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## **Focus on Form and Fun: EFL Learners' Playful Language-Related Episodes (PLREs)**

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### **Abstract**

This study aimed at bringing together the notions of language play and focus on form (FonF) through a cross-sectional investigation of playful language-related episodes (PLREs). PLREs, as a remarkably under-explored aspect of second language (L2) learners' focus on form, peer interaction and language play, were analyzed in an Iranian EFL context with 86 learners at elementary, intermediate and advanced level of L2 competence. The analysis of 46 hours of the participants' group interaction implied the facilitative role of L2 competence in the linguistic scope of PLREs. Different categories of PLREs also showed (slight) proficiency-based variations. The elementary learners, for instance, seemed more inclined to instigate pragmatic PLREs than formal ones. In this paper, major findings of the study are discussed in light of learners' L2 competence. Elaborating on this pivotal notion, I conclude the paper with a note on the pervasiveness of PLREs, ideas for more investment in L2 play and suggestions for further research.

**Keywords:** Playful LREs, Focus on form, Language play, Humor, L2 proficiency, EFL learners.

### **Introduction**

The present research is an attempt to address a rather neglected but potentially rich venue for attention to second language (L2) forms during learner-learner interaction. It seeks to shed light on how (EFL) learners' language play for fun or L2 humor may yield to their incidental focus on various aspects of the language. To this aim, I initially elaborate on the concept and role of (humorous) language play from the vantage point of L2 acquisition. Then, I link this notion to focus on form to pave the way for the primary concern of this study that is EFL learners' playful language-related episodes.

## Language Play: Definition, Classification and Functions

Language play can generally be considered as a non-transactional type of language use which usually serves the ludic intentions of language users (Sterling & Loewen, 2015). L2 language play often contains and entails (creative) manipulation of L2 forms to create humor and reflect on what learners are (linguistically and/or communicatively) concerned with (Heidari-Shahreza, 2018a).

Two types of language play are commonly discussed in L2 acquisition scholarship: Language play for ‘fun’ [1] (or ludic/humorous language play) and language play for ‘rehearsal’ (Bushnell, 2008; Heidari-Shahreza, 2018a,b). Ludic language play primarily points to spontaneous or planned incidences of verbal humor (e.g., jokes, funny stories, funny comments) in or outside classroom setting. Such language play is usually accompanied by contextual cues such as laughter (or smile), marked word order and prosody (Bell, 2009). Language play for rehearsal, in contrast, is primarily self-directed, private and sotto voce (Bushnell, 2008). Lantolf (1997, p. 11) in his study of L2 Spanish sets the following examples for language play for rehearsal (see also Heidari-Shahreza, 2018a):

*“ [T]alking out loud to yourself in Spanish; repeating phrases to yourself silently; making up sentences or words in Spanish; imitating to yourself sounds in Spanish; having random snatches of Spanish pop into your head. ”*

Also, of relevance to this study is the point that, as Broner and Tarone (2001, p. 367) note, humorous language play unlike language play for/as rehearsal “uses language forms known to be mastered by the speaker” (i.e., the L2 learner). This notion which still awaits further enquiry, among other things, implies that the type and the range of linguistic elements learners focus on through ludic language play may be an index of their L2 competence and can even serve, in Cook’s (2000, p. 204) words, as a “test of proficiency.”

Paraphrasing Tarone (2000), Bushnell (2008) summarizes the functions or rather the beneficial effects of language play into four categories: Firstly, language play can aid in alleviating learners’ negative feelings, “allowing linguistic data to pass through the ‘affective filter’... and become ‘intake’ ” (p. 50). Secondly, it provides opportunities for “highly internalizable” (p. 50) and “deeply processed” (p. 50) encoding of the language, thus improving the memorizability of the input (as well as learners’ retention and recall). Thirdly, through language play, learners may create and/or adopt different identities, roles and voices which can notably contribute to the development of their sociolinguistic competence. Fourthly, the creativity inherent in language play may facilitate further development of learners’ interlanguage (and impede the course of fossilization). Citing Cekaite and Aronsson (2005), Bushnell points to another function of language play; it can be a ‘face-saving device’ or a ‘safe house’ (in Pomerantz and Bell’s (2011) conceptualization) for L2 learners to express their (opposing) viewpoints (see also Heidari-Shahreza, 2018b). Last, but by no means least, humorous language play may be accompanied by language-related episodes where the learners have a chance to focus on L2 forms. It is, in fact, this function of play with language in which this study is mainly interested.

