Humor in the Classroom provides practical, research-based answers to questions that educational researchers and language teachers might have about the social and cognitive benefits that humor and language play afford in classroom discourse and additional language learning. The book considers the ways in which humor, language play, and creativity can construct new possibilities for classroom identity, critique prevailing norms, and reconfigure particular relations of power. Humor in the Classroom encourages educational researchers and language teachers to take a fresh look at the workings of humor in today’s linguistically diverse classrooms and makes the argument for its role in building a stronger foundation for studies of classroom discourse, theories of additional language development, and approaches to language pedagogy.

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HUMOR IN THE CLASSROOM

A Guide for Language Teachers and Educational Researchers

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This is a book about the role of humor and language play in classroom discourse and additional language learning. If you expect it to be funny, put it down now. That’s right, put it down. Shut it. Don’t read another page. This is an academic book. And, as you know, humor and play have no place in the serious business of scholarship, let alone language education. Or do they?

The purpose of this book is to revisit this and other misconceptions about funny, playful, and otherwise unconventional talk, particularly as they relate to how we understand language use, language learning, and language teaching in educational spaces. Although we hope that you will find this book at least mildly entertaining, our purpose is not merely to amuse. In the pages that follow, we argue for serious consideration of non-serious language as a way to align our work as language teachers and educational researchers with contemporary scholarship on classroom discourse and additional language learning.

Language Education as Serious Business

Talk around education tends to be serious and when that talk is about language education, it can often hit a fever pitch. Consider the following excerpts from recent news stories:

Uncle Sam certainly talks a lot, just not in enough languages. A Senate panel examined the language deficit during a hearing Monday on “A National Security Crisis: Foreign Language Capabilities in the Federal Government.” Sen. Daniel K. Akaka (D-Hawaii), chairman of the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs subcommittee on government management and the federal workforce, said national security agencies “continue to
experience shortages of people skilled in hard-to-learn languages due to a limited pool of Americans to recruit from.”

(Davidson, 2012)

“English is a powerful platform for professional, cultural and economic exchange,” says Christopher McCormick, senior VP of academic affairs at Education First, but he added that there are several countries in the region [Asia] that aren’t progressing with English proficiency in a pace that would be necessary to maintain their international competitiveness. This is especially alarming as English proficiency is a key indicator of a nation’s economic ability, with clear correlations between English skills and income, quality of life, ease of doing business and international trade, the study notes.

(Maierbrugger, 2014)

Britain’s foreign languages skills are in crisis. During the past month alone, ministers, university representatives, exam chiefs and industry bodies have each voiced their concern as entries to degree and A-level modern foreign language courses plummeted. So few young people are learning languages that in 10 years’ time as many as 40% of university language departments are likely to close.

(Ratcliffe, 2013)

New York City schools are broadly failing to meet the needs of many of their thousands of students who are still learning English, and they must improve or they may face sanctions, state education officials announced Wednesday.

(Otterman, 2011)

Within the United States and around the world language education seems to be in perpetual crisis, with needs like national security readiness, greater global economic competiveness, and more rigorous academic standards cited as the primary reasons for concern. At the same time, schools in immigrant receiving countries are consistently being chastised for their inability to meet the linguistic and educational needs of newly arrived students. From Boston to Berlin, Sydney to Shanghai, people are asking how to do education, and more specifically language education, better—often in the face of increasing linguistic diversity in their classrooms and communities. New approaches to language pedagogy, it would seem, are in order.

Yet, it’s not just this crisis talk that seems to foreground the serious nature of language education. Guy Cook (2000) has carefully documented the dichotomy between work and play that has emerged in modern educational settings, noting
how it gives rise to a view of humor, language play, and other forms of non-serious language use, as at best distracting and at worst detrimental to language learning. Moreover, Cook noted the tendency within language education to focus on utilitarian, transactional language use at the expense of all else:

Language teaching has in recent years often taken its cue from the *work needs* of the student, and tried to replicate them within the classroom. In this climate, although play persists, it is often severely marginalized and tends to be used for some ephemeral pedagogic purpose—such as ‘getting the class in the right mood’.

(2000, p. 183, emphasis added)

Particularly striking here is the presumption among many language educators and materials developers that the “work needs of the student” would neither privilege nor include non-serious language use, as sociolinguistic examinations of workplace interaction have shown just the opposite. Conversational joking, humorous refusals, and playful teases, for example, feature just as heavily in the talk of children on the playground, as they do in the talk of adults in the workplace. Yet, it is not just the ubiquity of humor and language play that merits our attention as language teachers and educational researchers. A focus on these forms of language use is key to expanding our students’ communicative repertoires and indeed, as we argue throughout this book, their overall understanding of language. In our everyday lives we draw on non-serious language to

- build relationships and establish rapport with others;
- mitigate face threats, relieve tension, and release emotions;
- subvert, resist, or critique social norms and conventions (albeit often in a safe or deniable fashion); and
- highlight or redraw certain relations of power.

If anything, humor and language play are an integral part of the work we do to indicate who we are and what we are doing within and through social interaction. And, in linguistically diverse spaces, the presence of multiple languages seems to amplify the possibilities for humor, play, and creativity, as participants are presented with broader, although not necessarily equitably distributed, repertoires of communicative resources.

**Humor in the Classroom**

The topic of this book, humor in the classroom, is likely very familiar to you, whether you are a language teacher, educational researcher, or additional language learner. Yet, as this is an academic text, we must take a moment to define some terms.
**What Is Humor?**

In our work, we follow Kuipers (2008) in seeing humor as “a quintessentially social phenomenon” (p. 361). Although we reference throughout this text humor’s many psychological dimensions, as language teachers and educational researchers grounded in the field of applied linguistics, we are primarily concerned with how people construct particular actions, utterances, and occurrences as funny or serious. That is, we begin from the premise that humor is constructed within and through interaction. Put another way, we think of humor as not residing within particular bits of language, but rather as an emergent and co-constructed dimension of communication. This dimension is captured in anthropologist Dell Hymes’s famous SPEAKING mnemonic by the letter K, which stands for key. According to Hymes (1972), key is the “tone or manner in which something is said or written” (p. 62). For us, humor is (just one) key. An utterance or text that is keyed as humorous is typically intended to elicit a feeling of mirth in its hearers or readers (Chafe, 2007).

**What Is Language Play?**

Language play, as we use it in this text, refers to any manipulation of language that is done in a non-serious manner for either public or private enjoyment. The playful modifications that speakers make may take place at any level of language: phonology (sound), morphosyntax (grammar), semantics (meaning), or pragmatics (what is meant by what is said). Here, it is important to keep in mind that language play need not be restricted to one level or even one language. Very often, it cuts across linguistic boundaries in ways that are both clever and unexpected. For example, multiple forms of humor and language play figure into this gem invented by two teenage Anglophones learning Spanish as an additional language at school and illustrated in this scene:

**Setting:** High school Spanish class. Student 1 and Student 2 (both male) are best friends. Student 2 has just given several correct answers in response to the teacher’s questions.

**STUDENT 1:** Stop being such a perhaps
**STUDENT 2:** Huh?
**STUDENT 1:** (laughing) You know, a quizás [kis as].
**STUDENT 2:** Ja, ja, ja [dʒa, dʒa, dʒa] very funny.¹

In this interaction, appreciation of the wordplay lies in recognizing that the Spanish word for perhaps (quizás) bears some phonetic semblance to the English phrase “kiss ass” when rendered in hyper-Anglicized Spanish. Thus, a novel insult is born
in the interstices of two languages and made available for public use at school, despite its mildly taboo meaning. Indeed, the morphosyntactic violation involved in a line like “stop being such a perhaps” (the adverb perhaps cannot be used as a noun) cues Student 2 that something is awry and further adds to the keying of the utterance as playful in its intent. Likewise, Student 2’s response suggests that he understands and appreciates Student 1’s utterance as a joke. That is, rather than responding with “ha-ha”—a conventional English language response to something amusing—Student 2 builds on Student 1’s bilingual sound play by recycling another shared joke, namely, rendering the graphic representation of laughter in Spanish texts (ja ja ja—pronounced [ha ha ha] in Spanish) through the rules of spoken English. The fact that Student 1 and Student 2 are best friends and often engage in jocular abuse provides even more grounds for seeing the exchange as a whole as non-serious. From a sociolinguistic perspective, we can say that a play frame (Goffman, 1974) emerges over the course of this interaction in which Speaker 2 comes to recognize that a non-serious—or at least nonliteral—interpretation is not just plausible but also highly probable within this context. That is, Speaker 2 recognizes that Speaker 1 is just playing and indicates his acceptance of a play frame by offering a joke of his own.

Is Language Play Necessarily Humorous?

As we saw in the above example, language play often elicits a feeling of mirth for the speaker and any interlocutors, and in such instances we can refer to it as humor. A great deal of language play—and particularly that which we focus on for this book—involves humor (e.g., jokes, banter, funny stories), and because of this we often refer to language play and humor together or interchangeably. Furthermore, because these acts are often also creative, we frequently utilize the terms creative, as well as creative language use. However, it is important to remember that not all language play will be humorous (e.g., rhymes and songs may be playful, but not amusing), and, furthermore, that humor is not an all-or-nothing situation. Utterances may be intended or interpreted along a continuum, ranging from hilarious to semiserious to dead serious. Creativity, too, is far from absolute, and not all language play is highly creative or sophisticated (Carter, 2004; Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992). Manipulations to language may be as simple (and unimaginative) as making a literal response to a conventionally indirect question: “Can I eat your cake?” “I don’t know, can you?” Thus, we retain the distinction between humor and language play within our text to highlight this subtle, but important, point.

We will also, at times, distinguish between playing in and playing with language (Bell, 2012; Vandergriff & Fuchs, 2009, 2012). Playing in language refers to the use of language to engage in play—that is, telling amusing stories or creating fictional worlds. Playing with language involves the manipulation of language(s)—that is, making up new terms (such as we saw in the quizás example) or creating rhymes.
Once again, some of these instances of play will be humorous and some won’t. Nevertheless, we consider both to be vital to our understanding of the role of humor in classroom discourse and additional language learning.

**What Counts as a Language Classroom?**

For us, language classrooms include both those that are organized explicitly around instruction in an additional language and those that are composed of linguistically diverse students. English classes for refugees in the United States or Japanese classes for Portuguese speakers in Brazil would be examples of the former, while biology or history courses that both domestic students and new immigrants enroll in would be instances of the latter. Likewise, classrooms in which multiple varieties of a single national language are in play will also figure into our discussion. Although you might be thinking that in today’s global and linguistically heterogeneous world all classrooms are, to a certain extent, language classrooms (and we wouldn’t disagree with you!), we are particularly concerned with educational spaces in which participants’ communicative repertoires differ in significant and socially meaningful ways, that is, classrooms where language matters. At various points we may describe these as second language (L2) classrooms, multilingual classrooms, linguistically diverse classrooms, or foreign language classrooms. They may be comprised of children, teenagers, or adults.

**Getting Serious About Humor and Language Play**

This book offers language teachers and educational researchers a multifaceted lens through which to understand, investigate, and perhaps even capitalize on humor in classrooms. Our aim is to look seriously at non-serious language. Responding to calls from within the field of education to account for the totality of classroom language—not just that which is “on task” or predictable—we consider the ways in which engagement with humor and language play in classrooms can construct new possibilities for identity, critique prevailing norms, and reconfigure particular relations of power. Our approach differs from studies that treat humor and language play as tangential to the “real” business of school and/or in need of remediation. Moreover, it questions the use of high-stakes classroom observation protocols that reduce “good teaching” to a set of predetermined interactional moves. Instead, we offer a springboard for asking how talk, as a whole, works in classrooms that are increasingly linguistically diverse yet simultaneously subject to pressures to regulate teaching and standardize language use. Given the push within the United States and around the world toward scripted curricula, high-stakes testing, and English-only (or single-language) instruction, we also see this book as a way to present a case for questioning some of the tenets of current educational
policy that favor uniformity over diversity and conventionality over creativity. Although we certainly do not believe that educators should do away with all serious talk, we present an argument for valuing and perhaps even nurturing humor in linguistically diverse classrooms. Thus, some of the questions we ask in this book are the following:

- To what extent is humor a “normal” part of classroom interaction?
- How do humor and language play work in classrooms?
- Why are such forms of talk frequently presented as needing to be controlled?
- What might the consequences of embracing or limiting humor in the classroom be?

At the same time, we also build on recent work within the field of second language acquisition and language pedagogy that examines how engagement in and with non-serious language might facilitate additional language development. Specifically, we describe how a focus on humor and language play not only extends particular theoretical models of L2 learning, but also illuminates aspects of language development that are overlooked in studies that take “serious language” as their point of departure. That is, we follow Cook’s (2000) lead in conceiving of playful language use as a key indicator of communicative competence. Although many questions remain about the role of humor and language play in L2 development, we see enough evidence to encourage the purposeful incorporation of non-serious language into pedagogy. At a minimum, we present a challenge to the view that classroom language must be carefully controlled and regulated to facilitate language learning. Beyond that, however, the ideas we present will allow teachers to find ways of systematically incorporating humor and language play into their classrooms to facilitate language awareness and to help L2 users develop ways of engaging with humor and playful talk. Moreover, given the linguistic diversity that now characterizes so many classrooms in today’s globalizing world, we believe that all teachers would benefit from serious consideration of how non-serious talk might facilitate language development. Thus, we aim to answer questions that teachers and researchers might have about humor and language play as they figure into classroom life and language pedagogy more broadly. The following are examples:

- What can humor and language play tell us about language and communication?
- How might these forms of language use facilitate or hinder additional language learning?
- Under what conditions should teachers urge, employ, or discourage humor in their classrooms?
- What research methods can be used to examine the role of humor and language play in additional language learning?
How This Book Is Organized

In this book, we move from a discussion of theoretical concerns related to language, humor, and classroom discourse, to practical guidance regarding teaching and research. Chapters 1 and 2 lay the conceptual groundwork for our argument. In Chapter 1, we present our views of language, communication, the learner, and the language classroom. To this end, we discuss scholarship that emphasizes the importance of seeing language and communication as variable, dynamic, and situated. Moreover, we consider arguments that urge us to see the language learner’s place in the classroom as one of greater agency. Noting how research on both language education and language in education has taken something of a “playful turn” in recent years, we contend that this new attention to humor, language play, and innovative language use has an important role to play in helping us chart a new course for language pedagogy in today’s rapidly globalizing and technologically mediated world.

In Chapter 2, we review current scholarship on humor. Here, we examine the formal mechanisms that underlie ludic language use, with an eye toward identifying what makes something funny. In addition, we describe different forms of humor and discuss the challenges of trying to develop taxonomic accounts for use in research and pedagogy. Moreover, we discuss the functions of humor in social interaction, as well as the importance of understanding such instances of language use as inherently ambiguous and able to achieve multiple ends simultaneously. Chapter 2 also includes attention to the various contextual factors that condition the use and interpretation of humor in particular settings. Our account ends with careful consideration of issues particular to the use of humor by additional language learners or emergent bilinguals.

Chapter 3 focuses on humor in classroom discourse. In this chapter, we describe some common and frequently researched features of classroom interaction. We then examine the affordances and limitations of particular approaches to classroom discourse research. Here, we observe that no matter what the approach, humor and language play have been largely undertheorized and/or ignored within scholarly accounts of classroom life. Thus, based on this review, we put forth some historical and theoretical reasons as to why this might be the case. We argue that this neglect of non-serious language use has been detrimental to our understanding of the way classrooms work and has serious consequences with respect to how we evaluate teachers and teaching. We close by noting some changes within the field of education, both in terms of our approaches to understanding classroom language use and in our theories of additional language development, that presage more attention to humor and language play.

The work discussed in Chapter 4 represents a counterpoint to the general disregard for examining the workings of humor and language play in studies of classrooms and, in our case, language classrooms. Here, we offer a selective review of the small, but growing, body of research that takes non-serious language seriously.
To this end, we provide detailed examples of how student-initiated humor, which is often considered off task by teachers and policy makers, serves necessary classroom functions. Specifically, we illustrate how students and at times even teachers use humor to play it safe in the face of various interpersonal and cognitive demands. Although we do not go as far as to claim that humor is an obligatory part of classroom talk, we do argue that it cannot and should not be perceived as tangential to the serious business of schooling.

In Chapter 5, we turn from the social and psychological functions of classroom humor to consideration of what the role of humor might be with respect to L2 development in classroom contexts. We examine the evidence for a link between humor or play and learning in general and specifically with respect to additional language learning. We then outline some basic tenets of a sociocognitive view of L2 development, building on the theoretical work put forth in Chapter 1. Here, we lay the groundwork for our discussion of professional practice in classroom contexts, as we propose a series of general tenets for pedagogy that flow from our examination of humor, classroom interaction, and additional language development.

Chapter 6 takes up the issue of humor in teachers’ professional practice. In particular, we reflect on the role that humor may play in teacher’s lives and address concerns that instructors often raise about incorporating humor deliberately into their classrooms. As you might expect, although we acknowledge that there can be serious challenges to using humor, we also argue that the needs and desires of students make it imperative that we attempt to overcome those obstacles.

In Chapters 7 and 8 we move squarely into the arena of practice, by considering ways of implementing a focus on humor and language play in L2 classrooms. Both chapters use the notion of “backward design” as a framework for planning lessons involving non-serious language. Chapter 7 encourages teachers to find ways to alter the activities they already do to incorporate play. That is, it discusses ways of intentionally using humor as a pedagogical tool. In contrast, Chapter 8 describes how teachers might make humor itself a focal point of their instruction. It identifies aspects of humor that are “teachable” in classroom contexts and presents a framework for designing sound lessons and curricular units.

Finally, in Chapter 9 we offer some guidance for designing research projects that examine humor and language play. In addition to noting some of the steps essential to the design of a strong research study, we also identify some special challenges involved in researching L2 humor and language play. Furthermore, we consider what gaps still exist in our knowledge and suggest fruitful avenues for future inquiry.

Note

1 The transcription conventions used in this text can be found in the Appendix. Any transcriptions not following these conventions originally have been adapted, with any additional notations provided in the text.
References


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Learning an additional language is a complex endeavor and many policy guidelines exist to help teachers and learners understand the goals of language education. Consider the following excerpts taken from the websites of key professional associations dedicated to language education within the United States. How do these excerpts portray language and communication? What aspects of language and communication do they emphasize? What do they omit? What space do these statements provide for humorous or playful engagement with the language of instruction?

The National Capital Language Resource Center (NCLRC), a language resource center funded by the U.S. Department of Education, describes the general goal of second language (L2) learning as the development of communicative competence. The document describes communicative competence by breaking it down into the components of linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence and then appends that discussion with the following suggestions:

In the early stages of language learning, instructors and students may want to keep in mind the goal of communicative efficiency: That learners should be able to make themselves understood, using their current proficiency to the fullest. They should try to avoid confusion in the message (due to faulty pronunciation, grammar, or vocabulary); to avoid offending communication partners (due to socially inappropriate style); and to use strategies for recognizing and managing communication breakdowns.

(NCLRC, n.d.)
As part of a statement issued in 2011 on the goals and challenges of learning a foreign language, the Modern Language Association (MLA) provides this statement of why students should learn new languages:

Studying a nonnative language gives students the tools to appreciate other cultures. It enables students to recognize how languages work and to gain a more thoughtful understanding of their native language: by pursuing a second language, students learn how to use their first language with greater precision and purpose. In addition, knowledge of a second language serves students well in the interconnected world: a second language opens the door to job opportunities in the global economy and makes more media accessible, enriching public discussion of current issues. Finally, language knowledge is critical to humanistic inquiry into the cultures and histories of the world. (MLA, 2011)

The World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages, put forth by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) are designed around five goal areas: Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities. These goal areas were selected “to prepare learners to apply the skills and understandings measured by the Standards, to bring a global competence to their future careers and experiences.” Under “Communities,” the general goal for learning languages is for learners to “communicate and interact with cultural competence in order to participate in multilingual communities at home and around the world.” One standard associated with this goal is lifelong learning, where “learners set goals and reflect on their progress in using languages for enjoyment, enrichment, and advancement” (ACTFL, 2015).

A sample progress indicator for this goal is provided:

Students who study a language can use their skills to further enrich their personal lives by accessing various entertainment and information sources available to speakers of the language. Some students may have the opportunity to travel to communities and countries where the language is used extensively and, through this experience, further develop their language skills and understanding of the culture.

(ACTFL, n.d.)

The University of California (UC) Consortium for Language Learning and Teaching offers guidelines for heritage language instruction. In describing the organization’s mission, the authors note that

knowledge of heritage languages is a valuable resource for individuals, families, communities, and the nation. While the need for proficiency in
languages other than English is greater than ever for social purposes, business, diplomacy and national security, education in foreign languages has produced few graduates with proficiency adequate for professional-level use. Because of their basis of knowledge, many heritage speakers, with the proper instruction, can reach professional-level proficiency more quickly than foreign language students. However, in order to take full advantage of this resource and allow students to develop their abilities fully, we as an educational institution need to resolve a number of administrative and pedagogical concerns.

(UC Consortium for Language Learning and Teaching, 2002, p. 2)

These statements are all quite typical of policy documents that establish broad goals for language teaching and learning. A structural view of language tends to predominate, suggesting that the L2 consists of a generally agreed-on, internally coherent, and fairly stable set of features to be acquired (e.g., the linguistic competence component of the NCLRC statement). One aim is the appropriate use of these features, which, as the NCLRC statement indicates, will help speakers avoid miscommunication. Likewise, for heritage and nonheritage learners alike, policy documents put a strong emphasis on the acquisition of “professional-level proficiency.” This leads directly to the conception of language as neutral. The MLA’s tool metaphor, for instance, suggests that, much like a screwdriver that can be wielded with similar results by anyone, well-formed utterances will be received the same way no matter whether they are a migrant worker with a foreign accent, a woman, or a person of color (see Lippi-Green, 2012, for a critique of this view). Finally, the purpose for learning an additional language is overwhelmingly seen as practical and utilitarian. We learn languages to better our employment opportunities, to travel, to understand other cultures, and to increase our facility in our native language.

Language learning for pleasure and personal growth is sometimes mentioned in the policy statements of professional organizations, but primarily as a peripheral benefit. In ACTFL’s scheme, such reasons fall under Communities—the last of the five goals. Here, although enjoyment and personal enrichment are mentioned, the sample progress indicator suggests a fairly passive role for learners. L2 learners are consumers, not creators of media and entertainment in their new language. The MLA’s reference to “humanistic inquiry” also hints at another place where creative language sometimes receives a nod from policy makers—the interpretation of literature. Being able to understand and interpret figurative language, for example, is sometimes noted as a goal. Yet, once again, the aim tends to be receptive, rather than productive. Finally, when play with or in an L2 is explicitly mentioned in policy documents, it is most often viewed in the service of learning and generally associated with the teaching of children. In other words, we find ourselves once again with a serious, utilitarian conception of language in the L2 classroom.
Now, take a look at these quotations from classroom L2 learners about their linguistic proficiency. What do they value about their competence in multiple languages? To what extent do their descriptions of their bi-/multilingual experiences mesh with those in the policy documents presented earlier?

Being able to say things in more languages changes your relationship to each specific one . . . If I didn’t speak English and I didn’t speak French and I didn’t speak German, it would never occur to me that I could have words that are linked to specific emotions that are untranslatable into other languages.

(Kramsch, 2009, p. 148)

There is a new language—well, for me at least. I call it Engleutsch [a blend of English and Deutsch or ‘German’]. Yes, you heard me correctly, Engleutsch. I don’t know if it was a real language before, but ever since I started speaking German, it’s become my pride and joy.

(Belz, 2002, p. 23)

I personally remember feeling quite a fool when, at the end of a period of instructed learning of Spanish at the university in Brussels, I went to Spain only to discover that I was unable to produce anything but bland talk with my interlocutors. I could say something about the weather (que calor ‘it’s hot’), I could order tapas, and ask for directions, but I was unable to impress Spanish girls with my sophistication and wit, which mattered a lot to me at the time. I felt like a terrible bore, acutely aware of my lack of sociocultural and sociopragmatic competence. I tried in vain to recall anything from my course books that could constitute the basis of an interesting conversation.

(Dewaele, 2005, pp. 375–376)

Although these comments represent only a small window into how classroom-language learners conceive of their relationship to the language of instruction, as educators we have heard countless students describe the emotional and aesthetic pleasure they get from manipulating their L2s. Moreover, we have counseled many students through the frustrations they experience as they grapple with both the affordances and limitations of “being themselves” in a new language. For as Liddicoat and Scarino (2013) note, “language learning provides a challenge for identity in two key ways. It raises the first question, ‘Who am I when I speak this language?’ and second ‘How am I me when I speak this language?’” (p. 23).

These remarks remind us that learners are quite aware of the instructional aims emphasized in many official goal statements, but in ways that go beyond the serious, utilitarian views of language favored in such documents. In addition to the pride learners feel at accurately and successfully communicating information to their interlocutors, they rejoice in the sounds and structure of their new language(s) and
take pleasure in manipulating them to playful ends. Even novice L2 users—like the high school learners of Spanish we met in the preface—are attentive to the aesthetic and emotional dimensions of their new languages and cognizant of the expressive possibilities that bi-/multilingualism offers. Although we would not go as far as to suggest that the creative possibilities unleashed through additional language learning outweigh learners’ utilitarian or professional concerns, we nonetheless believe that they do matter. And, much to our delight, a more central role for playful, aesthetic, creative, and humorous language use has begun to find its way into policy statements.

A number of publications by the Council of Europe, the entity responsible for the increasingly influential Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR; Council of Europe, 2001), have asserted or at least alluded to the importance of humor and language play. For instance, in one document advocating for plurilingual education as a basic linguistic right, the authors identify “familiarity with and preparation for creative, ludic and aesthetic uses of language” as a specific concern of language education (Coste, Cavalli, Crisen, & Ven, 2009, p. 9). In addition, the CEFR—unlike U.S. policy documents—makes explicit reference to “existential competence” a construct that encompasses “aims of a non-utilitarian character” within its account of language learning (Aase, 2006, p. 9). While the notion of existential competence is closely aligned with critical thinking, moral development, and identity, this construct also recognizes and provides space for attention to ludic and aesthetic language use within the language classroom (Council of Europe, 2001, pp. 55–56).

Although it might be tempting to dismiss this recent embrace of ludic or creative language as mere coincidence or fad, for us the “playful turn” in language education seems intimately connected to broader changes not only within the fields of applied linguistics and language pedagogy, but in the world itself. In the introduction to a special issue of The Modern Language Journal, a publication of the MLA, Kramsch noted that

there has never been a time when language teaching and learning has been more interactive and more imaginative than today. Communicative pedagogies have made the classroom more participatory, electronic chatrooms have loosened the tongues and the writing of even the shyest students, video and the Internet have made authentic materials available as never before, telecollaboration and social networks have increased students’ access to real native speakers in real cultural environments—and yet there has never been a greater tension between what is taught in the classroom and what the students will need in the real world once they have left the classroom. In the last decades, that world has changed to such an extent that language teachers are no longer sure of what they are supposed to teach nor what real world situations they are supposed to prepare their students for.

(2014, p. 296)
Like Kramsch, we too recognize that language education is facing both unprecedented opportunity and unparalleled uncertainty. Ironically, the CEFR’s focus on “existential competence” comes at a time of great “existential crisis” for language educators and researchers. Kramsch goes on to observe that globalization requires us to focus less on predetermined, stable, predictable facts of a linguistic, functional, or cultural nature, and more on such fluid discourse processes as comparison, contrast, analysis, interpretation, inferencing, and de- and recontextualization. It prompts us to rethink the role of the teacher from a classroom manager and information provider to a fellow analyst and interpreter (albeit a more experienced one), and someone who can help students place the facts into their appropriate historical and subjective context. (2014, p. 308)

At first glance, the seriousness of Kramsch’s concerns might seem wholly disconnected from our interest in advocating for more attention to humor and language play in language education. In fact, if you are scratching your head right now, wondering how we are going to make this leap, we wouldn’t be surprised! But, bear with us for a moment. In this book, we argue that because humor and language play are predicated on ambiguity and polysemy (an academic word for “multiple meanings”) they embody the very view of language, communication, and culture that Kramsch is describing. And, when humor and language play are brought into the classroom, they can help learners and teachers understand what language is and how it works in a postmodern, globalized world. To this end, Fleming (2010), writing for the Council of Europe, asserted that a view of language that embraces ambiguity, uncertainty, texture and nuances of meaning as being central to language use and not just confined to creative and aesthetic uses of language in literature and poetry can sensitize the language user to the way language can deceive.

(p. 6)

In fact, it is surprising to us that policy makers within the United States have been slow to embrace non-serious language, as research in bilingual communities has long recognized the vital and very often quite serious role playful language occupies in interaction. As Zentella (2003), among others, has noted, playing with language serves important psychological and social functions, particularly when the languages in play exist in a tense, hierarchical relationship to one another, like Spanish and English within the United States:

Latin@s have a good deal of fun at the expense of gringos, and language play is at the heart of their defense against their marginalization, exploitation, and stigmatization.

(Zentella, 2003, p. 62)
In the sections to follow, we examine developments within applied linguistics that underpin what we are calling the “playful turn” in language education and that form the basis of our understanding of language and communication in this book. To this end, we ask,

- What is language?
- What is communication?
- Who is the language learner?
- What does this mean for language education?

**What Is Language?**

As the excerpts with which we began this chapter suggest, language in classrooms has traditionally and predominately been seen as a largely stable and neutral system of (usually serious) communication. In recent years, however, applied linguists have become progressively more critical of the theories of language shaping the field of language education. Language is now being recognized as a sociocognitive system that exists in a dynamic state, continually being constructed and changed by its users. As Hopper (1998) described it, “grammar is . . . simply the name for certain categories of observed repetitions in discourse. There is no natural fixed structure to language” (p. 156). This perspective not only emphasizes linguistic variability and change but also the inherent tension between stability and instability in the system. Such views are detailed particularly well in the work of applied linguists using complexity or dynamic systems theory (e.g., Jessner, 2012; Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008; van Geert, 2008; Verspoor, de Bot, & Lowie, 2011) and ecological perspectives on language and language learning (e.g., Kramsch, 2002, 2008; Leather & van Dam, 2002; van Lier, 2004).

**Language as a Complex, Dynamic System**

Diane Larsen-Freeman (1997) introduced applied linguists to Complexity/Dynamic Systems theory, in which the idea of language as a complex, dynamic system, rather than one that is unitary, stable, or closed, is emphasized. Since that time, she has continued to articulate this position and examine its implications for L2 teaching and learning (e.g., Larsen-Freeman, 2010, 2012; Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008). From this perspective, what we refer to monolithically as language actually emerges as users draw on their linguistic resources improvisationally in response to conversational goals, contextual and discoursal constraints and affordances, and the moment-to-moment reactions of their interlocutors. The appearance of linguistic regularity and stability arises as individuals interacting in specific contexts draw on particular linguistic resources to accomplish specific social actions.

The perception of language as a preexisting cognitive entity that is merely used socially, rather than an open system that is constructed in a flexible, bottom-up manner in social interaction that is in use arises from the fact that some forms
(lexical items, syntactic patterns) are more useful than others and appear with greater frequency and across a wider variety of situations. These patterns, in turn, become widely available for use and reinforce the likelihood that they will be used again in the future by others. As Larsen-Freeman and Cameron (2008) described the process,

language emerges ‘upwards’ in the sense that language-using patterns arise from individuals using the language interactively, adapting to one another’s resources. However, there is reciprocal causality, in that the language-using patterns themselves ‘downwardly’ entrain emergent patterns.

(p. 80)

Nancy thinks of this process often when she takes her poodles for a romp in some nearby woods. The land is privately owned, and the trail is maintained only minimally and not by any official entity with parameters to follow. Over the years, she has seen parts of the trail shift in response to environmental changes. For instance, when a large branch fell over the trail, humans, large dogs, and deer all began to take the easier way around it, rather than make the effort to lift the obstructing branch or to scamper under it. Over time, a new swerve in the trail developed. For those who did not know or remember the trail without this branch, it might seem like the turn was always there. Although the trail appears to be stable, new routes have emerged and continue to change as successive individual walkers interact with their environment and adapt their behavior accordingly. Unless this forested area is closed for some reason, the trail will continue to change indefinitely.

As Nancy’s example illustrates, complexity theory emphasizes that there is no end point to the evolution of language or, for that matter, to individual linguistic development. Dynamism is inherent to the system and the direction of change is unpredictable, in part because the things that will influence it are also unpredictable. These assertions require us to take an integrated view of language and context, because the two are not conceived of as separate parts. Rather, they exist in a dialectical relationship, with one constituting the other. Each language-using event offers speakers an opportunity to adhere to normative ways of doing things or to creatively depart from them by various degrees. There is both change and stability in the system, with constant tension between creative and conventional uses of language.

An Ecological View of Language

The ecological view of language, of which Claire Kramsch has been a strong advocate (e.g., Kramsch, 2002, 2008, 2014), further foregrounds the interconnectedness of language’s cognitive, interactional, social and historical dimensions, eschewing the tendency within linguistics and language education to see language in discrete,
static, or decontextualized ways. Consonant with this integrated, holistic stance is a particular emphasis on Bakhtin’s notion of language as dialogic. Briefly, Bakhtin (1981) argued that

within the arena of almost every utterance [either spoken or written] an intense interaction and struggle between one’s own and another’s word is being waged, a process in which they oppose or dialogically interanimate each other.

(p. 354)

That is, Bakhtin conceived of utterances as dialogic or fundamentally in conversation with other utterances. He wrote,

The living utterance, having taken meaning and shape at a particular historical moment in a socially specific environment, cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads, woven by socio-ideological consciousness around the given object of an utterance, it cannot fail to become an active participant in social dialogue.

(1981, p. 276)

Ecological approaches to language build on this perspective, further invoking the idea of language as embedded in multiple, but not necessarily equally accessible, layers of synchronically and diachronically organized context. Blommaert (2010), for example, underscored this point in saying that whereas language-in-use or discourse “occurs in a real-time, synchronic event” it is also “simultaneously encapsulated in several layers of historicity, some of which are within the grasp of the participants while others remain invisible but are nevertheless present” (p. 130). He refers to this as layered simultaneity. For Blommaert and other language ecologists, then, language cannot be divorced from its social and temporal locations. Indeed, research on interaction in multilingual settings (e.g., Creese & Blackledge, 2011; Kramsch, 2008; Kramsch & Whiteside, 2008; Rampton, 1995, 2006; Rymes, 2014) has consistently illustrated that

social actors in multilingual settings, even if they are non-native speakers of the languages they use, seem to activate more than a communicative competence that would enable them to communicate accurately, effectively and appropriately with one another. They seem to display a particularly acute ability to play with various linguistic codes and with the various spatial and temporal resonances of these codes.

(Kramsch, 2008, p. 400)

Such work challenges the tendency in language education to view the relationship between the first language (L1) and the L2 as “simply a matter of code
replacement, where the only difference is in words and structures” (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013, p. 14). As Cameron (1992) put it,

language is radically contextual. It is not just a matter of context affecting the system, the system has no existence outside a context. Thus language cannot be abstracted from time and space, or from the extralinguistic dimensions of the situation in which it is embedded . . . this also implies, of course, that meaning is radically indeterminate and variable.

(p. 192)

An ecological approach to language encourages teachers and learners to move beyond a view of language as structural system, to one that sees language as variable, dynamic, dialogic, and, above all, situated.

**A Communicative Repertoire Approach**

As you might imagine, these views of language radically change the object of instruction and can be very unsettling for language teachers. First and foremost, they function to dispel the persistent fiction of a stable, universally accepted standard form of each language—an idea that has long been the cornerstone of classroom language instruction. As Blommaert (1998) reminded us,

every language name (‘French’, ‘German’, ‘English’) hides and obscures a multitude of varieties within these languages…. We never use ‘a language’, we always use a variety of a language: a genre, a speech style, a type of interaction.

(“2. Ethnographic Approaches”, para. 10)

For us, this means rather than teaching “a language,” we must begin to recognize language as a flexible and fluid set of resources and instead focus on the development of individual communicative repertoires. Briefly, Rymes (2010) defined communicative repertoire as the aggregate of ways that individuals “use languages and other means of communication (gestures, dress, posture, and other media) to function effectively in the multiple communities in which they participate” (p. 528). An individual’s communicative repertoire is not simply an array of multiple, fully formed (national) languages, but rather an ever-changing assembly of various genres, speech styles, pragmatic routines, and other reoccurring chunks of language, complemented by an array of resources (e.g., gestures, dress, posture, etc.) for making meaning. This repertoire emerges organically, in bottom-up fashion, as a continually shifting product of an individual’s life experiences, with each new addition to the repertoire existing in a dialogic relationship with its other components. A repertoire approach to language and language pedagogy fits well with the conception of language described thus far. As Rymes (2010) argued,
such a view foregrounds the goals of communication, rather than the grammatical accuracy of the message; it avoids reference to languages as stable monoliths, instead highlighting variability within and across contexts; and it recognizes that there is no endpoint to language development.

Second, a move from language to communicative repertoire pushes us to view language play as illustrative of normal everyday language use. That is, we start to see more clearly the many ways in which seemingly mundane repertoire elements can come together and produce novel—and very often playful—meanings, as in this as in this popular Internet meme: “What if soy milk is just regular milk introducing itself in Spanish?” Here, the play on the word soy as referencing a legume in English and the first-person singular form of the verb to be in Spanish (i.e., “I am”) does not require substantial knowledge of Spanish to be funny.

While there are also many examples of language play that are more derogatory than delightful—particularly when uttered by people and within contexts where there is a history of linguistic denigration (see Chapter 4)—it is important to recognize that language play is a regular part of everyday conversation. To this end, current discussions of globalization and linguistic diversity are increasingly recognizing playful language as central to the human experience and to the linguistic practices of multilingual societies and individuals. Otsuji and Pennycook’s (2010) metrolingualism, for example, “describes the ways in which people of different and mixed backgrounds use, play with and negotiate identities through language.” Yet, they are careful to note that “the focus here is not on elite game playing but the ludic possibilities in the everyday” (Otsuji & Pennycook, 2010, p. 244). Also relevant here is the substantial body of literature that uses the Bakhtinian concept of heteroglossia (see Chapter 4) to examine various forms of language play in multilingual educational settings, such as revoicing, parody, stylization, irony, and crossing (e.g., Blackledge & Creese, 2014; Blackledge, Creese, & Takhi 2014; Blommaert & Rampton, 2011). Whereas such work provides a precedent for seeing bi/multilingual humor and language play as both important and routine aspects of classroom discourse, it also serves to remind us how normal such talk is in its hybridity, ambiguity, and polysemy. Thus, we believe that serious consideration of non-serious language may be just what the language teaching profession needs if it is to grapple successfully with the changes brought about by globalization and technology.

What Is Communication?

It’s not just our view of language, however, that could use some rethinking in the (post)modern world; communication, too, is frequently reduced to a transmission model in language classrooms, whereby information moves from speaker to listener and back again with little regard for the interpretive and interpersonal work that goes on in interaction (Cook, 2000). But, as anyone who has played a game of Telephone or Whisper Down the Lane knows, information has a way of changing
as it’s passed from one person to the next. Whereas language teachers sometimes reference the more interpersonal aspects of communication in lessons on pronoun or register use (think *tu* vs. *vous* in French or admonitions to avoid phrasal verbs in academic writing), they often find themselves tongue-tied when trying to explain why competent users of the language of instruction frequently (and purposefully!) flout the very “rules” they have just taken great pains to describe.

Although work in ethnomethodology and interactional sociolinguistics has been central in offering a more collaborative and dynamic view of communication (e.g., Erickson & Schultz, 1982; Goodwin, 1981; Jacoby & Ochs, 1995; Kendon, 1990; Linell, 1998), such perspectives have not always made their way into language classrooms. Linell (1998), for instance, proposed that words and utterances should be regarded as having meaning potential. While the situation at hand helps to prime the meanings that are most likely to be relevant, he and others emphasize that participants work together to *jointly construct or negotiate* what aspects of the interaction are relevant and how they should be understood. Here, the work of John Gumperz (1982) on contextualization cues remains a valuable way of understanding how these situated interpretations take place. Gumperz defined contextualization cues as “any feature of linguistic form that contributes to the signaling of contextual presuppositions” (1982, p. 131). Cues may include linguistic elements such as intonation and lexical choice, as well as paralinguistic features such as gesture, gaze, timing, etc. While some cues may have conventional interpretations (e.g., smiling is strongly associated with signaling an attempt at humor), each cue’s meaning must be negotiated between interlocutors each time it is used. The moment-by-moment presentation of and reaction to cues help speakers and hearers to coordinate their action, adjusting their talk as meanings emerge in real time.

In addition, in order for interactants to engage in these sense-making activities they must have access to some shared frameworks for interpreting communication. In this way, it is important to understand that meaning is not only jointly constructed and emergent but also mediated. We must be careful, however, in how we understand this mediation process, particularly if we are to embrace a view of language that foregrounds dialogism, situatedness, and layered simultaneity. Language classrooms, for example, often conflate shared ways of making meaning with the idea of national or ethnic culture. From this perspective, “cultures then are the lens through which people mutually create and interpret meanings and the frame that allows the communication of meanings that go beyond the literal denotations of the words being used” (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013, p. 20).

While we agree that the idea of shared interpretive practices is central to the notion of communication as mediated, we maintain that these shared interpretive practices are much more fluid, dynamic, and incoherent than terms such as *culture* or *lens* or *interpretive framework* might suggest. Indeed, Gumperz (1982) himself emphasized that contextualization cues are learned and show some patterning across social groups, but as in the theories of language use we have been discussing,
the variability and dynamism of cues must also be acknowledged, particularly as we can no longer see languages as located within clearly defined cultural and/or national spaces. Perhaps, then, it is more useful to think of people as relying on loosely organized and constantly changing “interpretive repertoires” as they negotiate meaning. Much like the idea of language as communicative repertoire, the notion of interpretive repertoire moves us away from static, unitary, and simplistic views of meaning making. As Liddicoat and Scarino (2013) put it, “this means that meanings are not simply shared, coherent constructions about experience but rather can be fragmented, contradictory, and contested within the practices of a social group because they are constituted moments of interaction” (p. 21).

Moreover, as noted in the previous section, we must always remember that meaning is as much a synchronic concept as a diachronic one. That is, meaning making occurs in real time, but it is always subject to the meaning-making moments that have come before it. This is why a seemingly straightforward compliment such as “you look nice” can be understood as an insult even in the absence of any concurrent contextualization cues to mark the phrase as sarcastic. An interactional history of sarcasm can be enough to invoke such an interpretation!

Much as language play can be useful in raising learners (and teachers!) awareness of what language is, so, too, can non-serious language use help to foreground more nuanced views of communication. Once communication is seen as an act of interpretation, humor and language play become a kind of language use that should be central to language teaching, not ancillary. Playful language not only creates and relies on unpredictability; it also often communicates multiple meanings simultaneously and in indirect and ambiguous ways. It is, put simply, ideally suited to advancing the view of communication that Fleming and other architects of the CEFR have begun to articulate.

Who Is the Language Learner?

At this point in our discussion, we would be remiss if we did not make reference to the ways in which research on learner identity and agency within second language acquisition (SLA) complements the views of language and communication we have just described. For example, Bonny Norton’s (1995, 2000) work urged researchers to move away from the idea of the learner as an empty vessel waiting to be filled with target language forms and rules and instead focused the field’s attention on how learners’ multiple identities, positions, histories, and desires might mediate both their access to and use of particular communicative and interpretive resources. Subsequent research has carefully documented how particular institutional environments, interfamily relationships, and stereotypes about race, gender, or ethnicity shape peoples’ language learning trajectories. Moreover, such work has questioned how L2 learners’ investments in and commitments to being a certain kinds of people influences both how they chose to use or not use the
language of instruction (e.g., see Norton & Toohey, 2011, for review). That is, researchers have put their focus squarely on the notion of agency and how L2 learners come to be seen (or not seen) as legitimate users of a new language and central participants in their communities of practice. Gao (2014) described this as “a shift in the model L2 learner/user of English from faithful imitator to that of legitimate speaker” (p. 59). She goes on, however, to note that in recent years this concern with agency has since come to include a view of the learner as a “playful creator” and “dialogical communicator” (Gao, 2014, p. 59).

For Gao (2014), the playful creator is “typically young” and constantly “reinvents and reconstructs language or discourse by mixing different linguistic codes. Furthermore, she argues that this archetypal figure is not necessarily concerned with serious political aims, but rather rejoices in ludic and at times even self-deprecating or “cynical” acts of communication (Gao, 2014, p. 65). Unlike the MLA’s learner described in the first section of this chapter, who merely consumes media in the language of instruction, playful creators revel in the communicative affordances that globalization and new technologies have wrought. In contrast, Gao’s dialogical communicator respects “the integrity and entirety of each and every culture” (2014, p. 68). Rather than artfully arranging repertoire elements solely for the amusement of themselves and others, the dialogical communicator is more self-aware and attuned to the relationships between languages and cultures. Whereas we would argue that engagement in play requires just the kind of critical reflexivity Gao attributes to the dialogical communicator, nevertheless, we find her identification of these profiles useful, because they provide language teachers and researchers with models of the L2 learner/user as an active meaning maker.

At the same time, such models also remind us that not only must we expect that students come into our classrooms with different communicative resources, we must also recognize that students, as meaning makers, also take up and engage with the resources developed in class in different ways. And because people’s communicative repertoires are dynamic and flexible, both teachers and students must acknowledge that multilingualism does not imply having equal access to all linguistic resources in each language in one’s repertoire. As Kramsch (2009) described it, a multilingual subject is not necessarily the person who speaks many languages with equal mastery or with native or near-native proficiency, but is more often than not someone who resonates to each language relative to the other, and who has a more acute awareness than usual of the social, cultural, and emotional contexts in which his/her various languages have grown and of the life experiences they evoke.

(p. 148)
languages in an individual’s repertoire may be used for accomplishing practical goals, others may instead—or in addition—be a source of pleasure, a puzzle, or a way of understanding oneself and others.

Indeed, not only do learners arrive in the classroom with different possibilities for language use, but they also have different reasons for learning language. The development of practical, transactional use that is so often the focus of the L2 classroom may in fact be secondary for the learner, who, despite the dominant discourse of “linguistic instrumentalism” may recognize that additional language learning far from guarantees increased career opportunities (Kubota, 2011b). Instead, an additional language may be studied out of a sense of desire (Motha & Lin, 2014), as a way of gaining a sense of cultural belonging (Higgins & Stoker, 2011), or simply for leisure and social interaction (Kubota, 2011a). Furthermore, the goal of speaking “like a native speaker” is not only nonsensical, given the view of learner agency cited above, but may also be giving way to a greater acceptance among learners for different language varieties (e.g., Blommaert, 2010). In a world where superdiversity and transnational movement are increasing our contact with speakers of different languages and language varieties, many learners now hope to prepare themselves to communicate with a range of speakers, rather than imagining future language-using experiences that involve only idealized native speakers using idealized L2 forms. We believe that humor and language play have much to offer in both foregrounding not only the views of language and communication we have set out in this chapter but also the L2 learner/user.

What Does This Mean for Language Education?

