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Article

Engaging with language play: practices of Korean English teachers in elementary classrooms

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This study investigates the use of language play by Korean teachers of English as a foreign language in elementary classrooms. While previous research has extensively explored language play by learners, this paper shifts focus to teachers' engagement with language play, including their own usage and responses to students' language play. Utilizing the "Engagement with Language" (EWL) framework, the study meticulously analyzes classroom discourse across seven elementary schools in South Korea. We examined 83 forty-minute lessons and conducted semi-structured interviews with seven Korean English teachers to categorize their use of language play into four distinct types: initiation, acceptance, non-responsiveness, and refusal. Findings indicate that teachers' approaches to language play impact students' language learning and engagement within the EWL framework. The study highlights important pedagogical implications, suggesting that teachers' conscious use of language play can enhance language acquisition and classroom interaction. Furthermore, these insights offer a new perspective for teacher training programs, emphasizing the strategic integration of language play into pedagogical practices to foster more dynamic and effective language learning environments.

Introduction

In language classrooms, educators grapple with the need to rapidly assess and respond to students' comments—a process demanding nuanced judgment considering the remark's pertinence to the lesson, potential to cause disruption, and any negative connotations (Petraki and Nguyen 2016). In this educational setting, language play is often dismissed as irrelevant to serious learning (Kang 2017; Kim 2021). However, previous research has reported that language play, reflecting learners' understanding and consciousness of the target language, facilitates second language acquisition by easing affective filters and enhancing language learning (Cook 2000, 2001; Tarone 2000; Broner and Tarone 2001; Bell 2005; Bushnell 2009). Other scholars have also concentrated on its sociolinguistic benefits, such as enabling learners to navigate beyond conventional classroom roles (Waring 2013) and serving as a linguistic

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haven (Cekaite and Aronsson 2005; Pomerantz and Bell 2011). Additionally, studies have documented learners' use of language play in experimenting with various identities and blending multiple voices (Pomerantz and Bell 2007; Ahn 2016a,b).

Despite its acknowledged importance, there is a scarcity of research on language educators' strategies in responding to or adopting language play in classrooms. Addressing this research gap, our study conducts an exhaustive exploration of Korean English teachers' deployment of language play (or not) in real-time classroom situations. We scrutinized 83 forty-minute lessons led by seven Korean English teachers, selected for their varied pedagogical styles and experience, from multiple primary schools in South Korea. In this regard, this paper seeks to unravel the multifaceted nature of teachers' use of and response to language play, showcasing its viability as a potent linguistic tool. The findings are intended to guide language teaching professionals, enhancing the efficacy of English instruction in EFL contexts.

Literature review

Language play

Language play, encompassing playful or humorous applications of language, becomes apparent when learners experiment with the structure and meanings of words (Cook 1997, 2000). Such play is particularly important for second language acquisition, aiding learners in comprehending and contrasting linguistic structures across languages. Belz (2002) highlights that language play can involve intentional repetition or modification of words and sentence structures, thereby deviating from established language rules. Such experimentation signals a growing linguistic awareness, enabling learners to demonstrate their attention to and understanding of various aspects of language (Ahn 2016b). However, the context of language play in second or foreign-language classrooms diverges from that found in first-language learning environments where children are immersed in a rich linguistic landscape, often engaging in creative adaptations of rhymes and imaginative play (Cook 2000). For instance, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students often engage in language play that accentuates the interplay between their native language and English.

Cook (2000) argues that language play serves as a means of training and competition, where learners not only practice language skills but also establish solidarity among themselves by demonstrating their rejection of others. Yet its benefits extend to enhancing enjoyment, reinforcing group identity, and sometimes acting as a form of resistance. That is, not only does it add a layer of fun to the learning process, but it also serves as a tool of resistance against authority (Hay 2000; Holmes 2006). In this sense, Cook (2000) identifies specific linguistic features of language play—linguistic form, semantics, and pragmatics (see Table 1).

These features, while central to language play, may manifest differently across various discourse genres and are not always uniformly observed. Still, language play involving phonological similarities (linguistic features) (Cekaite and Aronsson 2004, 2005), serving entertainment (pragmatic features) (Bushnell 2009; Forman 2011), or featuring the fantastical or make-believe elements present in first language acquisition (Cook 2000) demonstrates the diverse purposes it can serve.

To better understand the nuances of language play, it is useful to distinguish between two primary types: rehearsal-based and ludic, or enjoyment-driven language play. From a Vygotskian perspective, rehearsal-based language play involves learners experimenting with newly learned L2 forms, practicing them in anticipation of future performance (Lantolf 1997; Sullivan 2000). This form of language play is often characterized by *sotto voce* utterances and typically lacks laughter (Broner and Tarone 2001). Conversely, ludic language play is driven primarily by amusement, frequently manifesting in smiles or laughter (Cook 2000; Tarone 2000). Its primary purpose, as Cook (1997) articulates, is not "task-based" but to provide "languages for enjoyment" (p. 230). While rehearsal-based language play focuses on mastering

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Table 1. Features of language play (Cook 2000: 123).

Linguistic form	(L1) patterning of forms (rhythms, phonological, and grammatical parallels) (L2) emphasis on exact wording (L3) repetition (both of parts and of whole texts)
Semantics	(S1) indeterminate meaning (foreign or archaic language, unknown obscure words, ambiguities) (S2) vital or important subject-matter (birth, death, sexual relations, health, etc.) (S3) reference to an alternative reality (S4) inversion of language/reality relation
Pragmatics	(P1) focus upon performance and upon the speaker and/or writer (P2) use in congregation and/or intimate interaction (P3) creation of solidarity and/or antagonism and competition (P4) no direct usefulness (P5) preservation or inversion of the social order (P6) enjoyment and/or value

new linguistic forms or meanings, ludic language play allows speakers to experiment with language elements in a more relaxed, entertaining environment, often creating an alternate reality and engaging listeners. However, the categorization of language play into these distinct types can be challenging. In real-world contexts, diverse factors intertwine, and specific instances of language play may display characteristics of both types, reflecting the complexity and fluidity of language use in natural settings.

