The impact of language play-oriented tasks with planned focus on form on Iranian EFL learners' accuracy in controlled writings

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Abstract

Language play and its effects on second language learning have been addressed by many scholars in recent years with instances of language play being identified both inside and outside the classroom. However, only a few have integrated language play with classroom tasks, and they just sufficed to the qualitative analyses of the learners' interactions. The present study investigated the possible effect of language play-oriented tasks with planned focus on form on Iranian EFL learners' accuracy in controlled writings. Employing a pretest-posttest design, the participants of the study were introduced to a series of meaningful tasks focusing on particular linguistic features. The tasks were accompanied by language play types such as semantic play, creation of imaginary scenarios, oral narrative play, syntactic play, pragmatic play, linguistic play and verbal dueling during a 12-week adult English class in a private language school. Field notes were taken as well as occasional audio-recordings of the instances of tasks and episodes manifesting the given treatment. The findings demonstrated the supremacy of playful tasks over non-playful language learning activities with the items in playful tasks being recalled better. The present study calls for integration of playful language tasks along with planned focus on form in EFL classes and provides EFL teachers with a good set of such tasks to create an enjoying and relaxing atmosphere in their classes.

Keywords: Language play; second language learning; task-based teaching; focus on form; humour

1. Introduction

Second language study is usually undertaken for different purposes around the world and many models of second language teaching have been offered in the field of second language learning and teaching. However, some scholars have recently drawn attention to a pedagogy that integrates language play with second language learning (Bell, 2012; Belz & Reinhardt, 2004; Broner &Tarone, 2001; Cekaite & Aronsson, 2005; Cook, 1997; Forman, 2011; Warring, 2012). It is established that language play facilitates both children and adult second language development but the research in this area has mostly been restricted to the qualitative analyses of the learners' interactions and few have explored this phenomena quantitatively (Bell, 2012; Lucas, 2005; Tocalli-Beller & Swain, 2007). Most research studies in this regard analyze language play as it emerges spontaneously in the classroom interactions of the learners and they just suffice to show that playing with the language is effective in second language learning. Moreover, the source of language play and humor are the learners themselves in most of these studies and the teacher or the researcher is just an observer.

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Therefore, the present study further illuminates the role of language play on the students' second language learning by investigating the effect of language play-oriented tasks accompanied by planned focus on form on Iranian elementary EFL learners' accuracy in controlled writings by putting the teacher on the spotlight as the initiator of language play in the classroom.

2. Literature review

2.1. Language play

The concept of "play" has been defined by many scholars in the field of second language acquisition. Garvey (1977) defines play in terms of enjoyment, intrinsic motivation, spontaneity, active player engagement and a systematic relation to non-play. Vygotsky (1978) defines play as "a novel form of behavior liberating the child from constraints" which has its own "internal rules". In his view, these rules are accepted by their relevant "actions" in play situations which he terms as "imaginary situations" (p. 95). He maintains that as the child develops cognitively and psychologically, he becomes more proficient in play. He emphasizes the role of play in child development by stating that play creates a zone of proximal development which enables the children to act beyond their current abilities. Peck (1980) refers to play as a mode, a way, a manner of doing any activity and argues that ludic language play provides opportunities for the learners to practice the target language forms and it also increases the affective climate in the language classroom. Deci and Ryan (1985) believe that play has a role in increasing the learners' intrinsic motivation towards learning. Cook (1997) defines play as "a behavior not primarily motivated by human need to manipulate the environment (and to share information for this purpose) and to form and maintain social relationships _ though it may indirectly serve both of these functions" (p.227). He divides language play into two types of formal level and semantic level. Belz and Reinhardt (2004) offer their own learner-sensitive form-based definition for play. They state that play is the conscious repetition or modification of linguistic forms such as lexemes or syntactic patterns (p. 328). Pomerantz and Bell (2007) believe that play is a skill that needs to be developed. They argue that the learners should know when to play with language and they consider it as a communicative choice that a learner has a head when engaging in interaction with others.