## Playful Language-related Episodes: Definition and Significance

Swain and Lapkin (1998, p. 326) defined language-related episodes (LREs, hereafter) as “any part of a dialogue where the students talk about the language they are producing, question their language use, or correct themselves or others”. In other words, LREs refer to instances of interaction discourse (and potentially leaning opportunities) where learners turn their attention to linguistic elements and features (e.g., word order, meaning, spelling) available in the context of a given language task or communicative act, discuss possible interpretations thereof, and provide feedback (Heidari-Shahreza, Dabaghi, & Kassaian, 2012). These temporary shifts from content to language during learners’ interaction can also be done *playfully*. In other words, this incidental focus on form (i.e., LRE) may occur while learners are being playful or, technically, ‘doing humor’. Thus, as Bell (2012) points out, playful LREs (PLREs, henceforth) incorporate an additional component than a typical LRE and that is the ‘fun’ element (see also the examples of PLREs provided under the Method section for further clarification).

Cook (2000) criticizes the assumption within communicative language teaching (CLT) framework that natural language use and communication do not or should not contain a focus on linguistic form. He argues that language play can serve as a common counterexample in which focus on form occurs while interlocutors are naturally engaged in spontaneous, authentic acts of communication (see also Cekaite & Aronsson, 2005; Ellis, 2015 ). PLREs are probably what Cook’s contention mainly point to. They serve as the intersection of focus on form and fun (FonF + F). From the perspective of task-based language teaching (TBLT), such funny moments within L2 learners’ group and/or class interaction deserve (further) attention as they also embody how learners can be *joyfully on-task* (see Bushnell, 2008; Heidari-Shahreza & Heydari, 2018).

## Review of the Literature

Although (incidental) focus on form in general and LREs in particular have already received some attention in the relevant literature (see Ellis, 2016, for a review), as Bell (2012) notes, PLREs have tangentially been explored by humor and/or second language acquisition (SLA) researchers to date. Also, despite the recognition of the potentially significant role of humorous language play, comparatively few researchers thus far have focused on this topic (Heidari-Shahreza, 2018 a,b; Sterling & Loewen, 2015). In the following lines, I briefly review the (scant) literature on PLREs to contextualize this study and justify the need for further research.

In their study of children’s L2 play, Cekaite and Aronsson (2005) found that despite limited L2 proficiency, children collaboratively used form-focused language play (e.g. puns, humorous mislabelings, alliterations) in their spontaneous peer interactions. The authors supported a ludic model of language learning, suggesting that language play could both manifest learners’ “spoken artistry” (p. 187) and serve as “informal ‘language lessons’ ” (p.169) to tap various aspects of L2 acquisition. In a similar study, Lucas (2005) requested five pairs of advanced ESL learners to collaboratively decipher the double meaning (hence, the playful feature) of eight pun-based comic strips. She spotted 35 LREs in the 40 pun-

related dialogues, noting that such focus on form could enhance the participants' metalinguistic awareness, comprehension and uptake. Also, the class teacher was found helpful in scaffolding the task, encouraging learners to actively engage in language use, and drawing learners' attention to (intended) aspects of language. Likewise, Tocalli-Beller and Swain (2007) investigated the effectiveness of language play tasks (i.e., puns and riddles) to draw ESL learners' attention to L2 forms. They identified three types of LREs (i.e., formal, semantic, and metalinguistic) in the participants' playful group interaction. The findings revealed that the learners had a positive attitude toward language play tasks and such activities could enhance their awareness of form-meaning relationships, leading to durable gains in their L2 acquisition.

More germane to this study, Bell (2012) investigated the differential effects of playful and non-playful attention to form by 16 ESL learners. She employed different tailor-made tests to compare the learners' recall rate of the linguistic items which were focused on either seriously or playfully. The results revealed that her participants had a significantly stronger recall of the L2 forms which had taken place in PLREs than in LREs. She also found the highest rate of recall for word meanings. Bell recommended that PLREs should be explored from the perspective of the factors which have been investigated in studies of LREs such as the learners' type of interaction, degree of collaboration and L2 proficiency. In a (more) recent study, Sterling and Loewen (2015) investigated teacher-initiated PLREs in an L2 Spanish class. The analysis of the 20 hours of whole-class interaction revealed that the participants were more engaged in L2 lexical features and elements than grammar or pronunciation during PLREs. They concluded that further research was required in other language settings to compare the pervasiveness of such language play. Also, addressing learners' L2 competence, in their view, could be illuminating to account for the presence/lack of PLREs and the code switching observed in the form-focused language play.