Language play in language learning and teaching

Contrary to the common perception that language play merely functions as a distraction or a form of lighthearted banter, a substantial body of research indicates its significant enhancement of language learning (Cook 2000, 2001; Broner and Tarone 2001; Bell 2005; Cekaite and Aronsson 2005; Pomerantz and Bell 2007, 2011; Forman 2011; Laursen and Kolstrup 2018). These studies have consistently underscored the critical role of language play in second or foreign language acquisition, focusing on how learners engage in and derive meaning from language play. For instance, Broner and Tarone (2001) analyzed classroom interactions among fifth-grade L2 learners attending a full Spanish immersion class. In their study, one male learner effectively employed language play for enjoyment. He positioned himself as the class clown and dared to reveal his mistakes, such as confusing *cerebro* (meaning brain in Spanish) with *celebro* (meaning "I celebrate" in Spanish). Additionally, he repeated the teacher's remark about no recess in a villainous tone, aiming to elicit laughter from a wider audience. His use of language play legitimized his behaviors and facilitated his exploration of the target language, demonstrating his alertness to the language. Bell (2005) also provided empirical evidence from adult non-native English speakers engaging in language play with native speakers often spontaneously during conversations. Furthermore, studies exploring the active learning process of language play revealed that learners often create play frames, stretching linguistic norms to engage in diverse linguistic manipulations such as phonological, morphological, and semantic language plays (Cekaite and Aronsson 2004, 2005; Bushnell 2009). In Cekaite and Aronsson's study (2004), refugee children learning Swedish engaged in a singing activity, altering lyrics to include the Arabic names of participating students and occasionally the teacher's name. The study highlighted how language play can reveal young learners' nuanced understanding of linguistic acceptability. Similarly, Moody and Tsuchiya (2021) highlighted how adolescents learning a foreign language engaged in language play during spontaneous multi-party conversations, using it for socially humorous interactions and as a tool for their language learning. In line with these studies, Laursen and Kolstrup

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(2018) observed that learners can maintain focus and navigate between reality and imagination, actively participating in their learning process. These insights collectively suggest that language play is a multifaceted and effective tool in language learning, meriting further investigation.

As shown, language play, characterized by unique linguistic forms, semantic meanings, or pragmatic usage (Cook 2000), has primarily been analyzed from learners' perspectives. This includes leveraging prosodic similarities between languages (Broner and Tarone 2001; Cekaite and Aronsson 2004, 2005; Kang 2017) and young learners restructuring knowledge through semantic language play (Laursen and Kolstrup 2018). However, there remains a gap in understanding how educators interpret and respond to language play, an area for further exploration. While the role of language play in learners' development has been extensively explored, the instructors' attitudes and responses to language play have received relatively less attention (Forman 2011; Kang 2017). Forman (2011) and Kang (2017) have specifically focused on the instructor's language play in college and primary school, both in EFL contexts. For instance, Forman (2011) illustrated how a proficient bilingual college instructor effectively employed humorous language play in English teaching to alleviate learners' anxiety. This approach integrated regulatory and pedagogic strategies, with the instructor voluntarily initiating language play, such as asking the class in a deadpan tone whether they used toothbrushes, immediately followed by a return to his usual tone, eliciting laughter, and engagement. Similarly, Kang (2017) emphasized the significance of teachers' reactions to language play, noting how some male students used wit to compete for their peers' laughter and the teacher's praise. The teacher's responses, such as smiles, laughter, and supportive remarks, were found to significantly influence both the learning environment and classroom power dynamics. In an English-as-a-second-language (ESL) classroom context, Reddington and Waring (2015) also reported that teachers employed language play as an attention-getting device, noting that students' responses required interaction, thereby encouraging learning.

Bell and Pomerantz (2015) discussed humor and language play from a pedagogical perspective and suggested practical implications concerning the risks and benefits of using them. They highlighted the complex nature of humor, focusing on how to use it safely and how to teach with and about humor. Particularly, they asserted that how teachers respond to humorous language play is more important than the source of the humor itself. Previous research has similarly explored the role and implications of language play and humor across various educational and social contexts, including immersion classrooms (Broner and Tarone 2001; Cekaite and Aronsson 2004, 2005), primary school settings (Kang 2017; Kim 2021), ESL contexts (Bell 2012; Waring 2013; Reddington and Waring 2015), EFL classrooms (Bushnell 2009; Forman 2011; Petraki and Nguyen 2016), as well as in ordinary conversation (Hay 2000) and workplace interactions (Holmes and Marra 2002; Holmes 2006). However, there remains room unexplored about various ways in which teachers employ or respond to language play. To complement previous studies, the present study seeks to examine how Korean EFL teachers engage with language play in their elementary classrooms, particularly focusing on how their attitudes and responses shape the learning experience.

Language play and engagement with language

The present study employs Svalberg's (2009, 2012) Engagement with Language (EWL) framework to examine teachers' use of language play in EFL contexts. Traditionally, language play has been interpreted primarily through its linguistic dimensions, but Svalberg's framework provides a more comprehensive approach by considering cognitive, affective, and social aspects of language engagement. According to Svalberg (2012), cognitive engagement involves alertness and active knowledge construction; affective engagement is characterized by a positive, purposeful attitude; and social engagement is seen in interaction and initiation of communication (Svalberg 2009: 247). The following criteria will be employed to identify EWL: cognitive, affective, and social dimensions (see Fig. 1).