Language play is considered to be fun and amusement by Cook (1997) and is defined in terms of rehearsal and practice of target language forms by Lantof (1997). Taking an interpersonal view, Cook divides language play into two types of formal level and semantic level. Formal language play deals with playing with sounds or with letter shapes to form rhyme, rhythm, assonance, consonance or alliteration and playing with grammatical structures to produce parallelisms and patterns. Semantic language play includes playing with units of meaning and mixing them to create fiction. However, Lantof takes an intrapersonal stand to second language play and analyzes it within the framework of Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory by discussing that language play is a kind of private speech which acts as a rehearsal and practice for the learners and helps them to produce language silently to themselves in the zone of proximal development and thus behave beyond their average daily behavior. He provides examples of language play such as the learners' talking out loud to themselves, repeating phrases to themselves silently, making up sentences and words creatively in the foreign language, imitating sounds to themselves and having random snatches of the foreign language pop into their head.

Taking these two perspectives into account, a large body of research is carried out concerning the role of language play in second language learning. It is adhered that language play reduces the learners' affective state and creates an enjoyable learning environment for them (Forman, 2011; Tarone, 2000) so that the learners could do the teacher-assigned tasks better because they are not

concerned with avoiding incorrect answers and saving face (Bushnell, 2009; Forman, 2011) and they participate in the classroom activities more (Katayama, 2009; Pomerantz & Bell, 2007; van Dam, 2002). Consequently, the learners may provide assistance to each other while playing with the language during the teacher-assigned tasks (Ohta, 2001). That is why some researchers contend that language classrooms should be accompanied by fun and enjoyment because in this way the learners become interested in language classes more and they could build their own "preferred worlds, preferred identities and preferred voices" and they could change the "authoritative discourse" of the classroom into an "internally persuasive discourse" for themselves (Lin & Luk, 2005, p. 94). Likewise, the learners may change the dominant discourse of the classroom into an enjoyable one by enacting situational, relational and personal identities in the classroom (Warring, 2012). Situational identities are specific to situations or relationships like teacher, parent, student, son or nurse; relational identities refer to a kind of relationship a person enacts with a particular conversational partner in a specific situation, equal or unequal, close or distant and personal identities include personality, attitude or character. Also, the learners may engage in pragmatic play during the class and play with different identities (Vandergriff, 2009).

It is also believed that language play improves second language learning by creating zones of proximal development for second language learners to improve their linguistic repertoire (DaSilva Iddings and McCafferty, 2005) because when the learners work collaboratively on language tasks by employing language play, their metalinguistic awareness is increased which in turn paves the way for the learners to understand the lesson better (Lucas, 2005). Furthermore, some researchers see language play as a means of learning grammar (Belz & Reinhardt, 2004) by positing that language play could cause extended repair sequences and help the learners to distinguish the correct language forms from the incorrect ones which could act as informal language lessons (Cekaite & Aronsson, 2005). Language play is also believed to play a crucial role in developing the learners' interlanguage system by helping the learners to produce utterances that do not conform to the accepted language norms and this "destabilize the language system" and therefore acts as an "opening to development" (Broner & Tarone, 2001, p. 375). Bell (2005) contends that language play is an indicator of learner proficiency because the more the learners use the linguistic resources in creative ways, the more proficient they are in second language. She argues that language play leads to better recall of the language items by the learners (Bell, 2012).

2.2. Language play and humor

Closely related to the concept of language play is "humor". Bell (2002) defines humor as something that makes a person laugh or smile. She sees humor as a specific communicative mode in which something is uttered with the intent to amuse (Bell, 2012). Humor has been investigated from the three categories of repression-based, aggression-based, and incongruity-based. The first category focuses on the relationship between the speaker and the hearer and their attitudes toward one another. The second one is concerned with the emotions of the hearer of an amusing quip in which laughter is viewed as the result of social constraints. In the last category, humor is created because something does not meet our expectations or is inappropriate to the context due to the fact that two incongruent elements are juxtaposed (Bell, 2002).