Ten years after the publication of Firth and Wagner’s (1997) seminal piece on the social–cognitive divide among SLA researchers, The Modern Language Journal published a focus issue to revisit that debate. In that issue, Freeman (2007) considered the disconnect that is often felt between SLA researchers and language teachers. He noted that many of the issues raised by Firth and Wagner—the idea of L2 learning as a process of making meaning; the view of language learners as agents, rather than deficient communicators; an understanding of classroom interaction as contingent and teaching/learning as an intersubjective activity—have deep roots within the discourses of methodology and teacher education. He attributes the oft-perceived gap between research and practice in part to the fact that research is by necessity a simplification of any phenomenon. Freeman (2007) wrote that research findings tend to narrow and even purify the messy, local complexity of teachers’ classrooms, and thus they chafe with the specific ways in which thinking and acting combine for teachers in their work.

(p. 904; see also Freeman, 1996)
As we near the close of another 10-year span, marking nearly 20 years since Firth and Wagner's (1997) article, this gap may be closing. As the policy statements and theoretical perspectives we have surveyed in this chapter indicate, language teachers and researchers are becoming more willing to acknowledge and grapple with the messiness and local complexity of language learning and, in doing so, may well be bringing together theory and practice in a way that will clarify both the goals and the means of language education in today's globalized world.

Indeed, seeing not just language but also the classroom itself as a complex system helps us, as language educators, to come to grips with the unpredictability of language learning. Ecological theory emphasizes individual subjectivity and agency. When we recognize this, we can also see that, no matter how much we are able to control the linguistic input students are exposed to and the quantity and quality of L2 interaction they engage in, we cannot expect uniformity in the process or outcomes of classroom L2 development, at any timescale. As Larsen-Freeman and Cameron (2008) explained, “even if a frozen or stabilized version of the language is used in a syllabus, grammar book, and test, as soon as the language is ‘released’ into the classroom or into the minds of learners it becomes dynamic” (p. 199).

Larsen-Freeman and Cameron (2008) found that rather than striving to control what and how the students learn, we must instead attend to our students' learning and allow that process to guide our teaching. What this means is that, through various interventions, the teacher can “nudge the students’ developing system into a trajectory through the state space that is consonant with the students’ goals and the goals of instruction” (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008, p. 202). From this perspective, teachers must be attentive to each student and prepared to seize upon learning opportunities as they arise. This means being attentive, as well, to the totality of classroom interaction, including those (often playful) moments that might typically be considered “off task” and thus not important. This view, which particularizes education and prioritizes local needs, can be found in a great deal of other work on pedagogy (see, e.g., Allwright, 2003, 2005; Kumaravadivelu, 1994, 2006; van Lier, 1996); however, we again emphasize how the shift in current theories of L2 development now allows for better alignment between these perspectives.

This flexibility is not only a quality that language teachers must develop in order to facilitate learning. It becomes, as well, a goal of language education. L2 users should not exit the classroom with the expectation that their interlocutors will use language in predictable ways. Rather, they should recognize that, like themselves, those they encounter will be subject to the same constraints and affordances of their lived experiences, their experiences with language, and their sociohistorical position as themselves.

This kind of pedagogy also requires a willingness on the part of the teacher to critically examine, and engage students in such examination of, cultural norms and values and the ways that they are encoded in language. In arguing for the pedagogical integration of culture and language, Lantolf and Johnson (2007) described the gap that often occurs when classroom learners encounter actual L2 language use to find that it is deployed in vastly different, unexpected ways for which their classroom
experiences did not prepare them, and advocate for increased awareness of the ways in which language and culture intersect. They suggested that the “end result of opening up languaculture for conscious inspection will most likely be that ‘the chaos of the streets’ will become the norm, rather than the exception, in L2 pedagogy” (Lantolf & Johnson, 2007, p. 886). In practical terms, this means that instructors will spend less time explaining whether an utterance is right or wrong and more time exploring with learners how an utterance positions the speaker in relations to others and the cultural schema it evokes, how it may be understood and evaluated by others, and what is assumed to be shared knowledge and thus remains unarticulated.

(Lantolf & Johnson, 2007, p. 886)

Underlying the goal of helping L2 learners develop broad and flexible interpretive skills is the fostering of learner agency. However, the development of learner agency extends beyond learning to simply interpret the meanings of others. We must also help the L2 users we instruct to become interpreters and creators of meaning for others. Learning should involve the development not simply of communicative competence, but of what Kramsch (2008) has called symbolic competence, which extends beyond the ability to communicate clearly and appropriately. Instead, it involves as well

the ability to shape the multilingual game in which one invests, i.e., the ability to manipulate the conventional categories and societal norms of truthfulness, legitimacy, seriousness, and originality, and the ability to reframe human thought and action.

(Kramsch, 2008, p. 402)

It is not enough to be able to understand and respond, but ideally, as part of L2 users’ agency, they will become intercultural speakers (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013) whose ability to access multiple perspectives and draw from a broader communicative repertoire will allow them to communicate successfully with a wide variety of speakers. From this perspective, the language classroom is opened up for interaction from a broad range of speech situations, genres, and interlocutors.

Conclusion

The perspectives on language, communication, language learners, and the L2 classroom that we have outlined above form the foundation for the rest of this book. In this text we aim to demonstrate how a focus on humor and language play can help us teach and learn in ways that are sensitive to these new understandings of language, communication, and the learner, and can enrich and enliven language classrooms in ways that are consonant with the goals we have outlined here. At this point, however, it is important to note that despite our emphasis on dynamism and variability, we are
not saying that educators must do away completely with any focus on more patterned or stable aspects of the language of instruction, as language consists of an interaction between stability and dynamism. Rather, we are advocating for an approach to pedagogy that at least recognizes characteristics like variability, dynamism, dialogism, and situatedness in its underlying conception of language and interaction, and aims to help learners develop this kind of metalinguistic awareness. We believe that such recognition is essential to helping teachers and learners meet the challenges brought about by globalization and new technologies. To this end, we have argued the following:

- Language is a complex, sociocognitive system that exists in a dynamic state.
- Communication is a jointly constructed and emergent act of interpretation.
- People’s multiple identities, positions, histories, and desires mediate both their access to and use of particular communicative and interpretive resources for communication.
- The use and acknowledgment of multilingual humor, language play, and creativity in the L2 classroom can contribute to the development of 21st-century approaches to language education.

The framework for understanding language, communication, and learners that we have presented here does away with tidy—and thus limited—presentations of language and communication, and recognizes as well, diverse and shifting attitudes and investment by the learner. In general, the messiness of the language classroom and the learning process must now be acknowledged by teachers and be integrated into their curricular plans in ways that help raise the metalinguistic awareness of learners and expand their interpretive and communicative repertoires. But, in order to understand how humor and language play can help create classrooms that are predicated on such views of language and communication, it is important to examine the nature of humor, which is the topic we turn to in the next chapter.

Note

1 A version of the sections of the paper dealing with language and communication in this chapter originally appeared in Bell and Pomerantz (2014).
2 Understanding this pun requires knowing that soy milk in English refers to milk made out of soybeans, whereas in Spanish the verb soy means “I am.” The Spanish verb soy is frequently used in greeting sequences to introduce oneself, as in “Hola, soy Anne” (Hello, I’m Anne).

References


In this chapter we survey research on humor in order to develop a strong foundation on which to base our discussion of classroom discourse, additional language learning, and language teaching. As we observed in the preface, humor refers to the key or manner in which elements from one’s communicative repertoire are spoken, written, or otherwise put into use. Humor may include both instances of language play and acts of creative language use. Before we review what the scholarly literature has to say about humor, take a moment to answer these questions:

1. How many different types of humor you can name (e.g., puns, irony, teasing)? Do the same types of humor exist in all the languages you know?
2. What are some reasons why we engage in humorous or playful talk with others? Is humorous talk always about enjoyment, or can other emotions be present when we are joking?
3. How do you know when someone is trying to be humorous?
4. Whom do you joke with? Whom don’t you joke with? Why?
5. What situations are appropriate for joking? When and where are you unlikely to find people joking around?

As this chapter demonstrates, and as you may have found as you considered the earlier questions, humor is more complex than we generally imagine. It doesn’t fall neatly and easily into taxonomic categories. Rules about when, where, and with whom it can be used are rarely hard and fast. The very topics we are often told we can’t joke about are those exploited for humor. At the same time, humor is just one type of language use and has much in common with other ways of communicating; thus, you may already understand more about it than you think!
What Is Humor and How Does It Work?

Although on the surface humor might seem particularly complex, it is not so different from other linguistic phenomena. Language use is universal, but we all follow certain local norms for getting stuff done communicatively. Every community engages in greeting rituals, but the exact nature of these interactional rituals is different from place to place and changes over time. For example, the international students we work with at our universities often puzzle over why their American classmates are forever asking the question, “How are you?” without stopping to hear the answer. It takes some time before they come to realize that this seemingly information-seeking question can also just function as way of saying hello. Yet, not every speaker of American English uses or understands this phrase as a greeting. Humor, too, is both universal and specific. We all know that what counts as funny varies across people and changes over time. A joke that is funny in France might fall flat in front of a Japanese audience. What’s more, even people who share the same language, ethnicity, or culture might not share the same sense of humor. Indeed, even jokes from the past—even when they deal with typical sources of humor such as sex—often fail to amuse the modern hearer.

What is more difficult to pinpoint, however, is what it is, precisely, that makes something funny. Thus, we begin our discussion with an examination of the mechanisms by which humor is created. Following this, we review common forms and functions of humor. We then consider the ways that interlocutors manage the failure of humor. Finally, we turn our attention to studies of humor and L2 users to better understand the cognitive, social, and linguistic challenges of engaging in such interaction in an L2.

Mechanisms of Humor

Humor, as a topic, has long captured the interest of philosophers and researchers alike. Since the time of the ancient Greeks, numerous theories have been put forth to explain why it is that we find certain utterances and situations funny. The most comprehensive of humor theories are those that attempt to explain it in terms of incongruity. These theories generally posit that humor derives from the juxtaposition of two odd, unexpected, or inappropriate elements in a particular context. The incongruity that results from this pairing must then be at least partially resolved in order for the contrast to be interpreted as funny. Of these theories, Attardo and Raskin’s (1991; see also Attardo, 2001) General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) is perhaps the most widely accepted.1

The GTVH posits six hierarchical knowledge resources that produce humor. At the broadest level is script opposition, the choice of which restricts the possibilities for the logical mechanism, which restricts options at the level of situation, and so on:
Beginning from the bottom of the hierarchy, language refers to the actual phonetic, lexical, morphosyntactic, and pragmatic choices that make up the humorous utterance. An examination of the language used helps us to understand how humor is constructed and whether and to what extent quips that draw on the same knowledge resources but use different language can be considered the same joke. This is illustrated abundantly in the 2005 documentary The Aristocrats, in which the same joke is told by numerous comedians in different ways. Narrative strategy is similar to the notion of genre or kinds of humor. Riddles, teases, and story jokes each exemplify different narrative strategies. The target identifies what is often called the butt of the joke, and because not all humor involves a target or a butt, it is the only knowledge resource not used in all humor. The situation refers to something akin to context, describing the general setting, characters, and activity of the joke.

With logical mechanisms, however, the territory becomes more complicated, and this is the aspect of the GTVH that has received the most questions and criticism (e.g., Brône & Feyaerts, 2004; Davies, 2004; Raskin, 2004). The logical mechanism is the means by which the humor is created, as it resolves the incongruity. For example, consider the following jokes:

Two tourists were driving through Louisiana. As they approached Natchitoches, they started arguing about the pronunciation of the town. They went back and forth until they stopped for lunch.

At the counter, one tourist asked the employee, “Before we order, could you please settle an argument for us? Would you please pronounce where we are very slowly?”

The guy leaned over the counter and said, “Burrrr-gerrr Kiing.”

The logical mechanism here is referential ambiguity. The phrase “where we are” is subject to multiple interpretations. While the tourists intend it to refer to the town, the name of which is pronounced in a manner that is not transparent given
its spelling, the fast-food employee interprets it much more narrowly, as referring to the name of the restaurant.

A different logical mechanism is used in our second example:

A piece of string walks into a bar and orders a whiskey and rye. The bartender says, “Get out! We don’t serve your kind in here!” So, the string goes outside and twists around and rubs up against the rough brick of the building before going back inside.

The bartender looks up and asks angrily, “Aren’t you that piece of string I just threw out of here?”

The string answers, “Nope, I’m a frayed knot.”

Here, *cratylism*, or punning, is the logical mechanism. The joke relies on the phonological similarity between the semantically different phrases “afraid not” and “a frayed knot.”

Finally, *script oppositions* are fundamental to the creation of humor. They are the most abstract of the knowledge resources. As Raskin (1985) noted, a script is “a large chunk of semantic information surrounding the word or evoked by it” (p. 81). Scripts do not reside in individual peoples’ heads. Rather, researchers imagine them as shared among members of a particular community. And, because they tend to involve common, everyday experiences, their content is fairly stable. At the same time, because scripts rely on personal experience, they vary from person to person and can change over time. Moreover, some elements may only be shared by a few community members or may even be unique to certain people.

Consider, for example, the various scripts surrounding a term like *suburb*. In the United States, the term *suburb* generally references a residential area outside a city. For some Americans, the term may evoke images of spacious homes, green lawns, and safe neighborhoods filled with playing children. For others, the term may reference an area that is architecturally bland and overly car-centric. In general, the U.S. script for suburbs indexes wealth whereas “inner city” is often a euphemism for poverty. In France, however, these scripts would be inverted, with suburbs associated with poverty and crime. In either case, individual experiences with the area known as the suburbs may create differences across individual scripts.

For a text to be humorous, it must be compatible with two scripts that are opposed to each other in some way. But, as anyone who has experienced failure in humor knows, script opposition alone does not always result in humor. First, script oppositions only succeed if the hearer has that script available for humor. The failure of quips involving disease, death, or accidents—particularly when addressed to those who have had recent or painful experiences with such issues—is well known. In fact, this type of gaffe is often exploited for humor in situation comedies. Second, not all opposing script juxtapositions create amusing incongruities. For example, newspapers often publish photos of a child’s toy lying amid the rubble of a natural disaster or war zone. The incongruity between
the toy and the rubble is supposed to create feelings of compassion, rather than amusement. Oring’s (1992, 2011) work on *appropriate incongruity* helps to capture this issue and define what types of script opposition might result in mirth.

Let’s use the following joke, originally analyzed in Nancy’s work (Bell, 2011), to walk through each of the knowledge resources posited by the GTVH:

A man and a woman who had never met before found themselves in the same sleeping carriage of a train. After the initial embarrassment they both went to sleep, the woman on the top bunk, the man on the lower.

In the middle of the night, the woman leaned over, woke the man and said, “I’m sorry to bother you, but I’m awfully cold and I was wondering if you could possibly get me another blanket?”

The man leaned out and, with a glint in his eye, said, “I’ve got a better idea—just for tonight, let’s pretend we’re married.”


Beginning with language, we can simply note the text is in English. Moreover, we might remark upon the switch from a more formal to less formal register in the final line. In other situations, however, the GTVH might be used to consider different realizations of this joke and to examine the effects of language variation. The narrative strategy used is a canned, narrative joke. That is, it follows the form and sequence of a typical story. The target in this story is the woman, because the problematic situation is one of strangers sharing a sleeping compartment on a train. The logical mechanism employed is pragmatic ambiguity, hinging on different interpretations of what married life is like. The script opposition is one commonly found in canned jokes; namely, whether and to what extent married people have sex. Via the garden path technique, the reader is initially led to expect that the man is suggesting that the two share a bed, with the implication that they will have sex—sometimes euphemistically referred to as “marital relations.” This impression is reinforced by the “glint in his eye” and the woman’s flirtatious giggle. The final line, however, reveals an alternative conception of marriage, in which sex is off the table, although intimacy remains in the directness of the address. The man seems to have been imagining a long-established and perhaps unhappy marriage, in which sex has long ceased to play a role and bickering predominates. The glint in his eye might now be read as malicious rather than mischievous. Although this opposition is likely to be widely accessible, given the common human experiences of sex and the changes that occur in long-term relationships, many script oppositions require specific cultural knowledge to appreciate. Thus, it is possible that this joke will fail if the listener does not have both scripts available for interpretation.
Forms of Humor

Classifying humor by type or form is more challenging than it might seem. On one hand, we recognize many folk and literary forms of humor. For instance, taxonomies of humor often include the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Canned Jokes</th>
<th>Irony</th>
<th>Mockery</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Narratives or anecdotes</td>
<td>Banter</td>
<td>Double entendre</td>
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<tr>
<td>Puns</td>
<td>One-liners</td>
<td>Wordplay</td>
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<tr>
<td>Riddles</td>
<td>Self-deprecation</td>
<td>Teases</td>
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<td>Satire</td>
<td>Hyperbole</td>
<td>Parody</td>
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Many of these humorous forms can be further divided into subtypes as well. If humor is to be classified into genres, Kotthoff (2007) warned against the use of any theory that “is too narrowly based on an interest in classifying ideals of pre-patterned discourse” and asserts that the “high degree of creativity, emergent construction and artistry typical of humor call for a concept of genre which makes sense of modifications and transgressions in communicative processes” (p. 263).

A few types of humor, such as canned jokes like the one analyzed earlier, conform to a fairly rigid structure (in this case, a setup and punchline) and are thus easily identified and analyzed. In fact, it is because prescripted jokes conform so strongly to certain generic conventions that meta-humor is possible. For example, in response to the question, “Why did the chicken cross the road?” the response “To get to the other side” is only recognizable as humor if one is familiar with the hundreds of other standard responses, such as “To get away from Colonel Sanders.”

In looking at spontaneously constructed conversational humor, however, it is often difficult to neatly classify even those forms that seem fairly straightforward, such as teases. Categories blend and overlap, and multiple forms may be used in a single humorous utterance. Consider, for instance, what Tanya, a native speaker of Russian, said in response to her friend’s display of the only three words of Russian she knows: “Fa::bulous! You can survive! You don’t even have to / ? / (loud, prolonged laughter)” (Bell, 2009b, p. 243). This is clearly a tease targeting the friend whose proficiency in Russian is near zero. The tease exaggerates the friend’s bilingual abilities via an ironic compliment. Thus, we have an ironic hyperbolic tease. This type of multiplicity is not uncommon in conversational humor and must be acknowledged if any type of classification of humor is to be attempted for research or pedagogical purposes.

Furthermore, as we discussed in the preface, humor is a key. As a stance or a mode of communication it can be used to contextualize any bit of spoken or written language as humorous (Priego-Valverde, 2003). For example, although
obituaries tend to be serious summaries of the life of the deceased, it is not unheard of for a family to construct a humorous one. Note that we are not referring to satirical renderings of a genre (such as the humorous news stories found on comedy sites such as The Onion), but simply humorous forms of a given genre.

There are also forms of humor that are widely used and recognized but for which users do not have a specific name. One such type is the joint construction of amusing imaginary scenarios. This has been referred to in the research literature as joint fictionalization (Kotthoff, 1999), fantasy sequences (Hay, 1994), or the comical hypothetical (Winchazt & Kozen, 2008). In contrast, a type of humor given the same, easily translatable name (e.g., “joke”) may have very different parameters that define it in different cultures. This point is of great importance to us as language educators and it is one we will return to later in our discussion.

**Functions of Humor**

By now you have no doubt realized that along with taking many forms, humor also has many functions. Martin (2007) grouped these functions into three categories:

1. Humor for stress relief and coping
2. Humor for establishing and maintaining social bonds due to the positive emotions it evokes
3. Humor for prompting social action and exerting influence over others

Table 2.1 provides a sampling of research that speaks to each of these functions.

Anyone who has experienced the de-escalation of an argument when one party manages to make the other laugh can relate to the power of humor as a way to relieve tension. So, too, laughter at a funeral suggests attendees are attempting to cope with grief that might otherwise be overwhelming and incapacitating. Even in everyday contexts, if we recognize that humor can help us cope with difficult situations, we can understand why so much humor centers on what Cook (2000) has referred to as “vital” topics, such as sex, death, race, and religion. Knowing what people tend to joke about may help us to identify specific areas of tension or discomfort for a particular person or culture. Oring’s (2003) analysis of the decline of Victorian sentimentality, for instance, helps explain the preponderance of humor in contemporary American greeting cards. As open expressions of sentiment fell out of fashion, humor stepped in as a way of sharing emotions in a socially acceptable way. As language teachers, when we consider both the challenging work conditions many instructors find themselves in and the stress students often feel in using a new language, the stress-relieving function of humor is important.

Humor’s function as a way of helping us to make friends and to maintain our affiliation with others can also not be underestimated. Although we may play with language and even utter things to amuse ourselves in solitary situations,
non-serious uses of language are primarily social. We use humor more in the presence of others and experiments have demonstrated that when our companions show appreciative responses to humor by laughing and smiling, our own laughter increases as well (Chapman & Chapman, 1974; Young & Frye, 1966). Thus, we often use humor for pleasure and entertainment, and, in doing so, we increase the positive affect among those sharing these diversions with us. The pleasure we receive on these occasions by orienting positively toward one another helps us to increase our affiliation with those around us. This effect occurs not only with those with whom we have already established a relationship, but with strangers as well. Fraley and Aron (2004), for example, found that strangers who shared laughter reported feeling closer than those who did not (see also Treger, Sprecher, & Erber, 2013). This points to the important function of humor in the development not only of intimate relationships but also of those connections that are merely collegial and allow us to communicate and collaborate more effectively. In initial encounters, humor can be used to probe for shared interests and values, and as acquaintances grow closer, playful language reinforces group identification and solidarity. The importance of humor preferences as a marker of taste may be much

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Humor Function</th>
<th>Examples of Relevant Studies</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stress relief/coping</td>
<td>Allen (2014)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Booth-Butterfield, Booth-Butterfield, &amp; Wanzer (2007)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Branneyn et al. (2014)</td>
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<td>Ladegaard (2013)</td>
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<td>Matsumoto (2011)</td>
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<td>Pogrebin &amp; Poole (1988)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Terry (1997)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Yedes (1996)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establishing and maintaining social bonds</td>
<td>Boxer &amp; Cortés-Conde (1997)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Holmes (2000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Knight (2010a, 2010b, 2011, 2013)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Norrick (1993)</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Straehle (1993)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Influencing others’ behavior (e.g., socialization, negotiating face threats)</td>
<td>Boxer &amp; Cortés-Conde (1997)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fine &amp; de Soucey (2005)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Haugh &amp; Bousfield (2012)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Holmes (2000)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Holmes &amp; Marra (2002a, 2002b, 2002c)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Jorgensen (1996)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Plester &amp; Orams (2008)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Wennerstrom (2000)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Yedes (1996)</td>
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</table>
Humor and Language Play

stronger than other types of preferences that we might judge people by. Kuipers (2006a, 2006b; Friedman & Kuipers, 2013) found that British interviewees tend not only to express their distaste for certain comedians they do not like quite vehemently but also to extend those expressions to emotionally charged judgments of anyone who enjoys the humor of those performers.

The use of humor to probe for and negotiate in-group affiliation brings us to the many ways that humor can be used to influence the behavior of others. For those whom a group is prepared to (or in some cases, such as the workplace, required to) accept, playful speech can function as a way of gently socializing new or potential members to group norms. Yet, humor can also be used in a range of ways to express degrees of affiliation and also disaffiliation from others, thus delineating in- and out-group boundaries (Haugh, 2010; Sinkeviciute, 2014; Vine, Kell, Marra, & Holmes, 2009). At a fairly benign level, a joke might be made about someone who is not present and who is not part of the group. In this case, the target is not hurt by the comment, but the joke participants enjoy increased affiliation through making fun of an outsider. The use of private, in-group humor in front of someone who is not a group member can, particularly if done deliberately, be more likely to reinforce the status of in- and out-group individuals. A quip that is aimed at an outsider, such as a tease, can be even stronger. At the cruelest end of the spectrum are those jokes that deliberately target the outsider and are uttered knowing that they will be upsetting or hurtful to that person but will make in-group members laugh (Smith, 2009). Given repeated acts of this sort, this type of humor can be a form of bullying.

Humor as a way of accomplishing social action need not always have a cruel edge. Humor is, in fact, an important means for doing politeness. It allows us to express a range of emotions and opinions in a safe manner. Although potentially aggressive, joking and specifically teasing, mockery, and jocular abuse are important ways of expressing negative emotions and of criticizing another person. Self-deprecating humor, too, can be used for such purposes, as joking about one’s own weakness can save face for the listener, whose error or shortcoming now appears less severe in light of the speaker’s (Yu, 2013). Moreover, delivering an uncomfortable message in a humorous key can create an indirect delivery, which in turn allows for the preservation of harmony, giving both parties ways to negotiate any face threat. Where a direct criticism might embarrass or place the hearer on the offensive, in this case she or he can laugh along with the joke while also taking the serious message to heart. If the hearer takes offense, the speaker can plead innocence under the guise that he or she was “just kidding.” For women in positions of authority, who often risk being labeled pushy or demanding by giving direct orders, humor is an important resource for doing leadership (Holmes & Schnurr, 2005; Mullany, 2004; Schnurr, 2008). At the same time, unpalatable messages must at times also be directed up the hierarchy at those in power, and here, too, humor provides a way to do so without unduly disrupting relationships. This, too, has been amply demonstrated in studies of workplace humor. These studies show that can humor be used not only to critique but also to challenge authority.
Here, again, the deniability of the serious message contained in any such humor potentially protects the speaker.

Even having limited this review to the most commonly cited functions of humor, the situation is clearly complex. It may be helpful to think of the goal of humorous interaction in broader terms. In Figure 2.1, the functions of humor are conceptualized on two different axes. The vertical axis represents the extent to which a humorous utterance tends to uphold existing social norms or tends toward the subversive, by challenging norms. The horizontal axis marks the extent to which humor is supportive and affiliative or to which it creates distance and disaffiliation among speakers. In each quadrant are examples of humor that, depending on the situation, represent varying degrees of each of these elements. Thus, for example, here a joke about a word that a friend used to mispronounce is norm upholding, because it reinforces what has been perceived as correct pronunciation, but it is affiliative in that it indexes the shared knowledge and history between the two friends. Teasing a friend about forgetting to call while also upholding a particular social norm, is less affiliative, as it expresses some displeasure. Although the examples presented here are invented, this figure is meant as a way of considering the functions of specific, contextualized examples of humor.

**Negotiating Humor in Interaction**

Given the complex forms and functions of humor, we can see that it is not only a rich resource for managing social interaction and relationships but also a complex and potentially risky one. Any attempt at humor might not be recognized, understood, or appreciated. It might cause a hearer to take offense. If the goal is to alter the hearer’s behavior in some way, a joke might be too indirect and not succeed in conveying any message beyond the affiliative one. How do interactants then manage this delicate but powerful conversational resource?
Contextualizing Non-Seriousness

In Chapter 1, we discussed the notion of contextualization cues, the linguistic and paralinguistic means by which interlocutors signal their intentions and understanding of the social situation. Although we emphasized the need for the immediate significance, the meaning of even highly conventional cues must ultimately be negotiated in situated interaction. Interactants have a range of cues at their disposal and these can be used to indicate that an utterance should be interpreted seriously, playfully, or any combination of these two keys. Cues that an utterance is humorous may be more or less explicit according to the social goals of the speaker. A student who wishes to respond to a teacher's question with a humorous but subversive answer will likely use subtle cues to signal a joke to classmates, while still affecting a stance that suggests enough of a serious demeanor for the challenging element of the joke to be denied. At other times subversive jokes will need to be clearly contextualized as humor to avoid causing offense or misunderstanding.

Research on contextualization has established a number of conventional cues for signaling humorous intent. Laughter is usually the first cue that comes to mind. When laugh particles are placed at the end of an utterance, they often signal to the hearer that the speaker intends to be humorous and, as Jefferson (1979) explained, invite the hearer to laugh along with the speaker. Jefferson's work involved dyads, and when Glenn (1989) examined laughter in multiparty discourse, he found a preference for someone other than the speaker to initiate the first laugh. He suggested that this might be a way for speakers to avoid seeming immodest by laughing at their own jokes. More recently, acoustic and multimodal analyses have confirmed the importance of laughter and especially smiling (Attardo, Pickering, & Baker, 2011; Kaukomaa, Peräkylä, & Ruusuvuori, 2013; see also Attardo, in press) as cues of humorous intent. Additional contextualization cues are presented in Table 2.2.

Despite these findings, it is important to recognize that laughter and laugh particles are strewn throughout primarily serious conversations as well as playful ones. Indeed, laughter's occurrence in serious talk is frequent enough to question whether its function as a cue for humor is even primary. As Partington (2006) described it, “laughter registers and communicates the recognition of change and the unusual and, especially, that some behavior has been perceived as improper” (p. 234, see also Glenn & Holt, 2013; Maemura, 2014). Specific examples of non-humorous uses of laughter include laughter as a way of creating ambiguity and stalling the interaction in order to allow participants to consider their next move (Keyton & Beck, 2010), shared laughter as a signal that a topic of conversation is closing (E. Holt, 2010), and laughter as a reaction to complaints, used to signal to the hearer that the topic should not continue, but without completely disaffiliating (L. Holt, 2012).
Humor and Social Context

At the beginning of the chapter, we asked you to think about where, when, and with whom joking occurs. If you named private, casual contexts with friends and family, you would not be alone. “Serious” or formal public contexts, such as religious or educational sites, courtrooms, business meetings, or ceremonial events are generally thought of as places where joking tends not to be appropriate. To a certain extent, your intuition is spot on. When social distance is low, humor is much more likely to occur (Holmes, 2000; Holmes & Marra, 2002a; Norrick, 1993). But, because much humor also takes place in the very places we imagine as serious, we use the extensive literature on humor in the workplace to illustrate the situated, local nature of joking contexts and relationships, as well as the way in which humor not only arises from different social circumstances but is also an important factor in shaping those contexts. If you are wondering why we are focusing on workplaces rather than on classrooms, our answer is simple. First, as we will see in Chapter 3, there has been a long and serious neglect of humor in studies of classroom discourse; thus, we know far more about humor at work than we do about humor at school. Second, workplaces feature many of the same hierarchies and relationships that figure into classroom and other social settings. Finally, in the preface we cited Cook’s (2000) critique of foreign language classes as too focused on the work needs of the language learner. Through this focused review we hope to illustrate the importance of humor in the workplace and demonstrate that our perceptions of work needs have been mistakenly narrow. In Chapters 3, 4, and 5 we look specifically at the small, but growing, body of research

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contextualization Cue</th>
<th>Examples of Relevant Studies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Specific bodily movements and gestures</td>
<td>Ford &amp; Fox (2010)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repetition</td>
<td>Bertrand &amp; Priego-Valverde (2011)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Code, style, or register switching</td>
<td>Cromdal &amp; Aronsson (2000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Holmes (2000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kotthoff (1999)</td>
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<td>Norrick (2007)</td>
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<td>Takanashi (2011)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Imitation/revoicing</td>
<td>Tannen (1984)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of marked linguistic forms</td>
<td>Straehle (1993)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explicit contextualization by naming the act</td>
<td>Bell (2007b)</td>
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<td>or key</td>
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<td>Flamson &amp; Barrett (2008)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Flamson, Bryant, &amp; Barrett (2011)</td>
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Humor and Language Play

on humor in language classrooms, but for now we use the extensive literature on workplace humor to identify some key points for consideration.

Perhaps the earliest research on humor in the workplace is Coser’s (1960) classic study of staff meetings in a mental hospital. Coser found a strong tendency for those at the top of the clinical hierarchy to initiate the most humor and for them to direct their jokes downward, targeting those with less power, such as junior staff or patients. In other strongly hierarchical settings, this finding has been confirmed; however, it has also been demonstrated that in workplaces where more egalitarian values are espoused more varied patterns of humor use are exhibited (Goldberg, 1997; Seckman & Couch, 1989; Yoels & Clair, 1995). Furthermore, social status does not always align with power, and research suggests that individuals with more power in the workplace, regardless of their social status, will tend to initiate more humor (Adelswärd & Öberg, 1998; Mulkay, Clark, & Pinch, 1993; Yoels & Clair, 1995).

Simply examining who initiates humor and who tends to be the target of jokes, however, is not enough to understand the complex ways that humor both constructs and reflects status, power, and social context. Schnurr’s (2009) study of the ways that teasing is used to create leadership demonstrates that even when humor is directed at those down the hierarchy, it can be of very different styles and functions, and result in very different atmospheres. Thus, when nonhierarchical relationships are valued, humor can be an important resource for “doing power” indirectly (Holmes, 2000; Lynch, 2010; Pullin, 2011). Managers are often in the position of issuing directives or criticisms to their employees, and by framing them playfully they are able to gain compliance while also maintaining friendly relations. There is some evidence that this tactic may be gendered, with women leaders using it to a greater extent than men (Mullany, 2004).³

Couching unpalatable assertions in playful language is also, however, a tool of those in subordinate positions. When humor is directed at those up the hierarchy it can be used to critique or even challenge the institutional status quo (Holmes, 2000; Holmes & Marra, 2002a; Lynch, 2010; Pogrebin & Poole, 1988; Pullin, 2011). Making a complaint about workplace norms in a humorous way can protect the speaker from sanctions. Should the person in charge become upset by the serious message, the speaker can deny any insubordination by instead emphasizing the joking nature of the utterance. Furthermore, treating a challenge in a playful manner makes it more difficult for those in power to express overt opposition or address the serious content directly (Holmes, 2000; Mulkay, Clark, & Pinch, 1993). The success of this tactic in effecting change in the workplace is, however, by no means ensured. Supervisors can opt to ignore challenges to the status quo that are issued playfully, and it may be that the strategy will meet with success mainly in workplaces with strong egalitarian values (e.g., Yedes, 1996). It is also worth noting that subversive humor may also be used to critique institutional norms by those with a relatively high degree of power (Schnurr & Rowe, 2008).
Cross-cultural studies of workplace humor highlight its universality while also illustrating its cultural-specific instantiations. Grindsted (1997), for example, compared the joking behavior of Danes and Spaniards during business negotiations and found that although there was a great deal of humor in both contexts, the Spanish meetings contained a greater amount of joking than the Danish meetings did. In addition, the Danes opted for self-denigrating humor, whereas the Spaniards preferred targeting others in their joking. Although humor seemed to function as a way to build team spirit in the New Zealand and Japanese business meetings analyzed by Murata (2014), patterns of humor were different. In the Japanese meetings, humor was initiated only by those in charge (e.g., the meeting chair) and then elaborated on by subordinates. In contrast, any meeting participant was able to initiate humor among the New Zealanders and the result was a great deal of collaboratively constructed joking.

Workplace studies of humor are interesting and illustrative of larger patterns in humor use because these sites involve a range of relationships. Coworkers may be close friends, strangers, friendly acquaintances, or even enemies who must share space. In addition to varying degrees of social distance, these relationships can be complicated by power and the need to achieve goals. Those in intimate relationships may also be boss and subordinate employee. Individuals who barely know each other may need to work closely to complete a project. Examining similar situations (e.g., business meetings) across cultures also helps us see the similarities and differences in the way that humorous interaction can function across cultures. As we have illustrated, humor is used to negotiate these delicate social situations, construct group boundaries, and negotiate degrees of affiliation and disaffiliation.

**Reception and Support of Humor**

Given that humor is a collaborative or co-constructed communicative endeavor, it is important to consider how people respond to humor. Once again, you are not alone if you imagine that most people, assuming they are amused, will laugh, or at least smile. Yet, as Hay (2001) has argued, any expression of appreciation implies that the hearer has (1) recognized that an attempt at humor has been made and (2) understood the joke. In addition, she notes that a response that fully supports a speaker’s humor (e.g., laughter, smiling, verbal expressions of appreciation) further implies agreement with any message contained in the humor. In other words, laughing at a joke that makes fun of people who spend hours each day at the gym suggests a shared (negative) attitude toward this type of person, or at least this behavior. Each of these implicatures—recognition, understanding, appreciation, and agreement—need not be expressed as an absolute, but to understand how humor is realized in interaction we must look a little closer at what listeners do.

Beyond laughter and smiling as expressions of appreciation, a listener can support another’s humor by maintaining the play frame and adding more humor. This
has been referred to by Attardo (2001) as “mode adoption.” For example, both punning and the sharing of canned jokes seem to elicit more of the same types of humor, with the joking sometimes becoming a kind of competition (Norrick, 1993; Sacks, 1989). Similarly, the creation of fantasy sequences (or comical hypotheticals) is often a joint affair (Hay, 1994; Holmes & Marra, 2002b; Kotthoff, 1999; Norrick, 1993; Winchatz & Kozen, 2008). In contrast, mode adoption is comparatively rare as a response to both teasing (Drew, 1987) and irony (Eisterhold, Attardo, & Boxer, 2006). Other forms of humor support include echoing the speaker’s words, demonstrating enthusiasm through overlapping speech and heightened involvement, and explicit statement of appreciation (Hay, 2001). The importance of nonverbal cues as humor support has also been recognized (e.g., Drew, 1987) but is likely somewhat obscured given that not all studies rely on videotaped interaction.

Some types of humor tend to garner particular responses. For example, in the case of both teasing (Drew, 1987; Lytra, 2007; Tholander & Aronsson, 2002) and irony (Eisterhold et al., 2006), the most common reaction seems to be for the hearer to respond to the content of the utterance. Thus, when confronted with a tease, the target is likely to deny or correct the content of the jibe (e.g., “I’ve never done that!”). Similarly, while jocular abuse was found by Hay (2001) to most frequently be ignored, the second most common response for women was to object to the abuse and for men, to respond seriously. Such reactions do not, however, mean that the hearer did not recognize the speaker’s playful intent, and in fact, serious responses may be accompanied by smiles or laughter. Self-deprecating humor, which might be seen as opening a speaker up to teasing, seems to be more typically met with expressions of sympathy or a statement contradicting the content of the humor (Hay, 1994; Jefferson, 1984). As Jefferson (1984) suggested, although speakers exhibit resilience by laughing at their own problems, it can be inappropriate for hearers to indicate that they find the speaker’s misfortunes amusing. Responding to both teasing and self-denigrating humor can be even more delicate when the social relationship between the interlocutors is asymmetrical, as Schnurr and Chan (2011) noted in their examination of such interactions in the workplace. They found a wide range of responses that often incorporated a number of strategies. This work emphasizes the need to consider any instance of humor within its sociocultural context, because the interlocutor’s relationship and the exact nature of the tease or self-deprecating joke will influence the type of response. For example, a tease that targets a minor, and perhaps even endearing, foible would be less likely to be denied.

Not all humor, of course, merits full support. Humor thrives on risk, surprise, and scandal, so it is no wonder that some attempts meet with failure. Jokes that go too far can shock and offend a hearer. Humor that does not exhibit enough novelty can also be unsuccessful because the joke is seen as stale, childish, or boring. Jokes might also simply fail to tickle the hearer due to personal humor
preferences. Appreciation, as noted earlier, is not an all-or-nothing affair, and the feeling can range from tepid to highly enthusiastic. As most of us can attest, having an attempt at humor fail in any of these ways can be embarrassing. However, the face threat is not limited to speakers but extends as well to hearers, whose lack of appreciation risks positioning them as stuffy, prudish, or simply boring. In order to ward off any such result, when an attempt at humor has been recognized and understood, but is not appreciated enough for it to merit full support, hearers tend to respond in ways that confirm both their recognition and understanding of the joke but also signal their lack of appreciation to varying degrees (Hay, 2001; Norrick, 1993). Hearers have a range of options for doing this, including explicit evaluations and metalinguistic comments (e.g., “That’s not funny!”), nonverbal cues (e.g., sighing, eye rolling), unenthusiastic interjections (e.g., “oh my God”), and fake laughter (Bell, 2009a, 2009c, 2015; Haakana, 2012). When a hearer finds a joke offensive, one option is clearly to withhold laughter and express distaste for the message. Another is to express appreciation (e.g., through laughter), while also distancing oneself (e.g., “That’s rude!”) from the message of the humor (Hay, 2001; see also Lockyer & Pickering, 2001).

Preventing and Managing Failure

As we noted in the previous section, an important part of negotiating humor in interaction is managing its failure. Avoiding humor that the speaker suspects might be offensive, dull, or silly is a simple way to prevent failure, because other than for professional comedians, humor is rarely a conversational necessity. Speakers may also choose to joke but to avoid specific types or topics of humor that might fail. Inoculation is another strategy that also allows the speaker to joke, but in this case it works to prevent failure by warning the audience about the humor. This might be done through the use of the formulaic phrase “I’m just kidding” (Skalicky & Bell, 2014) to ensure that joking intent was understood. Similarly, speakers might inoculate themselves against failure by introducing their humor as bad, silly, or tasteless as a kind of warning to the audience.

When failure does occur, Nancy (Bell, 2015) has found that four strategies are commonly employed by speakers to manage it. First, speakers often change the topic as soon as possible following the failure. Although this strategy seems to work as an attempt to create distance between speaker and the failed humor, some speakers try the very different tactic of coaxing or even exhorting their hearers into showing appreciation (e.g., “Come on! That’s funny!”). Such a strategy may be used more often among close friends in casual, relaxed contexts. A third technique seems to be used when an attempt at humor is met with silence or very little laughter, suggesting that the hearers may not have recognized this as an attempt at humor. In this case, speakers tend to explicitly point out that a joke has been made. Preliminary research suggests that the formulaic way of doing this in
English consists of three moves: (1) pause following the joke, (2) identify the joke (e.g., “That was a joke.”), and, optionally, (3) instruct the hearers to laugh (“You can laugh now.”). This strategy saves face for the speaker, as the joke identification move tends to elicit much more laughter than did the joke itself. Finally, a strategy that may be particularly useful when a joke fails because it seems to be too aggressive is for the speaker to turn the joke around on him or herself. Redirecting the humor to make fun of oneself can ease tensions that may have occurred over a joke that targeted another in a way that caused discomfort for the hearers.

Audience management of failure of jokes that were not appreciated is discussed above, however, as noted earlier, when jokes fail it may also be because the hearer did not recognize or did not understand them. In the case of non-recognition, the conversation is likely to continue with no participants being the wiser that an attempt at humor was issued (Priego-Valverde, 2009). However, if a joke has been detected but was not understood, the hearer must decide whether to feign understanding (with or without appreciation) or to admit that he or she did not comprehend the joke. Nancy (Bell, 2013) found that in response to a very difficult to understand canned joke, very few hearers feigned appreciation (thus implicating understanding). Instead, hearers opted to openly admit their lack of understanding (e.g., “I don’t get it.”). This suggests that, for the hearer, the face threat to not understanding humor is less than for not appreciating it. As always, however, social context will influence both responses and the extent to which a humorous utterance poses a face threat. Among friends who are prone to jocular abuse or when the knowledge required to interpret the quip is a marker of in-group status and prestige, feigning understanding might become more common.

**Humor and L2 Users**

Up to this point, this chapter has surveyed research that informs us about the structure, use, understanding, and negotiation of humor in general. In this section we turn our attention to these issues with an eye toward understanding the similarities and differences between using humor in an L1 and in an L2. The potential role of humor in facilitating L2 development is discussed in Chapter 5. Here we focus on the cognitive affordances and constraints associated with L2 humor and linguistic creativity, as well as the social experiences of L2 users and/or emergent bilinguals when they engage in and with non-serious language.

**L2 Humor and Cognition**

The cognitive process of perceiving, understanding, and appreciating humor is highly complex, as evidenced by the many years required for children to move from simple to increasingly complex forms of humor as they fully develop their humor abilities (Forabosco, 2008), as well as through experimental research (e.g.,
A two-stage model of humor processing is generally accepted (Suls, 1972). In the first stage the hearer perceives an incongruity, and the second involves a process akin to problem solving, whereby the hearer seeks to make sense of the incongruity and thus find the utterance humorous. Forabosco (2014) noted that for this process to be pleasurable, “the difficulty has to be moderate and the process has to be relatively effortless” (p. 137). It is easy to see, then, how humor can often prove to be a frustrating experience for many L2 users. Not only are they likely to require additional time to decode the literal message of an utterance intended to amuse, but the mental effort required to detect and resolve the incongruity may prove too taxing to result in enjoyment and mirth. In addition to these processing constraints, L2 users may not have access to the same scripts as their interlocutors, their scripts may consist of quite different features, or the same scripts may not be available for humor for social or cultural reasons or, although available for humor the scripts involved may not have relations of oppositeness.

Despite these processing challenges, Bell and Attardo (2010) suggested that humor does not fail differently for L2 users, it may just fail more often. In other words, while all language users are apt to experience difficulties identifying incongruities or not understand a joke because of unfamiliar language, these problems are likely to happen more often when we are using an additional language in which our proficiency is still developing. At the same time, however, bi-/multilinguals may be at an advantage when it comes to constructing and understanding language play. There is growing evidence that the consistent use of more than one language conveys cognitive benefits. Executive functions in the bilingual mind are enhanced, thus giving bilinguals an advantage over monolinguals in such things as memory, planning, and problem solving (e.g., Bialystock, 2009). Bilingualism is also clearly linked to greater creativity, particularly on nonverbal tasks, and this can be attributed to the enhanced cognitive abilities of multilingual individuals (Kharkhurin, 2012). With regard to humor, specifically, it seems likely that, having a broader total set of linguistic resources from which to draw on to create amusing incongruities, multilinguals may more easily construct humor. Support for this is found in a self-report study of bilingual Mexican-Americans by Vaid (2006), who found that a majority of respondents (67.5%) agreed with the statement “Knowing two languages and belonging to two cultures has expanded what I find funny—I find humor in more things compared to those who know only one language/culture” (p. 172).

Cognition intersects with culture, with different environmental cues prompting switches between interpretive frames for multicultural individuals (Hong, Morris, Chiu, & Benet-Martínez, 2000), with language functioning as one of the primes for such switches (Ramírez-Esparza, Gosling, Benet-Martínez, Potter, & Pennebaker, 2006). With regard to humor, specifically, Vaid’s (2006) survey of Anglo- and Mexican Americans showed a substantial amount of overlap in the
perceived use of humor by self and by typical members of a respondent’s culture between the two groups, but also revealed differences in the patterns of use. For instance, Mexican Americans ranked significantly higher in their reported use of humor for linguistic creativity and lower for teasing, whereas Anglo-Americans scored higher on the use of self-mocking humor. Results from a second study comparing the perceptions of humor use and styles among Mexican American participants who saw their two cultures as separated versus integrated suggested that the cultural group identification of bilinguals influenced their perception of their own humor use and style, as well as that of their cultural groups. Furthermore, group identification influenced the extent to which respondents saw language as influencing their use of humor. In a subsequent study (Vaid, Choi, Chen, & Friedman, 2008), European Americans, bilingual Korean Americans, and Koreans responded to embarrassing predicaments in either English or Korean. Language was demonstrated to have an influence on the emotional response of the bilingual participants, who found the situations more amusing when presented in English but more embarrassing in Korean.

**Sociocultural Aspects of L2 Humor**

Humor and other creative uses of language may be constructed by and received differently from L2 users than from monolingual interlocutors. Given the important role that non-serious interaction has in developing and signaling intimacy, it is no wonder that many L2 users report feeling marginalized or excluded when they find themselves unable to take part in joking interaction (see, e.g., Bell, 2007b, p. 220) or even to simply understand it in contexts where no response is necessary (Yu Wang, 2014). As we have already noted, humor is risky, as failure is always a possibility, but people are often willing to initiate play because of the payoff in terms of relationship building. For L2 users, however, the outcomes of engaging in playful interaction may not be the same as for monolingual speakers. Playful language use is likely to be overlooked or perceived as error. Some linguistic practices seem to be strongly regarded by monolingual speakers as markers of “native speaker” identity, and their use may constitute a kind of linguistic infringement when coming from L2 users (Chiaro, 1992; Giles & Smith, 1979). Like swearing (Dewaele, 2008), humor may be neither expected nor appreciated when uttered by an L2 user. Even expert use by highly proficient L2 users is prone to being judged by different standards of appropriateness than those that are applied to L1 users (Hassall, 2004; Prodromou, 2007).