As learners' PLREs are examined across proficiencies in the present research, it seems insightful to look at the studies on L2 humor which have also considered learners' L2 competence. Although the role of L2 proficiency on various aspects of SLA has been in the focus of a number of studies (see e.g., Pae, 2018), few studies thus far have probed into language play cross-sectionally. In this regard, Shardakova (2010), for instance, relied on the data obtained from discourse completion questionnaires to investigate how 113 Russian L2 learners, at different proficiency levels, naturally created humor while answering to 16 scenarios for four types of speech acts (i.e., apologies, compliments, invitations, and requests). She observed that L2 proficiency had an impact on the type and the extent of the participants' L2 humor. While at all levels of competence, pragmatics was the major source of their language play, discursive, lexical and particularly grammatical devices were employed more by learners at higher proficiency to instigate humor. Waring (2013) also collected data from elementary, intermediate and advanced ESL learners. Adopting mainly a functional-pedagogical approach, she noted that the participants, at all strata of L2 proficiency, used language play to try out different identities, express their viewpoints and gain more power in teacher-learner interactions (see also Heidari-Shahreza, 2018b).

## Motivation for the Present Research

As mentioned earlier and implied in the above review, comparatively little attention has been paid to PLREs whether in LRE studies or in L2 humor scholarship. This paucity of research persists while PLREs, at least theoretically, seem insightful in regard to how (creatively) learners marshal their linguistic resources to create humor and reflect on L2 forms within the constraints of their interlanguage. The present research aimed to contribute to the relevant literature by exploring PLREs *across proficiencies*. To my knowledge, this is a line of enquiry which is singularly under-explored. As implied in the above review, although previous studies (see e.g., Bell, 2012; Sterling & Loewen, 2015) have acknowledged the possible role of L2 competence, as far as I know PLREs have not yet been investigated cross-sectionally (see also Heidari-Shahreza, 2018b). Furthermore, this study is probably the first to address PLREs in an (Asian, Iranian) EFL setting.

## Method

### Research Design and Goals

This study is the second part of a larger research project which intended to broadly investigate EFL learners' humorous language play across proficiencies. The first part of this project probed into the participants' language play from linguistic, pedagogical and functional perspectives. It attempted to shed light on a) the linguistic devices (e.g., pun, irony) the learners employed to create humor, b) the instructional features (e.g., course relevance, target) that accompanied their play with language and c) the functions (e.g., strategic attitude) that such play had in class setting (see Heidari-Shahreza, 2018b, for further information). Although an initial quantification of the learners' 'L2 focus' was briefly reported too, it was decided that their form-focused language play be addressed in the second part of the project with an overarching attention to PLREs. Thus, the present research took a new look at the data to examine the participants' PLREs across proficiencies. The following research questions guided this study:

1. Does the number of PLREs learners engage in change as proficiency increases?
2. Whether and to what extent do the types of PLREs they engage in (i.e., formal, semantic, pragmatic) change with proficiency?

### Research Context and Participants

Six EFL classes in an Iranian English institute and a total number of 86 Iranian EFL learners took part in this research. Since learners' L2 proficiency was important to this study, based on recent ACTFL guidelines, two classes at each intended proficiency level (i.e., mid-novice, mid-intermediate and mid-advanced) were selected. In so doing, a quick placement test was given; learners' past records in the institute particularly their scores in the previous semesters were reviewed; (if available) the correlations between their coursebooks and international proficiency frameworks were considered and their teachers' judgment were taken into

account. Each class, on average, contained 14 male and female learners who were mostly at their teens. They came to the institute three times a week during the spring semester of 2017.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Within the purview of the approved research protocol and APA guidelines, the third, sixth, ninth and twelfth sessions of each class were audio- and video-recorded. Each session took roughly 90 minutes and included both teacher-fronted/whole class interaction and group work. The data analyzed in this study came from the participants' group interaction. To record their inner-group talk, small voice recorders were used. On the whole, 46 hours of peer interaction at the three proficiency levels (about 7-8 hours in each class) were obtained.

