Multicompetence in L2 Language Play:
A Longitudinal Case Study

Nancy Bell, Stephen Skalicky, and Tom Salsbury
Washington State University

Humor and language play have been recognized as important aspects of second language (L2) development. Qualitative studies that have documented the forms and functions of language play for adult and child L2 users have taken place largely in classroom settings. In order to gain a fuller understanding of such creative manipulations by L2 users, it is necessary to examine these phenomena across a variety of contexts. In this article, we explore the ways that two L2 users marshal resources to play with language across communicative activities, for various purposes, and with a variety of interlocutors in interaction. Our goal is to gain a fuller view of our participants as multicompetent language users, specifically with respect to their playful communicative repertoires. The data consist of informal conversations which were recorded approximately every 2 weeks over 10–12 months. Episodes framed by the participants as playful were identified across all recordings and were analyzed qualitatively to document patterns of use and participation. Despite individual differences in style, both participants demonstrated sensitivity to context in their use of language play and an awareness of the ways humor functions as a social practice, subtly adjusting their strategies to changing social situations.

Keywords language play; multicompetence; longitudinal research; humor; case study

Introduction

Language play involves the ability to manipulate the forms and functions of language for language learning practice, aesthetic pleasure, entertainment, and often humor (G. Cook, 2000). Research has demonstrated how the ability to
construct language play and humor (which can be seen as one subcategory of play) in a second language (L2) can figure prominently into an individual’s ability to negotiate various social roles and identities, do facework, and communicate subtle L2 meanings, as well as simply adding to the enjoyment of L2 use and learning (see Bell, 2011, for a review). The majority of this work has focused on learners in classroom contexts as they negotiate school-based tasks and interact with their peers and instructors. While these descriptions have illuminated the important role language play can assume in this context, as well as learners’ often skillful manipulation of L2 resources, it does not allow us insight into the full range of an individual’s communicative repertoire with regard to language play and how it is constructed as both an aesthetic use of language and an important social practice. The current study represents an attempt to present such a fuller picture by examining the language play of two L2 users over a period of 10–12 months as they communicate with a variety of interlocutors while participating in different activities in a nonclassroom environment.

**Multicompetence and L2 Creativity**

The term *multicompetence* was introduced by Cook (1991) to redress what he saw as a monolingual bias in second language acquisition (SLA) research, whereby the language knowledge of multilinguals was assessed, implicitly or explicitly, with respect to an idealized native speaker. He proposed that rather than considering multiple languages as separate (and often deficient), researchers examine the whole linguistic system of multilinguals. The term multicompetence was coined to capture the “state of knowledge of a mind that knows two [or more] languages” (Cook, 1994, p. 496). Hall, Cheng, and Carlson (2006) applauded the subsequent shift away from seeing L2 users as deficient communicators that Cook’s work helped to impel. At the same time, however, they pointed out that the construct of multicompetence has been framed in ways that have prevented it from providing significant insights into the nature of language knowledge. They critiqued much of the research for continuing to treat the first and second language systems as separate, for assuming that there are differences between mono- and multicompetence, and for seeing linguistic competence in general as largely static and acontextual.

It is this third critique, in particular, that we address in this study. Hall et al. (2006) argued for a usage-based view of multilingual language knowledge (e.g., Bybee, 2008; N. Ellis, 2008; Eskildson, 2009) in order to redress the shortcomings in much of the research on multicompetence. As they explained,
such a conception of language knowledge refocuses attention to the language resources that are available to and taken up by L2 users, and the ways that those resources emerge in situated interaction. The resources that make up the communicative repertoire of any language user depend on his or her experiences, with individuals who have engaged in a broader variety of language-using situations having developed a more diverse set of resources from which to draw in any given situation.

With respect to learning more about the knowledge of L2 users, the logical outcome of this perspective is research that documents and analyzes L2 user experiences. Hall et al. (2006) described the task as “a matter of examining the varying shapes and substance of individuals’ language knowledge as they are developed within specific contexts of action” (p. 233). Thus, research that documents L2 use across activities is what is needed, as stated by Hall et al.:

[The goal] is not an understanding of language systems apart from individuals or their contexts of use. Instead, we seek to understand the means by which language users’ and learners’ involvement in the various constellations of their practices is constituted and the particular forms of language knowledge that emerge from such activity. (p. 234)

Carter (2007) made a similar argument specifically with respect to the study of linguistic creativity.

Early work on the role of identity represents one type of research that exposed the ways that L2 learners construct and position themselves in interaction (e.g., Norton Peirce, 1995; Siegal, 1996) and pointed to the socially constructed—and therefore variable—nature of linguistic performance and cognition. Similarly, scholars began to examine the variable performance of L2 users across contexts (e.g., Shea, 1994; Tarone & Liu, 1995), as well as variation in the same task carried out by different interlocutors (e.g., Coughlan & Duff, 1994).

These types of research provided evidence for the dynamic nature of competence and its sensitivity to context, even if they were not employing the construct of multicompetence. Many areas of applied linguistics have since refocused their perspective in a way that urges us to look at the whole learner and learning situation. Complexity theory (Larsen-Freeman, 1997; Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008), ecological perspectives (Kramsch, 2002, 2008), and certain strands of emergentism (N. Ellis, 2008; N. Ellis & Larsen-Freeman, 2006), encourage us to place descriptions of L2 users’ situated deployment of their linguistic resources in a broader context, taking into account cognitive, social,
affective, linguistic, interactional, and historical factors. This wider focus also pushes us to examine forms of interaction that have historically been neglected in research on L2 development, validating the study not only of referential uses of language, but of playful and aesthetic ones as well.

(Linguistic) Resources in L2 Language Play

Although few studies have addressed language play in terms of multicompetence (but see our discussion below of Belz, 2002; Belz & Reinhardt, 2004; Pomerantz & Bell, 2007), many have highlighted the resources L2 users deploy for play and humor. Here we restrict our review to research involving older adolescents and adults in nonclassroom contexts and studies that have explicitly engaged with the construct of multicompetence. As a whole, this research suggests that L2 users tend to draw on a broader range of strategies in negotiating L2 play than they do in the classroom.

Davies’s (2003) study represents something of a bridge between classroom and nonclassroom studies, as she recorded and analyzed conversations among a group of beginning-level English language learners and an American peer, in a context that was fairly similar to that of our research. The groups were organized under the auspices of the Intensive English Program (IEP), but members met voluntarily to practice their conversation skills. Her study highlights how these beginning L2 users collaboratively constructed play frames, relying heavily on prosodic, pragmatic, and nonverbal resources to supplement their limited linguistic proficiency. Cheng (2003) and Habib (2008) each examined L2 humor used in casual conversations among friends, while Adelswärd and Öberg (1998) and Rogerson-Revell (2007) reported on the use of humor in intercultural business meetings. All four of these studies emphasize interactive collaboration and negotiation in the construction of play frames, as well as the use of cultural knowledge as an important resource. In particular, Cheng (2003) and Adelswärd and Öberg (1998) are valuable in emphasizing that L2 users are not always at a disadvantage when it comes to using and understanding L2 humor, and instead they are able to deploy their resources in ways that construct them as full conversational participants.

