

# **Humor and Play in Language Classroom Interaction: A Review of the Literature**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The past two decades have seen a growing interest in the role of humor and play in second-language (L2) learning and teaching. Vega (1990) went as far as to propose viewing humor as a fifth element of communicative competence; more recently, Cook (2000) has argued that language play should be regarded as “both a means and an end of language learning” (p. 204). Teachers have, in fact, long been advised to introduce elements of humor and play into the language classroom (e.g., Holmes, 1980; Schmitz, 2002; Trachtenberg 1979). However, as Bell (2009, 2011, 2013) has pointed out, such recommendations have largely been based on assumptions and intuitions rather than empirical research. Studies of specific pedagogical interventions have generally been lacking (Bell, 2013).

On the other hand, a number of recent studies have been devoted to humor and play in naturally-occurring classroom interaction. Drawing on the methods of conversation analysis, discourse analysis, and sociolinguistics, researchers have sought to understand how teachers and students “do” humor and play, what functions humor and play serve, and ultimately, what such practices might mean for language learning. The purpose of this paper is to bring together the growing body of work that addresses various forms of playful talk in language classroom interaction, commonly labeled “humor,” “language play,” or “humorous language play.” Following a brief sketch of how humor and play have been conceptualized in applied linguistics, I will discuss several classroom-based studies conducted over roughly the past decade. I will focus on specifying what has been learned about the forms that humor and play take in the classroom, or how humor and play are done; the social functions that playful classroom talk serves; and how humor and play may be connected to language learning. In this way, I hope to provide a snapshot of the state of the art and offer suggestions for future research.

## **CONCEPTUALIZING HUMOR AND PLAY IN APPLIED LINGUISTICS**

Widely recognized as universal elements of human experience, humor and play have been a focus of study in disciplines ranging from psychology to sociology to literature (Cook, 2000; Martin, 2007). In applied linguistics, humor and play are commonly conceptualized as types of creative language use (Lytra, 2008; Swann & Maybin, 2007). However, application of the terms is by no means standard. Verbal humor is sometimes discussed as a form of play (e.g., Bell,

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2013), while in humor scholarship, language play is commonly discussed as a form of humor (e.g., Dynel, 2009). Some empirical studies use the terms interchangeably (e.g., Bell, 2005). Nevertheless, there are identifiable traditions of scholarship on both “language play” and “verbal humor.” In this section, I will briefly outline major insights from this body of work relevant to recent studies of L2 classroom talk.

## **Language Play in Applied Linguistics**

Children’s play with language has long been recognized as facilitative of first-language (L1) acquisition (Garvey, 1977; Weir, 1962). Appearing somewhat later, studies of second-language acquisition (SLA) in children also suggested a positive link (Peck, 1980; Saville-Troike, 1980). Two distinct conceptualizations of language play have since been put forward by Lantolf (1997) and Cook (1997, 2000). Lantolf (1997), taking a Vygotskian perspective, described language play as private speech whose purpose is not communication or entertainment, but rehearsal. He identified several kinds of language play, including talking to oneself in the L2 or making up words in the L2. Because it creates opportunities for “doing something” with the language, Lantolf (1997) argued that such play is a likely pre-condition for SLA (p. 19).

In contrast to Lantolf’s (1997) utilitarian play-as-private-speech, Cook’s (1997, 2000) version of language play has been called play-as-fun (Broner & Tarone, 2001). Asserting that individuals engage in play primarily for enjoyment, Cook (2000) suggested that language play may take a variety of forms: linguistic (play with sound and grammatical patterns; repetitions); semantic (play with ambiguities; the invocation of alternate realities); and pragmatic (play that focuses on performance and may be done for enjoyment and/or value, for example, in achieving solidarity). By providing opportunities for focus on form and access to different types of interaction, Cook (1997, 2000) posited that language play facilitates SLA.

Taking a view similar to Cook’s (1997, 2000), Tarone (2000) described play language as “language whose purpose is not primarily to transmit information, but rather to entertain” either the speaker or others (p. 32). Highlighting its inherent unpredictability, Tarone (2000) suggested that while play may not be necessary in SLA, it may promote learning in three ways: by reducing anxiety and lowering learners’ affective filters, rendering language more memorable; by providing opportunities for learners to “try on different voices and language varieties”; and by destabilizing the interlanguage (p. 45).

As these theories of language play and L2 learning were advanced, language classroom-based research began to discuss instances of play in teacher-learner and learner-learner interaction (Kramsch & Sullivan, 1996; Ohta, 1995). In the quest to make the connection between playful talk and learning, Tarone (2000) called for more systematic observations of language play among different populations of learners—a call which later classroom-based studies appear to take up.

