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Playfulness in Classroom Interactions: A Sociocultural Approach

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Abstract: This paper uses Vygotsky's sociocultural approach to examine collaborative language play in an ESL class. While play is commonly considered to be peripheral to or distracting from the learning process (cf. Cook, 2000; Pomerantz and Bell, 2007; Swann and Maybin, 2007), play in Vygotsky's view is essential for cognitive and functional development, particularly for children's development. According to Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, play creates a zone of proximal development (ZPD), a metaphorically conceptualized zone that designates "the distance between the actual developmental level" and "the level of potential development" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). ZPD emerges when a child is engaged in play with more capable peers or under the guidance of adults, enabling the child to appropriate and internalize a higher level of performance and ultimately become independent at performing a task he or she was previously incapable of doing. Sociocultural research on second language learning applies Vygotsky's theory and illustrates how playful manipulation of a second language mediates the learner's language development (Kim and Kellogg, 2007; Lantolf, 1997; Ohta, 2000; Sullivan, 2000). Building on these and other studies that re-consider the value of playful language use in classrooms, the current study analyzes student-teacher interaction in an adult ESL cooking class. The analysis shows that while the students are at first reserved when it comes to speaking up, they soon engage in collaborative play in which they not only imitate the utterances of others but also become bold and experiment with new phrase combinations. By focusing on playfulness in classroom interaction, a rather marginalized aspect of second or foreign language research, this study attempts to contribute to the understanding of the nature of classroom discourse from a fresh perspective.

Keywords: Language Play, Language Learning, English as a Second Language (ESL), Vygotsky, Sociocultural Theory

Introduction

IN HIS WORK on language play, Cook (2000) notes the clear dichotomy assumed between play and work in modern society. Play is regarded as "something immature, trivial, and superfluous" and as an "appendage to be tagged on to the serious business of life" (p. 186). Cook further points out that work and study are considered concepts equivalent to and interchangeable with learning, while play is kept outside of the domain of learning: "Teachers let the children out to play *between* lessons and teach them to make a distinction *between* playing and learning" (ibid). Play serves as a reward or break after some intense, serious work because it is considered as peripheral, not crucial for students' intellectual development. Thus, play should not be excessive; if students spend a great amount of time in the classroom playing, it may be regarded as a sign of students being distracted from learning and not on task.

While play is commonly considered to be peripheral to or distracting from the learning process, play in Vygotsky's view is essential for cognitive and functional development, particularly for children's development. According to Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, play creates a zone of proximal development (ZPD), a metaphorically conceptualized zone that designates "the distance between the actual developmental level" and "the level of potential develop-

ment" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). ZPD emerges when a child is engaged in play with more capable peers or under the guidance of adults, enabling the child to appropriate and internalize a higher level of performance and ultimately become independent at performing a task he or she was previously incapable of doing. Sociocultural research on second language learning applies Vygotsky's theory of developmental psychology and illustrates how playful manipulation of a second language mediates the learner's language development (Kim and Kellogg, 2007; Lantolf, 1997; Ohta, 2000; Sullivan, 2000).

Apart from the works inspired by Vygotsky's theory, a small but growing number of second/foreign language studies consider the role of play in language learning and language acquisition (Belz, 2002; Belz and Reinhardt, 2004; Broner and Tarone, 2001; Pomerantz and Bell, 2007). For example, Pomerantz and Bell (2007) examines instances of spontaneous language play produced by learners in a Spanish conversation class at a university. Their analysis illustrates how the learners have gained "access to new and important sets of linguistic practices" by playfully manipulating the learning language (p. 557). They contend that linguistic affordances that become available to the learners through language play potentially expand the learners' "communicative repertoires" (ibid). Furthermore, they argue:



[I]n 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 (ibid).

In this way, the authors challenge the assumption commonly shared among researchers and practitioners in regard to what counts as legitimate, acceptable, and valuable language use in communicative language classrooms. Building on these studies that reconsider the value of play in language classrooms, the current study explores how playful exchanges in English as a second language (ESL) mediates the learner's language learning.