Recorded data collected by L2 users in a variety of situations over a period of 1–2 years are examined in several reports by Bell (2005, 2006, 2007a, 2007b). This work documents the ways in which L2 users are able to engage in more creative uses of their L2 resources with increasing proficiency (Bell, 2005). Bell (2007a) is helpful in noting how certain resources are not deployed for
playful purposes. For instance, participants avoided taboo topics or potentially face-threatening humor such as teasing. Similarly, Bell’s (2007b) analysis of the narratives of this group of L2 users found a dearth of stories about the speaker. Instead, these women tended to construct humorous narratives that often showed a third party in a bad light, while at the same time portraying themselves positively. While Bell (2006) focuses on one participant and the ways that she was positioned by her native English speaking interlocutors, it is of interest here in that it clearly demonstrates how competence in language play is both socially constructed and variable. The success of this L2 user’s attempts to engage in play was highly dependent on her interlocutors and their degree of experience in intercultural communication.

With respect to studies that have drawn on multicompetence in their discussion of language play, Belz (2002) was the first to explicitly link the two, proposing that “hybridized, form-based adult learner language play may represent the emergence of multicompetence in the learner” and that such “creative uses of language may be iconic and indexic signs of the destabilization and subsequent reconceptualization of the learner’s subjective sense of person and his or her relations to the world” (p. 21). In this study, advanced students of German at a university in the United States were asked to produce a text written in German and one or more other languages. The large amount of language play in these texts was unexpected and did not appear to be motivated by deficiency. Additional data collection included some interviews, which confirmed this. The students’ explanations of their code-switching was related instead to a growing sense of competence and in most cases “they explain[ed] their linguistic action in terms of an emerging metalinguistic awareness and appreciation of a variety of L1 and L2 codal properties” (Belz, 2002, p. 23). The multilingual language play of these L2 users suggested that the learning of a foreign language contributed to a new sense of self and new ways of seeing the world. Belz and Reinhardt’s (2004) case study of telecollaboration between Seamus, an American student learning German, and his class-assigned German keypal extended these findings to include play in a new modality. Pomerantz and Bell (2007) engaged with the prior research of Belz, as well as with Hall et al.’s (2006) critiques of multicompetence to emphasize the social nature of linguistic knowledge and the importance of diverse experiences in the development of a range of L2 linguistic resources. They examined the language play that occurred in an advanced Spanish conversation class in a U.S. university and highlighted the ways that such communication, while often unsanctioned by the instructor, allowed students to use Spanish in new and—for the classroom—unusual ways. These new communicative experiences also at
least temporarily allowed for alternative conceptualizations of expertise to be accepted.

The research we have discussed demonstrates that L2 users draw on a wide variety of resources to play with language and that the nature of L2 play varies across contexts. In the present study we aim to examine these processes more closely by documenting the ways that two L2 users of English engaged in language play with a variety of interlocutors and activities. Whereas previous studies took the playful communicative mode itself as a kind of multicompetence, here we focus on the linguistic repertoire as evidence of the participants’ dynamic knowledge of language play.

**Method**

**Procedure**

The corpus used here was originally collected by the third author for the purposes of studying the acquisition of modality (see Salsbury & Bardovi-Harlig, 2001); however, the rich conversational nature of the data lends itself well to the study of individual participants as case studies. The two participants selected as the focus of the present study, who will be introduced in greater detail below, both started at level one of a six-level intensive English program. Students generally finished the language program in 1 year and then left to begin their undergraduate studies. The elicitation sessions were presented to participants as opportunities to practice conversation skills with a conversation partner. These sessions were typically held in teachers’ offices during the participants’ regularly scheduled speaking/listening classes, as the entire level-one class had been recruited for the research project. Class size ranged from 10 to 15 students, and in the first months of the study, all the students in the class participated in the sessions at the same time. Later in the year of observation, elicitation sessions were held outside of the students’ regularly scheduled classes. This is because participants advanced through the program and entered classes with nonparticipating students. Study participants, including the two who are the focus of the current research, came to the elicitation sessions voluntarily and were interviewed approximately every 2 weeks over a period of 10–12 months. The interviews were audio-recorded and conducted either by the third author or by graduate students enrolled in a course on SLA. Occasionally, if there were not enough interviewers, participants were interviewed in pairs. Interviewers changed every 3–4 months. Tables 1 and 2 provide details concerning the interview schedule and interlocutors for each participant.
Table 1  Moussa’s interview schedule

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview session</th>
<th>Interviewer</th>
<th>Other students</th>
<th>Number of weeks between next interview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 (11–13–97)</td>
<td>Jane</td>
<td>Talal</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 (12–4–97)</td>
<td>Jane</td>
<td>Talal</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 (1–21–98)</td>
<td>Philip</td>
<td>Ahmed</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 (2–4–98)</td>
<td>Philip</td>
<td>Ahmed</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 (2–18–98)</td>
<td>Philip</td>
<td>Ahmed</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 (4–1–98)</td>
<td>Philip</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 (4–16–98)</td>
<td>Tom</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 (5–20–98)</td>
<td>Tom</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 (6–9–98)</td>
<td>Tom</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 (6–17–98)</td>
<td>Tom</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 (7–10–98)</td>
<td>Tom</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 (7–17–98)</td>
<td>Tom</td>
<td>Takako</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 (7–24–98)</td>
<td>Tom</td>
<td>Takako</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 (8–6–98)</td>
<td>Tom</td>
<td>Faisal</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2  Faisal’s interview schedule

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview session</th>
<th>Interviewer</th>
<th>Other students</th>
<th>Number of weeks between next interview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 (9–9–97)</td>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 (9–23–97)</td>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 (10–7–97)</td>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 (10–28–97)</td>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 (11–11–97)</td>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 (12–2–97)</td>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 (1–21–98)</td>
<td>David</td>
<td>Saeed</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 (2–4–98)</td>
<td>David</td>
<td>Saeed</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 (2–18–98)</td>
<td>David</td>
<td>Saeed</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 (3–10–98)</td>
<td>Ross</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 (3–31–98)</td>
<td>Ross</td>
<td>Abdul</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 (4–14–98)</td>
<td>Tom</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 (7–15–98)</td>
<td>Tom</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 (7–28–98)</td>
<td>Tom</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 (8–6–98)</td>
<td>Tom</td>
<td>Moussa</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Activities designed to elicit modals were made available to the interviewers in each session. Topics were never repeated and learners chose what they wanted to respond to. The tasks included picture descriptions; emotion and topic cards designed to elicit stories from the participants; hypothetical cards regarding students’ wishes, hopes, and dreams; and questions about learning English. The preference was for conversations to flow naturally, and the interviewers were instructed to ask follow-up questions and to engage the learners in discussion. Thus, often what began as a semi-structured activity gave way to free, spontaneous conversation.

