi partisipan tanpa pengukuran capaian, temuan ini tidak membuktikan peningkatan kemampuan pelafalan secara kausal. Penelitian menyimpulkan bahwa permainan bertujuan, yang ditopang pemodelan dan umpan balik guru serta interaksi sebaya, menjadi konteks yang menjanjikan bagi latihan pelafalan anak.

Kata kunci: pembelajaran berbasis bermain; pelafalan; sekolah dasar; studi kasus kualitatif; scaffolding

Abstract

Pronunciation is often neglected in elementary English instruction, although it shapes intelligibility and learners' confidence to speak. This qualitative descriptive case study explored how play-based learning was implemented in teaching pronunciation, which types of play emerged, and what challenges and opportunities accompanied it. The case was one fourth-grade class at a public elementary school in North Lombok, West Nusa Tenggara, involving one English teacher and 20 purposively selected students. Data were gathered through observation of two lessons on 15 July 2026 using a checklist adapted from Edwards' (2017) play typology, semi-structured interviews with the teacher and five students, and documentation, and were analysed with Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña's interactive model. Open-ended, modelled,

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and purposefully-framed play were observed on all 10 checklist indicators, alongside a pattern of peer learning not covered by the typology. All five interviewed students reported that the Picture Guessing Game helped their pronunciation. The teacher reported higher motivation and participation, yet identified limited time, mixed abilities, limited vocabulary, noisy classroom management, and student shyness as constraints. Because the evidence comes from one day of observation and participant perceptions without outcome measurement, it does not establish causal gains in pronunciation. The study concludes that purposeful games, supported by teacher modelling, feedback, and peer interaction, offer a promising context for young learners' pronunciation practice.

Keywords: play-based learning; pronunciation; elementary school; qualitative case study; scaffolding

INTRODUCTION

English instruction at the elementary level lays the linguistic foundation on which later communicative competence is built, and pronunciation is one of its most consequential yet least emphasised components. In English as a foreign language (EFL) settings, accurate sound production does more than make speech intelligible: it supports listening comprehension and helps learners form a positive self-image as speakers of the language (Toledo-Silva, 2024). Segmental features, such as the articulation of individual vowels and consonants, and suprasegmental features, such as stress and intonation, together determine whether learners can be understood and can understand others (Toledo-Silva, 2024). When pronunciation is treated as an afterthought, young learners are likely to hesitate to speak, and hesitation in turn reduces the practice through which pronunciation improves.

This problem is visible in the classroom that became the site of the present study. In the fourth grade of a public elementary school in North Lombok, West Nusa Tenggara, preliminary observation showed that learners struggled with English phonemes that have no counterpart in the Indonesian sound system, including /θ/, /ð/, and several diphthongs. Participation was low because lessons were predominantly teacher-centred, leaving learners with few opportunities to use the sounds they were taught in meaningful communicative situations. Such conditions are consistent with the observation that pronunciation difficulties in young learners are often linked to instruction that lacks a phonologically rich and engaging environment (Misna & Pamungkas, 2025).

Play-based learning (PBL) is a plausible pedagogical response. It positions play, rather than transmission, as the central medium through which children construct knowledge by means of experience, social interaction, and contextual exploration (Hamdi et al., 2025). Edwards (2017) distinguishes three forms along a continuum between children's freedom and teacher guidance: open-ended play, initiated by children; modelled play, in which the teacher demonstrates and scaffolds verbally; and purposefully-framed play, in which play is structured around explicit learning objectives. The theoretical rationale is reinforced by Vygotsky's (1978) account of play and the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), under which teachers and peers help learners achieve what they cannot yet accomplish alone. For pronunciation, this suggests that games can supply the repeated, low-pressure, socially supported practice that drill-based teaching often fails to provide.

Empirical evidence points in the same direction, although with important differences in design and context. Sağlam and Kartal (2023) reported, in a mixed-methods pre-test/post-test study

of 15 experimental and 15 control students in Türkiye, that drama activities produced significantly greater gains in pronunciation than conventional instruction (Wilcoxon $z = 3.301$, $p < .05$). Tekman and Yeniasır (2023) observed over seven weeks that third-graders in Northern Cyprus taught through games displayed more enthusiasm, speaking confidence, and progress in word pronunciation and intonation than a conventionally taught group. Hamdi et al. (2025) found, in a qualitative study of 18 kindergarten children in Indonesia, that Edwards' three play types supported active participation and contextual vocabulary use, and they identified a further dimension, interpersonal constructive play, reflecting empathy and cognitive initiative in peer interaction. Toledo-Silva (2024) reported that surveyed teachers considered repetition, modelling, multimedia, and interactive language games beneficial for young learners' pronunciation. Complementary work indicates that learning embedded in social context improves retention and motivation (Zhicong et al., 2023) and that games can support vocabulary acquisition and pronunciation (Young & Wang, 2014).