The Classroom

The class under study is an ESL cooking class in a university community. The class meets every Friday morning for two hours in a local church kitchen. Everybody is free to join in or drop the class at any time during the academic year. Three female native speaker volunteers – Meg, Carrie, and Mary¹ – teach the class, in which they provide students with hard copies of their original recipes, cook in front of the students and engage in small talk with the students while waiting for the food to come out of the oven.

In the center of the church kitchen (i.e., their classroom), there is a large kitchen table where the teachers do their cooking while explaining their procedures to the students. Kitchen appliances, such as refrigerators, ovens, and microwaves, are located behind the teachers. Usually, before the class the students bring in chairs for themselves from a room next to the kitchen. The students place the chairs around the large kitchen table so that they can observe the teachers' cooking and participate in conversation with the teachers.

Almost all students in the class are homemakers whose husbands are mostly studying as graduate students or working as visiting researchers at the university. The students are from Latin America, Eastern Europe, and Asia. The majority are from East Asian countries such as Japan, Korea, and the People's Republic of China.

The Data

The ESL class was videotaped and audio-recorded for two class periods in addition to participation-observation by the author for a full academic semester. The entire dataset has been transcribed according to the transcription conventions of Conversation Analysis (Atkinson and Heritage 1984: see Appendix A). The transcription conventions allow for the capturing of prosodic features in teacher-student interactions, including intonation, accent, pauses, changes in pitch and volume, overlaps between utterances of different speakers, latching between utterances or turns, and sound stretches.

In one of the recorded sessions, the teachers invited students to talk about what they did before coming to the United States. On the second data collection date, each student described what she cooked the prior week. Based on the students' discussion, the teachers respond, comment on, and ask additional questions to keep the conversations flowing. The analysis of this paper will focus on the first session in which individual students talk about their past experiences before arriving in the US. There were approximately 20 students present on this particular day of the class.

Analysis

"My English is Little"

After placing the students' food in the oven, Meg, the main teacher, asked them to take turns and tell the class what they did before coming to the United States. To begin this speaking activity, Meg assigns the first turn to Irena, a woman originally from Bosnia who spent approximately ten years in Germany. As shown in excerpt (1), upon finding out that she will be the first one to start a conversation with the teachers in front of many other students, Irena jokingly reacts to Meg by collapsing onto the kitchen table, which seems to be a sign of her disappointment. Meg then teases Irena saying, "I *saw* you kind of *die:d* there when I said that" (line 8), and this joking comment triggers students' laughter (line 10).

¹ The individuals' names that appear in this paper are all pseudonyms.

(1)	
1 Meg:	∴ (.) um (.) >let me see< where did I start <i>here</i> last week or
2	there.
3 Irena:	Here°
4 Meg:	okay.=
5 S:	=huh:
6 Meg:	I'll start here.
→ ((Irena collapses onto the kitchen table seemingly to show her disappointment.))	
7 Ss:	ahaha huhaha[ha
→ 8 Meg:	[Oh: I <i>saw</i> you kind of <i>die:d</i> [(.) there when I said
9	that
10 Ss/Meg:	[ahahahaha[haha

In this way, the class is already put in a cheerful mood from the beginning of the conversation activity.

This cheerful atmosphere is, however, going to be threatened when Irena starts her turn by negatively

assessing her English proficiency as, “Oh. My English is *little*. than- *not* so good(h)” with the somewhat nervous laughter:

(2)	
12 Irena:	Oh. (.) My (.) Engli-English is (0.8) <i>little</i> . than- (1.0) <i>not</i> so
13	good(h).

Upon receiving Irena's negative self-assessment, Meg responds with contrasting utterances, “*You* said my English is little” and “*We'd* say I *don't* speak

English very *well*.”, as shown in the extract below at lines 14 and 16.

(3)	
14 Meg:	Yeah.=I know. <i>You</i> said my English is little (well)
15 (.)	
16 Meg:	<i>We'd</i> say (2.8) I <i>don't</i> speak English very <i>well</i> .
17 (.)	
18 Meg:	caz- (.) litt(h)le. (1.2) it's a^:ll <i>right</i> and you know what? I
19	<i>understood</i> you pe^rfectly well. And o' course <i>that's</i> what <i>this</i>
20	class is a:ll about. Ta make ourselves <i>understood</i> . (1.2) and a-
21	caz I don't want anyone ta <i>fee:l</i> that they don't <i>want</i> ta talk.

