Facilitated Play, Target Language Use, and Authenticity

Nick Kasparek

ABSTRACT

Previous research and informal observations have suggested a number of potential benefits of language play for learning, including positive effects on student use of target language. This mixed-methods research project explores whether a playful approach can help instructors achieve course objectives. It evaluates the relative success of three different orientations toward play in the practice stage: facilitation, encouragement, and indifference. It finds that facilitation resulted in the most play and indifference the least. While play is not strongly correlated with target language repetition in the practice activity itself, there is indication of greater target language internalization with play. Discussion quality was not dramatically different among the three treatment groups, but student questionnaire responses suggest that play is surprisingly linked to sharing more authentic ideas. The study’s conclusion is thus that language play is better thought of as a possible on-task language learner behavior than as off-task diversion.

INTRODUCTION

Psychologist and education scholar Susan Engel (2016) has recently argued that pleasure should be thought of as integral to learning: “Becoming educated should not require giving up joy but rather lead to finding joy in new kinds of things.” In Rikkyo University’s English Discussion Class (EDC), students often seem to learn to find joy in discussing various social topics and hearing unfamiliar ideas. Practicing the target language that improves these discussions, on the other hand, requires form-focused repetition that is sometimes less engaging. Language play provides one potential way to make this target language practice more engaging.

Previous research on language play suggests that it and associated humor create stronger memories through deeper processing (Bell, 2012; Bushnell, 2008). Language play is thus posited to promote greater internalization through deeper engagement (Poehner & Lantolf, 2005, p. 237), and it provides a way for learners to focus on language forms in an authentic way through this “personal process of engagement” (Cook, 2000, p. 202). Furthermore, Tin (2013) suggests that the creativity involved in language play can “initiate the ZPD, helping learners to ‘stand a head taller than they are’ even in the absence of scaffolding” (p. 388). Other scholars note that play can provide scaffolding through collaboration (Bushnell, 2008; Pomerantz & Bell, 2011). It follows that play has been linked to greater use of target language forms (Bushnell, 2008). Broner and Tarone (2001) also noted the interweaving of play and work, and they identified two overlapping modes of the key concept of language play: rehearsal and fun. As Bell (2012) notes, in both types, it is “the repetition and/or manipulation of L2 forms and meanings” (p. 238).

The present study involves repetition, but it primarily fits in the “language play as fun” strain of research that is linked with humor. Humor and laughter can function to promote positive affect, communicate meaning, and relieve tension (Bateson, 1953; Bell, 2011). It follows, then, that humorous language play is linked with lowering affective barriers (Bushnell, 2008). One proposed reason is that it is safe and deniable if one is just kidding (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). Research suggests that learners recognize some of these positive effects on the language-learning atmosphere (Murphey, Falout, Fukuda, & Fukuda, 2014), although play may also be viewed as illicit behavior. Therefore, van Dam (2002) suggests that teachers should create affordances for play. In my informal observations, this seemed borne out:
facilitating language play through designed activities had positive effects on target language output and classroom atmosphere (Kasparek, 2015).

This exploratory study investigates these effects more closely. It examines whether a playful approach might help instructors achieve course objectives in a university English discussion class. Specifically, it seeks tentative answers to the following research questions: 1) Can learner language play be facilitated and encouraged by the teacher? 2) Is language play conducive to target language repetition? 3) Does language play promote the internalization of target forms? 4) Do students continue using learned language play strategies at later stages of the lesson? and 5) Is language play correlated with better discussions in any way? All of these questions can be subsumed under this fundamental final research question: Is language play an on-task behavior that teachers should encourage or even facilitate? The Results section will deal with the first five questions, while the Discussion section will focus mainly on the final question, with reference to both the results and theory.

**METHOD**

In order to have the maximum number of participants and yield the broadest possible results, I selected all of my Spring 2015 students in the Rikkyo University English Discussion Class (EDC). These students’ Combined Listening and Reading TOIEC scores had placed them in EDC levels 1 (680 or above), 2 (480 to 679), and 3 (280 to 479). The 12 classes were divided into three treatment groups: play facilitation, play encouragement, and control. These groups were balanced as much as possible in terms of level, department background, and teaching sequence; in other words, the grouping attempted to control for learner difference as well as teaching differences as the week progressed.