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Cognitive	Affective	Social
How alert is the learner? (Does the learner (L) seem energetic or lethargic? Does L seem to notice language/interaction features?)	*How willing is the learner to engage with language?* (Is L withdrawn or eager to participate?)	*How interactive?* (Does L interact, verbally or otherwise, with others to learn?)
How focused? Is L's attention on the language (as object or medium) or not? (Does L's mind seem to wander?)	*How purposeful?* (Does L seem bored or not focused on the task, or to be focused?)	*How supportive of others?* (e.g. by verbal or other behaviours? Does L engage in negotiation and scaffolding?)
How reflective? How critical/analytical? Is L's reasoning inductive or memory/imitation based? Does L notice and reflect, or simply react? (With regard to the target language, does L compare, ask questions, infer/draw conclusions?)	*How autonomous?* (Is L's behaviour dependent or independent?)	*Leader or follower?* (Are L's interactions reactive or initiating?)

Figure 1. Svalberg's (2012) criteria for identifying EWL. A table presenting the framework for dimensions of language engagement as proposed by Svalberg.

Utilizing the EWL framework, Ahn (2016a) argues that language play facilitates engagement across these three dimensions: cognitively by focusing attention on linguistic forms, effectively by generating enthusiasm among learners, leading to more meaningful interactions. Lastly, in the social dimension, language play serves as a collaborative tool for exploring the target language in interaction.

In this regard, this study aims to analyze teachers' utilization of language play within the EWL framework. Specifically, it addresses the following research questions: How do teachers deal with language play in the classroom? What is the impact of teachers' initiation of and response to language play on learner engagement? Through an examination of teachers' responses to and usage of language play in elementary English classrooms in Korea, our study aims to deepen the understanding of language play as a pedagogical tool from both theoretical and practical perspectives.

Methodology

Participants.

Seven Korean English teachers participated in this study, including two males and five females, with ages ranging from 24 to 49 years (see Table 2 for more details). The female participants were recommended for their expertise in English teaching, while the male participants were recruited through professional networks. Before recording, participants were informed that the study would focus on typical classroom discourse to avoid influencing their use of language play. It is important to note that the purpose of the study was not to make any generalizations based on the teachers' profiles, but rather to observe the kinds of interactions that occur with language play. All names used in this paper are pseudonyms.

In South Korea, primary teachers typically teach all subjects, but some may be assigned to specific subjects such as English, physical education, or science, depending on school needs, to balance their annual teaching hours. For instance, Mat had four years of general teaching experience but began teaching English in 2019. Therefore, the participants' experience in English teaching varied from one month to ten years. This range of experience captured a diverse spectrum of teaching practices, from novice to experienced English instructors. Most teachers used

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Table 2. Demographics of teacher participants (as of 1 April 2019).

	Sue	Mat	Yuna	Tony	Bora	Judy	Ga-In
Gender	F	M	F	M	F	F	F
Age	49	34	45	29	35	24	30
Eng. teaching experience	10	0	10	1	7	1	3
General teaching experience	27	4	22	4	11	2	7
Teaching grade	3	3	4	4	5	4, 5	6

Korean during their classes, except Bora and Ga-In, who used English for over 50 per cent of their instruction.

The class sizes ranged from 24 to 29 students, above the national average of 20.7 (KOSIS 2023). These students start learning English from third grade, and the present study involved students from third to sixth grade, aged 9 to 12 years. Most students were Korean, except for Judy's class in Ansan, a diverse area with predominantly Chinese or Russian students, where students learned Korean as their second language and English as their third.

Methods.

Data collection occurred in 2019 at public elementary schools in South Korea. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. A total of 83 hours of classroom interactions were video recorded, capturing teaching, and learning dynamics. English classes for grades 3 and 4 were conducted twice a week, lasting 40 minutes each, while grades 5 and 6 had three weekly sessions. Teachers were given the freedom to select which lessons to record, facilitating a naturalistic portrayal of their instructional practices. Video recordings also captured learners' gestures and facial expressions clearly.

Alongside video data, we conducted semi-structured interviews with seven teachers, each consisting of three sessions lasting one to two hours. These interviews, primarily face-to-face, allowed for in-depth discussions and reflections. The interviews included stimulated recall, where recorded classroom videos were played to prompt teachers to describe specific contexts and provide explanations for the observed verbal and nonverbal behaviors. The interview questions focused on several key areas: teachers' perceptions of language play, their strategies for responding to language play, the challenges they face in engaging students, and their reflections on specific instances of language play observed in the videos. This approach helped us understand how teachers' attitudes and decisions influenced classroom dynamics and student engagement.

Analysis.

The analysis aimed to explore the impact of teachers' initiation of and response to language play, using the EWL framework. To systematically code these interactions, we first identified instances of language play by applying Cook's (2000) specific definition. In this study, we understood language play as instances where students access or experiment with the target language structure through their L1 (or L2) resources in a playful manner, consistent with Cook's conceptualization (see Table 1). To clarify, not all uses of L1 or L2 to access the target language are considered language play. We distinguished between functional uses, where learners rely on their L1 to comprehend or produce the target language for practical purposes, and language play, which includes an indication of enjoyment or humour. In this vein, contextualization cues were also carefully monitored, including smiles, laughter, facial expressions, and gestures such as where students were looking, what they were pointing at, and how many students were responding to their teacher or peers. Coding categories were established to analyze the language play of teachers and students, supported by a set of coding rules to maintain consistency and accuracy in analysis (see Table 3).

From the data, forty episodes of language play were identified, and each instance was then categorized using the EWL framework to analyze cognitive, affective, and social dimensions of

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Table 3. Coding scheme for teacher responses to language play.