Using Nvivo software, the data was initially coded for any incidence of PLREs by the researcher and an assistant. To do so, initially, based on Swain and Lapkin's (1998) conceptualization (see Introduction section), LREs were identified. Afterward, in light of the relevant literature (see e.g., Bushnell, 2008; Heidari-Shahreza, 2018a,b), contextual cues such as laughter, word order and prosody were taken into account to discern the 'playfulness' feature. Then, based on their L2 focus, the identified PLREs were categorized into three different types (see the following section). Any discrepancies between the raters in the initial identification and/or categorization of (P)LREs were discussed and resolved. The mean inter-rater reliability (Cohen's kappa) was 0.82.

### **Classification of PLREs**

LREs have generally been classified based on the aspect(s) of language they have focused on (Bell, 2012). Thus, various types of LREs (e.g., lexical, grammatical) have been documented in the relevant literature (Heidari-Shahreza et al., 2012). Methodologically, however, any classification of PLREs needs to be compatible with both the conceptualization of language play as well as LRE as a type of focus on linguistic form. With an eye to this double requirement, in the present research, PLREs were divided into 'formal', 'semantic' and 'pragmatic' categories. The advantage of this way of coding PLREs was threefold: Firstly, it embraced all three types of humorous language play, widely discussed in L2 language play and humor scholarship: Play with 'form', 'meaning' and 'use' (see e.g., Cook, 2000; Waring, 2013, for further information). Secondly, from a linguistic perspective, it probably had a broader (or the broadest) coverage of various aspects of (second) language. Thirdly, it was more in line with previous studies on PLREs (e.g., Bell, 2012; Tocalli-Beller & Swain, 2007) and thus the findings could be more comparable and insightful.

Based on this rationale and in simple terms, this study looked into the humorous cases of learners' group interaction where their attention was directed to aspects of L2 knowledge such as grammar of a sentence (i.e., formal PLRE), meaning of a word (i.e., semantic PLRE) or language use (i.e., pragmatic PLRE). The three types of PLREs are exemplified below, using the study's collected data, to further clarify this classification and pave the way for the discussion of the findings.

**Formal PLREs.** This instance of formal PLREs comes from the small group interaction of four advanced EFL learners. They are engaged in a remedial practice of English conditionals, setting examples for different types of such sentences (see Appendix A for transcription conventions):

- 01 S<sub>1</sub>: this is my sentence (2) if I work hard, I can go to a good university.  
02 S<sub>2</sub>: ok! now me!  
03 S<sub>3</sub>: wait! your example is wrong. ☹ you should say (1) if I had had worked hard, (1) I could have gone to a good university. ☹  
04 S<sub>4</sub>: HHH she's right. ☹ type *three* is good, it's unreal and impossible. ☹=  
05 S<sub>3</sub>: = HHH type one is for *good* students.  
06 S<sub>1</sub>: ☹ shut up! next year you see. ☹

In this case, within the intimate atmosphere of peer interaction, the group mates tease the learner who is a senior high school student and here makes a future conditional about being accepted into a good university. During this PLRE, they talk about the difference between English conditional type one and three, humorously associating this to the point that the target of humor (i.e., S<sub>1</sub>) has not worked hard, so any chance of acceptance is very low. Thus, they do humor while they also attend to a formal aspect of L2.

**Semantic PLREs.** This sample incidence of semantic PLREs took place in one of the intermediate classes when a group of learners were making sentences with a list of words:

- 01 S<sub>1</sub>: ok! let's make a sentence with this, RIVERBANK  
02 S<sub>2</sub>: it's easy. (1) I always save my money in riverbank.  
03 S<sub>1</sub>: HHH and water take it away!  
04 S<sub>3</sub>: ☹ bank has two meaning. it is not *bank* for money here. ☹  
05 S<sub>1</sub>: HHH it's a word in that story, like beach.  
06 S<sub>2</sub>: ☹ why they don't say river *beach*!? ☹

In this example, the PLRE is built upon the different meanings or polysemy of the word 'bank'. The spontaneous humor here originates from a learner's mistaking 'riverbank' for a type or brand of banks where one can save money in. Then a dialogue follows this funny blunder illuminating the double meaning of the word 'bank'. Hence it serves as an example of a semantic PLRE.

**Pragmatic PLREs.** In the excerpt below, a group of elementary learners are working together to complete a conversation with several blanks in its speakers' turns:

- 01 S<sub>1</sub>: well! just one blank! =  
02 S<sub>2</sub>: =goodbye, (1) goodbye or see you (suggesting an answer for the end of conversation blank).  
03 S<sub>3</sub>: no! ☹ goodbye, excuse me, see you, take care, say hello to family! (.) all of them! ☹  
04 S<sub>1</sub>: (in Persian) HHH it takes half an hour to say goodbye in Persian, but they do not make it (i.e., saying goodbye) long.