## **Humor in Applied Linguistics**

In contrast to “language play,” “humor” has only more recently attracted the attention of researchers concerned with SLA. There is, however, a well-established tradition of humor scholarship in linguistics and pragmatics. According to the General Theory of Verbal Humor

(Attardo, 1994; Attardo & Raskin, 1991), the currently dominant account (Bell, 2011), humor stems from the resolution of incongruity. A joke or other humorous “text” is thought to be compatible with two opposing scripts (cognitive structures that provide standard information about routines and activities); a punchline or other disjunctive element triggers a shift in scripts and interpretations, resulting in humor (Attardo, 1994). Put another way, humor relies on “defeated expectations” (Goatly, 2012, p. 23).

While much work on humor has been based on the study of decontextualized examples (Martin, 2007), in the past two decades, there has been greater interest paid to humor in interaction, applying the methods of conversation analysis, discourse analysis, and interactional sociolinguistics (Norrick, 2003). In this work, humor is generally understood as something that is interactionally achieved, and instances of humor are identified based on speaker intention, audience interpretation, or both (Hay, 2001). There have been some efforts to specify the forms that humor takes in interaction; taxonomies include jokes, humorous narratives, one-liners, puns, hyperbole, irony, teases, wordplay, mockery, and parody, among others (Bell, 2011; Dynel, 2009). Attention has been devoted to problems such as identifying the contextualization cues (Gumperz, 1982) that mark utterances as humorous. Hay (2001), for example, has suggested several humor support strategies that participants deploy to signal understanding and agreement with humor: laughing, contributing more humor, echoing the speaker’s words, and displaying heightened involvement.

Analysts have also recognized that while its purpose is ostensibly to entertain, humor can serve as a resource for performing serious social functions (Norrick, 2010). Norrick (1993) has distilled these into social control functions (e.g., enforcing group norms, thereby enhancing group cohesion) and rapport-building functions (e.g., presenting a positive self-image and narrowing social distance). The functions of humor have been widely discussed in studies of so-called ordinary or everyday talk (Boxer & Cortes-Conde, 1997; Norrick & Spitz, 2008; Tannen, 1984) as well as in studies of workplace communication (Holmes, 2000; Mullany 2004; Rogerson-Revell, 2007).

Recently, there have been some attempts to empirically address the topic of L2 humor and the role of humor in language learning. Using surveys, researchers have found that in some foreign-language classrooms, both teachers and students believe that humor serves positive functions, such as motivating learners (Ketabi & Simin, 2009; Ziyaeemehr, Kumar, & Abdullah, 2011). Others have sought to understand L2 humor and its connection to learning through analysis of native-speaker (NS) and non-native-speaker (NNS) interaction. Based on the findings of a case study involving three advanced L2 speakers, Bell (2005) has argued that humorous language play may result in deeper processing of lexical items, rendering them more memorable. Davies (2003), in her study of NS-NNS interaction in extracurricular peer conversation groups, highlighted the role that joking exchanges may play in developing learners’ cross-cultural competence. As the following review will demonstrate, a number of researchers have since turned to the study of classroom talk in order to investigate humor and its possibilities.

## **INVESTIGATING HUMOR AND PLAY IN THE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM**

Although all the studies to be reviewed here attempt to speak in some way to the “big-picture” issue of learning, it is possible to discern three distinct research purposes: specifying

how humor and play are done in the language classroom; identifying the social functions of humor and play in the language classroom; and connecting humor and play to language learning. In this section, I will describe the studies that address each major issue and present their key findings.

## **Doing Humor and Play in the Language Classroom**

Drawing on the methods of conversation analysis, several studies have provided insight into how humor and play are accomplished in classroom interaction. By conducting detailed, turn-by-turn analyses, the authors reveal ways in which participants “do” humor and play by violating sequential expectations as well as role expectations and highlight the importance of lexical and prosodic cues in contextualizing utterances as non-serious.

In a study involving learners of Finnish as a Second Language, Lehtimaja (2011), for instance, found that student “reproach” turns could be used to launch humorous sequences. Lehtimaja examined video-recordings from seven secondary school classes, focusing on student turns that appeared to display a negative stance toward prior teacher talk. These reproach turns were systematically marked as a departure from serious, surrounding talk via prosodic cues as well as the addition of superfluous address terms, such as *ope* (Finnish: *teacher*). As they were used at the end of the turn, according to Lehtimaja, the address terms were not appeals for attention; instead, they served to render institutional identities more salient and thereby emphasize the incongruity of the student’s action and its playful nature. In one example, a student questioned a teacher’s characterization of an assigned story as exciting but marked her turn as playful via her agitated tone and by appending the superfluous address term *teacher*. Rather than treating this apparent challenge to her pedagogic choices as a serious offense, the teacher also oriented to the reproach as play by smiling and aligning with her own playful turn, posing a counter-question about what makes a story exciting. Based on her analysis of how such humorous sequences unfolded, Lehtimaja (2011) concluded that teachers may still accomplish “serious” pedagogical work by “playing along” and thus affiliating with students.

