

HANN, D. (2020). SPONTANEOUS PLAY IN THE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM: CREATING A COMMUNITY. Springer.

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This book explores the multiple functions of humor and play in the language classroom, looking especially at how in-group humor and play contribute to successful learning outcomes through their social role in creating a collective classroom community and fostering positive classroom dynamics. The book draws directly on the experience of the author, David Hann, during his time as an English teacher specializing in training English language learning executives in business English and communication skills in the UK. Much of the illustrative data in the book is in the form of transcribed extracts of recordings from classes he taught in this role. Hann shows how, even with a limited second language (L2) proficiency, adult English language learners use spontaneous humorous language to regulate their learning environment, reveal and construct their identities, take ownership of the target language, and build in-group culture.

After a brief introduction which outlines the motivation and the structure of the book, Chapter 2 looks at the underexplored role of humorous play in the L2 classroom, with an emphasis on its function as a dynamic social and cultural entity. This chapter introduces the two theoretical models of communication on which the book is based. First, Hann draws on Bakhtin's theory of heteroglossia, which refers to the multi-voiced and dialogical nature of language. From this perspective, all utterances respond to or are infused with previous meanings. Second, Hann employs Goffman's concept of frames (e.g., mental schema, positioning schema, cultural schema, western schema) to interpret social behaviour in the classroom. For example, when visiting a dentist, a child may have particular schema such as shaking or sitting helplessly in a chair. To comfort the child, the dentist may frame this potentially unpleasant experience as a treasure hunt when repairing the child's teeth and address the child as an adventurer in the search.

Chapter 3 introduces the setting and methodology for the research. The research was set in an English center named BizLang. The audio-visual facilities in the training rooms at the center made it ideal for an ethnographic investigation of this kind, which focuses on close analysis of classroom interactions, including both linguistic and paralinguistic features.

The findings of the study are presented in Chapters 4 to 8 and involve detailed analysis and discussion of 57 episodes of classroom interaction in which we see language play at work. Chapters 4 and 5 focus on data from three small classes of three to five low-proficiency learners and their teachers. Chapters 6 to 8 focus on a case study of two learners and the author as their teacher undertaking business communicative activities.

Chapter 4 shows how play-as-rehearsal frames allow low proficiency learners to establish common humorous play in their interactions, such as when they provoke laughter by using simple phrases. For example, one of the learners, Dieter, used the simple phrase, “Hands up!” to turn the threatening gesture of pointing his finger at another student into play. This gesture is considered as rude behaviour in some cultures, but the phrase and gesture commonly appear in gangster movies and Westerns. In this simple example, we see Bakhtin’s theory of heteroglossia and Goffman’s concept of frames at work.

Chapter 5 looks at recontextualizing and re-accenting language. Recontextualizing happens when learners repeat the teacher’s phrases as a form of playful interaction. For instance, Antoine in episode 10 made his friend laugh by reproducing his trainer’s saying “you want to compare a Volvo with a Ferrari” from a prior event. Re-accenting refers to the learners’ playful awareness and manipulation of the humorous potential of their accent. For example, since another student, Bilel, found it difficult to modify his accent or voice quality in English, he accompanied his words with finger-wagging while repeating “you should”. This gesture signals that his phrase is humorously keyed and should not be taken too seriously. Building on the themes in Chapter 5, Chapters 6 and 7 look closely at how learners play with the challenging linguistic and cultural features of the language they are learning. For example, the learners laughed playfully at their various attempts to pronounce the words “*Woodwork*” and “*Anaesthetise*”. In another example, two students, Juan and Marek, used “OK” or “*these things happen*” to play and relieve tension when they made fun of each other’s mistakes.

Chapter 8 explores the role of language teachers in spontaneous play drawing on examples from the data set where the author nurtures humor in the classroom. In the final chapter, Hann offers implications for using humorous language play in the second language classroom, and for further research on play and language learning.

As the reader will have gathered by now, the term “play” in the book refers not to playful classroom activities but to how humor functions in classroom communication to build community and reduce anxiety. Moreover, the book

illustrates how this playful use of the language is present in communication among low proficiency learners. Hann inspires language teachers to step out of their safe zone and encourage their students to find humor and play with their linguistic shortcomings on the road to learning.

Overall, I believe that Hann has achieved his purpose to show readers how low-proficiency adult learners can use language to play despite their limitations. The setting of this book may be narrow, but it illustrates how language play builds a rapport among people from different backgrounds. If the reader is a language teacher like me, they may find themselves reflected in the book's pages. Whenever we take over someone's class or begin our own, we try to break the ice and establish a positive learning atmosphere. Humor and language play are important ingredients in creating a cohesive and engaged community of learners. Hann has made a valuable contribution in revealing deep insight into the meaning of laughter in the language classroom, and the ubiquitous ways in which play is present in the to-and-fro of healthy classroom communication.

Reference

Bakhtin, M., & Holquist, M. (1981). *The dialogic imagination: Four essays*. University of Texas Press.

Goffman, E. (1986). *Frame analysis: An essay on the organization of experience* (Northeastern University Press ed.). Northeastern University Press.