Because language play was not the focus of the original study, the first step for the present study was to transcribe the interaction in more detail, including noting features that are commonly used to signal play, such as intonation, laughter, and smile voice. Upon completion of the transcription, two stages of coding were undertaken, with the first and second authors each taking responsibility for one of the two participants. In the first round of coding, possible instances of language play were identified using signals such as laughter, smile voice, hearer reaction, or unusual or exaggerated language use. We included both sequences of language play that were humorous, as well as instances in which the learner appeared to be playing in Lantolf’s (1997) sense of experimentation. These sequences were then examined by both coders, and instances in which the playful status of the interaction was questionable were eliminated from the final corpus. In the second round, each token was coded for the type (e.g., narrative, wordplay) and function (e.g., entertainment, mitigating face threats) of language play, the ways in which it was contextualized (e.g., intonation, smile voice), and the topics of play. Any discrepancies were resolved through discussion. This portion of the analysis allowed us to then examine the different ways that humor and play were used by each participant across the varied sessions. These categories were not quantified, largely due to the multiple codes which sometimes applied to the categories of type and function. For instance, a tease might also involve wordplay and a narrative may function to entertain, as well as increase affiliation among interlocutors. Therefore, quantification provided less insight than did the qualitative analysis.

Participants
A native of Mali and 22 years old at the start of the study, Moussa was adding English to a linguistic repertoire that already included Bambara and French. It was his first experience living abroad, and he took his opportunity to pursue higher education in the United States seriously, dreaming of one day becoming the president of Mali. Very friendly and easy-going, Moussa had good
relationships with his interviewers and co-participants and seemed to work hard to make sure that all conversational partners were comfortable.

Faisal hailed from Saudi Arabia and was 19 years old during the interviews. Faisal’s mother was a Christian from Lebanon and his father was Muslim, which helps explain why his family allowed him the freedom to choose his own religion. His choice of Christianity caused some conflicts with some of the Muslim men in the English program, and Faisal also spoke at times about problems with his father. He placed great value in working and providing for himself. This helps explain a 12-week hiatus he took from the program, where he worked at local restaurants and businesses in order to earn money to support himself. He also dated an American girl for a period of time. Although this hiatus jeopardized his status as a student in the program, Faisal’s English proficiency increased dramatically during and after his absence. As Faisal’s proficiency increased, his personality changed dramatically, revealing an aggressive, mischievous Faisal, full of bravado and eager to shock the interviewers and other participants.

Case Study Results: Moussa

Moussa’s observed tendency to put others at ease was reflected in his general style of language play. For instance, he often chose self-deprecating humor, rather than other, aggressive forms. He also used humor as a means of mitigating face threats and managing potentially uncomfortable interactions. In what follows, we begin by describing a variety of resources that Moussa drew on to construct humor, with examples in order to provide a sense of his style of language play. Then, we focus on one particular type of humor, teasing, to illustrate how Moussa altered the ways that he played in his L2 across contexts. All examples are numbered consecutively, immediately followed by the date on which the data were recorded given in parenthesis. The transcription conventions used are explained in the Appendix.

Resources for L2 Language Play

Aspects of the immediate context and/or co-text often provided affordances for language play, but Moussa also drew on more abstract resources. The topic of language learning, for obvious reasons, was a popular resource for humor and one of the first things Moussa joked about, telling self-deprecating stories about his experiences learning English. Other frequently used resources for language play included exaggeration, the activity itself, and the language itself, and below we provide examples of each of these.
Exaggeration was a resource Moussa employed to both signal and construct humor. In Example 1, which illustrates this technique, a discussion of the possibility in 1998 of a U.S.-led invasion of Iraq had become somewhat heated, with the other interviewee, Ahmed, rather aggressively trying to get the interviewer, Philip, to concede that the United States would be responsible for an invasion, given its power in the world.

Example 1 (2–18–98)

1 Ahmed: who’s the powerful country in the world right now?
2 Philip: I don’t know
3 Ahmed: who’s the powerful country in the world right now
4 Moussa: 😛you, you 😛!
5 Philip: not me, I’m just Philip Johnson
6 Moussa: 😛you you you 😛!
7 Ahmed: United States.

Moussa’s interjection, “you you you,” is contextualized as playful through his smile. The overdirectness, including the repetition, however, is also used to both construct and contextualize this as a mock accusation. Calling upon Philip to claim responsibility for the actions of his entire country is a way of mitigating the face threat by exaggerating it, thus simultaneously commenting upon it as ridiculous. Exaggeration is a simple humorous mechanism and one that is unlikely to be misconstrued, as the absurd content serves as a contextualization cue. In this case, the co-text provides a trigger, as Moussa has only to answer Ahmed’s question. Yet, while the humor may be simple, the social function is sophisticated, as Moussa simultaneously aligns himself with Ahmed through his accusation and, through play, deflects the face threat that Ahmed’s direct questioning poses to Philip. This was the third consecutive interview that these three had participated in together, and although their interaction had become increasingly jocular, often including playful aggression, this particular topic was getting heated, making Moussa’s interjection an appropriate way to diffuse some of the tension.