However, after a pause, Meg at line 18 changes her stance and assures Irena that her utterance was “all right” and comments that the student was perfectly understandable. She took back her initial corrective feedback because she does not “want anyone ta *fee:l* that they don't *want* ta talk” (line 21).

Having clarified her intention, though, Meg once again provides the correction: “But for *good* English we go- we say I don't speak English very well” (lines 24 through 26):

(4)	
24	matter <i>what</i> it is. They (.) <i>talk</i> . And they're understood. Bu:t(h)
25	(0.8) for <i>good</i> English we go- we say (.) I don't speak English
26	very well.
27 Irena:	°okay°

The two phrases – “I don't speak English very well” and “My English is little” – are soon to be modified and played around with in the subsequent conversation. Carrie, the peer teacher, does not want to teach

the students the contraction form and thus she modifies Meg's corrective feedback. To do so, Carrie emphatically utters and repeats the modified part, as shown in the excerpt below:

(5)	
30 Carrie:	[I <i>do</i> : not (.) I <i>DO</i> : not(h) >speak English very well<.
31 Ss:	<i>haha[haha</i>
32 Carrie:	[I <i>do</i> : xxxxxxx [using the contra:ction.=

Apparently, the intoned utterance, “I *do*: not (.) I *DO*: not(h) speak English very well,” by the teacher sounded somewhat comical and, therefore, the token invites laughter among students (line 31).

Meg does not seem to be satisfied with her own utterance, “I don't speak English very well” for a

different reason from Carrie's. As she explains in the following excerpt, Meg does not like the sentence because it is not close enough to the student's original sentence, “My English is little.” Therefore, Meg attempts to create another expression which would include the adjective “little.”

(6)	
34 Meg:	contra:ction. (.) right(h). I was trying to work <i>little</i> in though.=
35 Irena:	=um

Then, as shown below, Carrie promptly provides a solution, saying, “I *speak* very little English you could say”:

(7)	
36 Carrie:	I <i>speak</i> ve:ry little English. (.) you could say=
37 Meg:	=O(h)::HI^sn't that wonderful,
38 Irena:	<i>Bra:bo:w</i>

This solution receives Meg's emphatic positive assessment, “O(h)::HI^sn't that wonderful,” (line 37) followed by Irena's praise, “*Bra:bo:w*.”

The collaborative construction of the phrase, “I speak very little English” is then imitated and appropriated by Irena, as illustrated below:

(8)	
39 Meg:	[Tha:t is-
→ 40 Irena:	[((excitedly)) <i>lil'e</i> Englissh=
41 Ss:	=aha[haha
42 Meg:	[<i>Tha:t's</i> correct.
43 Ss:	ahaha
44 Meg:	[<i>That</i> is correct.

Irena's utterance, “*lil'e* Englissh,” is a partial imitation of Carrie's, “I speak very little English.” From a sociocultural perspective, this partial imitation by

the student carries a significant meaning. Quoting Vygotsky (1987), Lantolf (2000) contends that imitation, along with collaboration in the ZPD, is “the

source of all the specifically human characteristics’ of development” (pp. 17-18). Lantolf distinguishes imitation in the ZPD from copying. He argues that unlike copying, which is “the verbatim mimicking of what the expert appears to do,” imitation in the ZPD is “a complex activity in which the novice is treated not as a repeater but as a communicative being (ibid).” The author illustrates this with the following dialogue between an adult and a child:

Child: (opening cover of tape recorder) open, open, open
 Adult: Did you open it?
 Child: (watching tape recorder) open it
 Adult: Did you open the tape recorder?
 Child: (watching tape recorder) tape recorder

(Newman and Holzman, 1993, p. 151, cited in Lantolf, 2000, p. 18²)

Lantolf explains that the child, by partially imitating the adult’s utterance, “creates something new (open > open it; tape recorder)” and for this reason, Lantolf

contends that this exchange between the child and adult is “both communicative and instructional (p. 18).”