Despite this body of work, a research gap remains. Existing studies concentrate on vocabulary and general speaking skills, involve different age groups or media (university students learning from video, kindergarten vocabulary lessons), or rely on teacher surveys rather than classroom observation. Studies that describe, from direct classroom evidence, how play is actually enacted in pronunciation teaching to elementary learners in the Indonesian public-school context remain scarce. Moreover, it is unclear whether Edwards' typology, formulated mainly around teacher–child interaction, adequately captures the peer interaction that characterises children's language play.

The present study therefore describes the implementation of play-based learning in teaching English pronunciation to fourth-grade students, identifies the types of play that emerged in the classroom, and examines the challenges and opportunities that accompanied implementation. Its contribution is an in-depth, context-bound account of how play, modelling, feedback, and peer interaction were combined in practice, not a test of causal effects on pronunciation achievement.

Research Method

Research design and setting

This study used a qualitative approach with a descriptive case-study design. The design was chosen because the aim was to interpret the meaning of instructional practices and the natural dynamics of classroom interaction, not to quantify changes in scores (Creswell, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The study was conducted in one fourth-grade class at a public elementary school in Kayangan District, North Lombok Regency, West Nusa Tenggara, a school in which English was already part of the curriculum. Data were collected on 15 July 2026, in the second semester of the 2025/2026 academic year, across two classroom sessions held on the same day. The findings are intended to illuminate this classroom and are not meant for broad generalisation.

Participants and sampling

Participants were one English teacher and 20 fourth-grade students, selected through purposive sampling. Fourth grade was considered an appropriate level for introducing more structured pronunciation instruction in light of learners' cognitive and linguistic development. Five students were later selected for interview on the basis of their relevance to the research focus; they are referred to as S1–S5 in this article to protect their identity.

Instruments and data collection

Three techniques were used. First, classroom observation was carried out with the researcher in the role of observer, using a structured checklist adapted from Edwards' (2017) play

typology. The checklist contained 10 indicators in five categories (open-ended play, modelled play, purposefully-framed play, student engagement, and social interaction), each accompanied by narrative notes, and was supplemented by field notes. Second, semi-structured interviews with the teacher and five students followed an interview guide covering instructional strategies, perceived effectiveness, and challenges (teacher), and engagement, motivation, and learning experiences (students). Interviews were conducted in Indonesian and translated for reporting. Third, documentation, consisting of photographs, observation and interview guides, and field notes, was used to corroborate the other two sources.

Instrument quality and trustworthiness

Because the instruments were qualitative, validity and reliability coefficients were not computed; quality was instead established through trustworthiness criteria. Credibility was supported by direct engagement in two sessions, source and method triangulation across observation, interview, and documentation, and member checking with the teacher. Transferability was supported by detailed description of the context, dependability by an audit trail of systematically organised field notes, and confirmability by documented researcher reflexivity. Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the school.

Data analysis

Analysis followed the interactive model of Miles et al. (2014): data condensation (selecting, focusing, and transforming raw data), data display (narratives, tables, and matrices), and conclusion drawing and verification. Coding was guided by Edwards' (2017) typology but remained open to categories not anticipated in advance, which allowed peer learning to emerge as an additional category. Findings were organised by research question and displayed in triangulation matrices before being interpreted through Edwards' (2017) typology and Vygotsky's (1978) ZPD.

Results and Discussion

Results

Implementation of play-based learning. The teacher implemented the approach in three stages. In planning, the teacher set the learning objective, selected animal and fruit vocabulary suited to the learners' level, prepared picture cards, and considered the time available and the class size. Teacher Interview 2 states that games were chosen by their fit with the objective, the difficulty of the material, and their capacity to involve all students. In implementation, the lesson opened with vocabulary introduction using picture cards and an explanation of the rules. The teacher then modelled each word and had the class repeat it chorally before the Picture Guessing Game, in which students guessed pictures and pronounced the English names, individually and in groups. During play, the teacher moved among students, corrected errors by modelling the target word, and praised accurate attempts (Teacher Interview 7). In closing, teacher and students reviewed the vocabulary together, and the teacher noted which students needed further guidance. The structured checklist recorded every indicator as observed (Table 1).

