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The potential power of play in second language academic writing

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1. Introduction

About a year ago I was working on a paper with my colleagues Bruna Sommer-Farias and Jeroen Gevers (Tardy, Sommer-Farias, & Gevers, 2020), and as we plodded through our revisions—over hours and weeks—we found ourselves increasingly amused by our writing and writing processes. Our collaborative sessions became mixtures of serious discussions and humorous interludes as we worked through challenging theoretical issues and our personal and collaborative struggles with the content and language choices in our writing. Sometimes these jocular episodes occurred during our face-to-face meetings, as we sat around a table hunched over our three laptops. But they also popped up in our written in-text comments and side-bar chats as we worked synchronously and asynchronously online in a collaborative document. Humor was at times a way to diffuse the tension of disagreements or uncertainty about content that must be made in any collaboration. Often our playfulness was related to conventions of the genre, such as expectations of who and how much to cite, or the constraining word limit that authors inevitably contend with, as illustrated in the following interaction that took place in a synchronous chat while re-structuring a paragraph and trying to reduce our overall paper length:

Chris: I think [this sentence] is fine—are you both OK with that?
Bruna: Yes I think it works
Chris: it's definitely not a PIE[1] paragraph…
Jeroen: hahahaha
Bruna: hahha

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[1] PIE stands for "purpose-illustration-explanation." PIE has been a common way to teach paragraph structure to undergraduate students at our local institution, though it is one that at least some of us disagree with because of its formulaic and decontextualized nature.

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Jeroen: I like the rewritten sentences
Chris: We should have just done this whole thing as a five-paragraph essay. would have been MUCH easier
Jeroen: yes…and we wouldn't be at 11500 [words]
Bruna: hahaha
Chris: :)

It may be easy to argue that these injections of playfulness into our writing processes were simply a result of three familiar people interacting socially while writing. But I believe that there is more going on here, as we interwove work and play. I also suspect that such practices are not rare in writing, nor are they restricted to collaborative writing. On a somewhat regular basis, I encounter humorous posts on friends' social media pages, reporting their own efforts at self-amusement in their academic writing. I have seen discussions of their successful attempts to sneak in a reference to a favorite band or to use a unique word or phrase. In one instance, a graduate student at my institution, Emily, posted a screenshot of one of her class papers-in-progress, showing a bracketed comment in the middle of a paragraph, stating,"[THINGS NEED TO HAPPEN!]." Above the screenshot, Emily's post simply asked, "lol does anyone else leave placeholders for intelligent ideas while drafting?" (see Fig. 1). Numerous people responded, each sharing their own light-hearted approaches to bringing some levity to the process of academic writing.

Sometimes, of course, authors take their attempts at self-amusement further, intentionally slipping them into final products. Take, for example, the group of Swedish scientists at the Karolinska Institute who have had a decades-long wager to see who could sneak the most Bob Dylan lyrics into their publications before retirement (Savage, 2014). Their (formerly) secretive game has given way to paper titles such as "Like a Rolling Histone" and "Dietary Nitrate—A Slow Train Coming," as well as an editorial that begins, "Come editors and authors throughout the land" (p. h6505), a paraphrase of lyrics from "The Times They are A-Changin'." After the scientists' game was discovered, another group of researchers became curious enough about the phenomenon to study it (Gornitzki, Larsson, & Fadeel, 2015); they found 213 references to Dylan lyrics dating back to 1970, suggesting many scientists find opportunities for play in their scholarly writing.

These anecdotes of writers' playful approaches to academic writing are amusing and perhaps even refreshing to read about. Academic writing is hard, whether writing in a first or additional language. But these examples suggest that it also can be fun—at least sometimes—and perhaps this playful element of writing could have some value as well. Though play has been the focus of a small subset of scholarship in second language writing, these studies tend to be disconnected from one another and do not form a sustained line of inquiry within the field. This paper explores the potential value of play in the context of academic writing, with a specific interest in its implications for second language (L2)[2] writing instruction and research. Through a synthesis of scholarship on play, I highlight areas of particular relevance to second language writing, and I identify implications for instruction and scholarship. I begin by defining play and its role in human behavior more generally as well as the more specific role of language play in language development. I next turn to exploring play in academic writing, including play with both products and processes, highlighting its potential value. Finally, I consider how play might become a more prominent feature of L2 writing classrooms and scholarship.

2. Defining play

Miguel Sicart (2014), a self-defined "play scholar," has described play as "a way of engaging with others. . . a mode of being human" (p. 1), "a dominant way of expression" (p. 2), and "a fundamental part of our moral well-being" (p. 5). One of the earliest attempts to define and explore the cultural significance of play can be found in Johan Huizinga (1950/2014) book *Homo Ludens*. Huizinga argued that "pure play is one of the main bases of civilization" (p. 5), and he outlined several characteristics of play, many of which are important in considering play in relation to writing. First, play is voluntary or free; when play is ordered or required, it is no longer play but instead a "forcible imitation" (Huizinga, 1950/2014, p. 7). Play is also "a stepping out of 'real' life into a temporary sphere or activity" (p. 8). When my co-authors and I began joking about PIE paragraphs and five-paragraph essays in our chat, for example, we were temporarily stepping out of our "ordinary" task of revising a paper and into a temporary activity of playful banter. Huizinga also describes play as absorbing—recalling what Csikszentmihalyi (1997) has termed *flow*, a sense of timelessness that comes with complete engagement in an activity that poses an optimal level of challenge and engagement. For Huizinga (1950/2014), play is unrelated to material motives or profit; we don't engage in play for some external reward but rather for an internal or social motive. Further, play is secluded and limited in time and space. Huizinga notes, "Play begins, and then at a certain moment it is 'over.' It plays itself to an end" (p. 9). These points suggest that play cannot be prescribed, directed, or guided. Rather, it occurs, perhaps spontaneously, and then it serves its purpose and ends. Roger Caillois (1955) problematizes the notion that play cannot result in external rewards, noting that competitive games are playful but may result in a reward of some kind. For Caillois (1961), key characteristics of play include that it is free, fixed and separate in time and space, uncertain or unpredictable, unproductive (not creating new goods or wealth), rule governed, and make-believe or outside of regular life.