Play with institutional norms is not just the purview of adolescents, however, as Waring (2013) found in her study of how adult English as a Second Language (ESL) students do “being playful” in the classroom. The author analyzed video-recordings from eight classes, ranging from beginner to advanced. She identified talk that was either produced or treated as playful by focusing on incongruity and laughter as markers, noting that most of the examples came from two of the classes. Her analysis revealed that identity was a key resource for doing being playful. Play occurred as students invoked or appropriated situational (teacher/student), relational (close/distant), and personal (personality, character) identities. In one instance of situational play, a student usurped the “teacher” role by taking the teacher’s sequential feedback slot (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975) and pronouncing her own answer “very good,” with dramatic emphasis and clapping. In an example of play with personal identities, Waring discussed how a student imported a non-student identity into her classroom talk by telling a humorous narrative in which she portrayed herself as an obsessive shopper. Via such identity play, Waring argued that language students have the chance to experience ordinary conversation in normally stratified classroom talk.

Linguistic and pragmatic play were also observed in Reddington and Waring’s (2015) study of humor practices in adult ESL classrooms. Based on their analysis of a corpus of 15

video-recorded classes (beginner to advanced), the authors identified stretches of talk treated by participants as humorous, relying on Hay's (2001) humor support strategies. Reddington and Waring found that humor occurred as students manipulated sequence organization by using a turn component to pivot, or switch, from the current sequence to something new or by producing an unexpected turn. In one example of the latter practice, excerpted below, the teacher has just provided instructions on how to give an oral presentation and concludes with an assessment of the task and a question, to which a student provides a surprising response:

256		Simple. Right?	
257	Carmen:	→ For you.	
258	LL:	[hahahahah ]	
259	T1:	[\$For you ↑ too.\$]	(Reddington & Waring, 2015, p. 7)

Carmen's "for you" provides a grammatically fitted extension of the teacher's prior turn (it can be heard as a continuation of "simple"). Despite this surface alignment, however, Reddington and Waring argued that the turn is pragmatically disaligning in that it questions the teacher's assessment (i.e., by implying that the task is only simple for the teacher and not the students). Like the teachers in Lehtimaja's (2011) study, in response to this instance of a student-initiated, humorous challenge, the teacher extended the play by echoing the composition of the student's turn but countering its content with "for you, too." In line with Waring's (2013) conclusions about play, Reddington and Waring concluded that incongruity at various levels, including sequential and pragmatic, may be key to doing humor in the language classroom.

## The Social Functions of Humor and Play in the Language Classroom

A number of studies of humor in interaction have focused on identifying its social functions. Researchers have likewise attempted to specify the functions that humor and play serve in language classroom interaction, focusing on mitigating effects that may ultimately facilitate various forms of participation.

Van Dam's (2002) discourse analytic study of a first English lesson at a Dutch secondary school, for example, identified ways in which both the teacher and students used play to accomplish facework. By allowing the mixed-ability group to engage in playful forms of practice, such as spelling a difficult word via a chant in chorus, van Dam argued that the teacher allowed the lower-proficiency learners to participate without incurring the usual face threats associated with individual participation in the L2. The author also noted the use of humor in student-initiated efforts to manage face. She observed that during one activity, students announced and even bragged about their own private spelling errors. Van Dam saw these contributions as a kind of play on face itself: By inviting others to laugh at their mistakes, the speakers ultimately gained status with their peers. On a subsequent visit to the class, the author noted a high level of participation and student engagement in role play, verbal dueling, and mild teasing. Van Dam concluded that the high level of participation was due in part to the facework that began on day one: Through both teacher efforts and student contributions, a classroom culture that allowed room for play and making mistakes was developed.