Table 1. Observation checklist results (Meeting 1, 15 July 2026)

Category (Edwards, 2017; adapted)	Indicators	Observed	Key evidence
Open-ended play	2	2 of 2	Students tried words independently, repeated them, and self-corrected after hearing the teacher or classmates
Modelled play	2	2 of 2	Teacher modelled each word before repetition and guided hesitant students individually
Purposefully-framed play	2	2 of 2	Games targeted animal and fruit vocabulary and the stated pronunciation objective
Student engagement	2	2 of 2	Students answered enthusiastically, pronounced target words, and interacted with peers
Social interaction	2	2 of 2	Students helped and corrected one another and worked in groups
Total	10	10 of 10	Field notes: a few students were initially shy but became more willing after support

The checklist records presence or absence of a behaviour and does not rate its quality or frequency, so the 10 of 10 result shows that the behaviours occurred in the observed lessons, not how strongly. Notably, the group competition was not observed as a separate session; it is based on the teacher's account that students spontaneously modified rules, helped struggling classmates, and organised small inter-group competitions (Teacher Interview 8).

Types of play. Table 2 organises the evidence by Edwards' typology and the additional category that emerged.

Table 2. Types of play in pronunciation instruction

Type	Observed practice	Interview evidence
Open-ended play	Independent attempts, repetition, self-correction, experimenting with unfamiliar words	S1: the game was "more fun and more challenging"
Modelled play	Teacher demonstration, choral repetition, individual correction	Teacher: the lesson began with vocabulary and a demonstration of correct pronunciation before play (Interview 3)

Type	Observed practice	Interview evidence
Purposefully-framed play	Picture Guessing Game with animal and fruit themes tied to the objective	Teacher: games were not chosen randomly (Interview 2)
Peer learning (additional)	Students corrected and modelled words for classmates and discussed tasks in groups	S3 asked a friend how to say *butterfly*; S2 asked friends when forgetting a word; S1 reported teaching friends

Peer learning was not uniform. According to Student Interview 13, some students preferred asking classmates because they were shy of the teacher, whereas others, reluctant to ask peers, preferred to ask the teacher directly.

Challenges and opportunities. Table 3 summarises both.

Table 3. Challenges and opportunities in implementation

Type	Aspect	Source and evidence
Challenge	Differences in ability	Teacher: guidance had to be adjusted to each student's level (Interview 5)
Challenge	Limited vocabulary	S4 found *mangosteen* hard because it was new and long; S3 found *butterfly* hard because it was long; students confused *elephant* with *eleven* (Student Interviews 12)
Challenge	Limited time and media	Teacher (Interview 5)
Challenge	Classroom management	Teacher: difficulty when the class became noisy (Interview 5); field notes
Challenge	Shyness and nervousness	S3: "I felt shy because I wasn't used to it"; S5 was afraid of making mistakes
Opportunity	Motivation	Teacher: a more enjoyable atmosphere increased motivation (Interview 6)
Opportunity	Participation	Teacher: students more enthusiastic and willing to pronounce words than in conventional lessons (Interview 4)
Opportunity	Pronunciation practice	All 5 interviewed students answered "yes" when asked whether the game helped their pronunciation
Opportunity	Peer interaction and confidence	Students asked and helped one another; S1 and S4 reported high confidence, while others were still overcoming shyness

The pattern is double-sided. The same features that made the lesson lively, such as noise, group work, and open participation, produced demands on time, media, and class management. The unanimity of the five students' positive answer should be read cautiously: it is a perception reported by a small, purposively selected group, and the students described the improvement as slight.

Discussion

Why play lowered the barrier to practice. The first explanation lies in how the game reframed pronunciation attempts. In a guessing game, saying a word aloud is a move in the game and not a performance to be judged, so errors carry less social cost. Students described learning "without realising" and without boredom (Student Interview 9) and tried words even when unsure of accuracy, which the checklist recorded under open-ended play. This reading fits Edwards' (2017) view that open-ended play fosters curiosity and initiative, and it is consistent with Hamdi et al. (2025), who found that exploration and interaction encourage active construction of language knowledge. Repetition is the second mechanism: learners said the target words repeatedly because they wanted to win the round, not because a drill demanded it. The game thus converted what is often mechanical repetition into goal-directed repetition, which is the practical significance of purposefully-framed play. Toledo-Silva (2024) similarly reported that teachers regarded games as a context for repeated pronunciation practice, although that conclusion rests on teacher surveys and the present observation adds direct classroom evidence of how such repetition was organised.

Modelling as scaffolding. The teacher's sequence of modelling, choral repetition, individual correction, and positive feedback is a clear instance of scaffolding within the ZPD (Vygotsky, 1978). The support was graduated: whole-class modelling first, then individual help for those who still struggled, withdrawing as accuracy improved. Students who said they were initially afraid, nervous, and shy reported becoming more willing after encouragement (Student Interview 14), which suggests that modelling and feedback served affective as well as cognitive functions. This is the point at which Edwards' categories, usually described as separate, were found to depend on one another: modelled play provided the accurate input that made open-ended experimentation safe, and purposeful framing kept that experimentation directed at the objective.