In Example 2, the activity proposed by the interviewer, again Philip, affords Moussa the opportunity for language play. This task was framed as a fortune-telling activity and required the participants to describe the future. Moussa predicts a rather tame future for the other student. Ahmed is a fellow Muslim, but from the United Arab Emirates, and Moussa imagines that he will marry a Muslim woman.
Example 2 (2–4–98)

1 Moussa: yes, I think his wife will be from U.A.E. because I know him, his religion, maybe if his religion, ah, his religion is Islam, Islam, he’s Muslim, so he need to have, ah, like ah, wife, his wife must be Muslim

2 Ahmed: no, you can marry Christian girl, or, I can marry, it’s ok

3 Moussa: yeah but this is what I see.

4 Philip: this is what the fortune teller sees.

5 Ahmed: ok

Moussa does not initially present himself as a confident fortune teller. A hesitant delivery combined with hedges (“I think” and “maybe if”) frame the first part of his prediction for Ahmed as a rather weak assertion. However, once he has established Ahmed’s religion (“he’s Muslim”), his choice of the modals “need to” and “must” present the likelihood of his wife sharing the same religion as an obligation. Ahmed seems to orient to the obligatory nature of these modals, which can in fact be heard as a general statement of truth for all Muslims, and protests that it is possible for Muslims to marry Christians. Moussa acknowledges this, minimally (“yeah”), but counters Ahmed with an assertion of his authority within the task: “but this is what I see.” This also serves to particularize the statement. Moussa does not employ prosodic cues that stereotypically index fortune telling. However, his delivery of this line with a tone of exaggerated authority, including an utterance-final fall in intonation usually used to indicate certainty or finality, suggests his voicing of the fortune teller as an authority figure. Indeed, Philip confirms this as the fortune teller’s authoritative voice, following Moussa’s assertion in line 5 with a parallel construction, using “the fortune teller” in place of Moussa’s “I.” Thus, Moussa’s ability to experiment with ways of voicing authority in English was scaffolded by both the activity and the interviewer.

Language itself also provided Moussa with a resource for play. As part of a semi-structured activity, in Example 3 Moussa was narrating the interviewer’s own life to him. When describing how Tom (who is the third author of this paper and the architect of the original study) left a teaching position in Austria, Moussa made use of a phrase most commonly used by or with children, saying that Tom had “said bye bye in Austria” and then returned to the United States to teach. This strategy is used again about 2 weeks later when Moussa referred to Saddam Hussein as a “bad, bad boy” in the same discussion of the Gulf War in Example 1. Moussa’s lexicon at this time encompassed numerous terms for
common activities. Thus, we argue that Moussa was intentional in choosing these formulaic sequences normally used with children, rather than using them because he did not know or could not remember a more normative way of expressing these ideas. Moussa also experimented with new terms across taping sessions. For example, in one case his attention was drawn to the use and connotations of “on the bottom” and “beneath.” During one session, Tom asked Moussa and Takako, a Japanese woman who was also being interviewed, how they would feel if they were “at the top of their field.” This led Moussa to discuss the relationship with other colleagues, and the importance of being humble about one’s success, especially in front of others who enjoy less success.

Example 3 (7/24/98)

1. Moussa: because if you are in the top(,) of your field
2. Tom: mm-hm
3. Moussa: you might have colleagues. [no?
4. Tom: [mm-hm
5. Moussa: so if you are in the top, that’s mean that they are (.) on the bottom of you
6. Tom: mm
7. Moussa: right? =
8. Tom: = right they’re bel- they’re beneath you (M begins laughing) 😊 yeah at the bottom of you
9. would be like😊 (lots of laughter from everyone)
10. Moussa: 😊beneath and bottom are different😊
11. Tom: yeah you have to say they’re beneath you or below you

In line 7, it is possible that Moussa’s confirmation check was aimed at seeking agreement with the idea, but it may also have been a question about his word choice, which is how Tom responds to it, providing “beneath you” as an alternative formulation and later (line 10) “below you.” The laughter in lines 8 and 9 seems likely to be due to some nonverbal action, probably illustrating Moussa’s “at the bottom” phrase. At the end of this extract, Moussa’s confirmation check that “beneath” and “bottom” are used differently, suggests that neither term is new to him, but that he is now aware that they are not equivalent.

Following this, the three continue to discuss the situation, coming up with additional ways to explain it, including terms such as subordinate and unequal. About 10 minutes later, Takako tells a story about a paper on which she received an “F,” and the three begin to joke about how the paper probably merited something worse than an “F,” with Moussa laughingly calling it “on the bottom.”
At this point, Tom launches into a more detailed description of “bottom,” explaining that it also refers to the buttocks. This also leads Tom to refine his definition of “beneath,” explaining that it is highly insulting to say that someone is “beneath you.” Moussa asks whether there is a nice way to say this and Tom states frankly that there is not, but then suggests that you might tell someone that you find something “insulting,” if you needed to express this sentiment tactfully. This is a long discussion with a great deal of laughter and back and forth among the participants and thus probably memorable. It is therefore notable when Moussa, just 2 weeks later, opts to use this phrase that he has clearly been told is offensive. This time, shown in Example 4, the two students have been asked what they would do if they were president of the world. Faisal (our second case study participant) has been presenting an idyllic picture of a world in which one language is used by all, and there is universal equality. Moussa uses this as an opportunity to try out his new insulting phrase “beneath me.”

Example 4 (8/6/98)

1 Faisal: no different between like colors, no different between
[like women and men
2 Moussa: [ok
3 ok you can say, you can say, you will make everything ah same
like um no racism, or
4 discrimination, or you can say that. but if you are talking
about money, that’s mean you
5 have (.). you have your (.). your memories beneath me (laugh)
6 Tom: you have your what? (laughing)
7 Faisal: what?
8 Moussa: how AHA people get / / if you if you want do that nobody will
work. how can you do
9 that.

Moussa had a competitive teasing relationship with his fellow interviewee, and while it is unclear what he means when he tells Faisal that he has his “memories beneath me,” the playful framing of this is unequivocal. In addition, because Tom is the one who introduced Moussa to the differences in these terms, there may well be an element of performance for that specific audience, who not only shares this language as a resource for humor, allowing Moussa to make an inside joke, but who is also in a position to evaluate Moussa’s use of the term. The disfluencies leading up to the phrase suggest experimentation
and creativity with new language. Moussa appears to have internalized the derogatory connotations of something being “beneath” someone, as in line 8 it becomes clear that he is criticizing Faisal’s plan as impossible, and the feedback he received from his interlocutors may help him begin to refine his understanding of how this phrase is used—either playfully, as here, or seriously.

**Multicompetence in Teasing**

This section represents a smaller case study within Moussa’s larger data set. Here we focus on one form of humor, teasing, in order to illustrate the ways that it changed across various situations, activities, and interlocutors. The fifth session stood out as qualitatively very different from the earlier sessions, with the emergence of a great deal of the playful back-and-forth interaction that constitutes banter and sustained teasing across a number of turns. Not only did Moussa seem to become much more at ease with the interview process in general, but this was the third session conducted with both Ahmed, a classmate with whom he was now on quite familiar terms, as well as Philip, the very friendly interviewer seen in Examples 1 and 2 earlier. The extract in Example 5 comes from the beginning of an extended segment of play that continued in the same vein for a good portion of the tape. In response to self-pitying complaints that Moussa had been making earlier in the session (not shown here) about how bored he was during his free time, Philip has suggested that Moussa call Ahmed and they both come to visit him. Moussa, however, does not think Ahmed will do this.