How learners deal with lack of L2 knowledge also emerges as a theme in Garland's (2010) study of humor and identity at a private Irish language school. As part of a larger ethnographic study, Garland analyzed recordings of classes of different levels. Students

repeatedly engaged in what she termed humorous mock translation, that is, proposing imagined, literal translations of Irish expressions into English, as shown in the following extract. Here, Cora responds to a teacher's question about an alternative way of saying "I'm a teacher" in Irish:

- 53 Cora: Bim?  
'I am' (habitual present tense)  
54 Caomhín: no,  
55 Cora: → I do be in my teaching,  
56 All: (laughter) (Garland, 2010, p. 35)

In some instances, Garland argued that humorous mock translation served to mitigate face threats: Instead of being a student who does not know an answer or who has made an error, the learner becomes a student who makes a joke and invites others to laugh along, like the "braggarts" in van Dam's (2002) study. By offering such translations, students were also able to display what they *did* know about the rules and patterns of the L2. Humorous mock translation thus served as a display of expertise which might elevate the student's status and enable him or her to claim membership in a community of connoisseurs of a lesser-known language.

As in Garland's (2010) analysis, student-initiated humor is the focus of Pomerantz and Bell's (2011) discourse analytic study of the functions of humor in an advanced Spanish language class at a U.S. university. Based on their classroom observations and analysis of audio-recordings, the authors found that humor often functioned as a "safe house." Under the guise of humor, students were able to safely critique institutional and instructional norms and experiment with different identities, without negative repercussions. In one instance, after a small group had been discussing, in English, how boring an activity was, one student prompted another to speak into the microphone and say in Spanish, "I like beans." By suddenly invoking the ritualized practice phrase *me gusta*, Pomerantz and Bell argued that the student succeeded in criticizing the scripted nature of classroom discourse in a way that remained, because of its playfulness, deniable and safe. In an episode of whole-class interaction, several students again used language reminiscent of substitution drills to share their "views" on university teaching assistants:

- 1 Teacher: Kevin  
2 Kevin: → *me gusta los uh (.) asistentes (.) uh quien  
hablan (.) inglés?*  
(‘I like teaching assistants who speak  
English’)  
3 Class: ((laughter and clapping))  
4 Neela: *sí, verdad*  
(‘yes, true’)  
5 Teacher: *creo que tienes en eso mucha compañía*  
((laugh))  
(‘I think that you have a lot of company  
in this’) (Pomerantz & Bell, 2011, p. 156)

In this extract, Kevin's announcement that he likes teaching assistants who speak English is met with laughter and applause. The teacher also treats the potentially controversial statement as less than serious, sharing in the laughter and simply observing that the opinion is popular. By invoking humor in such ways, students were thus able to perform subversive acts and take on critical voices. Interestingly, Pomerantz and Bell also noted that humor was typically initiated by



- 10 Hiwa: En par skol ((smiley voice; picks a matching card))  
*A pair of shoel*
- 11 Fusi: Det [är två skol he he he he he he  
*It [is two shoel he he he he he he*
- 12 Hiwa: [he he
- 13 Layla: ((smiles)) (Cekaite & Aronsson, 2005, p. 176)

As Cekaite and Aronsson noted, the mislabeling prompts a correction from another student, which is partly taken up in Hiwa's subsequent turn. Yet focus on form continues as he and others playfully invoke the made-up word for humorous effect. Cekaite and Aronsson suggested that such stretches of talk promote awareness of correct and incorrect phonology and morphology and may offer opportunities for extended practice.

Bushnell (2009) also focused on collaborative play in his conversation analytic study of a beginning Japanese as a Foreign Language class at a U.S. university, but stressed its importance as a resource for managing pedagogical tasks and as a means of internalizing interactional episodes. In analyzing a set of audio-recordings, Bushnell observed instances of all three of Cook's (2000) types of play: linguistic, semantic, and pragmatic. Focusing on two students engaged in pairwork, Bushnell found that they used play to appropriate other roles and voices. During a teacher-student role play, for example, the learners reversed roles and flouted norms as the "teacher" proceeded to tell the "student" about a digestive issue. Bushnell argued that, in this case, play functioned as an interactional resource for renegotiating the terms of the task and experimenting with different voices, work that can contribute to developing sociolinguistic competence. Yet even as the students stepped outside the terms of the task, they continued to use target vocabulary. Noting other instances in which vocabulary from play sequences was recycled and used in later play, Bushnell suggested that play may also provide for better, more memorable encoding of target forms and motivate their use.

In contrast to the previously discussed studies, which focus primarily on student-initiated humor and play, Forman (2011) examined one teacher's penchant for humorous language play and its potential effect on learning. Audio-recordings were made of a Thai university EFL class as part of a larger ethnographic study. The author analyzed instances of humor that occurred in a low-level class conducted by a bilingual Anglo-Australian instructor. Via humorous linguistic play, Forman argued that the teacher managed to draw attention to lexical, semantic, and phonological form. In one example, the teacher feigned misunderstanding of a student's pronunciation of *bottle* as *bottom*, a potentially inappropriate word for the classroom, a moment that the class registered as particularly humorous. Forman noted that the teacher not only initiated humor, but also encouraged student initiation of humor. In another episode, as students named items typically found in the bathroom (e.g., *toothbrush*), the teacher broke away from the task and the target language, asking in Thai if the students actually used the items. Forman concluded that this teasing move served to reduce social distance and create solidarity, paving the way for a subsequent instance of student-initiated humor, in which students began listing obviously incongruent answers (e.g., *telephone*). Together, Forman observed, the teacher and students parodied "legitimate ways of approaching the study of English" (p. 558). Thus, humorous language play not only offered opportunities for focus on form, but, according to Forman, such play also provided affective benefits that might have accounted for the high level of participation, despite the learners' low level of proficiency.



## **HUMOR AND PLAY IN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM INTERACTION: THE STATE OF THE ART**

The L2 classroom-based studies reviewed here are linked by a shared interest in what have traditionally been considered “less ‘legitimate’” forms of classroom talk (Waring, 2013, p. 191): language use that is less serious, more creative, and in many cases, seemingly separate from the “official” business of learning (Lytra, 2008). In this section, I will briefly summarize the key findings, highlighting those that appear to counter common assumptions about who uses humor and play in the language classroom and how. Next, in light of the difficulty of defining humor and play in applied linguistics, I will address the conceptualizations invoked by the researchers and how they contribute to the ongoing discussion. Finally, I will discuss the evidence offered for how humor and play may provide opportunities for language learning.

### **Summary of the Findings**

A decade ago, Cook (2000) lamented the fact that, with the focus on transactional talk and students’ work-related needs in many language classrooms, play is often marginalized, relegated to the role of filler (p. 183). As recent analyses attest, however, playful talk can occur in a variety of classroom contexts and may be interwoven with work on pedagogical topics and tasks (Broner & Tarone, 2001; Bushnell, 2009; Cekaite & Aronsson, 2005). Several of these studies focus on how humor and play are done in the classroom, offering examples of playful talk initiated by adolescent and adult students that hinges on the manipulation of elements of turn composition and violations of sequential expectations as well as role expectations (Lehtimaja, 2011; Reddington & Waring, 2015; Waring 2013). These studies also underscore the importance of lexical, syntactic, and prosodic choices in marking utterances as non-serious. Other studies illuminate the social functions of humor and play in the classroom, which may include facework (van Dam, 2002; Garland, 2010), identity construction (Garland, 2010; Pomerantz & Bell, 2011), and the creation of safe houses for critiquing institutional norms, including those of the language classroom itself (Pomerantz & Bell, 2011). Finally, several researchers have sought to explicitly address the issue of learning. Based on their observations of children’s linguistic and semantic manipulations, Broner and Tarone (2001) argued that language play may have the power to destabilize a learner’s interlanguage. Several studies suggested that play can provide memorable opportunities for noticing and encoding form, for both child (Cekaite & Aronsson, 2005) and adult (Bushnell, 2009; Forman, 2011) learners. Finally, Bushnell (2009) attempted to show that, as play is used as a resource for managing classroom interaction, it may also serve as a resource for developing sociolinguistic competence.

These studies offer valuable insight into how teachers and students actually create and make use of humor and play in the language classroom, providing evidence that counters several common assumptions. First, humor and play are not simply the purview of children—adolescent and adult students, as well as teachers, initiate and participate in playful talk in the language classroom. Second, the data complicate a concern raised by Davies (2003) that the language classroom may not offer the right conditions for the production of interactional humor. While some examples of play in the classroom studies were tied to teacher-orchestrated fun and games, or what Pomerantz and Bell (2007) have called sanctioned play (e.g., the Memory game in Cekaite and Aronsson’s [2005] study or the chant in van Dam’s [2002] study), many of the

episodes discussed arose spontaneously. These moments of unsanctioned play (Pomerantz & Bell, 2007) occurred, in fact, as participants built responses around prior, often more serious talk. Finally, although the use of complex forms of humor has been discussed as a marker of advanced proficiency (Bell, 2005; Cook, 2000), it is clear from the data that learners of all levels may play with language and use language play for humorous purposes.