05 S<sub>2</sub>: ☺ one is enough in English. ☺

06 S<sub>3</sub>: HHH for us *ten*. (1) ☺ or they think you are not polite, (.) friendly. ☺

Here the learners' incidental attention is directed to the use of language in conversational situations especially family gatherings. They notice how ending a conversation by saying goodbye in their L2 can be different from their mother tongue (i.e., Persian). Using exaggeration as a humor trope, they talk about the use of expressions such as 'see you', 'take care', etc. in English, humorously pointing to the sociolinguistic fact that Iranians usually tend to use several of these expressions together on parting.

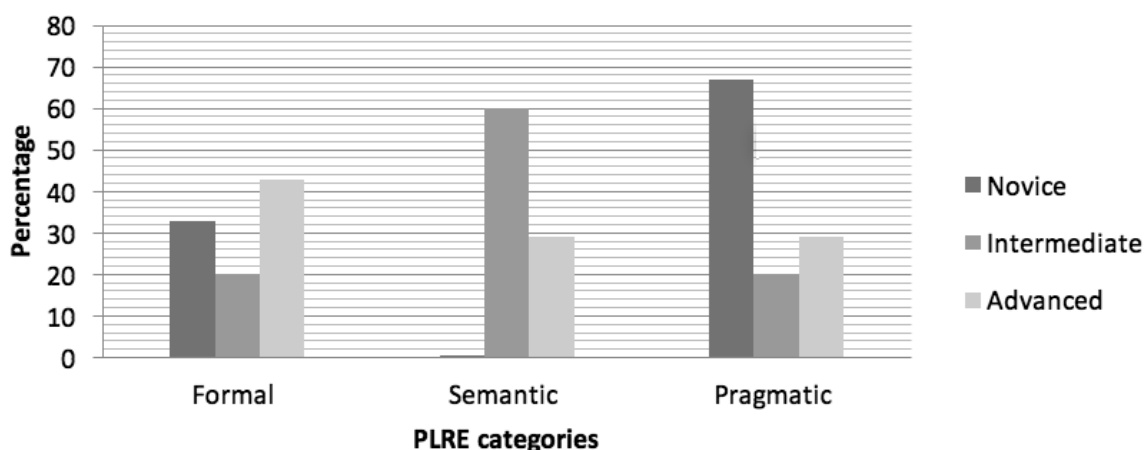
## Results and Discussion

Table 1 reports on the total number of (P)LREs and frequencies of PLRE categories across proficiencies. It seems the total number of LREs generally corresponds with an increase in the learners' L2 proficiency. Nevertheless, this relationship was not statistically significant at  $p < 0.05$ , based on chi-square test results ( $\chi^2 = 2.12$ ,  $df = 4$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 0.53$ ,  $P(\chi^2 > 2.12) = 0.71$ ). As compared to their LRE counterparts, the same pattern of increase persists with respect to the total number of PLREs. This rise, however, did not point to any statistical significance ( $\chi^2 = 3.88$ ,  $df = 4$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 0.97$ ,  $P(\chi^2 > 3.88) = 0.42$ )

Furthermore, to locate any significant difference in the frequency variation of each PLRE category across proficiencies, a Poisson regression was also run on the count data of PLRE types (see Cameron & Trivedi, 1998 for further information on count data analysis and interpretation). Despite slight increase, these discrepancies, however, did not reach statistical significance at  $p < 0.05$ . **Table 1.** *Frequency and Statistical Significance of PLREs across Proficiencies*

Level / Class	Total LREs	Total PLREs	Categories of PLREs		
			Formal	Semantic	Pragmatic
Novice 1	14	1	0	0	1
Novice 2	17	2	1	0	1
Intermediate 1	20	2	0	1	1
Intermediate 2	18	3	1	2	0
Advanced 1	26	4	2	1	1
Advanced 2	23	3	1	1	1
Sig.	0.16	0.44	0.48	0.12	0.80





**Figure 1.** Comparison of PLRE Categories across Proficiencies

As shown in Figure 1, there are apparently some variations in the frequency and distribution of PLREs across proficiencies. In this regard, pragmatic PLREs are more prevalent at the elementary level, especially in comparison to the total number of language play incidences. Moreover, the advanced proficiency seems to enjoy a more balanced employment of all three PLRE types. Unlike the lower proficiencies, at this level of competence, formal PLREs also outnumber the other types. Furthermore, the learners' semantic and pragmatic types of focus on form show more variance than the formal PLREs.