**Example 5 (2–18–98)**

1. **Moussa:** Ahmed is really busy.
2. **Ahmed:** just give me a call, I will, I will, I will have time for you, why not.
3. **Philip:** never has time for you.
4. **Moussa:** ᕰAhmed now is businessman<dddd
5. **Philip:** business man?
6. **Moussa:** ᕰbusiness man<dddd
7. **Philip:** isn’t that what we found out last, is that we got all these plans?
8. **Ahmed:** I’m waiting for anyone to call me
9. **Philip:** you’re waiting for people to call you?
10. **Ahmed:** yes, anytime, anytime
11. **Moussa:** ᕰhoo hoo<dddd no, this is not true because anytime you really, you are not in your
12 Ahmed: did you try? you didn’t try.
13 Moussa: no, I didn’t try, but I guess you, you are, you are not in your
14 Ahmed: you are guessing. Give me a call anytime
15 Moussa: because Monday I saw you in [dormitory name] you were with your friends, so I
16 guess you businessman

While the extract in Example 5 does not open with overt markers of play, the participants seem to be building toward it. Both Moussa and Philip construct exaggerated portrayals of how busy Ahmed is (Moussa uses the upgrader “really” and, in line 3, Philip relies on a formulaic construction that not only exaggerates Ahmed’s business, but also seems to poke fun at Moussa’s self-pity). In addition, both refer to Ahmed in the third person, even though he is present, one way of contextualizing a tease (Straehle, 1993). For his part, Ahmed follows the most common convention of responding to teases, by orienting to the serious message contained in the tease, rather than the joke (Drew, 1987). In line 4, Moussa begins something that more closely resembles teasing, as he smilingly refers to Ahmed (a student), as a “businessman.” From the whole set of extended banter, not shown here due to space considerations, it is apparent that, for Moussa, a “businessman” is someone who has many social contacts and always has plans with others. The teasing, gentle as it is, is only directed between the two classmates in this session.

As Moussa became more familiar with his peers, his teasing sometimes was much more aggressive, as in Example 6, where Moussa responds bitingly to Faisal’s tease. Although Moussa and Faisal were not friends outside of the program, they both seemed to enjoy the joking relationship that they had developed within it, including the sort of mock aggression displayed in this extract.

Example 6 (8–6–98)

1 Faisal: you gonna leave [name of city]? oh that’s great!
2 Moussa: yeah that’s great, because Faisal is here, that’s why I’m leaving!

When Faisal learns that Moussa is transferring to a school in another state, he jokingly expresses happiness at this departure. This playful animosity is immediately returned, with Moussa naming Faisal as the reason for his departure. In doing so, he demonstrates his sociopragmatic awareness of certain ways that teases in English can be manipulated to express degrees of playful aggression. Based on their observations of teasing practices in the United States
and Argentina, Boxer and Cortés-Conde (1997) described the aggressiveness of teasing on a continuum that runs from bonding to biting. Moussa adjusts the degree of aggression along this continuum through his choice of contextualization cues and topic. Neither smiles nor laughter are evident in this exchange, and the content, as well, places the tease on the more “biting” end of the scale. With Faisal, a familiar peer, Moussa could be quite direct.

In contrast, with Tom, who was older, a teacher in the English language institute, and the organizer of these sessions, a more gentle approach was in order. In Example 7, for instance, in his third consecutive session with Tom, Moussa teases him about having never been to Moussa’s home continent, despite having travelled widely.

Example 7 (6–9–98)

1 Moussa: you /been/ uh quite like every place but ☺you didn’t touch in Africa☺ hhh
2 Tom: ☺I know, [I haven’t been to Africa☺
3 Moussa: [hhh huh huh huh huh [huh
4 Tom: [hhh I know

Although this is clearly a tease—another mock accusation—it is a mild jab and carefully framed with smiling and a laugh particle. On Boxer and Cortés-Conde’s (1997) continuum of tease aggressiveness, this can barely be considered a nip. Teasing is an inherently dangerous speech act, thus it is not surprising that Moussa has waited 7 months before teasing Tom (or, at least, doing so on tape). That he does now suggests that his relationship with Tom is becoming closer. However, Moussa is still being careful in his teasing, constructing it on a topic that is not particularly personal and in a way that is highly unlikely to cause offense. The extract in Example 7 illustrates Moussa’s ability to use his L2 resources to construct a potentially face-threatening act toward a higher status acquaintance in an appropriate manner. Indeed, Tom responds with agreement and even some laughter to this gentle poke at his shortcomings as a traveler.

Case Study Results: Faisal

Whereas Moussa constructed himself as a “nice guy” throughout the interviews, Faisal successfully filled the role of “bad boy” during his sessions, and this quickly became apparent in his humor. Although initially shy, Faisal progressively exhibited more aggressive instances of teasing and banter, which typically emerged as bravado among other males. Below we catalog Faisal’s engagement
with language play in a similar manner to Moussa’s. We begin by describing his general style of language play and the resources that he drew on to construct it, paying special attention to the effects of different interlocutors, as we did with Moussa. Then, because considerable differences can be seen in his play before and after the 3-month break he took from the IEP to work various fast-food and service industry jobs, we devote one section to discussing the effects that these new language-using experiences seemed to have on his language play.

**Resources for L2 Language Play**

The first third of Faisal’s interviews were conducted with the same interviewer, Sarah, who was in her early 40s, and with no other students. Although the two developed a comfortable rapport during their six sessions together, Sarah framed these sessions as “work,” and remained committed to completing the assigned tasks. This orientation, as well as the differences their age and gender likely played in creating distance between them, left little room for casual conversation. The latter two-thirds of the sessions took place with a variety of different (all male) interviewers and often with peers present, marking a shift away from Sarah’s serious approach toward a more casual, conversational interview style. This new, more flexible format, along with the change in the level of formality, provided Faisal with opportunities to construct humor and language play, and a more rambunctious, rebellious Faisal emerged. His humor centered on teasing, language play, and potentially scandalous topics.

A resource frequently used by Faisal to construct teasing was one he had been familiar with since the beginning of his participation in the study: the learning task itself. With his new interlocutors and the less goal-driven conceptualization of the sessions, Faisal began providing facetious answers to questions, as in Example 8, where he uses the question as a way to make fun of the other participant.