In the case of Irena’s partial imitation, we may consider that the collaboration on expressions involving the adjective, “little,” has created the ZPD in which the students, especially Irena, learned the new expression, “I speak very little English.” That is, Irena, who started her turn with the expression, “My English is little,” has now become aware of the form, “(I speak) little English,” through the mediation of the collaborative exchange with the teachers.

Playful Appropriation and Keying

While it was the teachers who started the cheerful exchange involving the expression, “My English is little,” the students also initiates word play and other types of play in English. For example, Irena at the closure of her turn appropriates Meg’s utterance and transforms it into “play key” (Goffman, 1986), as illustrated in the excerpt below:

(9)	
→ 162 Meg:	See in the- (.) it’s <i>ea:sy</i> . (.) next <i>ta:ime</i> >it’ll come< so much
163	<i>ea:sier</i> .
→ 164 Irena:	next <i>year</i> .
165 (.)	
166 Ss:	a:hahaha hahaha ha(h)ha(h)ha
167 ((Meg moves on to the next student))	

In response to Meg’s comment, “next *ta:ime* [your English will] come so much *ea:sier*.”, Irena jokes back, saying, “next *year* (line 164).” The playful keying was especially noteworthy given that Irena in prior turns not presented in this paper, showed considerable difficulty completing the speaking task.

Student-initiated play continues even after Irena’s turn is completed. The next student, Eunhee, starts her turn saying, “I don’t speak English very well,” the exact utterance that Meg provided for Irena at the very beginning of the conversation:

(10)	
1 Meg:	okay. (.) • hh uh[: (.) Eunhee
2 Ss:	[mmha(h)ha(h)haha •h ha
3 (.)	
→ 4 Eunhee:	I- I don’t speaku(h) English very well ha[hahaha
5 Ss:	[haHAHAHAHA

As indicated in the excerpt, after the negative self-assessment was made, both Eunhee and other students started laughing. Why did Eunhee, whose English is relatively advanced, express a negative assessment of her English, specifically by imitating

Meg’s feedback? Why did other students laugh out loud upon hearing Eunhee’s negative self-evaluation? One may interpret that Eunhee has attempted to appropriate the teacher’s utterance to transform the conversation task into an extension of the playful

² As Lantolf (2000) clarifies, this excerpt is from Bloom, Hood, and Lightbown (1974) and cited in Newman and Holzman (1993).

exchange that took place right before her turn. Goffman (1986) contends that play is what is transformed from an original and serious form. In the interaction excerpted above, Eunhee transformed Meg's original utterance, "I don't speak English very well" into the play key. The original utterance was meant for a serious act – Meg wanted to provide Irena corrective feedback. However, Eunhee achieved the transformation, or "keying," by imitating the utterance while intending to display it for a different purpose, namely, for the purpose of showing

her understanding of and willingness to participate in the on-going playful dialogue.

If we are to assume Eunhee's giggling statement, "I don't speak English very well," as an indication of her intention to initiate playful exchange with the teachers, it seems that the student's attempt ended with success; as illustrated in the excerpt below, the statement leads Meg to provide positive yet humorous assessment feedback, "OH::: but that's a perfect sentence," further eliciting laughter in class:

(11)	
→ 6 Meg:	OH::: (.) but <i>that's a perfect sentence.</i> =
7 Eunhee:	[(°I need to°) =I need to:
8 Ss:	[A(h)HAHAHAHAHA

Even after this joking interaction was over, Meg continues the conversation in the play key and teases Eunhee:

(12)	
13 Eunhee:	uh before I came here (.) I wa:rza: (.) a elementary school
14	teacher (.) in Korea.
15 (.)	
→ 16 Meg:	and that's perfect too:↑
17 Ss:	ha(h)ha(h)ha(h): ha(h)ha(h)ha(h)
18 Eunhee:	now I (.) I take a-one year o:lfa
19 (1.0)	
20 Carrie:	mm hum
21 Eunhee:	°take one year olff°
((lines 22 – 32 skipped))	
→ 33 Meg:	Your English is very good. so (.) you could forget that first
→ 34	sentence.
35 Carrie, Ss:	hah[hahha
36 Meg:	[hahahahaha:

At line 13, Eunhee says, "before I came here I waza elementary school teacher in Korea." Then Meg gives positive yet teasing comments, saying, "and *that's perfect too.*" (line 16). This teasing invites further laughter from the class.

