Facetious Language Play for Creative Repetition
Nick Kasparek

ABSTRACT
This paper reviews the literature on language play and its potential benefits for language teaching and learning from three interconnected theoretical foundations: sociocultural, dialogic, and principled communicative. Language play is presented not as an off-task behavior or inauthentic use of language, but as a potential learning tool. Humorous or facetious language play can reduce learner anxiety, while creating positive pressure to produce target language. This play can furthermore maintain learner interest in repetitive practice tasks by providing an outlet for creativity. This paper presents one practice activity that seeks to promote creative repetition through facetious language play in English discussion classes. It then discusses the activity’s effects based on the author’s informal observations, suggests possible variations and improvements, and presents a plan for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW
Informal student feedback of Rikkyo University’s English Discussion Class (EDC) often seems to include “fun.” This is the case despite the fact that the topics discussed are generally serious social issues and that most students are facing the anxiety of communicating at length in a foreign language for the first time in their lives. Thus, the fun involved in the class seems at first to be just an incongruous by-product of the students’ serious learning of English discussion skills. While this paper does not attempt to explain students’ enjoyment or prove that it is a central element of their language learning, it does seek to explore, formalize, and promote one aspect that might be involved in this fun: language play.

Language play (LP) has received some attention as facilitating second language acquisition. Verbal humor is one important type of language play (Forman, 2011), and facetiousness is a relatively easy form of this humor. Bell (2009) acknowledges the common association between types of humor and language proficiency levels, embracing the idea that humor is highly complex. But she and many other researchers (e.g., Broner & Tarone, 2001; Bushnell, 2008; Pomerantz & Bell, 2007) have pointed to numerous examples of students of all ages and at all proficiency levels exploiting all “the linguistic and non-verbal resources at their disposal to create humor” (Bell, 2009, p. 245). Cook (2000) likewise argues that although there is a varying degree of complexity within LP, it “can take place at all levels of proficiency,” and suggests that it is patronizing to claim LP as the reserve of language users with native-like proficiency (p. 204). It is therefore less helpful to delineate levels for LP abilities than to recognize the types of humor that encourage sustained language play. For instance, fantasy sequences have been found to be among the most likely type to encourage others to play along (Bell, 2011, p. 150), and these could include facetiousness in that the participants are not restricted to serious reality or actual opinions.

Rather than a disruptive, off-task, or inauthentic behavior in language classrooms, this humorous LP can have positive affective, sociocultural, and linguistic effects (Forman, 2011). Indeed, the functions of humor can be divided into three categories: “(1) cognitive and social benefits of the positive emotion of mirth, (2) uses of humor for social communication and influence, and (3) tension relief and coping” (Martin as cited in Bell, 2011, p. 145). Cook’s (1997) seminal article presents a further, more fundamental rationale for including this ludic, or ordered but fun, language play in a larger language pedagogy: LP is ubiquitous among people of
all ages as part of the complexity of language, and the classroom is par excellence “a play world in which people can practice and prepare” (p. 230). It is true that the classroom is an artificial environment, but Cook (2000) notes that artifice can be “more authentic than reality” (p. 196). Cook (2000) draws on van Lier’s conception of authenticity as being essentially about “a personal process of engagement” (p. 202) and suggests that LP is a way for focus on form to take on this personal and social significance. While play certainly does not replace the work of language learning, it becomes such an integrated element that distinctions between “work” and “play” break down.

As the above introduction suggests, there are interconnected theoretical foundations for language play in second language acquisition research, drawing from sociocultural theory, dialogic theory, and principled communicative language teaching. From a sociocultural perspective, LP can be seen as fostering the construction both of novel thought and positive social milieu for language learning (Swain and Deters, 2007, p. 823). At the individual level, the creative language use in LP encourages greater internalization through deeper engagement, and it maintains an openness to the new (Poehner & Lantolf, 2005, p. 237). Indeed, many scholars have suggested a positive impact on memory thanks to the deeper processing and more elaborate, stronger traces that LP and humor enable (Bell, 2012; Bushnell, 2008; Forman, 2011). While this suggests elements of a cognitive model of SLA, it also relates to sociocultural theory in that LP pushes students into their particular zone of proximal development (ZPD). Tin (2013) suggests that the creativity involved in LP can “initiate the ZPD, helping learners to ‘stand a head taller than they are’ even in the absence of scaffolding” (p. 388). Similarly, other scholars note the benefits of humorous LP for enabling scaffolding through collaboration (Bell, 2005; Bushnell, 2008; Pomerantz & Bell, 2011). Although the use of humor is dependent on some degree of prior feelings of solidarity, it is especially powerful at promoting greater solidarity in groups (Coates, 2007), which suggests that it would be a positive element of cooperative learning. When teachers create affordances for play, it can help everyone construct relaxed, participatory classroom cultures (van Dam, 2002). Research suggests that learners themselves recognize some of these positive effects on the language-learning atmosphere (Murphey, Falout, Fukuda, & Fukuda, 2014), although there is also evidence that if it is not explicitly sanctioned, students view LP as an elicit, off-task behavior (Pomerantz & Bell, 2007).