Shardakova (2013) explored this phenomenon in detail, as a follow-up to a discourse completion task (DCT) that she used with U.S. learners of Russian, many of whom had provided humorous responses (unprompted) on the DCT, which was constructed as imaginary e-mail replies. She asked that subset of respondents to describe the self-image they wished to project in using humor and whether they hoped that in doing so their interlocutor would ascribe to them positive,
negative, neutral, or ambivalent characteristics. She then asked 48 native speakers of Russian and 70 learners of Russian to read the humorous DCT responses, evaluate them in terms of funniness, and describe their perceptions of the author. The learners uniformly intended their humor to portray them in a positive light as articulate and social. Their judges, on the other hand, assessed more than half of the attempts at humor as not funny and only judged the writers positively about half the time. Shardakova concluded that despite the importance of humor as a way of doing identity work, the “multifunctionality and evaluative ambiguity inherent in humor make it a particularly contested form of self-presentation” (2013, p. 231).

Despite the gloomy picture we have begun to paint, alienation and marginalization are by no means a guaranteed outcome when it comes to humor and L2 users. Power relations can considerably alter the nature of conversational humor and place even L2 users whose linguistic resources are considerably less than those of their interlocutors in an advantageous position in which their interlocutors work hard to accommodate them (Adelswärd & Öberg, 1998). Supportive interlocutors, too, can make all the difference in the success or failure of L2 attempts at humor, as well as the extent to which L2 users are encouraged and supported in their attempts to join in playful talk (Bell, 2006, 2007a; Bongartz & Schneider, 2003; Cheng, 2003; Davies, 2003; Yu. Matsumoto, 2014; Miller, 1995; Moalla, 2014; Moody, 2014; Nelson, 2014). Nancy (Bell, 2007a) found misunderstandings or conflict arising from humor to be rare in interaction, and suggested that this may be due to a general awareness of the part of all interlocutors that humor can be challenging for L2 users. Familiar with failed attempts at humor in their L1 and the feelings of humiliation that often follow, interlocutors seem to approach humor with both caution and a willingness to forgive blunders. Furthermore, both parties seem to exercise prudence in the use of humor by clearly contextualizing utterances within a play frame, by avoiding taboo topics, and by minimizing their use of more risky forms of humor, such as teasing.

This awareness of the challenge that humor can pose for L2 users in interaction can, however, have a downside. As Nancy (Bell, 2006) demonstrated, interlocutors may avoid humor in conversation with L2 users, thereby blocking their access to an opportunity to participate in and therefore learn about playful talk. In addition, interlocutors with little experience with intercultural communication in particular seemed more likely to misjudge the amount and types of adjustments to their humorous talk that were needed to help L2 users participate in it, erring on the side of more adjustments than were necessary. As a result, the very adaptations that interlocutors make in hope of including L2 users can end up positioning bilingual participants as less competent than they are and marginalizing them during playful talk.

L2 speakers also make choices, of course, and a substantial body of research documents the ways that L2 users who are aware of the pragmatic norms of their L2 discourse community might opt not to abide by them, and instead conform to their L1 norms or construct a third way of performing potentially uncomfortable speech acts in a way that allows them to adhere to their own values
while simultaneously being appropriate (enough) to their interlocutors (e.g., Blum-Kulka, 1991; Dewaele, 2008; Hinkel, 1996; Matsumura, 2007; Rampton, 1987; Siegal, 1996; Yi. Wang, 2013). Furthermore, linguistic behavior that is unlike that of L1 users is not necessarily a disadvantage. The aforementioned double standard in the assessment of L2 speech can mean that L2 users are given more leeway than are monolingual speakers in what is considered inappropriate (Bell, 2007a). L2 users can also humorously exploit a foreigner identity in order to achieve social and material gain (Moody, 2014). Finally, although far from unimportant, some L2 users may find it liberating to play with their L2, finding license to be creative in ways they are not normally able or allowed to do in their L1, for whatever reason (Belz, 2002; Belz & Reinhardt, 2004; Kramsch, 2009). The multilingual mind, as noted above, has more resources to draw on for play, and the social conditions of bilingualism may promote greater linguistic creativity.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have looked closely at the mechanisms by which humor is created in interaction, as well as its different forms and functions. Moreover, we have described the many factors that enable and constrain the use humor in particular social contexts. Specifically, we have observed the following:

- Humor, like serious language use, is a complex cognitive and social practice.
- It is difficult, if not impossible, to neatly divide humor into different categories.
- Humor has many different functions and these functions often occur simultaneously.
- Ambiguity and polysemy are important resources for and characteristics of humor in interaction.
- L2 users encounter many of the same social, cognitive, and linguistic challenges using humor as L1 users (“native speakers”). Being an emergent bilingual or L2 user is not necessarily a hindrance in using and interpreting humor.

It is our hope that this chapter has given you a strong (or at least stronger!) understanding of just what humor is and how it works. As we have argued here, a focus on humor helps us to see many of the characteristics of language and communication that we highlighted in Chapter 1. That is, humor is not merely a key with respect to its role in interaction, it is key to understanding what language is and how we negotiate meaning with one another. In Chapters 7 and 8, we discuss some ways in which language teachers might use humor as a pedagogical tool and perhaps even a focal point for instruction. But before we discuss how humor might be used pedagogically, we need to look first at what educational researchers have said (and in some cases not said) about humor in the classroom.
Notes


3 For more on humor and gender in the workplace see Holmes (2006), Holmes and Schnurr (2005), and Schnurr and Holmes (2009).

References


discourse: How to create it and how to describe it, Selected papers from the international workshop on coherence (pp. 125–150). Amsterdam, the Netherlands: John Benjamins.


The following story is an excerpt from humorist David Sedaris’s essay “Jesus Shaves” on his time learning French in France:

“And what does one do on the fourteenth of July? Does one celebrate Bastille Day?”

It was my second month of French class, and the teacher was leading us in an exercise designed to promote the use of one, our latest personal pronoun.

“Might one sing on Bastille Day?” she asked. “Might one dance in the streets? Somebody give me an answer.”

Printed in our textbooks was a list of major holidays accompanied by a scattered arrangement of photographs depicting French people in the act of celebration. The object of the lesson was to match the holiday with the corresponding picture. It was simple enough but seemed an exercise better suited to the use of the pronoun they. I didn’t know about the rest of the class but when Bastille Day eventually rolled around, I planned to stay home and clean my oven.

Normally, when working from the book, it was my habit to tune out my fellow students and scout ahead, concentrating on the question I’d calculated might fall to me, but this afternoon we were veering from the usual format. Questions were answered on a volunteer basis, and I was able to sit back and relax, confident that the same few students would do most of the talking. Today’s discussion was dominated by an Italian nanny, two chatty Poles, and a pouty, plump Moroccan woman who had grown up speaking French and had enrolled in the class hoping to improve her spelling. She’d
covered these lessons back in the third grade and took every opportunity
to demonstrate her superiority. A question would be asked, and she’d race
to give the answer, behaving as though this were a game show and, if quick
enough, she might go home with a tropical vacation or a side-by-side refrig-
erator/freezer. A transfer student, by the end of the first day she’d raised her
hand so many times that her shoulder had given out. Now she just leaned
back and shouted out the answers, her bronzed arms folded across her chest
like some great grammar genie.

(2000, pp. 174–175)

Although Sedaris’s story is clearly designed to maximize its entertainment value,
it offers a rich starting point for our discussion of what research has told us about
the organization and interactional unfolding of classroom discourse. Moreover, it
offers a context in which to consider some of the views of language, and in par-
ticular of humorous or playful language, that we developed in Chapters 1 and 2.

First, we note that in this example, the teacher selects the topic, materials,
form of language to use, and the preferred interactional sequence. Students then
compete to answer questions, in an effort to demonstrate their knowledge of the
correct linguistic forms and thus win the teacher’s favor. Cazden (2001) has noted
that very often, in depictions of classroom discourse, the teacher is presented
as “responsible for controlling all the talk that occurs while class is officially in
session—controlling not just negatively, as a traffic officer does to avoid collisions,
but also positively, to enhance the purposes of education” (p. 2). This view of the
teacher as directing the flow of talk is particularly prevalent in in research on sec-
ond language classrooms, as van Lier once observed:

Most L2 researchers (though see Allwright 1980) assume that it is the
teacher alone who does the structuring work, and if we begin with such an
assumption it is hard to see that the learners’ part in this might be anything
else than being passive recipients of methodological actions devised by the
teacher or the system.

(1988, p. 62)

This tendency, however, ignores the way in which classroom discourse is
co-constructed by all participants, including those who, like Sedaris, “tune out” until
it is their turn. As Pratt (1991) put it, to ignore the dialogic nature of classroom
talk, is to create an analysis in which “whatever students do other than what the
teacher specifies is invisible or anomalous to the analysis” (p. 38). In Sedaris’s story,
it is easy to see how the participation of the “Italian nanny,” “chatty Poles,” and
“pouty, plump Moroccan” form part of the talk, but Sedaris’s silence, too, merits
consideration. How does his choice to “sit back and relax” while other students
“do the talking” contribute to the interaction? Indeed, his description of his own
internal dialogue, as well as of the classroom, shows him to be a far from passive participant. A view of classroom discourse as co-constructed, rather than driven by the teacher’s agenda, offers us a much richer understanding of social interaction. And, as we will see later in this chapter, careful attention to the talk and actions of learners—and in particular talk that might be considered “off task” from the perspective of the teacher or outside observer for its humorous key or playful orientation—may reveal a dimension of classroom life that has yet to be fully documented and explored.

Sedaris’s account of this French-language classroom, however, also points to another dimension of classroom discourse that deserves our attention, namely, the emphasis on form over meaning in the talk itself. Indeed, one reason this scene may seem so familiar to you and thus a great resource for humor may be the way in which Sedaris pokes fun at the decontextualized, grammar driven instruction. Whereas the teacher begins the lesson with a question about the kinds of activities the French might engage in on Bastille Day, the exercise itself is directed toward the use of indefinite pronouns to make generalizations. Seedhouse (2004) referred to this as “form and accuracy” talk (p. 102). He wrote, “The teacher expects that learners will produce precise strings of linguistic forms and precise patterns of interaction which will correspond to the pedagogical focus which he or she introduces” (Seedhouse, 2004, p. 102). In Sedaris’s story, the teacher models the correct use of the third-person singular indefinite pronoun and then invites participation. In this context, we might expect learners to follow her lead, producing similar sentences (albeit in relation to the pictures in the textbook) that state what “one does” during the holidays depicted. Here, the emphasis is not so much on the meaning or truthfulness of their statements but, rather, on their form. Although there is much evidence to suggest that form-focused instruction can facilitate L2 learning, Sedaris’s wry commentary reminds us again that in analyzing classroom discourse, we must attend not only to the ways in which the interaction is co-constructed by all participants but also to the many layers of simultaneously occurring meaning (see Chapter 1). There is not just one conversation happening here. Depending on our line(s) of sight (Verschuren, 2008) and the different timescales (Lemke, 2000) in which the interaction is embedded, we may see things differently, and these views/scales are mutually implicated in one another.

In Sedaris’s story, the grammar-driven exercise that asks students to state what one does on particular holidays in France is unfolding moment by moment in the classroom, but it is funny, at least in part, because we (and Sedaris) recognize this talk as an instance of a more enduring interactional pattern that occurs in language classrooms around the world. The humor derives from the existence of this interactional pattern on different timescales. To see classrooms in this way allows us to appreciate their complexity. Indeed, as Kramsch and Whiteside (2008) noted, simultaneity does not necessarily mean congruence. Blommaert notes that the participants in verbal exchanges might speak from positions on different
scales of historicity, thus creating ‘multiple and contradictory temporalities’
that may lead to different intertextual references and to communicative
tensions.

(p. 659)

This notion of layered simultaneity reminds us that neither participants nor ana-
lysts necessarily have access to all of the potential meanings being made in a par-
ticular moment. Our view is always partial.

A third feature of Sedaris’s narrative is his account of the sequential unfolding
of the talk in this classroom. Not only is it controlled by the teacher, it also follows
what researchers call the IRE (Interaction, Response, Evaluation) or IRF (Inter-
action, Response, Feedback) pattern (see Seedhouse, 2004, for discussion). This
particular ordering of turns and their strict allocation are thought to be constitu-
tive of classroom talk, because they are found in classrooms both across academic
disciplines and throughout different grade levels. Indeed, accounts of children
playing school often feature explicit use of the IRE/IRF interactional pattern
(e.g., Gregory, 2001). As Sedaris continues his story, he pokes fun at what happens
when the IRE/IRF pattern breaks down and the teacher asks the students to take
control over both the sequence and the content of the talk:

The Italian nanny was attempting to answer the teacher’s latest question
when the Moroccan student interrupted, shouting, “Excuse me, but what’s
an Easter?”

It would seem that despite having grown up in a Muslim country, she
would have heard it mentioned once or twice, but no. “I mean it,” she said.
“I have no idea what you people are talking about.”

The teacher called on the rest of us to explain.

The Poles led the charge to the best of their ability. “It is,” said one, “a
party for the little boy of God who call his self Jesus . . . oh shit.” She faltered
and her fellow countryman came to her aid.

“He call his self Jesus and then he be die one day on two . . . morsels of
. . . lumber.”

The rest of the class jumped in, offering bits of information that would
have given the pope an aneurysm.

“He die one day and then he go above of my head to live with your
father.”

“He weared of himself the long hair and after he die, the first day he
come back here for to say hello to the peoples.”

“He nice, the Jesus.”

“He make the good things, and on the Easter we be sad because some-
body makes him dead today.”

Part of the problem had to do with vocabulary. Simple nouns such as
cross and resurrection were beyond our grasp, let alone such complicated
reflexive phrases as “to give of yourself your only begotten son.” Faced with the challenge of explaining the cornerstone of Christianity, we did what any self-respecting group of people might do. We talked about food instead.

“Easter is a party for to eat of the lamb,” the Italian nanny explained.

“One too may eat of the chocolate.”

“And who brings the chocolate?” the teacher asked.

I knew the word, so I raised my hand, saying, “The rabbit of Easter. He bring of the chocolate.”

“A rabbit?” The teacher, assuming I’d used the wrong word, positioned her index fingers on top of her head, wriggling them as though they were ears. “You mean one of these? A rabbit rabbit?”

“Well, sure,” I said. “He come in the night when one sleep on bed. With a hand he have a basket and foods.”

The teacher sighed and shook her head. As far as she was concerned, I had just explained everything wrong with my country. “No, no,” she said. “Here in France the chocolate is brought by a big bell that flies in from Rome.”

I called for a time-out. “But how do the bell know where you live?”

“Well,” she said, “how does a rabbit?”

(2000, pp. 177–178)

Although Sedaris cites lexical and grammatical lapses as the chief reason he and his classmates were unable to explain the concept of Easter to the Moroccan woman, thus resulting in a comical litany of less than informative responses, his account of the teacher’s evaluation to his remark about the Easter bunny merits particular attention. The teacher asks, “Who brings the chocolate?” and Sedaris responds, “The rabbit of Easter. He bring of the chocolate.” The teacher, however, does not accept this answer on factual grounds and proceeds to question him. Sedaris attributes this questioning to his faulty lexical competence, and there ensues a verbal tug-of-war in which he and the teacher go back and forth about who brings the chocolate on Easter: a rabbit or a bell. Although Sedaris exploits this interaction for its comedic potential on semantic grounds, from a classroom discourse perspective we observe two additional elements that contribute to the humor. First, because this interaction begins with an IRE/IRF pattern, we see the teacher positioning herself and being positioned narratively as not only knowing what the right answer is to her question but also having the authority to judge the correctness and appropriateness of the students’ responses. A tension emerges, however, when it becomes evident that the teacher and Sedaris (and presumably the reader!) have different scripts (see Chapter 2) about whether it is a bunny or a bell that brings the chocolate on Easter. Here, the teacher is so surprised by Sedaris’s answer that she attributes it to lexical error. Yet, American readers will recognize Sedaris’s response as perfectly normal according to their Easter script.
Thus, we see Sedaris playing with this incongruity, as he pokes fun at some of the intercultural misunderstandings that often happen in L2 classrooms.

Second, when Sedaris calls for a “time-out” and asks, “But how do the bell know where you live?” we witness a further break from the IRE/IRF sequence, because Sedaris takes the role of evaluator, challenging the teacher to justify her response. This too contributes to the story’s comedic appeal, as the narrator/protagonist is actively flouting his role as a student and thus questioning not only the distribution of participant rights/obligations in this particular sequence but perhaps also the norms of classroom interaction more generally. Indeed, this aspect of Sedaris’s narrative reminds us that in addition to understanding meaning in classroom discourse as co-constructed and subject to layered simultaneity, we must be mindful of the ever-changing social identities and power relations at play, themselves occurring across different timescales.

If you found yourself laughing at Sedaris’s account of this French class, then you are familiar with many of the canonical interactional patterns, social identities, and power relations that constitute traditional classrooms, whether they be aimed explicitly at language acquisition or be focused on the learning of other forms of academic content knowledge. Although Sedaris uses humor to poke fun at classroom talk, researchers have not always attended to instances of funny and/or playful language in formal educational contexts. Before turning to our discussion of what classroom research has said about humor, however, we must first look at how—and, more important, why—researchers examine classroom talk.

Categorizing Classroom Language Use: Positivism and the Search for Best Practices

To understand classroom research, it is important to consider the various theories and ideas on which analysts base their work. Studies rooted in a positivist approach, for example, begin from the premise that classroom discourse is comprised of linguistic forms and patterns that can be observed and analyzed. No matter who the researcher or the participants are, the forms and patterns are understood in the same way. Thus, the “truth” about classroom discourse is there for the researcher to discover. Many classroom studies conducted in this vein are predicated on a transmission or banking model of learning, in which knowledge is passed from expert to novice. Here, the learner’s mind is conceived of as an empty vessel, waiting to be filled with bits of new information. Consequently, it is no surprise that much classroom-based research in education has focused on the role of teacher talk in learning, as this is seen to be a primary source of knowledge. This view of learning has given rise to a robust search for what teachers and policy makers call “best practices” or ways of organizing and delivering instruction that maximize learning outcomes. For researchers working within this vein, the short-term goal is to identify interactional patterns within a classroom, with an eye to whether and
to what extent particular patterns might facilitate learning. The long-term goal is, quite simply put, an attempt to standardize the practice of education so that it becomes as efficient and effective as possible.

An early example of this approach to classroom research in the field of education can be found in the work of Flanders (1970), whose 10-category protocol was seminal in offering researchers a systematic approach to studying teacher–student interaction. Moskowitz (1971) later refined Flanders’s instrument for use in foreign-language classrooms, calling her system FLint, or the Foreign Language Interaction Analysis System (see Allwright & Bailey, 1990, for discussion). Particularly notable for our purposes in both Flanders’s and Moskowitz’s protocols is their treatment of humor. Flanders puts “jokes that relieve tension, not at the expense of another individual” under the category of teacher talk that indirectly “praises or encourages” students. Moskowitz, too, sees humor as a form of teacher talk that has an indirect influence, but she goes so far as to make “jokes” their own category in her instrument: “Jokes: Intentional joking, kidding, making puns, attempting to be humorous, providing the joking is not at anyone’s expense. Unintentional humor is not included in this category” (1971, p. 213). Moreover, she includes laughter by students and the teacher as worthy of the analysts’ attention. Moskowitz later extended her system for use in teacher education, as she sought to define the interactional practices that constitute “good” language teaching.

More recently, many school districts within the United States have begun to use the Danielson Framework (Danielson, 2014) as a way to systematically conduct classroom observations and evaluate teachers. This framework is divided into four domains:

1. Planning and preparation
2. Classroom environment
3. Instruction
4. Professional responsibilities

Within the domain of classroom environment, there is an emphasis on “managing relationships with students and ensuring that relationships among students are positive and supportive” (p. 33). Teachers are directed to create strong rapport with their pupils, but unlike in the Flanders and FLint systems, humor figures into this process only obliquely. Teachers are warned not to create an environment in which students “fear put-downs or ridicule from either the teacher or other students” (p. 33). In other words, the emphasis is squarely on the disaffiliative potential of humor and not, as we saw in Chapter 2, on its role in building classroom bonds, successfully negotiating asymmetrical relations of power, and/or positively managing face threats.

Within the domain of instruction, there is a similar lack of reference to the role of humor in generating student interest or facilitating learning (topics we expand on in Chapters 5–7). The Danielson Framework, in fact, privileges a view of
classroom interaction as serious and utilitarian, similar to that which we described in the preface and Chapter 1. Teachers are admonished to “present concepts and information” with “accuracy, clarity, and imagination, using precise academic language” (p. 55). But just what constitutes “imagination” is left unsaid, apart from the use of “metaphors and analogies to bring content to life” (p. 57). Although humor and language play could figure into an observer’s analysis, lack of specific reference to these forms of talk in the protocol makes this unlikely.

While the three frameworks referenced earlier represent only a small window into positivist approaches to classroom discourse analysis, it is important to recognize that in all of them, a set of a priori categories have been developed to describe classroom talk and these categories are then applied to an actual classroom setting to describe the presence, frequency, or mastery of particular interactional moves. Consequently, such approaches can only account for those moves that fit within the analyst’s classificatory system. Anything that isn’t named in the categories is either absent from or irrelevant to the analysis. While those interested in documenting the presence of humor, language play, or linguistic creativity in classroom talk could certainly develop instruments that foreground such instances of language in use (e.g., Wagner & Urios-Aparisi, 2011), it is important to recognize that such research begins from the premise that this kind of talk matters. And, as we will see throughout this chapter, this has not always been the case in studies of classroom discourse, no matter what the paradigm.

**Thick Description: Interpretive Approaches and Consciousness Raising**

While the preceding section represents one approach for doing research on classroom discourse, this section describes another. Interpretive research begins from the premise that what we know—in this case about classrooms—is always situated, partial, and open to further interpretation. Here, learning is viewed as a process of sensemaking. Individuals are viewed as active constructors of meaning, rather than passive recipients of already formed knowledge (see Chapter 1). Researchers focus their attention on how participants in classroom settings understand, organize, and orient to the activities in which they are engaged. The goal is to develop “thick descriptions” of classroom life. Researchers do not assume that one approach will work for all learners and thus are not looking for best practices. Rather, they aim at developing a richer understanding of the everyday interactional processes by which knowledge, identity, and power relations are constructed. Very often, research conducted in this vein has an explicit (or at least implicit) social justice orientation, predicated on the assumption that discriminatory educational practices would change if teachers, administrators, and policy makers only knew that they were acting in ways that systematically hindered or harmed particular groups of students. Thus, consciousness raising and the development of critical reflexivity are long-term goals of such work.
Researchers working from this perspective use ethnographic and discourse analytic methods to write detailed field notes describing what is happening in the classroom and these notes are generally accompanied by audio—and these days more commonly video—recordings of entire classroom sessions. These data are often complemented by interviews with participants, as well as analysis of site documents and other related materials. Moreover, researchers engage in frequent “member checks” as they compare their interpretations of particular moments with those of the participants. In interpretive paradigms, the researcher often begins with a set of questions, but the categories for analysis emerge in a more bottom-up fashion. It is important to recognize, however, that in classroom settings researchers are particularly attentive to patterns described in earlier work. Hence, a considerable amount of classroom discourse research has focused on, for example, IRE/IRF patterns, types of questions (i.e., known-answer or display questions vs. open-ended or referential questions), and patterns of address (who talks to whom). Yet, because the categories for analysis are theoretically open, they do leave ample room for consideration of non-serious, playful, and otherwise innovative language use. Thus, it is somewhat surprising that such forms of interaction have remained at the margins of research on classroom discourse for so long. Of course, as Cazden (1986) cautioned, it is important that research not overemphasize such forms of talk at the expense of other, more mundane moments of classroom interaction, lest we fall into the trap of reading too much into such novel forms of expression. At present, however, there does not seem to be a risk of this happening.

Saxena and Martin-Jones (2013) divided interpretive research on multilingual classrooms into three phases. The first wave drew on ethnomethodology, microethnography, and the ethnography of communication to understand not only the moment-by-moment unfolding of interaction in such spaces but also the values ascribed to particular communicative practices. For example, ethnomethodologists and microethnographers were particularly concerned with how students come to understand and participate in the interactional order in multilingual classrooms. For example, how do students know what aspect of the communicative repertoire to use? When? With whom? What does the use of a particular word or gesture at a particular time and with a particular person say about the user’s communicative competence or identity? Ethnographers of communication, on the other hand, widened their analytic lens to include a focus on the ways in the interactional practices of children marginalized by race, ethnicity, language, or social class might differ from those privileged in educational contexts. This work was followed by a wave of studies that attempted to link these fine-grained accounts of classroom discourse to broader questions related to language ideologies and educational policy. More recently, researchers have turned their attention
to the multiple contexts and timescales at which classroom interaction unfolds, aiming to, as McCarty (2011, p. 3, as quoted in Saxena & Martin Jones, 2013, p. 290) puts it, “investigate policy as a practice of power that operates at multiple intersecting levels: the micro-level of individuals in face-to-face interaction, the meso-level of communities of practice and the macro-level of nation states and larger global forces.” Although such questions may seem far beyond the scope of classroom research on humor, we would argue that this is not the case. As we shall see in the following chapter, teachers and learners often engage in non-serious and/or playful language in order to critique, subvert, and resist particular relations of power.

**Why Do People Study Classroom Discourse and Interaction?**

If, as we noted earlier, non-serious language use is an integral part of classroom talk and serves important social functions, why have researchers working from a more interpretive framework not taken note of its presence more often and considered its role seriously? One answer may lie in the origins of this research itself, particularly in Anglophone contexts. As Cazden (1986, pp. 433–434) has noted, classroom research employing ethnographically informed discourse analytic methods began in earnest in the early 1970s, just as the United States and Great Britain were grappling with questions around access to educational opportunity and differential educational outcomes in the face of deep-seated racial, ethnic, and social class based inequalities. As U.S. schools became purposefully, although by no means painlessly or successfully integrated, educational researchers began to ask questions about the communicative practices children engaged in at home and at school and how particular forms of interactional asynchrony might affect their educational trajectories. Such work was predicated on the belief that close examinations of talk-in-interaction, and specifically attention to practices such as sequential organization, turn taking, and prosody, could illuminate much about the workings of language as not just the means by which we transmit information from one person to another but also a form of social action. Language, these researchers argued, was implicated in everything from the construction of what counts as knowledge, to the enactment of our social identities, to the moment-by-moment negotiation of power relations. Hence, if we looked closely and carefully at how interaction unfolds in educational spaces, we might be able to uncover not just how, but why some people—and more often than not speakers of minoritized or subordinated languages—seemed to be routinely positioned as failures on academic, personal, and behavioral grounds. In a similar vein, researchers in Great Britain turned their attention to how particular interactional practices at school were implicated in the (re)production of social class–based hierarchies, and in particular the labeling of particular students as disruptive or uneducable. As
Cazden (2001, p. 3) explained, the three main questions for classroom discourse analysts at the time were

1. How do patterns of language use affect what counts as “knowledge,” and what occurs as learning?
2. How do these patterns affect the equality, or inequality, of students’ educational opportunities?
3. What communication competence do these patterns presume and/or foster?

Taken together, these questions reflect the gravity and urgency of the problems to which classroom discourse has responded. And given the stakes, it is no wonder that humor has received short shrift in accounts of classroom talk.

Moreover, we might also ask whether and to what extent researchers’ concerns about how their work would be perceived by the broader scholarly and/or policy community might factor into the decision to focus on humor and language play. Indeed, studies adopting an ethnographic, discourse analytic approach have long occupied a marginal position relative to those emanating from a more positivist stance. And, even within interpretive research, non-serious talk tends to be viewed as tangential to the serious business of school. Waring (2013), for example, prefaced her investigation of language play in adult English as a second language (ESL) classrooms by saying, “In this article, I take a stab at describing the creative by inspecting what may be considered the ‘fluff’ of classroom discourse, where participants are doing being playful” (p. 192). She then goes on to present a study that is notable not only for the precision of her analysis but also for the seriousness of her tone. As we will see in Chapter 4, researchers’ accounts of humor and language play tend to be anything but funny and may even tend toward the hyperserious to circumvent any charges that the work lacks credibility or depth.

A third and perhaps more theoretical reason for the treatment of humor as irrelevant to research on classroom discourse may be the emphasis in sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology on normativity. It is important to recognize that ethnomethodology and its theoretical descendants have traditionally focused on studying the mundane, routine practices that structure social life and understanding. As we saw in the previous section, the emphasis is on describing the interactional order, with particular attention to co-occurrence patterns like question/answer adjacency pairs or the IRE/IRF sequence. When the unexpected does occur, researchers are apt to focus on these interactional moves as “violations” and to highlight the “repair work” that people do to manage the interactional moment and return things to normal (see Hutchby & Wooffitt, 2008, for discussion). As Jaspers (2011) explained,

unusual moments such as these are what Goffman calls ‘ritually sensitive’ moments, i.e. moments at which actual or potential rips show up in the
routine fabric of social life, or moments where constraints apply “regarding how each individual ought to handle himself with respect to each of the others” (Goffman, 1981:16). Quite often on such occasions people use special linguistic material (a standard language, formulaic expressions, . . .) that has significance beyond the practical requirements of the here-and-now in order to re-synchronise the interaction or resume polite conversation.

(p. 1272)

Yet, Jaspers (citing Rampton, 2006) went on to note that “these occasions are equally susceptible to creative, playful and aesthetic behavior” (2011, p. 1272). So, if non-serious, playful and/or innovative language use is a frequent—and, we would argue, normal—part of everyday interaction, what accounts for the preference in classroom research for interactional work that has a stabilizing function, rather than a destabilizing one? And, furthermore, perhaps we should not be so quick to see humor as destabilizing.

Returning for a moment to Cazden’s three questions, we observe that one of the primary goals of classroom research has long been the identification of either deficiencies or mismatches between a particular student’s (or group of students’) communicative competencies and the competencies required for successful navigation of particular educational environments. From this lens, conformity is privileged over nonconformity, as the aim of education is—more often than not—a kind of social (re)production that leaves dominant identities and relations of power uncontested. In classroom studies, this has meant giving short shrift to humor, play, and acts of linguistic creativity, as they are considered deviations from or perhaps even threats to the normal business of classroom life.

So what did researchers working within this tradition do when they encountered humor, language play, and other such innovative language in the classroom? Some, as Cazden (1986) observed, just considered these moments to be irrelevant and ignored them. Others, however, have offered accounts of non-serious language use that tend to reflect a “teacher perspective” on the event, either casting the initiator of the non-serious language as either communicatively incompetent (i.e., unable to recognize the inappropriateness of using a humorous key within a particular activity) or behaviorally disruptive.

The following example, recorded by Philips (1983, pp. 97–98), describes a classroom exchange on the Warm Springs Indian reservation in which an Anglo teacher prefaces her initiating question with an admonishment of serious answers being preferable to non-serious ones. From our perspective, the teacher’s comment indicates that “being silly” is not only an undesirable activity or identity in this classroom, but also a recurring problem. This sets off an interaction in which the teacher positions herself as the regulator of not just the content of student responses/identities but also the overall key of the activity. Whereas the reference to key figures prominently in the data, Philips does not pick up on this theme in her analysis.
Instead, she highlights the overall effect of this exchange in positioning this child, and Indian children more generally, as communicatively incompetent at school.

TEACHER: Now without being silly/ /think of something that does not
smell good.
STUDENT 1: /IT'S NOT/
STUDENT 2: SKUNK!
TEACHER: Now don’t name that one again. Ok.
STUDENT 2: SKUNK
TEACHER: /It looks like you got /. OK. We were /thinking of/ things now.
STUDENT 3: /A LION./
STUDENT 4: ONE OF THOSE/ONE THINGS/.
TEACHER: /What else/doesn’t?
STUDENT 3: A LION.
TEACHER: Well, where did you smell a lion?
STUDENT 3: / /ONE TIME WE WENT ON A TRIP AND THERE'S A /REAL/ LION AND
UH /WE/ WENT TO AFRICA AND THEN I SMELLED ONE /OF THEM
REAL LIONS/ AND IT STINKED.
TEACHER: Now, Lee, /alright/ we said we weren’t gonna be silly. We were gonna
really name some things that do not smell good without being silly.

As we noted earlier, Philips included this episode in her analysis as an example of the tendency of Anglo teachers to construct the answers of Warm Springs Indian children as inappropriate. In her discussion of the exchange, Philips acknowledged the plausibility of the child’s answer on factual grounds as a serious response to the teacher’s question about what things smell bad. But what if the child was orienting to the teacher’s earlier comment about “not being silly”? Could the response “a lion” be understood as an attempt to subvert the teacher’s control over the activity—and over classroom talk in general—by introducing a factually congruent, but non-serious answer (see Grahame & Jardine, 1990)? Unfortunately, Philip’s transcript doesn’t tell us much about the contextualization cues surrounding the child’s utterance, but two pieces of ethnographic evidence later in this book do shed some light on the situation.

Shortly after her discussion of this episode, Philips offers a fairly lengthy description of the importance of play—and in particular pretend play and teasing—as forms of talk central to children’s lives in the Warm Springs community. She noted,

When the Indian children are engaged in interaction, they signal to one another through gestures and body movements, often to try to make others laugh . . . In all of this play one sees a good deal of faking and pretense, or creating a sense that things are other than they “really” are.

(1983, p. 102)
This play, Philips observed, becomes less physical and more verbal as children mature: “Students tell one another things that aren’t true, and say things about one another to others than [sic] aren’t true...” (1983, p. 103). Yet, despite Philips’s attention to non-serious language use as a demonstration of in-group communicative competence in peer-to-peer interaction, she does not extend this interpretive frame to the understanding of teacher–student discourse. For example, the placement of the lion response after the teacher has just chastised Student 2 for repeating “skunk” seems to suggest that the child is seriously attending to the rules of the activity at hand, namely, the importance of naming something factually true that has not been offered yet. At the same time, the child’s appeal to a presumably pretend set of experiences with “real” lions—and in particular the exaggeration involved—mark this utterance as an example of talk that is patently untrue. Although Philips is quick to remark on the factual validity of the child’s answer, she does not explore the possibility that the child may have been engaging in play as an effort to demonstrate his communicative competence in front of his peers or perhaps even for his own enjoyment. Indeed, as Grahame and Jardine (1990) remind us, play does not need to exist in service of any other goal.

A second but related interpretation emerges if we think of this exchange as a form of what Janet Holmes (2000) called “contestive humor” or humor that is “used by the subordinate in an unequal power relationship to subvert the overt power structure” (p. 165). In looking again at the sequential unfolding of the interaction, it is important to note that the child’s story about smelling a lion in Africa comes after the teacher has questioned the validity of his answer. Here, the teacher challenges the child to explain how it is that he knows that lions do not smell good. The placement of the Africa story, coupled with its appeal to empirical, although no doubt improbable evidence, suggests that the child may be playing with the teacher as a way to question her authority and redraw classroom power relations. Indeed, although Philips later acknowledges contestive behavior as a communicative strategy in which some minoritized speakers engage, she does not entertain that possibility with regard to this example.

While access to a recording of the original exchange would allow us to test the feasibility of these interpretive possibilities, it is important to recognize that examining such episodes through the lens of humor may enrich our understanding of classroom discourse. In the preceding example, we do not know what contextualization cues were present during the interactional moment that would lead to an interpretation of the child’s response as either serious or playful. What we do know, however, is that the teacher’s reference to not being “silly” at the start of this episode does turn our attention to key as an important analytic concern.
Our intent in singling out this episode from Philips’s work is not to denigrate in any way the quality or importance of her findings. Her work on multiethnic classrooms stands as a classic within the field of linguistic anthropology and has had a profound impact on how we understand language-in-interaction. And, as we shall see in the next chapter, the questions Philips raises about language in education remain equally relevant to researchers working in today’s linguistically diverse classrooms, because they grapple not only with issues of academic achievement, educational opportunity, and social integration but also with the particular challenges brought about by globalization and new technologies. Indeed, scholars who examine the interface between language and social life (e.g., Blommaert & Rampton, 2011; Creese & Blackledge, 2011; Flores & Schissel, 2014; García, 2009; Jørgensen, 2008; Rampton, 2006, Rymes, 2014), particularly within schools, have begun to call for a new, postmodern sociolinguistics that takes as its starting point

- ambiguity, polysemy, and multimodality as defining features of all forms of communication;
- meaning making as operating simultaneously across multiple locations and timescales; and
- multilingualism and the inequitable/ever-changing distribution of communicative resources as the norm.

These are, as we saw in Chapters 1 and 2, precisely the approaches to language, communication, and linguistic competence that scholarship on humor embraces. And, as we argue throughout this book, it is through such a move that we will gain a richer understanding of the workings of language in educational spaces, particularly as it relates to the construction of knowledge, identities, and power relations, both at the level of classroom interaction and at the level of larger, more enduring educational policies and practices.

**SLA and Classroom Research**

The seriousness of the educational issues to which early work on classroom discourse was responding, and the tendency within ethnographically informed work on interaction to favor normativity and conformity have been presented as two potential reasons researchers have shied away from an explicit focus on humor. But are there any others? Classroom-based work that looks not only at language as the medium of learning but also at language as the explicit object of instruction provides another clue. Here, it is important to acknowledge that within the larger field of research on classroom discourse is a line of work within SLA committed to understanding the specific relationship between classroom talk and additional language learning. While some work in this vein has focused on the acquisition of academic or discipline-specific language forms within the context of schooling
writ large, and the serious consequences of not doing so, other researchers have
turned their attention to examining educational spaces in which a national lan-
guage (e.g., English, French, Japanese) is the primary object of instruction.

Early classroom research within SLA took as its starting point the examination
of deviations between the linguistic forms and patterns produced by learners and
those favored by “native speakers” of a prestige variety of the national language.
This emphasis on error analysis was guided, in part, by a belief that exposure
to faulty input would somehow impede the learning process and lead to the
internalization of incorrect language knowledge and perhaps even fossilization.
It was up to researchers to identify these errors and their origins so that they
could begin to address questions about developmental sequences, first language
“interference,” and—perhaps most important—variation with respect to learning
outcomes. After all, one of the central questions driving early work on SLA was
the observation that learners, and in particular classroom learners, rarely achieved
high levels of communicative competence, deviating from both one another and
native speakers in terms of their ultimate attainment. From this perspective, then,
it is not surprising that language play and other forms of linguistic creativity were
taken to be evidence of incomplete or faulty acquisition, as learners were not
vested with the authority to act upon the language they were learning. As Thomas
(1983), in a critique of this tendency, noted,

all too often, however, language teachers and linguists fail to admit the pos-
sibility of a foreign student’s flouting conventions, in the same way as they
fail to allow him/her to innovate linguistically. In fact, the foreign learner is
usually expected to be ‘hypercorrect,’ both grammatically and pragmatically.
(p. 96)

In addition to the lack of agency accorded to learners, much classroom-based
work on SLA has also been predicated on a cognitive, input-driven model of
learning. This, too, may account for some of the disinterest in humor, language
play, and linguistic creativity. As we saw earlier, much of the initial work in class-
room discourse analysis undertaken from a positivist perspective assumed a trans-
mition or banking model of learning, and classroom-based work within SLA
was no different. Here, language knowledge was thought to be static and remain
unchanged as it passed from experts to novices—and in the case of classrooms,
from teachers to students. Thus, “teacher talk” was an early and important locus
of examination, because it served a key role as the chief form of language input.
Classroom researchers were particularly interested in examining the features of
teacher talk as a didactic register, similar in purpose to caretaker talk or “moth-
erese.” Eager to identify best practices, they focused on the features of teacher talk
that might facilitate comprehension, reduce errors, and lead to better learning
outcomes (see Allwright & Bailey, 1990, for discussion). From this perspective,
instances of humor, language play and linguistic creativity—even if initiated by the teacher—rarely figured into researchers’ accounts of classroom discourse, as such deviations would not be considered a legitimate part of the instructed language system.

In recent years, however, researchers have begun to undertake a serious revision of the models of language and learning underlying cognitively oriented SLA research. As Diane Larsen-Freeman (2006) noted in a recent critique of the notion of fossilization in SLA,

> SLA researchers have written about variability, volatility, unpredictability, indeterminacy and selectivity of interlanguage performance, and they have sometimes done so as if these qualities challenge the concept of fossilization. However, they are serious problems only if one subscribes to a particular view of language—a view of a monolithic, homogeneous, idealized, static end-state competence, where language acquisition is seen to be a process of conformity to uniformity.

(Larsen-Freeman, 2006, p. 194)

Larsen-Freeman’s final point about language acquisition as a “process of conformity to uniformity” is an important one and echoes much of what we said in Chapter 1. With learning understood as the process of acquiring a stable and fully formed system, it is not surprising that humor and language play have not figured widely in classroom-based studies of SLA. But, as Larsen-Freeman goes on to ask,

> What if we start from a different point? What if we acknowledge, instead, that there is no end state because, first of all, there is no end? There is no finite uniformity to conform to.

(Larsen-Freeman, 2006, p. 194)

Here, we see the beginnings of an approach to SLA research in which a focus on humor, language play, and acts of linguistic creativity would figure centrally in our analyses of classroom discourse, a topic that we address in Chapter 5.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, we drew on David Sedaris’s humorous account of his experience learning French to highlight some typical patterns of classroom discourse. We then described and contrasted two frameworks through which educational researchers typically document and analyze these and other forms of classroom talk: positivist and interpretivist. Next, we looked back at the history of educational research to ask why it is that humor, while so frequently present in descriptive accounts of classrooms, is so often ignored or undertheorized in researchers’ resulting analyses.
Finally, we considered the implications of this tendency to privilege serious, utilitarian uses of language over more humorous or playful ones within studies of classroom language learning.

In Chapter 4, we continue our discussion of classroom humor, with an eye to the many important functions it realizes. Specifically, we examine how students and teachers draw on humor to manage their identities and relationships in the face of various psychological, social, and institutional pressures. From quelling the anxieties that come with using an unfamiliar language, to successfully navigating potential face threats and other tensions, to engaging in safe critiques of school-based rules and norms, we argue that humor is an essential and very important aspect of classroom talk.

Note


References


Consider the following examples of classroom discourse in light of our discussion in Chapter 3. What are the participants doing on a turn-by-turn basis? What is happening from the point of view of the teacher? From the point of view of the students? What kinds of identities are the participants enacting? Does your interpretation change depending on whether you view this kind of classroom interaction as occurring just once, or as a pattern that repeats itself over and over again?

Now, compare your interpretation(s) with that of a classmate or a colleague. How are they similar? How are they different? Are there any new interpretations that arise as you look at these segments of classroom talk together?

Example 1

From a multiethnic, multilingual high school in London:

Tutor period in the morning. There has been an incident in the school and Mr. Alcott is talking about racism to the class, who are listening quite quietly (Rampton, 2009a; see also Rampton & Harris, 2010/2014).

MR. A: so we’ve got to make sure that these ideas which I think we all- you know we- we’ve discussed and analysed (.) Um are connected in some ways with how we behave (1.5) I seem- I seem to be doing lots of talking (quietly) I’m sorry

BOY: [no you’re not

ANON: [(light laugh)

SIMON: no go on
ANON M: carry on
ANON: (light laugh)
SIMON: it’s very interesting
BOY: (in a funny voice) go on //
SIMON: (light laugh)
MR. A: okay but you’re the ones who are experiencing: (.) this erm: (1.0) this situation

Example 2

From a university Spanish class in the United States (see Pomerantz, 2001, for other examples from this classroom):

Students in this excerpt are freshmen and sophomores in college, enrolled in a fifth-semester Spanish conversation course. The course is organized around a series of “controversial topics” and is aimed at developing students’ oral language abilities. This sequence occurs during a session in which students are asked to debate whether cults have the right to exist in the United States. The teacher gives some opening remarks and examples. She then divides the class into small groups. The topic does not stir much interest in the small group under consideration. Throughout their conversation, there are numerous digressions from the assigned topic, including much talk about fraternity and sorority pledging. The following extract occurs right after the students discuss how they are being graded in the class. Hannah says that she thinks that the teacher gives them a grade every day. She notes that teacher walks around with little notebook and writes things down—a practice that she finds unsettling. Ravi and Jim add that the grading procedure isn’t clear. Suddenly, Ravi asks Hannah (in English) if she had fun at the sorority dance she attended the night before. She says yes, and they go on to have the following discussion:

RAVI how was the mixer? did you have fun?
HANNAH yeah
RAVI te divertí ti
(‘Did I enjoy yourself’)
HANNAH huh?
RAVI (trying to form verb) te divertives o diverti-
HANNAH sí pero los dos noches antes
(‘yes but the two nights before’)
RAVI mm:
HANNAH solamente tenía tres horas
(‘I only had three hours’)
JIM de dormir o
(‘of sleep’)


RAVI (softly) de dormir
('of sleep')

HANNAH y uh yeah so no uh

RAVI qué significa dormir?
('what does dormir mean?')

JIM sleep

RAVI (softly) gracias
('thanks')

JIM sí sí sí
('yes yes yes')

HANNAH necesito dormir hoy mucho
('I need to sleep a lot today')

RAVI mm

JIM sí
('yes')

HANNAH porque tenemos un retreat mañana
('because we have a retreat tomorrow')

RAVI con las chicas sophomores (final word uttered in mock Spanish style)
('with the sophomore girls')

HANNAH con los las chicas evil (final word uttered in mock Spanish style)
('with the evil girls')

RAVI a::h (laugh) sí

JIM ¿dónde? ¿a dónde?
('where? to where?')

HANNAH I don’t know. Somewhere off campus

RAVI (speaks into microphone on table) Xando* (laughing)

JIM Xando Center City (in mock announcer voice)

HANNAH en una casa de una chica de
('in a house of a girl from')

RAVI cerca de un Xando o Starbucks (laughing)
('close to a Xando or Starbucks')

HANNAH cerca de King of Prussia**
('close to King of Prussia')

RAVI aah porque hay un Starbucks grande
('aah because there is a big Starbucks')

JIM en King of Prussia
('in King of Prussia')

RAVI King of Prussia Mall (laughing)
(. ) sí pues
('yes well')

JIM how do you say shopping?

HANNAH ir de compras
('to go shopping')
RAVI     Sí
JIM     irás de compras con unas chicas
       (‘you will go shopping with some girls’)
RAVI     (laughing)
JIM     shopping trip
RAVI     oh man (.) pues ¡um
       (‘well ¡um’)
HANNAH     ok so (reads aloud in Spanish what the group had previous written)

*Xando is a coffee bar.
**King of Prussia is the name of a large shopping mall.

If you found yourself wondering just what the students were up to in the preceding examples, you are not alone! In Example 1, we see the students interacting with the teacher in ways that could be read as either indexing disrespect or intimacy. On one hand, we might understand the students’ utterances as a collective effort to contest the teacher’s right to establish the topic and interactional norms for a talk about race. On the other, as we saw in Chapter 2, we might understand the students’ actions as a form of jocular abuse aimed at sustaining or building rapport with the teacher. Key and frame thus become central to the interpretation of this segment, because it is unclear whether and to what extent individual student contributions to this exchange are sarcastic, playful, or a little bit of both.