Code		Definition
Teacher initiation (TI)		The teacher initiates language play to highlight linguistic features.
Teacher acceptance (TA)		The teacher accepts and responds positively to student-initiated language play, validating it.
Teacher appropriation (TAp)		The teacher incorporates student-initiated language play into the lesson, using it as a learning tool
Teacher non-responsiveness (NR)	Purposeful non-responsiveness (PNR)	The teacher intentionally redirects or does not respond to language play to stay on task.
	Unintentional non-responsiveness (UNR)	The teacher overlooks student attempts at language play unintentionally.
Teacher refusal (TR)	Gentle refusal (G)	The teacher politely corrects the student without discouraging play.
	Disciplinary rebuttal (D)	The teacher uses authoritative action to stop language play.
Students' reactions (SR)	Enhanced engagement (EE)	Language play leads to higher student engagement.
	Student persistence (SP)	Students continue engaging in language play despite the teacher's response.
	Student withdrawal (SW)	Students withdraw from further attempts at language play due to teacher feedback.

language engagement, providing valuable insights into language teaching and learning dynamics. Discussions with teacher participants further deepened our understanding of these interactions. In addition, content analysis (Patton 2002) was applied to thoroughly examine the themes and patterns within the classroom discourse and interview data. This method enabled the identification of recurring linguistic and interactional features that characterized language play.

Transcriptions followed Jefferson's notation (1979), with adaptations for this study's specific needs (see Appendix A). The transcriptions captured detailed conversations, nonverbal behaviors, and speaking errors. Member checks ensured the accuracy of the recorded data.

Findings

Overall, we identified forty instances of language play across seven classrooms. Here, teachers employed language play in four main ways: 1) initiating language play themselves, 2) accepting language play initiated by students, 3) not responding to students' language play, and 4) discouraging their language play. Out of all the instances of language play, teachers initiated 13 episodes, while students initiated 27 episodes, indicating that students were more inclined to engage in language play voluntarily and autonomously. The most common response was teachers accepting student-initiated language play (16 instances), followed by teacher ignoring (7 instances) and rejecting (4 instances) student-initiated play (see Table 4).

Below, we provide a detailed description of each situation, as well as factors contributing to the dynamics of these interactions. The examples provided from four teachers' cases are representative of the sample, illustrating the diverse strategies and contexts observed in the study.

Teacher initiation.

Teachers frequently utilized language play to illustrate linguistic patterns, including phonology, semantics, or sentence structure, often presenting them humorously. They used common student errors as the source of the play. In the following excerpt, Sue, a teacher with ten years of English teaching experience, initiates language play to promote students' phonological understanding.

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Table 4. Types of teachers' utilization of language play.

		Sue	Mat	Yuna	Tony	Bora	Judy	Ga-In	Total
Teacher initiation		3	0	4	4	1	1	0	13
Student initiation	Teacher acceptance	0	0	3	6	3	3	1	16
	Teacher non-responsiveness	0	2	0	0	0	0	5	7
	Teacher refusal	1	0	2	1	0	0	0	4
Total		4	2	9	11	4	4	6	40

After introducing the names of fruits and vegetables in English, Sue explains the difference between a western and a Korean pear. She describes that a western pear looks like a quince, tastes less sweet than a Korean pear, and has a sponge-like texture. The following excerpt begins with the teacher's instruction on the correct pronunciation of "pear".

Excerpt 1: Pear, not bear

1 Sue ((with two hands showing a picture card of a pear))
2 >pear는↑ 발음을 조심해야 돼<
you should be careful pronouncing it
3 이거 발음 잘못하다간↓ BEAR ((in an exaggerated tone))
if you mispronounce it
4 Ss bea(hh)r ((giggles heard distinctively)) haha
5 Sue =bear 아니야 PEAR
no
6 Ss PEAR
7 Sue /p/ /p/ PEAR
8 Ss =/p/ /p/ PEAR

Here, Sue engages her students by drawing their attention to the first letter of the words "bear" and "pear," using minimal pairs. Her demonstration of phonological awareness leads to an attempt to further involve the students in exploring the similarities and differences in pronunciation between the two words. In line 2, she first warns her students to be careful with the pronunciation of "pear." Sue does not simply end with her warning but instead clarifies that the word might be misconstrued as "bear" if pronounced incorrectly. In doing so, she changes her tone to a louder and more animated voice when saying "bear" in line 3, which is immediately accompanied by students' laughter and repetition (line 4). The students' response displays their recognition of the teacher's language play, evident through the incongruity between Sue's usual calm attitude and her unexpected, exaggerated tone shifts. When the students enunciate "bear" in response to her play, Sue clearly states that the pronunciation of the fruit is not "bear" but "pear" (line 5) and has the students repeat after her, paying close attention to the voiceless consonant [p] (line 7). Although her language play initially draws students' attention to "bear," Sue guides them to focus on the new word "pear". Her language play elicits laughter from the students, creating an interactive and collaborative atmosphere.

This particular instance showcases the ludic nature of language play. The students' repetition of both "bear" and "pear" indicates their heightened awareness as they concentrate on the linguistic pattern. While the teacher initiates and develops the play as part of her pedagogical approach, the students participate voluntarily through repetition and focused attention. Hence, the affective dimension is highlighted by laughter and autonomous participation demonstrated through repetition. Through the lens of the EWL framework, it can be observed that the students are alert and focused on the phonological similarity and difference between "bear" and "pear" and are highly engaged in the interaction, as evidenced by their laughter. The students' joint collaborative engagement in producing the sound at the end of the excerpt highlights their active involvement in the interaction.

In her interview, Sue, 52 years old, reflected on her previous learning experience and its impact on her use of language play in the classroom. She explained that her English learning experience as a non-native speaker was quite difficult as she did not learn English during her K-12 school years. Thus,

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to compensate for her insufficient English learning experience, she argued how she had to invest more time and effort into learning English when she had to start teaching English in an elementary school in 1997. She described that she shared her previous learning experiences and struggles with her students, including her own mistakes as a non-native English speaker, to relate to them. Moreover, she was attentive to students' mistakes and errors and incorporated them into her lessons, effectively using them to enhance the classroom experience. For instance, she described that she frequently used students' slips of tongue or mistakes in an amusing manner and created humorous language play. In Excerpt 1, Sue modeled a way of learning by not only repeating the words, asking students to reiterate the word in lines 7 and 8, but also embodying the practice of playing with language. Stemming from her own experience as a non-native learner, her view of language play as an effective learning tool prompted her to use language play in her classroom.

Teacher acceptance and appropriation of students' language play.

In addition to teacher-led language play, the study also identified instances where student-initiated language play was accepted and incorporated into the lesson by the teacher, thereby encouraging language learners' exploration of the target language. In the following excerpt, Judy was verifying her students' understanding of the newly introduced word "together." Reacting to the teacher's translation in Korean, G1 introduced the name of a popular ice cream in Korea, known as Together [tu-ge-deo], into the conversation (line 2). The teacher welcomed this connection, fostering the student's linguistic curiosity and reflective thinking about the target language.

Excerpt 2: Together

1	Judy	같이입니다(.) 같이. *it means together, together*
2	G1	((quietly))투게더↑ 투게더 아이스크림 이름 [tu-ge-deo] [tu-ge-deo] *an ice cream name*
3	Judy	=어↑ 맞아↑ ((in a loud voice)) 너 그거 알아? *oh right* *you know that*
4	G1	[네↑ 알아요↑ *yes I know*
5	Ss	[알아요↑ ((raise their heads to look at Judy)) *know*
6	Judy	>투게더 아이스크림 먹어봤어?< *have you ever eaten the ice cream* [tu-ge-deo]
7	Ss	=네↑ *yes*
8	Judy	얘들아(.) 투게더 아이스크림 엄청 크지? *everyone [tu-ge-deo] ice cream is very big right*
9		>메로나가 커, 투게더가 커?< *is Melona bigger or [tu-ge-deo] bigger*
10	Ss	=투게더요↑ [tu-ge-deo]
11	B1	((makes a big circle describing the size of the ice cream with his arms))
12	Judy	=왜 투게더가 커? *why is* [tu-ge-deo] *bigger*
13	Ss	=[같이 먹으라고 *to eat together*
14	Judy	=[같이 먹으라고 그런 거야 (.) 투게더↑ *it's to eat together* [tu-ge-deo]
15	B2	=그래서 이름이 투게더↑ *that's why the name is* [tu-ge-deo]
16	Judy	=((in an assured tone)) 그럼, 그럼, 그럼↑ *sure sure sure*

When Judy conveyed the Korean meaning of "together," G1 subtly and voluntarily took the next turn, referencing the ice cream's name (see Fig. 2).

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Figure 2. G1 answering Judy. An interaction sequence highlighting G1's response to Judy's query.

Judy promptly acknowledged G1's input with an enthusiastic "Oh, right!" and inquired if she was familiar with that ice cream, as indicated in line 3. G1, along with her classmates, responded in unison to Judy, entering the discussion, and showcasing their prior familiarity with the ice cream. The teacher reacted affirmatively to their answers, posing another question about whether they had previously tried the ice cream (line 6). Upon discerning that many students were already acquainted with the ice cream and its name, Judy brought up the subject of the dessert's size by juxtaposing it with another brand, Melona (line 9). In line 12, the teacher further encouraged students to contemplate the correlation between the ice cream's name and its size. Students collaboratively responded, drawing connections to the word's meaning that they had just learned (line 13). B2 echoed the word's significance and the name of the ice cream in line 15, to which Judy expressed agreement.

The learners' concentrated attention on the linguistic elements encapsulated the cognitive dimension of the EWL framework. In Excerpt 2, G1's quiet revelation implied she was speaking more to herself than to the teacher. In this regard, it was G1 who independently made the connection between the English word "together" and the ice cream brand [tu-ge-deo]. The name of this ice cream brand, "투게더 [tu-ge-deo]", presented primarily in the Korean alphabet on its packaging, is introduced and comprehensible to students in Korean.

Here, G1 managed to link the newly acquired English vocabulary with her preexisting knowledge obtained in Korean. From an affective standpoint, the student initiated the discourse upon discerning the similarity between the English word "together" and the proper noun "투게더 [tu-ge-deo]." Although the teacher's explanation in line 1 could have concluded the interaction, the student spontaneously and voluntarily contributed her insight. Moreover, the exchange engaged multiple participants, including G1, Judy, and other students, indicating a collaborative and social nature in this discovery and language play, which captures the social dimension of the EWL framework. While the teacher's question, "Have you eaten it?" was primarily posed to G1, the spontaneous involvement of other students underscored the interaction's collaborative character. Students articulated their understanding not only verbally but also through nonverbal behaviors, with some using their hands to indicate the ice cream's size. Furthermore, Judy seized the opportunity to build on G1's language play, guiding students to relate the word's meaning to the message conveyed by the ice cream brand. In this process, Judy did not simply define the word, but she encouraged students to delve into why the ice cream was named "together," prompting critical reflection on the product's naming.

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As the students linked the English word with the name and size of the ice cream, the teacher's encouraging reactions and probing questions (lines 3, 6, 8, 12) offered a platform for students to demonstrate their prior knowledge and explore the new word's meaning. Judy instantly grasped the student's playful use of language, leveraging it to deepen learners' semantic understanding. Judy's decision to inquire about G1' previous experiences captured the attention of other students. Though some students were focused on their books during G1's remark, it was Judy's extension of G1's comment into a question that drew other students actively into the conversation. Overall, the teacher recognized and accepted the female student's language play as a meaningful remark, dedicating time to it and amplifying it into a language teaching opportunity. This pedagogical approach suggested that embracing their language play could enrich classroom interactions and foster heightened language awareness. In this exchange, the teacher facilitated students in expressing their thoughts and prior knowledge, while guiding and encouraging them to actively engage in the discovery of the target language. These two sections have outlined the utilization and nurturing of language play by teachers in their classrooms. Subsequent sections will illustrate instances where students' language play was overlooked.