Language play offers further benefits from a dialogic perspective. Dialogic theory derives from the work of Bakhtin, who saw all language utterances as having both an addressor and an addressee. In this model, language is learned through social interaction, and people create and recreate their identities through these dialogues (Swain & Deters, 2007). The Bakhtinian model also importantly views language as a “continual interplay between conformity and creativity” (Pomerantz & Bell, 2011, p. 157). Language learners thus find themselves appropriating different voices and recontextualizing them to make them their own (Bushnell, 2008).

Scholars of ludic LP have drawn upon several of these aspects of dialogic theory to discuss how LP expands the possibilities of language use within the limited realm of the classroom. Although all language use involves a tension between normalizing and creative forces, LP especially encourages creative exploration beyond known forms and a stifling overemphasis on accuracy. Language play might encourage this exploration by lowering affective barriers (Bushnell, 2008) and reducing foreign language anxiety (Forman, 2011) through both positive affect and coping strategies. This has important implications for students’ willingness to communicate (WTC) and intrinsic motivation, which relies in part on a “balance of both cognitive and affective euphoric tension” (Spielmann & Radnofsky, 2001, p. 273).
Language used to entertain oneself and others has the key feature of *deniability*, such that one can claim to be “just kidding” and therefore protect one’s “true” identity or “save face” (Pomerantz & Bell, 2011). Humor can thus help to create “safe houses,” that is, sites that foster L2 development through their openness to experimentation and risk-taking (Pomerantz & Bell, 2011); by using humor, learners can commit face-threatening acts while remaining “‘off-record’ in the context of play” (Bushnell, 2008, p. 51). Bushnell (2008) found that LP “functions to provide affordances for learners” both to internalize target language and develop sociolinguistic competence (p. 51). Bushnell (2008) notes that in more transactional tasks, learners often neither negotiate meaning nor accomplish the expected task, but when learners can jointly frame the task as play, there is greater use of target language forms. Broner and Tarone’s (2001) study of an immersion classroom revealed a similar interweaving of “play and work” (p. 371). Indeed, it is in the “interactive juggling between play and seriousness” (Rampton as cited in van Dam, 2002, p. 258) that students can find authentic engagement in otherwise less engaging topics.

Moreover, in LP, learners experiment with a wide variety of play voices through mimicry and parody that enable an appropriation and ownership of new language (Bushnell, 2008). Language play helps learners learn to *ventriloquote* in order to become communicatively competent; they can experiment with different styles, registers and social varieties of language (Bell, 2005; p. 200). Learners can practice “double-voicing” to create script oppositions through their different resonances. Language learners, even beginners, have been shown to recycle other speakers’ prior utterances in creative, playful ways, both through intertextual play and through role appropriations (Cekatte & Aronsson, 2004). This establishment of a play frame also encourages secondary jokes and play.

Dörnyei’s (2013) proposed revisions to communicative language teaching, the Principled Communicative Approach (PCA), also point to reasons for an increased role for language play. PCA involves the addition of several principles to the Communicative Approach while retaining as primary the meaningfulness and personal significance of classroom language use. Namely, he adds the need for controlled practice, declarative input, focus on form, formulaic language, language exposure, and focused interaction. In short, he brings back some of the elements of traditional language teaching, but only as these work in service of meaningful communicative goals. This compromise approach is less thoroughgoing than Cook’s (1997) call for greater openness to elements of older forms of language teaching, but it nonetheless shares many similarities. While Dörnyei (2013) retains the terms “meaning-focused” and “meaning-based,” Cook (1997) points out that language play is sometimes nonsensical and fantastical, but still *meaningful* in a broader sense. Carter (2007) suggests that there is a danger in language use becoming overly transactional, utilitarian, and mechanistic if this is forgotten. Authentic conversations full of play and banter among friends may convey little information, but they involve language for its own sake, for the enjoyment of the interaction. Welcoming this language creativity and play into communication-focused classrooms would thus mean allowing for this equally “authentic” language use in meaning-focused or transactional tasks. Cook (1997) suggests that we integrate the best elements of different forms of language teaching to better respond to the complexity of language learning.