Although Irena's negative comment, "My English is little," does not at all seem to be intended as a joke, Eunhee successfully appropriated the teachers' feedback and transformed it into a cue that shifts the on-going frame of interpretation from the serious to

the playful. The student-initiated play was then expanded by the teacher, which further fostered the cheerful atmosphere in the class.

Back on 'Task'

A student who we call Jaeyun was reluctant to speak to the teachers upon her turn. When Meg calls Jaeyun's name to indicate her turn, she starts to scribble something in the notebook as if to ignore the teacher's call. Thus, Meg pushes the student to start:

(13)	
1 Meg:	okay. uh:m.
2 (.)	
3 Jaeyun:	°(Murmur [with low voice])° ((writing down in her notes))
4 Carrie, Ss:	[ha(h):ha(h):: aha(h)ha(h)ha(h)HAHAHA
5	AHA(h):HYA(h)::HA(h):[HA(h)HA
6 Meg:	[She's busy writ[ing xxxx.
7 Ss:	[Ha(h)aha
→ 8 Meg:	she's be- okay. commo:n Jaeyun.

As illustrated in the excerpt below, Jaeyun replies with giggles, “I don’t speak English,” apparently, joking with Meg:

(14)	
8 Meg:	she's be- okay. commo:n Jaeyun.
→ 9 Jaeyun:	mmhu(h) •h I(h): I don't speak Engli(h)shi(h)aha(h)
10	ha(h)h[a(h)
11 Ss:	[H[A(h)HA(h)HA(h)HA(h)
12 Meg:	[That was a perfect sentence.
13 Meg:	That was a PERRfect sen[tence.
14 Carrie, Ss:	[AHA(h)ha(h)haha(h)ha

Jaeyun’s joking reply triggers student laughter as well as Meg’s teasing uptake, “That was a *perfect* sentence (line 12).” Meg repeats this teasing reaction yet again at line 13, this time emphatically uttering the adjective “perfect.”

While this turn-taking sequence is very similar to that of Eunhee’s, the two are quite different. When Eunhee appropriated Meg’s feedback for the first time, she transformed the utterance from the serious key to the play key. However, what we see in the extract above is Jaeyun producing a copy of Eunhee’s

play key. By repeating the play key, Jaeyun may have attempted to identify herself as a member of this cheerful learning community and also to indicate her wish to extend the playful exchange to her turn.

After the patterned playful exchange, Meg asks Jaeyun to tell the class about her experiences before coming to this university town. With frequent pauses and hesitation markers, Jaeyun says that she is from Korea and her husband is a visiting scholar at the university:

(15)	
15 Meg:	>and<so: what did you do: [(1.0) before you came to State
16	Co^::llege?
17 Jaeyun:	[aha(h)ha
18 (.)	
19 Jaeyun:	ye:e(h)he °u::° (.) I'm from Korya. uh my husbendu- (.) State
20	Collige (.) uh- University oh- co^mputer science visiting scholar.

Jaeyun’s response seems to be problematic to Meg because the answer does not match the question she asked and also because Jaeyun’s answer is not a well-formed sentence but a string of words.

Meg thus indicates the need to “put [Jaeyun’s words] into complete sentences” (lines 21 and 23):

(16)	
19 Jaeyun:	ye:e(h)he °u:° (.) I'm from Korya. uh my husbandu- (.) State
20	Collige (.) uh- University oh- co^mputer science visiting scholar.
→ 21 Meg:	Okay. [>you're-< >you're-< you're saying a lot of things. (.) Let's put=
22 Jaeyun:	[he(h)he(h)hehe
→ 23 Meg:	=them into complete sentences.

What follows is Meg's attempt to create and provide grammatically correct sentences to express all the information that the student has provided. Jaeyun, on the other hand, does not pay much attention to

the teacher's corrective feedback. Instead, as shown in the extract below, she starts to offer more information in pieces one after another, as if to collaborate with Meg on the meaning making:

(17)	
24 Meg:	I: am from Korea is perfect.
25 Jaeyun:	°Yes.°
26 (0.6)	
27	Penn State.
28	A:T(h) Penn State University,
29 Jaeyun:	computer Science.
30 Meg:	WORKING, (.) in computer scie[nce].
((two lines skipped))	
33 Jaeyun:	visiting scholar.
34 Meg:	he- he: IS a visiting scholar.