Caillois (1961) also offers several additional concepts to help understand play. First, he describes gameplay as lying on a continuum from *paidia* (free, improvisational play) to *ludus* (goal-oriented play). In addition, Caillois describes four categories of gameplay: *agôn* (competitive games), *alea* (games of chance, which may promote risk taking), *mimicry* (simulation or taking on roles in an imaginary universe), and *ilinx* or vertigo (a physical or psychological disorientation, a sense of "being immersed in another reality" (Reinhardt, 2019, p. 60), which may promote experimentation or transformation).

[2] I use the abbreviation "L2" in this paper as an umbrella term to refer to any additional language(s), acknowledging that the some "L2 writers" or "L2 users" may be better described as multilingual or additional-language writers or users

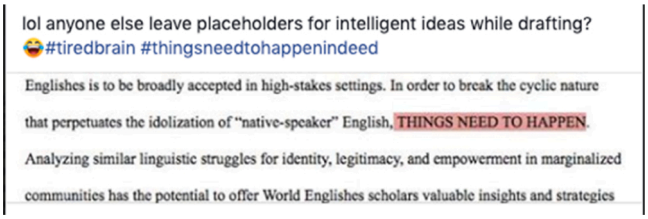

Fig. 1. Emily's Playful Writing, Posted to Social Media (Shared with permission).

Play is often associated with childhood, and it carries an important role in children's lives. In fact, play is considered by the United Nations to be a human right for every child in Article 31 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989). In early childhood development research, play has gathered a great deal of attention, as it is a primary way in which children interact with the world. Play is considered important for healthy brain development, engaging children's problem-solving, creativity, imagination, and dexterity, as well as physical, cognitive, and emotional strength (Ginsburg, 2007). Through play, children practice new social roles and identities, confront their fears, and explore the world. Play also allows children to build social bonds with their playmates, whether those be their caretakers or peers.

Some scholars have studied how both humans and animals play and *why* they engage in such a "frivolous" activity. Studies of cats, grizzly bears, and human children all suggest that one major function of play is rehearsal (Brown, 2010)—that is, through play, we are able to practice skills in safe environments, experiencing situations without any fear of real failure. In practicing potential future scenarios, we are also building cognitive connections, shaping and developing our brain (Brown, 2010).

Scholarship has often distinguished play from playfulness. Sicart (2014), for example, describes the two as overlapping but not identical concepts, whereby play is an activity, but playfulness is an attitude or stance toward an activity. He defines playfulness as "the capacity to use play outside the context of play" (Sicart, 2014, p. 21); it is a way of engaging with a context or object "that is similar to play but respects the purposes and goals of that object or context" (p. 21). Such playfulness is also a form of appropriation and expression, disrupting and personalizing a functional activity. Sicart's descriptions of playfulness are especially relevant to the activity of academic writing, a decidedly functional and serious practice. Through their competition over inserting Bob Dylan lyrics into their texts, the Swedish scientists created an instance of play (a game) within their research writing activity, and they are also taking a playful attitude toward their academic work, disrupting and personalizing it.

In this paper, I use *play* to refer broadly to an activity in which people temporarily step outside of "ordinary" practice (in this case, writing) and engage in activity that may involve different goals and/or roles, often involving rehearsal, experimentation, or rule-shifting with low risk. Play typically involves a playful attitude, though playfulness may also occur without shifting to a new (temporary) activity of play. Both play and playfulness are relevant to language (and, I would argue, writing) development: the activity of play may have benefits for practicing new linguistic and rhetorical forms or raising awareness of how language (and writing) works; adopting a playful attitude toward writing and language use may have motivational and affective benefits.

3. The functions and benefits of language play

Within applied linguistics, play has most often been investigated as *language play* (Bell, 2005, 2012; Carter, 2004; Cook, 1997, 2000; Crystal, 1996, 1998), defined by Crystal (1998) as manipulating language "as a source of enjoyment, either for ourselves or for the benefit of others" (p. 1). Bell, Skalicky, and Salsbury (2014) (following Cook, 2000) similarly describe language play as involving "the ability to manipulate the forms and functions of language for language learning practice, aesthetic pleasure, entertainment, and often humor" (p. 72).

One common kind of language play concerns the exploitation of language form, such as through rhyme, alliteration, parallelism, and puns. As Crystal (1998) describes:

> We take some linguistic feature—such as a word, a phrase, a sentence, a part of a word, a group of sounds, a series of letters—and make it do things it does not normally do. We are, in effect, bending and breaking the rules of the language. (p. 1)

In a corpus-based study of spoken interactions, Carter (2004) found creative language—or language play—to be pervasive. In fact, it was so common in his corpus that he concluded that language play "is a property actively possessed by all speakers and listeners; it is not simply the domain of a few creatively gifted individuals" (Carter, 2004, p. 6).

Though we most often think of language play as exemplified through these playful manipulations of form, Cook (1997) identifies a second kind of language play, which exploits the semantics of language—"play with units of meaning, combining them in ways which create worlds that do not exist: fictions" (p. 228). Semantic language play can be found in fictional work (think of J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* books, for example) that allows us "to try out—to play with—new and unreal worlds in a way which would be quite impossible were we using this language to do real things with real people" (Cook, 1997, p. 230). Similarly, irony, sarcasm, parody, and role playing can all be considered examples of semantic language play (and roughly parallel Caillois's (1961) category of *mimicry*). These instances of "double-voicing" (Holquist, 1981) are prominent in the play found amongst language learners (Tarone, 2000). In double-voicing, a speaker borrows another person's discourse for their own purposes, "using sociolinguistically marked varieties of the L2" (Tarone, 2000, p. 45). For example, we may imitate another way of speaking through accent, register, or even linguistic code for

humorous effect or to share another person's point of view, stepping temporarily into their vantage point. Language play at formal or semantic levels may also involve mimicry, repetition, or relocalizations, "the re-enactment of the same in a different context" (Pennycook, 2010, p. 139)—as in, for example, the use of remixing or sampling in hip hop.