In Example 2, the students have abandoned the teacher’s assigned topic in favor of their own. While we might observe that they are “off task” with respect to the teacher’s lesson plan and thereby somewhat disobedient, the overall purpose of the class was to improve the students’ conversational abilities in Spanish through engagement in authentic conversation. Here, the students are using Spanish with one another, albeit in playful fashion, to interact in meaningful ways. Indeed, the very act of play seems to be driving their desire to communicate with one another. Throughout the exchange, we see the participants working through grammatical difficulties and asking one another for lexical assistance in order to further the comical story world they are co-constructing. These are, as we discuss in the next chapter, the very moves that SLA researchers cite as facilitative of language learning! Throughout this chapter we will return to these interactions, but for now keep thinking about what you see happening in them.

As we saw in Chapter 3, researchers have long struggled with how to understand humor in classroom contexts. In Pomerantz and Bell (2011) we drew on the notion of the safe house as a way to understand the various—and more often than not—ambiguous ways in which such talk functions in educational settings. Briefly, Pratt (1991) defined safe houses as “social and intellectual spaces where groups can constitute themselves as horizontal, homogeneous, sovereign communities with high degrees of trust, shared understandings, temporary protection from legacies of oppression” (p. 40). Canagarajah (2004) later extended this term
to describe the spaces at school in which students found refuge from irrelevant, face-threatening, or oppressive institutional practices. He examined the ways in which students passed notes, drew in the margins of their books, and interacted during small-group discussions, for example, to reframe school-based activities in ways that not only were more meaningful to them but also afforded a more favorable array of identity options. Secure in their safe houses, students were able to fashion new identities for themselves and gain some measure of power, while minimizing the threat of institutional reprisal. Whereas Canagarajah focused on the physical spaces that provide safe houses in educational settings, like Pratt we understood this construct to include metaphorical spaces as well. Specifically, we noted that the shift into a humorous key or play frame, as in the earlier examples, often serves a similar function, calling into being new meanings, identities, and relationships. Moreover, we found that as students play in and with the language of instruction, they may reframe classroom talk in ways that facilitate additional language learning.

In this chapter, we review the small but growing body of research on humor in classroom settings, with an eye to how the safe-house construct might help us to make sense of such talk. Our review is not meant to be exhaustive, as new studies (much to our delight!) continue to emerge. Rather, we have elected to highlight specific studies in detail in order to deepen our discussion of what a focus on humor might contribute to our understanding of classroom discourse and to language education more broadly. In particular, our chapter addresses the following questions:

- To what extent is humor a “normal” part of classroom interaction?
- How do humor and language play work in language classrooms?
- What might the consequences of embracing or limiting humor in the classroom be?

In Chapter 5, we examine the relationship between classroom talk and language learning. For now, our discussion focuses more on studies that illuminate the interactional ecology of classrooms.

**Normalizing Humor at School**

*When I say I miss school, I mean my friends and the fun. Not the school.*

—Anon.

Ethnographic, discourse analytic studies of classroom interaction have shown us that humor is anything but abnormal at school. As we saw in Chapters 1 and 3, talk around and about education—especially language education—tends to be serious. Yet, we know from classroom research (and from personal experience as well!) that talk within classrooms is frequently rife with humor, language play,
and other acts of creative language use. And, as we noted in the preface, the more languages available, the more opportunities there are for language play. Teachers, too, as we will see in Chapter 6, often use non-serious language both to make instructional points and build rapport. Although it might be tempting to try to quantify the presence of humor as a way to demonstrate its normativity and thus analytic merit, we believe that the presence or frequency of particular forms of talk is not enough to warrant our attention. After all, every classroom has its own ever-changing ecology. Just as participants in the most scripted classrooms may sometimes erupt into laughter, so, too, may students in more intentionally playful instructional environments engage in long periods of serious behavior. Rather, our interest in examining humor is motivated by calls from within the field of classroom discourse research to account for the totality of classroom language, not just that which is teacher directed, serious, “on task,” or predictable.

Recall that in Chapter 3, we noted that frameworks that begin with predetermined ideas about what forms of talk should be included in an analysis run the risk of ignoring or erasing important interactional moments. Such work treats humor from the outset as tangential to the “real” business of school and in need of remediation. Such a view is quite troubling when we consider how particular protocols for examining classroom interaction, like the Danielson Framework, are used not only to document what is happening in specific classrooms but also to evaluate teachers in very high-stakes ways. Indeed, we are deeply concerned about the role certain forms of classroom discourse analysis have come to play in education policy making, at both the level of individual schools and across countries such as the United States, because they are often predicated on very narrow views of language and communication. Thus, we believe that it is not the mere presence of humor that matters but, rather, the imperative to approach classroom discourse analysis from a more open stance that warrants our attention. This means seeing everything that happens in educational spaces as a normal part of classroom discourse, whether we believe it to be purposeful, orderly, and facilitative of learning or not.

Ethnographic, discourse-analytic classroom research, due in no small measure to its interpretive stance and dynamic design, has been instrumental in illuminating (albeit at times unintentionally) how humor and language play form part of the everyday fabric of classroom life. Rampton’s (1995, 2006; Rampton & Harris, 2010/2014) ongoing work in multilingual, multiethnic high schools in London, from which Example 1 is drawn, is particularly notable in its effort to describe the totality of classroom talk. His research offers detailed accounts of the ways in which adolescents draw on their multilingual communicative repertoires to play with and through various national languages, socially marked codes, and bits of mass-mediated discourse (i.e., songs, commercials, YouTube videos) to do complex forms of identity work and comment on racial, ethnic, and social class tensions. Of particular interest to Rampton are styling and crossing, two practices that
often involve not only shifts into a non-serious key and/or play frame but also no small measure of linguistic innovation. Rampton and Charalambous (2012) define stylization as follows:

In stylization, speakers shift into varieties or exaggerated styles that are seen as lying beyond their normal range, beyond what participants ordinarily expect of them, and this disjunction of speaker and voice draws attention to the speaker herself/himself, temporarily positioning the recipient(s) as spectator(s), and at least momentarily reframing the talk as non-routine—a joke for example, or some kind of artful performance.

(p. 484)

Stylization differs from crossing in that crossing involves the use of varieties or styles that raise issues of ownership and entitlement. For example, a working-class boy living in London might style a posh British accent to mock a friend for acting too arrogant. In this example, neither the friend nor an outside observer is likely to call out the boy for appropriating communicative resources that didn’t belong to him or for acting classist. But imagine what might happen in a classroom if a white female teacher were to chastise a male student of Indian origin for not following directions and that Indian student’s best friend, a White male, were to react to the teacher’s utterance by saying something back to the teacher in a stylized Indian accent—a not so subtle comment on British colonialism. Here, the White male friend, however well meaning, might run the risk of insulting his peer, as the appropriation of Indian style might be read as patronizing rather than playful. Yet, in his data from the mid-1990s on crossing, Rampton found that

a clever or funny interactional design could capitalize on ethnic difference and neutralize the political sensitivities, potentially leading to new solidari-
ties; conversely, the politics might be overriding, crashing the original inter-
actional plan; or alternatively, the two could be held in awkward tension, as when people found jokes funny that they also objected to as racist.

(2009b, p. 153)

This view of crossing as a risky, ambiguous venture accords closely with our discussion in Chapter 2 of how humor functions more generally in conversation. As in our safe-house research, crossing often entails the use of a playful key and frame to downplay the effects of difficult and potentially dangerous identity work. And, as Rampton observed, crossing sometimes results in polysemous outcomes, where people both delight in and are offended by particular forms of identity play. Rampton’s attention to styling and crossing in multilingual, multiethnic schools in London has prompted other researchers to look closely at these practices in other educational
context (e.g., Bucholtz, 1999; Creese & Blackledge, 2011; Grimshaw, 2010; Jaspers, 2011; Shin, 2012). Although not all instances of styling or crossing are humorous or even playful, we now have considerable documentation of the functions of this kind of talk, particularly in ethnically and linguistically diverse urban schools.

Whereas much of Rampton’s work is aimed at understanding the functions and implications of styling/crossing within institutions marked by sharp ethnic, racial, and social class stratification and massively interconnected modes of communication, he has also paid considerable attention to the moments in the ongoing flow of interactional events within which such talk is likely to occur. For example, he has observed that artful performances (e.g., stories, songs, jokes, etc.) and games are two contexts in which the framing may serve to loosen up the rules for conventional language use and give rise to a broader array of acceptable linguistic practices, including humor, play, and linguistic innovation. This is quite similar to our work on safe houses. Yet, Rampton goes on to argue that styling and crossing also occur during moments of highly ritualized interaction, when “the uncertainty on hand temporarily jeopardizes the reassuring, orderly flow of interaction, intensifying the need to show respect for social relations to compensate” (Rampton & Charalambous, 2012, p. 489). While people often turn to a host of highly scripted interactional formulas, like greeting or apology routines, to restore order, “funny voices”—a potentially destabilizing force—tend to occur at such moments as well.

At this point, you might be wondering: How could funny voices possibly serve to resynchronize an interaction? Returning for a moment to Example 1, we see just such a move in the boy’s final turn, when it has become increasingly unclear if the class will grant Mr. A the right to establish the potentially uncomfortable topic of racism that he has nominated for discussion. Note that Mr. A responds to the boy’s “go on” (uttered in a funny voice) by resuming control of the classroom and the topic. On one hand, it is as if the boys have taken the interaction one step too far, thus provoking the teacher to step in and restore order. On the other, we might simply note that the funny voice serves to defuse an escalating situation and thus ushers in a return to “normal classroom business.” That is, the change in key works as a release valve and allows teachers and students to return to their conventional classroom roles. In Example 2, although we see the students attempting to interact with one another in meaningful ways in Spanish, we also witness considerable gaps in their lexical repertoires. Indeed, we observe several instances in which the students code-switch into English in order further their exchange. Yet, as the conversation unfolds, they begin to alter their voices in ludic ways, thus both highlighting and mocking their lack of proficiency in Spanish. Midway through the excerpt, Ravi uses a stylized Spanish pronunciation to draw attention to the English word sophomores he has inserted into his utterance. What makes this move particularly interesting is that the word sophomore by virtue of its Greek origin could be a legitimate Spanish word. Hannah then mirrors this practice, again using a highly stylized voice to render the word evil in mock Spanish.
In Example 2, we see styling not just occurring within the context of a storytelling moment—with the attendant effect of embellishing the performance—but also serving as an index of the students’ earnest efforts to keep this conversation going in the face of lexical trouble. As Rampton (2009b) describes, “performance might be offered for the enhancement of experience, but interaction ritual offers a defense against its vulnerabilities” (p. 160). Yet, we might also note that some of the self-mocking playfulness in this exchange may serve a protective function (e.g., Boxer & Cortés-Conde, 1997; Norrick, 1993; also see Chapter 2), anticipating and preventing charges of linguistic incompetence. After all, as we will see later in this chapter, with L2 learners it is sometime difficult to judge when innovative language use serves as an index of interactional competence or lack of linguistic ability. Thus, we see both performance and interactional ritual as viable lenses through which to understand the use of funny voices in these episodes. Consequently, it is important to recognize that while humor and language play are often original, nonformulaic, and even silly in their surface form or sequential placement, they are nothing short of ordinary in everyday interaction and may even serve to preserve the status quo. In fact, a classroom in which all forms of mirth and play have been prohibited, may find maintaining order a challenge, as participants struggle to find other ways to synchronize their interactions and defuse tensions.

**How Does Humor Work in Language Classrooms?**

As the preceding section has illustrated, non-serious, ludic, and otherwise innovative language may be a normal part of classroom talk, but engaging in it is no simple affair. Although as we saw in Chapter 2, even those new to a language can certainly initiate and respond to funny or playful talk, more sophisticated non-serious language use necessitates well-developed communicative and interpretive repertoires, the careful and coordinated deployment of contextualization cues, ample reflexivity, and more often than not some risk. Waring (2013) provides a particularly illuminating account of how students “do being playful” in an adult ESL classroom. Drawing on 16 hours of audio and video recordings from eight adult ESL classrooms in the United States, she scoured her corpus for instances in which the participants themselves either initiated or responded to a communicative action in playful fashion. She then looked at how such moments unfolded on a turn-by-turn basis, paying careful attention to the range of communicative resources deployed in each episode (i.e., language, gesture, posture, pitch, etc.). In the following reproduced example, Abby, a student, appropriates a teacherly identity through her comic styling of the language of positive assessment in educational settings (see also Bushnell, 2008):

T: ( . . . ) a:::nd December? ( )
   it’s the [English e. ah hah?]
At the start of this extract, Abby has spelled the word December wrong on the blackboard, and the teacher has corrected her. On making the change, Abby raises her chalk in a triumphant gesture and then offers herself an exaggerated token of praise, thus momentarily speaking through the voice of a teacher. The teacher then offers Abby a positive, but somewhat less exuberant, evaluation of her effort to amend the spelling of December on the board. Waring observes that

by playfully appropriating a category-bound activity (Schegloff 2007a) of a teacher, Abby temporarily claims that category (as opposed to enacting the student category in the earlier lines), and in so doing, implicitly chastises the teacher for her ‘oversight’ and succeeds in obtaining the latter’s EPA [explicit positive assessment].

(2013, p. 197)

What makes Waring’s (2013) analysis particularly notable is the way in which she details the interactional coordination involved in pulling off funny moments in class. Here, the students act in ways that might run the risk of sanction, but instead, they are lauded for their playfulness. Indeed, Waring goes on to argue that humor and play served a “transformative role” in the classrooms she examined, allowing participants momentary relief from “institutional roles and constraints” (2013, p. 206). In the preceding example, Abby’s playful appropriation of a teacher identity not only broadens the range of subject positions available to her in a classroom context but also saves her from being positioned as less competent in front of her peers. Waring, like Rampton, further noted that the participants in her study were clearly cognizant of their use of humor and play in the classroom and at times even reveled in the “naughtiness” of their actions. Secure in their safe houses, participants were able to “mess around” with both the institutional and interactional order of the classroom and reap the rewards of their small transgressions.

Reconfiguring the Identity Landscape: Saving Face

Teacher: Why are you talking during my lesson?
Student: Why are you teaching during my conversation?
Waring’s (2013) work is but one example of the many studies of classroom discourse that have looked at the ways in which students and teachers negotiate their positions relative to one another in what is, by all accounts, a highly stratified and asymmetrical setting. As we noted in Pomerantz and Bell (2011), students often find their identities as competent individuals threatened when they are asked to provide information that they don’t know or to communicate in ways that are unfamiliar or uncomfortable. Van Dam (2002), for example, offers a richly textured analysis of one face-saving moment in a secondary school English as a Foreign Language (EFL) class in the Netherlands (pp. 213–214). In this episode, recorded by two students in their joint diary, Schreurs (the teacher) has asked the pupils to give the next question in an ongoing English-language exercise. Note that because this is a diary extract, the usual transcription conventions do not apply here. This entry opens with an illustration that helps frame the extract textually as playful:

[Drawing of laughing and grinning pupils] 6th English. Schreurs was in his usual mood.

S.:  “Next question!”
ELLEN:  “Mag ik even naar de wc. menner?”
   [L1 Dutch: May I go to the lavatory please, Sir?]
S:  “I don’t understand you, speak English!”
E:  “Darf ich mal zum . . .”
Even Schreurs joins in the laughter!

In this IRE/IRF sequence (see Chapter 3), the unmarked response to Schreurs’s command would be a rendering of the question the teacher has requested. Instead, Ellen (a third student) asks the teacher, in Dutch, if she may go to the bathroom. The teacher, noting the breach in both interactional order and language choice, responds by saying that he doesn’t understand Ellen’s utterance and demands that she reformulate it in English. In analyzing this extract, van Dam (2002) noted that

what was a half-off-record informal request uniquely addressed to the teacher in a dyadic interaction is recontextualized as public class business. Being ordered to repeat something on command in front of an overhearing audience is in itself quite humiliating: an unequivocal instance of a face-threatening act (Brown & Levinson, 1987). On top of that there is the potential gender- and age-related embarrassment that private physical needs are publicly topicalized. And thirdly, the order is trivial, functionally pointless: there was no problem of understanding in the first place.

(pp. 214–215)
Van Dam (2002) goes on to argue that “given the asymmetrical power relationship between the teacher and the students in institutional situations, it seems Ellen has no choice but to obey or be openly rebellious and face the consequences” (p. 215). What happened next, however, is all but expected. Ellen, rather than responding to the teacher’s directive to reformulate her question in English, instead deploys the equivalent question in German—another language she is obligated to study at school. As van Dam noted, her playful response serves as a skillful face-saving maneuver. Here, Ellen’s somewhat cheeky move orients to the first part of the teacher’s request, where he states that he “doesn’t understand Dutch.” As this statement is not factually true, Ellen’s response seems highlight the fact that she is conscious of the rules of language classroom “game.” Her use of German seems to play on the fact that it doesn’t matter what you say in a language classroom, provided that you say it in the language of instruction (see Pomerantz, 2008, for a similar example). Her utterance, as van Dam contended, “is both pseudo-cooperative and subtly subversive” (2002, p. 215). Thus, Ellen is able to save face through her witty display of German thereby avoiding the teacher’s sanction and offering all participants in this tense exchange, and as we might assume from the comment about the teacher being in his “usual mood,” some much warranted comic relief from both the stress of the episode and the monotony of the lesson itself.

Class Clowns

Very often, however, students want not only a momentary reprise from the subordinate position they tend to occupy in classrooms; they also struggle with competing identity aspirations. That is, they often want to be seen as “good students” from the point of view of the teacher but also as “cool” in their eyes of their peers. Unfortunately, in some educational contexts these two identity positions become mutually exclusive, as high peer status is indexed within and through defiance toward the teacher and various institutional norms. Thus, as Norrick and Klein (2008) noted in their study of elementary school class clowns, some students “baldly mock the learning process, with its ‘question, answer, feedback’ structure, or even the teacher herself in an attempt to assert a rebel (but humorous) identity (p. 103). Nancy offers this lighthearted example of clowning from her own teaching, in which a student, Sang-Tae, plays on the literal meaning of her directive to “make noise” in the classroom (Bell, 2009, p. 245):

NANCY: If you want to work together, talk, make noise.
          Noise is good in my class. I like noise.
SANG-TAE: All right. (Starts banging on desk, students laugh)
In contrast, Acalá Recuerda (2010) offers a sobering examination of the interactional practices at a multilingual, multiethnic high school outside of Madrid. In line with educational policy in Spain at the time of the study, both students who were identified as learning disabled and those from immigrant backgrounds or with interrupted formal schooling were singled out for placement into a specific educational track, referred to in the study as the Compensatory Program. Focusing on “norm transgression sequences,” Acalá Recuerda documented the ways in which particular students in the Compensatory Program were further positioned in specific moments and over time as “problematic,” “conflictive,” or “at risk” (2010, p. 212) and how this negatively affected their academic and social trajectories. Of particular importance in Acalá Recuerda’s work is the role of what she termed “compensatory logic,” in which teachers drew on a discourse of social inclusion justify the need to insist that students follow classroom norms uncritically, regardless of whether or what their divergences might contribute educationally or socially to the activity at hand. She noted that by virtue of the compensatory logic, teachers often prioritized the assimilation to school-based norms to such an extent that it detracted from the lesson at hand. Although humor and play were not the foci of Acalá Recuerda’s work, she provides a poignant illustration of how one student of immigrant origin, Obiang, played on the teachers’ attention to school-based norms of conduct so that he could engage the class in long, humorous digressions. In general, the teachers ignored his forays into the absurd, but in one case, the teacher in question oriented to the play frame and positioned the student not as a transgressor in need of academic and social remediation but, rather, as a smart student who knew not only what the rules of the school game were, but also how to break them with impunity. Even more notable in this example was the role the teacher played interactionally in constructing a safe house for this student. While other students verbally positioned Obiang as ignorant and incompetent, in this instance, the teacher announced that Obiang was just acting “tonto” (foolish) in order to make the class laugh. Indeed, she prefaced her remarks about Obiang’s clowning by categorizing him as “listo” (smart) and fully cognizant of his efforts to derail the lesson at hand.

Additional examples of clowning can be seen in the two extracts with which we began this chapter. In both cases, we see students drawing on humorous or playful language, albeit in different ways, to enact classroom identities that simultaneously respond to both school and peer-group demands; that is, the competing needs to be perceived as educationally compliant and socially cool. Example 2 is particularly illustrative of ludic student-initiated talk that is on task via its orientation to classroom goals, but also disorderly (and thereby cool) in terms of its lack of deference to the teacher’s right to assign conversational topics. Rampton and Harris (2010/2014) have argued that such talk is tolerated and at sometimes even encouraged by teachers, because they prefer the wit and exuberance displayed by
Playing It Safe
class clowns to the refusal to participate often demonstrated by other pupils. In Pomerantz and Bell (2011, pp. 155–157), we see a teacher getting in on the action in a Spanish conversation course. Here, she doesn’t merely condone the student’s play but also contributes to it:

RAVI  
me gusta mi clase de cálculo porque um (2)  
(I like my calculus class because um’)

el profesor no habla inglés (class laughs)  
(‘my professor doesn’t speak English’)

y es como un idioma extraña  
(‘and it’s like a strange language’)

TEACHER  
la matemática o el profesor? (laughing)  
(‘math or the professor’)

And, as we shall see in Chapter 5, there is some research to suggest that playful language use with a more linguistically skilled interlocutor can contribute positively to language development and the expansion of learners’ communicative repertoires. Thus, as Norrick and Klein (2008) asked,

How much and which kinds of humor are really disruptive? Do the positive aspects of humor—its infusion of playfulness, creativity and flexibility, along with its potential to enhance rapport among the pupils and between the teacher and pupils—balance out its disruptive effects?

(p. 103)

Indeed, we agree with Rampton and Harris (2010/2014), who postulated that the existence of the “class clown” as a tolerated and, at times, even favored classroom identity marks a change in the traditional interactional order within classrooms, because teachers and students in many educational contexts need relief from the demands of exam-driven educational policies and scripted curricula that favor particular, tightly controlled, kinds of participation. Yet, as we will see in the following section, some forms of clowning around are significantly riskier.

Playing It Safe in the Classroom: “Just Kidding!”

As you have no doubt realized by now, deniability is a key feature of humor (see Chapter 2). When we invoke a humorous key, everything we say and do is subject to the proviso that we were “just kidding.” Likewise, when we construct a play frame, it becomes difficult—and at times even impossible—to distinguish between reality and fantasy. Some 60 years ago, anthropologist Gregory Bateson (1955/1972) asked how is it that we come to understand some actions as “real” and others as “play” or mere artifice. To this end, he offered the following
observation from the animal world: “The playful nip denotes the bite, but it does not denote what would be denoted by the bite.” In part, Bateson was asking, “What distinguishes a bite from a nip when they look so similar on the surface?” What clues (or, as we saw in Chapters 1 and 2, contextualization cues) emerge during an interaction to tell fellow creatures that the dog with the open maw is just playing around? This verisimilitude makes a humorous key or a play frame a particularly powerful resource within classroom contexts. Participants can create new identities and power relationships, appropriate/resist the identities and positions of others, or even balance competing identity aspirations all while claiming that they are just fooling around. So, how do we know what’s real and what isn’t? In classroom contexts, whose interpretation counts? As Ravi, a student featured in Example 2, told Anne of his time in high school,

I think teachers get a kick out of like you know, “oh he’s so . . . he’s so funny,” but like I think that year (in high school when I got 98 detentions) taught me to curb that (laugh). Classroom antics had to be curbed in order to pass (laugh).

(Pomerantz, 2001, p. 256)

Let’s return to Example 1 again. At the start of the episode, Mr. A makes an oblique reference to some “ideas” the class has discussed in the past and tries to connect this conversation to the students’ actions outside of class. We know from the field notes accompanying this example that what Mr. A is alluding to is an incident that happened at school that had something to do with race. He then goes on to admonish the students to think critically about their actions and quickly follows this with an apology uttered in a soft voice, “I seem to be doing lots of talking (quietly) I’m sorry.” Immediately after, a male student challenges the sincerity Mr. A’s statement of contrition and the students begin to laugh lightly. A chorus of students then chimes in, urging Mr. A to continue and confirming both their interest in the topic and their willingness to listen to what he has to say. Here, it is difficult to discern whether these utterances (at least at first) are aimed at constructing the speakers as compliant students eager to hear what the “sage on the stage” has to say (thus setting the speakers apart from the boy who initially challenged the teacher) or playful barbs designed to align the speakers with their “bad boy” leader. We know from the transcript that some “light laughter” accompanies these remarks, but we don’t know whether this laughter indicates discomfort at the challenge to the teacher’s authority, mirth in the face of mounting transgression, or some combination of these.

Yet, we could also understand some of the identity work enacted in this extract as defensive in origin, as the students try to preempt the face-threatening nature of “feelings talk” at school. We might surmise that Mr. A’s apology for “doing lots of talking” indicates a preference for a participation structure that is less lecture and more discussion. Consequently, we might infer that the students have been
or will be invited to share their perspectives. From the field notes, we don’t know what role, if any, the students or the teacher had in the race incident under consideration. Thus, we might also read the students’ utterances as enactments of jocular masculine identities aimed at saving face, so that both their defiance and any subsequent admissions of guilt, fear, or caring related to the racial incident in question can be written off as mere play.

While the preceding represent some plausible interpretations of what is happening in Example 1, it is important to keep in mind that unlike the students in Waring’s or Bell’s studies, who were in enrolled in an optional, non-credit-bearing ESL courses, the students’ in this example, like those in Acalá Recuerda’s work, are in high school. They have, by virtue of their age, status, and educational setting, much more to lose by “acting out” at school. Playing it safe matters here, and the students may be engaged in some work to figure out just how far they can go with Mr. A before they are subject to some form of disciplinary action, because no matter what the students’ aims or intentions, it is, more likely than not, the teacher’s interpretation that is ultimately going to count at school.

### Playing Dumb in the Foreign-Language Classroom

The consequences of asymmetries such as those described earlier are evident within many studies of humor in language classrooms. Very often, people invoke key and frame to manage the tensions between their complex and ever-changing identity needs and their institutional/interactional positions in creative ways. Worth (2008), for example, looked carefully at the interactions that took place in a first-year Italian class at a prestigious U.S. university. She described the ways in which classroom foreign-language learners “played dumb” to protect their identities as competent college students and articulate language users. As Worth noted, although they were all intelligent and articulate, some students would regularly engage in performances of incompetence, of failure to comprehend classroom events, and of the inability to speak any words of Italian. This counter-discourse, which was initiated by one or two students and eventually spread to many of the students in the class, was a means by which certain learners protected their identities as “successful student” when threatened by the possibility of an unsuccessful grade or outcome, or as “articulate individual” when silenced by the TL-only [target language only] policy.

(p. 253)

In interviews with students, Worth (2008) learned that some engaged in these practices to preempt potential face threats and challenges to their identities. Students intentionally “played dumb” to both lower their own and others’ expectations about what grade they might receive and what kind of language learner they were in what amounted to be—at least for some pupils—a challenging course.
Here it is important to notice, as Worth repeatedly emphasized in her analysis, that the students themselves referred to these practices as “play.” Thus, one might wonder whether and to what extent the invocation of a play frame here—albeit in retrospective fashion—is an attempt by particular students to “play it safe” in front of the researcher, who, as an Italian instructor herself, has observed the students’ lack of linguistic expertise in action. As one of Worth’s informants put it,

> if you shoot low in a class you’re not sure about, then you won’t let yourself down, (. . .) It was like, if I can skate out of here with a solid BC [sic], I’ll be happier than all hell and I’m just gonna go on and graduate. Like, yeah, if you almost, I don’t know, dumb yourself down, you’ll be like, whatever, I’m not expecting an A. The letdown is a little ea—I mean, if you’re not expecting it, then no big deal.

(2008, p. 253)

Here, the explicit invocation of a play frame is congruent with the construction of a safe house within both the interview and the larger research context. As this student explains the rationale for his actions, he offers both himself and Worth a lens through which to understand his cumulative performance in class. Although Worth was particularly interested in why classroom language learners might engage in such actions and what the implications might be for language instruction in such settings, we are reminded of Bateson’s distinction between the nip and the bite in trying to understand the implications of her work. To what extent can these students’ practices be read as “play” and to what extent are they a “real” indication of their communicative competence? Are these students feigning ignorance, or is this really what they can do in the language of instruction? Here, the fact that Worth’s participants are explicit in their desire to understand and have their actions understood as play points to the students’ recognition of this frame as affording interpretive possibilities that go beyond serious or nonplayful language use. That is, this seems to be a conscious effort by the students, at least in part, to use play to construct a safe house in plain view.

A similar case is detailed in Lefkowitz and Hedgcock’s (2002) examination of the psychosocial factors that shape pronunciation in U.S. foreign-language classrooms at the secondary and postsecondary level. Here, the authors considered the role of prestige as it relates to particular phonetic realizations in French and Spanish classrooms. Because their work draws on extensive survey and interview data to analyze students’ perceptions of classroom discourse, it offers an important complement to Worth’s study. Like Worth, Lefkowitz and Hedgcock also found a form of “playing dumb” in their data, with deliberate mispronunciations of French and Spanish equated with being “cool” or “subversive” in class, particularly in high school contexts. The authors note that although students now in university were quick to distance themselves from their high school antics, they expressed unfettered joy in telling the researchers about their playful insubordination in
high school, with some accounts detailing with pride just the kind of banter we observed in Mr. A’s class. Yet, Lefkowitz and Hedgcock acknowledge a discrepancy that begins to emerge as students move from high school to college, with those at the university level expressing respect for peers who display “native-like” pronunciation. Indeed, they found that students at all levels expressed anxieties with respect to using the language of instruction, with some informants noting that they underperformed in class so as not to make other, less skilled classmates “feel bad” or even to mask their own incompetencies (see Pomerantz, 2008). While language play is not directly addressed by Lefkowitz and Hedgcock in their study, their findings with respect to how deliberate and very often deliberately humorous mispronunciations are used in some classroom contexts to reduce status differences and accord closely with Pratt’s definition of the safe house as a place favoring “horizontal” and “homogeneous” relations of power. At the same time, Lefkowitz and Hedgcock also noted that despite students’ insistence in their abilities to distinguish “good” and “bad” pronunciation, many were unable to produce speech samples that varied significantly in quality. Thus, once again as in Worth’s (2008) study we are left wondering whether and to what extent references to playing dumb are also directed at “saving face” given the pressure in many language classrooms to appropriate “native-speaker” like norms, particularly in the area of phonology. As Lefkowitz and Hedgcock put it, “‘off-target’, or inaccurate, oral production (particularly pronunciation) may reflect subversion and the covert prestige paradox as much as it may suggest underdeveloped speech production and metalinguistic skills” (2002, p. 239). Indeed, here we may be seeing the construction of safe houses with many rooms—some directed at managing peer relationships and others devoted to protecting learners from the identity threats imposed by the structure of classroom language education and the pressure to achieve “native-like” patterns of language use. The questions then become: What are students telling us through their ludic underperformances in foreign-language classrooms? Are they playing their teachers, or are they merely playing themselves?

**Mock Language: Just Play or Covert Racism?**

An additional form of language play that has received attention in the research literature is the use of mock languages. Hill (2008) describes mock Spanish as a set of practices by which Anglos in the American Southwest appropriate and transform elements of Spanish to create a particular kind of persona. Briefly, the tactics of mock Spanish include the following:

- Hyper-Anglicization or deliberate mispronunciation of Spanish words (similar to what Worth and Lefkowitz and Hedgcock describe)
- Incorporation of Spanish loan words and mass-mediated Spanish expressions into English discourse (“cerveza” or “Yo quiero Taco Bell”)

Mock Language: Just Play or Covert Racism?
• Obscene or scatological use of Spanish terms in place of English equivalents (“I kicked him in the cojones”)
• Morphological changes, such as the addition of the suffix –o to derive new Spanish words from English (i.e., “shark” → “sharko”)
• Semantic pejoration, or the use of words with a positive or neutral connotation in a negative or humorous way (macho to mean hypermasculine as opposed to just male)
• Disorderly use of Spanish grammatical elements (“Me no problema”)

To Hill, the user of mock Spanish is at once a jocular, witty, somewhat worldly speaker, who knows just enough of this “foreign” language to use it in creative ways. She goes on to note, however, that the association of mock Spanish with this persona, “assigns Spanish and its speakers to a zone of foreignness and disorder, richly fleshed out with denigrating stereotypes” (Hill, 2008, p. 129). Thus, for Hill, mock Spanish is at once “jocular and pejorative,” functioning as a “socially acceptable” form of White racism.

Studies of classroom discourse have uncovered instances of various mock national languages, including jocular attempts at styling L2 users (e.g., Chun, 2009; Creese & Blackledge, 2011; Jaspers, 2011; Talmy, 2010a, 2010b). Houser (2011) recorded the following instance in an intermediate Spanish class at a university in the U.S. Southeast that served the predominantly White, local population (p. 123).

In the following exchange, a Spanish instructor (Maite) asks students about the aspects of the sea that relax or bother them:

**MAITE**  
los animales peligrosos? son relajantes?  
(‘dangerous animals? are they relaxing?’)

**STUDENT 1**  
no  

**STUDENT 2**  
molesto (.)  
(‘annoying’)

**MAITE**  
molestos sí (.) quien me puede dar el nombre de un animal peligroso?  
(‘annoying yes. who can tell me the name of a dangerous animal?’)

**STUDENT 2**  
tigre  
(‘tiger’)

**MAITE**  
en el mar? (laughter)  
(‘in the sea’)

**STUDENT 2**  
yeah (.) a tiger shark (.) (laughter)  
tigre sharko /ti.ɡæi.ʃɔɹ.ko/ (laughter)

**MAITE**  
tiburón (.) okay? un tiburón vale?  
(‘shark, okay, a shark, right?’)

Here, both the grammatical and morphological formation of the noun phrase ‘tigre sharko’, as well as its phonetic realization and humorous reception fit with
Hill’s description of the form and function mock Spanish. Houser, in analyzing this extract in reference to ethnographic and discourse analytic data collected in both the Spanish and ESL programs at this university, suggested that, although the use of “sharko” may have represented an attempt to elicit an unknown lexical item, the jocular key of this utterance contributes to the way in which students (and at times even the teachers) constructed Spanish as “foreign,” inconsequential, irrelevant to the students’ lives. For example, Houser notes that while the university’s Spanish program website was filled with information about the personal, cognitive, and professional benefits of learning a language other than English, the ESL program engaged in no such advertising. The value of studying English was presumed and left unstated. Moreover, Houser found no examples of mock English in the ESL courses she observed. Yet, one could also argue that the use of mock Spanish in this instance was directed at trying to uphold the “Spanish only” policy in the classroom. That is, like the students we saw in Example 2 at the beginning of this chapter, the student in question may have been trying to use humor to move the interaction forward in the face of lexical trouble.

Talmy (2010a) provides an additional, and more overtly political, example of mock language use at school. His work focuses primarily on the ways in which students of East/Southeast Asian heritage in an ESL program denigrated new arrivals from Micronesia through the use of “mock ESL.” Talmy’s analysis illuminated the working of local ethnolinguistic hierarchies within the ESL program that mirrored, albeit on a different scale, racial mappings within the high school under consideration and throughout Hawai’i more broadly. In particular, he focused on the practices of distinction by which “old-timer” ESL students positioned themselves as both different from and superior to newcomers, and specifically those students from Micronesia. These practices included teasing Micronesian students about their English-language proficiency; publicly mocking their linguistic errors, clothes, hairstyles, and accessories; crossing into mock ESL for derogatory purposes; and engaging in overtly racist behavior.

Talmy (2010b) noted that mock ESL is similar in structure and pejorative meaning to other mock languages, though it indexes not a racial or ethnic “other” but rather an “archetypal, pan-ethnic Foreigner” (p. 228). Drawing on Rampонт’s work, Talmy observed that mock ESL constitutes a form of derisive crossing, in which the speaker not only constructs the purported “owner” of this style as linguistically, socially, and cognitively incompetent but also simultaneously distances him- or herself from such a characterization. Thus, in this way, the user of mock ESL engages in an ironic commentary on the “authentic” users of ESL style through parody. And, as Talmy went on to argue, in doing so, this individual further protects him/herself from the charge of being “FOB” or “Fresh off the boat,” a particularly low-status position in this school community. Yet, in addition to the identity work occurring within and through the use of mock ESL, this example also reminds us that the line between parody and bullying is often quite blurry (see
Chapter 2). Thus, here we see humor, play, and acts of linguistic creativity being used in ways that construct safe houses for the speakers, but leave those voiced through such utterances (whether physically present or not) outside the door.

**Play Is Not Necessarily Subversive**...

Garland (2010) provides an important counterpoint to the work on styling, playing dumb, and mock language in her examination of students’ use of humor to demonstrate metalinguistic awareness and lay claim to an expert language user identity. Specifically, she examined the ways in which adult learners in an Irish class used mock translation as a resource for doing identity work. Whereas some students keyed their utterances as humorous in order to save face when asked to produce unknown lexical items or grammatical constructions—a move not unlike the playing dumb and mock language use we described in the previous sections—mock translation functioned somewhat differently in this context. Here, students offered incorrect, but lexically and grammatically plausible, translations of English expressions into Irish, using humor to signal not only their delight in producing these creative tokens of Irish but also their metalinguistic knowledge of conventional Irish structures. As Garland noted, students in this class were particularly attuned to the value placed on being a “connoisseur” of Irish, an identity they and their teachers associated with being able to recognize and appreciate not only structural differences between Irish and English but also the authenticity of particular Irish ways of communicating. Thus, in this classroom mock translation served as a way for students to signal their expertise in Irish on metalinguistic grounds, while simultaneously downplaying their lapses in their linguistic repertoires. What emerges as especially striking in Garland’s work is the way in which humor and linguistic innovation are contextualized as authentic and positive attempts to use Irish, as opposed to derisive or destructive forces. Here, the students and the teacher revel in their language play, seeing it as a show of their metalinguistic awareness and love for the language of instruction. Yet, we might also note that the key and frame play a role in constructing a safe house in which humorous linguistic innovation can be read as a bid for solidarity and belonging. That is, the students can safely play with Irish, precisely because they have demonstrated the love and appreciation for this language and its speakers.

**But How Do We Know When Humor and Play Are Being Used for More Than Just Fun?**

The extent to which instances of humor and ludic language play at the classroom level might serve as a way to highlight and or contest particular language ideologies, educational policies, or social practices is a question that has come to dominate contemporary studies of classroom discourse. As we saw in Chapter 3,
the relationship between the classroom and the wider world is one that has long
interested researchers and new theories and approaches to analysis have emerged
to make this kind of micro–macro work possible. Although some researchers have
made strong claims about humor and play as forms of resistance to larger pat-
terns of societal asymmetry, others have taken a more cautious stance, noting the
role of non-serious language in reframing activities to make them more joyful or
interesting. To this end, Rampton (2006) distinguishes between parody and pastiche.
Whereas parody references humor and play “grounded in moral and political crit-
icism of the oppressive distortions of class” (and we would argue any asymmetrical
power relationship indexed through language), pastiche is “pleasure in the play
of voices” (Rampton, 2006, p. 235). But how do we know when participants are
engaged in parody or when the humorous scene in question is mere pastiche?
This ambiguity accords with the difficulties we have noted in ascribing singular
or even multiple meanings to humor and play in interaction, as the “deniability
factor” makes it difficult, if not impossible, to know whether and to what extent
participants are acting with intention (see Chapter 2). And therein lies a great
irony: What represents an interpretive challenge for teachers and researchers is also
precisely what makes humor such a powerful communicative resource!

Jaspers’s (2011) work in a multiethnic secondary school in Belgium is one
example of a more circumspect approach to understanding the relationship
between classroom discourse and large-scale social structures and policies. He
focused on a set of practices that focal students of Moroccan descent referred to as
“doing ridiculous.” For these students, doing ridiculous consisted of

play-acting in class, faking ignorance and enthusiasm or giving confusing or
inappropriate answers which sometimes considerably delayed the rhythm
and fluent organization of what in their eyes were ‘boring’ or all too ‘serious’
situations such as lessons or research interviews.

(Jasper, 2011, p. 1268)

In many ways, this accords with our discussions of clowning and playing dumb in
the previous sections. And, as Rampton (1995, 2006, 2009b) has observed in his own
work, these practices often had a restorative dimension, occurring at liminal moments
(e.g., the beginning or end of an activity) or when there was some tension around the
construction of a work frame and the (undesirable) identities such a frame might entail.
Jaspers went on, however, to discuss the ways in which one particular manifestation
of doing ridiculous, which he names “talking illegal,” served an ambiguous—and per-
haps even contradictory—function. Briefly, talking illegal consisted of mocking, albeit
in a stylized exaggerated form, the Dutch spoken by new arrivals (and, in some cases,
long-term immigrant residents) in Antwerp. Jaspers described how, on one hand, the
Moroccan boys in his study talked illegal in order to contest local language ideologies
that cast them as incompetent and/or unwilling speakers of Dutch and unwelcome
residents in Belgium. Yet, on the other hand, he noted that they used this same style
to mock those whom they perceived to be either less fluent in Dutch or habitual users of a low prestige variety of the national language. Jaspers argued that although these playful stylizations may have served as “small-scale acts of rebellion that provide momentary release from prevailing social and linguistic norms,” it would be overly ambitious to credit the boys with “actively contesting large scale policies around language, education, and immigration” (2011, p. 1273). Drawing on Goffman, Jaspers described the ways in which “doing ridiculous” seemed to “to disrupt ease and order in social occasions,” without necessarily having consequence beyond the situation in which the action occurred (Goffman, 1974, p. 426, as cited in Jaspers, 2011, p. 1273). Moreover, in analyzing one particular instance of “doing ridiculous” that occurred during an interview with two boys, Jaspers (2011) noted,

Indeed, Faisal and Imran’s digression remains on topic, and seems to “depend crucially on the artful avoidance of any decisive interruption of the [interview],” and the pleasure of playing is “derive[d] from the interweaving of realities, not from a breach that would require deciding on one or the other.” (p. 1273)

This last point is important, because many studies of classroom discourse have tried to make stronger claims about the relationship between what is happening in the classroom and larger social patterns and processes. Approaching the study of classroom discourse from the perspective of humor and play requires doing away with the presumption that communicative moves must have a singular, fixed, or even shared meaning and embracing polysemy as a fact.

In keeping with this perspective, Evaldsson and Cekaite (2010) offered a more political interpretation of the interactional practices they observed in two multilingual, multiethnic primary school contexts in Sweden while simultaneously recognizing the ambiguities present in their data. They focused on the ways in which minority children responded to the ideologies of monolingualism circulating in their educational environments and the pressure to speak “good Swedish,” here defined not only in terms of grammatical correctness but also in the avoidance of sexist language, curses, teases, and insults (breaches that might, if overheard by a teacher, be reason for a phone call to one’s parent). Evaldsson and Cekaite documented numerous instances in which the children playfully engaged in correcting or criticizing instances of language use that fell outside the proscribed norms of correctness and appropriacy. The authors observed that

by commenting on, mimicking and teasing one another for deficient/improper use of the majority language (i.e., Swedish), the children establish who is in-the-know and cast the others into more subordinate positions, claim their proficiency in the majority language and enforce monolingual norms for language use.

(Evaldsson & Cekaite, 2010, p. 602)
Evaldsson and Cekaite went on to note that, paradoxically, the children often drew on “bad language” to police the language use of others. The bad language consisted of utterances in the children’s home languages, as well as utterances that were considered pragmatically inappropriate at school (curses, teases, barbs, etc.). Yet, in keying this bad language as humorous and framing their corrective routines as play, the children mitigated some of the negative value indexically assigned to such talk. That is, they seemed to play on and with the irony inherent in a world in which bad language can be used to uphold the very ideologies that construct it as bad. While Evaldsson and Cekaite leave open the possibility of reading the children’s actions as subversive, some caution is warranted in deriving a more political reading. Here, it is important to note that the authors do not claim that the children are acting with intention to uphold the language ideologies that relegate them to subordinate positions at school, nor do they understand the children’s actions as a premeditated and coordinated form of resistance. Rather, they highlighted ambiguity and polysemy as central features of the correction sequences they analyzed. In this way, we might understand the use of humor and play in their corpus as contributing to the construction of safe houses, in which children are able to engage with and test the limits of the ideologies of monolingualism and proper language use that regulate their lives at school and in Sweden more generally.

Whereas the earlier pieces represent more cautious attempts to understand humor, play, and linguistic innovation as forms of resistance, research in heritage language or complementary schools has taken a decidedly more political stance. For example Wei and Wu (2009) examined the ways in which children of Chinese origin enrolled in a Chinese complementary program used code-switching in both playful and non-playful ways to resist the “One Language Only” (OLON) and “One Language at a Time” (OLAT) policies at work in their classroom. Throughout the piece, examples of code-switching are used to show how the pupils resist the OLON and OLAT policies; how they manipulate their language proficiency to undermine the teachers’ authority and gain control of classroom interaction; and how they use codeswitching creatively and strategically to push and break the boundaries between the old and the new, the conventional and the original, and the acceptable and the challenging.

(p. 194)

As in many of the pieces we have discussed in this chapter, humor and play were not specific foci of Wei and Wu’s work. Yet, in examining their code-switching data, many of the episodes they center on are marked by shifts in key or frame. And, more important, they illustrate forms of humor and play that are, in many cases, similar to the examples of clowning and playing dumb we saw earlier.
Indeed, throughout their analysis, Wei and Wu insisted that the children in their study were fully cognizant of the language games in which they were engaged and used the complementary school as a “safe space” for multilingual activity, with a particular eye to manipulating various codes “strategically in a game of power and control” (2009, p. 196), as in the following example:

T: 你可以不溫和的, 拿零蛋嘛。
   (‘You don’t have to revise. You just get a zero egg (zero mark)’).

P: 零蛋?如果我拿100分, 是否有100隻蛋呀?
   (‘Zero egg (zero mark)? If I get 100 mark, does it mean I get 100 eggs?’)

ALL: (laugh)

P: Anyone got this?

Wei and Wu (2009) argued that P was well aware of the meaning of zero egg in this example but chose to mock it. They go on to assert that P’s switch into English was typical of the ways in which students used code-switching to contest the OLON and OLAT policies and to undermine the teacher’s control more generally. Whereas Wei and Wu offer a positive assessment of the students’ practices, going so far as to say that their data “challenge the stereotypical view that Chinese children are polite but passive learners” (2009, p. 194), we can also note that P’s utterance could have been aimed at making what was perhaps a rather dull activity more palatable. Here, we are again reminded of Jasper’s warning not to read too much into students’ play, because resistance and “messing about” often take identical forms. Yet, Wei and Wu were careful to present us with a richly textured description of the context in which not only this classroom but also Chinese complementary schools in Britain more generally are set. Thus, we have more license for seeing P’s play as a form of resistance to particular language ideologies and practices.

In an effort to construct not only empirical, but also theoretical, warrant for positing connections between micro and macro-level discursive processes, Blackledge and Creese (2009) noted that

linguists have increasingly turned to the works of Bakhtin and his collaborator Volosinov because their theories of language enable connections to be made between the voices of social actors in their everyday, here-and-now lives and the political, historical, and ideological contexts they inhabit.