The role of humor in the process of second language learning and teaching has been investigated by many scholars from different perspectives. A number of research studies focused on the role of humor in facilitating the recall of the second language. For example, Keenan, MacWhinney and Mayhew (1977) say that the unusual or emotionally laden sentences are remembered more than the mundane ones during incidental learning. Bates, Kintsch, Fletcher and Guiliani (1980) conclude that bizarre language in natural context is more remembered in intentional learning environment. McDaniel,

Einstein, DeLosh, May, and Brady (1995) say that bizarre sentences are remembered more than common sentences. McDaniel, Dornburg, and Guynn (2005) believe that bizarre and common sentences should be mixed to be recalled better. Martin, Preiss, Gayle, and Allen (2006) contend that humor has a positive effect on the recall of lectures. Strick, Holland, van Baaren, and Van Knippenberg (2010) posit that humor has a good effect on memory. Some researchers explored humor in relation to face-work and face-threatening acts. For instance, Zajdman (1995) focuses on self-directed humor and posits that this kind of humor presents an appealing self-image of the learner to others and saves face. It also shows the learners' superiority over others. In a similar vein, Holmes (2000) contends that humor has a positive effect in mitigating face-threatening acts. Pomerantz and Bell (2012) argue that humor acts as a safe house that changes the monotonous, culturally insensitive or face-threatening classroom practices. And some others like Schmidt and Williams (2001) believe that humor facilitates learning both in incidental and intentional learning environments. And finally, Davis (2003) contends that the ability to participate in jointly-constructed joking episodes improves the communication among the learners and increases the rapport.

2.3. Language play and focus on form

According to Ellis (2001), and Ellis, Basturkmen and Loewen (2002) focus on form is divided into two types of incidental focus on form and planned focus on form. The former contains spontaneous attention to form which emerges during meaning focused activities and it is considered to be difficult to be assessed because pre-test and post-test cannot be utilized to measure individual learning (Loewen, 2005). The latter involves the use of focused communicative tasks to elicit the use of a specific linguistic form in the context of meaning-centered language use.

Since the assessment of student learning was difficult in incidental focus on form, some researchers decided to identify language related episodes (LRE) in the students' interactions. LREs are defined as any part of a dialogue where the students talk about the language they are producing, question their language use, or correct themselves or others (Swain & Lapkin, 1998). Bell (2012) focuses on playful language related episodes (PLREs) and compares them with the learners' non-playful language related episodes (LREs) and concludes that PLREs help the learners to recall the bits of language better. Language related episodes are also important in form-focused tasks since the learners interact with each other while doing these kinds of tasks.

Thus language related episodes are an important part of the learners' conversational interaction in the classroom. The learners' conversational interaction is considered to be an indicator of the learners' language development (Mackey & Goo, 2007). Conversation helps learners to get information about language, to gauge what is and is not possible in the L2 and practice and test their own hypotheses about L2 forms (Gass & Mackey, 2006). According to the sociocultural theory, learning occurs in interaction with a more competent speaker. When the learners converse with each other, they notice the gap in their own knowledge and a more proficient L2 user and they try to compensate for this gap (Lantof & Thorne, 2007). Language play could be one of the ways to help the learners to notice this gap in their own knowledge while interacting with each other during the classroom activities. Bell (2012) considers play as one form of interaction that "may draw learners' attention to form-meaning relationships" which in turn could increase the depth of language processing (p. 241).