## **Conceptualizing Humor and Play in Language Classroom Talk**

Given the continued discussion surrounding definitions of humor and play, it is worth examining how these terms have been employed in the analysis of language classroom discourse. Among the studies reviewed here, only Forman (2011) attempted a theoretical account of the relationship between humor and play, treating verbal humor as a form of language play and both as forms of linguistic creativity, similar to Bell (2013), Lytra (2008), and Swann and Maybin (2007). In articulating their research purposes and findings, several authors foregrounded the term “humor” (Garland, 2010; Lehtimaja, 2011; Pomerantz & Bell, 2011; Reddington & Waring, 2015). Van Dam (2002) and Waring (2013) opted for the general “play,” while others addressed “language play,” following Cook’s (2000) definition and taxonomy (Broner & Tarone, 2001; Bushnell, 2009; Cekaite & Aronsson, 2005). Forman (2011) ultimately adopted a focus on “humorous language play.” Only Broner and Tarone (2001) discussed instances of Lantolf’s (1997) play-as-private-speech; however, this fact is not surprising. As Broner and Tarone (2001) pointed out, Lantolf (1997) and Cook (1997, 2000) offer quite distinct conceptions of play; thus, it may be more practical to investigate their forms and functions separately.

Despite these apparent differences in research focus, it is worth noting that researchers who have dealt with collaborative forms of language play, or play as performance for others, have highlighted its often humorous nature (e.g., Broner and Tarone, 2001; Bushnell, 2009; Cekaite & Aronsson, 2005; Forman, 2011). In all the analyses, there is an assumption that play, whether it is with linguistic forms, ambiguous meanings, or participant identities, may be treated as humorous. As a result, there is often overlap in the specific episodes of talk described, such as punning, teasing, or joking, and the markers used to identify these episodes, such as laughter, regardless of whether the study aims to focus on “language play” or “humor.” Yet while humor is widely understood as an inherently social phenomenon (Martin, 2007), the work of Cook (1997, 2000) and Broner and Tarone (2001) serves as a reminder that play in learner talk may be fun without being funny, and may be engaged in purely for one’s own enjoyment. It seems that distinguishing between the terms will be useful in allowing for continued description and discussion of creative language use for pleasure, and perhaps simply for oneself, and creative language use aimed at amusing others.

## **Humor and Play as Opportunities for Language Learning**

Turning to the “big-picture” question of language learning, these analyses of L2 classroom talk highlight several ways in which humor and play may offer opportunities for language learning that are consistent with factors believed to be key to SLA. Considering the findings of this body of work, it seems that humor and play may facilitate language learning in the classroom in at least three ways: by promoting focus on form; by providing opportunities for

learners to develop sociolinguistic competence; and by contributing to a classroom culture that supports and encourages participation.

*Focus on form through humor and play*

Attention to form is a key component in a number of psycholinguistic accounts of SLA. According to Schmidt (1990), noticing linguistic form is a requirement of acquisition, at least for adult learners; be it intentional or unintentional, noticing is necessary to transform input into learner intake. As the findings of several studies reviewed here demonstrate, producing and understanding verbal humor and language play often demands close attention to elements of linguistic form. For example, the child learners in Cekaite and Aronsson's (2005) study created simple puns based on noticing and highlighting L2 homophones or phonological similarities between words in the L1 and L2. Similarly, in the adult class examined by Reddington and Waring (2015), a student's production of a humorous utterance depended in part on fitting it to her teacher's prior utterance, as if it were a syntactic continuation. Skehan (1998) has argued that forms that are more prominent in input are more likely to be noticed. In instances such as these, where form itself is an object of play and a potential source of humor, it may be rendered particularly salient for participants.

Attention to form also features in Long's (1996) interaction hypothesis. Long has stressed the facilitative role of the kind of focus on form that occurs as learners engage in negotiation of meaning and receive feedback from interlocutors. While it might be hard to argue that all episodes of language play described in the studies involve a meaningful exchange of information in the sense suggested by Long, researchers such as Broner and Tarone (2001) and Cekaite and Aronsson (2005) observed instances of play that involved learner collaboration and form-focused feedback. Cekaite and Aronsson, for example, described how the child learners in their study focused on form on their own initiative, essentially conducting "peer-run 'language lesson[s]'" (p. 187).

When learners spontaneously and playfully focus on form in such ways, Broner and Tarone (2001) have further argued that the episodes are "affectively charged" and that the "emotional excitement" inherent in play has the potential to make L2 forms more memorable (p. 375). Bushnell (2009) and Forman (2011) also argued that forms encountered in humorous language play may be bettered-remembered. According to Forman, this is a result of the deeper cognitive processing required to understand certain forms of humor, a claim similar to that made by Bell (2005) based on her examination of non-classroom interaction. Bushnell (2009), in fact, highlighted examples in which learners recycled target items from one play episode to another.