(p. 237)

To this end, they invoked Bakhtin’s work on dialogism, heteroglossia, and carnival to understand the language practices they observed in their data. Recall that in Chapter 1, we referenced Bakhtin’s view of utterances “as dialogic or fundamentally in conversation with other utterances” and noted the importance
of understanding discourse as subject to layered simultaneity. Likewise, we introduced the notion of communicative repertoire to capture not only the heteroglossia present at the level of the individual, but also the heteroglossic nature of language use more generally. As Bakhtin (1986) wrote,

> Our speech, that is, all our utterances (including our creative works), is filled with others’ words, varying degrees of otherness or varying degrees of “our-own-ness”. . . . These words of others carry with them their own expression, their own evaluative tone, which we assimilate, rework, and re-accentuate.

(p. 89)

As we saw earlier, it is precisely this “otherness” that makes styling and crossing such noteworthy and powerful phenomena.

Blackledge and Creese, however, go on to engage with a third strand of Bakhtin’s work, carnival, as a way to address the particular role of humor, play, and acts of linguistic creativity in the complementary school classrooms they observed. For Bakhtin, the carnival in medieval times offered those in subordinate positions respite from their hierarchically organized and predictable lives, as it “celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions” (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 10). Yet, Blackledge and Creese draw on DaSilva Iddings and McCafferty’s (2007) observation that although Bakhtin saw rebellion in carnival, he also understood it to be ultimately about play. That is, while carnival contained some elements of subversion, motivated in no small part by the desire to “come out from under” in a highly stratified society, Bakhtin recognized the ambivalence inherent in such activity. During carnival, people mock, parody, and poke fun at the dominant relations of power as a way to release tension and gain a short-lived reprieve from the social order. They don’t fully overturn it. As Blackledge and Creese noted, “Bakhtin demonstrated that carnivalesque parody was often tolerated by the powerful, as it was no more than a temporary representation of the usurping of traditional and conventional hierarchies” (2009, p. 239). We might think of this as a medieval parallel to the way in which modern bosses often tolerate employee humor (see Chapter 2). Yet, the temporariness of the carnival merits our attention here, because it again accords with our own understanding of humor and play as contributing to the construction of classroom safe houses. During carnival, the people were permitted to act in ways that were unusual, unfettered, ribald, and even unseemly—all with the shared understanding that this behavior was temporary and aimed just as much at enjoyment, as it was at letting off steam: “Both subversive and conservative, it [carnival] undermined the powerful only for a moment, before authority was reestablished” (Blackledge & Creese, 2009, p. 250).
In applying this lens to their data, Blackledge and Creese (2009) chronicled the students’ parodies of everyone from the teacher to their peers and to the idea of the L2 learner. Moreover, they described the ways in which these parodies often served to call attention to not only the school’s overly eager attempts to teach “cultural heritage” but also the disjuncture between the purportedly meaningful ethnic culture being foisted on the students and the actual popular British culture in which they lived outside the classroom. Blackledge and Creese argued that in many ways, the students in their study were engaged in two worlds simultaneously: the serious and the carnivalesque, with neither one serving as the “real” to which the other was oriented. Thus, what emerges in this study is not so much the disorderliness of carnivalesque talk but, rather, the necessity of it in the face of complex and highly stratified social situations. Had the students in these complementary schools not had recourse to non-serious, playful language, what might they have done instead?

The (Dis)Orderly Classroom

Our final example comes not from research on classroom discourse, but rather from a narrative account of one third-grade teacher’s experience in a New York City charter school. In the following excerpt, posted on education historian Diane Ravitch’s blog, the teacher describes the pedagogical approach she was advised to follow at her school:

Students were expected to stand up and “mirror” instructions using a Whole Brain Teaching technique at the beginning of lessons. They used “mirror talk”—repeating verbatim what the teacher just said. After “mirroring” some snippet of knowledge, for example “9 × 3 = 27” or “adverbs modify verbs,” they had to return to the carpet and have a mini-lesson related to that fact, using “Turn and Talk,” when students repeat the information to another student sitting near them, and “Teach/Okay,” when students repeat in unison verbatim what the teacher just said using the same tone of voice and gestures. Every word, every gesture is supposed to be done exactly so, no variations. (Ravitch, 2014)

Particularly notable in this teacher’s account are the names used to describe the various interactional patterns privileged at her school: mirror talk, turn and talk, teach/OK, and the emphasis on producing them in canonical fashion—no deviations in form or sequence allowed! Although such recurring patterns, even when mandated like this, can become resources for creative language play, L2 development, and relationship building (e.g., Gardner, 2008), we do not see that happening here. Instead, the teacher goes on to note that her evaluation consisted largely of classroom observations in which her supervisor documented her use (and, in many cases, nonuse) of these interactional patterns. Moreover, she recounts how
the interactional work she did to build trust, rapport, and intellectual curiosity among her students went unnoticed within this evaluation protocol.

Although the quality of such approaches to pedagogy and teacher evaluation certainly raises many red flags, this example also highlights the dangers of eliminating non-serious language use from the classroom. As we have seen throughout this chapter, humor and language play have important functions that go far beyond entertainment. At the very least, humor can be used to do the following:

- Help teachers and students manage competing identity needs
- Diffuse tensions and mitigate face threats
- Critique and/or redraw relations of power
- Increase student interest and enjoyment
- Restore harmony

Without humor, teachers and students are left to find other, perhaps less effective and/or enjoyable, ways of doing this kind of work.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has examined the many and often overlapping functions of humor in classrooms, with an emphasis on how and why teachers and students make use of this key to do important interactional work safely in the face of particular social or psychological risks. Here, as in Chapter 2, we have seen how difficult, if not impossible, it is to assign just one, unequivocal function to humorous or playful utterances. The ambiguous, polysemous nature of humor is what makes it such a powerful resource in institutional contexts, like schools, that are marked by identity challenges, potential face threats, and asymmetrical power relations. Put simply, we have looked at how humor allows students and teachers to play it safe in the classroom.

In addition, in Chapter 3 and again in this chapter we have emphasized the importance of seeing everything that happens in classrooms as a *normal* part of the interactional ecology, whether it is “on task” or not. Approaches to research that presuppose that humorous or playful language is unworthy of analytic attention may overlook much of the work teachers and students engage in to manage their relationships at school. And, when such approaches find their way into the hotly contested arena of teacher evaluation, we may find ourselves assessing teachers relative to interactional norms that are not only unnatural but also impossible to uphold. As we have argued throughout this book, humor and play serve important social purposes and cannot be eradicated from classroom contexts. Education may be serious business, but it cannot be conducted solely through serious means. In Chapter 5, we examine the relationship between humor and learning, with a particular eye toward the role of language play in additional language development.


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In Chapters 3 and 4, we highlighted the many functions of humor in language classrooms. From building rapport, to quelling tensions, to subtly critiquing social norms and relations of power, we noted the numerous roles humor plays in managing our identities and our relationships with others. At this point, a question that we have not addressed yet has no doubt crossed your mind: What is the role of humor in classroom language learning? The answer, of course, is not as straightforward as the question (if it were, this chapter would be a lot shorter).

In this chapter, we begin by looking at the research on humor and learning. We then consider the role of play, and in particular language play, in facilitating additional language learning. To this end, we review foundational work in the field of SLA that has posited a place for language play within studies of L2 development. At the same time, we highlight some of the difficulties researchers have had in examining this relationship. We then lay out the tenets of a sociocognitive approach to additional language development that accords with the theories of language, communication, and the language learner that we discussed in Chapter 1. Finally, we end with discussion of six principles for language education, with an eye to how humor and language play might facilitate their realization in the classroom.

**Humor and Learning: General Educational Findings**

Judging from the sheer number of publications and websites devoted to the use of humor in educational contexts (not just L2 classrooms!), it would seem that humor must be facilitative of learning. Yet, a close look at the research literature
suggests that the results are mixed (see Martin, 2007, for review). Given the current evidence, the most robust argument for using humor in education is affective. Humor is found in some studies to promote a sense of immediacy and connection between teacher and students, to reduce anxiety, and to increase enjoyment of and interest in the class (e.g., Berk & Nanda, 1998; Wanzer & Frymier, 1999). One caveat to this, however, is that the type of humor used by the teacher is important. Students, as we will see in Chapter 6, tend not to appreciate offensive, aggressive, or disparaging humor, particularly that which is directed at them or their peers (Wanzer, Frymier, Wojtaszczyk, & Smith, 2006). With respect to academic learning, there is some evidence to suggest that when humor is used positively, thus reducing anxiety, student achievement will be higher (Ford, Ford, Boxer, & Armstrong, 2012). A few studies, too, have linked humor to greater memorability, although this effect may not take place under all conditions (McDaniel, Dornburg, & Guynn, 2005; Strick, Holland, van Baaren, & Van Knippenberg, 2010). Moreover, the studies that have demonstrated higher classroom achievement through the use of humor have meticulously constructed their curriculum using humor that is relevant to the topic and not simply an entertaining sidebar (Suzuki & Heath, 2014; Ziv, 1988). In general, however, it has been difficult to connect the use of humor to increased learning, rather than simply perceptions of learning. Thus, many scholars—and, in particular, those interested in additional language learning—have instead turned their attention to the role of play and, in particular, language play.

**Vygotsky, Play, and Development**

Although many scholars have noted the importance of play in development (e.g., Erikson, 1963; Piaget, 1962; Sutton-Smith 1975, 1997), the work of Lev Vygotsky has been particularly influential for SLA researchers. Briefly, Vygotsky’s research and writings focused on young children. One of his major insights was that learning is what pushes development. In other words, it is not the case that a certain level of development must be reached before skills can be used. Rather, it is the use of new skills that leads to further development. Moreover, it is in social activity that learning occurs. That is, new abilities make their first appearance in social interaction and are constructed through collective action. It is only later that they become internalized and available for individual use. Both of these ideas are addressed in the following quote, in which Vygotsky (1978) explained that

learning awakens a variety of internal developmental processes that are able to operate only when the child is interacting with people in his environment and in cooperation with his peers. Once these processes are internalized, they become part of the child’s independent developmental achievement.

(p. 90)
The process of internalization mentioned here relies on an understanding of another important concept introduced by Vygotsky, that of mediation (see Chapter 1). As Lantolf (2000) succinctly explains, “humans use symbolic artifacts to establish an indirect, or mediated, relationship between ourselves and the world” (p. 1, emphasis in original). This means that “humans do not act directly on the physical world but rely, instead, on tools and labor activity, which allows us to change the world” (Lantolf, 2000, p. 1). Of these mediational tools, language is among the most important.

It is through the social use of language as a mediational tool that internal mental processes develop. Vygotsky (1978) described how children solving problems that are beyond their capabilities will seek assistance from others. In the absence of assistance, or if the child is at a slightly higher developmental level, egocentric (or private) speech will occur, as the child uses speech to control, and eventually to plan, his or her behavior. With time and repeated exposure to similar problems, external speech becomes internalized. Although Vygotsky was focused on children’s development, it is easy enough to see these processes at work for adults. For instance, Nancy remembers learning to drive a standard transmission car. At first, she could do nothing without instruction and often needed to appeal to her long-suffering father for guidance. Eventually the ability to use a stick shift became automatic, for the most part. However, before that time she recalls having to “talk herself through” some of the steps. Furthermore, even once she felt fairly confident about her abilities, she remembers having to again seek external help from her more experienced passenger in certain challenging situations, such as getting the car moving from a dead stop up a steep hill. Thus, even when social and private speech has largely become internalized, they may reappear as needed when confronting new problems.

Like instruction, Vygotsky found that play, too, leads development and helps in the process of internalization. In a well-known quote he explained that “in play a child always behaves beyond his average age, above his daily behavior; in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 102). For Vygotsky, a crucial aspect of play was that it freed participants from situational constraints by creating an imaginary scenario. A second primary component of play was its rule-based nature. Whether in organized games or in creating make-believe scenarios, overt or covert rules characterize play. Participation in play entails voluntarily opting to subordinate oneself to these rules, whether this means not touching a ball with your hands or agreeing to treat a pillow as an animate creature and engage in conversation with it. In this view, “the essential attribute of play is a rule that has become a desire” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 99). Abiding by the rules creates contexts for children to try out new roles, new language, and new activities. Holzman (2009) interpreted this as a kind of acting, explaining that children “are creating new performances of themselves—at once the playwrights, directors and performers” (p. 52). For Vygotsky, the creative imitations that children engage in during play represent an important means by which they
can accomplish tasks that are beyond their capabilities when they are they acting alone (1978, p. 88). He wrote,

> Though the play-development relationship can be compared to the instruction-development relationship, play provides a much wider background for changes in needs and consciousness. Action in the imaginative sphere, in an imaginary situation, the creation of voluntary intentions, and the formation of real-life plans and volitional motives—all appear in play and make it the highest level of preschool development.

(p. 102)

Although Vygotsky’s sociocultural view of development remains seminal, Holzman (2010), among others, found his presentation of play as confined to young children too stark. She asked, “Can’t play be the highest level of preschool development and still be developmentally important across the lifespan?” (p. 35). In other words, might play be central to adolescent and adult learning? Moreover, questions about the role of specific forms of play in specific forms of learning have prompted SLA researchers to ask how private speech, repetition and imitation, revoicings, reappropriations of classroom tasks, and linguistic manipulations might contribute to L2 development.

### Lantolf, Language Play, and L2 Learning

Lantolf began speaking about language play in the late 1980s, with two presentations in Philadelphia (see Lantolf, 1987, 1989), but it was not until his 1995 keynote address at the Conference on the Acquisition of Spanish as a First and Second Language at Penn State that this work began to gain a wider audience. For example, Amy Ohta (1995) took up his ideas in her examination of a classroom of U.S. learners of Japanese, which was the first description of adult L2 language play. Shortly thereafter, Lantolf’s (1997) talk was published under the title “The Function of Language Play in the Acquisition of L2 Spanish.” In this paper, he focused on L2 language play as self-directed speech, seeing it as a “non-communicative language activity” (Lantolf, 1997, p. 3) that, by creating opportunities for the learner to “do something” (Lantolf, 1997, p. 19) with the L2, could facilitate acquisition. In this work, key forms of language play that he identified as potentially leading to L2 learning were “talking out loud to yourself in Spanish; repeating phrases to yourself silently; making up sentences or words in Spanish; imitating to yourself sounds in Spanish; having random snatches of Spanish pop into your head” (Lantolf, 1997, p. 11). Broner and Tarone (2001) described Lantolf’s view like this:

> The purpose [of play] in Lantolf’s (Vygotskian) sense is clearly exercise, or the rehearsal of target forms. Lantolf focuses on language play as a type of private speech that has the function of rehearsal for some future public.
because language play in Lantolf’s sense exists as mental rehearsal of unmastered L2 forms, it is a phenomenon that diminishes when the L2 learner has mastered them and no longer needs to rehearse.  

(p. 366)

As Broner and Tarone observe, within this paradigm, language play is conceived of as rehearsal for future interaction, rather than as a ludic end unto itself.

Language Play: Work, Play, or a Little Bit of Both?

The question of whether language play is solely or primarily a means to an end or whether it can also be an end in itself is one with which many SLA researchers have grappled. Whereas Lantolf’s work highlights the utilitarian function of language play with respect to L2 learning, other researchers (e.g., G. Cook, 1997, 2000, 2001; Tarone, 2000), while giving equal emphasis to the serious functions of language play, have placed the enjoyment that comes from it as more focal to their definitions. Recall that in Chapter 1, we defined language play as “any manipulation of language that is done in a non-serious manner for either public or private enjoyment.” Here, it is important to recognize that Lantolf’s perspective on language play is not mutually incompatible with ours. As we have seen throughout this book, humor and play can serve many functions simultaneously and teasing them apart is not always possible or productive.

It is also worth noting that there has, in fact, been a thin, but consistent thread of interest in and acknowledgment of nonutilitarian and non-serious uses of language within linguistics (e.g., Leech’s, 1983, interest and expressivity principles). Similarly, despite the general emphasis on language learning as serious, ludic language use has received considerable attention from scholars for its role in L1 development (e.g., Cazden, 1976; Chukovsky, 1928/1963; Horgan, 1981; Johnson & Mervis, 1997; Kuczaj, 1983; McGhee, 1979; Nelson, 1989; Weir, 1962; also see reviews in Bariaud, 1989; Bergen, 2006; Martin, 2007, pp. 229–241; and Semrud-Clikeman & Glass, 2010). Within SLA itself, early explorations into the role of ludic language play in L2 development include Kramsch and Sullivan’s (1996) and Cook’s (1997) works. Whereas Kramsch has continued to maintain a peripheral interest in ludic language play (see, e.g., Kramsch, 2009) and Sullivan’s (2000a, 2000b) work remains as an important empirical account of classroom language play, it was Cook who really encouraged other SLA researchers to take non-serious language play seriously. Although he had been writing on L1 language play since the mid-1990s (see G. Cook, 1994a, 1994b, 1996), his ideas on ludic language play in L2 learning achieved considerable currency in his monograph, Language Play, Language Learning (G. Cook, 2000).

In that text, Cook questioned the notion of language as primarily utilitarian, serious, practical, and meaning focused, as well as the idea that language play
represents an unimportant dimension of communication and learning. To this end, he invited readers, and in particular language teachers and linguistic researchers, to consider language’s more playful side. Among the potential benefits of language play, Cook argued that its incorporation into the language classroom offered learners access to a broader array of speech events, thus affording opportunities to engage with a wider array of language forms. Moreover, he noted the potential of ludic language to help draw learners’ attention to particular language forms, urging teachers trained to incorporate “authentic materials” into their lessons as much as possible to reconsider the use of rhymes, tongue twisters, and silly sentences, too, as authentic forms of language use and viable pedagogical tools. Finally, he questioned whether and to what extent language play might function as a memory aid. Whereas Cook put forth a strong argument for seeing language play as potentially facilitative of additional language learning, he suggested that it may also be an indicator of advanced language proficiency. That is, he asked SLA researchers to consider the ability to play with language as a key measure of learners’ communicative competence.

In an effort to bridge the work of Lantolf and Cook, Tarone (2000), too, argued that not just systematic L2 usage, but unpredictable, creative language, was worthy of study. To this end, she provided evidence and examples of spontaneous L2 language play in older children and adolescents to show that they do indeed play with their L2. Prior to this, such evidence had only been provided for very young children, thus this represented an important step forward. Based on these findings, Tarone suggested that language play was likely helpful, but not necessary to L2 development. Like humor, it might help to reduce the stress learners experience in dealing with a new language and perhaps even make form-meaning relationships more memorable by lowering learners’ affective filter. Moreover, in keeping with Cook, Tarone maintained that language play might facilitate the development of sociolinguistic competence by providing classroom learners with access to a broader array of speech events and their accordant identities. Finally, Tarone suggested that language play might prevent fossilization by destabilizing learners’ developing systems and thus acting as an agent for change (see also, Broner & Tarone, 2001).

Conceptualizing Additional Language Learning

As you might imagine, Lantolf, Cook, and Tarone set the stage for the empirical work that followed in that they provided some initial descriptions of language play and offered some theoretical claims about the role of language play in L2 learning that could be tested (see Chapter 9). Yet, despite continued interest in understanding this relationship, SLA researchers have struggled to come to any definitive conclusions. One reason for this may come from the difficulties associated with trying to operationalize learning—and specifically additional language
learning—in the first place. Sfard (1998), for example, identified two metaphors that tend to drive theories of learning within education: the acquisition model and the participation model. Whereas the former envisions learning as a primarily cognitive process of “getting” or internalizing bits of knowledge for use at some later date, the latter sees learning as a social process of “doing.” Within the participation model, learning is thought of “as a process of becoming a member of a certain community” (Sfard, 1998, p. 6). In other words, it entails the process of engaging in meaningful interaction with others. Although some SLA researchers have been staunch in their embrace of one metaphor over the other, like Sfard, we believe that both are essential. That is, a sociocognitive approach is necessary to understanding just what additional language learning entails (see Batstone, 2010, for a variety of sociocognitive perspectives).

To this end, we agree with Seedhouse (2010), whose definition of L2 development accords with the perspectives on language and communication we described in Chapter 1: “Second language learning involves both a sociocognitive process and a change in cognitive state. It involves adapting linguistic and other semiotic resources to communicative needs. It represents an adjustment in a complex adaptive system” (pp. 247–248). This definition highlights the external, social process of interaction, in which language develops through use as speakers draw on various aspects of their communicative repertoires to respond to ever-changing communicative needs, opportunities, and pressures. In addition, the internal, cognitive change that precipitates transfer of knowledge across contexts is also recognized as an important aspect of learning. In other words, in addition to being social, learning involves individual change and retention of knowledge, which is what allows us to exhibit similar behaviors across contexts, rather than starting with a blank slate each time we enter into a certain type of interaction. By introducing the notion of learning as involving adaptation and change in a complex system, we gain a broad understanding of the potential influences on language development. These can include any number of individual (physical, psychological, neurological, affective) and social (context, interlocutor, conversational goals) factors, as well as a range of cultural, historical, and political elements that may constrain or facilitate learning.

At the same time, we maintain that a sociocognitive approach to L2 learning also entails foregrounding the notion of learner agency. As Liddicoat and Scarino (2013) put it,
work towards interpreting and creating meaning *in vivo* in interaction in using the language they are learning; at the same time and in so doing they are interpreters of another linguistic and cultural system and learning to be themselves in this system that is not their own; in addition, they are interpreters of the experience of learning itself.

For us, a sociocognitive approach is consistent with the views of language, communication, the language learner, and language education that we described in Chapter 1. But, before we go on to address how humor figures into our understanding additional language learning, we need to describe what we see as key features of our sociocognitive understanding of L2 development: communicative repertoires and resources, emergence, adaptation, and, finally, social action and interpretation.

**Communicative Repertoires and Resources**

Recall that in Chapter 1, we defined language in terms of communicative repertoire. Specifically, we said that

an individual’s communicative repertoire is not simply an array of multiple, fully formed (national) languages, but rather an ever-changing assembly of various genres, speech styles, pragmatic routines, and other reoccurring chunks of language, complemented by an array of resources (e.g., gestures, dress, posture, etc.) for making meaning.

But where does this communicative repertoire come from? Remember, additional language learners already have at their disposal a rich communicative repertoire to which they are adding new elements. While this point may seem patently obvious, it is sometimes overlooked in studies of SLA. That is, we must always remember that L2 users are not “deficient communicators”; rather, their repertoire serves them well in the contexts in which they habitually participate and during the process of learning it will stretch to include the communicative resources necessary for participation in new contexts. They do not come to the world as empty vessels waiting to acquire language knowledge.

Van Lier (2000) described the process of repertoire expansion in terms of affordances. For him, an affordance is

a particular property of the environment that is relevant—for good or for ill—to an active, perceiving organism in that environment. An affordance affords further action (but does not cause or trigger it). What becomes an affordance depends on what the organism does, what it wants, and what is useful for it.

(p. 45)
From this perspective, a silly hat may be an affordance for humor. Furthermore, it may afford a particular kind of biting humor that causes the wearer to stop making certain choices in his or her apparel, which could have been the goal of the speaker. As individuals move through the world, they take advantage of the affordances within the various contexts in which they find themselves. In so doing, their communicative repertoires bear the traces of their various life experiences, subjectivities, and desires.

Yet, each new repertoire element does not stand alone: It exists in a dialogic relationship with other elements and is subject to change as other elements change. Complexity theory emphasizes the importance of the initial conditions of a system in order to understand what has come after (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008). In other words, the past influences the present. Within such a view of language, learning is not conceived of as occurring in linear, predictable ways. Rather, changes may occur at any point in the system at any time and at any timescale. Just as the meaning of any utterance is contingent on the utterance that came before it, each change in a learner’s communicative repertoire is contingent on what came before it. This is also true on the larger timescale of a lifetime, in which prior language learning experiences influence how and what is learned.1

In terms of humor, we can think of each new element in a speaker’s repertoire as representing a new possibility for play, as well as noting the ways in which humorous uses of language often instigate additional uses in the same vein, as interlocutors develop a shared repertoire for humor (i.e., “inside jokes”).

Emergence

It is important to recognize that L2 development emerges incrementally as the learner participates in similar activities and thus experiences similar language use. To operationalize change within the system, Rod Ellis (2010) suggested documenting how at various points in time a learner may move from being unable to use a particular form, to being able to use the form only with scaffolded assistance, to using that form independently in a similar context as when it was first used with assistance, to using it in a completely new context. This type of change, echoing Vygotsky, demonstrates the transfer of learning. This process is not, however, a linear progression, with forms used appropriately at one point in time continuing to be used appropriately (Larsen–Freeman, 2006). Instead, language used correctly in one context might not be available to the L2 user in another. Or a form used correctly at one time may begin to be used incorrectly or may temporarily disappear when another form is introduced.

Ample research has demonstrated that both L1 and L2 learners are sensitive to the statistical patterns of linguistic features and structures that they encounter in interaction, and that they use this implicit abstraction of frequencies to build up their linguistic resources (N. Ellis, 2002, 2012). Both token and type frequency are
important to learning. Token frequency refers to “how often particular words or phrases appear in the input,” while type frequency describes “how many different lexical items can be applied to a certain pattern, paradigm, or construction” (N. Ellis, 2002, p. 166). For instance, tracking token frequencies would demonstrate to us that the verb get occurs much more often in English than does procure. In terms of type frequencies, in a construction such as “Give me the X,” we would find a large number of nouns can be slotted into the X spot. While learners are sensitive to both type and token frequencies, it is the type frequencies that are particularly important for L2 development, as the most productive of these provide frameworks for learners to use. What begins, then, as a largely formulaic chunk slowly emerges as a creative construction that the L2 user can manipulate in various ways—including for humor—across various contexts.

From a complexity theory perspective, Larsen-Freeman (2012) notes the importance of iteration for the emergence of these patterned constructions. As she explains, iteration involves repetition, yet she acknowledges that in repeating any act we also change it, thus no two utterances are ever exactly the same: “Iteration does not preserve the fidelity of the original, but only approximates it” (Larsen-Freeman, 2012, p. 203). As described in the previous section, communication entails ongoing mutual adaptation; however, this process is made easier by the fact that many situations recur regularly, thus allowing for some predictability in our exchanges. Seen through the lens of iteration, these recurring events introduce variation into the system, since even the most common, conventional language used by each participant (e.g., “How are you?”) is always slightly different. Variation is important for L2 development, as “every use of language changes the language resources of the learner/user, and the changed resources are then potentially available for the user and members of the speech community” (Larsen-Freeman, 2012, p. 205).

**Language Use and Adaptation**

It goes without saying that interaction is crucial to language development, as it is in social interaction that affordances for language use, and thus for learning, arise. Although the public tends to portray communication as an orderly, linear process of encoding and decoding utterances, applied linguists know that the act of making meaning is, as described in Chapter 1, a dynamic, messy process involving continual mutual change and adjustment between interlocutors. Communication entails “action, reaction, collaborative interaction, intersubjectivity, and mutually assisted performance” (Hulstijn et al., 2014, p. 40). This cooperative, adaptive process of aligning oneself with another individual in order to construct meaning and effect social action is how L2 development takes place.

Larsen-Freeman (2010) describes how this is a cyclical process, explaining learning as “the constant adaptation of their [learners’] linguistic resources in the
service of meaning-making in response to the affordances that emerge in the communicative situation, which is, in turn, affected by learners’ adaptivity” (p. 67). Through this ongoing cycle, new resources become available to the learner, who then may be able to deploy them at a different time or in a different context—or in a different key, with features first encountered in a serious context later being used for humor or vice versa. In response to the L2 user’s increasing linguistic sophistication, interactants also adjust the language they use, drawing on more complex structures and topics. Thus, with increasingly intricate language resources at our disposal we are presented with, and eventually are able to manage, more complex social actions. Thus, Atkinson (2014) defined learning as “the ability to adapt to our environment BETTER (than formerly) through progressive interaction with/experience in and alignment with that environment” (p. 7, emphasis in original; see also van Lier, 2000).

**Learning as Social Action and Interpretation**

As the previous two sections indicated, L2 development is seen in a learner’s increasing abilities to construct meanings effectively and with growing sophistication and nuance across a variety of contexts, (i.e., Atkinson’s, 2014, “adapting better”). But what do terms such as effectively and better mean? From the perspective on the language learner that we introduced in Chapter 1 and the view of L2 development that we are presenting here, we see these terms as implying a keen focus on the learner’s subjectivity. Learners and their interlocutors each come to the task of communication with

their own linguistic and cultural biographies, their distinctive frames of reference that come from their history of prior experiences, their meanings, and values. In the act of communicating, they engage in mutual interpretation to negotiate their own meanings in relation to those of others.

(Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013, pp. 43–44)

From this perspective, learning “also involves learners coming to understand how they themselves interpret knowledge through their positioning in their own language and culture” (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013, p. 35). This is consistent, too, with the move to consider communicative competence in terms of an individual’s entire language repertoire. Far from merely accumulating linguistic items, in learning an additional language, we engage in new interpretations of ourselves, of those with whom we interact, of our other languages, and of the process of communication. Thus, “better” and “more effective” L2 communication involves meaning making at a deeper level, in which we do not merely interpret words or structures.

Kramsch (2002) defined success in language learning from an ecological perspective as “aligning oneself in the social space,” “using one’s full semiotic
potential,” and “seizing the moment and negotiating paradoxes” (pp. 24–25). Taken together, these indicate that successful learners are those who are able to make choices within their whole linguistic repertoire in order to appropriately position themselves and their interlocutors within the conversational space, to negotiate power structures, to express stance and emotion, and to notice and take advantage of variability and diversity (all of which, we can’t help but note, can be done within a humorous key). These points presaged Kramsch’s (2006) move to see the goal of learning as the development of symbolic competence, as discussed in Chapter 1. The ability to engage in social action effectively takes center stage when learning is seen as the development of symbolic competence, which involves, as we noted in Chapter 1, “the ability to shape the multilingual game in which one invests” (Kramsch, 2008, p. 402).

A related, and until recently almost completely neglected, issue in L2 development is the role of emotions. Emotions are not only linked to a learner’s affective state but also play a crucial role in issues such as L2 subjectivity, cognition, and the ability to express oneself and interpret others (Benesch, 2012; Dewaele, 2011; Pavlenko, 2005, 2006; Swain, 2013). Becoming multilingual can be a process of gaining a new self, and many multilinguals report feeling different in each language they use (Koven, 1998; Pavlenko, 2006). The ability to communicate emotions is crucial to being able to engage with others and effectively represent ourselves; yet, as Dewaele and Pavlenko (2002) demonstrated, L2 users tend to use proportionally fewer emotion words than monolinguals. Attending to the emotional aspects of L2 learning would seem to be an important part of helping L2 users achieve the first two goals mentioned here: engaging in interpretation and social action. Furthermore, Swain (2013) argued that emotions, both positive and negative, can facilitate L2 development and are inseparable from cognition. She analyzed the metalinguistic talk of two classroom learners from a sociocultural perspective and concluded that their talk “mediates the co-construction of a cognitively permeated set of emotional processes” and “an emotionally permeated set of cognitive processes” (Swain, 2013, p. 203). Thus, we again see that a sociocognitive position, taking a holistic view of the learner, is necessary.

Facilitating Classroom L2 Development Through Humor and Language Play

Thus far, we have described SLA as a sociocognitive process in which interaction is key to allowing learners to develop a range of linguistic resources that they might then deploy in increasingly sophisticated ways to achieve their goals more effectively. How might humor facilitate this process? In Chapter 1 we put forth a number of propositions regarding what the goals of an L2 classroom should be in today’s globalized and technologically mediated world. Consistent with the views of language, communication, and the language learner that we put forth,
and now with the understanding of L2 development that we have outlined here, it should come as no surprise that we believe that today’s language educators must be attuned to

• developing learners’ agency,
• raising learners’ awareness of variability,
• preparing learners for unpredictability, and
• honing learners’ abilities to read and manipulate situations.

Yet, as we stated in Chapter 1, this does not mean that teachers must do away with all attention to more predictable aspects of the instructed language. Our view could not be further from this. Instead, we are calling for language educators to acknowledge the foundational perspectives we have discussed thus far and to consider how humor and language play might help us to accomplish some of the conceptual shifts that are necessary to move language education into the 21st century. The classroom can be a space where learners access structured interaction designed to facilitate the development of their interpretive and communicative repertoires. And, as we noted at the outset of the book, humor and language play may (ironically) be just what the serious field of language education needs right now if it is going to deal with the tensions and contradictions brought about by multilingualism and new forms of communication. Based on how we understand the process of L2 development, the goals of the language classroom, and what language use entails in today’s world, below we put forth six broad principles for the structuring of activities to facilitate L2 learning. These are

• teaching language as a set of choices,
• raising language awareness,
• constructing iterative activities,
• engaging learners with unpredictability,
• teaching meaning as relational and subjective, and
• engaging with emotions.

These principles are by no means revolutionary and will likely be familiar to most language educators. However, here in addition to describing each principle, we also examine evidence for the ways that humor and language play can help in carrying out each of these.

**Teach Language as a Set of Choices**

Rather than presenting elements of the L2 as inherently meaningful, learners must instead learn to see them as a set of options that the speaker can choose among for different effects. Although this approach to teaching is common with respect to instruction in pragmatics, it should be extended to all aspects of the L2.
As we have emphasized, lexical items, grammatical structures, and phonological patterns do not have fixed meaning but, rather, become imbued with meaning in situated interaction. This means that each word or structure that a speaker selects indexes a subtly different stance and relationship to the hearer. This is made abundantly clear, for example, in pedagogical approaches derived from concept-based instruction, in which the conceptual bases of various linguistic features (e.g., verb morphology) are made transparent to learners (e.g., Lantolf, 2008; Negueruela & Lantolf, 2006). Because of the different meanings that each option constructs, language cannot be taught as a fixed set of forms, but must be presented as a set of options with varying and sometimes unpredictable consequences that learners must be prepared to negotiate. An understanding of language as choices also raises awareness of systematic sociolinguistic variations, as well as the idiosyncratic and unsystematic variability that can occur within and across speakers. Furthermore, instilling in learners that they have meaningful alternatives for how they construct their utterances also respects and develops learner agency and autonomy.

To teach language as an open, flexible system of options for communicating various stances and shades of meaning requires first that the classroom activities provide space for experimentation, and second that the teacher be able and willing to provide thoughtful feedback on possible consequences of various linguistic choices. Language play that suspends the normal rules of interaction and encourages learners to construct scenarios that allow them to use language in ways not normally associated with the L2 classroom—for example, by expressing strong emotions (grief, anger, love) or by using voices that take them out of their usual student role (teacher, taxi driver, ambassador)—is one way of fulfilling the need for linguistic experimentation. Feedback can then address the appropriateness in different situations of the language used, the meanings of any pertinent lexical items used and their usual domains of use, and the ways that different aspects of the register used tend to be perceived in different contexts. Casual conversation can also fulfill these needs. A longitudinal study by Bell, Skalicky, and Salsbury (2014) traced the resources used for humor by two L2 users, Moussa and Faisal, with very different personal humor styles as they conversed on a scheduled, but informal basis, with staff of an intensive English program. Both learners showed sensitivity to context and interlocutor in the ways that they used humor, and attended to feedback about their choices. Moussa, for instance, having been told that to describe something as “beneath me” was very rude, used it deliberately in an apparent attempt to aim jocular abuse at a fellow student just two weeks later. Rather than shy away from a phrase he had been told was rude, he took it as an opportunity to play. The other participant, Faisal, having gained an extensive repertoire of swear words while working off campus, tended to initially offer potentially offensive words in a hesitant manner, sometimes explicitly marking them as “bad words” before uttering them and only using them enthusiastically and often once he established that his interlocutor was not shocked and the conversation being recorded was private.
Humorous practices themselves also offer an opportunity to present language as choices. Davies (2004) described a German preference for joking as largely a private act in contrast to Americans, who tend to joke in public as well. She noted that teaching about these differences can help American learners of German make choices about whether and when to joke in German and to be aware that joking might make Germans perceive them as frivolous. J. Kim (2014) found that Korean learners of English had difficulties understanding sarcasm because they were drawing on their L1 schema to interpret potentially sarcastic utterances. A subsequent study (J. Kim, 2013) that evaluated the use of direct instruction on these students’ recognition of sarcasm and understanding of the different goals speakers might have in using it showed significant improvement. This in no way meant that the learners were then expected to use sarcasm themselves in similar ways; rather, the learners reported feeling empowered by their deeper understanding of the subtleties of the practice.

**Raise Language Awareness**

Indeed, a tenet closely related to teaching language as a set of choices involves raising language awareness, a necessity for learners to be able to make choices in their language use. This may occur through activities structured in such a way as to draw learners’ attention to particular patterns, or it may be done through explicit instruction. The former include activities such as the dictogloss (Wajnryb, 1990) and other text reconstruction tasks, while the latter can be seen in the use of a SCOBBA (Schema for Orienting Basis of Action) used in pedagogies based on construction-based instruction. Examples of these flow charts can be found in Lantolf (2008). Activities should also draw learners’ attention not so much to similarities, but to contrasts—both between the L1 and L2, and within the L2 for better transfer of learning (Larsen-Freeman, 2013, citing Marton, 2006). Raising awareness also suggests a role for the use of the whole linguistic repertoire available to the students in the classroom, including the L1. This may mean allowing students to interpret new cultural concepts or to puzzle through the meaning of different L2 forms in their L1, or it may mean employing flexible strategies of translanguaging (e.g., Creese & Blackledge, 2010; Flores & Schissel, 2014; García, 2009).

Raising language awareness among learners can involve such things as drawing students’ attention to specific forms and form-meaning relationships and sensitizing them to the pragmatic force of different linguistic choices. We can clearly do such things playfully, and G. Cook’s (2001) discussion of the role of invented sentences in L2 instruction provides a cogent argument for their use in facilitating both noticing and memorability. It is because a sentence designed specifically to illustrate a particular word or structure “is isolated and decontextualized [that] it can stand in relief against the activity from which it arises, lifting out from it
the structure in question, and presenting it unencumbered by the distractions and complications which can sometimes work against noticing in on-line communication” (G. Cook, 2001, p. 381). Furthermore, Cook argues, “the more bizarre its meaning the more likely it is to be remembered” (2001, p. 381). Research supports the memorability of bizarre language, and humorous language is remembered even better (see Bell, 2012b, for a review). One important caveat, however, is that bizarre or humorous items must be mixed with serious items for this effect to be achieved (McDaniel et al., 2005).

A small body of work supports the use of language play in raising language awareness and helping learners notice L2 forms. Both Lucas (2005) and Tocalli-Beller and Swain (2007) found positive results in terms of comprehension and recall of lexical items discussed during activities that they designed that required students to work in twos or threes to decipher the meanings of puns. The study by Tocalli-Beller and Swain (2007) was most extensive, employing a delayed posttest and a production element in addition to the peer collaboration. They found not only that the linguistic items of focus were recalled well, but that the learning was durable. Where these two studies involved a planned, playful focus on form, Bell (2012b) investigated the effects on memory of playful focus on form events that occurred spontaneously during an ESL class. A statistical analysis of tailor-made tests to document each students’ recall of language that was the explicit focus of either playful or serious attention showed a significant difference in favor of those items that were used in a playful context. The results of a comparison between focus on meaning and focus on form indicated clearly that a playful metalinguistic episode was beneficial in terms of learning meanings, but the results were not significant for forms. Thus, language play seems more likely to facilitate the learning of lexical items than of morphosyntax, although further study is needed to explore this.

In addition to facilitating the noticing and retention of particular L2 morphosyntactic patterns and lexical items, at a broader level humor often revolves around play with pragmatics (Shardakova, 2010). One specific type of pragmatic play involves playing with different voices. For instance, researchers have documented the voices of villains (Broner & Tarone, 2001, p. 372), melodramatic daytime talk show guests (Pomerantz & Bell, 2007, p. 572), language instructors (Bushnell, 2008, p. 57; Waring, 2013, p. 196), and cool or tough guys (Bell, 2005, p. 201; Bongartz & Schneider, 2003, p. 21). Toohey and Day (1999) suggested that, for the first graders they observed, the language play that occurred in group-speech events, in particular, provided a nonthreatening space for emergent bilinguals to appropriate others’ words and to develop new voices. Tarone (2000) suggested that such play with voices could be an important facilitator in the development of sociolinguistic competence. She noted that empirical verification of this is challenging and that it must be emphasized that at present, while the existence of this type of play has been well documented, evidence for development remains scant.
Several qualitative studies, however, provide evidence that noticing of L2 forms and functions can occur in informal peer interaction. For instance, both Cekaite and Aronsson (2005, 2014) and Wang and Hyun (2009) found that language play served as informal peer lessons in children’s interaction, drawing learners’ attention to forms even when proficiency was limited by one or both interlocutors. Ohta (1995) also found peer scaffolding and hypothesis testing through language play among adult learners of Japanese. Belz and Reinhardt (2004) demonstrate experimentation through play during computer-mediated interaction by an adult learner of German. In a rare longitudinal study of pragmatic development, Shively (2013) found that for one student, noticing the pragmatic norms associated with L2 humor led to changes in his humor use and thus to more successful humorous interactions during study abroad. Teachers, too, can support the development of language awareness through playful talk, something that has been documented through qualitative research on classrooms with both adults (Lucas, 2005; Tocalli-Beller & Swain, 2007) and children (e.g., Gardner, 2008; Sullivan, 2000a, 2000b).

For multilinguals, language play is often created through shifting, juxtaposing, and blending languages (Cromdal & Aronsson, 2000; Lin, 2011; Luk, 2013). Thus, creating space for use of the whole linguistic repertoire in the L2 classroom is not only a more realistic and natural way of communicating, but allows for the construction of more nuanced meanings (Blackledge, Creese, & Takhi, 2014). Instruction that incorporates activities to raise L2 language awareness may also raise awareness of L1 linguistic practices. This was demonstrated by J. Kim (2013), who provided instruction in the conceptual basis of sarcasm in English to Korean learners and found that this resulted in greater awareness of uses of sarcasm in Korean, as well. In examining the writing of trilinguals (Spanish, Basque, English), Cenoz and Gorter (2011) found not only that cross-linguistic influences are multidirectional (e.g., L2 to L1, L3 to L2, etc.) but also that linguistic creativity developed through the use of multiple languages.

**Construct Iterative Activities**

Having fallen out of favor in language education for some time now, repetition is making a comeback as an important facilitator of L2 development. In a review of the role that repetition can play in L2 development, Larsen-Freeman (2012) found that it promotes rote learning, enhances working memory, develops automaticity in processing, and frees space for processing, allowing for improved performance. Each of these findings points to the potential benefit of activities involving memorization and (public or private) rehearsal in the L2 classroom. As noted earlier, however, Larsen-Freeman emphasizes that repetition is never exact and that in fact, iteration, in which learners engage in a number of activities that are similar but that also require some adjustment to their use of their linguistic
resources, can be an important facilitator of L2 development. Such a sequence of activities not only requires the L2 user to adapt when a slight change introduces a new challenge to an otherwise familiar landscape but, in doing so, also introduces variation, potentially making new resources available and maintaining dynamism in the system, thus allowing it to continue to develop.

Iteration is also a fundamental feature of much language play, thus elevating its importance for learning as well. This is the case whether we view language play as rehearsal (Bedford, 1985; Lantolf, 1997) or as a pleasurable activity focused on form rather than meaning (G. Cook, 1994c, 1997, 2000). From both perspectives, repetition is valued as a way of pushing forward L2 development through automatization and creative experimentation. Both stability and change can be introduced into the developing L2 system through language play. Tarone (2002) further suggests that while frequency of exposure to L2 patterns is crucial for development, play may help the learner select which patterns to attend to.

As noted in the previous section, Nancy (Bell, 2012b) provides evidence that language play may be beneficial specifically in vocabulary development. The often iterative nature of humor and ludic language play may be one factor that is particularly influential in this regard. Bongartz and Schneider (2003) observed successful vocabulary learning by two young brothers learning German during play that involved repetition and modeling. Iteration may also be particularly important for vocabulary acquisition, because we have to encounter a word repeatedly in numerous contexts in order to learn it. Also, having a critical mass of vocabulary seems to be one of the most important indicators of being able to communicate successfully (see, e.g., Iwashita, Brown, McNamara, & O’Hagan, 2008). This seems to be true for being able to use and understand creative and humorous language, as well. A well-developed ability to recognize and use formulaic sequences is also likely to provide an L2 user with more opportunities for humor, as formulaic language is an important resource for joking (Bell, 2012a; Shardakova, 2010). Similarly, Shively, Menke, and Manzón-Omundson (2008) studied the comprehension of irony by learners of Spanish and found that growing lexical knowledge seemed to be most strongly linked to the steady increase in understanding of irony that came with greater L2 experience. Essentially, not being able to understand a key word in the ironic utterance meant not interpreting the irony.

Although it is certainly important for teachers to build iteration into their curriculum, it is worth noting that students are likely to create iteration on their own, as well. For instance, Ohta (2008) found that the way that students play with mundane activities creates iteration. Rather than simply repeat the activity with the predicted reply they often gave sarcastically exaggerated responses. Similarly, we (Pomerantz & Bell, 2007) found students playfully reconfiguring teacher-designed activities, and in transgressing the norms they used more creative language than was normally found when the sanctioned activity was completed as the teacher intended (see also Bushnell, 2008). Ohta’s (2008) study, however, also provides a
Engage with Unpredictability

Although linguistic and sociolinguistic patterns in language are identifiable, individuals use their language resources flexibly and idiosyncratically, as well. Furthermore, language changes through time and across different social and geographical spaces; thus, learners must be aware of linguistic diversity and prepared for the unexpected in addition to more conventional, routine uses of language. Constructing activities that allow learners to encounter unexpected language and linguistic practices will afford them the opportunity to improvise communicative solutions, and to learn to make choices and to make do with what they have at the moment. Activities that involve an element of surprise may also raise awareness of the situated, contingent nature of interaction.

Humor thrives on unpredictability, making it a natural way to insert unexpected language into the L2 classroom and encourage learners to make situated interpretations and reflect on the contingent nature of communication. Furthermore, as Tarone (2006) suggested, language play may function to destabilize a learner’s L2 system, allowing further development. From a complexity theory perspective, linguistic innovations and the type of discourse that encourages them may suggest a system in flux, where language play instigates cycles of change (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008, p. 58). Tin (2012) argued convincingly that constraints rather than freedom in language learning activities encourages creativity and pushes learners to construct unknown meanings, rather than relying on familiar language, which they may do when given complete freedom (see also Ohta, 2008). Tin (2012, 2013) provides examples of a variety of ways to constrain the tasks, by restricting the goal, the input, or the outcome.

These types of adjustments to language play activities have been demonstrated to result in different types of language use. Y. Kim and Kellogg (2007), for example, found that role-plays allowed the child learners they observed to rely on familiar, formulaic sequences and contained a larger proportion of preferred responses. The language used in rule-based games that constrained learner contributions, on the other hand, used more novel language but a higher proportion of dis-preferred responses, resulting in overall greater complexity to those interactions. Tin’s (2011) findings when comparing two creative writing tasks were similar. An activity with high formal constraints (creating an acrostic poem) produced more complex language than a simile creation task, where formal constraints were much lower.

Humor and language play can also introduce unpredictability into otherwise mundane, predictable classroom interactions and prescribed curricula. Gardner (2008) offered a detailed account of how one primary school teacher working in a linguistically diverse classroom transformed a scripted phonics activity into a
creative game that supported not only the children’s language development, but also their identities as competent members of the classroom community. In this case, the teacher used a variety of strategies to help children justify their answers to the “silly questions” (i.e., Do hens dig?) posed in the instructional script rather than accepting simple yes/no responses. Gardner found that these strategies were central in making the activity “at once more cognitively challenging with the real communicative need to justify, more enjoyable in its appeal to the imagination, and more social in its negotiation of meanings and past experiences” (Gardner, 2008, p. 272; see also Poveda, 2005 for a similar example in an ethnically diverse public kindergarten class in Spain).