**Example 8 (2–4–98)**

1. David okay Faisal, what will Saeed be doing in two years.
2. Faisal you know he steal some money from his, he’s planning to steal uh some money from
3. /any friend/ /???
4. Saeed /???
5. David hhh
6. Faisal I know he’s gonna steal /???,
7. Saeed if I can do that I will steal your money
8. David hhh
The task set forth by the interviewer, David, was to describe what the other participant would be doing in the future. Faisal’s jab at Saeed (line 2) is phrased as a legitimate, if absurd, answer to David’s question. Although some of this recording was indecipherable, we can discern Faisal, in line 6, repeating the playful accusation, aggravating it with “I know.” We also see David supporting the playful frame in lines 5 and 8 with laughter, providing acceptance or even encouragement of Faisal’s ability to both remain on task and tease his classmate. While it was easy to initially attribute Faisal’s teasing in these interviews to the presence of the other student participant and the friendly rivalry that existed between them (perhaps in part due to their shared Middle Eastern background), the role of the interviewer should also be considered. It is difficult to picture this level of teasing occurring had the initial interviewer, Sarah, been in charge of this session.

Perhaps even more difficult to envision, however, would have been a tease directed toward an interviewer. Yet, later in this same session, when the participants were asked to describe the interviewer’s life in the future, Faisal did just that. This is shown in Example 9. His sociopragmatic awareness of the inherently aggressive potential of teasing is evident. Although this tease is very similar as the one in the Example 8, he frames it quite differently.

Example 9 (2–4–98)

1 David okay good, and what about the future.
2 Faisal you’ll still, uh, teach English,
3 Saeed you think he will still.
4 Faisal and I think you and, (.) HHH and he steal something, I’m kidding! no maybe you will
5 have the because the, because because you will have 2 years uh, 2 years more to
6 finish your major and you have job and you have money.
7 David: very good, good job.

In contrast to the previous tease, this one is constructed in a much less threatening manner. It is more clearly framed as play, with both an initial laugh particle and then with smiling voice as Faisal utters the tease. He also overtly marks the speech act as “kidding” (line 4), making his nonserious intent clear, and immediately launches into a serious answer to David’s question. Finally, David’s response in line 7 is a confirmation that Faisal has completed the task set forth. There is no laughter from David that encourages this teasing, but there is also no indication that the jab was inappropriate. Even though Faisal’s earlier
tease of Saeed was at least implicitly encouraged by the interviewer, Faisal still frames this tease with multiple markers and also immediately retracts it, suggesting an awareness of the need to adjust teases according to their targets.

The next two examples involve the same participants and demonstrate how Faisal used exaggeration and language itself as resources for play and humor. In the first extract, shown in Example 10, David is engaging the participants in small talk, rather than strictly following the tasks. His question about activities they do with their friends provides Faisal with an opportunity to construct his mischievous and even defiant identity, and then to play with language.

Example 10 (1–21–98)

1. David: and what kinds of things do you do with your friends?
2. Faisal: oh every weekend drink.
3. David: \(\text{'}\text{'}\text{'}\text{uh huh}\text{'}\text{'}\text{'}
4. Interviewees: hhh
5. David: you drink water?
6. Interviewees: (laughter) =
7. Faisal: = HHH ☺yeah, yeah, water, liquid or coffee, milk, drink tea, coke, drink coke,☺no no no, drink beer, some vodka wine /that too/,

Faisal and his friends at the university are all under the age of 21, so he is, in effect, admitting to underage drinking in the second line, as well as to something that is against his Muslim faith. Although David’s response in line 3 is noncommittal, laughter from both interviewees suggests that they are orienting to the alcoholic connotation of the verb “drink.” David then feigns innocence with his question (line 5), and the second instance of joint laughter from the participants seems to confirm that they did indeed interpret Faisal’s use of the word “drink” in terms of alcohol connotation and recognized David’s suggestion of water as semantic play. Even though this play with ambiguity provides Faisal with an opportunity to deny drinking alcohol, in line 6 we instead see him adopt David’s suggestion, providing an exaggerated list of nonalcoholic beverages, smiling all the while. Finally, in a move common in responses to teases (Drew, 1987; Schegloff, 2001), Faisal issues an explicit denial and seriously addresses the content of David’s (playful) question by providing examples of the types of alcohol he and his friends drink. Although admitting to drinking was a somewhat risky move, the apparent success of his joke suggests that his assessment of it as appropriate to this context was correct.
About 1 month later, we see a similar pattern, with Faisal finding an opportunity to construct humor around the even more daring topic of sex when he is asked about how he spent Valentine’s Day. In the extract in Example 11, he again plays with language, this time using pragmatics as the resource.

Example 11 (2–18–98)

1 David: Faisal, did you do anything?
2 Faisal: yea:h
3 David: whatdja do.
4 Faisal: ◦ many things ◦ [hhh
5 David: [hhh (laugh)
6 Saeed: [/???
7 Faisal: [/??/ actually uh to /??/ the:: night. I went with my girlfriend to restaurant

While David’s first question technically requires only a yes or no answer, it is conventionally heard as an invitation to report one’s activities. Faisal uses a dispreferred response, combined with a smile, to construct a play frame. This minimal response, along with the ambiguity of “do anything,” allows him to insinuate that his activities were interesting and probably salacious in nature. David seems to have oriented to this, or at least to the playfulness of Faisal’s response, as he, too, smiles when he presses Faisal to elaborate (line 3). Faisal again provides a vague answer, spoken quietly and with a sly intonation that even more clearly indexes lasciviousness. The laugh particle at the end of his utterance is taken up successfully as an invitation to joint laughter (Jefferson, 1979) by the interviewer. Thus, in Example 11 we see Faisal exploiting semantic and pragmatic resources to initiate humor and successfully engage his interlocutor in its construction.

Language Play Following Faisal’s Break From the IEP

As discussed above, a 3-month gap exists in Faisal’s data because he temporarily left the IEP to take various jobs. He developed a circle of American friends and began dating an American girlfriend during this time. He returned to the program with a much stronger command of colloquial English, and these experiences provided him with new resources for language play. While Faisal’s preference for teasing and wordplay continued, particularly constructed around potentially risqué topics, in this section we examine the new resources he had developed to construct such play.
Much of Faisal’s interest in playing with English resembled play as experimentation and practice (Lantolf, 1997) to a greater extent than play for entertainment. Most prominent was his newfound repertoire of swear words (e.g., he refers to a coworker as a “dumb bitch” [7–15–98]), sometimes combined with markers of African American English, as when Faisal explained that it is not good to work and take classes at the same time “because your classes be fucked up if you work” [7–28–98]. In another instance, the interviewer used the idiomatic expression “new flame” to refer to a girl that Faisal was telling a story about. Faisal immediately noticed this and was able to decode its meaning, responding with laughter and repeating the term approvingly (“flame, that’s good” [7–15–98]). Perhaps a clearer example of experimentation is when he used the phrase “smart crazy” (7–28–98) to describe himself, and after the interviewer questioned the exact meaning, Faisal agreed that “irresponsible” was the word he sought. This demonstrated a willingness on Faisal’s part to creatively combine words to express concepts for which he lacked one specific term.