Play with language forms and play with meaning are both described as primarily fun and are therefore often characterized as *ludic* language play (Broner & Tarone, 2001; Cook, 1997). Lantolf (1997) describes another kind of language play, which is essentially rehearsing or practicing language—we may do this when talking to ourselves or through roleplay. Lantolf refers to this kind of language play as private speech, following a Vygotskyan framework. *Rehearsal language play*—what Cekaite and Aronsson (2005) call *private language play*—may not be enjoyable *per se* but may help learners navigate language-related problems and may help build learners' confidence in L2 use. In an early study of 3- to 8-year-olds learning English as an additional language, Saville-Troike (1988) found that such private speech was common for these young learners and appeared to contribute to their L2 development. Lantolf (1997) argues that rehearsal language play may be necessary (though not sufficient) for second language learning—a point that Tarone (2000) similarly makes regarding ludic language play. Lantolf (1997) further notes that this kind of attention to form through rehearsal or private speech may diminish as learners' proficiency increases. In contrast, ludic language play requires language competence and may be more common with increased proficiency (Bell, 2005; Broner & Tarone, 2001).

As humans, we begin to play with language in our first months of life, developing increasingly sophisticated ways to manipulate language as we age (Cook, 2000; Crystal, 1996). We move from phonetic play with sounds to phonological play with syllables and rhymes. Children often play with these forms in private monologues, for example just before falling asleep (Weir, 1962, cited in Crystal, 1996). Eventually, children engage in language play with playmates, even making up nonsense words. Children's literature and songs are, of course, replete with occurrences of language play. Some English-language examples include Mary Poppins' song about *supercalifragilisticexpialidocious* or many of the fictional worlds created through language play in books from Dr. Seuss to *Alice in Wonderland*.

One benefit of language play is that it appears to contribute to metalinguistic awareness, or "the ability to make language forms opaque and attend to them in and for themselves" (Cazden, 1974, p. 29). As we play with language, our attention is drawn explicitly to its forms, flexibility, and possibilities (see also Reinhardt, 2019). Cazden further relates metalinguistic awareness to literacy development, noting that the very task of literacy development involves making tacit knowledge more conscious. And, in fact, research has suggested that an ability to manipulate language is also associated with children's success in learning to read (Crystal, 1996).

Aside from the potential developmental benefits of language play, why do humans engage in this activity? The simplest answer is, of course, for fun. Playing with language brings enjoyment and pleasure. It is this ludic function that drives our love of puns, tongue twisters, hashtags, and even hip hop. We play with language in books, music, social media, texts, and conversation, in part, just because it is enjoyable.

Perhaps because of its ludic quality, playfulness, including humor, can also function as a way to reduce tensions in otherwise serious circumstances. One example of this function can be found in Swales's (2004) study of the oral dissertation defense. Despite the seriousness of this activity, a corpus analysis of four defenses at University of Michigan found humor to be used fairly liberally. For example, Swales found laughter (general or individual) to occur about once every three and a half minutes, often in conjunction with banter, hyperbole, and irony in the discussion amongst the committee and candidate. Swales hypothesized that in these cases humor (and other informalities that flout the genre) "emancipates by reducing tensions and by moderating the pious insistencies of institutional regulations" (p. 168).

Play with language also allows individuals to assert and even try on new identities. Pennycook (2010) uses the term *metrolingualism* to refer to "the ways in which people of different and mixed backgrounds use, play with and negotiate identities through language" (p. 85) as users experiment with and blend their multiple linguistic and cultural resources. When we play with language, we show ourselves to be the *kind of person* who plays with language—or we may be able to highlight certain aspects of our (multilingual) identities that are otherwise occluded.

Language play is also highly social, helping to form social bonds. Gilmore (2016) describes one remarkable example of this in her book *Kisisi,* which shares the story of how her six-year old son (Colin, an English speaker) and his close friend (Sadiki, a speaker of Up-Country Swahili, a regional variant of Kiswahili) became playmates on a ranch in Kenya while Gilmore was researching a local troop of baboons. Within weeks of meeting, Colin and Sadiki had created a new language for themselves—a mixture of Swahili and English, a kind of pidgin, but one that used inventive words, sound play, and syntax. As Gilmore writes, the boys' "culture of play" (p. 37) provided a social context for exploring meaning and for linguistic creativity and innovation. They played through and with language. Their language, which they called *kisisi,* was private, secretive, and fun. It was also transgressive in some ways, transcending and even challenging the "marked social and linguistic borders of hegemonic postcolonial Kenya" (p. 51) in 1975. The language play of Colin and Sadiki demonstrates how far we can go with language play, even at very young ages, and it beautifully illustrates some of the social functions of language play.

4. Language play in second language learning

Even more relevant to those of us involved in second language teaching is the role of language play in L2 learning. Tarone (2000, 2002) has written extensively on the value of language play for second language acquisition. Through L2 language play, she argues that "learners notice and intentionally manipulate variables in their interlanguages to assert different social identities or for entertainment" (Tarone, 2002, p. 295). Tarone (2000) has outlined several ways in which language play may promote second language acquisition. First, the fun and emotional excitement involved in language play may increase the memorability of discourse by lowering affective barriers (Broner & Tarone, 2001; Tarone, 2000; see also Peck, 1980). Language play can also give learners practice in double-voicing or

using alternative sociolinguistic varieties and practicing new identities (Broner & Tarone, 2001); in doing so, they "may come to 'own' and appropriate those new varieties and voices as an expression of their own complex identities" (Tarone, 2000, p. 46). By taking on new sociolinguistic roles and rhetorical stances, learners may also develop their sociolinguistic competence. Finally, play with language forms may draw learners' attention to form (Cazden, 1974) and help to keep learners' interlanguage system dynamic and in flux, "stretching it beyond its own limits" (Broner & Tarone, 2001, p. 375), which is a necessity for learning (Tarone, 2000, 2002). Play becomes a centrifugal force that acts against the normalizing centripetal forces on language (Holquist, 1981), encouraging change and development of the L2 system (Bell, 2012; Tarone, 2000).