Learner-initiated humor can also be used to disrupt mundane activities and add an element of unpredictability to teacher-fronted classroom activities (Waring, 2011). In particular, Waring’s work showed how the typical triadic IRF (initiation–response–feedback) sequence could be disrupted by learners’ humorous initiations. Such learner-initiated classroom talk can be an opportunity for rich, unpredictable, and highly engaging interaction; however, teachers may not always take advantage of or even welcome these opportunities (Yoshida, 2007). Later studies by Waring (2011, 2013) demonstrated that play in the ESL classroom seems to arise mainly from play with identities at various levels (situational, relational, personal). She demonstrated how, as learners playfully created alternate universes in which they were teachers or music lovers, rather than students, they were afforded the opportunity to “do conversation” and thus engage in contingent talk that included unexpected elements (see Chapter 4).

**Teach Meaning as Relational and Subjective**

Although we have already emphasized the importance for L2 development of using the language of instruction to construct meaning, Kramsch’s (2008) description of language educators as “not teachers of a linguistic code but teachers of meaning” (p. 403) places additional emphasis on this aspect of language education and calls for us to interrogate as well what we mean by “meaning.” In Chapter 1 we discussed the emergent and contingent nature of meaning. Moreover, we noted the situated, subjective, and relational dimensions of meaning. Kramsch calls for teachers to highlight dialogic relations among texts in order to examine the ways that meaning is not static and unified but, rather, is relational and to examine underlying individual and cultural assumptions in words and texts and the multiplicity of interpretations that can emerge from them. Thus, teaching meaning involves creating contexts in which learners can consider the social, political, cultural, and historical significance of different texts for different people.

The role of humor in examining the relativity and subjectivity of meaning is not an area that has been tackled by researchers; therefore, our discussion here as to how humor and language play may facilitate this aspect of learning are
largely speculative, with suggestions gleaned indirectly from scholarship on L2 humor. This aspect of language education touches on individual and cultural norms, values, and attitudes. As such, it can become a site where humor—so often irreverent—is less welcome, as respect should be shown for the values of others, but also because such topics tend to be “serious,” perhaps involving potentially difficult issues of race and class, for example. However, because humor is both a universal phenomenon and has culturally specific instantiations, it can be valuable in highlighting the underlying assumptions speakers make about culture and meaning, and indeed, Wagner and Urios-Aparisi (2008) have demonstrated that some teachers do use humor as a way to explain culture. As noted in Chapter 2, humor preferences seem to be, for some people, a touchstone for determining in- and out-group status; thus, speakers’ norms and values can be displayed in the humor they choose to use, as well as how they opt to respond to different types of humor. Finally, humor often indexes social, historical, and political conflicts, thereby allowing learners to access and analyze attitudes about these issues. It seems possible that by directly engaging with the resistant humor that students sometimes use in in the L2 classroom, teachers could establish a starting point for such discussions. For instance, students’ deliberately poor or mocking renditions of the language being studied (e.g., Blackledge & Creese, 2009; Hirst, 2003; Houser, 2011; Lefkowitz & Hedgcock, 2002; Worth, 2008) could work as a starting point for discussing the status of the languages they know and local and global attitudes toward them (see also Pomerantz & Schwartz, 2011).

Engage With Emotions

Engaging with emotions in the L2 classroom involves two related aspects: Attending to emotion in the process of learning and teaching about emotion as a linguistic and intercultural topic to broaden learners’ repertoires with respect to the language of emotion. With respect to the first area, classroom language learning is well known as a potentially anxiety-raising experience. In addition, however, it is also often a site of satisfaction, pride, curiosity, frustration, joy, and irritation. Students are often asked to discuss personal or sensitive topics, something made more challenging by using a language that they may have little control over. Engaging with emotions first means paying attention to the emotional atmosphere of the class and of individuals, and listening to and talking with students about the way they feel in order to both judge when and how to intervene and scaffold their learning (Swain, 2013) and as a way of critically reflecting on language and the process of learning from the micro-context of individual interactions to the broader sociopolitical context (Benesch, 2012).

The realm of emotions is perhaps the most accepted place for humor to be used. Unfortunately, as we discussed in Chapter 4, formal L2 instruction can be an anxiety-inducing undertaking and many classroom activities can be face
threatening, because they position the learner as a novice or, worse, as incompetent, and tend to set up competitive comparisons with other students. Humor and language play provide a way for students to manage that tension, couching their insecurities and lack of knowledge as humor and renegotiating activities in more manageable ways (Bushnell, 2008; Pomerantz & Bell, 2007, 2011). It has been amply demonstrated that humor and language play are important for enjoyment and creating a more relaxed environment in which students have a sense of community (e.g., Cekaite & Aronsson, 2004; Forman, 2011; Pomerantz & Bell, 2007; Sullivan, 2000a; Toohey, Waterstone, & Julé-Lemke, 2000). Even when teachers use humor as a way of reproaching students, it can function to increase the sense of closeness between teacher and students (Lytra, 2004). Making the classroom environment safe and comfortable cannot only result from the use of humor, but it may also stimulate language play. Tarone and Liu (1995) found that the child learner in their study used the more creative language when he was at home and speaking with the researcher, who was also a family friend. Thus, a relaxing situation may encourage experimentation and, thus, L2 development. Finally, humor is intrinsically motivating due not only to the feeling of mirth it engenders but also for the aesthetic pleasure to be gained. Thus, we see students playing with language in ways that suggest aesthetic enjoyment both in the classroom (e.g., Sullivan, 2000b) and out of the classroom, beyond the eyes of the teacher (e.g., Jaspers, 2011; Rampton, 1995, 2006; van Dam, 2003).

Moving beyond the affective and aesthetic benefits of playful language use for L2 learners, humor might also be used to teach emotion words and the language associated with different emotions. Despite the range of emotions that classroom L2 learning can elicit, language learning materials tend to be bland and, lacking the same range, put classroom learners at a disadvantage when it comes to expressing emotions in their L2 (Dewaele, 2011). Moreover, emotion words need to be taught as they consist of their own class within the lexicon, and the multilingual lexicon of emotions is conceptually and affectively different from that of monolinguals (Pavlenko, 2008). Teachers should be aware that distance between languages, typologically and culturally, can increase the challenge a learner has in interpreting emotional displays and understanding the way that different emotions are conceptualized in their L2 and be prepared to help them bridge this difference (Dewaele, 2008, 2011).

If expressed genuinely, the range of emotions acceptable in the classroom is quite limited. Expressions of anger, love, hate, jealousy, loneliness, and grief, for instance, would need to be limited in their display. Other emotions might appear, but be difficult to talk about, such as embarrassment, shame, fear, or pride. Still others would be unlikely to appear, or would do so only rarely, providing little chance to discuss them, such as courage, loyalty, or surprise. Humor and language play provide a way of introducing a broader range of emotions into the language classroom, including those that are rare or possibly inappropriate. The talk show
activity described in Pomerantz and Bell (2007), for instance, provided learners with a forum in which to practice communicating love, anger, betrayal, and shock. Even informal joking can afford a space for the construction of unusual emotions, as demonstrated in Nancy’s work (Bell, 2012b, p. 251) when one learner pretended to be hurt by his teacher’s suggestion that she would not want two of him in her class. He used a plaintive tone when asking her why and later used the formulaic sequence “I’d like to be alone right now” as his classmate and teacher laughed. Thus, humor and language play can be used both formally and informally to encourage greater engagement with emotional language.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have surveyed the evidence, and in some senses lack thereof, for humor’s role in classroom learning. Whereas in Chapter 4 we offered a robust account of the role of humor in safely managing identities and power relations at school, humor’s precise role in learning—and in our case additional language learning—is more difficult to discern. To this end, we noted that many SLA researchers have instead turned their focus to the role of language play. Although some, like Lantolf, have emphasized the idea of language play as a form of private speech or rehearsal that facilitates comfort and competence with L2 forms, others have followed G. Cook (2000) and Tarone’s (2000) lead in thinking about language play as an end unto itself. That is, they have considered language play to be a kind of language use that L2 users engage in to both showcase their communicative competence and grow their metacommunicative awareness. In addition, we have noted that while interest in the study of language play has slowly taken hold, SLA researchers still find themselves still struggling to understand L2 learning. Thus, in this chapter we laid out a sociocognitive theory of additional language development that is consistent with the views of language, communication and the learner that we described in Chapter 1. Moreover, we discussed six principles for language education that are not only grounded in this view of development but could also be realized through purposeful engagement with humor and language play. Put simply, we make a case for taking non-serious language seriously in language education. It is with this thought in mind that we now turn to teachers and the risks and rewards of using humor in professional practice.

Note

1 This is most commonly recognized as cross-linguistic influence from the L1 to the L2; however, all the languages in a multilingual repertoire can influence each other in any direction (Cenoz & Gorter, 2011; V. Cook, 2003; Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2008). In other words, a third language can influence the way an L1 is used.
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In May 2013, Melissa Cairns, an Ohio middle school teacher, was fired for posting a picture to Facebook depicting her students with duct tape covering their mouths. The photo was accompanied by a caption reading “Finally found a way to get them to be quiet!!” The incident began in class, when a student with a broken binder asked Cairns for a roll of tape. The student then took the tape, and instead of putting it on her binder, she put a piece over her mouth and laughed. The student then proceeded to pass the tape around and about 8 or 9 of her 16 classmates followed suit. The group then asked Cairns to photograph them. Cairns later posted the picture to Facebook with the caption. Another school employee saw the posting and alerted the principal. Shortly thereafter, the board of education voted to dismiss Cairns.

Although Cairns told reporters that she regretted her actions, she was adamant in saying that the posting was meant to be a joke. Indeed, she asserted that the students’ willingness to joke with her was an indication of the trust she had built in the classroom. It was a student, not Cairns, who had come up with the duct tape idea and staged the photo. A spokesperson for the Akron Public Schools defended the board’s decision to terminate Cairns, saying, “She showed a lack of good judgment. Her conduct was unbecoming of a teacher” (Kaufman & Jones, 2013).

In April 2011, a faculty member at one of New York’s most elite private schools was fired for directing allegedly racist comments toward students of color. Barry Sirmon, a history teacher at the Ethical Culture Fieldston School, was depicted as saying to two Black students that he hoped he would be able to tell them apart. Yet, what captured many in the media’s attention was this fact about Sirmon’s past:

The situation is made more interesting by the fact that Sirmon is South African and was raised during apartheid. As a young man in the South African Army,
Sirmon was sent to modern-day Namibia to put down a black independence movement, but said he refused his orders and eventually fled to the United States.

(Coscarelli, 2011)

Indeed, although Sirmon refused to verify the offending comments, he defended his actions by saying that they were not “racist” and that he was attempting to illustrate how “lame and stupid” certain “–isms” can be. In chronicling the story, New York Magazine went on to note,

“Jokes I’ve made in the past, light-hearted, were misinterpreted,” he [Sirmon] admitted. But Sirmon blames the misunderstandings on his sarcasm, typical of Brits and South Africans. Indeed, in an anonymous RateMyTeachers.com post from last year, in which Sirmon received a 5/5 for easiness and 1/5 for clarity, one student wrote, “You can tell he is always bored because of how sarcastic he is.” Another said, “He is really dry, sarcastic, and arrogant. But that’s why we love him.”

(Coscarelli, 2011)

In March 2013, controversy ensued when beloved high school drama teacher, Jeff Jones, was fired for handing out seven pages of jokes to his students as part of a theater exercise. The students were to use the jokes as a starting point in developing their own stand-up comedy routines. A parent found the jokes—which included short riffs on stock themes such as dead babies and blondes—in her daughter’s backpack and reported Jones to district administrators. Jones was put on “home study” and later terminated for distributing this material to students (Blatchford, 2013).

These days, particularly within the United States, the public excoriation of educators—whether they have acted unprofessionally or not—has become commonplace. From the policing of teachers’ social media accounts, to stories and at times even videos of teachers acting inappropriately in class, to parents lodging complaints about teaching materials, “teachers behaving badly” is now a stock journalistic theme. Although non-serious and/or playful language use is certainly not to blame in each and every case, the “war on teachers” (Giroux, 2012) may feel very real to those who lack experience or other professional protections and may make even the most jovial of educators think twice before saying or doing anything in jest.

In this chapter, we address a variety of challenges that educators, and in particular language educators, may face in incorporating humor into their classrooms. Some teachers, for example, may struggle with maintaining a professional demeanor in the face of difficult working conditions. Confronted by apathetic students, insufficient supplies, and/or low wages, they may turn to staff-room humor as a way to blow off steam. Alternately, as in the case of Ms. Cairns, others may
revel in the funny things that their students do and find approbation on Facebook, where comedic stories and well-placed sarcasm can earn the poster a steady stream of “likes.” At the same time, teachers may have concerns about classroom management, fearing that humor will weaken their authority and disrupt the serious business of learning. Yet, they may worry (or not, as in the case of Mr. Sirmon) that their efforts at humor will be misunderstood and thus avoid all non-serious talk. Language teachers may struggle with whether and to what extent humor, language play, and linguistic creativity merit attention as instructional foci, believing that such aspects of language use are either too difficult or too inconsequential to teach. And, if language teachers do decide to focus on such talk, they may face pressure from supervisors, students, and parents to justify their pedagogical choices. As we saw in Mr. Jones's case, even a strong pedagogical rationale may not be enough to convince others of the relevance and/or appropriateness of certain materials for particular classroom contexts.

**To Be or Not to Be Funny: Humor and Professionalism**

Being a teacher is hard and, as we've seen throughout this book, humor is not only a normal part of everyday interaction, but it can also be a powerful resource for managing relationships and dealing with difficult situations. But, non-serious language use also carries with it some risks: Chief among these for teachers is the possibility that their attempts at humor will backfire and lead to unintended professional consequences. Just how far can teachers go with humor and play? Ms. Cairns was dismissed from her position, in part, for engaging in conduct that was “unbecoming of a teacher.” Mr. Sirmon was revered for his sarcasm but was ultimately fired for it. Mr. Jones’s use of humor as an instructional tool cost him, and the many students and community members who stood by him, an award-winning drama program. Does this mean that teachers who are eager to keep their jobs should play it straight and avoid humor altogether? Or, are only certain forms of humor appropriate for school contexts? Do language teachers face any particular challenges when it comes to humor?

**It's All Fun and Games Until Someone Gets Hurt: Light Versus Dark Humor at School**

When Anne was a senior in high school, her biology teacher often included extra-credit questions at the end of exams. On one test, Anne was shocked to see the following printed at the bottom of the page: “Why are women such poor drivers?” The following day, she was even more stunned to learn that her classmates were given additional points for answers such as “You can’t drive and put on makeup at the same time” or “You can’t drive in high heels.” Angry at what she perceived to be overtly sexist behavior and a flagrant violation of teacher
professionalism, Anne confronted her teacher after class and asked him to stop. The sexist extra-credit questions disappeared, but the “humorous” remarks in class did not. In January, Anne’s class switched teachers, and she was initially relieved to be with a new, and from what she had heard from other students, well-loved instructor. A day or two into the new semester, Anne raised her hand to answer a question and the teacher called on her, saying, “Gloria?” “Uh, my name is Anne,” she replied, somewhat baffled by the teacher’s error. The teacher then said, “No, Gloria—I’m going to call you Gloria, Gloria Steinem. I heard you were quite a feminist.” Needless to say, Anne was both shocked and humiliated by the teacher’s actions. At the end of the term, he told her that he hoped that she wasn’t too put off by his teasing, but by this point in the year the damage had been done. Anne detested attending biology class—once a favorite subject—and shunned lab sciences for the rest of her academic career.

In an effort to understand the role of humor in teachers’ professional practice, Bullough (2012) distinguishes between light and dark humor. For Bullough, light humor is that which “facilitates cooperation, lowers tension, softens boundaries, encourages bonding, is exhilarating, energizing, and fun.” Light humor, he notes, is that which students and teachers deem “safe” for rapport building and/or instruction, as it includes canned jokes on academic themes, puns, riddles, and other forms of ludic language play. This is the type of humor that, as we discussed in Chapter 5, can create increased affiliation between students and teachers, a more comfortable classroom atmosphere and, as a result of both of these, greater learning. In contrast, dark humor belies dissatisfaction and seeks to undermine or unsettle others. The object of dark humor is to create divisions, while simultaneously protecting the self (see also Holmes & Marra’s, 2002, distinction between supportive and contestive humor). It is this type of humor that, as we noted in Chapter 5, tends to have a negative effect on student attitudes and thus learning outcomes.

Reflecting back on Anne’s story, it is easy to see how what might have been intended as “light humor” by her teachers was experienced as “dark humor” by Anne. Although it would be hard in this day and age not to see such remarks as blatantly sexist and perhaps even a form of bullying, Anne was told to “lighten up” by her teachers. Indeed, the teacher who referred to her as Gloria seemed surprised at the end of the term when Anne told him that she didn’t appreciate his teasing. As educators, we hold a position of authority; we do not advocate using humor that is overtly (or even covertly) demeaning to a particular group of people or a specific individual. This is not so say that we believe that teachers’ language should be rigidly policed and sanitized; rather, we recommend some prudence on the part of educators as they reflect on how their words and deeds might be interpreted by others, particularly in light of the theories of language and communication we discussed in Chapter 1. Moreover, distinctions must be made between incidents that are “one-off” such as Ms. Cairn’s and Mr. Jones’s cases and those that involve a history of repeated actions, like the allegations
surrounding Mr. Sirmon and Anne’s own experience across two biology classes. There is a fine line between playful teasing and bullying, but very often the distinguishing features are repetition and asymmetrical relations of power.

In some cases when humor has caused offense, an apology may be all that is necessary to restore the social order. In others, harsher sanctions must be levied. To this end, some schools and universities have explicit policies governing the use of language, although as we will see later in this chapter, they do not always provide guidance for what to do when the instance in question is said purportedly in jest. Mr. Sirmon’s case provoked an onslaught of media attention, not only because it took place at one of the nation’s most elite private schools but also because of the question of whether a humorous interpretation was possible given his history and propensity for sarcasm. To what extent, for example, does a teacher’s identity as a “funny person” play into decisions regarding whether he or she should be sanctioned for using particular forms of humor? Are certain forms of humor completely off limits at school, like the jokes distributed in Mr. Jones’s class? What if the teacher is not the instigator of the humor, as in Ms. Cairn’s case, and he or she is merely playing off the students? These are questions that need to be dealt with seriously, as “zero-tolerance” policies regarding talk in institutional contexts lack the nuance necessary to understand the workings of humor and play in interaction.

At this point in our discussion it might be tempting to say that only light humor should be used in schools. Yet, as we saw in the preceding example, people may have competing interpretations of what constitutes a light or dark remark. And, as Bullough (2012) reminded us, such a stance would be not only overly simplistic, but also limiting. He wrote,

> What dark humor has that is potentially of most value is its edge; often residing in dark humor when spoken by a ‘defender of a dominated group’ is a painful truth, a point forcefully made by Harvey (1995, p. 21): ‘The game of humor is not played on an even field—especially when the subject of the humor is present’.

(Bullough, 2012, p. 290)

Bullough argued that although many forms of dark humor are not conducive to maintaining a professional demeanor at work, edginess does have an important role to play in institutional contexts such as schools, where teachers must tackle delicate issues. For example, there are any number of jokes, cartoons, and other humorous images that can be used to explore sensitive topics. The Language Log archive (http://languagelog.ldc.upenn.edu/nll/?cat=9) is an excellent resource for locating comics related to language. When carefully paired with thoughtful readings and activities, edgy humor can be used to raise students’ metalinguistic awareness, particularly around topics like dialect difference and linguistic prejudice.
As Bullough (2012) observed, dark humor may serve as a necessary social corrective, particularly when it draws attention to troubling or unjust situations. In humor, Bullough noted, there exists the possibility of raising serious issues for comment and reflection, albeit in a palatable way—an affordance we saw illustrated numerous times in our discussion of safe houses in Chapter 4. Therein lies what Bullough perceives as the greatest challenge: “How to create institutional cultures that themselves are safe spaces . . . places [where] humor thrives and relations are simultaneously playful but also richly challenging and mostly honest” (2012, p. 291). For Bullough—and for us as language educators—this is achieved when people are able to view the world from different vantage points and take pleasure in engaging others around meaningful topics.

**Are There Limits on Where Teachers Can Use Humor?**

While Bullough urges caution with respect to the use of dark humor in classroom settings, researchers have long noted its presence in what Goffman (1959/1971) refers to as the back region, or spaces such as the teachers’ lounge or shared office in which educators can air out their grievances or merely joke around, sometimes at the expense of students and/or administrators. For Goffman, back regions are, in effect, the opposite of front regions—exhibiting characteristics reminiscent of Bakhtin’s carnival (see Chapter 4). Here, dark humor reigns—along with other forms of language, posture, gesture, dress, and conduct that could be seen as inappropriate or untoward in a front region, such as the classroom. Although Goffman’s use of the terms front region and back region are embedded within his dramaturgical metaphor for understanding social life, it is worth looking at how he describes “backstage” communication with an eye to how we understand “conduct that is becoming of a teacher.” Goffman wrote,

> The backstage language consists of reciprocal first-naming, cooperative decision-making, profanity, open sexual remarks, elaborate griping, smoking, informal dress, “sloppy” sitting and standing posture, use of dialect or sub-standard speech, mumbling and shouting, playful aggressivity and “kid-ding,” inconsiderateness for the other in minor but potentially symbolic acts, minor physical self-involvements such as humming, whistling, chewing, nibbling, belching, and flatulence. The frontstage behavior language can be taken as the absence (and in some sense the opposite) of this.

(1959/1971, p. 129)

In Goffman’s detailed and some might even say hyperbolic account of backstage behavior, we see how incursions of humor and play into front region spaces, like the classroom, can become the subject of sanction. Nancy spent several years teaching at a university in a heavily Church of Latter-Day Saints (LDS; Mormon)
community in Utah. At the end of one semester, an LDS student raised her hand and said, “Dr. Bell, I just wanted to thank you for not using profanity this semester.” Needless to say, Nancy was shocked, because swearing in front of students had never been part of her classroom style!

Although Goffman’s observations about the binaries that structure our social world are certainly instructive as we try to understand how people use and orient to humor and play at school, it is important to remember that the parceling of space into such strict regions is more often than not a fiction given the messiness of social life. As we saw in Chapter 4, there is much humor and play, both light and dark, in classroom settings. Likewise, as Richards’s (2010) ethnographic, discourse analytic account of the talk that took place in the staff room of one language school revealed, the teachers’ lounge is also home not only to much dark humor but also to considerable professionally oriented talk—some of it uttered in a serious key and some of it not. He found that teachers often used humor to increase their colleagues’ interest and involvement in stories about particular incidents that occurred in their classrooms. While some of these stories were designed to build co-membership, others clearly functioned as release valves, allowing the audience to sympathize with the narrator and let off steam. Moreover, he found that some humorous stories allowed both narrator and listeners to delve into the story world and analyze the actions that took place in the classroom from a professional point of view. That is, the humorous stories served as case studies for the examination of and reflection on classroom discourse. Thus, it would be hard to say that the dark humor in Richards’s study was unprofessional.

In a similar vein, Vaughan (2007) noted the frequent presence of humor, and in particular quips and jocular abuse, in recordings of faculty meetings at two English-language schools—one in Ireland and one in Mexico. She argued that while such spaces may be understood as back regions with respect to the classroom, they may simultaneously function as front regions in terms of a teachers’ professional identities vis-à-vis their colleagues. Vaughan documented the role that shared communicative practices, including staff meeting humor, played in both the construction and maintenance of the teachers’ professional communities of practice and identities as insiders. She noted that “newly qualified teachers are often subject to a ‘rude awakening’ when they leave the safe and structured confines of their respective degrees and certificates and start work in a new school” (2007, p. 186). And we would argue that some of this awakening is related to confrontation with new ways of talking about, and indeed orientating to, professional practice in both staff meetings and the teachers’ lounge. Likewise, some degree of “hazing” may figure into this experience, as newcomers are tested by old-timers to see whether and to what extent they fit in with the group. As a teacher in Richards’s (2010) study noted, “The ones that make it here are the ones that don’t take themselves too seriously” (p. 149).
Blurred Lines

In recent years, cases such as that of Ms. Cairn’s, the teacher who posted the ill-fated picture of her students on Facebook, have raised numerous questions about what constitutes the front or back region with respect to teachers. It is important for teachers to remember that even things said in back regions can be made public and spread easily via social media. Something that was intended and received as jest by all parties in private can cause trouble when it reaches a wider audience, where not only is it likely to be judged by individuals with a very different set of values but it may also sound very different when lifted out of its original context.

It is now harder than ever to discern whether and to what extent a person who posts something to social media is acting in a professional capacity. Educators now have unprecedented access through technology to colleagues around the world and can share jokes and funny observations with ease. Are these front region or back region interactions? Are they professional or personal? Larry Ferlazzo’s English website (http://larryferlazzo.edublogs.org) offers a forum for language teachers to connect with one another. Here, he archives not only his posts on contemporary education issues but also instructional material for ESL and EFL teachers. Yet, Ferlazzo’s site also includes many links to humorous videos and memes about the teaching profession. Are the people who interact with this site doing so as teachers or merely as run-of-the-mill Internet users? To what extent is their participation subject to monitoring/sanctions by their employers?

The same questions might be asked of sites that are overtly political. Facebook groups such as the “Badass Teachers Association” (www.facebook.com/BadassTeachersAssociation) provide a forum for teachers to organize and advocate against the overuse of high stakes testing. This group uses a humorous name to attract publicity but is engaged in sending a serious message to the public about U.S. education reform. Its members are predominantly primary- and secondary-level teachers, but the group also includes parents, university faculty, and other allies. Are the participants who interact on this site doing so as professionals or as private citizens concerned with education policy? How do we know when someone is communicating as a teacher or a parent? We all have multiple identities that we shift in and out of as we interact with one another and the question of “who is speaking/writing now” is anything but clear, particularly when it comes to social media.

In an effort to provide some guidance, many professional associations and educational institutions have issued policies regarding the responsible use of social media by teachers and students alike. To this end, the New Jersey Education Association (NJEA, n.d.) has this advice for teachers:

As educators, we are held to higher standards than the rest of the working world. It’s a responsibility that we take very seriously. Be safe online and never post anything you wouldn’t want read out loud at a school board meeting.
Indeed, the NJEA makes a point of cautioning its members to use humor carefully, saying, “Consider carefully how what you post could be interpreted. Humor, especially sarcasm, is extremely difficult to convey” (NJEA, n.d.).

Yet, despite the proliferation of guidelines and policies around what constitutes professional conduct in educational spaces, the NJEA’s comment on humor reminds us that rules still rely on people to interpret them. The rise of the political correctness movement on U.S. college campuses, and the public mocking it engendered, offers a sobering reminder of how efforts to police communication must be grounded in theories of language and language use that are mindful of the issues raised in Chapter 1.

The Rise and Fall of Political Correctness

In the late 1960s, as universities became more diverse, many sought strategies to build more inclusive communities. By the late 1980s, this was accomplished, in part, by the articulation of policies aimed at specifying what people could and could not say and do on campus, with an eye toward eradicating racist, sexist, homophobic and otherwise exclusionary and/or derogatory language. In keeping with the “linguistic turn” in the humanities and social sciences, many such policies found their intellectual genesis in poststructuralism, and in scholarship documenting the ways in which everyday language use constructs our social world and reifies particular, often inequitable, relations of power. Starting from the presumption that language change can lead to greater consciousness and thus social change, many campus groups began calling for critical engagement with language use in public spaces. For example, gender activists urged caution with respect to word choice, noting how pairings such as “waiter” and “waitress” served not only to construct gender as a binary set of relations but also to marginalize and disempower those who do not identify with dominant identity categories such as male and female. Although controversy continues to reign regarding the wording of campus language policies, much attention has also been given to whether and to what extent universities have the right to act as “language police,” controlling not only what can be said on campus but how it should be interpreted.

Of the many cases capturing the media’s attention over the years, several have involved comments in which the speaker insists that he or she was just making a joke. What makes these cases particularly difficult to adjudicate is the slippage between poststructuralist understandings of language that seek to illuminate the inequitable relations of power that make some interpretations seem more plausible or valid than others and the fact that enforcement of any speech code requires the elevation of one interpretive possibility over all others. In other words, poststructuralism (like humor scholarship) reminds us that meaning in language is always polysemous and open to multiple interpretations. Speech codes, on the other hand, require that we take a stance with regard to whose interpretation
of meaning counts the most. Recall that in Mr. Sirmon’s case, questions were raised about whether his reputation for being sarcastic, coupled with his previous political actions, offered enough contextualization cues to interpret his comments about race as ironic. Yet, Sirmon was quoted as saying that he was aware that some of his jokes in the past had been misinterpreted by his listeners. Wherein lies the burden of proof? Is it up to the speaker to offer enough contextualization cues to ensure that his/her attempts at joking do not fail? Or, is it the listener who gets to decide whether enough cues have been given—both in the moment and in the past—to interpret a particular utterance as humorous? These are complicated issues and they raise questions about the extent to which speech codes are the right way to raise people’s consciousness about the workings of language and power in society, particularly when humor is involved. Indeed, it is rather ironic that humor and language play, frequent offenders of speech codes, are central to understanding why such policies have been subject to so much criticism, despite their important and laudable aims.

But What About Tenure? Doesn’t That Guarantee Free Speech?

But what about tenure, some of you may be wondering. Doesn’t that guarantee educators the right to free speech? In a nutshell, the answer to this is no. Within the United States, tenure has been the subject of great debate, as educators and noneducators battle over whether it is merited in today’s labor market. It is important to remember that tenure, more than anything else, guarantees educators the right to due process. A professor or a teacher with tenure cannot simply be fired. The institution must follow a proscribed series of steps in which the burden of proof is on the school to show that the educator in question has acted unprofessionally or is otherwise incompetent.

Very often, tenure is confused with the notion of “academic freedom”—a value that is at the heart of many, but not all, educational systems. Academic freedom stipulates that schools remain safe places for the free interchange of ideas. It is what allows people to feel free to engage in debate and to challenge conventional wisdom or even one another. Academic freedom alone, however, does not afford faculty any job protections. It is an ideal, not a law. In the United States, the First Amendment protects freedom of speech, but the Constitution does not forbid institutions from firing workers who express ideas that are not in line with their core mission and values.

Here is where things get tricky. Probationary faculty (i.e., teachers without tenure)—whether at the elementary, secondary, or postsecondary level—can be let go for reasons unrelated to their performance. They do not have the right to due process and institutions do not have to tell them why their contracts aren’t being renewed. While the First Amendment of the U.S. constitution does give tenured and nontenured faculty alike, as citizens, the right to raise “matters of
public concern,” this right does not extend to talk or writing that is personal in nature, runs afoul of an educational institution’s code of professional conduct, or is disruptive of the workplace in any way. Tenure merely stipulates that an institution must follow particular procedures for seeking termination, including the demonstration of “just cause.” In the case of nontenured faculty, the institution does not have these obligations.

Jovial Instructor or Clown: Concerns About the Use of Humor in L2 Classrooms

In Chapter 5, we noted that despite the paucity of empirical evidence supporting a connection between humor and learning, the field of education has long regarded humor as an important instructional tool. Yet, some teachers may feel like the risks outweigh the rewards. For example, as efforts in the United States to tie K–12 teacher effectiveness to student performance on standardized assessments continue unabated, teachers—and particularly those who work with English-language learners or users of nonprestige varieties of English—may feel intensifying pressure to toe the line instructionally, shunning creative assignments for test preparation and foregoing anything that feels too much like fun in the classroom (e.g., Menken, 2008; Wiley & Wright, 2004). Moreover, those being evaluated by the Danielson Framework may feel pressured to adhere to the serious forms of talk valued within this protocol. Both research reports and the media are rife with accounts of schools in which heavily scripted interactional routines have come to dominate the instruction, like in the example from Diane Ravitch’s blog that we shared at the end of Chapter 4. In Chapter 7, we describe our approach to using humor and play as instructional tools in language classrooms. For now, however, we examine some reasons why language teachers, in particular, might shy away from humor.

In a study of academic ESL instruction in Malaysia, Ziyaeemehr, Kumar, and Faiz Abdullah (2011) asked students to speculate on why their instructors might avoid humor in the classroom. Given both scholarly and professional accounts of the benefits of humor with respect to both classroom management and additional language learning (see Chapter 5), the researchers wanted to know why students believed their instructors did not capitalize on its benefits. Answers ranged from the belief that some instructors were, by nature, humorless, to assumptions about the teachers’ linguistic proficiency in English and their (in)ability to formulate humorous utterances. Our own conversations with language teachers yield a similar set of beliefs with regard to why instructors might shy away from non-serious or playful language use. These include humor as the following:

- Too hard to pull off without professional guidance, as using humor is not part of teacher training
- Too tangential to serious curricular matters
• Too threatening to instructor credibility, as learning is serious business
• Too uncertain, as humor can fall flat or be offensive
• Too linguistically or culturally complex for the students, as “L2 users can’t do humor”
• Too risky, thus potentially resulting in the loss of classroom control

The first two of these bullet points, we hope you will recognize, have already been addressed with this text, which is in itself a response to teachers who have sought guidance from us regarding the use of humor in the classroom, as well as an argument for making a playful element central to classroom language learning. In the sections that follow, we address the concerns about instructor credibility; about the failure of humor, due to its causing offense or to the students’ not understanding it because of their unfamiliarity with the language or culture; and about classroom management issues.

Instructor Credibility

In an ethnographic account of EFL teaching in a Chinese university, Stanley (2008, 2013) noted that the pressure on Western (i.e., foreign, English-speaking) teachers to be “fun” in the classroom had a deleterious effect on both the quality of language instruction and the psychological wellbeing of teachers. As one American teacher in Stanley’s study, Beth, put it, she often felt like a “foreign monkey” charged with entertaining the students and making sure that the classroom time passed as painlessly as possible:

They [the students] expected me to get up there and be the funny, foreign monkey. Let them play fun games, tell funny jokes, clown a bit, and then they’d get to go home . . . it’s so easy at this university to let yourself slip . . . To just go into class, get through the 80 minutes, and move on. And there’s definitely been weeks where I’ve done that . . . because, [there’s] the pressure from the students, and the pressure from management to amuse the students so they don’t complain . . . It’s absolutely just like pulling teeth otherwise. It’s just so slow, if you don’t do something to force the students to engage, if you don’t make it fun, then it’s just absolutely horrible. You have 80 minutes of ‘say this, say this’.

(2008, p. 84)

In interviewing Western teachers and observing their classes, Stanley found that teachers often used humor and play to engage the students in activities that did little to improve the students’ English language competencies. Although some teachers, such as Beth, were aware that their instruction did not always have clear pedagogical aims and were disheartened by the pressure they felt to act in such ways,
others came to their positions as English-language instructors with little professional training and were unaware that their methods lacked any substance beyond entertainment value. As Beth noted in her comments, both the English-language program supervisors and the students expected the foreign teachers to be light-hearted and amusing, as such behavior was considered both constitutive of Westernness and in keeping with widely circulating ideologies that constructed Confucian educational values as both oppositional and superior to their alien counterparts. This, Stanley argued, resulted in a situation in which Chinese students’ encounters with Western educators served not only to reify stereotypes but also to ensure that only the least prepared teachers stayed on in their posts. At the same time, Stanley observed that even when teachers tried to use humor and play in ways that were consonant with serious developmental aims, students often resisted such pedagogical approaches, complaining that they were “not learning anything” because the lesson didn’t involve the memorization of new forms/rules or any form of scripted practice. In other words, the students (and their Chinese professors) tended to equate “real learning” with the acquisition of new knowledge, relegating communicatively oriented activities to the realm of mere practice. From this, Stanley concluded that some caution is warranted in using humor and play as instructional tools, as the non-serious stance indexed by such activities can serve to de-professionalize teachers in particular settings.

Stanley’s work represents a worst-case scenario report of the use of humor and play in the L2 classroom. Teachers were trapped, since acting in ways that they saw as credible and professional (i.e., using games with clear pedagogical goals and providing students with a mix of playful and serious activities) put them at odds with the students and administrators, who only wanted fun in their conversation classes. In many Western language classrooms the situation is reversed, and teachers’ credibility and professionalism may be at risk if games and humor are the only thing they do in the classroom and they can provide no clear pedagogical rationale and learning outcomes for such activities. In both cases, teachers can protect themselves by becoming educated about the role of play in learning (see Chapter 5), by constructing playful activities carefully and with clear pedagogical goals in mind (see Chapters 7 and 8), and by tactfully sharing this information with fellow teachers and administrators. For example, a short workshop on incorporating humor into a lesson plan might be welcome during a professional development day.

### Dealing With Failed Humor in the Classroom

Another fear shared by many language teachers is that their attempts at humor will fall flat with or offend students who may lack the linguistic or cultural knowledge needed to appreciate it. For example, although cartoons and other humorous images can be used as jumping-off points for a serious discussion, some teachers may worry that students will not get the joke or will come away with an
erroneous understanding. Likewise, teachers may question whether students have the necessary linguistic competence or background information to understand puns or politically motivated humor. Thus, it's important for teachers to carefully design activities around humorous materials so as to support students’ abilities to interact with them in meaningful ways.

Anne once observed an excellent ESL lesson aimed at adult learners, in which the teacher did just this in an activity that focused on puns in advertising. As the learners ranged in proficiency from novice to intermediate, the teacher provided different levels of lexical support to different students so that they would be able to understand and appreciate the puns. At one point in the lesson, the students were shown an advertisement with a slogan that involved a pun. They were then asked to work in groups to figure out what the pun was. If the teacher observed that particular groups were having trouble accessing the humor, she would supply a vocabulary card showing the multiple meanings of a key vocabulary word and encourage the students to try again. By the end of the lesson, it was clear that, despite even multiple failures by some groups, all the learners had understood all the puns, because they were able to explain to one another why the advertisements were funny. This lesson illustrated one way in which humor can come to be understood by students without an overt explanation, which not only would not have engaged the students in the desired metalinguistic work but, as everyone knows, would also likely have ruined the jokes.

Of course, sometimes even the most well-crafted lesson falls flat, and students just don’t appreciate the humor. Furthermore, instructors often enjoy engaging in spontaneous humor with students, both for fun and for learning purposes, and here too, the humor may not be understood or appreciated. In such cases, it is up to the teacher to initiate a discussion of what might have gone wrong (either in the moment or at some later date). The important point is not to abandon humor altogether or spend too much time dwelling on what went wrong. Sometimes as a teacher you just need to laugh things off and try again the next day.

An additional concern that some language teachers have is the mismatch between the kind of humor that is valued and considered commonplace in one national cultural context versus another. A professor of Spanish once asked Anne how she would handle the following dilemma in class: In Spain, many television programs and movies feature slapstick routines in which the audience is encouraged to laugh at the failures of a character on the screen. For example, a typical scene might feature a person falling and both the onlookers in the skit and the viewers are expected to delight, at least in part, in the character’s misfortune. What if on viewing the scene, some of the American students in the professor’s class find the characters’ laughter offensive? And, more important, what if they then develop negative perceptions of Spaniards as uncaring people? These are legitimate concerns, so how can we address cultural differences with regard to humor preferences without overgeneralizing, making value judgments, or promoting inaccurate stereotypes?
Throughout this book, we have aligned ourselves with Liddicoat and Scarino (2013), who argue that the goal of language education should be not the acquisition of bits of cultural knowledge or facts about particular language users, but rather the development of an intercultural orientation. To us, their emphasis on “confronting multiple possible interpretations” and “decentering” stands out (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013, p. 49). In the Spanish teacher’s dilemma, the fact that some American students might not appreciate or value slapstick humor offers an opportunity for discussion and reflection. As we noted in Chapter 1, humor and language play are dialogic, addressed not only to immediate aspects of the linguistic and social context but also to our expectations about what should or could, as well as has previously been a part of the dialogue. In asking why some people find a particular scene funny and some do not, we are forced to consider multiple interpretations simultaneously and to imagine various perspectives. Students can begin to consider the values and interpretations behind physical humor, and compare it to similar types of humor that they are familiar with from their own culture, such as the Three Stooges, whose slapstick humor elicits a feeling of mirth in a smaller amount of the population than when it first appeared, or the often-painful physical pranks done by the cast of Jackass, a reality show that aired in the United States in the early 2000s on MTV. It is precisely this kind of critical capacity that we believe the use of humor and language play in the classroom can help to develop in our students.

Humor and Classroom Management

Perhaps the most common reason teachers may avoid using humor is the fear that they might lose control of the classroom or become the victim of student teasing. Of course, whether or not we as teachers opt to introduce humor, students are likely to find something about us amusing.

Although not specific to the language classroom, Šed’ová (2013) helps us understand what types of humor students may aim at teachers, as she asked Czech pupils to recount such incidents in writing in order to obtain “representations of pupils’ perception of humour in school” (p. 525, emphasis added). Of the 137 texts Šed’ová collected, 52 centered on episodes in which the teacher was the target, and these tended to fall into three categories:

1. The comical teacher who unwittingly perceived as funny by the students (11 texts)
2. The duped teacher who falls prey to students’ pranks (23 texts)
3. The intentionally funny teacher who makes an effort to amuse students (18 texts)

Šed’ová (2013) noted that teachers were perceived as comical when their behavior deviated from the stereotype of educators as organized, all-knowing,
and in control. Whereas the comical teacher was laughed at for showing signs of “weakness,” the duped teacher was purposely put into situations to test his or her professional mettle. For example, the texts Šed’ová collected included numerous incidents in which students organized elaborate pranks to distract and at times even humiliate their instructors. Unlike the comical or the duped teacher, the purposefully funny teacher used humor for either classroom management or pedagogical ends. Crucially, in such incidents, teachers capitalized on student initiated humor to achieve their own aims.

Šed’ová (2013) posited that each of the earlier mentioned categories could be understood with respect to its work along the dimensions of solidarity, power, and psychological need. From this perspective, the comical teacher and the duped teacher allowed for an increase in student–student solidarity, as well as a reduction in the anxiety and pressure pupils often feel in hierarchically organized institutional settings. In both cases, the humor worked to momentarily subvert the teacher’s authority, and thus, it resulted in a change in classroom relationships (see Chapter 4). In instances in which the teacher purposefully engaged in humor, student solidarity with the teacher increased, but the teacher’s dominance remained unquestioned. Moreover, Šed’ová went on to note that such incidents also served as relief valves for teachers, allowing them to vent some of their anger or frustration toward students or their work, albeit in lighthearted ways. Here, it is important to note that it is not the source of the humor but, rather, how the teacher responds to it that affects whether and to what extent traditional classroom relationships are preserved or disrupted. Indeed, it’s critical that teachers recognize the importance of developing effective coping strategies when they do find themselves the butt of student joking—whether it be face-to-face or through social media, as this is an inevitable part of the profession. Teachers who can laugh at their own mistakes or use wit to diffuse student aggression stand a much better chance of saving face than those who lack the confidence and composure to respond to shifts in key or frame. Being able to initiate and respond to humor/play is an important part of teachers’ communicative and interpretive repertoires. And we would argue that a focus on non-serious language use should figure into teacher preparation programs as a key dimension of classroom management.

Furthermore, this type of preparation should not only consider strategies for responding to students whose humor is disruptive, but also ways of initiating humor to manage student behavior. Despite research suggesting that, in general, students report not appreciating teacher jokes that denigrate learners, in actual practice, many teachers manage to use more biting forms of humor successfully for classroom management. For instance, Lytra (2007) examined how teachers used play frames as a site for managing both assessment and classroom behavior in a primary school in Athens that served both monolingual speakers of Greek and children who were Greek/Turkish bilinguals. Lytra described one English lesson in which the teacher used a lighthearted tease to preempt any potential efforts by students to pluralize adjectives, thereby highlighting the fact that in English,
adjectives do not change form to agree in number with the nouns that they modify (e.g., two *smalls* books). This then set off an interactional sequence in which students exploited the play frame the teacher had ushered in to jocularly reproach a classmate for her incorrect use of a plural adjective. Lytra argued that although this episode was framed as play, serious language instruction was still occurring, and—perhaps even more important—students moved from being largely passive recipients of the teacher’s lesson on the formation adjectives in English to active participants focused on a particular aspect of English-language morphosyntax.

Although teasing can be quite gentle as a form of reproach, Piirainen-Marsh (2011) looked closely at the ways in which teachers used irony and at times even sarcasm to manage behavior in Finnish secondary classrooms where the goal or medium of instruction was English (EFL or content and language integrated learning [CLIL], respectively). In particular, she focused on moments in which students initiated talk that either diverged from the teacher’s lesson plan or challenged the teacher’s authority. Piirainen-Marsh found that unlike more direct forms of reproach, irony and sarcasm allowed teachers to attend to the students’ attempts to subvert traditional classroom hierarchies, while simultaneously recognizing the importance of acknowledging students’ face needs. For example, she found that many instances of digressive talk occurred at lesson boundaries. In such cases, students often used humor or play to divert the class’s attention from academic matters. Yet, very often, these lighthearted remarks also included bids to create a more affiliative relationship with the teacher. Piirainen-Marsh noted that some teachers used irony as a way to build on these efforts to create solidarity, while at the same time establishing clear expectations related to behavior. Likewise, she observed that irony and sarcasm were also commonly used as resources to construct specific student utterances as oppositional to institutional ideologies regarding “appropriate behaviour, levels of knowledge, attitude or even character” (Piirainen-Marsh, 2011, p. 380). And, as she pointed out, much of the power of irony and sarcasm in these instances rested on the fact that they were purely pragmatic phenomena. In other words, it was up to the students in these episodes to recognize that the utterance in question was both *relevant* and *inappropriate* with regard to the ongoing flow of talk and the context more generally and to glean its meaning. As Piirainen-Marsh put it, “irony is one type of resource through which moral meanings are implicitly embedded in interactional activities. In particular, irony functions as a resource for evaluative stance-taking through which the participants manage the norms of acceptable conduct” (p. 365). Thus, irony (and sarcasm) require the listener to figure out what is meant by what is said and in this way serve as a form of socialization into institutional norms.

What distinguishes the play and humor in the above two studies from the teasing Anne experienced in her biology class is the purpose of the teachers’ utterances, their frequency, and their intended targets. In Lytra’s study, both the teacher and the students initiated play frames, and they arose spontaneously in response to local interactional concerns. And, although the play often served as a site in which the teacher would engage in assessment or reproach, no one
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child was the consistent target of this talk. Similarly, in Piirainen-Marsh’s study, teacher-initiated irony was a regular feature of classroom talk and “designed to be heard and appreciated by others” (2011, p. 373). It was aimed as much at the student who was violating classroom norms as at his or her peers. That is, the talk was directed at establishing and maintaining the moral order of the classroom. In Anne’s case, the teasing she was subjected to neither was relevant to any institutional norms (unless promoting sexism was a goal of the school!) nor directed at the class as a whole. It was aimed exclusively at Anne, who did not respond to it in a supportive or encouraging manner, and it lasted for an entire semester. Furthermore, her teacher’s attempts at being funny constructed and reinforced very negative attitudes about women and in this way sent a message that sexism was acceptable at school. As these examples suggest, it is essential for teachers to remain mindful of how they use humor and play as classroom management tools, not only in the traditional sense of monitoring behavior but also how such talk contributes more globally to the moral order of the classroom and the institution in which it is situated. Consequently, we urge teachers to use humor and play with caution, as talk plays an important role in structuring our social world.