In response to Jaeyun who throws keywords bits by bits, Meg starts to form sentences while emphatically uttering the preposition “at,” the adverbial participle, “working” and the copula “is,” thereby highlighting the importance of using these function words. After

providing grammatical sentences and noting the importance of speaking in full sentences, Meg repeats the original question, “What did you before you came here?” and prompts Jaeyun to give a second try:

(18)	
34 Meg:	he- he: IS a visiting scholar. (.) you've got all these de:tails. (0.2)
35	but you need to >put 'em in< comple:te sentences. •h And what
36	did you do: before you^ came here.=wha-
37 (0.8)	
38 Carrie:	did you work- have a jo:b in Korea?
39 (0.6)	

As the silence at line 37 in the extract indicates, Jaeyun does not respond to Meg's question. This leads Carrie to repair Meg's question into a yes-no question (line 38), which would make it easier for Jaeyun to respond. This yes-no question also fails to elicit Jaeyun's response, as indicated by the silence in line 39. These pauses might suggest Jaeyun's struggle to construct her response as a complete sentence. It is possible to assume that in order to be

faithful to Meg's suggestion, Jaeyun needed some extra thinking time to process her thoughts into complete sentences in English.

The silence is soon broken, however, as Eunhee, a friend of Jaeyun who has already finished her turn, participates in the conversation and helps Jaeyun. As the excerpt below illustrates, with Eunhee's help, the teachers successfully find out what Jaeyun used to do in Korea.

(19)	
41 (0.6)	
42 Eunhee:	[she wazah: >elementary< uh: (.) [school teacher.
43 Jaeyun:	[uhm [school teacher.
44 (.)	
45 Meg:	SCHOO^L TEACHER.
46 Ss:	haha
47 Jaeyun:	(xxxxxxx) aha(h)haha(h)haha(h). yea::
48 Meg:	oh::: WHAT GRADE?

Furthermore, Eunhee's assistance at line 43 ("she wazah elementary") prompts Jaeyun and, as shown above, Jaeyun was able to join completing the response successfully with Eunhee (lines 42 and 43).

From an Obligated Task to a Playful Dialogue

The rest of her turns, however, were completed mostly by her fellow classmates. Excerpt (20) con-

tains the part where Jaeyun's conversation with the teachers was coming to an end. Here, another student from Korea, Song-Oh, explains that Jaeyun taught at an elementary school for 25 or 26 years. Meg then responds by telling Jaeyun, "Well, you *deserve* the nice *trip* to United States" (line 74), seemingly closing the conversation in a cheerful tone.

(20)	
70 Song-Oh:	twenny five or sirty years.
71 Carrie:	hmm.
72 (.)	
73 Meg:	my:: goodness.
→ 74 Meg:	Well- you:- you: deserve the nice trip to United Sta[tes.
75 Carrie, Ss:	[AHAHA=
76	=hahaha

With this teacher's comment, the conversation with Jaeyun could have been completed. However, now Jaeyun initiates her turn and continues the conversation;

Jaeyun responds to the teacher's comment by telling her, "I like musical, New York Broadway. I see *Cats*, *Phantom of the Opera*":

(21)	
78 Jaeyun:	I liku:? (0.2) nnnn (.) a- I- I see musicull, o- (0.4) Ne^w York.
79	Brudowa:y, (.) o:: (0.4) uh (.) I:: (.) see: (.) Ke^tts:: (.) nn: (.)
80	Phe^nto^m of the o:pra,=
81 Carrie:	=Phantom o[f the opera.
82 Jaeyun:	[oh::: uhu(h)hu(h)hu(h)hu
83 Meg:	C[a::ts-
84 Jaeyun:	[MI::SU:: (.) Missu Saigon, [(.) Le- Le mizera:bul, (.) oh:: Lion
85	King.
86 Carrie:	[Mis[s Saigon.
87 Meg:	[Miss- Oh::
88 Ss:	°Wa:::h(h)°
89 Meg:	[You've see 'em A^:::LL.
90 Ss:	[AHA(h)HA(h)HA(h)HA(h)
91 Meg:	OH::[::

Although one can only assume, it might be the case that this is Jaeyun's attempt to indicate that she indeed had a nice trip to New York City. This is the first time that the student responds to the teachers without peers' help. It should be noted that although the topic she responds to is not on the designated topic, her response is in alignment with Meg's previous comment, "You deserve the nice trip to United States."