Tom, the interviewer in these final sessions, had met with Faisal just once before his break from the English program. In that interview, which was conducted without other students, very little of the aggressive, boisterous Faisal showed up, although Tom exhibited a willingness to play along with—and even encouraged—off-task, playful talk. This prior experience would already have provided Faisal with signals about the relaxed structure of the interview, and as he tested the boundaries of appropriacy he quickly found that there were few constraints. Tom exhibited tacit approval of Faisal’s swearing and was unflappable in the face of his belligerence. He also encouraged Faisal to speak openly, ensuring him of the confidentiality of the recordings. This likely provided a green light for Faisal to not only experiment with slang and colloquialisms, but also to engage in more aggressive types of teasing and banter than he had previously done.

Example 12 illustrates Faisal’s more aggressive style of teasing and also includes the use of slang. When Faisal admitted to having some difficulty in speaking to American girls, Tom offered to help him, which provided an opening for Faisal to tease.

Example 12 (7–15–98)

1 Tom: well you know I’ve talked to a lot of American girls, so if you
2 ever need advice,
3 [hhh (laugh)]
4 Faisal: [hhh I can, we:ll (laugh)
Tom: I can tell you

Faisal: I think, you’re a pimp in high school.

Tom: what’s that?

Faisal: you’re pimp in [high school

Tom: [me! [:no!: (,) no, hardly!

Faisal: [(laughing)

While Tom only admitted to having experience talking to girls, Faisal calls him a “pimp,” implying that Tom had many sexual experiences with girls during high school. The word appears to have been used here in a modern American colloquial sense, meant as a measure of success with females, not as a means of employment. The use of the word “pimp” is what constructs this as a tease, because, Faisal does not employ additional (verbal) contextualization cues. Furthermore, without its use, the utterance would likely have been far less humorous (e.g., if Faisal had said “I bet you had a lot of girlfriends”). Tom’s vigorous denial of the content of Faisal’s utterance demonstrates his orientation to it as a tease, as this is a common response to teasing, as noted earlier (Drew, 1987). This extract stands in contrast to Example 9, where Faisal teased David, but immediately mitigated the jab. Although both interviewers had only met twice when he teased them, in this later exchange in Example 12 Faisal teases Tom directly and without mitigation. Two factors seem most likely to account for this difference in teasing style: Faisal’s break from the program and Tom’s interview style.

Not only did Faisal appear to acquire access to an additional set of resources following his experiences in the working world, he also deployed them in new ways, using humor as a strategy for doing mitigation in sociopragmatically appropriate ways. In Example 13, Tom and Faisal had been discussing Faisal’s ongoing concerns that his numerous absences were going to jeopardize his status in the program. Tom agreed that the situation was quite serious, and as they discussed the possible consequences of these absences, Faisal jokingly suggested that Tom could step in and help him.

Example 13 (7–28–98)

Tom: if you get too many absences, /[then like/

Faisal: [they’re gonna kick me out.

Tom: yeah they’ll kick you out. I mean, you know, provided you don’t get,

Faisal: [:no:, you’re gonna save my ass!

Tom: what’s that?

Faisal: you’re gonna save my ass.
In line 4, Faisal playfully proposes that Tom will do something to prevent him from being expelled from the program. The request is actually framed quite forcefully, using the imperative; however, it is also clearly framed as play, as he utters it while smiling. The use of mild profanity in the formulaic sequence “save my ass” further serves to present the request aggressively, but playfully, and is quite typical of Faisal’s self-presentation at this time, particularly in conversation with Tom, who, as has been noted, encouraged Faisal’s boisterousness. Because Tom was also an instructor in the program, it is reasonable for Faisal to think that he might be able to solicit support from him. At the same time, such a request represents a considerable imposition and thus presents a serious face-threat. By framing his request as a joke, Faisal is able to put forth the proposition, but also deny that he did it seriously, in case his interlocutor is offended. In fact, Tom acknowledges the humor (line 7), but aligns himself with the institution in his response by explaining seriously what Faisal will need to do. Although his request was not successful, Faisal at least achieved using humor itself as a resource for appropriately negotiating a delicate social situation. In doing so with an air of carefree bluster, he also managed to present these concerns as distant from himself.

**Discussion**

In contrast to other areas of pragmatics, such as speech acts, which tend toward conventional realizations, humor and language play often involve creative language use, and thus are sites where individuality may shine through. Indeed, both Moussa and Faisal had preferred humor styles that matched with their overall personalities. Moussa tended to use humor to minimize face threats and make interactions go smoothly. His self-deprecating narratives and gentle teasing constructed him as kind and humble. Faisal’s style, on the other hand, tended to be antagonistic, as seen in his preference for teasing, which grew more direct and aggressive. Despite these individual differences in style, both participants demonstrated sensitivity to context in their use of language play and an awareness of the ways humor functions as a social practice. In this section we discuss four interrelated factors that help explain the variation in their use of language play throughout the study: the interview situation, interlocutors, language-using experiences, and L2 proficiency.
Familiarity with and understanding of the interview situation likely played a role in the participants’ comfort with language play. Although the sessions were presented to the students as opportunities for informal conversation, as the study took place under the auspices of the IEP, it is conceivable that they were initially perceived as part of the institutional structure, where more formal interaction might be expected. In addition, the activities could be more or less conducive to play. Some, for instance the fortune-teller activity in Example 2, encouraged imaginative and creative responses, whereas others, such as a picture description task, lent themselves more to straightforward reporting of information. Finally, the framing of the situation by the interviewer was important, too, as seen in the near total lack of language play in the six sessions that Faisal took part in with Sarah, who oriented exclusively to the charge of completing the tasks.

The interlocutors present in each session, more so than the activities, seemed to have a large influence on the amount and types of play that appeared. First, familiarity among the interlocutors was an important factor. For both participants, the early sessions, when both interviewers and peers were less acquainted, contained little language play. As familiarity grew, language play tended to increase. However, familiarity, specifically with the interviewers, seemed to be mitigated by their institutional role, which was arguably seen as wielding some power. Still, the interviewers’ individual approach to the sessions was crucial. The extent of their willingness to engage in and support playful talk clearly influenced the quantity and quality of humor initiated by the participants. Finally, the presence of a peer, particularly one who was familiar, always increased the amount of language play and usually resulted in a great deal of banter between the students.

The interplay between familiarity and peer presence was particularly notable in later sessions where a familiar interviewer, but not a peer, was present. These tended to be serious affairs. For instance, even alone with Tom, whom he knew well, Moussa tended to take advantage of that one-on-one time with a program teacher to get feedback and advice on his L2 development. Similarly, Faisal focused on his own needs in these individual sessions, whether to recount tales of his past glory as a form of bragging or to attempt to reconcile his tentative status within the IEP.