A growing number of studies have empirically investigated the use of language play by L2 learners, both within and outside of classrooms contexts. Learners seem to engage in language play in a variety of ways, including play with form (e.g., phonological, morphological, lexical), play with content or meaning (semantic play), and play with the frame of interaction (pragmatic play) (Warner, 2004). Many studies have found L2 learners to engage in language play multilingually, for example through codeswitching and use of hybrid language forms (e.g., Belz, 2002; Belz & Reinhardt, 2004; Broner & Tarone, 2000, 2001; Cekaite & Aronsson, 2005; Cekaite & Evaldsson, 2019). These instances often do not index a linguistic deficiency; instead, learners' multilingual language play is often shown to be purposeful and creative (Belz & Reinhardt, 2004). L2 learners also engage in rehearsal language play, though this may be more common at earlier stages of L2 development (Broner & Tarone, 2001).

Within the classroom, L2 language play is both common and spontaneous (Broner & Tarone, 2000, 2001) and may be initiated by students and teachers (Cekaite & Aronsson, 2005; Forman, 2011; Kramsch & Sullivan, 1996; Sullivan, 2000). Unplanned episodes of language play have the effect of disrupting assumptions about "what counts as a meaningful or legitimate act of language use" (Pomerantz & Bell, 2007, p. 557) and offering expanded options for acceptable use. In classroom and non-classroom contexts, language play is marked by its collaborative and interactive nature; it can provide a vehicle for social interactions and is often collaboratively constructed (Bell et al., 2014; Belz & Reinhardt, 2004; Cekaite & Aronsson, 2005; Cekaite & Evaldsson, 2019).

The functions of language play for L2 learners are numerous. As with any kind of play, at least one reason that learners engage in L2 language play is for pure enjoyment and pleasure, and we see this with both advanced adult foreign language learners (Belz & Reinhardt, 2004) and very young immigrant learners (Cekaite & Evaldsson, 2019). As such, L2 language play can serve as a motivator for learners (Bushnell, 2008) and can thus lead to more time for practice in the L2 (Cekaite & Aronsson, 2005; Pomerantz & Bell, 2007). It may also result in more risk-taking in language use as learners stretch their linguistic resources and experiment with new ways of expressing themselves (Broner & Tarone, 2000). Additionally, language play may have linguistic, social, and identity functions for L2 development.

As with child language development (Cazden, 1974) language play in an additional language can promote metalinguistic awareness as it draws attention to language forms and choices (Bell, 2005; Cekaite & Aronsson, 2005; Cho & Kim, 2018; Sullivan, 2000). Studying university L2 learners of German in computer-mediated communication (CMC), both Belz and Reinhardt (2004) and Warner (2004) found numerous instances of language play—such as creation of new words, play with spelling, and crosslingual puns—and noted that these instances appear to help learners consolidate their existing knowledge of the L2. Language play also seems to have an expanding effect, aiding learners in appropriating new forms of the language and linguistic practices and building their broader communicative repertoires (Hann, 2016; Pomerantz & Bell, 2007). Language play amongst L2 users is often highly creative, as learners manipulate language into new or unexpected forms and usages; examples of linguistic creativity, found even in traditional EFL classrooms (Kramsch & Sullivan, 1996), should not be dismissed as unimportant, as they require knowledge of more conventionalized forms. Language play can also be pragmatic in nature, as learners experiment with new registers and voices in the L2 (e.g., Bell, 2005; Bushnell, 2008), thus developing their sociolinguistic competence.

Beyond its functions in linguistic development, language play can facilitate L2 learning through its social functions. For instance, classroom learners have been shown to use L2 language play as a means of building their personal relationships in the language (Belz & Reinhardt, 2004; Kramsch & Sullivan, 1996) and reducing tension in interactions (Hann, 2016); outside of the classroom, L2 learners may similarly play with language to reduce face-threats as they interact with others (Bell et al., 2014). Language play can also contribute to community-building, as Hann (2016) found in a small-group class of Business English learners and Hattem (2014) found amongst a sub-group of learners in an ESL grammar course. In studying children in a Spanish immersion classroom, Broner and Tarone (2000) saw that language play also helped to build "an in-group vernacular" (p. 127), strengthening a sense of community amongst the children.

Language play can further serve as an important means of identity expression for L2 learners, who may feel like "strangers" to the target language. Kramsch (1997) has noted that "[t]he pleasure of annexing a foreign language does not primarily consist in identifying with flesh-and-blood native-speaking nationals. It derives rather from the unique personal experience of incarnating oneself in another" (p. 364), from the "thrill in trespassing someone else's territory" (p. 365). Studies have shown that L2 learners use language play to present themselves in a positive way to interlocuters (Belz & Reinhardt, 2004; Hann, 2016), to express their individuality (Bell et al., 2014), and to take ownership of the L2 as they use it in more authentic ways (Kramsch & Sullivan, 1996; Warner, 2004). Language play in the L2 can also serve to index a learner's growing multicompetence (Cook, 1992). As Belz (2002) notes, such indexing can often be found through the names and labels that learners invent. In one example, "Seamus," an advanced learner of German, described his own play with the language as *Seamusdeutsch*, using a heteroglossic name to reflect his own "(emerging) linguistic and cultural hybridity of identity" (Belz & Reinhardt, 2004, p. 346). In some cases, multilingual language play may have the benefit of transforming a learner's multiple languages into assets rather than deficiencies. For example, Cekaite and Evaldsson (2019) found that when preschool immigrant children in Sweden engaged in multilingual language play, they were able to highlight their own heritage language resources and thus take on new roles vis-à-vis their teachers and classmates, temporarily disrupting existing language hierarchies and classroom roles. In addition, Belz (2003) demonstrates how undergraduate learners of German as an additional language

were able to transform their linguistic identities through playful integration of their multiple languages into written texts.