Teacher non-responsiveness.

In the preceding sections, language play was depicted as a positive, engaging pedagogical approach, where the teacher actively encouraged and fostered students' language awareness through language play. However, instances were observed where teachers disregarded or failed to acknowledge students' attempts at language play in the classroom. For instance, during a review session on farm animals' names with his third-grade students, Mat, a 34-year-old male teacher, clarified the distinctions between chickens, hens, and cocks. Yet, despite his efforts, the classroom environment remained noisy and disrupted.

Despite Mat's repeated attempts to quiet the class, a group of students continued to engage in language play during his instruction. Excerpt 3 began with the teacher demanding the students to be quiet when other students asked a question. He even gave explicit warnings to students B3 and B4 in line 2.

Excerpt 3: Shee

1	Mat	오↑ (.) 조용↑ 친구 질문할 때는 같이(.) *oh quiet when your friends ask questions*
2		((giving warning cards)) B3 하나 B4 하나 *one one*
3	B5	>우리 반에 여자들이 있잖아요< *there are women in this classroom*
4		여자들이 영어로 she에요 (.) she에요 SHE↑ *women are in English it is*
5		((imitates urinating sound)) /shee:::/ /shee:::/
6	B6	=아니야 she는 그녀라는 뜻이야 (.) 여자 아니고 *no means she not a woman*
7	B5	=아니야 여자야↑ ((several boys start repeating the same word)) *no, it's a woman*
8	G2	=그녀야↑ *it's she*
9	B7	=여자는 girl이지 ((turns around to look at B5)) *woman is*
10	B?	=He하고((unclear))
11	G3	=아니야 ((?))이지 ((explanatory tone)) Hey (.) girl *no*
12	G4	=girl 맞아 *is correct*
13	Mat	조용↑ 자 (.) 이제 한 번씩 (.) 한 명씩 하고 시작할게요 *be quiet now let's do it one by one and begin*

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Regardless of the teacher's warnings to B3 and B4 in line 2, B5 interjected with a comment about the phonological similarity between the third-person singular pronoun "she" and a sound mimicking urination (lines 3–5). Rather than outrightly stating this auditory resemblance, B5 expressed it through an imitated sound, following his explanation that the personal pronoun "she" refers to females in English. This sparked a debate among students about the correct usage of "she". In line 6, B6 joined the conversation, suggesting that "she" does not mean "woman". G2 agreed to B6 (line 8), which was accompanied by B7's comment (line 9). This discussion continued for 23 seconds until Mat interrupted, telling the students to be quiet, and moved on to the next activity.

This excerpt illustrated a moment of language play that was neither acknowledged by the teacher nor by other peers. B5 showcased his phonological awareness by highlighting the similarity between the English third-person singular pronoun "she" (line 4) and the onomatopoeic word [shee], a sound mimicking urination in Korean (line 5). Instead of merely articulating this similarity, B5 took an elaborate approach, providing context by mentioning the female students in the class. His initial play with language, underpinned by a sense of phonological parallels, was directed at Mat, albeit in a manner audible to others, denoted by his use of Korean honorifics[1] such as "-아요" and "예요." However, this attempt at language play was overlooked, even by other students, who were more engrossed in deciphering the proper translation of "she" in Korean. Their dialogue drew in more participants, evolving into a collective endeavor to interpret the term over several exchanges (lines 9–12). Although this interaction was not accepted by the teacher, the level of student engagement was high. From a cognitive perspective, B5's phonological awareness and ability to connect the sound "she" with the onomatopoeic sound in Korean demonstrated mental processing and understanding. Affective engagement was evident in the students' enthusiasm and excitement during the debate, reflecting their intrinsic motivation, and attitudes toward language learning. Socially, the interaction among students highlighted the collaborative nature of their learning, as they negotiated meaning, corrected each other, and engaged in a peer-based discussion, thus emphasizing the social dimension of language play in the classroom. While the playful aspect was not acknowledged, the ensuing discussion showcased the students' active participation and collective engagement in learning.

After this interaction, Mat promptly redirected students to read specific questions in the textbook, aiming to reclaim their attention. Mat's decision to ignore this instance of language play can be analyzed in light of the challenges the teacher faced in balancing classroom management with pedagogical opportunities. While language play, when acknowledged and utilized effectively, could enhance linguistic awareness and engagement, not all instances were conducive to the lesson's flow, especially when they were perceived as disruptive. In the interview, Mat reflected on his approach, stating that he had intentionally ignored this instance of language play, considering the urinating sound distracting, or inappropriate to be discussed in an English classroom. His priority was to recapture the students' focus on learning. Students' ongoing discussions and negotiations of meaning, including B5's language play, were disregarded as Mat insisted on transitioning to the next activity. His stern request for silence, emphatic instructions, and deliberate pauses underscored his determination to halt the preceding conversation and reassert control over the classroom. This pedagogical decision appeared to stem predominantly from constraints like limited class time and student numbers. In the interview, Mat noted,

> *Students talk in such diverse ways. It's impossible to control them. If there was an exceptionally skilled and experienced teacher, the teacher might link every student interaction back to the lesson. That'd be ideal. However, in order for that to be possible, the sheer volume of students and their discussions… If we had fewer students, you could say "Yes, I noticed student A made an interesting point." That'd be nice, but it's impossible with 25 students. It's not possible to respond to every comment. Is this really needed? Does it align with the lesson objective? I think I made the decision based on the lesson objective. … I remember thinking several times about how students could play with language. Yet, I admit, I don't think I can address them all.*