As an exploratory study, this research project was designed to be open to finding a variety of possible differences among the treatment groups, but it was nonetheless guided by theory about language play’s positive role in language learning. This mixed methods research used a concurrent triangulation strategy that involved comparing quantitative and qualitative data (Creswell, 2009). For the quantitative data, language play was operationalized simply as instances of laughter, with no attempt to determine the authenticity of this laughter (Bateson, 1953). Likewise, target language use was determined simply by number of utterances, with rare cases of immediate same-speaker repetition excluded. Data were collected for target language questions and phrases, but these were combined to simplify analysis. Play facilitation involved updated and adapted versions of Kasparek’s (2015) activity for two lessons: Lesson 6 on Examples and Lesson 11 on Possibilities.

Audio-recordings of three student interactions in Lesson 6 provide the primary data: the focused practice activity for examples target language, the first discussion after this practice, and the second discussion. Audio-recordings of their final discussion tests months later were also recorded for more detailed analysis. A simple checklist was used to document instances of laughter and target language use at different stages. I also took notes on my interpretation of the interactions, including the types of laughter involved, specific examples of what provoked laughter, and the general quality of target language use. For greater uniformity, detail, and practicality, the following stages were chosen for Lesson 6: three minutes of the practice activity (Px), the first five minutes of the first discussion (D1), the first five minutes of the second discussion (D2.1), and the last five minutes of the second discussion (D2.2).

The unit of analysis was the class, and for uniformity, each class’s discussion data were mathematically adjusted for two discussion groups (i.e., the data for the three-group class was multiplied by 2/3, and the data for the one-group class were multiplied by 2). The discussion test
data were averaged per student in order to avoid this conversion, but this per-student average was converted to five-minute eight-student class scores for some comparisons. This was a very small sample that was sensitive to many confounding factors and limitations, so the qualitative data were vital for the clarification of these quantitative data.

Students also completed a brief questionnaire on their perceptions of the course in the final lesson, which involved both a rating scale and a comments section (Appendix A). This questionnaire was employed to tease out possible connections between student perceptions of language play and three related elements: positive affect, self-evaluation of competence, and content (especially authenticity). The unit of analysis was the individual student. Comments helped clarify responses at times.

RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION

As the quantitative and qualitative results are used for mutual clarification, these results are presented along with their complementary interpretation. The research questions for this exploratory study were deliberately open to multiple types of results, so these present the most interesting answers for future research rather than systematically proven results.

The first and second research questions were focused on immediate effects: whether language play could be facilitated or encouraged by the teacher, and if this play would increase repetition of the target language in the practice activity. The qualitative and the quantitative data converge to suggest that both teacher facilitation and teacher encouragement of language play were successful. The facilitated group laughed the most and the control group laughed the least (see Figure 1). Student questionnaire responses also bear this out, with the same trend across groups for the item on joking (see Appendix B). However, the data also suggest that this play did not always lead to more frequent use of the target language; language play and target language repetition were only somewhat correlated (.32) at the practice stage across all classes. More strikingly, as Figure 1 shows, play facilitation led to the lowest target language use. This challenges the hypothesis that facilitated language play would increase creative repetition.

![Figure 1. Examples target language and laughter in practice activity by treatment group.](image)

The qualitative data might help to explain some of this discrepancy. My notes on the practice stage reveal other differences among the treatment groups. The control group classes seemed to focus on completing the task as a task. Half of these classes used the target language frequently, but did not seem engaged in this relatively easy activity. These students played only occasionally, and when they did, they typically went off task. The other half seemed more engaged, and they independently found some ways to play on task (e.g., Is technology safe? What do you think? For example, a camera? It's safe! [Laughter]).
In contrast, the facilitated and encouraged groups typically played on task, with their choice of examples and rationales for their choices evoking laughter. More students in these groups seemed engaged in serious play. For instance, I was surprised to find dark humor emerging from several of these classes. One group introduced and laughed about terrorism through understatement, one about exploding smartphones through specificity and personalization, one about the threats of computers and cameras for children through vague implications that let listeners trace the logic to its unstated vulgar reference, and another about murderous future robots through reference to popular culture. The most salient difference for the facilitated group was that these classes took longer to get started with the activity, absorbing and understanding the possible play content and thinking about how to complete the task first. This cut into their time spent actually practicing the target language. Pauses for laughter and additional explanation of creative ideas also seem to have reduced the time for target language use. In this light, it makes sense that play facilitation in this lesson led to less repetition of the target language.