2.4. The present study

Most of the studies reviewed above concerning second language play seem to favor the contention that language play has an enormous effect on second language learning. Few of these studies have explored this phenomenon quantitatively and the researcher or the teacher had a passive role in the

creation of language play because he/she was just an observer or recorder of the playful discourse of the learners. Furthermore, few studies have drawn attention to the effect of language play on form-focused tasks. Thus, the present study investigates the role of language play on the learners' accuracy during planned focus on form quantitatively by tackling the following research questions:

1. Do language play-oriented tasks with planned focus on form affect Iranian EFL learners' accuracy in controlled writings?

2. Does language play have an effect on the recall of the items by the learners?

3. Is there any significant difference in attitudes of elementary Iranian EFL learners towards planned focus on form with playful and non-playful language-oriented tasks?

3. Method

3.1. Participants

The participants of the study included 41 elementary female learners of English in a private language institute in West Azarbayjan, Iran. Their age ranged between 15 and 18, and they were in their first, second and third year in high school. Two intact classes were selected and the participants in both classes took Cambridge Young Learners English Flyers test to ascertain their initial homogeneity regarding their general English language proficiency and the outliers were identified and were excluded from the study.

3.2. Instruments and materials

3.2.1. Language proficiency test

The participants took Cambridge Young Learners English Flyers test to ascertain the initial homogeneity of the learners in two groups concerning their general English language proficiency. The test consisted of four parts: listening, reading, writing and speaking. The listening section had five parts and it included 25 questions which lasted approximately 25 minutes. The reading and writing sections had seven parts. There were 50 questions and the test lasted 40 minutes. The speaking test had four parts and it lasted about eight minutes.

3.3.2 Pre-test

The pre-test consisted of 35 multiple-choice questions and the items of the test were constructed according to the grammatical structures addressed through planned focus on form during playful and non-playful task-based activities. The test was piloted before the study began on a similar group of participants and its reliability was calculated to be 0.85 using Kuder-Richardson Formula 21.

3.3.3 Post-test

The post-test was comprised of several parts with each section focusing on a separate grammatical point which was dealt with during the classes. In this test, the participants filled in the blanks, wrote short responses to the questions, asked questions about the underlined words and phrases, completed a story and provided answers to the questions related to some pictures. This test was piloted on a similar group of learners and its reliability was 0.83 using Kuder-Richardson Formula 21.

3.3.4 Language play-oriented activities

The tasks for the present study were selected from *Games for Grammar Practice* by Zaorob and Chin (2001) and then language play was implemented in these tasks. The following table summarizes these tasks and their language focus.

Table 1. Tasks selected from *Games for Grammar Practice*

Activity	Language focus	Activity type	Topic	Time (minutes)	Language output
A day at home	Present continuous	Board game	Activities done at home	10-20	A: What are you doing in the living room? B: I'm watching TV in the living room.
Looking for a flatmate	Present simple	Interview	Habits and routines	20	A: Do you have a pet. B: Yes, I do. I have a cat.
Making friends	Wh-questions with present simple	Find someone who	Personal information	10-20	A: When is your birthday? B: My birthday is on June 5th. A: Really? My birthday is in June too!
Come one, come all	a/an v. some	Board game	Food	15-20	A: Would you like a hot dog/ some cake/ some strawberries? B: Yes, please. / No, thanks.
Rain or shine	It as subject	Tic-tac-toe	Weather conditions	10-15	When it's foggy, it's dangerous to drive on the motorway.

Language play types which were integrated with these tasks included semantic play, oral narrative play, syntactic play, pragmatic play and linguistic play. Semantic play refers to playing with the units of meaning (Cook, 2000) such as referring to an "apartment" as a "togetherment" (Forman, 2011). In oral narrative play, the learners narrate a story playfully by creating imaginary scenarios (Sullivan, 2000). Syntactic play includes playing with the grammatical order of the sentences (Belz, 2002). For example, the sentence "I must myself now shower, in order to afterward time to have, the paper to read and breakfast to have" illustrates syntactic play where the learner plays with the grammatical order of the sentence. One type of pragmatic play includes playing with the identity and is defined by Vandergriff (2009) as a type of pretend play that allows the speaker to take on a different identity and speak with the voice of someone else. And finally, during the linguistic play, the learners play with the language through rhyming, rhythm, assonance, consonance or alliteration (Cook, 1997).