Here, Mat conveyed that optimal classroom interaction would involve the teacher acknowledging and appreciating every student's input, language play included. However, faced with a high

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student-to-teacher ratio and time constraints, he had to be discerning in his responses. Though he did not classify himself as a novice teacher, Mat emphasized that managing such a dynamic required an "exceptionally skilled and experienced teacher." The emphasis through these descriptors highlighted the complexities involved in recognizing and integrating students' language play into lessons. Mat's commentary suggested that a teacher's decision to ignore or dismiss students' language play was not arbitrary but influenced by multiple factors. Other teachers also reflected on similar challenges. For instance, Yuna with ten years of English teaching experience, mentioned,

> *Sometimes time constraints can make it difficult to give each student's language play the attention it deserves. In those cases, I try to at least acknowledge their efforts with a response like, 'I like this! So creative, fun, interesting… I'm very proud of you.' I also use non-verbal cues like smiling, nodding, and giving thumbs up to show my appreciation. But again, time constraints can sometimes prevent me from doing this as much as I'd like.*

This reflection highlighted a common theme among teachers regarding the difficulty of managing language play within the constraints of a structured curriculum.

It is crucial to recognize the role and function of humour in this classroom context, despite B5's language play not eliciting approval or laughter from either peers or the teacher. In this setting, language play was a significant social currency among certain groups; notably, five male students frequently engaged in humorous language play, marking their in-group identity. For instance, these students exploited the phonological similarity between the word "melon" and the Korean expression [merong], which is often accompanied by a childlike gesture of sticking out one's tongue in a playful or mocking manner. This particular language play created a stir in the classroom. Despite the teacher's disapproval, these students persisted with their language play. Their behavior underscored a vital social dynamic: language play was used during class, not solely for language exploration or diversion, but also to garner peer recognition and affirmation. This observation aligned with findings that language play among peers could serve to reinforce social bonds and group identity. This language play, while seemingly disruptive, functioned as a bonding agent, cementing in-group ties and fortifying social connections amidst the academic environment.

Teacher refusal.

The final type of teacher response observed included explicit negative feedback on the students' language play, often manifesting as outright rejection or discouragement. Out of twenty seven instances of language play episodes initiated by students, four (15 per cent) were met with dismissal by the teacher. In the following excerpt, the students were reviewing English vocabulary for stationery items such as books, pencils, and rulers. After reviewing the term "ruler," Tony, a teacher with one year of English teaching experience, introduced "glue stick," explaining it as a solid adhesive in a tube form. B8 then embarked on a language play (line 5).

Excerpt 4: Glue stick and water glue

1	Tony	자, glue stick이라는 말이 나오는데요↑ 풀입니다.
		so the word appears in the textbook it means glue
2		Glue가 원래 풀인데요. Stick은 이제 우리,
		means glue is like
3		>딱풀처럼 이렇게< glue stick, stick으로 된 걸
		like a ttak-phwul in the shape of
4		°glue stick이라고 합니다.°
5	B8	선생님, 그러면은 물로 되어 있는 건
		teacher then what if the glue is made of water
6		water stick이에요?
		is it

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7	B9	=(hh)HAHA↑
8	Tony	=Glue입니다. Glue. *it is*
9		물로 된 풀, 이런 건 다 glue라고 하는데요. *watery glue these are all*
10		딱풀은 glue stick이라고 *ttak-phwul is*
11	B10	=water glue↑
12	B11	=그럼 물풀은요? *then what about liquid glue?*
13	Tony	=그냥 glue라고. *it's just*
14	Bs	WATER GLUE↑
15	Tony	=water glue가 아니라 glue라고. *it's not it is*
16	B?	[WATER GLUE↑ 라고 *it is*
17	B8	[WATER GLUE↑
18	Bs	=water glue
19	Tony	자↑ (2) 외워봅시다. 한 문장씩. ((playing the video)) *now let's memorize each sentence*

In line 5, B8 seized the opportunity to playfully challenge the teacher, questioning if a water-based adhesive could be termed a "water glue." Here, he constructed this query based on the literal translation of "물(water)" and "풀(glue stick)", referring to the Korean term for a type of clear, liquid adhesive, "물풀." Instead of engaging with B8's inventive language use, Tony repeated his previous explanation, avoiding further exploration of the topic (lines 8–10). B10 said "water glue" again (line 11), and B11 recasted B10's question (line 12). Nonetheless, the teacher's response did not change as he reiterated his remark with an emphasis on "just", (lines 13). This pattern continued despite other students' echoed inquiries and repetitions of "water glue" (lines 14, 16–18). Then, in line 19, the teacher loudly said "now" and redirected his students to memorization tasks.

B8's understanding of the compound noun provided the foundation of his ludic language play. The playful nature of this exchange was evident, not just in B8's remarks, but also in how it resonated with his classmates, inciting their collaborative, amused participation. It is important to note that B8 understood that "물풀" was not composed of water. The definition of the Korean word "물" includes both liquid in general and water. For instance, the word seawater is a combination of sea "바다" and water "물". B8's understanding of the compound noun, coupled with his focused attempts to engage Tony, demonstrated significant cognitive engagement. B9's laughter in line 7 as well as B11's question in line 12 also demonstrated the social, collaborative engagement in interaction. According to the EWL framework, the peer-based discussion and collaborative effort to negotiate meaning underscored the social nature of their learning experience, even though the teacher did not engage with the playful aspect.