Few studies have directly examined the impact of language play on language production, but a study by LaScotte and Tarone (2019) offers potential insight. Here the researchers elicited unrehearsed narratives from 10 English L2 learners of various proficiency levels, looking specifically at the learners' constructed dialogues (that is, instances of voicing or ventriloquating another's words, such as *She said, "…"* or *Then he goes, "…"*). The learners' language in both the narrative and the enacted voices were then analyzed in terms of accuracy, fluency, and complexity. These learners were consistently more accurate and fluent in the language used in their enacted voices (that is, when taking on a different identity) compared with that used in their narratives. The study is small in scale, but it suggests that taking on roles and new voices—a form of language play—could have a positive benefit on language use and learning.

Finally, we may consider the importance of *playfulness* (that is, a playful stance) in L2 learning. In an exploration of digital games in the L2 classroom, for example, Reinhardt, Warner, and Lange (2014) argue that teachers should help students to develop a playful attitude, or a "ludic disposition" (p. 164), toward language. They note that playfulness contributes to creative language use, which in turn makes language authentic and human. In other words, play and playfulness might help move learners away from seeing language as a static, alien system that they must conform to, and instead start to see it as a system that they themselves can exploit for various purposes. This argument echoes Pennycook's (2010) call for seeing "the ludic possibilities in the everyday" (p. 85) of language use.

In sum, research into L2 language play suggests several functions that play takes on as a facilitator of second language development. It can bring enjoyment and motivation to learning, promote learners' metalinguistic awareness, give opportunities to try on new identities and their associated language varieties, resolve tensions, build community, and help learners see language as flexible, variable, and social. Unlike factors such as practice or input, language play is not a necessary component of second language development (Tarone, 2000), but a growing body of research suggests it can play a facilitative role and is thus worthy of our attention as teachers. As Cekaite and Aronsson (2005) argue, "we need to take non-serious language more seriously" (p. 169).

5. Play in academic writing

Most studies of language play have focused on oral language or informal and interactive written language like chats or email (cf. Belz, 2003). Extending the concept of language play to writing, especially academic writing, has been rare. Arguing that there is room for playfulness in the "academic literacy game," however, Casanave (2002) writes that "Most of us do not view our academic lives as a game in [the] playful sense (although I think our professional and personal lives might be better off if we did)" (p. 3). In addition, I would suggest that play has potential for facilitating academic writing development and is thus very worthy of our scholarly and pedagogical attention. Research into language play in L2 learning gives us a glimpse at how play could be brought to written form, content, and rhetoric. Importantly, as we have already seen, language play may not just focus on an artifact of production but can also be embedded in the metalingual discussions in collaborative talk or even private speech. In relation to writing, I will discuss these areas broadly as falling into two categories: play with a written text and play in the *process* of academic writing (for example, through a playful stance toward the activity of writing). Because it is often difficult—and not necessary—to distinguish *play* from *playfulness* in these areas, I use *play* as an overarching concept here, following the work in language play; however, I note examples of *playfulness* specifically where relevant.

5.1. Play with written text

> A common kind of play with written texts is *genre play*, defined by Hyon (2015) as: altering, stretching, and/or mixing genre conventions in response to particular writing situations. Such work is playful in that it often involves creative, inventive choices by the writer. (p. 72)

Like language play, genre play may involve the manipulation of "forms and functions of language for language learning practice, aesthetic pleasure, entertainment, and often humor" (Bell et al., 2014, p. 72), though manipulations can operate at the level of genre as well as language—that is, writing may exploit norms and features related to content, rhetorical structures, stylistic features, design, and modality.

One example of genre play is explored in Hyon's (2008) study of inventive language in university faculty retention and promotion reports, a high-stakes genre in which we might not expect authors to veer away from conventions. She found that playfulness in these texts included hyperbole, irony or humor, and informal language, giving rise to statements like the following:

> One student expressed the wish that Dr. X could be cloned. Reading these [student evaluations], we are inclined (rather regretfully) to agree that the English department would probably be a better place if we were all replaced by clones of Professor X. (p. 184)

Hyon's research demonstrates that even an evaluative genre in a high-stakes context (after all, Dr. X's retention and promotion were at stake!) can incorporate elements of play.

Other examples of genre play can be found in lower-stakes elements of prestigious genres, demonstrating elements of *alea* (Caillois, 1961) or gameplay that promotes risk-taking. A recently circulated article, for example, highlights a Twitter thread in which scientists share humorous titles from serious scientific publications (for example, "Medical Marijuana: Can't We All Just Get a Bong," published in *American Journal on Addictions*, and "An-arrgh-chy: The Law and Economics of Pirate Organization," published in the *Journal of Political Economy*) (Cassella, 2019). Scientists have also incorporated humor into acknowledgements sections, with clear deviations from expected conventions. In one example, authors state that they

> …would also like to thank the U.S. Immigration Service under the Bush administration, whose visa background security check forced her to spend two months (following an international conference) in a third country, free of routine obligations – it was during this time that the hypothesis presented herein was initially conjectured (Wright, 2016).

As these examples show, academic writers can and do find ways to play with their texts, but the more pertinent questions are *why* do they do so and what are the potential benefits? Hyon (2008) identified at least three reasons why writers invoked play in the retention and promotion reports, and these functions echo those of language play more generally. First, play was used to strengthen the evaluation of the faculty member under review by boosting positive evaluation and softening negative comments. Play also built solidarity with the faculty member under review; through humor, the authors may mitigate the face-threatening act of reviewing in some way. Finally, play was used simply to entertain, carrying the ludic function discussed earlier in this paper. In addition to entertaining readers, playful elements of academic writing provide much-needed relief for authors themselves. We all know that academic writing can be difficult, intimidating, and even ego-crushing. Humor and play bring some respite, much as language play can be used to reduce tensions in oral interactions in classrooms (Hann, 2016) or dissertation defenses (Swales, 2004).