Ultimately, whether or not episodes of play based on form constitute "meaningful" communication in Long's (1996) sense may be beside the point. Cook (1997, 2000), for example, offers a reminder that "authentic" language use is not always practical or goal-oriented. He has argued that allowing opportunities for serious as well as playful language use, with its often explicit attention to and manipulation of form, leads to a richer learning environment (Cook, 1997). By providing a vehicle or resource for linguistic invention, humor and play may, as Tarone (2000) and Broner and Tarone (2001) have argued, serve to destabilize learners' interlanguage, keeping it open to change.

*Developing sociolinguistic competence through humor and play*

Tarone (2000) offered an early articulation of another potentially beneficial function of play in language learning: enabling learners to experiment with different voices. Tarone (2000),

and later Broner and Tarone (2001), drew on Bakhtin's (1981, 1984) notion of double-voicing, in which a speaker uses the language of others for his or her own purposes. Ultimately, this appropriation promotes language change in the speaker (Bakhtin, 1981). Building on Bakhtin's work, Broner and Tarone (2001) argued that the appropriation of other voices is necessary for a learner to become a fully competent speaker, one familiar with different registers and varieties of the language.

In the classroom studies reviewed here, a number of episodes of humor and play appear to involve this kind of appropriation. Learners stepped outside the potentially constraining role of "student," whose classroom participation may often be limited to providing the response component of the initiation-response-feedback sequence (Waring, 2013; see Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975). Waring (2013), for example, discussed the case of a learner who produced a humorous personal anecdote that is more typically associated with everyday talk (Norrick, 1993) than with classroom talk and suggested that play offers students opportunities to engage in ordinary conversation in the classroom. Some learners arguably went further, challenging their teachers or appropriating actions typically associated with the teacher role, as Lehtimaja (2011), Reddington and Waring (2015), and Waring (2013) observed. In examples documented by Bushnell (2009), Forman (2011), and Pomerantz and Bell (2011), students became critics of institutional and classroom norms and rituals, even parodying classroom talk and classroom activities. As Bushnell (2009) argued, by taking on and trying out these other voices, learners are effectively engaged in developing their sociolinguistic competence.

The key to understanding humor and play as resources for such experimentation in the classroom may lie in Pomerantz and Bell's (2011) notion of humor as safe house. As the authors stressed, the inherent deniability of humor offers a cover for performing potentially risky or subversive actions that fall outside traditional institutional definitions of the student role. When students take these risks, they not only have a chance to practice language, but also to receive feedback from peers and teachers, who, in the cases discussed here, frequently offered interactional support (Hay, 2001) by laughing, contributing more humor, or responding playfully to the content of the utterance. When talk is thus ratified as playful or humorous by interlocutors, learners are also provided with valuable feedback as to the appropriateness and overall effect of the utterance.

It may be useful to view collaborative play through the lens of language socialization theory, in which the L2 speaker is positioned as an "apprentice" who learns how to use language "accurately and appropriately" through interaction with other community members (Kramsch, 2002, p. 2). Drawing from this perspective in his discussion of humor and interactional competence, Bushnell (2009) turned to van Lier's (2000, 2004) notion of affordances, in which active engagement in interaction is seen in light of its ability to "afford" learning opportunities. If one, in turn, looks for evidence of "learning" in speakers' development of "effective ways of dealing with the world and its meanings" (van Lier, 2000, p. 247), then one might argue that as students successfully adopt other voices in their play with roles and identities, learning is taking place.

### ***Creating classroom culture through humor and play***

Drawing as well on language socialization theory, van Dam (2002) suggested that episodes of play can contribute to constituting a classroom culture in which student questions and participation are valued and encouraged. Although other studies reviewed here do not

explicitly invoke the term, it may be useful to frame the discussion of a final set of potential benefits of humor and play in terms of how they might contribute to creating a classroom culture that is conducive to learning.

Both van Dam (2002) and Forman (2011) argued for a connection between teacher-orchestrated humor and play and learner participation. If we accept that interaction, as seen from either a psycholinguistic or language socialization perspective, is key to SLA, then a classroom environment that encourages participation is highly desirable. The authors of the present studies propose several ways in which humor and play might promote such a culture. In the L2 classroom, as in other contexts (Norrick, 1993), use of humor and play may contribute to building rapport and establishing group cohesion. Via humor and play, learners can put forward positive identities (van Dam, 2002; Garland, 2010; Pomerantz & Bell 2011) for ratification by peers and teachers. When teachers also initiate or contribute to student-launched humorous sequences, Lehtimaja (2011), Reddington and Waring (2015), and Forman (2011) noted an affiliative effect that could serve to reduce social distance. Such work to promote cohesion and develop relationships, and perhaps consequently reduce learner anxiety, may ultimately have a positive impact on learner motivation (Dörnyei, 1994).