In addition, based on the quantitative results, the elementary learners seemed more inclined to instigate pragmatic PLREs than formal ones. At the advanced proficiency, in contrast, the proportion of formal PLREs was equal or even higher than the respective rates for semantic and pragmatic PLREs. In other words, despite statistically insignificant differences, high-proficiency learners were probably better able to marshal their linguistic resources to do humor. This observation seems plausible for humorous language play is theoretically assumed to be built upon already-acquired L2 knowledge (Broner & Tarone, 2001). Thus, (more) advanced learners are expected to be able to initiate more instances of language play for fun. This is also in line with previous studies. For example, only advanced learners, in Shardakova's study (2010) were found to create grammatical (i.e., formal) language play. Similarly, Davies (2003) reported that her low-level participants, among other things, relied on their knowledge of L2 pragmatics to compensate for their low L2 competence. Nevertheless, in this study, such correspondence as a general trend not a strong correlation was observed (i.e., it did not reach statistical significance) which, among other things, might be due to the low frequencies of the PLREs, not the actual weight of this interplay (see also Cameron & Trivedi, 1998; Heidari-Shahreza, 2018 a,b).

## Conclusion

The current study probed into EFL learners' PLREs during small group interaction and across proficiencies. The findings elucidated that in play with language, relying on available cognitive and contextual resources, L2 learners may notice and creatively manipulate L2

forms within a meaning-focused, communicative context. Thus, language play could be regarded as a type (and/or a facilitator) of focus on form (Sterling & Loewen, 2015). This study also addressed how PLREs might exhibit learners' L2 competence.

Furthermore, as a reviewer notes, regardless of their frequency and pervasiveness across proficiencies, some PLREs might be linguistically more sophisticated than the others. Also, how and why L2 learners do humor should be factored in. As for the linguistic complexity and sophistication involved in language play and humor, reliable measures and indices (if possible) are to be developed to distinguish less complex incidences of language play from the more sophisticated ones.

### **Ideas for More Investment in L2 Language Play and Humor**

Since this study mainly hinged on the notion of L2 language play and humor, it seems beneficial to suggest some guidelines to incorporate (humorous) language play in language teaching and learning. As a prerequisite, however, "we need to take non-serious language more seriously" (Cekaite & Aronsson, 2005, p. 169). My impression is that, generally, neither in the language teaching practice nor SLA scholarship, language play has yet treated as a serious enough, worthwhile phenomenon. That is probably why some language teachers still frown upon the humorous moments in language classes (see Banas et al., 2011; Bell, 2009; Bushnell, 2008; Heidari-Shahreza, 2018 a). In the following, some ideas to invest more in ludic language play are put forward.

Generally, awareness-raising and inductive activities can be helpful in making learners familiar and comfortable with L2 play (Bell, 2009). In this regard, encouraging learners to find and analyze instances of humor (in interaction), incorporating humorous video clips (e.g. sitcoms) and cartoons in the teaching and learning process, using drama and acting out (comic) persona in the class, and discussing the notion of humor from both the source and receiver perspective with learners are some of the recommended activities (Banas, Dunbar, Rodriguez, & Liu, 2011; Bell, 2009; Heidari-Shahreza, 2018 a,b). In addition, a linguistic focus on the humor mechanism of authentic comic texts may aid in raising the learners' awareness of L2 discourse, bringing their attention to the discursual variation in the exchange of meaning in real-life communication (Schmitz, 2002). It is also important to note that various contextualization cues such as laughter, repetition, change in prosody, use of another's voice, facial expressions and even no cue (e.g. a blank face) may signal humor (Bell, 2011). Thus, raising learners' awareness of L2 humor should also include a focus on such peripheral components of humor. In this regard, analyzing humorous video excerpts may be of help in highlighting both verbal and nonverbal (visual) aspects of humor (Bell, 2011).