Genre play in academic writing can, like language play, contribute to metalinguistic awareness, as well as metacognitive genre awareness. Playful manipulations require attention to genre, including how conventional forms may be adapted and exploited in different rhetorical situations and for different purposes (Tardy, 2016). Canagarajah (2015) illustrates such experimentation through a case study of Kyoko, an advanced multilingual writer who playfully subverted academic writing conventions in a literacy autobiography by drawing on her growing awareness of how voice can be strategically constructed. Kyoko integrated, for example, emotive and poetic writing, including rhythm and imagery with more typical academic conventions like citations. In another study of two 5th grade bilingual writers, Harman (2013) found an emphasis on metalinguistic awareness helped students learn how to draw on other texts as resources for their own writing. Through modeling from the instructor, the writers learned to manipulate linguistic resources from other texts in playful ways, ultimately contributing to their academic literacy development. Though these examples may be less obviously humorous than others I have shared, they nonetheless demonstrate writers' playful stances as they manipulate and exploit written text.

Finally, we shouldn't overlook the identity function of genre play, which provides a means for writers to, even just temporarily, take ownership of academic genres. Just as language play allows language learners an opportunity to appropriate language, make it their own, and engage in it more authentically (e.g., Kramsch & Sullivan, 1996), genre play allows novice genre writers to assert themselves within a discourse that may feel alienating. In a study of 30 English as an additional language (EAL) doctoral students writing research articles, Negretti and McGrath (2020) found that playful genre manipulations were at times used to challenge or critique genre conventions, for example using more attitude markers or boosters than would be typical. These intentional transformations indexed the students' growing sense of agency and empowerment as writers. And as Thurlow, Morton, and Choi (2019) note, "a lack of agency can lead to playing it safe and conformity in academic writing" (p. 53). Genres can feel like the property of others, especially for writers who are newer to a community of users. Yet there *are* options in the identities we can assume when writing in—or playing with—a genre. We can become not just "the graduate student" but "the *inventive* graduate student" or "the *clever* colleague" or "the *Bob Dylan fan* biomedical scientist." This is an important benefit of play: it gives us a strategy to bring to the surface aspects of our identities that we tend to mask in academic writing. These may be just temporary identities, even fleeting, as play usually is, but they may still help us gain a sense of enjoyment in writing academically.

The examples I've shared so far illustrate play with the textual products of academic writing. Such play with language and genre conventions are, of course, at times risky and their success is highly dependent on contexts of use as well as the role and identity of the writer(s)—not all writers are given license for such exploitations (Canagarajah & Lee, 2014; Kubota, 2003), though risk can be minimized in tasks that encourage students to stretch and take chances in their writing. It is also worth noting that genre play may, like ludic language play, be more common and available to those who have already achieved some level of familiarity or expertise (Bell, 2005; Broner & Tarone, 2001)—in this case, with both language and genre. In other words, while genre play may contribute to writing development, it may also index a writer's growing multicompetence. Studies do suggest that play with texts is not restricted to experienced or advanced multilingual writers (see, for example, Harman (2013) and Tarnopolsky (2000)), though it does require some emerging understanding of the target genre, including its common features, available options, and functions.

5.2. *Play while writing*

Importantly, play in academic writing is also not limited to visible deviations in a finished text. Play *while* writing—often demonstrated through a playful attitude or stance—may be just as important to consider and would appear to be available to writers with a range of experience and proficiency. My opening examples in this paper illustrate play while writing, as my co-authors and I engaged in playful banter about our choices in revising our text, and as Emily shared her own attempts at self-amusement during composing (Fig. 1).

The potential benefits of bringing enjoyment into the activity of academic writing should not be overlooked, perhaps most particularly for L2 writers. As teachers, I am sure we have all heard our students describe writing in ways that are far from pleasurable or enjoyable. These anecdotal impressions have also been borne out in empirical studies. Wan (2014), for instance, examined the metaphors that ESL students used to describe academic writing and found examples like "Writing is like making a plan for weight loss. Although I have tried planning things down to the detail. . . what comes out was often unexpected and certainly not to my liking" (p. 62) and "Writing is like learning swimming. . . Due to my unfamiliarity with the basic swimming rules, I frequently drink the pool water" (p. 61). Petric (2002) more directly studied affective responses to writing through individual interviews with eight Master's degree students in Hungary who were writing their theses in English as an additional language. She found that most described

academic writing as challenging; however, some of the students responded to that challenge positively and even specifically noted their use of play to mediate the challenge. One noted that "[linking ideas] might be very difficult at times. . . but at the same time it's fun to do, if you think of solving a puzzle or arranging these mosaics" (p. 19), while another said they responded to the challenge by trying "to play a little bit with the words," finding ways to "express things with a minimal amount of words" (p. 19).

Writing enjoyment has garnered very little study in the field of second language writing, though Tarnopolsky (2000) noted its positive learning impact on beginning EAL writers in Ukraine. Cumming (2016) similarly has drawn attention to the importance of enjoyment, identifying flow as a motivational condition for stimulating and extending expertise in second language writing. L2 writing teachers may want to consider how they can help students to find pleasure in the process or activity of writing, both within and even outside of the classroom. The idea of developing a "ludic disposition" (Reinhardt et al., 2014, p. 164) toward language and even academic writing can help us see how playfulness may be relevant even when writers are composing serious products. Playfulness can help us—even temporarily—see the possibilities in language and genre and give us some distance from the registers and voices we are adopting.