Likewise, Pennycook (2007) creatively recasts an old saying to emphasize the same idea: we should not throw out the “mimetic baby” with the “behaviourist bathwater” (p. 590). Repetition and recontextualization, rather than being old-fashioned and stultifying, can instead be framed as creative acts. Pennycook’s model of creativity challenges its conflation with originality and difference, arguing instead that it involves just as much repetition and recontextualization as it does minor differences. Thus, he can claim that “language creativity is
the common stuff of everyday language use” (p. 583). Tin (2013) suggests that imposing constraints is one way to encourage this move toward creativity and play. Having a strict form allows for the language users’ focus to shift to creative content and creative repetition of others’ content. Language play thereby enables a focus on form that remains meaningful and engaging. As Cook (1997) notes, LP focuses students’ attention on the formal and semantic levels of language, as they must play by these rules. In other words, LP rarely comes from nowhere, but connects directly to the task. This in turn is credited with disrupting learners’ interlanguage, again pushing them into their ZPD (Bushnell, 2008).

Research into LP has followed two related but different definitions of its core concept, which Broner and Tarone (2001) helpfully distinguish as “language play as rehearsal” and “language play as fun.” These can overlap, as repetition is often a key feature of both types, just as Pennycook’s (2007) model suggests of creativity more generally. As Bell (2012) notes, both “see language play as the repetition and/or manipulation of L2 forms and meanings” (p. 238). In a related vein, Tin (2013) suggests that language creativity be defined as “the playful use of language to construct new and surprising meaning” (p. 387). While rehearsal is often a solitary act, though, ludic LP is typically social, and indeed is primarily co-constructed by multiple participants collaborating through improvisation like jazz musicians (Coates, 2006). Rikkyo’s EDC involves many opportunities for this fun language play through student-to-student interaction, especially in the rapid exchange of facetious ideas. Maximizing repetition of target phrases and forms, while keeping it fresh and authentic, is a challenge in EDC classes, which are otherwise highly meaning-focused. Thus, the practice stage not only presents many opportunities for LP, but also could benefit from the engaging focus on form that LP can provide. This repetition in turn could help develop creative automaticity and improve long-term recall and transfer of the target language. It is hoped that with the constraints of the target language, provided topics, and activities, students can be encouraged to playfully riff on creative content and thereby explore the limits of the form together.

**TASKS AND MATERIALS**

As the above literature review suggests, language play is most easily conceptualized as a naturally occurring phenomenon in language learning and authentic language use, but it is one to which teachers can be open rather than resist or stifle as “off-task.” This openness is akin to an approach to language teaching or a guiding principle for all aspects of teaching. For instance, teachers can use feedback to recognize students’ positive, on-task LP, use humorous LP in their teacher talk to signal its acceptance, and demonstrate a risk-welcoming openness to content and form when monitoring students. Thus, while the focus of this paper is the purposeful fostering of LP within a specifically-designed activity, it is important to recognize the broader foundations that invite play and sanction it as a productive learning strategy. In other words, the proposed activity is unlikely to work in total isolation.

The long-term preparation in my class involved a peer-idealizing discussion in the first lesson, in which students imagined together and discussed what they hoped their classmates would do to help them have a positive learning experience throughout the course. The preparation for this discussion involved agreeing and disagreeing with opinions taken from Murphey, Falout, Fukuda, and Fukuda’s (2014) repeated peer-idealizing activities with Japanese university students. One of these opinions involved the use of language play, fun, and humor (Appendix A). Students were nearly unanimous in their agreement that this was something that they hoped their classmates would use in their class. In my feedback, I noted this agreement and explicitly sanctioned this behavior for future classes; moreover, I provided the phrase “Just
“Just kidding” as an additional classroom English phrase to provide a tool for future language play. I did not use a control group, so I cannot draw many conclusions about the efficacy of this foundational activity. Nonetheless, I did observe students using “Just kidding” in future lessons, and I think there was a general openness to playfulness that may have been otherwise more limited.