However, the qualitative data above suggests that play facilitation may have nonetheless led to higher-quality target language practice, which leads to the next batch of research questions. The third, fourth, and fifth were about the longer-term effects of language play in practice activities: whether it promotes internalization, whether language play continues in later activities, and whether all of this, in turn, leads to more creative discussions. Predictably, the data are also mixed on all these questions, but in interesting ways.

As Figure 2 shows, target language use varies across the groups across stages, suggesting mixed results on the question of internalization. The hypothesis linking internalization to language play is challenged by the fact that the control group performed best in D2.1 in Lesson 6 and in the final test discussion. However, there is also some support for language play’s potential help: the facilitated group performed best relative to the other groups in the first discussion and the last part of the second discussion, with the control group performing worst at these stages.

![Figure 2. Examples target language use by treatment group in each interaction.](image)

My observation notes suggest that the D2.1 results are less indicative of good performance than might be assumed. Examples were far more appropriate for the questions discussed in D1, and in most cases in D2.2, than in D2.1. More to the point, one of the control group classes skewed the D2.1 data dramatically, recording nearly 11 more uses than the group average, because they seemed overly focused on using the target language, whether or not it was appropriate to the context. After speakers stated their opinion about whether a particular technology was good or bad, the listeners asked for an example rather than a reason. Although this was not a big problem.
in terms of the learning process, this class seemed not to have internalized the appropriate use of
the target language yet. My interpretation is that this overuse led to artificial inflation of these data
in this small sample (excluding this class leads to nearly identical performance among the groups).

Again, the small sample size means differences are only suggestive, but the correlations in
Table 1 nonetheless offer interesting directions to explore (most relevant bolded). It is striking that
laughter (L) in the practice (and at all stages) is positively correlated with Examples target
language use (TL) in all later lesson stages, but especially in D1 and D2.2. In fact, TL in
discussions is consistently about twice as correlated with laughter in practice as TL in practice.

Table 1. Correlations among Lesson 6 observation data from all classes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>TL Px</th>
<th>TL D1</th>
<th>TL D2.1</th>
<th>TL D2.2</th>
<th>LPx</th>
<th>LD1</th>
<th>LD2.1</th>
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<tr>
<td>TL D1</td>
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<td>TL D2.1</td>
<td>-0.305 0.283</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>TL D2.2</td>
<td>0.292 0.342 0.031</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>LPx</td>
<td>0.318 0.571 0.197 0.6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LD1</td>
<td>0.425 0.658 0.328 0.352 0.718</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>LD2.1</td>
<td>0.251 0.365 0.119 0.472 0.719 0.699</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LD2.2</td>
<td>-0.262 0.309 0.3 0.463 0.546 0.35 0.678</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note. TL = target language use; L = laughter; Px = practice activity.

Focusing on two very different classes in terms of performance illustrates why this might
be the case. Using quantitative and qualitative data, I chose the highest and lowest achieving
classes from all 12 classes. Both were eight-student Level 3 classes. The highest achieving class
was in the facilitated group, while the lowest was in the control group (shown in Figure 3).

Figure 3. Target language and laughter in highest and lowest achieving classes.

The facilitated group class showed a developing ability to use the target language both to
play and to express a wide range of creative ideas. For instance, in the first discussion, one speaker
gave an extreme example of excessive use of technology and had to clarify, to the listeners’ delight:
Not me. [Laughter] For example, some people, but not me. [Laughter] In the second discussion
(10 minutes), students began playing more with humorous over-explanations and increasingly fraught examples. To explain why digital telepathy technology was bad, one student started escalating the examples: For example, if I hate you… soushitara [Ah, I can know]. Yes, yes. [If you hate me, I can know.] Yeah, wakachau. If I love you [I can know] Yes, yes. All… [Everyone knows]. Yes. Bad, bad, bad. In this case, the student’s use of the L1, Japanese, (soushitara for “and then”; wakachau for “unintentionally find out”) indicates some stretching beyond her current L2 knowledge, but she was scaffolded through group collaboration. It should be noted that there was laughter throughout this interaction, especially after the L1 use. In contrast, the control group class seemed less engaged in the practice activity, just using the target language to complete the task as instructed. In the first discussion, the laughter came mostly at communication breakdowns. Students still attempted to use the target language as instructed, but seemed to have more difficulty applying it in less straightforward contexts. When they did give creative examples and laughed in the second discussion, they rarely used the target language.

As the above cases suggest, the hypothesis that learners would continue using the strategy of language play after the practice stage found support in the data. Looking again at Table 1, laughter in the practice activity is correlated with laughter at all later stages. The facilitated group consistently played the most across the entire lesson (though laughter increased in all treatment groups). Again, the qualitative data suggest that some control group classes learned how to play with the target language just as well as classes in the facilitated group by Discussion 2, but facilitation of play, and to a lesser extent encouragement, seemed to lead to more consistency about playing on task. This comes from both my observations and the questionnaire results reflecting students’ perceptions. As Figure 4 shows, the standard deviations for the questionnaire items on fun and joking were highest for the control group, who were left more on their own to discover how to play with the target language. Many in the control group independently found creative on-task ways to make the interactions fun for themselves, but some were less successful at this.

This variance suggests an unsurprising but unsatisfying answer to the fifth research question regarding effects on discussion quality: there was no striking difference among the different treatment groups in my observations at the class level. However, the questionnaire data suggest that students perceived some differences. Perceptions of joking in class went along with agreement that they expressed their real opinions in practice activities, and both were positively correlated with rating the class fun (see Appendices B and C for average group ratings and a correlation table for individual ratings). As Figure 5 shows, on average, the facilitated play group
agreed most strongly with both joking and using authentic content.

![Figure 5. Survey responses on joking and expressing true opinions by treatment group.](image)

**DISCUSSION**

The above questionnaire data (Figure 5) also suggest an answer to the final research question from the learners’ perspective: play can certainly be an on-task behavior. This aligns with previous research about positive learner perceptions of play (Murphey, Falout, Fukuda, & Fukuda, 2014). This also supports the theory that language play is associated with greater personal engagement with tasks (Cook, 2000). The correlation of target language use, especially appropriate use, in discussions with laughter at all previous stages (twice as much as it does with target language repetition in the practice activity) suggests that Poehner and Lantolf (2005) are right that this deeper engagement promotes internalization. As others have noted, the mixing of work and play led to dissolution of distinction between them (Broner & Tarone, 2001).

The creativity of ideas in the discussions across the treatment groups and the fact that there were no obvious differences in the quality of the discussion content suggests that, overall, language play was just as much an on-task behavior as less playful behavior was. The case of the successful class provides an example of how striving to give a humorous example (If I love you…) pushed a student beyond her current language ability and promoted quick collaboration from her classmates, as Tan (2011) and others have suggested (e.g., Bushnell, 2008). This extended to more serious ideas as well. It is noteworthy how students laughed about very dark ideas (e.g., war and extreme environmental destruction in the future, death of oneself or loved ones, personal regrets, and many fears), as well as strikingly sincere or grand ideas (e.g., wanting to show one’s feelings, that digital telepathy would be good for democracy on principle, and various philosophical statements). Again, there was a mixing of play and seriousness, with laughter seeming to create space for authenticity.

However, play was not necessarily on task, as we saw in half of the control group classes. Indeed, at times in all classes, there appeared to be off-task play, or at least play that was difficult to categorize as on task. Some of this was probably to ease tension about perceived failure, as when students laughed when there were communication breakdowns or when they could not phrase their idea eleganty in English. Most importantly, the results showed that students often learned how to play on task through facilitation, and to a lesser extent, through encouragement. In all classes, students laughed, but this laughter was notably directed by the teacher toward lesson objectives.

Not all laughter is equal regarding language play, and this points to a major limitation of this study. Observation notes indicate a number of different types of laughter, but a systematic breakdown of these types and their connection to language play was beyond the scope of this exploratory research project. Nervous laughter did not necessarily indicate play, and as mentioned...
above, laughter at communication breakdowns and struggles with language production were only tangentially connected to on-task language play. Others were clearly on-task language play, with students laughing about obvious prompting for target language, demands for more and more examples, over-explaining with seemingly endless lists of examples, teasing turn completion, and the use of creative, surprising or absurd examples that necessitated convoluted rationales. There was some playful outbidding as well (e.g., *For example, if I’m not healthy, I can’t play. [And then you can’t study.] And then I can’t work and get money.*)

However, some more interesting types of laughter also emerged from these notes, which indicate the mixing of play and seriousness more directly. As Young posits in Bateson (1953), there was laughter at “sudden agreement” or identification with speakers and their ideas (p. 5). This was especially true for slightly shameful admissions such as using one’s smartphone too much; big laughs surrounded *Me too!* in these cases. As Mead points out in Bateson (1953), this confessional humor is a “playful change of identification” that emphasizes the safety of saying and thinking this way for a moment (p. 11).