At times, such language play, especially when it involves collective chanting or questioning of the teacher's statements, might be perceived as challenging to the teacher's authority or knowledge. This perception might explain Tony's unyielding stance in this instance, a departure from his usual openness to students' jests and queries. By insisting that "glue" was the sole correct term, the teacher inadvertently curtailed the students' linguistic exploration and left them puzzled about the "water stick." In this case, the teacher's refusal of language play limited the opportunity for further student engagement and linguistic creativity.

Discussion and conclusion

Our study undertook a comprehensive investigation into how Korean English teachers utilize language play in their classrooms and its potential for more effective language teaching and

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learning. These teachers' incorporation of language play, or lack thereof, was categorized into four types: initiation, acceptance, non-responsiveness, and refusal. Utilizing Svalberg's (2012) EWL construct, the analysis focused on both teachers' and students' appropriation of and reactions to language play. Overall, echoing previous studies, student participation in language play exemplified their cognitive engagement in the language learning process. By engaging with language in a playful, yet purposeful manner, students exhibited deeper cognitive processing of the language. The findings underscored the positive impact of teachers' receptivity to, and incorporation of, student-initiated language play. Students immersed themselves more profoundly in the language, thereby bridging new and existing linguistic knowledge. Conversely, when teachers attempted to suppress language play to maintain focus on the lesson, students generally exhibited diminished interest and concentration in subsequent interactions. Teachers' affirmative responses and probing questions further played an important role in this process, motivating students to actively participate and articulate their understanding of unfamiliar terms. This collaborative dynamic between teachers and students established a vibrant, interactive learning atmosphere that not only heightened language awareness but also stimulated active engagement. Furthermore, language play served to solidify students' group identities and foster social relationships, even when such playfulness did not always align with teachers' expectations.

The study recognized that the functions of language play extended beyond aiding language learning. That is, the findings demonstrated instances where teachers successfully transformed spontaneous language play into "teachables" (Stoewer and Mush 2019: 123), effectively integrating them into English learning, rather than dismissing them as mere jests. These instances captured the teachers' recognition of language play as a meaningful reflection of students' grasp of new knowledge, warranting substantial feedback. That is, some teachers gave serious consideration to certain language plays, treating learner opinions as "audible" and worth addressing (Laursen and Kolstrup 2018). In contrast, the suppression of students' language play, for various reasons, corresponded with a noticeable decline in student interest and concentration. Through our interviews, we found teachers' approaches to language play vary depending on factors such as classroom dynamics, teacher experience, and personal teaching philosophy. For instance, teachers navigated language play differently based on their specific classroom contexts. Judy embraced language play, viewing it as an opportunity for cognitive engagement, attentive listening, emotional involvement, and social interaction. Her approach highlighted the potential for language play to enrich the learning experience by fostering a more dynamic and interactive classroom environment. On the other hand, Mat opted to ignore and cease language play discussions. His students appeared more focused on using language play to exert social influence, and Mat's decision to dismiss language play could be seen as a strategic response to the disruptive potential of such interactions, prioritizing classroom order over playful engagement. In Tony's case, he described his strict adherence to the lesson plan often led to the decision to forgo language play, which was seen as a pragmatic response to balancing the benefits of language play with the constraints of time and curriculum demands. These varied responses underscored that the pedagogical potential of language play was contingent upon classroom conditions and teacher discretion. While language play could be a powerful tool for fostering engagement and learning (Waring 2013), its effectiveness depended on the teacher's ability to navigate the interplay between maintaining classroom order and leveraging playful interactions for educational gain.

The study offered insights into language teaching practices concerning language play. While previous research studies had suggested a correlation between students' language play and language acquisition, the present study provided a more detailed examination of how teachers engaged with and responded to language play and its influence on classroom dynamics. We believe the recognition of language play could function as a valuable pedagogical resource, suggesting that even language slips or mistakes can be repurposed into engaging learning experiences, enriching classroom discussions. Moreover, teachers could encourage students' language play attempts by providing support such as repetition, positive feedback, and affirmation, thereby

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fostering a higher level of student involvement. Given that play with language, whether as a ludic language play or language play as rehearsal, is a natural part of learning a new language, the research called for an enhanced emphasis on language play in teacher training programs. Additionally, integrating the notions of language play and language awareness into teacher training curricula could better equip educators to harness the potential of language play, fostering more effective and dynamic language teaching practices.

Moreover, the study explored the unique insights that teachers who speak both Korean and English bring to interpreting language play dynamics in the classroom. Korean teachers in this study exhibited a nuanced understanding of students' intended meanings, seamlessly integrating these instances of language play into their instruction. This finding accentuated the potential for Korean English teachers, especially those sharing a linguistic background with their students, to leverage language play effectively in amplifying language awareness. For example, Forman (2011) depicted how a bilingual teacher, fluent in both languages, fostered engaging language play. With a shared linguistic background, non-native teachers are often in a better position to comprehend the students' linguistic challenges or developments, which may manifest as language plays. On the other hand, English-speaking teachers without proficiency in the students' first language (L1) might not have fully grasped the subtleties of bilingual language play (Ahn 2016b).

For future research, it is encouraged to delve into students' perceptions of teacher-initiated or teacher-discouraged language play and its enduring impact on language learning. Moreover, the exploration of students' perception of language play and the subsequent teacher responses can contribute to a richer understanding of language play's impact on learners. Still, we believe the present study adds empirical evidence to the growing body of research on language play in educational settings, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of this multifaceted and intriguing aspect of language acquisition.

Supplementary data

Supplementary data is available at *Applied Linguistics* online.

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END NOTES

[1] Honorific refers to showing respect for the person you are speaking to. In Korea, Korean speakers adjust their use of honorifics depending on their relationship with the person they are speaking to (Kim, Winter and Brown 2021). For example, young students generally use honorifics toward their teachers, while not using honorifics to their friends.

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