As shown above, the two teachers repeat the names of musicals in turns, apparently showing their surprise and interest. Everyone in the classroom displays some type of affective markers in response to Jaeyun's comments (lines 88 through 91). The cheerful atmosphere created through Jaeyun's talk along with the peer's responses might have encouraged Jaeyun to continue her talk even further, as indicated at lines 92 and 93 of excerpt (22) below.

(22)	
91 Meg:	OH::[::
→ 92 Jaeyun:	[Andu, u- I (.) liku, (.) oh- (xxxx same pla[ce). ?my::-
→ 93	get- togezar, (.) o- husbendu, (.) u:: (1.0)
94 Ss:	u(h)h(h)ha(h)
95 ?:	almost everyday.
96 Ss:	Uwa(h)ha(h)[ha(h)ha(h)ha(h)
→ 97 Carrie:	[Your husband- your husband worked everyda:y
→ 98	and you: went to the thea[ter eve[ry day.
99 Jaeyun:	[Yea: [Yea:
100 Ss:	[AHA(h)HA(h)HA
111	(h)HA (h)HA(h)HA(h)

In lines 97 and 98 Carrie teases Jaeyun and says, "Your husband worked everyday and you went to the theater everyday." Jaeyun spontaneously affirms this teasing at line 99, which triggers another wave of laughter throughout the classroom.

By this point in the interaction, the teachers and students seem to be fully involved in this cheerful

exchange. Apparently, the teachers no longer care about the fact that Jaeyun's story is not related to today's speaking theme. As illustrated in the excerpt below, the teachers continue joking in replying to Jaeyun:

(23)	
112 Meg:	[WO::W.
→ 113 Carrie:	[That- That sounds like Ay:: g[oo:d life.
114 Ss:	[AHA(h)HA(h)[HA(h)HA(h)HA(h)
115 Meg:	[But (you:
116	ha[d thee idea.)
117 Carrie:	[aha(h)ha(h) h[a(h)ha(h)
→ 118 Meg:	[You- you spent the budget(h).
119 Carrie, Ss:	EE(h):HA(h)HA(h)ha(h)hahahaha
120 Meg:	Lie- Lion Ki^ng is something like seventy do:lla[rs.
121 Ss:	[Oh:::
122 Carrie:	The tickets are ver[y expensive.
123 Meg:	[The tickets are very expensive and she's told.
124	me (.) FI[:VE of xxxxx
125 Ss:	[Ha(h)ha(h)ha(h)ha(h)

Having heard the list of musicals that Jaeyun has seen, Meg jokingly responds and says, “you spent the budget” at line 118. This comment triggers laughter from all the participating members. Although Jaeyun could possibly finish her turn at this

point, given the comments by the two teachers, she again opts to extend the conversation. Now Jaeyun tells the teachers, “I like computer- internet shopping” and starts to list the items that she bought for herself on the internet:

(24)	
→ 127 Jaeyun:	o- I liku- (.) oh: (.) computer inter-net shopping.
128 Carrie, Ss:	Oh::::: HA(H)HA(H)HYA(h)HA(h)
129	H[A(H)HA(H)Ha(h)ha(h)ha(h)::ha(h)
130 Meg:	[Computer SHO^PPing.
→ 131 Jaeyun:	u:m Kem Kohdah? (.) uu- (.) golpu:: (.) clu:b? (.) uu- golf: andu
→ 132	tennisu, (.) uh (tee tie) (.) uhu(h)hu(h)hu(h)[hu(h)hu(h)
133 Meg:	[E(H)he(h)

It should be noted that Jaeyun is again right on the topic of this off-the-task conversation that emerged as the conversation developed: i.e., expenses on en-

tertainment. As shown in excerpt (21) below, Jaeyun receives a joking response from Meg who asks her, “Did you rob a bank? Or did you win the lottery?”:

(21)	
134 Jaeyun:	a- [I justa-
135 Meg:	[Di-Di-Did you ro:b a bank?
136 All:	AHA(h)HA(h)HA(h)HA(h)HA(h)
137 Meg:	Or did you win the lo:tt[ery.= AHA:(h)AHA:(h)AHA:(h)A
138 Carrie, Ss:	[AHA(h)HA(h)HA(h)HA(h)

At this point, the classroom was filled with laughter. The cheerful dialogue comes to an end with Meg's

positive assessment of Jaeyun's English: “Pardon me, but your English is very good”:

(22)	
140 Meg:	[We::ll
141 Carrie:	[You are- you are enJO:Ying life i[:n the United States.
→ 142 Jaeyun:	[Thet's- the[t's- (right.)
143 Students:	[WA(h)HA(h)
144	HA(h)HA(h)HA(h)HA(h)HA
145 Carrie:	EHE(h)HE[(h)HE(h)
146 Meg:	[Oh: (0.8) pardon me::=>but your< English
147	is v[e:ry good (and xxxxxxxx)
148 Carrie, Ss:	[A(h)HA(h)HA(h)HA(h)[HA(h)
149 Meg:	[A(h)HA:(h)ha(h)ha(h)
150 Carrie:	E(h)H[E(h):he(h)he(h)

The entire class laughs again, as this comment plays on the much-repeated sentence in the class: “I don’t speak English very well.”

Jaeyun was reluctant to speak up in front of the class in the very beginning. Then she failed to answer the question, resulting in other students answering for her. However, as the conversation develops in the cheerful mood, Jaeyun started to lead the conversation to a new direction. Apparently, the exchange filled with laughter and teasing comments have mediated the student’s language learning. It was within this playful dialogue that Jaeyun opted for extra turn taking. With the extra turn taking, Jaeyun accomplished the communication task that she was not able to perform at the earlier point of her turn, that is, to be engaged in a one-on-one conversation with the teacher and making herself understood in English.

Regarding language play and language proficiency, Cook (2000) argues that “[k]nowing a language, and being able to function in communities which use that language, entails being able to understand and produce play with it” (p. 150). Although Jaeyun in the above excerpt does not necessarily “produce play with” English, she clearly indicates her understanding of the teachers’ playful comments. Moreover, her attempts to collaborate in the playful

dialogue are evident in the above extracts. These attempts are significant given that the student at first was reluctant to take her turn in the speaking activity.

Conclusion

This paper looked at student-teacher interactions in an ESL classroom. My focus was how playfulness, in particular, the keying from “serious task” to “play,” assisted the students’ language learning. As discussed earlier, play in educational contexts is commonly considered a marginal or even distracting part of learning. Being playful is considered almost an equivalent of not being serious on task. However, Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory lends us a lens to re-examine the significance of play in learning.

The examples discussed in this presentation are taken from a rather non-traditional language class where playful attitude is perhaps more acceptable and appropriate than in regular language classrooms. Nevertheless, it is my hope that the analysis in this study illustrated a case where laughter and playfulness in the classroom encouraged students to become bold and actively participate in a communicative activity, thereby engaging in meaningful and purposeful language learning experiences.

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Appendix A

Symbols	Meaning	Example
:	sound stretch	my:
::	longer sound stretch	uh::
upper case letters	increased volume	and THE^N
° °	decreased volume	°and°
italics	stress	<i>Very</i> emotional
period	final, falling intonation	he uses profanity.
question mark	final rising intonation	with my father?
^	non-final rising intonation	fir^st of all
comma	continuing intonation, slight rise	right,
↑	sudden rising intonation	↑GO::D
=	latched speech	and=uh
> <	compressed speech	>if I were to<
-	false restarts	I- I would
square brackets	overlapping speech	we got off the [a^irplane, [right.
parentheses	uncertain hearing	(wha:^t.)
(.)	micro pause	
-l	timed pause	
·h	in-breath	
·hh	longer in-breath	
(h)	aspiration	
(hh)	longer aspiration	
hah heh huh	laughter	
(())	comments	

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