Peers as a second source of scaffolding, and its limits. Peer correction, mutual help, and spontaneous rule variation indicate that learning was socially mediated and not only teacher-led. Students functioned as more knowledgeable others for one another, as when S1 taught friends or S3 learned *butterfly* from a classmate. These behaviours correspond to the interpersonal constructive dimension that Hamdi et al. (2025) identified in kindergarten, and their appearance in a fourth-grade class suggests that the dimension is not confined to early childhood. It also supports the view that Edwards' typology, which centres on teacher–child interaction, may under-describe elementary language play. Yet the finding that some students avoided asking peers, and others avoided asking the teacher, shows that peer scaffolding was unevenly used. Without structured peer-learning tasks, the most reticent learners may receive the least support, which is a practical weakness of relying on spontaneous interaction. The same caution applies to the spontaneous group competition, which is reported by the teacher and was not independently observed.

Comparison with earlier studies. The findings are consistent in direction with Tekman and Yeniasır (2023), whose teacher observations also showed greater enthusiasm and speaking confidence in game-based classes, and with Sağlam and Kartal (2023), who found that an enjoyable, repetition-rich activity (drama) was associated with pronunciation gains. They differ in an important respect: both studies compared groups or measured scores, whereas the present study has no comparison group, pre-test, or post-test. The students' report of a slight improvement

therefore supports plausibility but not effect. Likewise, Zhicong et al. (2023) showed that socially contextualised learning improves retention, but in an adult, video-based vocabulary setting, so its relevance here is as a principle (social context supports processing) and not as direct confirmation.

What the game did not clearly address. Two critical observations qualify the picture. First, the difficulties students themselves named, *elephant* confused with *eleven*, and long words such as *mangosteen* and *butterfly*, concern word length and lexical familiarity more than the specific phonemes /θ/ and /ð/ identified in the preliminary observation. The lesson data do not show that these problematic sounds were explicitly targeted, so a vocabulary game, however well run, may improve lexical retrieval and willingness to speak more readily than accuracy on difficult phonemes. Second, the challenges of mixed ability, limited time, and noise are not defects of play as such but consequences of its interactive, student-centred nature: more learner talk requires more time, media, and management. This interpretation is theoretically coherent but was not tested here.

Implications. Teachers can treat play as a vehicle for purposeful practice only when games are tied to explicit sound or word targets, preceded by modelling, and accompanied by corrective feedback. Peer learning should be planned, for example through paired tasks with defined roles, so that it reaches shy learners. Schools can support this with varied media and adequate lesson time. The study's limits are those of a single-day, single-class case with a small interview sample and no outcome measurement; the claims above are therefore interpretive, and the relationship between play and measurable pronunciation gains remains an open question for longitudinal and mixed-methods research.

Conclusion and Suggestions

This study set out to describe how play-based learning was implemented in teaching English pronunciation to fourth-grade students, which types of play emerged, and what challenges and opportunities accompanied it. First, the teacher implemented the approach systematically through planning, implementation, and closing, using a Picture Guessing Game with animal and fruit vocabulary, preceded by modelling and accompanied by corrective and positive feedback. Second, Edwards' open-ended, modelled, and purposefully-framed play were all present and complemented one another, and peer learning emerged as an additional pattern in which students corrected and helped each other, which suggests that the typology may need to accommodate student-to-student interaction in language classrooms. Third, the opportunities reported were greater motivation, participation, enjoyment, and willingness to practise, while the challenges were limited time and media, mixed abilities, limited vocabulary, noisy classroom management, and shyness. The challenges appear to arise from the interactive and student-centred character of play and not from its weakness.

These conclusions concern observed practice and reported perceptions in one classroom. They do not demonstrate that pronunciation accuracy improved, and they should not be generalised beyond this case. What the study does indicate is that play supports pronunciation learning when it is purposeful, scaffolded by the teacher, and socially supported by peers, not when play is left unstructured.

For teachers, games should be diversified beyond picture guessing (for example songs, matching cards, and movement games), tied explicitly to target sounds, and combined with modelling and feedback. Peer learning should be planned through structured pair or group roles so that shy learners also receive support, and time and noise should be managed through fixed game durations and clear rules. For schools, more varied learning media, professional development on play-based strategies, and adequate English lesson time are recommended. For future researchers, longer observation across more meetings and more sites is needed, together with mixed-methods

or quasi-experimental designs that use standardised pronunciation measures, and further inquiry into peer learning as a possible extension of Edwards' taxonomy.

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