The specific task seeks a balance between the pressure to produce language rapidly and a reduction of anxiety about this foreign language use. In Spielmann and Radnofsky’s (2001) terms, the activity seeks to promote “euphoric tension.” To accomplish this, this practice activity uses a “scoreboard” (Fink, 2013) to help students track their own use of the target phrases, and it invites students to join a teacher-constructed play frame or create their own. I used poker chips as manipulatives that students placed on a laminated card to create a record of their language production (Appendix B). Establishing a play frame was the more challenging aspect, and one that requires still more modification and experimentation. In some lessons, students read aloud a simple humorous model dialogue that used well-known Japanese comedians as characters (Appendix C). In one lesson, the function presentation deviated from the lesson topic for greater dramatic and humorous effect. In future lessons, I plan to introduce potentially humorous constraints (Appendix D). Primarily, however, I encouraged LP in my introduction to the activity itself. This will be discussed further in the sections describing the procedure and the variations of the activity.

**PROCEDURE**

This practice activity follows a presentation, ideally with an element of play or humor, and then students reading aloud a model or gap-fill dialogue, again preferably involving some LP. The teacher gives each pair of students their laminated scoreboard (Appendix B) and a stack of color-coded chips. For this illustrative case, I used the balancing opinions function; red chips represented disadvantages, and blue chips were advantages. The teacher models the use of the chips with a brief demonstration, ideally using student ideas if done after an initial test without these materials. In this case, I used a big version of the scoreboard on the board with red and blue magnets for the chips. The teacher then (re-)emphasizes the two general rules for this type of practice activity: 1) students must use an appropriate target phrase whenever they place a chip on the scoreboard, and 2) wild, funny ideas are great too because the goal is just to say as many phrases and ideas as they can. For the balancing opinions function practice, the teacher also stresses that students keep a good balance between advantages (blue) and disadvantages (red), for example, at least two of each for every topic. The teacher can then remind students that a funny idea might help them think of the other side.

The teacher monitors students for three to four minutes of this practice, ensuring that students use the target phrases and collecting playful or other good examples for feedback. The teacher then praises the success evidenced by the students’ scoreboards (e.g., pointing out that there were at least two chips of each color before students changed topics) and highlights a particularly interesting example observed (i.e., an instance of language play or other creative use). The teacher then states that there were many other interesting ideas and that students should share some of their groups’ best examples as quickly as possible with a new partner. Students then switch partners and repeat their groups’ most interesting examples in half the time given for the initial practice, again repeating the target phrases. Students thus have two chances for recognition for their successful LP, first in teacher feedback and then in a kind of peer feedback that doubles as continued practice.
VARIATIONS
The basic procedure described above allows for a great deal of variation. The scoreboard does
not need to consist of manipulatives such as poker chips with a laminated graphic organizer, but
could involve a checklist or some other form of counting. The scoreboard aspect provides the
primary structure of the activity, while language play is encouraged primarily through the
framing of the activity and the focused repetition of the most interesting examples. This,
however, may not be enough for many groups of students, especially early in the semester, to
co-construct their own play frames.

Thus, an idea bank (Appendix D) could be added for each topic, and one of these
topic ideas for each topic could serve as prefabricated play frame for students to join. For
instance, a one- or two-word idea that is ambiguous about whether it is an advantage or
disadvantage could be given. The less playful ideas could also serve as a helpful content aid for
lower-level students who might otherwise feel all of the pressure to produce language without
being able to take advantage of the anxiety-reduction of LP. Similarly, one playful advantage or
disadvantage could be given on the scoreboard itself for students to start with (Appendix E).

DISCUSSION
This activity stemmed from observed student behavior in a discussion the previous semester,
namely, a group of lower-level students engaging in language play as they challenged each other
to contribute facetious and creative examples of how to use technology for heating and cooling.
Students used the target phrases for both asking for and giving examples and then supported
these examples with reasons, thus reviewing previous target phrases. It was in this discussion
that I observed the highest group-wide use of target phrases. This on-task LP seemed to arise
from a practice activity that challenged students to creatively use examples they had generated
prior to seeing the practice questions. They were asked to use their list of technologies as
examples with the target phrases, sometimes to comic effect. After reviewing the literature and
learning of the various potential benefits of language play for language learning, the question
then became how to foster this positive LP more formally and for other practice activities.

In my informal observations, the scoreboard element of the activity seemed to ensure its
success in achieving its goals of generating a great deal of target language. This was
unsurprising, but it remains important to note. In my observations, students had little difficulty
using the chips, and they seemed to reference it and push each other to generate at least two
advantages and disadvantages for every topic. In short, this helped to recreate the
student-to-student challenging pressure that I observed in the naturally-occurring language play.
This pressure also did not seem overly anxiety-producing, despite the activity being introduced
relatively early in the semester.