Humor-integrated language learning (HILL), as reflected in the activities suggested above, may greatly aid teachers in encouraging their learners to focus on form and may notably facilitate the teaching delivery and L2 uptake (see Heidari-Shahreza & Heydari, 2018 for a practical account of such approach). Probably, PLREs would be much more pervasive within HILL and thus their beneficial effects can be more feasibly achieved. Moreover, learners are found to be (much) more playful and use a wider range of humorous forms in the virtual world (e.g., online forums and chat rooms) than in the classroom (see for example, Belz &

Reinhardt, 2004; Warner, 2004). Computer-mediated communication is probably more fertile in this regard because learners have more time and more oral and written resources to employ humor, also feeling more secure due to the anonymity of the medium (Bell, 2009). Thus, technology-enhanced instruction and e-learning can be (more) appropriate venues for playful experiment with L2 and PLREs.

A noteworthy question here is how prevalent are language play in general and PLREs in particular? In this regard Cook (2000, p. 123) contends that “[the] ubiquity of language play demands more attention in applied linguistic theory”. Thus, he implies that language play is a widespread phenomenon. To support this standpoint, a notable number of studies have also found instances of learners’ play with L2 forms especially phonological play in classroom settings (e.g., Pomerantz & Bell, 2007). As Bell (2009) indicates “the classroom may well be the best place for learners to experience humorous and creative uses of the L2.” (p. 251). Nevertheless, it should also be noted that quantitative accounts of language play and especially PLREs are remarkably scarce (Heidari-Shahreza, 2018b; Sterling & Loewen, 2015). Thus, comparisons are hard to make and it is probably not yet tenable to speak of the pervasiveness of PLREs in quantitative terms. As far as this study may tell, however, a small proportion of LREs and only a little larger amount of language play belonged to PLREs (see also Bell, 2012; Sterling & Loewen, 2015). Even assuming the low frequency of PLREs, one should not downgrade its beneficial effects as (inspired by Mark Twain’s famous quote) ‘it is not the size of PLREs in the learning context; it is the size of learning in the PLRE context’ that really counts. This is what, for instance, Bell’s (2012) study indicates, comparing the effects of LERs and PLREs on learners’ L2 acquisition and retention.

### **Suggestions for Further Research**

As Bell (2012, p. 262) states “[a]lthough the study of L2 language play is still young, it seems a promising avenue for both teachers and researchers.” In addition to research on humor and language play in classroom settings (which has relatively received more attention), it would be illuminating to investigate how playfully and creatively L2 learners deploy their linguistic resources to communicate in broader social contexts and especially in encounters with native speakers (see Bell et al., 2014). The relevant literature, at present, indicates that despite their wavering language proficiency, L2 users may successfully participate in conversational humor by joint construction of play frames, exploiting their cultural knowledge (and differences) to their advantage (Bell et al., 2014; Cheng, 2003; Habib, 2008). Furthermore, Waring (2013) contends that language play provides a communicative milieu to try out various voices and identities. She further underscores that to account for the characteristics of classroom humor, the type of activities L2 learners engage in as well as the individual differences teachers and learners bring to the class should be factored in. Thus, interested researchers may address the ‘face’ work and the realization of different identities during PLREs. Alternatively, it seems promising to see how personality traits as well as task types may contribute to the extent of language play and focus on form that is observed during learners’ class and/or group interaction. Also, comparing learning gains in playful and serious LREs, teacher- and learner-initiated PLREs, or play with versus play in language can be fruitful areas of research. As a reviewer suggests, it may also be insightful to investigate how promoting group cohesion and participation (especially within the framework of cooperative

language learning) might encourage PLREs. Likewise, examining the possible correlation between PLREs in the learners' L1 and L2 as well as exploring the (facilitative) role of their L1 can add to our current understanding of form-focused language play.

## Notes

[1] Language play for fun can further be divided into play with 'form', 'meaning' and 'use' (Cook 2000; Waring, 2013) [[back](#)]

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## Appendix A

Transcription conventions (Based on Bell et al. 2014):

.	sentence final falling intonation
,	clause-final intonation
!	animated tone
?	rising intonation
1.	glottal stop: sound abruptly cut off; self-interruption
italics	emphatic stress
CAPS	(much) louder
°words°	(much) quieter
:	after a vowel indicates elongated vowel sound
/words/	in slashes indicate uncertain transcription
wo[rds	overlapping speech
[words	
=	latching
hhh	aspiration
HHH	aspiration/laughter (while speaking)
(ironically)	description of voice quality or non-verbal action
(...)	intervening turns at talk have been omitted
(.)	pause of 1/2 second or less
(7)	pause of this many seconds
☺ great ☺	smiling voice quality

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