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# Learning to Play, Playing to Learn: FL Learners as Multicompetent Language Users

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In line with recent critiques of communicative language teaching (Byrnes and Maxim 2004; Byrnes 2006), this paper considers how instances of spontaneous, creative language play can afford access to a range of linguistic practices that are often devalued or ignored in classrooms. To this end, it examines how university students in an advanced Spanish conversation course jointly manipulate linguistic forms, semantic units, and discursive elements for the amusement of themselves and others. The analysis suggests that these humorous moments provide opportunities for new and more varied forms of participation and language use, contributing to the expansion of learners' overall communicative repertoires. That is, it illustrates how co-constructed episodes of unscripted language play can destabilize institutionally-sanctioned assumptions about what counts as a meaningful or legitimate act of language use, momentarily reconfiguring the definition of linguistic expertise and broadening the possibilities for acceptable language use. Following Hall et al. (2006), the authors advocate a view of learners as multicompetent language users (V. Cook 1991, 1992, 1999), whose language knowledge is grounded in the actual linguistic practices in which they engage.

## INTRODUCTION

In this paper we focus on language play as an aspect of creativity in language that has particular relevance to language teaching and learning. As more and more foreign language (FL) teachers at the university level have embraced communicative approaches, classrooms now offer opportunities for new and more varied forms of talk, including language play. Whereas choral repetitions, grammar drills, and translations were once the norm, contemporary FL classrooms are filled with small-group discussions, games, and skits that often involve, but rarely laud, the creative and playful use of language. Building on the theoretical proposals of scholars like G. Cook (2000) and Tarone (2000), a small but growing body of work has begun to examine empirically the ways in which language play might both index linguistic competence and facilitate additional language learning in classroom contexts. For example, scholarship conducted

in this vein has illustrated how engagement in creative and playful language practices might contribute to increased metalinguistic awareness, syntactic and semantic development, and the appropriation of additional socially-inflected voices or identities (Belz 2002a; Sullivan 2000; Broner and Tarone 2001; G. Cook 2001; Belz and Reinhardt 2004).

The present paper extends this line of research by looking specifically at how language play can afford access to a range of linguistic practices that are often absent, devalued, or ignored in communicative FL classrooms. As recent critiques of this approach have noted, a strong focus on utilitarian, transactional language use has obscured and delegitimized other language functions (e.g. Byrnes and Maxim 2004; Byrnes 2006). While such discussions have focused primarily on how communicative language teaching, particularly at the university level, can be reoriented to facilitate the acquisition of academic literacy skills, we suggest that the role of language play, too, merits additional consideration. As Guy Cook (2000: 150) has observed, ‘Knowing a language, and being able to function in communities which use that language, entails being able to understand and produce play with it, making this ability a necessary part of advanced proficiency.’

With this in mind, we draw on Hall et al.’s (2006) discussion of language knowledge as located not within individual minds, but rather in social use, to argue that language play can afford access to new and important sets of linguistic practices, potentially contributing to the expansion of learners’ overall communicative repertoires. Hall et al. (2006: 232) define communicative repertoires as ‘conventionalized constellations of semiotic resources for taking action—that are shaped by the particular practices in which individuals engage.’ We contend that in classrooms, spontaneous episodes of language play can destabilize institutionally-sanctioned assumptions about what counts as a meaningful or legitimate act of language use, momentarily reconfiguring the definition of linguistic expertise and broadening the possibilities for acceptable language use.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

### Ideologies of language use in FL classrooms

In this paper, we problematize the tendency in both communicative language teaching and SLA research to privilege utilitarian acts of language use, thus relegating play to the margins of acceptable classroom practice (cf. Cook 2000: 183). In FL classrooms, the creation of novel L2 forms, even during sanctioned language play, is often considered useless, disruptive behaviour, and is generally frowned upon, regardless of the communicative or affective potential of these new locutions. Unlike native speakers, learners are rarely positioned in ways that grant them agency creatively to supplement or subvert the target language system. As Brutt-Griffler has noted:

Modern linguistics works from the assumption that change initiated by a ‘native’ (or mother tongue) speaker is not error. Theories of SLA, on the other hand, begin from the opposite premise; change introduced into the language by L2 learners constitutes error. (Brutt-Griffler 2002: 129)

Whereas native speakers are often lauded for their creation of witty neologisms, puns, and rhymes, non-native speakers are rarely granted such licence. L2 users playing with language regularly run the risk of being corrected or chastised for what is seen as their failure to conform to target language (TL) norms (cf. Piller 2002: 198; Bell 2006; Prodromou 2007).

Likewise, code-switching is also seen as a violation of classroom norms in communicative classrooms (V. Cook 2002). Learners and teachers are expected to use the TL at all times, in an effort to recreate the monolingual conditions that are assumed to exist in the TL environment and to maximize opportunities for TL exposure and interaction. Multilingual utterances (cf. Belz 2002a) are viewed with suspicion and learners are admonished to use one, and only one, language for communication.

Recent scholarship, however, suggests that some of the language play and code-switching that occurs in communicative FL classrooms is facilitative of language learning and reveals growing metalinguistic awareness of both systems (Kramsch and Sullivan 1996; G. Cook 1997, 2000; Lantolf 1997; Sullivan 2000; Tarone 2000; Broner and Tarone 2001; Belz 2002a, 2002b; Belz and Reinhardt 2004; Bell 2005). Following Kramsch (2000), Belz criticizes the tendency of teachers and researchers to focus predominantly on the grammatical correctness or denotational content of learner utterances, while ignoring the other functions of language as a semiotic system (i.e. identity construction, play, etc.). She contends:

The use of multiple languages may depict the learner as a richly textured practitioner with a sophisticated ability to actualize linguistic and pragmatic meaning potentials often relegated to the marginal features of the linguistic system and which typically fall outside of the traditional purview of institutional correctness-oriented language instruction. (Belz 2002b: 77)

Indeed, in keeping with this perspective, Larsen-Freeman (2003, 2006) and others who have advocated an emergentist perspective on SLA argue that this type of linguistic creativity is likely to be a normal part of L2 development.

### Play and language play

Play, as a general category of behaviour, tends to be set apart from 'ordinary' or 'serious' life, governed by a separate set of rules, and is not apparently or overtly constructive. We argue, however, that the framing of any activity as play is always negotiated interactionally. As G. Cook has observed, 'In fact it is very often...attitude which makes something play rather than anything intrinsic to the behaviour per se. People are playing when they say and believe they are playing' (2000: 101).<sup>1</sup> The present study examines the language used within classroom activities that have been framed predominately as either work or play, with the focus mainly on ludic, or humorous, language play.<sup>2</sup> This type of language play is fun (Sullivan 2000: 122), and is commonly marked by overt signs of pleasure, such as laughter, which also work to construct a play frame (Bateson 1972 [1955]) around the utterance or interaction.



Language play includes a wide variety of activities, as any communication can take place playfully through manipulations of linguistic form, meaning, or use. G. Cook provides examples of a number of features of language play at each of these levels:

- linguistic form: patterning of forms, emphasis on exact wording, repetition;
- semantics: indeterminate meaning, vital or important subject matter, reference to an alternate reality, inversion of language/reality relation;
- pragmatics: focus upon performance, use in congregation and/or intimate interaction, creation of solidarity and/or antagonism and competition, no direct usefulness, preservation or inversion of the social order, enjoyment and/or value (adapted from G. Cook 2000: 123).

Thus, for the present study, language play can be recognized through the presence of these specific features (although they need not all be in evidence), in conjunction with a play frame, regardless of whether the play is sanctioned or not.

### Language play and language knowledge

In recent years, researchers have begun to call for more detailed and comprehensive accounts of the role of language play in additional language learning. For example, Tarone (2000, see also 2005) has pushed for further examination and acknowledgement of the relationship between language play and L2 development. She suggests that Larsen-Freeman's (1997, see also 2002, 2006) proposal to view interlanguage from the perspective of chaos/complexity science, as well as Bakhtin's (1981) model of language as a site where normalizing (centripetal) forces are in tension with (centrifugal) forces of individual creativity, both provide a way of viewing language play as part of the unpredictability inherent in (L2) language use and arising from individual creativity. Indeed, Carter (2004) questions whether creative rather than conventionalized language use is actually the norm.

Moreover, in response to the tendency in much SLA research to position L2 users as deficient communicators, Cook (1991, 1992, 1999) has proposed the notion of multicompetence. Briefly, he argued that a 'monocompetent' individual has perfect (100 per cent) knowledge of a particular language, while a 'multicompetent' person is 100 per cent in L1 plus whatever expertise he/she has gained in an additional language. Building on this construct, Belz (2002a, 2002b; Belz and Reinhardt 2004) examined the language play that occurred when students in a third year German course were asked to write texts in German and at least one additional language. This work demonstrated that rather than switching languages to make up for some deficiency, learners, at times, switched playfully and purposively at all levels of language. Furthermore, they associated code-switching with 'a growing sense of linguistic competence, creativity, and power' (Belz 2002a: 21–2). More recently, the notion of multicompetence has been taken up by scholars in areas such as language teacher education (Pavlenko 2003; Golombek and Jordan 2005) and L2 pragmatics (Garces-Conejos 2006). Indeed, a recent edited volume (Cook 2002) showcases the breadth and depth of scholarship in this area. The enthusiasm with which the construct has been greeted has contributed to

changing views on the language learner and renewed interest in examining additional language learning from a multilingual perspective.

Hall et al. (2006) note, however, that research on multicompetence has yet to provide us with significant insights into the nature of language knowledge because the work often relies on flawed assumptions regarding language knowledge and use, and the nature of multi- and mono-competence. In particular, they critique the assumption that language knowledge remains stable across contexts. Drawing on a wide variety of scholarly work, they emphasize the emergent nature of linguistic knowledge within and through interaction. Their review of the literature shows language knowledge to be comprised of dynamic constellations of linguistic resources, the shapes and meanings of which emerge from continual interaction between internal, domain-general cognitive constraints on the one hand and one's pragmatic pursuits in his or her everyday worlds on the other, that is through language use (Hall et al. 2006: 226).

From this perspective, language knowledge is seen as:

an inherently dynamic set of patterns of use which, in turn, is subject to a variety of stabilizing influences that are tied to the constancy of individuals' everyday lived experiences, and more generally, to more encompassing societal norms that value stability (Hall et al. 2006: 229).

Indeed, they argue that the notion of a stable linguistic system existing within a particular individual's mind is an illusion, brought about by the repetitive, ritualized nature of so much social interaction. They contend that as people participate in new and more varied activities, both their access to and use of novel linguistic resources increases. Hence, a focus on language use, particularly in classrooms, can reveal the ways in which language knowledge is contingent upon and situated within the kinds of activities in which learners are actually engaged, including play. Whereas learners and teachers often position language play as extraneous to and disruptive of the serious business of language learning, we contend that a close examination of such episodes offers a richer and more nuanced account of the range of communicative practices available in a FL classroom and the linguistic affordances they offer.

For example, Toohey and Day (1999) followed two groups of ESL learners in mainstream classes in Canada from kindergarten through second grade. In comparing various participation frameworks, they found rich uses of language and freer access to linguistic resources in small-group work and choral repetitions. Much of the language in these situations was playful, and students' identities were not threatened, as 'errors' were often regarded as part of the fun and thus did not have negative consequences. Toohey and Day see language play in these types of contexts as a site where the possibilities of appropriating L2 resources and finding 'ever new ways to mean' are the greatest (Bakhtin 1981, cited in Toohey and Day 1999: 51). Kim and Kellogg (2007) also examine children learning English, comparing the language they produced in two contexts in which play was sanctioned in the classroom: role-plays and rule-based games. The two different types of play, one in which rules are explicit and the other in which rules are implicit, but the (imaginary) situation is foregrounded, produce qualitatively different language. Discourse in rule-based games, such as Scrabble, was more complex than the language produced in role-plays.

In order to develop a more accurate and comprehensive account of the role of play in additional language learning, further investigations of the play that occurs across contexts are needed. For the present study we look at both language play and, like Kim and Kellogg (2007), the language of play to show the ways in which language knowledge shapes and is shaped by different activities. Moreover, we take a critical stance in our analysis, noting how particular ideologies of language and communicative FL teaching are implicated in the construction of play as marginal and perhaps even detrimental to FL learning. In so doing, we argue for a broader conception of what counts as legitimate language use in FL classrooms.

## METHODOLOGY

The data we wish to present are drawn from a larger study of FL learning at a US university (Pomerantz 2001). They were collected over the course of a 15-week semester in an advanced Spanish conversation course and the corpus includes ethnographic observations in both the classroom and the department, tape-recordings of 45 hours of classroom interaction, and interviews with individual study participants in both English and Spanish. Twelve of the resulting classroom tapes were transcribed in their entirety. These transcripts, along with extensive field notes from ethnographic observation in and out of the classroom and interviews with individual learners, comprise the data for this paper.

### Context and participants

There were sixteen students in the advanced conversation class under investigation and one teacher. As a pre-requisite for enrolment in the course, the students had all fulfilled the university's foreign language proficiency requirement which, at the time, correlated with a score of intermediate-mid on the ACTFL scale. It should be noted, however, that their expertise in Spanish varied quite a bit and some had achieved levels more representative of advanced speakers. The teacher, a bilingual Cuban-American, had been teaching at this university for 4 years prior to the study and was regarded as an expert user of both languages.

The conversation class met three times per week for 50 minutes and focused primarily on the development of transactional oral skills and strategies. The majority of class sessions involved students arriving at class having read a pair of opposing essays on a controversial topic, like gun control or euthanasia, and discussing their personal positions in small groups for approximately 30 minutes. The small groups generally consisted of four students, with one acting as director and another as secretary. The director was responsible for asking questions and maintaining the discussion. The secretary was charged with recording the group's comments. During the small-group work, the teacher would walk around the room, answering questions and taking notes on students' strengths and weaknesses. The class usually ended with one representative from each group (usually the secretary, but not always) summarizing his/her team's discussion. While this format dominated most of the sessions, some class time was given over to role-plays, games, and mini-lessons on vocabulary or grammar.

While our examination of the data revealed numerous instances of language play, it is important to observe that the tenor of the class tended to be serious. The topics were intended to be provocative and centred primarily on hotly contested issues. The assumption was that students would feel compelled to voice their opinions and thus engage in ‘authentic’ argument. While the teacher never explicitly stated that students were expected to reveal their true beliefs in the small-group discussions (and thus enact their ‘true’ identities), there are no instances in the data of learners saying things like ‘I was just playing devil’s advocate’ or ‘I said that to be provocative’. Rather, over and over again we observed students ‘playing the game straight’ and expressing anxiety over how a lack of expertise in Spanish often made participation in the small-group discussions difficult and potentially embarrassing. Consequently, episodes of ludic language play stood in marked contrast to the general tone of class discussion and many occurred on days in which the usual small-group format gave way to a role play or game, or when the students were momentarily ‘off-task’. For example, in our corpus of classroom interaction, there were 43 hours of small-group discussion and only 2 hours of teacher-sanctioned games or role plays. Whereas a typical small-group discussion contained 0–3 moments of language play, the game activity showed 19 instances. Moreover, the role-play session consisted almost entirely of language play.

## Procedure

We initially scanned the transcripts in order to identify instances of language play, using the definition we outlined earlier. Following Bell (2005: 198–9), we relied on contextualization cues such as laughter, exaggerated intonation or prosody, marked vocabulary choices, and the use of registers normally part of another domain to facilitate this process. Moreover, we observed that code-switching was also used, upon occasion, to signal the speaker’s non-serious intent. Finally, our judgements were also aided by the first author’s extensive first-hand knowledge of the participants.

In performing this first round of coding, we immediately noticed that language play was not dictated by activity type. Learners engaged in language play when we expected them to (i.e. during role plays and games) and when we did not necessarily (i.e. during small-group discussions). This observation led us to consider how our own assumptions about FL classroom talk were embedded in particular ideologies of language and language teaching. Like the participants in our study, we too had presuppositions about how people were supposed to use and indeed learn language in this, and perhaps even all, communicative FL classrooms. Turning a critical eye toward the data, we then saw how the instances of language play we had initially identified needed to be read within the larger context of communicative FL teaching. Hence, we proposed a distinction between sanctioned and unsanctioned play in order to foreground the role ideologies of language and language teaching play in shaping what counts as knowledge in an FL classroom. Drawing on Bateson’s (1972) notion of framing, we thus divided our corpus into instances of each type of play. Sanctioned play refers to activities that were introduced by the teacher for both ludic and pedagogical reasons, such as games and skits. Unsanctioned play describes learners’ creative, humorous uses of language (L1 and/or L2) that occurred during activities that were not framed as ‘fun’.

Here, it is important to note that we understand frames to be co-constructed, emergent, and situated within particular ideological contexts. As individuals interact with one another, they draw on a broad range of contextualization cues (Gumperz 1982) to signal who they are and what they are doing on a moment-by-moment basis. Over time, these cues come together, making some frames seem more possible and plausible than others (cf. Wortham 2001). As such, what frame (or frames) eventually materializes for the interpretation of a given interactional sequence depends, in large part, on the prevalence of similar episodes. This is particularly relevant given the dominant, and generally negative, view of language play within FL classrooms. As our data show, despite this view, language play not only occurred in this classroom, but it also instigated some of the richest language use.

## DISCUSSION

We begin our discussion with a detailed examination of a non-playful episode that typifies much of the interaction that occurred in the class under investigation. It consists mainly of utilitarian talk that adheres to the norms of this class and of communicative FL classes in general. Here we observe how the learners were able to accomplish the activity by drawing on a fairly limited and highly stylized communicative repertoire. We have chosen to begin with a canonical example of classroom discourse, in order to present a backdrop against which to understand the subsequent episodes of language play.

### Example 1: Playing the school game straight

Example 1 comes from a day in which the students were asked to discuss the place of cults in American society and to decide if the government should play a role in regulating them. At the start of the session, Ravi, Jim, and Hannah (pseudonyms) call the researcher over to ask for additional clarification on the topic. They are unsure as to how to approach the issue and seem not to have read the assigned chapters in the textbook. Indeed moments after the researcher has stepped away from the group, Hannah tells her classmates in English, ‘Let’s do this and then we can discuss [what we want] just cause I want to get it over with.’ Jim concurs and says, ‘Yeah...cause she [the teacher] is going to come over and yell at us. She keeps looking at us, giving me dirty looks.’ In this exchange, Hannah and Jim frame their investment in the activity as purely utilitarian. They agree to carry out the activity as efficiently and conventionally as possible in order to both attract and divert the teacher’s gaze.

Immediately prior to Jim’s turn in line 1, Ravi asks the group if there are any good cults.

- 1 Jim    unos cultos son buenos pero no todos los cultos  
          (‘some cults are good but not all cults’)
- 2 Ravi    sí’ um el fraternidades son un tipo de culto (.) sororidades  
          (‘yes um the fraternities are a type of cult sororities’)
- 3 Jim    sí’  
          (‘yes’)

## 564 LEARNING TO PLAY, PLAYING TO LEARN

- 4 Hannah            creo que un poco  
                          ('I think that a little')
- 5 Jim     no se'  
                          ('I don't know')
- 6 Ravi    porque hay cosas secretos y  
                          ('because there are secret things and')
- 7 Leah            un grupo y  
                          ('a group and')
- 8 Ravi            todos los miembros son muy uh uh  
                          ('all the members are very uh uh')
- 9 Hannah        cerca  
                          ('close')
- 10 Ravi            sí  
                          ('yes')
- 11 Hannah        y uh tiene inici iniciacio'n [laughs] ('and  
                          uh it has initi initiation')
- 12                    I don't know how to say it
- 13 Ravi            sí en secr en fraternidades s  
                          ('yes in secr in fraternities yes')
- 14                    ma's de los sororidades hay iniciaciones secretos  
                          ('more of the sororities there are secret initiations')
- 15 Hannah        y es difi'cil para jo (.) co'mo se dice join?  
                          ('and it is difficult to jo—how do you say join?')
- 16 Ravi            hm
- 17 Hannah        join

At first glance, the learners seem to be having a 'meaningful' conversation in Spanish. A closer look at the propositional content of their utterances, however, reveals little in the way of new or controversial information. Their talk seems to be directed at signalling that they are on task, rather than actually discussing the issue in depth. That is, each contribution is met by only a minimal response (e.g. lines 3, 5, 10, 16). Moreover, violations of classroom norms, like code-switching, are marked in particular ways. For example, in line 15, Hannah makes a bid for vocabulary assistance and this time deploys the stylized expression '¿co'mo se dice?' to mitigate her use of English (see Pomerantz forthcoming, for an extended discussion of the identity implications of such moves). Here, her stylized expression is both reflective and constitutive of Spanish FL classroom talk. This conversational move, like the minimal responses, seems to be directed at signalling involvement in the official activity. Hence, we argue that in playing the school game straight, learners are indexing their competence in sanctioned classroom practices. Moreover, as the example illustrates, 'successful' completion of the activity requires a fairly limited and conventionalized communicative repertoire. Learners need not test the boundaries of their linguistic knowledge in order to do what is expected of them.

## Unsanctioned language play

Our next three examples focus on episodes of unsanctioned play. Here we see learners manipulating—and at times even transgressing—classroom norms, while simultaneously engaging in the proscribed classroom activity.

These playful moments stand in contradistinction to the utilitarian, transactional tenor of the activity, as illustrated above, and open the door to a much broader array of linguistic practices. Ravi, one of the focal students from the original study from which these data are drawn, figures prominently in many of the examples. While he was not the only student who engaged in language play, our data reveal that he was frequently the instigator of such episodes. As such, we have chosen to foreground examples in which Ravi is the protagonist to reflect the overall participation pattern of the class under consideration.

### Example 2: Playing with the school game

This example highlights what happens when learners play both with and within, the school game. That is, we see learners actively subverting the assigned conversation topic, calling attention to their lack of investment in the official activity. Yet, these playful moves actually serve to create just the kind of emotionally-charged, linguistically rich discussion the ‘official’ activity is supposed to foster. Here, each group has been asked to discuss the various forms of government that exist around the world and to decide which form is best. While the students initially remain on task, the resulting conversation consists mainly of naming political leaders and regimes in a chain-like fashion. Indeed, immediately before the subsequent example takes place, Fatima, usually one of the most engaged students in the class, yawns and says in English, ‘this is so boring’. Then, moments later, Ravi attempts to pique his classmates’ interest by asking them to name the worst kind of government.

- |    |         |  |
|----|---------|--|
| 1  | Ravi    | what’s the worst kind of government?   |
| 2  | Prajesh | fascism  |
| 3  | Ravi    | uhh fascism all right um [pause]   |
| 4  | Prajesh | Stalin [laughs softly]   |
| 5  | Ravi    | un dictadura militaría<br>(‘a military dictatorship’)  |
| 6  | Prajesh | sí [laughs softly]<br>(‘yes’)  |
| 7  | Ravi    | uh es la buena idea<br>(‘uh it’s the good idea’)   |
| 8  |         | porque una persona tiene control de todos los personas<br>(‘because one person has control over all the people’) |
| 9  | Prajesh | sí<br>(‘yes’)  |
| 10 | Ravi    | y uh<br>(‘and uh’)   |

- 11 Prajesh no hay argumentos en el gobierno  
(‘there aren’t arguments in the government’)
- 12 Ravi sí  
(‘yes’)
- 13 hay orden en el país  
(‘there is order in the country’)
- 14 Prajesh nos gustamos Stalin [laughs softly] (‘we  
like ourselves Stalin’)
- 15 Ravi es el modelo de nos gobierno ideal  
(‘it’s the model of our ideal government’)

In line 2, Prajesh takes Ravi up on his request to name the worst form of government and offers a response, in English, ‘fascism’. In line 5, Ravi switches to Spanish and Prajesh offers a minimal response in this language. The juxtaposition of languages is particularly notable here, as Ravi seems to be invoking a return to the norms of classroom practice. In other words, his codeswitch seems to reframe the playful topic switch as acceptable if done in Spanish. Ravi and Prajesh then spend lines 7–15 working together in an animated fashion to enumerate the benefits of military dictatorships in Spanish. Indeed, they seem to be co-constructing a dual frame that allows them to ‘play the school game’ (i.e. work), while simultaneously having fun with it.

Yet, in their minor act of transgression, they are actually producing more elaborate and thematically cohesive utterances than they had earlier in the activity. Here, the playful change in topic encourages the learners to marshal a broader range of lexical items and syntactic constructions in order to produce a facetious argument in favour of military dictatorships. As we see in lines 7–15, the play frame both creates and entails participation in a kind of verbal duelling (cf. Cook 2000: 64–70), as Ravi and Prajesh compete to enumerate an exaggerated list of imaginary benefits that come from embracing this form of government. In the interest of entertainment, Ravi and Prajesh’s previously careful (and rather boring) utterances give way to language that is richer and more meaningful. The grammatical errors that riddle their talk suggest that they are taking some risks with the target language. When the debate is framed solely as work (as in example 1), it seems to encourage less complex constructions in order to ensure a conventional and perhaps more error-free performance. The parody of the debate, however, offers a licence to experiment. Should the learners’ performance deviate too much from ‘standard’ Spanish and the norms of FL classroom talk, they can always say that they were just ‘playing’.

### Example 3: Playing with words

Our next example is also drawn from the discussion on cults (see Example 1) and involves a long and complex instance of semantic play around the word *pues* that contributes little to the ‘official’ goal of the activity. In Spanish, *pues* has several functions: it can be a filler word (‘so’); it can be used to gain the floor (‘well’) and initiate change in speaker/topic; or it can serve as a conjunction (‘since’). At first, we see Ravi using *pues* (line 3) conventionally, as a way to initiate a change in topic and code:



- 1 Ravi I'm so glad I don't have to speak in front of the class today  
 2 Jim me too  
 3 Ravi [laughs] all right um pues  
 Jim los cultos  
 ('the cults')

A few moments later, when the teacher, Sylvia, approaches the group, we see Ravi using pues again, but this time the meaning of his utterance is less straightforward.

- 29 Hannah es posible pero  
 ('it's possible but')  
 30 Ravi pues  
 Sylvia pero quiza's parte de de  
 ('but perhaps part of of')  
 32 tener un culto es que sea semi-secreto no  
 ('having a cult is that it is semi-secret, right?')

Here, it is unclear whether he is using pues to get the floor or to signal that he is actively participating in the activity in Spanish. After all, prior to the teacher's approach, he had been regaling his classmates, in English, with a story about his drunken escapades at a bar the night before. Two subsequent uses of pues, however, shed additional light on Ravi's understanding of this term.

- 260 Ravi [to Jim, Hannah is writing] Do we have a paper due for poli sci next week?  
 261 Jim I hope not man  
 262 Ravi Yeah  
 263 Jim I haven't touched the books  
 264 Ravi [yawns] pues pues pues  
 265 Jim I'm getting emails about it  
 266 Ravi Si'  
 ('yes')  
 267 Jim by all these dumb people  
 268 Hannah co'mo se dice even?  
 ('how do you say even?')  
 269 aun (.) no it's not  
 ('even no it's not')  
 270 Ravi I don't know  
 271 um just put down pues  
 272 that usually fits in everywhere  
 273 Hannah pues [laughing]

At the beginning of this extract, Jim and Ravi are discussing an upcoming assignment for a political science class, while Hannah struggles to write a summary of her group's

discussion on cults. In line 264 Ravi yawns and says ‘pues, pues, pues’ and again this utterance is difficult to interpret definitively. It seems, as in the previous example, to be some kind of acknowledgement of the fact that he is in Spanish class and that he (and his classmates) should be speaking in Spanish, despite his long and repeated lapses into English. In lines 270–2, however, Ravi makes explicit observations on the frequency and usefulness of *pues*, albeit in a humorous tone. Once again, Ravi seems to be commenting on the use of Spanish to signal involvement in official or expected classroom business, while simultaneously acknowledging his growing awareness of the semantic and pragmatic parameters of *pues*.

This interchange is then followed, several minutes later, by two more instances in which *pues* seems to act as a parody of FL classroom talk. In these two cases, *pues* is devoid of any denotative meaning and retains only its playful function. Indeed, in the second case, Ravi actually uses *pues* and an additional Spanish phrase, *tengo dinero*, to feign a musical performance in Spanish. Here, he appropriates an English lyric associated with rap or hip hop music and translates it to Spanish, thus speaking through the voice of an imagined performer.<sup>3</sup>

375 Ravi it’s like pues [laughs]

378 Ravi could you picture like doing concerts with this thing [the microphone]

379 they just like start rapping into these things [picks up microphone]

380 [speaking into microphone] like *pues* [laughs]

381 Spanish rap [laughs]

382 [speaking into microphone] *Tengo dinero*  
 (‘I have money’)

Finally, at the end of class, Ravi turns to the researcher (who is observing the group from afar) and apologizes for his group’s antics. Here, *pues* returns to its expected function, as it is being used conventionally as a filler word.

430 Ravi [looks at researcher taking notes] *lo siento por la conversacio’n*  
 (‘I’m sorry for the conversation’)

431 Anne *oh no me importa*  
 (‘oh, it doesn’t matter’)

432 *no la estoy escuchando*  
 (‘I’m not listening to it’)

433 Ravi *es muy peor*  
 (‘it’s very worse’)

434 *pues pero en la cinta*  
 (‘well but on the tape’)

435 Anne *si’ la tengo en la cinta si’*  
 (‘yes I have it on the tape yes’)

436 Ravi *damn (.) damn la cinta*  
 (‘damn damn the tape’)

As we noted earlier, language play often involves the conscious repetition or manipulation of linguistic forms for ludic purposes. Here we see how Ravi's use of pues serves to both entertain his classmates (and himself), as well as to represent his growing understanding of this word. Indeed, it is only through play that Ravi can demonstrate, and perhaps even extend, the range of potential functions of pues. Following Kramsch (2006: 251), we suggest that Ravi's play is indicative of his emerging 'symbolic competence', or his ability to understand 'the meaning of form in all its manifestations (e.g. linguistic, textual, visual, acoustic, poetic)'. This kind of knowing transcends the more utilitarian competence privileged in communicative classrooms and broadens our perspective as to what knowledge of a language might entail.

#### Example 4: Demonstrating symbolic competence

The final example in this section shows learners engaged in play that is unsanctioned only in the sense that it occurs during an activity (and in relation to a topic) that is primarily framed as serious. In this extract, Rachel, Addison, Margaret, and Nicole are discussing the prevalence of divorce in American society, a topic that generated some intense discussion. In the turn prior to line one, Margaret uses the phrase *estaban enamorados* ('they were in love'). The excerpt opens with Rachel's request for clarification, as she seems to have either misheard or incorrectly parsed Margaret's utterance.

- 1 Rachel            *que' significa morado?*  
                          ('what does morado mean?')
- 2 Margaret        *enamorado*  
                          ('in love')
- 3 Rachel            Oh
- 4 Addison        *bueno morado* [laugh]  
                          ('good purple [group]')
- 5                    colour

In line 4, Addison exclaims, '*bueno morado*' and laughs. He then says the word 'colour' (*morado* is the Spanish word for purple) in English. Addison's utterance, however, is not only a clever observation of the phonetic similarity between *enamorado* and *morado*, two semantically unrelated words.<sup>4</sup> It also seems to be an allusion to the fact that the teacher has assigned names to the discussion groups and this one is, in fact, 'the purple group'. Indeed, his code-switch to English in line 5 seems to underscore the fact that he has said something ambiguous, as he both laughs and offers his classmates additional information with which to interpret the preceding utterance. As such, line 5 seems to mean 'good job purple group' and could be referencing the way in which his classmates have used both Spanish and classroom language appropriately to negotiate a misunderstanding. This episode of unsanctioned language play, which allows Addison to experiment with a kind of language use that the 'regular' discussion/debate talk does not permit, resonates with Ravi's manipulation of pues. While Addison's foray into the realm of the symbolic is brief, nevertheless it stands as an act of a (multi)competence that extends beyond the confines of transactional language use (cf. Broner and Tarone 2001: 370–1).

## Sanctioned language play

We now turn our attention to moments in which ‘normal’ classroom activities gave way to role plays or games. While students considered these ‘diversions’ fun, many remarked in private that they did not think such activities had any pedagogical value. Indeed, some even noted in interviews that they were looking forward to ‘Advanced Syntax’ (the next course in the Spanish language sequence, known at the university for its difficult exams and monotonous exercises), as this was a more ‘useful’ and therefore more valuable course. Yet, as we will see, despite these views, when language play was sanctioned, learners became deeply invested in their utterances and rich uses of language occurred.

## Example 5: Appropriating new voices

Example 5, which illustrates the manipulation of different discursive elements for ludic purposes, comes from an activity in which students were asked to dramatize the kind of interaction that takes place on TV talk shows (e.g. Jenny Jones, Jerry Springer, etc.). On such shows, a group of people presents a problem (usually something salacious) and the audience comments on the problem and offers advice. This framework was intended to provide students with opportunities to practise the use of the subjunctive mood in expressing doubt and giving advice. The teacher began the class by introducing the talk show format and giving examples of popular programmes. Then, she offered a review of the use of the subjunctive mood and passed out cards that briefly outlined a problem typical of this genre (e.g. two teenagers who wanted to drop out of school and get married, a man who could not be faithful to his girlfriend, etc.). Each group of students received a card and group members were asked to take on the roles of talk show host, psychologist, and talk show guest(s) during the dramatization of the problem on the card in front of the class. As in a true talk show, the ‘audience’ was instructed to offer advice to the guests.

In this example, Fatima and Luís play the roles of a young couple with ‘*problemas sexuales*’ (‘sexual problems’). Luís wants Fatima to remain faithful to him while he continues to date other women. Suddenly, Fatima sighs dramatically and tells the audience ‘*tengo un secreto/estoy embarazada*’ (‘I have a secret/I’m pregnant’). This announcement sets off a round of laughter, whereupon Christi asks Luís what he is going to do about this situation.

Luís says that he will not marry Fatima and she pretends to cry dramatically. At this point, the following unscripted exchange takes place:

- |   |        |   |
|---|--------|---|
| 1 | Fatima | e’l es un<br>(‘he is a’)  |
| 2 |        | e’l es UN ANIMAL [audience/class laughs]<br>(‘he is an animal’) |
| 3 | Luís   | no tengo que casarme<br>(‘I don’t have to get married’)<br>[    |
| 4 | Kevin  | no con <u>dos</u> no con <u>tres</u> con <u>ella</u>            |

- (‘not to two not to three [women] but to her’)
- 5 Fatima no (.) no quiero [in a whiny, high-pitched voice]
- 6 (‘no no I don’t want to’)
- 7 es un animal [audience/class laughs]  
 (‘he is an animal’) no va a  
 ser un padre bueno  
 (‘he is not going to be a good father’)

Throughout the episode, the participants speak through the voices of typical talk show guests, asking personal questions, revealing secrets, and making outlandish accusations, linguistic acts that would not typically occur in a debate/small-group discussion. As the story-line unfolds, the learners build on one another’s contributions by appropriating chunks of discourse that are associated with such talk in English (cf. Tarone 2000).<sup>5</sup> This exchange illustrates the learners’ awareness and selection of communicative repertoires that extend beyond those privileged in typical FL classrooms. In lines 2 and 6, Fatima insults Lui’s by calling him an ‘animal’, a language function that is not usually permissible (although frequently present) in classroom settings. While we cannot say with certainty whether Fatima’s choice of this particular constellation of linguistic forms was based on her knowledge of insult routines in English or Spanish (‘he’s an animal’ is a common insult in both languages), nevertheless it shows her using a communicative repertoire that is conventionally associated with both the situation at hand and her talk show identity. Moreover, because this exchange occurs in the context of a role play, it allows Fatima to take some risks. Should her facetious insult misfire linguistically or socially (i.e. should she actually insult the ‘real’ Lui’s), she can always back away from her utterance by saying that she was ‘just playing’—a stance that is not as available during more ‘serious’ activities (see, however, Example 2).

### Example 6: Working in the service of play

Our final example is drawn from a day in which the learners were involved in a contest. The teacher had divided them into two teams, each charged with composing a list of questions related to the university’s core curriculum.

The teams then took turns asking each other the questions, earning points for correct answers. In the following extract, we see Ravi engaged in a serious effort to render a mathematical word problem into Spanish.

- 1 Ravi una persona una personas uh manejar  
 (‘a person a person uh to drive’)
- 2 Leah oh god I hate those questions

Leah immediately recognizes the structure of his utterance and voices her dislike of word problems. Ravi, however, is not swayed and continues on with his effort, eventually asking his classmates for assistance, as his communicative repertoire does not seem to include the language of math.

## 572 LEARNING TO PLAY, PLAYING TO LEARN

- 12 Ravi por cuá'ntas horas or cuá'ntos minutos necesita manejar por avregar<sup>6</sup>  
(‘for how many hours or how many minutes does he need to drive to average’)
- 13 co'mo se dice average?  
(‘how do you say average?’)
- 14 Shauna Mm
- 15 Ravi por avregar avre  
(‘in order to average’)
- 16 Fatima median median
- 17 Ravi oh por su median uh speed es sesenta milas por hora  
(‘oh in order to median uh speed is 70 miles per hour’)

Mistaking Fatima’s offer in line 16 of the noun ‘median’ for the verb ‘average’, Ravi again tries to phrase his question. Finally, after numerous unsatisfactory attempts, he leaves the group and asks the teacher for assistance. Here, it is important recognize that despite the linguistic difficulties this ‘translation’ activity presents, Ravi seems deeply invested in both articulating the question and making sure that his team uses it in the contest. This episode differs quite a bit from the previous examples that feature Ravi in that here his attempt to come up with the Spanish word for ‘average’ (lines 13 and 15) does not seem playful at all. While he adds Spanish verbal morphology to the English word, the resulting novel form does not meet with his classmates’ recognition or even laughter. This bid for vocabulary assistance is constructed as serious and not an attempt to engage in either form play or what Jane Hill (1993, 1998) has termed ‘mock Spanish’ (see also Barrett 2006). Yet, in subsequent turns, Ravi reveals that part of his motivation for translating this word problem accurately rests on the fact that it is a trick question, ‘they [the other team] will think this is pretty easy but it’s not...it’s a trick question.’ He wants to use it in the service of play. As such, an anticipated play frame necessitates the use of a highly specialized communicative repertoire and Ravi must tap his instructor’s expertise in order to access the necessary linguistic forms. Here, it is the desire to play that seems to be driving Ravi’s investment in expanding his knowledge of the language of word problems.

## CONCLUSIONS

In this classroom, as in many FL classrooms, what counted as legitimate language use was narrowly defined. Language play was acceptable only under certain conditions, like during the two class periods (out of 45 total meetings) that were given over to a role play (example 5) and a game (example 6). Moreover, we suggest that despite the students’ own recognition of the dull and repetitive nature of their interaction during the debates, language play—even when sanctioned by the professor—was suspect and thought to be a waste of time. As one student said of Ravi, the instigator of much creative and playful language use:

I like [working with] Ravi for kind of the like wrong reason, cause we’ll always like talk about something that has like no relation to it and go off on like a long tangent. So I guess he’s someone that I shouldn’t work with frequently, but I do like working with him (interview, Kevin).

As the above comment reveals, play and those who engage in it were constructed as activities/people one should try to avoid in the classroom, no matter how tempting or enjoyable. Likewise, even Ravi himself was cognizant of the prohibition against play in this and most FL classrooms, stating during a private interview that frequent disciplinary sanctions in a middle school Spanish course had taught him that ‘classroom antics had to be curbed in order to pass’. While not all play involves the complex use of multiple languages, we argue that in FL classrooms the potential benefits of play are ignored and little effort is made to include such creative forms of language use.

This view comes at a time when both the construct of L2 competence and the role of language play are being subjected to scrutiny. Our analysis shows a qualitative difference in the language used during sanctioned and unsanctioned play, as well as in non-playful discourse, which comprised the bulk of interaction in this classroom. Following Hall et al. (2006), we have advocated a view of learners as multicompetent language users (Cook 1991, 1992, 1999), whose language knowledge is grounded in the actual linguistic practices in which they engage. In examining the use of language play across activities we have indeed seen multicompetent learners. In Examples 2–5, the play in which the learners participated offered both a context for and evidence of their linguistic expertise. Thus, Examples 2 and 3 show learners enacting, through their use of Spanish, awareness of conventional FL classroom discourse, while at the same time, constructing creative and playful subversions of the topic (military dictatorship as the best form of government) and of semantic possibilities (extending the use of puses). In this way, they walk a fine line between doing school and just playing around. In Example 4, however, the student seems to recognize that his pun is a school-sanctioned display of Spanish knowledge, despite its playful nature.

He makes no effort to hide his creative act, unlike in Examples 2 and 3, where we witness covert behaviours and an apology. Examples 5 and 6 illustrate what happens when play is sanctioned, and perhaps even encouraged, by the teacher. In Example 5 we see learners eagerly engaging in overtly playful language which allowed—and perhaps even required—them to experiment with voices, structures, and lexical items that are not a usual part of the FL classroom repertoire. Example 6 shows Ravi earnestly seeking assistance, first from his classmates and later from the teacher, in order to craft a tricky math question which will later be used to play a game.

As our analysis has demonstrated, L2 language play has an important role in the development of learners’ identities, multicompetent selves, and communicative repertoires. It is indeed an area worthy of further inquiry. At the same time, like G. Cook (2000: 182), we do not suggest that instructors implement nothing but games and role plays. Nor do we believe that all language play also serves a learning function. The emergentist view of language learning that we outlined in the introduction emphasizes that linguistic competence develops through experience—the more and more varied experiences a learner has with the L2, the more that person will develop a strong and broad communicative repertoire. Play is part of this. As our focus on Ravi’s performance reveals, engagement in language play can facilitate the use of more complex and varied linguistic forms—opportunities learners do not necessarily have when they ‘play it safe’ in the classroom (as in Example 1). As G. Cook explains, ‘transactional discourse...constitutes on a subsection of authentic language use. If

language teaching were really to engage with a wide and representative sample of language use, it would include a far greater proportion of nonsense, fiction, and ritual, and many more instances of language use for aggression, intimacy, and creative thought' (2000: 193).

In addition, play itself is a skill that needs to be developed. In university classrooms, the practical and economic benefits of FL study are often emphasized over the cognitive or social ones. In the US, Spanish is embedded in a larger discursive context that constructs this language as one key to professional success both abroad and at home (Pomerantz 2002). To this end, traditional literature-based curricula are giving way to more diverse, and in some cases, more professionally-oriented language programmes (e.g. Spanish for business, nursing, law enforcement, etc.). Despite this broadening of the Spanish language teaching agenda, creative and playful language is even further relegated to the margins in these new courses which focus exclusively on 'useful', situation-specific linguistic routines. Yet, as Cook (2000: 202) has observed, not only does play not necessarily interfere with work, but 'playful elements may paradoxically contribute to or even affect the utilitarian function'. Ravi's insistence (Example 6) on properly formulating a trick mathematical word problem to stump the other team attests to this notion.

In offering this critique, we do not intend to condemn communicative language teaching or advocate its banishment. Rather, we recommend a broadening of its scope to include a wider variety of language experiences, including playful ones. As Leung (2005) has suggested, communicative language teaching would do well to consider a return to its Hymesian roots, emphasizing the exploration of actual communicative events, rather than extrapolating from idealized scenarios. Professionals who have dealt with advanced learners reiterate that the issue is not primarily one of adherence or nonadherence to grammatical rules. The issue, instead, is making choices and having the capacity to make those choices in a meaningful—that is, culturally and situationally conscious—fashion, including deliberate and now meaningful violations of 'rules' and 'fixed norms' (Byrnes 2006: 5). Knowing when to play with language is one of the communicative choices that FL students must learn to make. Engaging in language play may be one means by which they learn to make such choices.

## TRANSCRIPTION CONVENTIONS

?	rising intonation
—	stressed word/syllable
CAP	loud
[text]	commentary
[	overlapping turns
(1)	approximate length of pause in seconds
((xxx))	speech hard to discern
('gloss')	gloss of Spanish utterance
italics	Spanish language utterance
bold	linguistic resource of interest to discussion
(.)	pause of less than one second



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**NOTES** 2 For discussions of the variety of ways in which language play has been concep-

1 For a thorough review of the concept tualized in its short history in SLA of play and the difficulty in defining it see, e.g., Tarone 2000; Belz 2002a; see Cook (2000, ch. 4). Bell 2005.

3 The data were collected in 2000, a time when Spanish-language music, like Reggaeto'n, was just gaining popularity in the USA. Ravi seems to be imagining the possibility of Spanish rap more than imitating an actual performance.

4 Morado derives from the Latin noun *morum* ('mulberry'), while *enamorado* derives from the Latin noun *amor*

('love').

5 While such shows were popular on Spanish-language television at the time of data collection, no overt linguistic tokens point definitively to where learners located the voices they were appropriating.

6 *Avregar* is an invented word.

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