In addition to the interview situation and the interlocutors present, a third factor worth considering when attempting to explain the variation observed in Moussa’s and Faisal’s use of language play is what we call their language-using experiences. Examining L2 use from the perspective of multicompetence highlights the experiences of the L2 users and the ways in which these experiences
afford them access to new and varied resources. In this study we were able to focus on how these experiences allowed the participants to expand their playful repertoires. For Moussa, for instance, repeated conversations with the same interviewer gave him an opportunity to experiment with language play across sessions, building and testing the potential of particular phrases for constructing humor, as well as allowing him the chance to build shared resources with a more proficient conversational partner. The impact of a variety of language-using experiences is most evident in Faisal’s case, where his immersion in a life with a job and an American girlfriend afforded him access to a wide range of colloquial English, which he began to use quite fluently. The dramatic changes to his creative uses of language during that period may index Faisal’s renegotiation of his sense of self, as suggested by Belz (2002). Because Faisal’s final three sessions took place with the same interviewer, we do not have a sense of whether or how he manipulated these new resources with different interlocutors. However, his initial reluctance to use some of his new ways of speaking suggests sociopragmatic awareness of the force of many of his new resources. For instance, he initially avoided cursing, instead stopping at the point where such a term would be inserted and saying instead that it was a “bad word.” He also offered new words that were potentially offensive in a hesitant, quiet or questioning intonation, only later uttering them with enthusiasm, after having received reassurance of the privacy of his conversations.

Lastly, developing L2 proficiency, which we understand as including developing cultural knowledge of and constraints on specifically what is likely to be appreciated as playful or humorous, was also sure to affect whether and how these L2 users were able to engage in such behavior. Shardakova (2010) describes a cross-sectional study with data gathered via discourse completion tasks that compared the use of humor by native Russian speakers and U.S.-based learners of Russian. The 113 L2 Russian users’ proficiencies ranged from novice high to superior on the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) scale, and thus provide a snapshot of the ways that humor use changes with increasing L2 abilities. The variability among tasks, topics, and interlocutors in our data are valuable in illustrating multicompetence, but make it impossible to isolate proficiency itself as an explanatory factor in the changes in the participants’ use of language play. However, it seems worthwhile to compare some of our findings with Shardakova’s as a basis for future developmental studies of L2 language play.

Shardakova (2010) found that the L2 users at all levels in her study relied largely on pragmatics for creating humor and did so from the novice level of
proficiency. This is similar to our participants, who used exaggeration and situational factors, for example, especially in the early stages of data collection. Shardakova also notes that “contestive” (vs. “supportive,” p. 300) humor increased with proficiency, before falling off at the advanced levels. This pattern seems to dovetail with the way that teasing abilities changed over time for both Faisal and Moussa, with teases becoming more aggressive toward familiar interlocutors, as well as teasing being directed at higher status individuals, although increasing familiarity among the participants may also account for this. Neither participant would have tested at the ACTFL advanced level by the end of the study, making it uncertain whether the decline in more aggressive forms of humor would have been seen.

With regard to play with language itself, Shardakova (2010) found that the first social domain that learners in her study exploited for humor was that of children’s language, which is in line with Moussa’s use of “bye bye” and “bad, bad boy.” Among her participants, humorous play with the lexicon often began with “profanity, slang, and alcohol-related words” (p. 296). While Faisal’s language play had already encompassed such forms as teasing and banter, when wordplay emerged, it was carried out with these same classes of words. Both of our participants showed a somewhat later interest in learning about and experimenting with new words and new senses of words, which may also indicate a developmental path for certain types of play. In a study that draws on a broader swath of the same data of which the present study is a subset, Crossley, Salsbury, and McNamara (2010) demonstrated that after the fourth month these learners began to use new, noncore senses of polysemous words. While Moussa began to play with words early on, he only began to experiment playfully with multiple senses in the eighth month and Faisal in the tenth (which was also after his 12-week leave of absence). This suggests that in terms of development serious use may precede playful use of specific lexical items.

Finally, it is important to note some of the things that we did not see in the data with regard to language play. Neither participant engaged in language play based on phonology or grammar, which may be unsurprising as Shardakova (2010) found this only at the advanced level of proficiency. Specific types of humor also remained rare or absent, such as prescribed jokes, irony, or comical hypotheticals (Winchatz & Kozen, 2008). Despite our rich data, it is difficult to ascertain the extent to which these absences are due to developmental, social, cognitive, or other individual factors, such as personality.
Conclusion

Although still rare in applied linguistics, longitudinal research can contribute a great deal to our understanding of L2 use and development. For the present study, we have conceived of our case study participants as multicompetent language users and have illustrated the ways that this competence is constructed across contexts, interlocutors, and tasks. Both Faisal and Moussa were largely successful in negotiating humor and language play appropriately, subtly adjusting their strategies to changing social situations. In this study, the humor of the participants tended to be supported by their interlocutors, and pragmatic failure was not apparent. This may be because, unlike transactional discourse, in which a misunderstanding must be negotiated in order to achieve a goal, playful talk is largely phatic, which allows errors and pragmatic failures to be glossed over. On the other hand, misunderstandings or failures in the playful sequences presented in the current study may simply not have happened due to the approach the interlocutors took to play. This provides further support for Bell’s (2007a) findings that interlocutors appear to approach humor in intercultural conversations with particular care, tending toward forgiveness of failures or inadvertent offenses, and preferring to ignore, rather than correct attempts at humor that are sociopragmatically or pragmalinguistically unusual.

Longitudinal work is crucial for tracing L2 development, and while we see this study as a starting point for documenting the development of L2 humor and language play, the complexities of such a project must be acknowledged. First, language play relies on creative manipulations of language, and as such is much more diverse than other pragmatic acts whose developmental trajectories have been charted, most notably requests (R. Ellis, 1992; see also the review in Taguchi, 2010). Second, because humor usually relies on spontaneity, it is difficult to envision elicitation tasks that will remain successful over time. This is crucial, as the tasks must remain the same in order to trace changes in L2 humor competence or style. Isolating particular types of humor, such as teasing, might be one way to approach questions of development. Given that our understanding of L2 pragmatic development remains incomplete, and our understanding of L2 language play even more so, the description that we have offered of these two learners can be seen largely as a starting point for future research.

Final revised version accepted 29 June 2013
References


**Appendix: Transcription Conventions**

- sentence final falling intonation
- clause-final intonation
- ! animated tone
- ? rising intonation
- 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[ords 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 $\frac{1}{2}$ second or less
(7) pause of this many seconds
😊great😊 smiling voice quality