In this section we have provided some examples of teachers who have successfully used humor in their L2 classroom for both classroom management and instruction. Being able to successfully do this may be enough for teachers who have a great deal of freedom to design their own curricula and experiment with activities in their classrooms. Isolated examples may not, however, convince reluctant classroom innovators or skeptical administrators. Whereas Chapter 5 provided extensive evidence for the benefits of using humor and language play in the classroom to facilitate L2 development, in the final section of this chapter we provide an additional argument based not on the cognitive benefits of such instruction but on student need.

Why Use Humor in Language Teaching?

Q: If you could change one thing about your student experience at [name of institution], what would it be?
A: I would like to have more interaction with the native students

(International Student Survey, Spring 2012)

In *The Lost Art of the Good Schmooze*, Diana Boxer (2011) discusses the importance of engaging in conversation that is pleasurable, but not necessarily transactional. To “schmooze” is to talk in ways that build rapport and solidarity. L2 users, like the above student, often report that they have trouble making friends with “native speakers;” in part because they don’t know how to schmooze in their new language. They don’t know what speech acts might be appropriate for entering conversations, and once they cross that hurdle, they don’t always know how to
keep the talk going in a light, friendly manner. In U.S. contexts, making a small joke, offering a funny observation, or just plain laughing is often the way people signal their openness to friendship. This is precisely the kind of talk that many students are eager to learn (Bell, 2002, 2009; Morain, 1991) and there is a thriving market for phrase books that promise to teach students just the words and expressions they need to survive outside the classroom. From *Dirty Russian* (Coyne & Fisun, 2009), to *Niubi!: The Real Chinese You Were Never Taught in School* (Chao, 2009), to *Hide This Spanish Book* (APA Editors, 2013), learners have a plethora of resources to choose from. Yet, because much of this conversational advice is limited to isolated vocabulary lessons and because teachers often assume that learners intuitively know (or can easily infer) how to do it, the pragmatics of schmoozing remain elusive to learners. A focus on humor, language play, and verbal creativity, however, far from being mere fluff, can help students to build a repertoire of communicative strategies that will allow them to participate more comfortably and competently in interaction. In short, one simple answer to the question, “Why teach humor?” is student needs and desires.

Specifically, it is important to recognize that because humor is so contextual learners may appreciate some explicit support in order to know:

- What topics can be joked about
- Who can be joked with
- What functions humor might accomplish in particular situations
- What contextualization cues are typically used to signal a humorous frame (e.g., formulaic chunks like “A man walks into a bar. . .”)

As we saw in Chapter 2, there is a considerable well of research that could be drawn on in order to accurately address these issues with students. Furthermore, as we will see in Chapter 8, learners may benefit from an opportunity to ask questions and practice participating in humorous or playful exchanges. In addition, teachers can provide learners with frameworks for thinking about how non-serious language use might function in interaction, to develop the kind of metalinguistic awareness we described in Chapter 1 as a goal of language education.

Moreover, learners whose experiences have been confined primarily to classroom contexts may have very little exposure to spontaneous interactional humor and may welcome direct instruction on these topics. And, as Nancy has pointed out, this may even hold true for those who do have the opportunity to interact with others in nonacademic settings. Her research (Bell, 2009) suggests that

> in humorous communication NSs [native speakers] may tend to over estimate the extent to which conversational adjustments are necessary for the NNS to understand. These excessive adjustments can have the effect of marginalizing the L2 user, positioning him or her as lacking proficiency.

(p. 252; see also Bell, 2006)
Wulf (2010) illustrated this in a bittersweet account of the first pun he made as a learner of German. Although his peers greeted his display of linguistic prowess with a hearty laugh, they immediately questioned whether he was aware of the double entendre he had just uttered. Likewise, well-meaning interlocutors may intentionally avoid humor, language play, and acts of linguistic creativity, presuming they are too difficult for learners to grasp. Thus, as teachers, we cannot assume that learners will necessarily have access to the kinds of humorous or playful exchanges they need to fully develop their communicative and interpretive repertoires. And, although many people are quick to offer their take on why a particular utterance might be funny or inappropriate, few “citizen sociolinguists” (Rymes, 2014) are fully equipped to engage in nuanced conversations around pragmatics. Given the wealth of information that now exists about humorous language-in-interaction, language teachers and materials writers have abundant resources to draw on in order to help students make sense of non-serious, playful, and innovative language use. Indeed, as we argue in Chapter 8, we believe that it is the teacher’s responsibility to provide a careful, research-driven account of how humor works in particular contexts so as not to spread misinformation or stereotypes. Too often, we have witnessed well-meaning teachers offer their personal opinions or intuitions about humor as fact, thus leaving students with erroneous or incomplete understandings.

So far, we have offered reasons why classroom learners might welcome a focus on humor so that they can initiate such talk. Another important consideration is teaching learners how to respond to humor. As we discussed in Chapter 2, there are some conventional, language-specific patterns for providing humor support in interaction, as well as expected sequences for responding to a speaker’s utterance as “failed humor” (Bell, 2015). Because reacting to humor, both successful and failed, is often challenging in an additional language, and because L2 users’ responses are sometimes prone to misinterpretation by their interlocutors, learning canonical responses may help smooth interaction. Furthermore, as we saw in Chapter 4, additional language users are sometimes the object of teasing and other negative forms of humor, both in and out of the classroom. They may be perceived as easy targets because of language competency issues, as in Stephen Kelman’s (2011) novel *Pigeon English*. Kelman’s book is told from the point of view of Harri Opoku, an 11-year-old boy from Ghana, now living in South London. As Harri strives to make sense of his new, and often cruel, world, he comes face-to-face with challenges large and small, including this poignant encounter with classmate Connor Green:

When I came to my new school, do you know what’s the first thing Connor Green said to me?

CONNOR GREEN: ‘Have you got happiness?’

ME: ‘Yes.’
CONNOR GREEN: ‘Are you sure you’ve got happiness?’
ME: ‘Yes.’
CONNOR GREEN: ‘But are you really sure?’
ME: ‘I think so.’

He kept asking me if I had happiness. He wouldn’t stop. In the end it just vexed me. Then I wasn’t sure. Connor Green was laughing, I didn’t even know why. Then Manik told me it was a trick.

MANIK: ‘He’s not asking if you’ve got happiness, he’s asking if you’ve got a penis. He says it to everyone. It’s just a trick.’
It only sounds like happiness but really it means a penis. Ha-penis
CONNOR GREEN: ‘Got ya!’ Hook, line and sinker!’
(Kelman 2011, p. 6)

Jokes such as this are sometimes used as a kind of knowledge test (Norrick, 1993; Sacks, 1974), and the inability to respond strategically in such situations can have negative effects on L2 learners, who may already be at a disadvantage socially. Alternately, L2 users may feel like they don’t have the right to push back on bullies like Connor Green, as their failure to perceive the shift in key may render them defenseless. Consequently, a focus on both initiating and responding to humor can help L2 users manage situations in ways that build rapport, create solidarity, and diffuse efforts to position them in subordinate ways.

Finally, as much research has revealed, learners often struggle with how to construct and negotiate particular, socially recognizable identities in a new language (see Block, 2007, and Norton & Toohey, 2011, for a review). Shively’s (2013) longitudinal study of Kyle, an American college student studying abroad in Spain, illustrates how a humorous L2 identity might be negotiated. During his sojourn, Kyle wrote in his journal of his attempts to joke around. His strong investment in positioning himself as a jovial, lighthearted person with a witty sense of humor pushed him to both participate in and initiate humorous interactions with his peers, as well as to notice the kinds of humor his Spanish interlocutors used and how they responded to his jokes. These opportunities helped Kyle to develop a range of strategies, such as avoiding “deadpan” humor, for ensuring that his interlocutors would identify and appreciate his playfulness. For learners with different identity aspirations, the usefulness of playful interaction may be less apparent and gaining access to humorous talk may be more difficult. Thus, the classroom provides a safe space for introducing this kind of interactional practice and discussing its uses.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have considered the role of humor in professional practice. Although we recognize that some of you, as teachers, may feel pressure from
supervisors, parents, or even the students themselves to play it straight in the classroom, it is our hope this chapter has highlighted some of the benefits of using humor with intention to manage relationships and facilitate learning. Just as we put forth in Chapter 5 the idea of teaching language as a set of options, so, too, might you think about humor and language play as another option in your teaching repertoire. As we have seen throughout this chapter, humor and play can help teachers to cope with stressful working conditions and to handle difficult classroom situations. Moreover, thoughtful exposure to humorous language may be just what learners need to be successful outside the classroom. In Chapter 7, we discuss some ways to use humor to enhance students learning. In Chapter 8, we offer some guidelines for how language teachers might make particular aspects of humor a focal point for instruction. Whereas we are clearly in favor of a place for humor in classroom discourse, we are also mindful of the potential dangers. Thus, we urge you to proceed with caution, lest you be sanctioned for behaving in a manner unsuited to a teacher.

References


As we saw in Chapters 4 and 5, humor, games, and other playfully creative linguistic activities have many cognitive, social, and affective benefits in classroom contexts. From lowering students’ anxiety levels, to building rapport, to managing face threats, humor and play can provide a much-needed palliative to the demands of interacting in a “strange” language at school. Freed from the narrow set of identity options and social situations frequently offered in serious educational settings, students may find themselves taking communicative risks and expanding their repertoires in novel ways. Used intentionally and with an eye to theoretical developments and empirical findings, humor and language play can provide teachers with new ways of teaching that foreground aspects of language that may not be evident in other pedagogical approaches.

In this chapter, we provide a framework for incorporating humor thoughtfully and deliberately into the curriculum. To do so, we draw on the notion of Understanding by Design (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005) to illustrate how teachers might use non-serious and/or playful language to achieve particular language learning objectives in smart, principled ways. To this end, we focus on the development of curricular units (rather than daily lesson plans or individual activities) through backward design in order to illustrate where, when, why, and how humor, language play, and opportunities for linguistic creativity might figure into the planning process. Our focus is on the purposeful use of such language as instructional tools. We then offer some detailed suggestions for activities that highlight the theories of language and communication we have been developing throughout our discussion in order to illustrate what our approach to teaching language through humor might look like in real classrooms.
Throughout our discussion, however, we remain mindful of the dangers of romanticizing the benefits of humor and play at school. As we noted in Chapter 6, teachers can feel unduly pressured to be fun in the classroom. There can be a fine line between teaching and entertainment. Just because an activity is enjoyable or engaging does not mean that students are learning. This is not to say that we are against all forms of classroom fun that don’t serve some deep pedagogical purpose (we would never argue that); rather, we believe that it is important to tease apart the different functions of humor, language play, and linguistic creativity. For as we saw in Chapters 4 through 6, teasing, mocking, and playing dumb can have a negative effect on classroom relationships and can serve to limit teachers’ and students’ willingness to engage with one another and the academic content material. Thus, we urge you to be mindful of both the affordances and limitations of non-serious language.

Making Sound Instructional Choices: Understanding by Design

**Stage 1: Identify Desired Results**

Backward design rests on the assumption that meaningful curricular planning begins with the identification of desired results or learning outcomes. That is, what should learners know about the target language at the end of curricular unit? What should they be able to do with this language? To answer such questions, practitioners must figure out where they are going first and then make decisions about how to get there. For language teachers interested in using humor and language play as effective pedagogical tools, a focus on learning outcomes is key. All too often—and particularly in communicatively oriented classrooms—teachers tell us that they are so worried about getting students to use the target language that lowering students’ anxiety level by making activities fun so that students are willing to speak becomes the primary instructional goal. Consequently, they lose sight of their language development goals. We think of this kind of instruction as “learning to play” not “playing to learn.” Although, as we noted in Chapter 5, students may be more receptive to learning if they are not paralyzed by anxiety, we also insist that non-serious language has a larger role to play in L2 development.

The process of backward design helps teachers think through just what that role might be, by asking them to consider the bigger instructional picture. Wiggins and McTighe (2005) summarize backward design like this:

Deliberate and focused instructional design requires us as teachers and curriculum writers to make an important shift in our thinking about the nature of our job. The shift involves thinking a great deal, first, about the specific learnings sought, and the evidence of such learnings, before thinking about what we, as the teacher, will do or provide in teaching and learning activities. Though considerations about what to teach and how to teach it may
dominate our thinking as a matter of habit, the challenge is to focus first on the desired learnings from which appropriate teaching will logically follow. (p. 14)

So, if having fun is not necessarily the primary goal in a language classroom, what might some learnings be? Here are a few examples of desired results or learning outcomes for curricular units at the beginning, intermediate, and advanced levels:

**Beginning:** Learners will be able to exchange greetings and introduce themselves to others.

**Intermediate:** Learners will be able to give advice across a range of social situations, tailoring both the form of the advice and its content to particular contexts.

**Advanced:** Learners will examine data on the effectiveness of several marketing campaigns and be able to synthesize their findings for a corporate client.

Once the desired results have been identified, teachers work *backward* to determine what lexical items, linguistic structures, and cultural understandings learners will need to accomplish them. From this perspective, the use of humor *facilitates* the realization of the desired results; it is not an end in itself.

Moreover, along with asking *what* the desired results are, it is important to remember that backward designers also continuously ask themselves *why* specific desired results matter. Who are the learners? Why are they studying the target language? What do they already know? How will they use the language in the future? Although learners’ interest in humor and love of playful classroom activities may be a factor in motivating instructional decisions, as teachers we must remain mindful that we are also accountable to multiple audiences: department chairs, principals, administrators, parents, and employers. Backward design requires us to think about the big picture first and thus keeps our learning objectives squarely in view, helping us articulate not only what learners will know and be able to do at the end of the curricular unit but also why these understandings and abilities matter.

An additional strength of backward design is its focus on “enduring understandings,” which in terms of language teaching, means considering both short-term and long-term learning outcomes. As teachers, we need to think about how what we are doing in the classroom today connects to what our students will know and do in the future. In 1999, when we were in graduate school, *The Daily Pennsylvanian* printed an editorial in which a student traveling in Puerto Rico lamented her inability to use Spanish outside the classroom:

On the island of Puerto Rico, people speak Spanish. Unfortunately, though I’m proficient by Penn’s standards, I do not. . . . I know the essentials: how
to get a hotel room, order vegetarian food and find a bathroom. But I am often mistaken for a native speaker and at times during the week people began speaking to me in Spanish, leaving me embarrassed when I couldn’t respond. Expending the effort to formulate a question or comment in Spanish and then getting a response that I could not comprehend frustrated me even more.

In addition to providing yet another piece of evidence that L2 classrooms tend overemphasize utilitarian language, this piece illustrates how sometimes an institution’s desired results don’t match with what learners experience beyond the classroom. This learner fulfilled the university’s language requirement (which at the time was operationalized as scoring at what the American Council for Foreign Language Teaching describes as the “intermediate-mid range” on a battery of tests), but her knowledge and abilities were not adequate to function in other contexts. Consequently, as language teachers, we need to take into account our students’ needs after they leave us. Likewise, we need to be clear about both the affordances and limitations of classroom language instruction. Backward design can help teachers and learners set reasonable and transparent goals so that an understanding of the language learning process, in and of itself, becomes part of the desired results. After all, one thing we don’t want our students to say is “Language class was fun, but I still can’t use the language!”

At this point, it is also important to note that backward design is closely linked to the standards based movement in U.S. public primary/secondary education more generally (see Chapter 1). Thus, teachers who practice this approach in K–12 contexts often link their assessments to the state and national standards for their content area. For ESL teachers, this means aligning learning outcomes with the standards not only for English-language proficiency but also for English Language Arts more generally. For foreign- or world-language teachers, this means considering the standards laid out at the state, district, or school level for particular languages, as well as those articulated at the national level by the American Council of Foreign Language Teachers. For those working in post-secondary contexts, community organizations, or private elementary/secondary schools, there may be additional or different institutional, department specific, and/or vocational standards that must be met at particular times throughout a student’s educational trajectory. Should such local standards not exist (at least not in written form), it is important for teachers, in conjunction with other key stakeholders, to outline what they perceive as appropriate, meaningful, and attainable learning outcomes. As Wiggins and McTighe (2005) remind us, “our lessons, units, and courses should be logically inferred from the results sought, not derived from the methods, books, and activities with which we are most comfortable” (p. 14). We need to set goals first and then work backward to determine our approach.
**Stage 2: Determine Acceptable Evidence**

The second step in the backward design process is to consider how students will demonstrate where they are in the learning process. Are they on their way to meeting the desired results? Have they met them already? What evidence will serve as an indicator of understanding? As language teachers, we have an array of assessments at our disposal, including everything from observations of classroom performance, to quizzes, tests, and projects, to learner self-reflections. Indeed, Ishihara and Cohen (2010) provide some excellent examples of assessments that would be appropriate for a curricular unit on humor and we encourage readers to consult this and other work on evaluating L2 pragmatics. It is our contention that language assessments need not be long or overly complex. The important point is that they should show a strong and meaningful connection to the desired results or learning outcomes identified in step one.

Consider the following example: Imagine you are teaching Spanish to a class of American college students who are preparing to spend a semester in Argentina. As part of your overall focus on preparing students to engage in everyday conversation in socially and culturally sensitive ways, you are designing a curricular unit on advice and the desired result is “Learners will be able to give advice across a range of social situations, tailoring both the form of the advice and its content to particular contexts.” In this case, your assessments must test the following:

1. Learners’ linguistic knowledge of advice (i.e., knowledge of the specific linguistic forms that constitute conventional advice sequences, including particular lexical items, verb tenses, and syntactic patterns).
2. Learners’ understanding of how and why these different advice forms say something about their relationship to their interlocutor and the topic of the advice itself. For example, is the learner asking a close friend for advice on buying a textbook or a luxury apartment? What linguistic features index the intimate relationship between the two and/or the magnitude of the decision?

An assessment that addresses the first goal might consist of a fill-in-the-blank activity where learners complete a dialogue that includes giving advice. Here, learners would be illustrating the knowledge of the language of advice sequences. The second goal might be assessed through an activity in which learners match certain advice sequences to particular situations and then explain their answers. In doing the matching and the explaining, learners would be demonstrating not only their ability to apply information to new situations, but also their thinking behind these choices. This is different from the kind of expertise that students are demonstrating in the fill-in-the-blank assessment, as it requires a different level of understanding—the kind needed to use language in novel and creative ways! In fact, such assessments leave open the opportunity for students to, for instance, propose asking for advice from a family member on a trivial matter using highly
formal language and then go on to explain that the exaggeratedly lofty language was intended as a joke.

Remember, too, that assessments are not ends in and of themselves. They can help teachers and learners to take stock of their progress, make mid-course corrections, and refine their goals. That is, all assessments need not be summative in nature. As we noted in Chapter 1, language learning is an ongoing process and language competencies are rarely stable. Furthermore, an important principle discussed in Chapter 5 was the need to construct iterative activities for students, and smaller, formative assessment activities can be one way to do this. As a teacher, you may use the information gleaned from formative assessments to give developmental feedback to learners and to shape curriculum planning. Of course, you might also use it summatively to offer an evaluation of how well learners (and your design!) have met the goals you set out at the beginning of the curricular unit. The important point here is that assessments give you and your learners a chance to reflect on where all class members are in terms of meeting particular goals and to make any necessary changes. This kind of reflection and revision is a necessary component of backward design.

Thus, the second stage in the backward design process asks us to consider our assessments before we plan instruction. For language teachers used to working with end of unit exams provided by textbook companies, testing agencies, or government ministries, what we’re advocating here may not seem very radical. But, when it comes to using humor, language play, and innovative language as instructional tools, assessment is an important consideration. We have both witnessed well-meaning and dynamic teachers create fun, engaging lessons full of opportunities for humor, language play, and linguistic creativity, only to realize that these teachers have neglected to consider how they will assess whether and to what extent particular learning outcomes have been met. Students are enjoying the class, but how do we know if they are learning anything if we don’t gather any information about their understandings and abilities? Likewise, students themselves often express reservations about classrooms in which there are no progress measures or goals. In the words of one language learner, “It’s tough to like excel in a class where you don’t really know kind of what the standards are” (Pomerantz, 2001, p. 132).

**Stage 3: Planning Learning Experiences and Instruction**

The final step in the backward design process is to plan the instruction itself. Here is where language play becomes part of the picture. It is at this point in the instructional design process that teachers should ask themselves the following questions:

- Why do I want to make elements of my lesson plans funny or playful?
• How will the use of humor and language play contribute to the realization of particular learning outcomes?
• What benefits/problems might I encounter in using and/or encouraging my students to use humor, language play, or linguistic creativity at particular points in my lesson plans?

As we’ve stressed throughout this section, non-serious language can be a valuable instructional asset, but only when used wisely. Engaging in the backward design process can help teachers to reap the benefits of incorporating humor, language play, and opportunities for linguistic creativity into their instruction, while simultaneously mitigating the potential risks. The biggest risk, of course, is that your lessons will involve too much learning to play and not enough playing to learn. As with assessment, there are many print and electronic resources for planning sound instructional activities (e.g., Ishihara & Cohen, 2010; Martínez-Flor & Usó-Juan, 2006), and teachers can also begin by considering the six more general pedagogical principles presented in Chapter 5. We urge readers to first consider how their activities function in service of their desired results and then weigh the risks and benefits of using humor/play to accomplish them.

Let’s return to our curricular unit on advice for university students of Spanish preparing for a study abroad experience. Here is an example of how humor might be incorporated into instruction. The essential questions driving our curricular unit are the following:

• When do we give advice?
• To whom do we give advice?
• What topics are considered appropriate, delicate, or taboo when it comes to advice giving?
• What other social factors do we need to consider when we give advice to others?

Teachers in the United States might recognize these questions as responding to some of the World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages (W-RSLL; National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project, 2014). More specifically, our desired results echo the focus on “communication” and “culture” within this framework:

• Interpersonal communication: Learners interact and negotiate meaning in spoken, signed, or written conversations to share information, reactions, feelings, and opinions.
• Interpretive communication: Learners understand, interpret, and analyze what is heard, read or viewed on a variety of topics.
• Relating cultural practices to perspectives: Learners use the language to investigate, explain, and reflect on the relationship between the practices and perspectives of the culture studied.
In order to address these questions, our students need to know what linguistic forms are used to give advice in the target language, as well as some knowledge about the social factors that condition advice giving (i.e., setting, relationship between interlocutors, topics, etc.). In our curricular unit, the students have already studied the notion of advice and have identified some of the social factors (e.g., age, gender, social status, level of intimacy) that condition advice giving. They have also investigated what topics might be considered appropriate (or not) for advice giving in particular situations. Finally, they have learned that in Spanish verbs in the subjunctive mood are often used within advice sequences. Although the learners are generally adept at forming the subjunctive mood, they need practice using it in authentic situations, such as giving advice. Thus, the focus of our sample lesson is on using the subjunctive mood to give advice to particular people around particular topics. In Figure 7.1 we have listed the desired results, as well as the assessment evidence. So, at this point in the plan, you might be wondering, how do humor, language play, and linguistic creativity fit in?

**Stage 1: Identify Desired Results**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Establish goals: World readiness standards for learning languages</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Interpersonal communication</td>
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<td>• Interpretive communication</td>
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<td>• Relating cultural practices to perspectives</td>
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<tr>
<th>Essential questions</th>
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<tr>
<td>• When do we give advice?</td>
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<td>• To whom do we give it?</td>
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<td>• What topics are considered appropriate, delicate, or taboo when it comes to advice giving?</td>
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<tr>
<td>• What other social factors do we need to consider when we give advice to others?</td>
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<tr>
<th>Understandings</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• The form and content of advice varies depending on our relationship to our interlocutors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What counts as “appropriate” advice varies from place to place.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

| • Learners will know that the form and content of advice changes across social situations. |

**Stage 2: Determine Acceptable Evidence**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Performance tasks</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Learners will recognize and be able to produce typical advice patterns in dialogs, including proper use of lexical items, personal pronouns, verb morphology, and the subjunctive mood.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Learners will match advice sequences to particular situations and then explain their answers.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**FIGURE 7.1** Stages of Backward Design
During this curricular unit, the students have practiced giving advice to one another in a serious key around a range of issues that are connected to their personal lives. Although these interactions have provided some authentic interactional practice, we have noticed that learners keep using verb forms that index their personal relationship to their classmates. They have not used many verb forms that index social distance and/or deference. Likewise, the advice sequences seem to be confined to a small range of topics having to do with university life. As teachers, we need to create some contexts for advice giving that amplify the opportunities for communicating across social boundaries such as age and social status. Moreover, we need to expand the range of topics so that learners can demonstrate to us their understanding of what topics might be considered appropriate, delicate, or taboo for advice. What strategies do people use when they want to mitigate the face-threatening aspects of asking for and giving advice in certain contexts? In order to provide students with broader—and more broadly realistic—opportunities to experiment with the language of advice giving, we need to consider some additional contexts for advice giving that will allow us to reach our desired results. One way to do this is to shift the key of the activity from serious to playful. In what follows, we describe several instructional activities that could be used separately or together to complement our sample unit.

For example, students could begin a day’s lesson by watching clips from television talk shows in Spanish where the guests air their problems and the host and audience work together to offer some advice. Very often, on these shows, the talk turns from the mundane to the outrageous, as the host provokes the guests and audience members into making overly dramatic statements. Students could use these clips to further raise their language awareness with respect to their understanding of the linguistic routines that constitute advice sequences, as well as their ability to identify the use of subjunctive verb forms. They might also enter into some discussion of how and why the talk on such shows is often funny, as much of the humor in these programs derives from the transgression of social norms. This would allow us to further probe some of the social and cultural norms that tend to condition advice sequences and focus on the relational and subjective ways that meaning is constructed.

From there, students could stage their own imaginary television talk show, with class members taking the role of host, guest with problem, and advice giver in the audience (see Pomerantz & Bell, 2007). Here, the humorous key is central to providing students with an additional context for practicing advice sequences. This is also an example of how humor can be used to introduce iteration, as not only will students be entertained by the pretend play, they will also have opportunities to give advice from different social positions. The student playing the host will have to craft advice befitting a wise psychologist, while other students in the class may play anyone from an elderly lawyer to a pregnant
teenager. Here, students will have to adjust not only their use of register to play their parts effectively; they will also have to use particular linguistic forms to mark their relationships to other actors. They will be required to use particular pronouns and verb forms to mark social distance and/or hierarchy, because they will no longer be communicating as peers in their new roles. The outlandish situations typical of these shows can also encourage the use of emotional vocabulary that the students may not often have need to access in the classroom. Moreover, the teacher can add in practice with specific verb forms by handing out cards to the “audience members” and requiring them to give advice using the verb(s) on their cards. The teacher can also control the topics by asking students to center their imaginary scenarios on particular themes. Each of these ways of altering the activity can also be used to introduce unpredictability into the role-play, particularly for the students playing the roles of host and guests. Finally, the students watching the performances can be asked to identify and evaluate the advice sequences and provide constructive feedback to their peers. This would also allow the speakers to reflect upon and justify their linguistic choices, or propose more appropriate alternatives than they were able to initially formulate.

As you can see, it is not humor and language play driving this lesson. Rather, it is an opportunity for structured practice around advice giving that is rekeyed to create a wider array of social contexts for interaction. Indeed, as we saw in Chapter 5, classroom research has suggested that classroom interaction is often qualitatively richer and more complex when students are engaged in the kind of linguistically oriented pretend play we describe earlier. Moreover, as we discussed in Chapter 4, students who are normally quiet may participate more actively and with greater ease when they are permitted to play a fictitious role in class.

Learning About Language

In looking back at the pedagogical suggestions we offer in this chapter, you may recognize that many of them have their origins in both cognitive and social approaches to L2 development. Focus on form (e.g., Doughty & Williams, 1998; Swain, 1998; Swain, Lapkin, Knouzi, Suzuki, & Brooks, 2009; Williams, 2001), the importance of noticing (e.g., Philp, 2003; Pica, 1996; Schmidt, 1990), and opportunities for output (e.g., Swain, 1985; Swain & Lapkin, 1995) all figure centrally in our activities. At the same time, our repeated emphasis on engaging learners in the process of critical reflection is rooted in the field’s gradual embrace of notions like agency and identity (e.g., Atkinson, 2011; Block, 2003; Norton, 2000; Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004; Zuengler & Miller, 2006). What is different here is our insistence that efforts to use humor and language play strategically within language classrooms be driven by issues of instructional design. Our pedagogical choices must always begin with the identification of what it is we want our learners to know and be able to do.
On a final note, one question that often comes up in our discussions of humor and play concerns the use of key to transform a dull topic into a more meaningful, memorable, and high-interest one. Very often, teachers ask us what we think about the use of funny stories in the classroom. That is, they want to know if such talk has any instructional merit beyond attracting the students’ attention and building positive teacher–student rapport. Are these stories educational or merely “edutainment”?

Research on the role of narrative in cognition suggests that stories are one way—if not the primary way—we make sense of ourselves, our relationships, and our experiences (e.g., Bruner, 1990; Polkinghorne, 1988). It is through narrative that we figure out how events are related to one another and how we should interpret their meanings. For teachers, narratives can become powerful classroom resources, as they are composed not only of depictions of past events but also messages about how these events should be understood and acted upon (Ochs & Capps, 2001). Wortham (1994), for example, described the phenomenon of “participant examples” in which teachers (and students) tell stories related to the academic focus of the lesson that feature members of the classroom community as protagonists. These participant examples are engaging because they involve actual students, but they are also instructive as the narrative often includes a strong moral dimension or set of guidelines for future behavior.

While research on the use of humor to make academic material more memorable is somewhat inconclusive (see Chapter 5), we maintain that humorous stories can also support learning—particularly if one considers them in light of backward design. That is, what “desired results” or “learning outcomes” does the telling of a particular funny story support? For example, Anne’s language classes always include a focus on vocabulary development. In each curricular unit, she includes activities that serve not only to increase students’ lexical repertoires but also to deepen their awareness of how language works. Very often, as part of her lesson on using bilingual dictionaries and online translation aids, she tells the following (true!) story:

She once had a college student in an intermediate Spanish class who wanted to share the fact that his brother was a Navy SEAL. He had looked up the words that comprise this pairing separately in a bilingual dictionary and subsequently announced to the class with great pride, “Mi hermano es una foca azul marino” (My brother is a navy blue seal). As one might imagine, it took Anne a few minutes to realize what this student was trying so earnestly to say. Not only had he confused two meanings of navy (color vs. branch of military), he seemed not to realize that SEAL is an acronym standing for “Sea, Air, and Land” team. Moreover, his pronunciation of foca sounded an awful lot like a certain taboo word that begins with F in English! Although all language teachers—and, indeed, all bi-/multilinguals—no doubt have their own funny stories about translation mishaps, the important point to remember is this: Humorous anecdotes belong in the classroom in so far as they
serve some kind of instructional or interpersonal goal. In Anne’s case, the navy blue seal story is just one small piece of a much larger instructional design aimed at helping students to understand the semantic aspects of language in use and the dangers of relying on word-for-word translations.

Conclusion

This chapter has aimed to provide you with practical guidance on how to incorporate humor into lessons that you already are doing. To this end, we have offered the notion of backward design to help you develop pedagogically sound curricular units. As we have emphasized here and in Chapter 6, our focus is on playing to learn, not learning to play. That is, we encourage you to use humor in your teaching insofar as it supports your broader instructional and classroom management goals. Strong curricular design begins not from the desire to make your lessons funny but from consideration of your desired results or learning outcomes. Moreover, your use of humor should take into account both what you hope your students will learn in the short term and what enduring understandings you hope they will develop over the course of their lifetimes. Recall too, that humor can be paired with more serious activities to make certain points salient or increase student interest. Just as a serious assessment can be used to evaluate humorous language, so, too, can a humorous assessment be used to evaluate serious language. It is our hope that this chapter has given you both the expertise and the confidence to begin (or continue!) using humor in your classroom in ways that are both principled and professional. In Chapter 8 we again take up the issue of humor in L2 pedagogy, this time by addressing head on the question of how to make humor the object of language instruction.

References


As we have emphasized throughout this book, serious talk has traditionally been privileged in educational settings. This is understandable, because classroom language instruction is often concerned with helping L2 users gain the ability to convey basic information and express utilitarian needs, which L2 users are imagined as requiring. Non-serious communication tends to be thought of as trivial and nonessential, and its development is not typically considered beyond, perhaps, some practice making small talk about the weather. Yet, as we have noted throughout this text, playful discourse can have an important role in communicating practical, mundane information, as well as make navigating certain social situations much smoother. The ability to join in humorous discourse can ease an individual’s entry into a new social group. To begin considering how we might teach norms of interaction around playful interaction, try selecting an aspect of humor in Chapter 2 that would be relevant to your learners (e.g., script opposition, cues for contextualizing humor, formulaic language). Now, drawing on what you learned in the previous chapter about backward design, develop a lesson plan that highlights it. What are your desired results or learning outcomes? What assessments will you use? What activities and experiences will you develop?

In 2013, Anne began asking a group of preservice language teachers and intercultural educators at the University of Pennsylvania to do this very activity. Her students were tasked with designing and teaching a lesson on humor to adult ESL learners (see Figure 8.1). These novice teachers had spent the semester learning about pragmatics, and in particular, the workings of humor in interaction. Now it was their turn to put this knowledge to work in a real classroom.
Teaching Demonstration: Humor

The purpose of this project is to investigate one area of humor and to use this research to design a lesson that teaches people how to use or respond to this form of humor. For example, you might select irony and design a lesson that teaches people a range of strategies for identifying ironic remarks and acknowledging them communicatively (i.e., through language, facial expressions, gestures, etc.). The aim of this project is to make clear connections between theory, research, and practice.

Step 1: Meet with your group members and decide aspect of humor you would like to focus on. One good place to start is Bell’s (2011) review of research relevant to TESOL.

Step 2: Identify and read the relevant research literature on this aspect of humor. You may want to limit your review of the literature to work done on one particular language/culture.

Step 3: Design a 20- to 30-minute lesson that builds on what you have learned about this aspect of humor, and interaction more generally. In so doing, consider drawing on the frameworks presented in Ishihara and Cohen (2010) and Martínez-Flor and Usó-Juan (2006).

Step 4: Present your lesson to the class. You will walk your classmates through your lesson and give them a chance to test out your materials. Depending on what happens in this session, you may need to make some modifications to your lesson plan/materials.

Step 5: Teach your lesson in an actual ESL classroom setting.

Step 6: Compile a report that connects what you discovered about humor to your lesson. Your report should include the sections listed below, as well as copies of any supporting materials needed for teaching your lesson.

Humor

- What aspect of humor did you investigate?
- Why did you select this aspect of humor?
- How/why is it relevant to your learners?
- What did the research literature say about this aspect of humor?
- How does your understanding of this aspect of humor connect to what you know about interaction more generally?

Desired Results

- What do you want your learners to know?
- What do you want them to be able to do?

Continued
Teaching About Humor

Looking closely at the guidelines, you might see many of the elements of backward design that we discussed in Chapter 7. There is an emphasis in this project on identifying desired results or learning outcomes. Moreover, the project asks teachers to consider how their desired results connect to their instructional activities. You may have also noticed that there is no mention in this project of assessments. Why is that? Recall that this project forms part of a class for preservice language teachers and intercultural educators. One of Anne’s desired results, as the course instructor, was to see how well her students understood and could put into practice the elements of backward design she had presented earlier in the semester. For example, Anne hoped that her students’ project reports would detail how the identification of desired results preceded the development of instructional activities. Moreover, she hoped that her students would include some attention to the issue of assessment in their plans. While Anne recognized that this project involved a single lesson and not an entire curricular unit, she was eager to test her students’ knowledge of instructional design. In other words, Anne was using the project report as a way to assess her students!

At this point, you might be thinking, “Whew, I’m glad I wasn’t in that class! I could never teach a lesson on humor.” You would not be alone. Although Anne had spent months designing her course and was confident that her students had the expertise necessary to pull this project off, they were not so certain. As the day of
the teaching demonstration grew closer, anxieties began to mount. A small group
of international students came to Anne’s office to express their misgivings about
the project. “We are not native speakers. We can’t teach about humor in English.”
Minutes later, there was another knock at Anne’s door. “My group is struggling with
the humor project. We don’t know what to do. We don’t think humor is teachable.”

Much like the preservice language teachers and intercultural educators in
Anne’s class, many experienced instructors, as we saw in Chapter 6, also shy
away from an explicit focus on teaching humor in the classroom, believing that
it is just too hard or too dangerous to address. As we saw in Chapter 2, humor
often relies on the unexpected use of lexical items or grammatical sequences
within the ongoing flow of talk. Apart from canned jokes and other formulaic
phrases for keying humor, it is difficult to predict when and how a humorous
sequence might be inserted into the ongoing conversation. Likewise, what counts
as “funny” often varies across social contexts. We have all experienced moments
in which a well-intentioned joke ends up falling flat or, even worse, offending
our interlocutors. Language teachers may be wary of making pronouncements
about what is funny and what is not, believing that they have neither the right
nor the cultural competence to wade into this territory. Some, as we discussed in
Chapter 6, may also fear that they do not have the linguistic expertise to be funny
in any language, let alone the language of instruction. In this chapter we argue
that although humor may be challenging to teach, it can form an integral part of
language curricula in particular ways. Throughout our discussion, we build on the
notion of backward design that we developed in Chapter 7 to show how teaching
humor is no different that teaching other pragmatic dimensions of language use.

Making Humor Teachable

Ishihara and Cohen (2010), in their work on teaching L2 pragmatics, reminded us
that “having pragmatic ability means being able to go beyond the literal meaning
of what is said or written, in order to interpret the intended meanings, assump-
tions, purposes or goals, and the kinds of actions that are being performed” (p. 5).
As we have seen throughout this book, this is precisely the kind of meta-awareness
that humor requires and can help to facilitate in instructional contexts. In the past
30 years, research on pragmatics and additional language learning has consistently
illustrated that instruction can facilitate L2 users’ comprehension and use of par-
ticular speech acts (see Alcón Soler & Martínez-Flor, 2008; Bardovi-Harlig, 2001;
Kasper & Rose, 2002; and Rose, 2005, for a review). That is, learners can be taught
to understand how greetings, requests, invitations, apologies, refusals, and other
formulaic but complex interactional sequences are used in particular contexts to
accomplish a range of social functions. Indeed, in Chapter 7 we saw how a lesson
on speech acts might be enhanced by the addition of humor. But what if we want
to make humor itself the focus of our teaching? Is humor even teachable?

We are confident that humor is teachable, but it is important to be explicit
about what we mean by “teaching humor.” Although we and others speak of
teaching “humor,” we are not suggesting that students learn an entire canon of humorous techniques. We do not intend that students work like professional comedians to master the art of humor and improvisation, nor do we think that the end goal of teaching humor should be “funny students.” Instead, the aim should be to familiarize learners with a variety of conventional practices around humorous interaction, so that they are better able to take part in it. This is, of course, consonant with the teaching of other aspects of pragmatics.

One way to begin to teach humor is to ask yourself what it is you want your students to know and be able to do with humor. For example, Nancy has argued that humor instruction tends to have one or more of the following desired results (Bell, 2009, 2011):

1. Identifying humor
2. Comprehending humor
3. Producing humor
4. Responding to humor

While at first glance these desired results might seem too broad or long term to be of use in instructional design, Wulf (2010) argued that we should think of them in terms of the microskills they entail. Drawing on Richards’s (1983) work on identifying the microskills related to listening comprehension (e.g., the “ability to recognize the stress patterns of words” or the “ability to recognize the elliptical forms of grammatical units and sentences”), Wulf recommended generating “taxonomies of microskills to serve as objectives for humor-focused activities” (2010, p. 157). So what might some of the microskills related to each of the above desired results look like?

**Identifying Humor**

As we discussed in Chapter 1, meaning in communication is jointly constructed and emergent. As people interact with one another—whether face-to-face or in written form, whether in real time or asynchronously—they use an array of contextualization cues to indicate how what they are saying or writing should be interpreted. That is, they contextualize their language use as funny or serious, sarcastic or sincere. Sometimes, these contextualization cues are overt, such as when someone prefaces a narrative with a statement such as “Here’s a funny story.” Other times, however, the contextualization cues may be less direct and listeners/readers may be left wondering about the key of a particular utterance or text. Thus, one important set of microskills for the identification of humor entails the ability to detect and make sense of particular cues used to contextualize humor (see Chapter 2) in particular contexts.

Common contextualization cues or those that tend to signal a particular form of humor can be presented in the classroom in order to help L2 users identify utterances as humorous or playful. Film and television clips seem to be a fairly reliable source of material for this type of activity, as scripted interaction has
been demonstrated to represent well the pragmalinguistic aspects of utterances with respect to compliments and compliment responses (Rose, 2001), apologies (Kite & Tatsuki, 2005), request modification (Martinez-Flor, 2007), and teases (Janney & Bell, 2014). That is, the presentation of these speech acts in film and television closely resembles the form and content found in unscripted, everyday talk. Thus, examples of scripted interaction can be shown to students, who can then attempt to identify the contextualization cues. The cues described earlier for humor are also used for other keys or functions, which allows for additional, serious examples to be shown in order to emphasize the situated nature of interpretation. Teachers can easily adjust the complexity of the examples and the saliency of the contextualization cues to meet their students’ needs, making the development of this microskill appropriate for both novice and more advanced learners. Moreover, teachers can extend their instruction to include written language as well, so as to help learners recognize humor in email, online chats, newspaper articles, and literary texts, among other genres. Finally, recognition tasks can be combined with production tasks in which learners are asked to rekey or reframe a particular instance of spoken or written language as humorous or playful.

Comprehending Humor

Beyond identifying the presence of humor, L2 learners may benefit from support with issues of comprehension. That is, they may detect the emergence of a humorous key or play frame but find themselves unable to comprehend or appreciate the joke. Although a great deal of being able to understand humor involves simply becoming familiar with as much history, language, and culture as possible, as we saw in Chapter 7, presenting learners with opportunities to encounter and analyze humor is an important aspect of building their pragmatic competence and may facilitate their ability to understand jokes. So what are some of the microskills related to “getting the joke”?

Wulf (2010) suggested developing student understanding of script opposition, sociocultural knowledge, logical mechanisms (what he refers to as “masking”), and figurative language. Helping students gain familiarity with social and cultural information related to the language they are learning, as well as developing their abilities to identify and use figurative language are already things that happen in most L2 classrooms, as well as aspects of the L2 that users are likely to gain knowledge of simply through exposure and uninstructed interaction, if that is available to them. Less likely is that they will be exposed to the concepts of script opposition and logical mechanisms. Furthermore, as noted in Chapter 2, logical mechanisms are difficult to understand and are the subject of debate even among humor scholars.

Script oppositions, on the other hand, seem to provide a more promising way in to understanding a wide variety of humor types. The notion may be introduced by presenting canned jokes, such as those analyzed in Chapter 2. Once students begin to understand that much humor involves incongruity created through the pairing of incompatible scripts, they can begin to analyze them in interaction. As
we have seen throughout this book, much humor is predicated on violations or juxtapositions of “cultural scripts” that form part of peoples’ shared, although not necessarily fully overlapping, interpretive repertoires. This humor may poke fun at expectations for actions, identities, or stances in a particular situation or indicate something about the kinds of scripts that are even available for playful manipulation in a given context. To understand humor, one has to engage with both what is actually present in an interactional moment and one’s assumptions and expectations about what should have been there. This can be particularly challenging for L2 learners, because their interpretive repertoires may differ from those of other users of the language of instruction. And, as we discussed in Chapter 6, L2 learners may “get” certain jokes but not find them funny (more on this later).

Once again, television, film, and even self-produced video clips or those gleaned from the web can be excellent pedagogical resources for engaging students in analytic activities around script opposition. For as Elwood (2006) observed in her detailed analysis of humorous refusal sequences in the television sitcom *Seinfeld*, “exploration of the ways in which refusals produce laughter provides insight into American cultural norms related to a face-threatening act and how these norms may be violated deliberately in a sitcom” (p. 217). A humorous response to such instances illustrates what Rymes (2014) referred to “metacommentary” on sociolinguistic norms. That is, when we observe characters laughing in a particular instance, we must ask ourselves what it is that they find so funny. Classrooms offer a safe, structured space for such discussions, as learners can ask questions and test out hypotheses without fear of losing face. As Kramsch (1993) put it, “talk about talk is what the classroom does best and yet this potential source of knowledge has not been sufficiently tapped, even in communicatively oriented classrooms” (p. 264).

The available detailed sociolinguistic descriptions of different humorous practices also provide information instructors can use to construct activities designed to help their students gain insight into them. For instance, Winchatz and Kozin (2008) provide a detailed analysis of the interactive construction of “comical hypotheticals,” in which speakers collaboratively build an imaginary scenario. They find that the larger speech event consists of four moves: the initiation of the fantasy sequence, an acknowledgment of it, its construction, and, finally, termination (p. 391). Through exposure to this communicative practice, learners may begin to be able to identify it in ongoing interaction. Moreover, as studies of the ways in which L2 users from particular language and/or cultural backgrounds interpret particular forms of humor begin to emerge, such as Kim’s (2014) study of Korean learners of English and sarcasm, language teachers can further identify key microskills related to humor comprehension and identify their needs so as to better target their instruction.

**Producing Humor**

A third area ripe for instructional intervention is the production of humor itself. Although L2 learners don’t necessarily need to become comedians, opportunities
to create and perform humor can help to develop learners’ communicative repertoires, as well as their overall confidence as (humorous) language users. Teachers might benefit from conceiving of their instruction as falling into two broad, but intertwined, camps: content and performance. As we saw in Chapter 2, being funny requires careful attention to what can and cannot be joked about in a particular context. This is, however, easier said than done. As Nancy (Bell, 2011) has pointed out, there are many scholarly descriptions of the humor preferences of particular nations or cultural groups (e.g., Davis, 2006; Mizushima & Stapleton, 2006; Ruch & Forabosco, 1996; Ruch, Ott, Accoce, & Bariaud, 1991; Ziv, 1988), yet these descriptions do not fully account for the workings of humor in particular interactional contexts. Somewhat more useful to teachers is Driesen’s (2004) list of six themes for humor that seem to defy national or cultural boundaries:

1. Sex or gender
2. Age
3. Language
4. Politics
5. Religion
6. Ethnicity

One problem with these themes, as you have likely noticed, is that many of them are the same topics that we often advise our students to avoid. However, recognizing that these are common topics for humor around the world can raise students’ awareness of the particular ways that they are used in their new language, as well as in any other languages they may know, and allow them to begin to experiment with humor around these topics.

It is also incumbent on teachers to help learners to understand the degree of risk involved in exploiting certain themes for mirth. Here, however, it is important to recall the ways that L2 users may be positioned by their interlocutors when they use certain types of “insider” language. As we noted in Chapter 2, L2 users may be seen as “outsiders,” and their humor may not be judged by the same standards as that of “native speakers” and thus may not be appreciated. At the same time, however, we also discussed how L2 users can often get a “pass” when using words or joking about topics that might be perceived as off-limits by “native speakers.” It seems that their “outsider” identity may offer some measure of cover, as insiders attempt to smooth over the social breach through a variety of repair strategies (see Bell, 2011, for further discussion). Indeed, as Nancy has noted, “rather than attempting to follow the norms of the target community, learners can emphasize their outsider status, exploiting linguistic and cultural differences for humor” (Bell, 2011, p. 141). Given this situation, Nancy recommends that teachers encourage learners to conduct their own ethnographic investigations of humor in the communities of practice in which they engage, to develop both the necessary content knowledge about humor and the intercultural competence.
to recognize when, where, why, and with whom it might be ok to use particular expressions or joke about particular topics. For, as Liddicoat and Scarino (2013) remind us, learning about a particular language and the people who use it involves more than just absorbing a set of facts or prescriptions. Learning entails “purposeful, active engagement in interpreting and creating meaning in interaction with others, and continuously reflecting on one’s self and others in communication and meaning-making in variable contexts” (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013, p. 57). As we noted in Chapter 6, language classrooms offer a safe space for discussion of and reflection on risky forms of expression (e.g., see Horan, 2013, on swearing and cursing).

In addition to focusing on what themes, linguistic resources, and rhetorical devices L2 learners might marshal for humorous ends, the microskills related to humor production also include careful attention to particular aspects of performance. Sequence, turn taking, volume, timing, and prosody (including intonation, rhythm, stress), among others, are all important areas related to the successful cuing of a spoken utterance as humorous. Likewise, kinesthetic features such as gaze, gesture, expression, and posture also figure into the contextualization process. Although humor is notoriously difficult to translate, funny personal stories do tend to be easily shared across languages and may be one of the easier ways that L2 users are able to share humor (Bell, 2007). Translating and performing such a narrative can allow learners to hone their ability to use humorous cues and techniques, as well as practice basic conversational skills such as getting and maintaining the floor. Similarly, as we saw in Chapter 7, a serious lesson on pragmatics can be rekeyed to include opportunities to engage in humorous interaction. Winston’s (2012) edited volume on drama-inspired techniques in L2 teaching, for example, includes numerous ideas for speaking activities that involve humor (see also Bell, 2009). This emphasis on non-serious language use in the classroom accords with current thinking in L2 research (see Chapter 1) that depicts learners not as “faithful imitators,” but as “legitimate speakers,” “playful creators,” and “dialogical communicators” (Gao, 2014).

Beyond opportunities to engage in spoken performances, teachers might also assist learners in developing an array of textual and co-textual devices for keying written language as purposely humorous, as this mode of communication offers them more time to compose their humor and reflect on its presentation. From the clever use of lexical items, collocations, syntactic structures, or rhetorical devices to the creative deployment of font, pictures, emoticons, and punctuation, language users have an array of devices at their disposal for indicating how their texts should be interpreted. Whereas writing instruction in academic contexts tends to focus on the production of conventional, and very often serious, texts, exploration of other genres can help to expand both learners’ communicative repertoires and their confidence as authors. Hannah Brenneman, an ESL teacher in one of Anne’s graduate courses, did a short project in which she analyzed, in detail, the
textual resources one 11-year-old bilingual student used in the stories he wrote in an after-school program. The resources Hannah identified were the following:

1. Varying font sizes and styles, to create and/or emphasize meaning
2. Parentheses, to interact with the reader directly
3. Phonetic spelling and unconventional punctuation techniques to develop characters’ voice and overall tone

In her analysis, Hannah noted that opportunities to write humorous texts were central to not only this student’s literacy development but also his desire to write more generally. Indeed, Hannah’s classmates observed similar tendencies in their work with young learners at this center, because the regard for humor and language play within this academically focused after-school program led both to the production of texts that were more rhetorically and linguistically sophisticated than what the children were doing at school and to more positive attitudes toward writing.

In addition to creating an academic environment in which written humor is explicitly taught and valued, teachers might also take advantage of the affordances offered by particular modes of written expression. Although Vandergriff and Fuchs (2009) demonstrated that the amount of play that occurs in online versus face-to-face contexts is not significantly different, studies of computer-mediated communication do suggest that the medium may encourage joking and play by L2 users, in particular (e.g., Belz & Reinhardt, 2004; Kern & McGrath, 2002). This may be due, in part, to the greater control they have over the ongoing stream of talk. Vandergriff and Fuchs (2012) describe the strategies L2 users deployed in synchronous online chats to respond to each other’s humor, whether supportively or to indicate lack of appreciation. Information such as this can be used by teachers to identify not only specific aspects of written humor as focal points for their instruction, but also contexts in which humor and language play are likely to occur and then use the tools of backward design to develop assessments and activities that speak to these aspects of language use.

### Responding to Humor

Closely related to our discussion of recognizing humor, is an emphasis on helping learners to respond to humor. Just as the skillful deployment of a humorous remark requires attention to various contextualization cues and communicative resources, so too does the reception of humor—particularly in spontaneous interaction. As Hay (2001) described, to fully support at attempt at humor, the hearer must express recognition of the presence of a joke, understanding of it, and appreciation. Furthermore, in responding to humor in ways that demonstrate all three of these, unless otherwise indicated, she suggests that the hearer is also implicating agreement with any message in the humor (see Chapter 2). There is a variety of
conventions by which interlocutors indicate each of these levels of support, and some may be particularly helpful for L2 users. For instance, given the tendency for L2 users’ tepid reactions to humor that they understood, but did not appreciate, to be interpreted as lack of understanding, practice with formulaic ways of expressing this sentiment may help them avoid the frustration of having a joke that wasn’t funny the first time repeated to them (see Bell, 2009, for examples; see also Bell, 2013, for conventional responses when humor was not understood).

As noted in Chapter 2, humor often contains serious information, and full support of humor indicates that the hearer agrees with the message, values, or attitudes it expresses (Hay, 2001). Recognizing this aspect of humor and not knowing how to express understanding and/or appreciation for the humor without also agreeing with the message is a useful skill for L2 users. Bell and Attardo (2010) noted that laughing at an ethnic joke may brand someone a racist (the metamessage being that it is acceptable to laugh at this topic). Similarly, teases often mask criticisms, and the failure of the hearer to understand this implicit message and alter his or her behavior may cause interpersonal difficulties.

Thus, teachers may want to include in their instruction an emphasis not only on humor appreciation but also on humor rejection and ways of responding to the serious message as well. Here, an array of activities ranging from awareness-raising tasks to scripted and spontaneous role-plays can be used to develop learners’ abilities to respond to humor.

Managing Risk: Learners as Critical, Reflexive Language Users

While the preceding discussion may have convinced some of you that teaching humor in the language classroom is possible, others may still be wondering, “Isn’t being funny just too dangerous for L2 users?” After all, as we’ve noted throughout this book, humor and indeed even serious acts of linguistic creativity always entail some degree of risk, particularly for those who identify and are identified as “nonnative speakers” of a particular language. In introducing our students to humor and encouraging them to play with language, we must remain mindful of the inequalities that structure our social world. As we saw in Chapter 1 and again in Chapters 3 and 4, work on identity in bi-/multilingual contexts cautions us that agency is always mediated by who we are and where we stand in relation to particular interactional moments and arrangements of power. This was further demonstrated with respect to humor, specifically in Chapter 2. A student from China in one of Anne’s graduate courses illustrated the issue in a paper in which she discussed using humor in her academic writing assignments:

Some of my papers required description of teaching experiences and reflections, so there were chances that I could put some comic elements in my
writings, like self-deprecation. I even wrote down the funny part, read it several times to make sure that my professor would be able to get the punch line. However, I gave it up after the second thought. As an international student and a newcomer, I am not sure if my professors would misunderstand my joke or have the thought that “Huh, she is an international student, so she does not know jokes are not proper in academic writing.” I would not take this risk to get a low score, so I must be serious and professional in writing. Also only my limited English proficiency is enough to make my paper not professional. Apart from academic life, I am definitely a funny person, especially the writings for social purposes. Without anything interesting to talk about, I would rather not write at all.

Here, this student, who identifies as an “international student and newcomer,” describes her ambivalence about incorporating humorous elements into her writing. On one hand, she is eager to construct herself as a funny person. On the other, she fears that her attempts at humor in an academic setting will hinder her efforts to portray herself as a serious professional and competent user of English. As language educators, comments such as these remind us that our desired results or learning outcomes must extend to include opportunities for learners not only to expand their communicative repertoires but also to reflect on issues of identity and positionality. We cannot just encourage learners to engage in humor and language play without alerting them to the potential risks and rewards. For us, this means designing curricular units that don’t merely proscribe what to say in particular specific situations, but engage learners in critical reflection about how we make meaning within and through interaction and what this means in terms of who we are and who we aspire to be.

**Putting It All Together**

So now that we’ve convinced you that teaching humor is a possible, though by no means simple, endeavor, how do you go about designing curricular units? What should the pro-humor language teacher do? You are already familiar with backward design, from the previous chapter, so here we just mention some additional tips and some examples specific to teaching humor itself.

**Define Your Focus**

As we’ve repeatedly emphasized throughout this chapter, teachers interested in making humor the focal point of a curricular unit or series of units should first consider what “desired results” or “learning outcomes” they are keen to facilitate and how these learning objectives accord with learners’ wants and needs. As you might imagine, we do not advise teaching about humor merely because it might be a high interest topic (which, of course, it is!) or because it seems trendy (because, really, does humor ever go out of style?). Rather, in accordance
with the principles of backward designed outlined in Chapter 7, the decision
to concentrate on humor in the language classroom should be motivated by a
desire to expand learners’ communicative repertoires, metalinguistic awareness,
and critical reflexivity in meaningful, relevant, and practical ways. For example,
newly arrived immigrant children in an elementary school setting might respond
well to a unit on knock-knock jokes, as such talk would allow them to participate
in or perhaps even initiate interactions with domestic peers in ways that are fairly
scripted and easy to realize. A staple of U.S. playground interactions, engagement
in knock-knock jokes not only shows newcomers to be culturally competent but
also allows them to enact playful, collaborative identities. Adult learners of English
for business purposes, on the other hand, might appreciate a focus on puns in
advertising. Here, the purpose of the curricular unit might be not only the recog-
nition or production of the kinds of word play that tend to figure into advertise-
ments but also some discussion of what kinds of puns are appropriate for particular
products and markets. In this case, the focus on humorous language would com-
plement and extend the business principles guiding the class and provide oppor-
tunities for developing learners’ metalinguistic knowledge, linguistic creativity, and
cultural understanding. Learners offered this kind of language instruction would
be well positioned to create or evaluate an advertisement that aims to extend an
existing brand across linguistic borders.

Beyond identifying the relevance of humor with respect to a teacher’s desired
results and learners’ social, emotional, and professional needs is consideration of
how a focus on humor figures into the language curriculum more generally. Is
the main purpose to help learners to demonstrate expertise in academic language
use on a written exam? If so, where/when do you anticipate that your learners
might encounter humor? What role will they play with respect to this humorous
language? Will they have to interpret it? Use it spontaneously in an essay? Offer
some commentary as to the function of a humorous interchange in a particular
social context? In making curricular decisions, it is essential to have a sense of
what learners will have to know and do (or not do) linguistically with humor.
How will a focus on humor allow you to meet your short-term and long-term
learning outcomes both in and out of the classroom?

Do Your Research

Once you have identified the desired results and zeroed in on the aspect(s) of
humor you would like to focus on in your curricular unit, the next step is to do a
little research. The resources mentioned in Chapter 9 are excellent starting points.
Are there descriptive accounts of this kind of humor? What do they say about
the forms this particular kind of humor may take? What do they say about its
functions? When is this kind of humor used? By whom? Are there ways in which
this particular kind of humor might vary cross-linguistically or cross-culturally?
In other words, what linguistic structures, lexical items, and cultural understandings will learners need to achieve the desired results? How will your unit help to develop your learners’ metalinguistic awareness and critical reflexivity?

As we saw in Chapter 2, humor has long captured the interest of scholars. Such work has much to teach us about the forms and functions of humor in refusal sequences or the types of irony in certain literary genres. We strongly recommend that teachers who wish to focus on humor in the classroom familiarize themselves with scholarly work in this area to ensure that they are providing credible instruction. Although the humor that is presented through mass media (e.g., television, movies, radio) is an excellent classroom resource, teachers must remember that in some instances it is an exaggerated version of what happens in more everyday interactions. Thus, it is important to carefully evaluate the information upon which you base your instruction. This volume offers teachers an overview of the research to date, but we strongly advise that you do your own investigating as well, as new research is constantly appearing. After all, even the most engaging lesson on humor loses its value if it is built on a shaky foundation!

**Develop Assessments**

Now that you’ve articulated the desired results or learning outcomes, investigated what research has to say about humor, and identified the necessary linguistic structures, lexical items, and culturally understandings, it is time to consider your assessments. As we noted in Chapter 7, it is important to think through how you will know whether and to what extent students are meeting particular objectives. For example, if the focus of the lesson is on knock-knock jokes, students need to demonstrate their ability to recognize and produce the formulaic language that composes this type of humor. Fill-in-the-blank, sequencing, and matching activities are good ways to test this knowledge when students are at the early stages of their language learning trajectories. Students who are more advanced linguistically and academically might be asked to bring in samples of knock-knock jokes or to create and perform their own. No matter what the assessment, the important point is that it provides the teacher with evidence that learning outcomes are being met and—in the case of formative assessments—what additional instruction might need to be put into play to help learners meet these goals. And, remember that just because you are teaching about humor, your assessments need not be silly. They offer a serious window into what your students know about humor and what they are able to do with it.

**Plan the Instruction**

The final step is, of course, to plan the instruction. Here, it is once again important to remember that a lesson about humor or language play does not necessarily need to be conducted in a humorous key. As we stressed in Chapter 7, there is a
difference between using humor, language play, and creative language as pedagogical tools and making them the object of instruction. The key is making sure that your instruction is aligned with both your desired results and your assessments. What tasks and activities will allow learners to reach both their short-term and long-term language-learning goals?

For example, in a curricular unit on knock-knock jokes for young immigrant learners in an ESL setting, emphasis might be placed on understanding, producing and responding to this highly predictable and common form of humor. Instruction might begin with a series of activities that help students to identify the interactional sequence that characterizes knock-knock jokes, followed by attention to some of the linguistic resources and rhetorical devices that tend to figure into the punch lines. Given that puns, and in particular those that feature sound play, are a typical feature of knock-knock jokes, noticing activities that focus on homophony might figure prominently in the instruction (see Monnot & Kite, 1974, and Medgyes, 2002, for examples). For students at lower proficiency levels, the focus of instruction might be limited to the identification and performance of classic knock-knock jokes, as well as on understanding their meaning. This instruction might also include attention to what, when, and with whom such jokes are usually told. Learners, for example, might appreciate knowing that knock-knock jokes, like conversational stories, are often subject to the “one-up” principle. That is, one person tells a knock-knock joke and the next person responds with another—and presumably “better”—knock-knock joke. For students with more advanced language proficiency, activities might be directed at the development and performance of new knock-knock jokes. In this case, students might be given the punch line and be asked to come up with the trigger. Or students might work in teams to develop and perform their own jokes. Likewise, students might be asked to do some ethnographic observations about what happens when they tell knock-knock jokes to their peers outside the language classroom. These are but some of the activities that might figure into a curricular unit that has knock-knock jokes as a central theme.

**Teaching Humor**

So, what were some of the topics that the pre-service language teachers and intercultural educators in Anne’s class developed? What forms of humor did they choose to teach? Here are a few samples:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Proficiency Level</th>
<th>Desired Results</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Puns</td>
<td>Beginner</td>
<td>Recognize puns in English-language advertisements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Be able to explain dual meaning of particular lexical items in puns</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As we can see in the table, Anne’s students were quite creative and purposeful in their selection of topics. Although some of the students initially struggled, they used the principles of backward design to facilitate the development of their lessons. Moreover, in taking the time to research their topics, all of the students in Anne’s class—whether native speakers of English or not—emerged from the experience knowing a lot more about how a particular form of humor works in interaction. And, more important, they gained some confidence as language teachers.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, we have identified some aspects of humor that are teachable in language classrooms. In highlighting an array of microskills, it is our hope that this discussion has convinced you that humor is not only a desirable instructional focus but also a possible one. And, as you consider how you might go about designing your own curricular units around humor, we encourage you to do some additional research on the topics presented in Chapter 2 in order to deepen your own understanding of non-serious language use. For just as we believe that additional language learners must be presented with opportunities to develop meta-linguistic awareness, so, too, must language teachers continue to sharpen their own
professional knowledge. Yet, as we noted in the preface, humor is a vast and relatively underexplored area of inquiry in sociolinguistics. There are still many questions left to answer. In Chapter 9, we describe some approaches to designing your own studies of humor so that you can contribute to this emergent area of inquiry.

References


All good research starts from a place of curiosity. And, with respect to humor and language play, there are still many areas ripe for investigation. Take a moment to consider the following:

1. What are some questions you still have about humor and language play?
2. What are some ways in which you might begin to address these questions?

In some instances, the answers to your questions may well be in your library. But, what if no research directly addresses what it is you would like to know? In this case, you will need to do your own study. What might that study look like? What challenges might you encounter during the design phase of your investigation?

In 2010, when we first began to talk seriously about coauthoring a guide to humor for language teachers and educational researchers, we had some reservations. Was the research base robust enough to warrant a book? Would we be able to point to any clear findings? Since that time, however, research on L2 humor, language play, and linguistic creativity has experienced healthy growth, as more and more researchers have come to recognize the relevance of these areas of inquiry to their own scholarly interests. Of course, many questions still remain. The aim of this chapter is to help you to meet some of the conceptual and methodological issues involved in researching L2 humor and language play. We begin by outlining some basic steps to assist you in designing research projects focused on humor or language play. Our discussion is not meant to be comprehensive and should not be understood as a substitute for more detailed treatments of research design. Rather, this chapter is intended to supplement what you already know about researching language and/or communication. Next, we identify some common pitfalls
specific to examining humor and/or language play and offer some suggestions on how to avoid them. Finally, we propose a number of suggestions for future research, using proposals set forth in some of the early work on language play in studies of second language learning as a starting point.

**Designing Research Projects**

*Developing a Research Question*

No matter what topic you wish to explore, the first step is always the same. You need to develop a researchable question. Not every question is open to systematic investigation, and, perhaps more important, not every question is worthy of asking. You must consider not only what you are going to research, but also why this question matters. What are we going to learn from your research? While the process of constructing a strong research question will no doubt involve taking stock of your own interests, you should also be prepared to conduct a preliminary, but careful, survey of the existing scholarship. Taken together, your interests and your reading should help you to identify a question that has not yet been addressed or one that you would like to address in a different way. You may also wish to replicate a prior study, something that is needed in many areas of applied linguistics (Norris & Ortega, 2000). At the same time, remember that your question should also be of a scope that will make it manageable within your time frame—whether it be two weeks or two years.

*Finding Prior Research*

As you have likely realized, there is a substantial amount of scholarship on humor and language play in the databases you are already using for your research, such as the Education Resources Information Center and the Linguistics and Language Behavior Abstracts. Yet, as we saw in Chapter 3, humor and language play may not be the topic of these studies. It may take some creative library work to identify all the research relevant to your project. Moreover, because studies of humor and language play tend to cross disciplinary boundaries, it is important to extend your review of the literature accordingly. The majority of humor scholarship has been done by psychologists, but valuable work can also be found in sources that catalog research in the fields of sociology, anthropology, folklore, business, and nursing (just to name a few!).

In addition, we strongly recommend consulting publications that focus exclusively on humor (as opposed to humor in classroom or other educational contexts) in order to get better idea of the broad range of topics and approaches that have been taken in this multidisciplinary field. The International Society for Humor Studies, for example, has published *Humor*, an academic journal devoted
to humor research since 1988, and it was joined in 2013 by the open access *European Journal of Humor Research*. Two recent surveys of the field are also helpful starting points for those new to humor scholarship. Victor Raskin’s (2008) *The Primer of Humor Research* has chapters discussing key perspectives and findings from humor scholarship across 17 different disciplines and topics. Salvatore Attardo’s (2014) two-volume *Encyclopedia of Humor Studies* offers short entries that summarize a variety of theories, research methods, concepts, and phenomena important to understanding and studying humor. Whereas Raskin’s text is useful for understanding the range of findings within particular disciplinary approaches, Attardo’s encyclopedia is an excellent place to turn for bite-sized introductions to more specific topics, such as intercultural humor, reframing, and sense of humor. Both texts are also worth perusing simply in order to grasp the range of research that has been done on humor and to further develop and hone your own ideas.

**Choosing an Approach**

Although we each have our own preferences with regard to epistemological frameworks (i.e., theories of knowledge) and research methods, as with all scholarly inquiry, ultimately the approach must fit the question. In Chapter 3, we discussed some of the differences between positivist and interpretive frameworks for classroom research. Specifically, we noted that each framework begins with its own set of premises regarding knowledge, truth, and the researcher’s relationship to the researched. Likewise, we observed that these frameworks vary with regard to how they conceive of learning (see also Chapter 5). Whereas much of the classroom-based research we reviewed in Chapter 4 is grounded in the interpretive tradition, the studies we surveyed in Chapter 5 represent a mix of positivist and interpretive frameworks.

In addition to aligning yourself with a particular epistemological framework, as a researcher you must also choose your approach to data collection and analysis. Within studies of classroom interaction, interpretive studies employing qualitative approaches have thus far dominated research on humor and language play, and most have drawn on ethnographic, discourse analytic methods. Such research is useful for documenting how phenomena unfold. Studies adopting qualitative methods provide rich descriptions of interaction, often complemented by participant interviews for additional insight. Although quantitative research on humor and language play—and in particular that which draws on experimental methods—has been less common within applied linguistics, it is plentiful within the field of psychology. Such research is helpful for illuminating general numerical trends, identifying variables that predict certain outcomes, and testing hypotheses. The question of whether and to what extent language play might facilitate L2 development by acting to make L2 forms more memorable, for instance, has been addressed by a few quasi-experimental studies thus far (see Bell, 2012a; Lucas, 2005; Tocalli-Beller & Swain, 2007).
As you consider your own methodological choices, do keep in mind that while qualitative and quantitative methods are often set up in opposition to each other, projects designed to draw on aspects of each of these traditions have become increasingly common (see Riazi & Candlin, 2014, for a general review of mixed methods research in applied linguistics). In fact, although we have identified much of the research in this text as qualitative, a great deal of it relies on mixed methods. Moreover, note that just as some interpretive work involves quantifiable information, so too does some positivist work rely on qualitative observations.

**Defining Terms and Setting Parameters**

Defining the object of study is a crucial, yet often (surprisingly!) overlooked step in the process of designing any research project. With humor and language play, it can be particularly thorny. Although we all intuitively know what humor and language play are, there are many ways to understand these phenomena. In the preface to this book, we defined language play as “any manipulation of language that is done in a non-serious manner for either public or private enjoyment” and humor as a subset of language play that elicits a feeling of mirth. This broad definition was useful to our purposes here, as we wanted to cast a wide net. For a research study, however, definitions very often have to be narrower and more specific. For example, if humor is the focus of your research

- will you treat it as an emotion, a stimulus, or a reaction?
- will your focus be the humorous text itself or on the external manifestations of the emotion of mirth, as elicited by humor (Chafe, 2007)?
- will all types of humor be of interest in your study, or will you want to limit your data set to, for instance, self-denigrating humor or teasing?
- how will you treat humor that arises accidentally, such as from a slip of the tongue, as opposed to utterances that were intended to amuse?

Indeed, a parallel set of questions emerges with respect to studies of language play. In your research,

- will you limit your data set to language play as a type of practice, following Lantolf (1997), or will you consider all non-serious behavior, including that with no clear rehearsal function?
- will you consider language play as exclusively or primarily a private, self-directed behavior, or will you restrict yourself to social play, in which interlocutors entertain each other?
- will you include both kinds of play? Why or why not? If so, how will you distinguish the two?

These are the kinds of questions you will need to consider before embarking on data analysis and likely even data collection.
In addition, depending on the parameters you set, you will identify humor or language play in different ways, looking for specific activities, reactions, and/or textual features. For example, a speaker-based definition of conversational humor will require different evidence than a hearer-based one. Often evidence will need to be drawn from a variety of sources, including the interaction, the text, and the context. It is important to carefully read the work of others to see how such issues have been handled in prior research. Tarone (2000), for example, offers a set of guidelines for distinguishing between play as rehearsal and play as fun. In many of the articles cited in this book, you will find additional examples of researchers defining terms and laying out procedures for data collection and analysis. Even if you come to your own decision about how to define and identify humor and/or language play, it is critical that you recognize how your work extends or diverges from previous practice.

Avoiding Common Errors

Whether you are new to the field or an experienced researcher, there are some pitfalls particular to the study of humor and language play that can make this line of inquiry challenging. Perhaps the most common way to identify humor, at least in studies of interaction, is through contextualization cues, but even this fairly well-established method should be approached with caution. As we discussed in Chapter 2, multimodal and acoustic analyses have recently been used to examine contextualization cues, and this work (e.g., Attardo, Pickering, & Baker, 2011; Kaukomaa, Peräkylä, & Ruusuvuori, 2013) has called into question some long-held beliefs about how humor is signaled in interaction, thus complicating our notions of phonetic cues. For instance, despite prior assertions to the contrary, both canned narrative jokes and spontaneous conversational humor tend to be marked by smiling or laughter but not changes in volume or speech rate. Likewise, punchlines of such jokes tend not to be preceded by a pause, as researchers had previously assumed (Attardo et al., 2011; Pickering et al., 2009). Moreover, Ford and Fox (2010) demonstrated how impoverished our understanding of the cues to humor is by focusing on the ways in which researchers code laughter. For instance, while it is common for studies of humor to identify aspiration within speech as laugh particles, their analysis showed that in fact this blanket assignment makes up a number of distinct phonetic practices, such as guttural sounds, breathiness at the beginnings of words, and extension of fricatives (e.g., /fː:/; see also Potter & Hepburn, 2010). They further identified a number of bodily movements (e.g., leaning forward and back) and gestures (e.g., covering the face with the hands) associated with the construction of humorous utterances. Familiarity with this and other such research is important for any type of project in which humor must be identified in interaction.

In addition, researchers often struggle to distinguish between humor and laughter. A frequent error is to equate the two, given the strong intuitive link
between them. Yet, as conversation analysts have amply demonstrated, laughter can serve a wide variety of functions in interaction. While it clearly occurs as a response to something that has been perceived as amusing, it also appears regularly in conversational trouble spots (e.g., Glenn & Holt, 2013; Partington, 2006). A specific kind of conversational trouble is when an attempt at humor fails, and laughter often shows up in these instances (Bell, 2015), creating a strong potential for misidentification of humor. Furthermore, laughter is not a unitary phenomenon. The quality of laughter varies, so that hearers are often (but not always) able to identify it as genuine, forced, or derisive, for example (Bachorowski & Owren, 2001; Frank, Ekman, & Friesen, 1993; Szameitat et al., 2009). Thus, the study of laughter, although it can overlap considerably with the study of humor, presents a very different set of questions and problems.

Furthermore, much research on humor and language play aims to identify how shifts in key or frame realize particular, and very often overlapping and ambiguous, social functions. Here too, however, we have a few words of caution. The first applies to all studies of humor and language play, while the second involves a potential complication specific to the study of non-serious talk by L2 learners. First, there is a marked tendency among researchers to view humor as, at a minimum, liberating in some way, and further as a potentially powerful agent of critique and thus social change. Although we do not wish to suggest that humor cannot fulfill these functions, we advise you to exercise care when considering the evidence for such interpretations. As we noted in Chapter 4, it is often difficult to distinguish between humor that is politically motivated and humor that the initiators themselves see as merely entertaining. To this end, Rampton’s (2006) distinction between parody and pastiche offers a valuable reminder. In dealing with humor and language play, we urge you to be mindful of your own positionality as a researcher and of how this influences your interpretations.

The second issue involves questions of intent and error. Although you certainly want to avoid situations in which you interpret as error an utterance an L2 user intended as play, it is nonetheless true that errors do occur in the speech and writing of developing bilinguals. Thus, it is particularly important to find ways to distinguish between intentional acts of linguistic creativity and unintended mistakes. In Chapter 4, we cited a study by Lefkowitz and Hedgcock (2002) in which students often joked around in class by using deliberately poor pronunciation. Yet, the playfully bad pronunciations that these students delighted in did not differ considerably from their genuine attempts at “good” pronunciation. This observation suggests the possibility of the researcher seeing humor where there is only a sincere attempt to communicate. Thus, we encourage you to consider this issue during the design phase of your research so that your study includes interviews, playback sessions, or other modes of triangulation to verify your interpretations. Ultimately, the credibility of your analysis will come down to the evidence you are able to mount in support of your claims and your ability to deal convincingly with counter arguments.
Suggestions for Research

In Chapter 3 we observed that while humor and language play have been historically under-theorized or ignored in studies of classroom discourse, recent work in sociolinguistics and SLA has begun to take non-serious language more seriously. To illustrate this, in chapter 4 we looked at how studies of classroom talk, and in particular language classroom talk, have foregrounded shifts in key or frame as worthy of analytic attention. Specifically, such work has described the ways in which students—and at times even teachers—draw on humor and play to realize risky, but socially or psychologically rewarding moves. Although this research has yielded detailed accounts of the forms and functions of humor and language play in today’s linguistically diverse classrooms, we know somewhat less about the workings of non-serious language use with respect to additional language learning. In Chapter 5, we traced the roots of the current interest in humor, and more specifically language play, within SLA by focusing on seminal pieces by Lantolf (1997), Cook (1997, 2000), and Tarone (2000). In this section, we return to those works and examine the authors’ proposals regarding how language play might facilitate L2 development. Here we note which proposals have been addressed by researchers and which have yet to be examined. We then put forth some additional suggestions for inquiry into L2 humor and language play and offer our assessment of where the field is going.

Lantolf, Cook, and Tarone Revisited

Lantolf’s earliest published work on language play was based on a review of the literature, as well as the results of a language play questionnaire administered to 156 students. In this 1997 article, Lantolf posited the following:

1. We know very little about how adults play with language (p. 10).
2. Language play may cease with increased L2 proficiency (p. 12).
3. In classrooms, play occurs more frequently following conversation, rather than in more structured language learning activities (pp. 13–14).
4. Language play functions as an “activity of regaining lost equilibrium, either in the course of reception or expression” (p. 16).
5. L2 language play seems to increase confidence (p. 18).
6. Language play may be necessary for L2 development to occur (p. 19).

Some of the more specific ideas Cook (2000) put forth in his book-length treatment of language play included the following:

1. Language play may function as a marker of proficiency, with higher-level learners playing more effectively (p. 204).
2. The ludic function of language might be exploited as a way of drawing learners’ attention to language forms (pp. 190–193).
3. Play with bizarre meanings may function as a memory aid (p. 197).
4. Play in the language classroom might allow learners access to a broader range of interaction types (pp. 199–200).

Tarone’s (2000) proposals, which were based on actual examples of L2 language play produced by older children and adults, as well as on her readings of Cook’s and Lantolf’s pieces, included the following:

1. Language play is likely helpful, but not necessary to L2 development (p. 44).
2. Language play may help make language learning less stressful (p. 45).
3. Playing with language may make form and meaning more memorable, because of the more relaxed state of the language learners (p. 45).
4. Language play may facilitate the development of sociolinguistic competence (p. 46).
5. Language play may prevent fossilization by destabilizing the developing system (p. 47).

Although these hypotheses have provided a rich set of entry points into the study of humor and language play, many of them (unfortunately!) remain wholly or largely unexplored. Here, we start by examining those assertions that have received the most concrete attention and then turn to those that remain on the table, fair game for any intrepid researcher—perhaps even you! Note that although each of these scholars conceptualized language play in their own ways, in this review we continue with our definitions and will be using humor and language play interchangeably unless otherwise noted.

First and foremost, although we still have a great deal to learn about how adults play with language, we can no longer say, as Lantolf (1997) did, that we know very little about it. We have seen throughout this book that L2 language play does indeed occur among adults in a variety of ways. Humor can no longer be seen as marginal to communication in the L2 classroom. Specifically, descriptive studies have established that adult L2 humor often involves the use of a variety of voices, genres, and registers. Cook (2000) postulated that language play might allow learners access to a broader range of interaction types and subsequent research seems to have established this. For example, we have documented adults pretending to speak as “tough guys” (Bell, Skalicky, & Salsbury, 2014) or as teachers (Pomerantz & Bell, 2007; Waring, 2013). The question that remains, however, is the one posed by Tarone (2000), as to whether play with a variety of voices and registers actually facilitates the development of sociolinguistic competence. Although we have recognized that this type of play occurs among adults, longitudinal studies are needed to help verify the extent to which such play may or may not facilitate L2 pragmatic development. Lantolf’s suggestion that play occurs more frequently after conversation and less often following more structured language learning tasks concerns the distribution of play, as well as its triggers. It is
likely that whether or not play occurs following learning tasks depends on the type of activity, as well as the type of classroom and its atmosphere, although this conclusion can only be inferred from the totality of descriptions of language play both in and out of the classroom and by studies of L1 conversational humor. Thus, this is an area that deserves more attention.

Perhaps the most important question to have emerged in these early studies is the possible link between language play and increased attention to and memorability of L2 forms and meanings (items 2 and 3 on Cook’s list earlier). In a similar vein, Tarone (2000) tied possible memory effects to the affective changes that might be brought about through humor. Although the research evidence still remains scant, what work there is on a connection among humor, bizarre language, and memory suggests that language play does indeed facilitate memorability (see Bell, 2012a, for an overview). In fact, the memorability effect may be stronger for L2 meanings than for forms, particularly in unstructured activities (Bell, 2012a). Furthermore, although the precise nature of the relationship between affective and cognitive factors, as posited by Tarone, remains unclear, it seems that, as with other types of learning, humor leads to positive affect. Indeed, research suggests that even when a playful task is not overtly introduced as such, learners seem to find it enjoyable (Tocalli-Beller & Swain, 2007), and this may, as we noted in Chapter 5, facilitate learning.

The remaining questions originally posed by these three researchers remain fully or largely unexplored. The precise role of humor and language play with respect to L2 development continues to be unclear. While Lantolf (1997) suggested that language play—and here we must defer to his definition, in which language play is a function of private speech—may well be necessary for L2 learning to occur, Tarone (2000) took a less strong position, suggesting that it may be helpful, but not necessary. She also saw a developmental role for language play as a way of destabilizing the learner’s developing L2 system (see also Tarone, 2002), another underexplored avenue.

Two perspectives on the relationship of language play to L2 proficiency were also put forth. Lantolf’s (1997) review of the literature, as well as findings from his own survey data, indicated that there is likely some relationship between the frequency of language play and proficiency, and that it may be the case that language play will drop off as learners gain proficiency. Cook (2000) suggested that language play may serve as a marker of L2 proficiency. Rather than focusing on quantity, however, he focused on quality. An important difference between these two assertions is that Lantolf was focused on language play as private speech, while Cook’s broader perspective included social interaction involving non-serious talk, much of which could be considered humor. Because of this, Cook was also focused on the quality of language play, rather than simply the quantity. He suggested that L2 play would become more effective with gains in L2 abilities. This topic has barely been touched on, although Shardakova (2010) has suggested that
the use of humor increases up to a certain point, but then drops off with advanced proficiency, a finding that supports Lantolf’s (1997) assertions.

Finally, two additional assertions found in Lantolf (1997) remain open for exploration. First, the question as to whether language play functions as a way of “regaining lost equilibrium” seems plausible, particularly in light of the way that laughter frequently signals conversational turbulence, as noted above; however, focused research is required to confirm this. Second, his assertion that L2 language play may increase confidence is ripe for inquiry. Despite the extensive work in psychology on humor and emotion, as we note below, the relationship between humor and language play and various affective factors in applied linguistics is an area that we may just be ready to begin examining closely.

In addition to the hypotheses laid forth in these seminal articles, numerous other areas of L2 humor and language play have yet to be considered in any depth, if at all. We have selected just a few ideas for you to contemplate and perhaps even investigate.

**Humor Among Different Types of L2 Users Across Different Contexts and Learning Conditions**

Although research on L2 humor and language play is increasing, it would still be helpful to have data on L2 humor and language play from classrooms around the world, from L2 users of various proficiency levels and ages communicating in both classroom and nonclassroom contexts, and from classrooms of different sizes and in which different teaching styles are represented. Along the same lines, we should begin to examine more closely the different types of humor and the ways that they function for L2 users and the ways that they are received in interaction. Such descriptions form the basis for the development of additional research questions and are crucial for establishing a foundation for future research.

**The Effects of Pedagogical Interventions Involving L2 Humor and Language Play**

The lack of research on the effectiveness of different pedagogical interventions involving humor or language play is a surprising omission, as pedagogy is an important area inquiry for language teachers and education researchers more broadly, and one where a rich variety of research topics and methods is readily available. Within this broad topic, two main questions must be addressed. First, does instruction on L2 norms of humorous interaction affect learners’ understanding or production of L2 humor, and if so, in what ways? Here we can look to interlanguage pragmatics for examples of pedagogical interventions, as well as numerous research models, involving quasi-experimental research, discourse completion tests, role-plays, surveys, and observation.
The second question about pedagogical interventions involves the extent to which various types of humor may have an impact on L2 development itself. Probably the best model in this instance is Tocalli-Beller and Swain (2007; although see also Lucas, 2005, and Bell, 2012a). They had students collaborate to work out the meaning of a joke containing a pun, which they later told to the class. Recording of the interaction, a pretest, two posttests (immediate and delayed), and a stimulated recall session allowed insight into the learning process and outcomes of the activities. These methods could be altered to investigate the effects of different types of language play, such as that involving syntactic ambiguity or pragmatic violations, or humor in narrative forms. We may find that L2 learning is aided by some forms of humor but not by others.

**Topics of Humor**

Although Bell (2007) has suggested that L2 users and their interlocutors might be careful about the topics that they joke about, that assertion is founded on case studies of proficient L2 users interacting outside of the classroom. This finding may not hold true in classrooms and workplaces, or it may not hold for less advanced L2 users. Further information about what is joked about, what can be joked about, and how different topics are treated humorously by L2 users is needed. Vaid (2006) also proposed that we delve into the ways that cultural beliefs influence what bilinguals joke about and whether certain topics are easier for them to exploit for humor in one or the other of their languages.

**L2 Humor Comprehension**

Most work on L2 humor thus far has focused largely on production, rather than comprehension and interpretation. This is an area in which we depart sharply from the early research done on, for example, negotiation, because one of the first questions asked in that line of research was whether conversational adjustments aid L2 comprehension. This is a curious gap for two reasons. First, many of the same questions that concern researchers working under the paradigm of the interaction hypothesis can be asked specifically with regard to humorous interaction. For instance, it would be useful to examine humorous communication in terms of feedback and reformulation, or to consider attention and noticing of L2 humorous forms. The second reason the neglect of comprehension seems odd is because of the fact that this is a topic of great interest to language teachers. Books and articles that suggest ways of using humor in the classroom are consumed eagerly by language instructors, yet most of the suggestions they make have little grounding in research (perhaps largely because there is so little). For instance, we are unable to gauge the potential difficulty of different types of humor (if any), despite the publication of classificatory schemes that purport to do this (e.g., Deneire, 1995).
The issue of bilingual humor processing, representation, and interpretation has been taken up by psychologist Jotsnya Vaid (2000, 2006), yet many of her astute observations and suggestions for future research have been largely overlooked by applied linguists and educational researchers. For instance, she suggests using humor comprehension to tease out the relationship between general linguistic proficiency and L2 cultural proficiency and to examine the ways that L1 and L2 knowledge of figurative language interact. It is also worth noting that this is not an area in which established research methods are lacking. Conversation analysis has the potential to help us here, as do stimulated recall, elicitations (via DCTs or role play), questionnaires (Vaid, 2006), and diary studies (e.g., Bell & Attardo, 2010).

**The Relationship Between Creative and Formulaic Language Use for L2 Users**

The study of humor, as one example of the more general category of creative language use, has the potential to contribute to our understanding of language structure and change, as suggested by Tarone (2000). She placed language play within models of language that allow for an understanding of the tension between innovation and maintenance of language forms and functions, noting that it “involves the individual’s exploration of the unpredictability which can be generated from use of the language system” (Tarone, 2000, p. 34). Humor often exploits formulas, but it can also create them. Although studies of both formulaic and creative language uses make apparent the strong relationship between the two, the connection has tended to be explored peripherally within studies of either one or the other of the phenomena. With respect to the relationship for L2 learners, of great interest is the question of processing each type of language and the extent to which the learning of one may drive the learning of the other. Linguistic corpora may be particularly helpful for these types of questions, as Veale’s (2012, 2013; Hao & Veale, 2010) work on L1 creativity might be replicated using corpora of L2 users (e.g., the Corpus of English as a Lingua Franca in Academic Settings or the Multimedia Adult English Learner Corpus). See Bell (2012b) for further discussion of these and additional issues in the study of formulaic and creative language.

**L2 Humor, Stress, and Coping**

Despite the well-documented use of humor as a way of coping with stress (see Martin, 2007, for a review), this aspect of humor has yet to be taken up by applied linguists and other educational researchers. Cultural differences and language difficulties are clearly something that L2 users joke about, but do those who do so adapt better to stresses brought on by these things? Do they have an easier time interacting in the L2 and making friends who are speakers of it? Given the attention that emotion is currently receiving in applied linguistics, it may be time to examine the emotional aspects of L2 humor.
A Developmental Path for L2 Humor and Language Play

In Chapter 5 we noted that the development of humor in children learning a first language has been fairly well-documented. However, the same cannot be said for children being raised bi- or multilingually, although the language play of such children has been discussed. Of particular interest to applied linguists and educational researchers would be what the development of humor among bilingual children might reveal about bilingual cognitive processes and language development. We should also ask how bilingual children develop an awareness of the pragmatics and sociolinguistics of humor in each language.

Furthermore, we should consider the development of proficiency in the use of L2 humor by older learners. Do some types of humor and language play develop later or earlier than others? A general path of pragmatic development, based mainly on studies of the production of requests (see Taguchi, 2010, for a review), has been charted and it is worth considering the extent to which this holds for L2 users as they learn to do humor in their new language. Here, as with other topics in education, longitudinal work is sorely needed (although see Shively, 2013, for one notable exception). Shardakova’s (2010) cross-sectional study involved 113 L2 users of Russian whose proficiencies ranged from novice high to superior on the ACTFL scale and thus may provide a snapshot of the ways that humor use changes with increasing L2 abilities. In this study, discourse completion tasks designed to elicit one of four different speech acts were given to the participants, and responses containing humor were identified and analyzed. Her analysis of the types of humor used showed that most learner humor relied on pragmatics, although some humor was created using lexical or discursive strategies. Humor using grammar was rare and only appeared in users with a proficiency level of advanced-mid or higher.

Assessment

Here we have questions from a variety of perspectives. For instance, might humor be used as an assessment device in the L2 classroom, and if so, how and under what conditions? How should we assess assignments that have been designed to incorporate language play? What effect might formal evaluation of such activities have on their production? Both the role of humor in assessment, as well as ways of assessing the learning of any humor taught in class, are areas that are open for inquiry.

Too often, suggestions for future research are not taken seriously as possibilities for one’s own projects. Perhaps some scholars feel that they must come up with original ideas, or at least not take them directly from published suggestions. We, however, encourage you to consider these as kind of wish list we have for work we would like to see done and it is in that spirit that we share these ideas—in hopes that they will, indeed, be taken up. This area of inquiry is broad and relatively underexplored and there is plenty of room for all!
Conclusion

Education, and in particular language education, is serious business, but as we have seen throughout this book humor does have something very important to teach us about how language is used and to contribute to how it is taught and learned in classrooms. Humorous language—whether spoken or written—is, by its very nature, polysemous and ambiguous. Its meanings are embedded in multiple layers of context and are always negotiated within and through interaction. What is funny to one person may be lost on another. And, although it might seem like such characteristics are particular to humor, we have argued that this is not the case. Much of what we have said about the workings of humor applies to language and communication more broadly, and the historic omission of non-serious language in educational research has serious consequences for how we understand language use and indeed even language learning in classroom contexts. We have thus argued that language educators, educational researchers, and policy makers would do well to think about some of the changes brought about by globalization and new technologies not as a challenge to be overcome but, rather, as an opportunity to rethink some of the ideas that have long dominated our practices.

In highlighting the workings of humor, we note that much of what makes non-serious language use interesting to researchers, is also what makes it so appealing to language users. Humor is, as we saw, difficult to categorize and even harder to interpret. A single instance of humor can be used to accomplish multiple social functions at once, and not all participants will necessarily recognize the work being done. Yet, humor is, for many of us, a familiar and frequently present form of language use. To neglect the teaching of humor is to deny developing bilinguals access to a powerful communicative resource, potentially contributing to their marginalization during this type of talk. On the other hand, exposing students to the workings of non-serious interaction can provide them with additional tools for navigating complex social relationships and social situations. It can further the goal of learners seeing themselves not as “faithful imitators” whose sole job it is to parrot preformed utterances (Gao, 2014) but as active creators of meaning, whose innovative and playful manipulations of language come to shape the very code they are using.

In order for principled engagement with humor and language play to become a normal part of the L2 classroom, it must be incorporated into teacher education programs and ongoing professional development opportunities. In addition to its potential to facilitate L2 development, humor is an important means by which both students and teachers can deal with the interpersonal, cognitive, and political challenges inherent in classroom life. It is essential to mitigating face threats and constructing more palatable identity options, as well as a way to subtly critique particular institutional norms and power relations. Pre- and in-service teachers can both benefit from sharing and learning about specific strategies for using humor to manage classroom relationships, promote intercultural understanding, and mitigate tensions both in the class and in their professional practice, and
teacher evaluation procedures should begin to acknowledge and value the extent to which educators are able to do this.

While our discussion in this book was written with language instructors in mind, it is important to note that in today’s global and linguistically diverse world, we are hard-pressed to find an educational context in which some form of language learning is not an instructional objective. Thus, we see much of what we said about the role of humor in pedagogy as applicable to educators across a wide variety of contexts—from elementary schools that teach young learners pragmatic routines to diffuse teasing, to high schools that focus on the language of particular academic disciplines—language teaching is at the heart of much of what happens at school. Many of the arguments presented in this text should also be acknowledged by administrators, policy makers, textbook developers, parents, and anyone else with an interest in (language) education. We hope that researchers will continue to explore the ways that humor and language play work in language classrooms in order to extend these arguments and move them toward the mainstream so that humor is seen, like other types of language, as a flexible resource that can be used in multiple ways for multiple ends. As we all—language teachers, educational researchers, and policy makers—struggle to make sense of some of the changes to communication brought about by globalization and new technologies, we hope that we have convinced you that a focus on humor, language play, and other forms of creativity may be just what is needed to chart a new course.

**References**


APPENDIX

TRANSCRIPTION CONVENTIONS

. sentence final falling intonation
, clause-final intonation ("more to come")
! animated tone
? rising intonation (not necessarily a question)
- glottal stop: sound abruptly cut off; self-interruption
italics emphatic stress
CAPS spoken much louder than surrounding text
°words° spoken more quietly than surrounding text
: after a vowel indicates elongated vowel sound
:: more elongation
/words/ in slashes indicate uncertain transcription
wo]rds [words beginning of overlapping speech, right brackets may be used to indicate the end of the overlap
= latching
hhh aspiration
.hhh inhale
HHH aspiration/laughter while speaking
(sarcastically) description of voice quality or nonverbal action
( . . . ) part of a turn or some intervening turns at talk have been omitted
( . ) pause of less than 1 second
(7) pause of this many seconds
"words" speaker is quoting another person or adopting his or her voice
[ðənɛDIk] phonetic transcription
☺ great ☺ smiling voice quality
identity 13, 40–2, 73, 74, 77–8, 79–80, 86, 88, 89, 150, 173, 177
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