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The occurrence of teacher-initiated playful LREs in a Spanish L2 classroom

Scott Sterling [a], [*], Shawn Loewen [b]

[a] Indiana State University, United States
[b] Michigan State University, United States

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ABSTRACT

Studies on language play in second language classrooms have largely been qualitative in nature and, as noted by Forman (2011), focused primarily on the learner. These two focuses have resulted in a literature that largely ignores the instructor's role in language play and has yet to show how often language play occurs in the classroom. The current study presents findings from 20 h of teacher-fronted classroom interaction in an intermediate Spanish as a foreign language course. Our analysis focused on language play events and playful focus on form. Overall we found 209 examples of language play; however, only 27 of those were language-related episodes (LRE). Additionally, we categorized the playful LREs and found that vocabulary was the most frequently targeted linguistic feature while grammar and pronunciation playful LREs were found to a much smaller degree.

1. Introduction

Language learning is a lifelong task that is often rewarding, but it can also be both difficult and/or boring at times. As Cook (1997, 2000) pointed out, the idea of a boring classroom conflicts with the second language (L2) field's promotion of communicative language learning, which aims to provide learners with naturalistic opportunities to use the second language. Although language, both inside and outside the classroom is often seen as a means of transactional communication, it is also used for ludic or playful purposes (Broner & Tarone, 2001). Crystal (1999), drawing on his own rich body of research, stated that "ludic language exists in hundreds of different genres, and adds enjoyment to our daily lives in many routine ways" (p. 1). This can be seen in our love (or loving hatred) of puns, language games, or even humorous lines in great works of literature such as Shakespeare. This type of language falls under the umbrella term of creative language, which has been found to occur in all linguistic situations (Carter & McCarthy, 2004). Furthermore, the use of playful language in the L2 classroom has the potential to increase students' participation and enjoyment of the language (Bell, 2005; Wagner & Urios-Aparisi, 2011; Wulf, 2010). Lessons that contain elements of language play might also draw students' attention to linguistic forms, as well as motivate them to continue the time-consuming work of learning an L2. Using materials that allow students to develop appropriate humor in the target language might also allow them to interact more naturally with native speakers, providing an important source of linguistic input for the learners.

In spite of both the authentic use of playful language outside of the classroom and its potential pedagogic usefulness, the occurrence and role of language play inside the L2 classroom has received minimal attention. However, since Cook's early

* Corresponding author.
  E-mail addresses: scott.sterling@indstate.edu (S. Sterling), loewens@msu.edu (S. Loewen).

writings on the topic, there has been an increase in research into L2 learners' use of playful language (e.g., Bell, 2005, 2012; Belz & Reinhardt, 2004; Broner & Tarone, 2001; Pomerantz & Bell, 2007). Nevertheless, it remains unclear (a) how frequently playful language is used during whole class discussions in the L2 classroom, (b) to what extent teachers initiate playful language, and (c) what linguistic areas are targeted during playful language. With little investigation into teachers' use of naturally-occurring language play in L2 classrooms, it is difficult to design pedagogic interventions that take into account the potential advantages and disadvantages of such language play. Gaining a better understanding of how playful language occurs, especially when instigated by the teacher, will allow researchers and teachers to subsequently conduct more ecologically valid investigations into the effects of such language play on L2 development.

2. Literature review

2.1. Play

Everybody plays (Cook, 2000; Crystal, 1998), just as everybody has a sense of humor (Martin, 2007; Ruch, 2012; Ruch & Köhler, 1998). Play is conducted by a variety of living creatures, often when there is a perceived lack of danger (Pellegrini, 2009). Play in humans can be observed in a variety of different contexts, from computer gaming (Griffiths, Davies, & Chappell, 2004), to playfighting (Pellegrini, 2009), and even to interspecies relations between humans and dogs (Rooney, Bradshaw, & Robinson, 2000) or other domesticated animals.

Cook (1997, p. 227), defined play for humans in two parts as "behaviour not primarily motivated by human need to manipulate the environment (and to share information for this purpose) and to form and maintain social relationships — though it may indirectly serve both of these functions," later adding that amusement and enjoyment are pivotal. Yet play is a very difficult concept to define. Pellegrini (2009, p. 20) noted in his review of various literature ranging from anthropology to zoology that "play is a multidimensional construct and should be considered from structural, functional, and causal criteria, simultaneously." Children are often associated with play (Crystal, 1996; Pellegrini, 2009), to the extent that Pellegrini cited several sources that view any activity conducted by children as a form of play. Nonetheless, there is consensus that humans of all ages can, and do, engage in playful activities (Belz & Reinhardt, 2004; Crystal, 1996). One well-recognized form of play involves linguistic resources and has been termed *language play*.

2.2. Language play

In applied linguistics, language is often seen as being used primarily in a communicative and cooperative manner (e.g., Grice, 1975) or viewed from "a more sober perspective" (Crystal, 1999, p. 1). However, language can also be used in playful, humorous, or subversive ways (Cook, 1997, 2000). Language play exemplifies this non-transactional usage of language because it exists largely for ludic and phatic purposes due to its incongruent or unexpected nature (Bell, 2012; Deckers & Kizer, 1975; Yus, 2003).

In recent research, language play has been conceptualized in several similar ways. For instance, Warner (2004) breaks language play into three categories depending on whether the learner is playing with: form (linguistic content), content/ concepts (fictional worlds), or frame (role or voice changes). Similarly Bell (2012), operationalized language play into *playing in* or *playing with* language. *Playing with* language occurs when learners pun or use other types of wordplay such as word coinage, repetition of sounds or whole words, or experiment with language structure. Thus playing with the language involves the manipulation of words, sounds, and grammar of a language. *Playing in* language involves learners role-playing, creating fictional worlds, or jesting with others. Here, language norms in terms of discourse and pragmatics are being tested and stretched by learners. Both systems appear to differentiate between playing with the linguistic code as compared to play that stresses discourse or role change. Language play thus refers to any play involving language, regardless of the level or type of language used. Note that no reference to humor is made in these categorizations. In both systems, language play is seen as a way of creatively manipulating language, not necessarily in constructing humor or inducing laughter. While play is often seen as an enjoyable act, it should be noted that very playful events might be devoid of fun. As an example, role playing the proper way to behave at a funeral would involve the use of fictional worlds and imagination but would likely not be considered humorous by the student participants.

Around the turn of the 21st century, several researchers in the field of SLA began to take a focused interest in language play (Bell, 2005; Belz, 2002; Bongartz & Schneider, 2003; Broner & Tarone, 2001; Cook, 2000; Tarone, 2000). Language play has been found to have a positive impact on L2 learners by increasing intrinsic motivation (Cekaite & Aronson, 2005), reducing negative affective features of language learning (Tarone, 2000), and allowing students to take on new voices in the classroom (Tarone, 2000; Waring, 2013). Language play may also be facilitative of language learning by helping students notice gaps or errors in their current linguistic system (Bell, 2012; Belz, 2002; Tarone, 2000).

The majority of research into language play in the L2 classroom has focused on learners. In an early study of learner language play in the L2 classroom, Broner and Tarone (2001) discussed the use of language as a tool for entertainment, and they proposed an operationalization of language play to better detect language play in the classroom. Using classroom data, they found five channel cues that potentially signal the presence of language play. Not all language play need contain all five cues; however, Broner and Tarone considered four cues the minimum required for play to be present. Language play should: