Observations on the Effectiveness of Humor and Language Play in the L2 Classroom
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ABSTRACT

In many circles the use of humor and language play in the second language classroom is considered off-task, disruptive, or a misappropriation of class time. In this paper I will discuss my observations of EDC lessons during the Fall 2015 Semester which, I believe, show the above assertions to be misguided. To the contrary, humor and language play can serve to lower student anxiety, allow for creativity and repetition of formal language, and ultimately contribute to second language acquisition. In what follows, I will examine literature related to humor and language play as it relates to second language learning, including the benefits and possible barriers to utilizing humor in the classroom. I will then reflect on my observations of both teacher-generated and student-generated language play in English discussion classes and, by linking this to parallels discussed in the introduction, discuss the positive effects language play had on observed student behavior.

INTRODUCTION

For many teachers using humor in the classroom is something which comes naturally, and not much consideration is given to contemplating humor as a pedagogical tool of the second language teacher's repertoire. After all, being humorous simply makes class more "fun", and thus more enjoyable for all involved. However, humor and language play (LP) can also serve to create a comfortable classroom atmosphere, raise student interest, and improve willingness to participate (Bell, 2009; Stroud, 2013). In addition to considerations regarding the lowering of anxiety, there is much literature which supports the notion that humor can also play an important role in facilitating second language acquisition.

The most immediate benefit of LP is that it affords students space to practice a second language (L2) without the anxiety of being judged for making mistakes. This can lead to more opportunities to practice form, and can encourage creativity in the classroom. As Pomerantz and Bell argue, humor can serve as a "safe house" which in turn "occasions more complex and creative acts of language use than those normally found in L2 instructional settings" (p. 148). The ability to use ludic language play, articulated by Cook (1997) as language used for the purpose of self-amusement and fun, extends to students of all proficiency levels. (Bell, 2009; Cook, 2000) As Bell notes, it would be a misrepresentation to assert that "beginning learners cannot create or appreciate this type of humor" (p. 244).

LP also lowers anxiety due to the fact that it allows students to better deal with situations which would otherwise be confrontational, embarrassing, or monotonous. In classroom settings where students may feel threatened or uncomfortable, they are able to employ humor as a 'face-saving device' (van Dam, 2002). Humor also serves to protect subversive identities through deniability in that it allows participants to claim that they are "only joking" (Pomerantz & Bell, 2011). Humor is also employed by students in order to cope with boring or difficult classroom tasks. In a study conducted by Pomerantz and Bell (2011), it was found that humor occurred more when students were asked to discuss "dull" or "uncomfortable" topics (p. 151). I have also observed this coping strategy in EDC classes, especially when such topics as the death penalty or social welfare were discussed.

Language play can lead to second language acquisition in that "LP may increase the

memorizability of the discourse engaged in by the learner" (Bushnell, 2008, p. 50). Cook (1997) stresses that authentic language is often focused upon "form" and "fiction", and is not always meaning-focused or task-based. There is reason to believe that the use of LP in this context may provide opportunities for better internalization and encoding of language. Bell states that LP may aid in the acquisition of L2 vocabulary and "allow lexical items to be processed more deeply, making them more memorable" (Bell, 2009, p. 253). Likewise, Bushnell argues that LP has value in terms of mnemonic efficacy, and "functions to provide affordances for encoding the target language in a highly memorable fashion" (Bushnell, 2008, p. 64). By focusing on form over meaning, there are more opportunities to practice L2 in a more personalized, repetitive manner, and this may lead to meaningful L2 acquisition.

While LP appears to have a range of benefits, there are also barriers to both the use of humor in the classroom and the possible conclusions which can be drawn from LP use by both teachers and learners. The first is the issue of definition. As Tarpey acknowledges, "a particular challenge in conducting studies on language play has been the procurement of an established definition" (Tarpey, 2007, p. 3). Broner and Tarone (2001) lay out two specific definitions of LP (taken from Cook, 1997, 2000; and Lantolf, 1997), distinguishing between language play as fun and language play as rehearsal. Focusing on either definition, however, will provide different results. When it comes to defining words such as humor or fun, the situation becomes even murkier, and perhaps can only be reduced to what Broner and Tarone call "ostentation", or "I know it when I see it" (Broner & Tarone, 2001, p. 364).

Other potential barriers include sociocultural and sociolinguistic differences, and the personalities of individual students. In the case of the first issue, problems can arise between students in terms of gender (Pomerantz & Bell, 2011) or between the teacher and students in terms of cultural differences. As Bell notes, "In many countries professors would not be expected to joke with students, nor especially would they be expected to use self-deprecating humor" (Bell, 2009, p. 252). There are also problems with defining the English word 'humor' in a Japanese context (Stroud, 2013), or in the case of EDC classes, in a Japanese first-year university student's context. This can lead to difficulties in assessing whether students laugh as a result of humor, or some other factor (e.g. nervousness, misunderstanding, or peer pressure). In the case of the second issue (personalities), individual students and even entire classes can differ greatly in their response to and ability to generate humor in the classroom. Thus, an extremely shy student may not be as comfortable or willing to use LP as a more outgoing student.

These are issues I kept in mind as I observed and implemented humor and LP in my classes throughout the semester. I was diligent in being aware of the needs of individual students with regards to their personality types, avoiding any use of LP which I perceived might hinder L2 use or result in raising affective filters. In order to sidestep sociolinguistic issues related to humor which might arise, I tried to utilize both universal humor and cultural humor (Schmitz, 2002). In other words, I incorporated instances of humor specific to Japanese culture as well as humor which would not be lost in translation due to language or cultural issues. I also recognized the importance of distinguishing between teacher-generated humor and student-generated humor (as discussed in Aldrich, 2015; Forman, 2011; Kasparek, 2015; Stroud, 2013; van Dam, 2002), both of which offered distinguishing benefits in regards to student behavior in my observations.

DISCUSSION
Teacher-Generated Humor
I will begin with some examples of how simple teacher-talk can aid in lowering student anxiety. Students seem to be most anxious at the start of a lesson, and in EDC classes the first

communicative task the students are asked to perform is the 3/2/1 fluency activity. I noticed that some classes in particular had trouble relaxing, which resulted in long periods of silence before the production of language, despite giving students preparation time to gather their thoughts. In these classes I tried various methods to generate laughter before starting the activity. One method was to drill English reactions with the listening group before starting. By repeating one reaction several times (e.g. *really, ok, I see, uh-huh, uh-huh, uh-huh*), or, in the case of higher level classes, adding extra reactions (e.g. *unbelievable, fantastic*) I was able to generate laughter, and this usually had a positive effect in terms increasing fluency. Another example relating to the fluency activity involved instances of odd numbers of students, as often happens. In this case, one student (speaker) must be paired with two listeners, which I have noticed often causes anxiety in the speaker. To resolve this, upon asking two students to be a listening pair, I would ask them something along the lines of "Could both of you please listen to the handsome, talented, well-dressed, incredibly intelligent Yuji?", again prompting laughter and lowering anxiety in the speaker.

There were also examples of humorous teacher talk having a positive impact on improving participation in terms of gender issues. As Pomerantz and Bell (2011) discuss, ideologies of gender can impact classroom dynamics and inhibit the free use of LP in some instances. I have frequently observed gender tension in EDC classes and have witnessed that, at every possible opportunity, boys and girls sit separately. This behavior may be the result of sociocultural norms in Japan and the fact that many EDC students attended single-sex high schools. This segregation is impossible to maintain for long, however, as students are frequently asked to change partners throughout an EDC lesson. In an attempt to lower anxiety about talking to a student of the opposite sex, I have used humorous teacher talk during partner changing. One example which had positive results was alluding to the partner change as being a dangerous, risky endeavor, by saying "Makoto, could you please join the super dangerous girls table?", or "Miho, please be a partner with Yuki at the crazy wild boys table". In most instances I observed that this teacher-generated joking immediately reduced tension and in several cases lent itself toward the further use of language play in L2 identity formation. This was evident in that students repeated this instance of LP later in the lesson or in some classes throughout the semester, for example saying "So, *dangerous* Sara, what do you think?"

Another form of teacher-generated humor which I observed to have a positive impact on student's L2 use was in the adaptation of classroom materials. This was especially true with a topic that some students found difficult - social welfare, which was coupled with the functional language *comparing ideas*. I observed that many students struggled to contemplate this difficult topic while at the same time attempting to practice the functional language related to comparing ideas. In order to provide an atmosphere in which students could more effectively practice form, I decided to decouple the functional language from the topic of social welfare. I prepared two supplementary materials which provided more "playful" opportunities for repetition and free practice of form. In the first activity, the students were asked to think of an unreal situation in which they were stranded on a desert island (see Appendix A). Students were then asked to complete two tasks: 1) compare ideas regarding which items would be more or less important to have on the island, and 2) discuss which situations were better or worse from a binary list of circumstances. Changing the topic from real-word issues to a fictional situation allowed students to practice comparing ideas in a setting free of "real-world" consequences. In other words, students were able to "play" with the lesson's functional language without having to postulate opinions related to poverty and homelessness, allowing them the opportunity to get a better grasp on form before moving on to meaning-focused content creation.

In the second activity students were asked to consider real-world problems related to

social welfare (see Appendix B). The students were provided with a list of possible solutions to problems of poverty (e.g. homelessness, children in poverty) and were prompted to choose two solutions for each social problem. Students were then paired and asked to discuss which solutions, based on their choices, were better. Due to the initial reluctance by many students to discuss such obtrusive topics as free health care and job assistance, I decided to add one extra solution: free hugs. This resulted in a lowering of affective filters and students were better able to discuss serious topics when comparing them to this silly solution. Adding a "playful" solution also led to an uptick in student creativity. As discussed in Kasparek's (2015) paper on facetious LP in EDC classes, when teachers provide prefabricated play frames or playful ideas within an activity in an English discussion class this can lead to more creative repetition of L2. By demonstrating to the students that they were free to create unique ideas not listed in the book, I observed that they did so at a higher rate.

During the semester another utilization of teacher-generated LP was my feedback to students. In several instances I was able to appropriate humorous occurrences of mistakes in student utterances which, when presented to students, benefitted them in terms of internalizing language while retaining the student's anonymity. One example I observed occurred during a lesson on poverty. During a discussion, one student managed to somehow replace the word 'poverty' with 'puberty' several times in his discourse. I assessed that none of the students in his group were familiar with the replacement term, and upon providing anonymous feedback also discovered that this student was unaware if its meaning as well. After a brief explanation from the teacher, students had a grand time repeating both terms 'poverty' and 'puberty', and proceeded to "play" with the lesson's form by creating such unique utterances as "Puberty is worse than poverty!" and "We must end puberty in Japan". This iteration of LP led to internalization of the above terms and served as a perfect example of what Cook describes as "language for enjoyment", "focused upon form and fiction rather than on meaning and reality" (Cook, 1997, p. 224). Other examples of this type of feedback, in which the teacher informed students of mistakes, include observations of students saying "*mother*" instead of "murderer", and "My father never does *homework*", instead of "housework".

Student-Generated Humor

It was often observed that students frequently used LP during lessons without any teacher intervention as well. In the same vein as the above examples, mistakes in meaning and translation between L1 and L2 were common sources of humor which provided opportunities for repetition and aided in L2 internalization. Students consistently used negotiation of meaning in order to help each other check understanding. Thus, students often asked each other about the meaning of terms, and I was able to observe that humor and LP often assisted students in this task. One example during a lesson on personality involved a student asking about the meaning of 'logical'. Only one student in the group was familiar with this term and, after failing to explain its meaning in English, reverted to L1 and announced "In Japanese, it's '*ronri teki*'". One student started laughing and mused "So, do you mean that being logical is very *lonely*?" All of the students in the group laughed, and were able to use 'logical' confidently for the remainder of the lesson due to the opportunity to memorize its meaning. I observed many other examples of student-generated LP as well. One example of LP which was observed to lower anxiety occurred when a student said "We are *kaiten*-students!" The word '*kaiten*' in Japanese means 'rotate', as in '*kaiten-sushi*'. This student was referring to having to change partners often during class, which can sometimes be a source of tension during lessons. By joking about changing partners, students in this group were better able to relax.

Adjusting classroom activities also provided the opportunity for student-created LP. One clear example I observed was in a lesson on media, in which students were asked to discuss advantages and disadvantages. In some lower level classes students were having difficulty conceptualizing the strong and weak points of various types of media. In these classes, before discussing media, I asked students instead to focus on simple topics not related to the lesson at hand, such as food, sports, or pets. On the board I wrote:

A: What is your favorite _____?
B: My favorite _____ is _____.
A: What are the advantages/disadvantages of _____?

While this does not seem immediately humorous, I observed that students experimented much with the activity and used a great deal of LP to practice form. Some examples of utterances include: "One advantage of sports car is we can get romantic partner.", "What are the disadvantages of hamsters?", and "One advantage of sausage pizza is it has meat!" Students were aware of the "silliness" of these creative sentences as observed by their laughing and smiling. Since students were given the freedom to have fun with the lesson's functional language, there was a greater internalization of form and students were better able to successfully discuss advantages and disadvantages of media later on in the lesson.

The final observation of humor which I will discuss happened during a discussion test, which is a 16-minute student-led discussion without any teacher interference. Naturally, many students are quite nervous during discussion tests and I observed far less occurrences of LP during tests as opposed to regular lesson discussions. The anxiety felt during discussion tests often has a strong impact on fluency and the ability to use recently acquired forms, which is especially exasperated in lower level classes. During this particular discussion test involving four low-level students, the discussion questions centered around identity and societal pressures relating to personality and appearance. The discussion did not start smoothly, and only two students had spoken in the first three minutes of the test. This was followed by almost an entire minute of complete silence until one student finally asked, "So, from my fashion, what do you think about my character?" I was a little surprised by the question, as this student, while smartly dressed, was often shy and reluctant to open himself up to criticism. I was even more surprised when another student answered "In my opinion, you are a playboy!" All four students laughed hysterically at this, and despite the fact that the first four minutes of the test had been relatively silent, the discussion finally took off. Another student quickly asked "Oh, me next! What do you think about *my* character?" Even though the students were not directly discussing the test questions, the use of humor had acted as a catalyst to get the discussion moving, break the tension, and create genuine interest in the topic. For the remainder of the test students were able to wander back to the task at hand, and began discussing different viewpoints about fashion and how this relates to university life in Japan. The affordance for laughter had resulted in increased fluency and use of form, which, ultimately, led to higher scores on the discussion test.

CONCLUSION
The examples of my observations presented here are certainly not exhaustive, as teacher and student use of humor and LP occur in virtually every EDC lesson. However, I have presented observations of humor and LP which I feel are relevant in showing the benefits of using LP as a pedagogical tool. There are many challenges to quantitative research of the use of LP in the classroom as pedagogy. "Funny" is a relative concept, and its usefulness in an L2 classroom is

open to interpretation. However, upon further, more objective analysis, I believe it will be found that humor can play a very beneficial role in second language acquisition. My observations during the 2015 Fall Semester have strengthened this belief.

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APPENDIX A – Non "Real-World" Practice Supplement for Comparing Ideas

If you were stranded on a desert island…

1. Which is more/less important to have?
-     a knife   or   a gun?
-     shoes   or   a raincoat?
-     a lighter   or   a radio?
-     a book   or   an i-pod?

2. Which is better/worse?
-     a warm dangerous place   or   a cold safe place?
-     an island with sharks   or   an island with bears?
-     being alone   or   being with a stranger?
-     a clean beautiful island   or   an island with garbage on it?

APPENDIX B – Social Welfare Alternative Activity for Comparing Ideas (Providing Playful Idea - Free Hugs)

Social Welfare: Poverty

Use the ideas below to fill in the blanks. Choose the best two ideas for each situation.

Ideas	
- free health care	- donating money
- free education	- job assistance
- donating goods	- free housing
- volunteering	- free hugs

1. To help people after a ***natural disaster***, which is better _____ or _____?
2. To help ***children*** in poverty, which is better _____ or _____?
3. To help ***homeless*** people, which is better _____ or _____?