In L2 classroom interaction, humor and play may also serve as resources for accomplishing facework. By making fun of their own language mistakes (van Dam 2002; Garland 2010), by laughing and inviting others to laugh, students can maintain a positive image even when attempts at participation in the L2 fall short. Again, it may be useful to return to Pomerantz and Bell's (2011) notion of safe house: The deniability of humor and play may not only offer protection from being held accountable for the content of a contribution, but also for the accuracy and appropriateness of the form in which it is delivered. In this way, learners can find the freedom to participate and experiment linguistically while distancing themselves from face-threatening L2 mistakes (van Dam, 2002).

Based on the studies reviewed here, a case can thus be made for a facilitative role of humor and play in language learning. Engaging in humor and play may provide opportunities for memorable focus on form as well as for developing sociolinguistic competence via the appropriation of other voices. Humor and play may also contribute to establishing a classroom culture that encourages learners to participate and thus to actually make use of opportunities to produce language and receive feedback. It is important, however, to temper the discussion by highlighting, as several authors have done, that humor and play often seemed dependent on teacher and student personalities, with certain teachers and students producing more examples than others (Forman, 2011; Pomerantz & Bell, 2011; Waring, 2013). Forman (2011) also cautioned that, as humor has the power to offend as well as to amuse, teachers must handle it with care (p. 562). Thus, these studies do not necessarily paint a picture of humor and play as an easily transportable resource for teachers, to be "implemented" in the same way that one might implement a particular method for teaching a grammar point. Many of the examples of humor and play documented in the classroom arose spontaneously and were highly context-dependent. Nevertheless, the studies do offer examples of instructors harnessing these "less 'legitimate'" (Waring, 2013, p. 191) moments to serve important social, and potentially, learning functions; it is in this regard that the studies may offer a model for teachers.

## **CONCLUSIONS: LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

While much work has been done to specify the forms and functions of humor and play in the L2 classroom, as well as their potential contribution to language learning, a number of avenues remain open for further research. First, the studies come from a diverse array of classrooms in different countries and involve both child and adult learners of various proficiency levels. At this juncture, then, it would be worth investigating other classrooms and other schools within those same contexts in order to determine if the findings are transferable. Among these studies, for example, only two deal with ESL classes (Reddington & Waring, 2015; Waring 2013); more work could certainly be done here.

Second, a number of themes addressed elsewhere in humor studies have yet to be explored in the language classroom. With the exception of Forman's (2011) word of caution, the classroom-based studies focus on the positive, neglecting the potential "dark side" of humor. That humor is, in fact, a "double-edged sword" (Rogerson-Revell, 2007, p. 24), with the power both to include and to exclude, is acknowledged in the literature on humor in other settings. For example, Rogerson-Revell (2007) showed how the use of humor by a small group of participants in a workplace meeting led to the creation of a distinct in-group and out-group, affecting participation. Similarly, in her study of an L1 high school class, Baxter (2002) found that the creation of "class clown" identities by several male students enabled them to dominate whole-class discussions, from which the female students, who did not engage in such humorous performances, were excluded. It would thus be worth investigating whether social exclusion is another, negative by-product of humor and play in the language classroom and addressing questions such as who participates via humor and play, and who does not, and to what extent a classroom culture that encourages humor and play might actually limit the participation of those who are not comfortable with taking part.

In addition, several of the limitations noted of humor research in applied linguistics generally also apply to the L2 classroom interaction studies. Bell (2013) observed that little attention has been paid to learner comprehension of L2 humor or to instances of failed humor in interaction. These are other areas that could be explored in-depth through analyses of L2 classroom discourse, which might examine the kind of negotiation involved in comprehension, or if and how repair ensues when attempts at being humorous or playful go awry.

Finally, while a few of the studies reviewed drew from data collected over the course of a semester or year, more longitudinal studies tracing learners' use of humor and play and their language development over time could be valuable in addressing the issue of language learning. Yakimowski and Wagner (2013) recently called for greater collaboration and more mixed-methods approaches to the study of humor in education in general. Following their suggestions, one might envision research projects in which an analysis of classroom discourse informs the development of surveys to gain knowledge of a wider audience's use or perceptions of humor and play. There is clearly more work to be done on humor and play in the language classroom, and good reason to continue to heed Cekaite and Aronsson's (2005) call "to take non-serious language more seriously" (p. 169).

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