The playful stances that writers adopt *while writing* are hardly documented at all in our research. Most studies of second language writers composing—collaboratively or independently—examine their language choices, the focus of their cognitive resources, or perhaps how their time is allocated amongst various composing activities (e.g., planning, drafting, revising). Yet, as we have seen in the research of language learners, play and playfulness are not uncommon in language use and in the social interactions amongst learners, so we can surmise that it likely also plays a role, at least in collaborative writing. In a rare study of play during the collaborative composing of 4th and 5th grade children, Daiute (1990) found that playful episodes made up 33.4 % of their conversational turns, with the vast majority of these instances involving play related to their narrative writing task. She describes the children's play during composing as "concrete, complex, frequent, and distinct from other composing activities" (p. 39). The most common functions of their play were to elaborate on the content of the text, to construct rules about the character description and development in their text, and to relieve emotional and cognitive tensions arising in the composing process. These young writers' playful composing does suggest that such playfulness is not necessarily limited to advanced writers. Of course, Daiute's research is limited to a small group of young children writing stories in a science curriculum in their first language; we know little about the play in the composing practices of other groups of writers in other contexts. Yet, given the potential facilitating role of play in language learning, it would seem to be an area worthy of attention in second language writing.

6. Bringing play into second language writing instruction

Acknowledging the potential power of play in language learning more generally, second language writing practitioners may consider how we can help students to develop "the capacity to recognize elements of play. . . in everyday activity, and to act on the affordances they offer for innovation, creation, and transformation" (Reinhardt et al., 2014, p. 163). Tutorial contexts, workshops, and non-graded graduate courses may be particularly suitable to integrating "playful habits of mind" (Turner & Turner, 2016, p. 359), but I suspect ludic possibilities exist even in our more high-stakes writing classrooms, even if associated primarily with low-stakes activities.

It is worth first reviewing some basic principles of play, as described by Huizinga (1950/2014) and Caillois (1961):

- voluntary, not forced;
- absorbing;
- something we engage in for enjoyment (though there may be external rewards)
- limited and separate in time (it plays itself out, but is not regulated into a timeframe provided by a teacher);
- uncertain or unpredictable;
- rule governed; and
- a means of forming or maintaining social bonds.

Through playfulness, we may appropriate any activity, "taking over the world to see it through the lens of play" (Sicart, 2014, p. 24), and in doing so, "open the possibility of expressing who we are" (Sicart, 2014, p. 29). Given the potential learning benefits of play, teachers, tutors, or advisors of students writing in an additional language would do well to consider what kinds of instructional environments might foster such behaviors or attitudes. In doing so, perhaps we can also help students see that play *can* be a part of writing (even academic writing) in an additional language.

Some research suggests that certain kinds of activities promote play in the classroom more than others. Pomerantz and Bell (2007), for example, found that game-based activities and role play tasks generated much more language play than small-group discussions. Reinhardt (2019) advocates using activities that incorporate game-like elements (e.g., puzzle solving, negotiating, building, quests, use of points or badges), which may help construct a risk-embracing environment, facilitate the use of languaging or collaborative dialogue about language and writing (Swain, 2006), and foster identity play, allowing students to experiment with temporarily taking on new identities (Reinhardt, 2019). Casanave (2002) has also adopted a "game" metaphor to understand academic writing, arguing that adopting this lens can help us to see how writing "offers choices and potential empowerment as they learn how to participate skillfully and flexibly in academic writing games" (p. 6).

Perhaps the most common type of "gameful task" in most language classrooms is role play, which draws on *mimicry* (Caillois, 1961). Hann (2016) describes role plays as "rich with possibilities to playfully recycle and recontextualize language" (p. 240). While this type of activity is almost a mainstay in L2 classrooms focused on oral language, it tends to be much rarer in writing classrooms. Yet, we might imagine numerous ways in which role plays can be incorporated. Students could write an evaluating text (such as a movie

review) while taking on different reviewer identities (a harsh critic, an easy-to-please viewer). Similarly, a colleague of mine draws on game principles to turn her peer review sessions into role plays, with each peer taking on a particular reader-identity (e.g., the motivator, the rhetorical strategizer, the citation checker) (S. Edmiston, personal communication, March 20, 2018). Though her activity was designed for undergraduate students, it could be adapted to younger students and even those at earlier stages of literacy development. By bringing a creative element into such activities, we may give students more license to play with their identities and language use, perhaps experimenting with or stretching their writing in ways they otherwise may not.

Playful activities have long been part of John Swales's approach to teaching L2 academic writing, in which he has highlighted the value of parody (also an example of *mimicry*) in drawing on and exploiting awareness of genre conventions and in considering how those conventions may be stretched for other purposes (2004, Swales, 1990; see also Devitt, 2004). Parody, Swales argues, can help to "relax the grip of academic conventions" (2004, p. 24); as such, it allows writers to distance themselves from dominant norms and values. Through this kind of play we can "see values and practice them and challenge them so they become more than mindless habits" (Sicart, 2014, p. 5). Teachers can engage students with parodic academic texts such as those found in the *Journal of Irreproducible Results*, which publishes satirical science. My own students have enjoyed reading examples of the Twitter hashtag #overlyhonestmethods, in which scholars share aspects of their research methodology in ways that would never make it through to publication. Writing their own texts in this vein takes only a few minutes of class time but also engages a discussion of academic discourse, genre conventions, and disciplinary values, albeit with a more playful and critical stance.

Another type of play well suited to the second language writing classroom relates to discussion of genre norms and the playful creation of new norms. For example, at the undergraduate level, Batt (2010) has described activities for playing with dominant norms in an early undergraduate writing course, incorporating elements of risk-taking (*alea*) and experimentation (*ilinx*) (Reinhardt, 2019). His students create their own citation systems, discussing the pros and cons of their creations, then comparing theirs with MLA style. Through this playful transformation of authoritative discourse, Batt argues, students are better positioned to critique such discourse. Such playful approaches to writing can be implemented with writers at earlier stages of development as well. Tarnopolsky (2000), for example, outlines a sample writing class for beginning Ukrainian EAL writers (adolescents through adults), in which writing for fun was a goal. Activities included transforming texts into "absurd writing," creating collaborative writing in which students individually added sentences to a story, and writing fairy-tales. Based on student interviews, Tarnopolsky concluded that "students started to regard themselves not as learners doing written assignments in a language foreign to them, but as *authors* writing in that language" (p. 223).