However, evidence of clear language play was harder to find. As noted in the discussion
of possible variations, the structure of the activity did not provide its own play frame; rather,
there was only the teacher’s encouragement and the general playful atmosphere inviting students
to co-create their own language play frames. Future implementation of such activities will need
to include prefabricated play frames for a true test of their efficacy. Despite this limitation, I
nonetheless observed significant student laughter during the activity, and this carried over
somewhat into the discussions and peer feedback activities as well. This was especially
pronounced in three types of classes: those that already seemed to exhibit a great deal of group
solidarity, those with students who first seemed uninterested in the topic (in this case, it was
study abroad), and those with especially quiet and reserved students. While the already-bonded
groups may not need this additional encouragement to engage in on-task play, this activity seems
promising for quiet groups with only nascent feelings of solidarity and for students who might not otherwise engage with the topics.

Thus, while it remains unclear whether LP can be credited with creating the conditions for the successful repetition of target phrases with a variety of content, there remain reasons to suspect that it played a role in helping the scoreboard element produce euphoric pressure rather than debilitative pressure.

CONCLUSION
There is therefore a need for continued research into the specific effects of introducing language play in distinct ways. The activity needs to be designed with at least three variations: 1) a control group who complete the task without explicit reference to play or fun, 2) a group who are primed for play with a humorous example and encouragement to play within the target form, and 3) a group who are both primed for play and are provided possible prefabricated play frames. This would allow for comparisons of the frequency of target language use and comparisons of instances of laughter. Both could be observed with a simple observation checklist (Appendix F), and simple correlations could be suggested. For the activity sample, random pairs could be selected from two classes completing each type of variation of the activity. Observations of the group discussions following the activity could use the same type of checklist for additional comparisons among the three different treatment groups, which could suggest differences in internalization and creative automization.

While this more robust study still would not attempt to uncover the deeper processes involved in how language play affects language learning, it would attempt to provide some evidence for LP’s general effects on the frequency of target language use in practice activities and discussions. This could have implications on how teachers view and respond to observed LP, possibly leading them to see this as a positive, on-task learning strategy rather than an off-task disruption or distraction. Moreover, it could lead to greater appreciation for this authentic use of language for pleasurable social interaction; and in turn, this appreciation of how language acquisition can be serious fun could be strongly motivating for all involved and have a significant impact on future learning.

REFERENCES
392.

**APPENDIX A - Preparation for Peer-Idealizing Discussion (Relevant Section)**

I’m not sure, but I think good classmates sometimes play and joke. I mean they are not always totally serious. For instance, they laugh and help everyone have fun while we practice English. This helps everyone learn better. What do you think of my idea?

**APPENDIX B - Scoreboard Graphic Organizer for Balancing Opinion**
APPENDIX C - Example Playful Model Dialogue for Pre-Practice Review (Recontextualizing Well-Known Japanese Comedians and One of their Jokes)

Read this good short dialogue with your group to review the target phrases.

Hamada: WSWDF?
Barbie: WDWD being fashionable? Can I start?
Everyone: Sure!
Barbie: I always try to be fashionable because one + of being fashionable is we can meet cool people. And then ♡ fall in love ♡. Are TA other +?
Matsumoto: Really? IPA with Barbie. I usually try to be fashionable. Another + is we won’t look old and old-fashioned. But WA the –?
Hamada: Hmm. One – is fashion changes very fast. So we have to buy new clothes every year. Sometimes I like to wear my old favorite clothes. DAWT add something?
Barbie: Can I AAQ?
Hamada: Go ahead.
Barbie: Are your old clothes fashionable?
Hamada: I think they show my personality more. Is that C?
Everyone: Yes!
Matsumoto: So DAH any OI?

APPENDIX D - Idea Bank for the Topic of Going Abroad (Imposing Further Creative Constraints and Providing Possible Prefabricated Play Frames)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Millionaire</th>
<th>Criminals</th>
<th>Romance</th>
<th>Pets</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sick</td>
<td>Famous</td>
<td>Rainy</td>
<td>Sushi</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

APPENDIX E - Scoreboard with Example Playful Ideas

Travel
Is traveling abroad a good idea?

+ —

☐ You can escape from the local police
☐
☐
☐
**APPENDIX F - Example Checklist for Observing Practice Target Language Performance and Language Play**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Speaker Target Phrase Use</td>
<td>✓ ✓ ✓ ✓</td>
<td>✓ ✓ ✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listener Target Phrase Use</td>
<td>✓ ✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laughter or “Just kidding”</td>
<td>✓ ✓ ✓</td>
<td>✓ ✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>