This is similar to another type: the dark humor mentioned above. It is important to note that the speakers themselves laughed after stating a sad or frightening idea, signaling that it was okay for others to laugh. This seemed to allow otherwise frightening content into the interactions at a critical playful distance. Likewise, sincere and grand ideas said with a laugh evoked listener laughter. It seemed that this laughter was more in recognition or admiration than in belittlement. Again, the laughter seemed to create a safe space for these ideas, as the negative correlation between the joking and embarrassment items in the questionnaire (-0.31) and previous language play research also suggests (Bushnell, 2011; Pomerantz & Bell, 2011). Statements like *I’m very scared and I don’t want to die* were also collectively framed as playful, even if they were also reflective of real opinions. Listeners sometimes also reframed the speakers’ ideas as playful in order to make them safe. For instance, the statement *the beauty of life depends on death* was met with both laughter and praise at its grandiosity. Listeners reacted to similar ideas with laughter combined with words like *Deep! Great! and Nice!* and even sincere applause in some cases.

A more thorough study would distinguish among these types of laughter and language play, and it would attempt to overcome some of the other major limitations of this exploratory research project. Primarily, it would better control for the many confounding factors in this study. For instance, the teacher’s style and overall approach to play meant that all groups, even the supposed control group, received not only play encouragement but also modeling of language play in feedback. Moreover, repeated feedback that was adjusted to class performance meant that classes that were slower to internalize the target language spent more time on focused practice of these forms; this means that the more long-term the effects, the more confounding the influence. Also, it bears repeating that the small sample size means that group dynamics and differences at the class and even individual level could have had an outsized effect on the data.

CONCLUSION
This research was exploratory, so the implications for teaching are necessarily modest. The findings suggest at the very least that teachers should not view play as a necessarily off-task behavior. Furthermore, teachers can find some justification for facilitating language play in practice activities. This is especially true if students are going off task to play, as teachers can help these students find more productive ways to play with the language, to “[find] joy in new kinds of things” (Engel, 2016). Moreover, if students are unengaged and not internalizing the forms despite repeated use, these findings suggest that teachers can facilitate or encourage language play to deepen engagement and increase internalization. While language play in the practice activities
might not lead to strikingly better discussions, teachers who adopt a playful approach can take heart in the findings that play was often linked to serious and authentic content. Indeed, laughter seems to help learners accommodate more authentic content, so by creating affordances for play, teachers might also create affordances for a wider range of content.

Further research would help to substantiate these findings, especially if it focused on one promising direction. For instance, student perceptions of play could be compared with authentic engagement over time with survey items that focused on only these themes. Future research could further investigate language play’s connection to quicker internalization by looking more closely at the types of play and target language use in only two successive stages (e.g., the practice activity and the discussion preparation task immediately following it). This reference to types of play suggests perhaps the most important direction for future research: developing a more nuanced operationalization of language play by investigating types of laughter, perhaps through detailed ethnography of particular cases.

REFERENCES
APPENDIX A – Questionnaire Items

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
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<td>This class was a lot of fun</td>
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<td>5</td>
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<td>My classmate and I joked around a lot in class</td>
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<td>5</td>
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<td>It was boring to practice the new target phrases</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It was easy to remember the target phrases</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td>It was difficult to think of what to say in practice activities</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I always said only my true opinions in practice activities</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I sometimes felt embarrassed in this class</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td>I worried a lot about making mistakes with English</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
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APPENDIX B – Questionnaire Results

![Questionnaire Results Graph]

APPENDIX C – Correlation Table for Questionnaire Responses

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Fun</th>
<th>Joked</th>
<th>Boring</th>
<th>Easy</th>
<th>Difficult</th>
<th>Truth</th>
<th>Embarrass</th>
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<td>Joked</td>
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<td>Boring</td>
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<td>Easy</td>
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<td>0.184</td>
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<td>Difficult</td>
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<td>Truth</td>
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