Genre stretching and genre mixing also offer opportunities for play in the academic L2 classroom (Hyon, 2018; Tardy, 2016). For example, students can alter the modalities of a genre (e.g., create a video product review out of a written product review) (Kramsch, 1993), stretching the norms of how the genre is typically constructed, or bend formal conventions to carry out private intentions (e.g., to assert a particular cultural identity); these examples illustrate *alea* through risk taking (Caillois, 1961). Such play must be adapted to meet the needs and developmental levels of students. Young writers, for example, could practice composing parodies of author bios from their perspective of their favorite fictional characters (using *mimicry* [Caillois, 1961]). Genre mixing, through the creation of hybrid genre texts (Tardy, 2016), similarly engages students in awareness-raising of genre conventions and audience in a playful manner (using elements of *vertigo* through transformation [Caillois, 1961]). In an illustration of genre mixing, Hyon (2015) asks students to "write a love story that views the lovers and their story from the perspective (i.e., paradigm) of a scientist" (p. 92). The assignment requires students to blend scientific concepts of love from a biological perspective (pulling from class readings) with a narrative that also aims to entertain. Hyon describes the assignment as generating "some of the most delightful 'academic' texts I have ever read" (p. 79) while allowing students to see how conventions may be exploited across genres. These kinds of genre play are not only fun and often motivating for students, but playful manipulation of texts also helps learners develop their understanding of genre as dynamic and writers as agentive within rhetorical situations (Boscolo, Gelati, & Galvan, 2012; Hyon, 2018; Tardy, 2016). Although this kind of creative play with genres carries risk that discourages its use in many contexts, the classroom offers a safe environment for such exploration and appropriation while developing students' rhetorical flexibility.

Play in L2 writing classrooms can and should also engage students in writing across languages. When exploring how genres work crosslingually, students draw on their multilingual resources as valuable assets for learning. Comparing genres across languages can help to raise students' genre awareness (Gentil, 2011; Tardy et al., 2020); playfully integrating elements of genres across languages (e.g., Canagarajah, 2013) or creating multilingual texts in a genre (e.g., Belz, 2003) engages writers' rhetorical knowledge and full range of linguistic resources. Many students write in multilingual communities, and they might further consider how they effectively bend genres across languages and contexts. As they engage in crosslingual genre or language play, students also foreground their identities as multicompetent writers and language users (2003, Belz & Reinhardt, 2004; Belz, 2002).

Alongside activities and assignments that incorporate play *with* writing, we should not overlook the value of simply adopting a playful disposition *toward* writing. Teachers may have a valuable role here, as research suggests that a classroom teacher's playful stance may foster an environment that promotes playfulness (Kramsch & Sullivan, 1996; Van Damm & Bannink, 2016). In such an environment, L2 learners may be more likely to take risks and to take on agency "to supplement or subvert the target language system" (Pomerantz & Bell, 2007, p. 557). Teachers might also consider the benefits of digital writing on fostering a playful stance. Danet, Ruedenberg, and Rosenbaum-Tamari (1998), for example, note that "Digital writing is inherently playful, first of all, because the medium, the computer, invites participants to fiddle, and to invoke the frame of make-believe" (p. 44). Second language writing teachers can engage students with emerging written genres, modalities, and processes, in which constraints tend to be relaxed, and opportunities for inventiveness are readily available.

Students often perceive that writing (especially in an additional language) is only a serious, sometimes tedious process, but teachers can demonstrate that writing can also be fun and that there are opportunities for *enjoyable* production of text, even in academic settings. It is probably inconsequential whether a writer's playful elements of writing ever make it into final products; the playful

activity itself may well support the writer in a longer process of development. Further, playfulness makes our writing process human, as it "authenticates the students both in their sense of authorship and in their search for academic literacy" (Turner & Turner, 2016, p. 359). As Casanave (2002) has noted, we tend to adopt "way-too-serious academic writing practices" (p. 4), but we can also model to our students our own attempts at subverting that seriousness and taking on a playful attitude toward academic writing. Research suggests that doing so could have valuable benefits.

It has not been my goal to provide a recipe or set of guidelines for fostering playfulness with academic writing in our second language writing classrooms, but I hope that some of the examples I have shared have led readers' minds to wander and to contemplate the potential value of play and playfulness to both our conversations about and our practices in second language writing.

7. Taking up play in second language writing

This paper has sought to demonstrate the potentially powerful role of play in facilitating second language writing development, much as it appears to facilitate L2 development more broadly. Practitioners might consider the opportunities for play that exist within our classrooms and writing tasks, and we should take seriously the value of humanizing—through play—the activity of academic writing in an additional language. Likewise, scholars might identify strands of research that deserve closer attention because they can inform a broader understanding of second language writing and writers. Building on existing research in language play, questions like the following may be particularly fruitful to explore:

- How common (or rare) is play in second language writing? When does it tend to occur and for what purposes? What classroom environments foster play? Do certain modalities or writing activities (such as gameful tasks or collaborative writing) encourage play more than others?
- In what ways do novice and more experienced writers play with writing (products and processes)? Are different kinds of play beneficial to writers at different levels of experience or proficiency?
- In what specific ways might play with academic writing raise metacognitive awareness of genre, language, or other aspects of written discourse? Are some kinds of play more or less beneficial in this regard?
- Can play enhance student writers' enjoyment of and motivation for writing?

Given the complexities of academic writing in an additional language, play may seem like a somewhat frivolous area of attention. Yet perhaps attention to play can help scholars, practitioners, and learners re-frame our orientation to academic writing as something that is more than a set of alien, normalizing, and challenging conventions. It is, in fact, an activity of *human* communication. As such, all writers can at times subvert or transform the seriousness of the system to adopt a sense of agency and perhaps even make writing a little bit more enjoyable.

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