3.3. Data collection procedures

To achieve the aims of this study, a semi-experimental design was employed. Two intact classes were selected. At first, the participants in both groups took Cambridge Young Learners English Flyers test to ascertain the initial homogeneity of the learners at the beginning of the study. Then both groups received a pre-test at the beginning of the study in the form of multiple-choice to homogenize the learners concerning their grammatical accuracy. Then, in the experimental group, the teacher introduced language play-oriented form-focused tasks. Field notes were taken as well as occasional audio-recordings of the instances of tasks and episodes manifesting the given treatment. The students'

interactions with their teacher and their peers were transcribed and analyzed as qualitative measurement to further shed light on the findings of the study. In the control group, the teacher focused on the same topics through non-playful tasks. Finally, both groups received a written post-test. Later on, the attitude of the students towards form-focused tasks was investigated in both groups.

3.4. Data analysis

The quantitative data gathered through pre-tests and post-tests were analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) 19.0. To compare the performance of the learners in both groups, an independent samples t-test was run.

The qualitative data included the audio-recordings of the learners' interactions with their teacher and their peers in the classroom and the learners' comments regarding the tasks in the classroom in both groups. The audio-recordings were transcribed and analyzed and the learners' written comments regarding focus on form during playful and non-playful tasks were used to further support the findings of the study.

4. Results and discussion

4.1 The impact of language play-oriented tasks on the learners' accuracy

The first research question in this study dealt with the effect of language play-oriented tasks with planned focus on form on Iranian EFL learners' accuracy in controlled writings. To answer this question, both groups were given a written test at the end of the course and the results are as follows:

Table 2. Descriptive results of the participants' controlled writings

	LP treatment	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Posttest	Control group	18	35.73	3.081	.796
	Experimental group	20	38.44	3.881	.970

Table 3. Independent Samples T-Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
participant's score	Equal variances assumed	.510	.481	-2.139	29	.041	-2.704	1.264	-5.290	-.118
	Equal variances not assumed			-2.155	28.263	.040	-2.704	1.255	-5.273	-.135

The table above demonstrates that there is a statistically significant difference between two groups regarding their grammatical accuracy at the end of the study: t (28.263) = - 2.155; $\rho < 0.05$. The experimental group performed better than the control group. This may be attributed to the fact that

language play helped the learners to learn grammar better through fun and enjoyment. The overall effectiveness of language play on the grammatical accuracy of the learners corroborate the findings of Belz and Reinhardt (2004) who see adult foreign language play as a means of learning grammar. Similarly, Cekaite and Aronsson (2005) contend that language play causes extended repair sequences which act as informal language lessons focused on formal aspects of language. Further support comes from Pomerantz and Bell (2007) who argue that language play leads to linguistic practice and the manipulation of the linguistic forms and provide opportunities for more varied forms of language use. In a similar vein, Bushnell (2009) concludes that through language play the learners are able to manage the pedagogical tasks in the classroom better. Additionally, Forman (2011) finds that language play provides practice opportunities for the learners. For example, in the following extract about "*The giftsday*", the grammatical focus of the task is on *wh-questions with present simple* and the students are supposed to look at the pictures and ask wh-questions. When the learners ask these questions for some time, they become tired of this dry practice. At this moment, the teacher tries to add spice to the classroom by initiating semantic language play and asks one of the learners about her "giftsday". The learners don't get the meaning of this new word at first but when the teacher explains about it, they like it because it is against the routine classroom practice and at the same time it is funny and enjoyable.

Extract 1: The giftsday!

T: when is your *giftsday*?
SS: huh huh huh huh huh
S1: tea:cher (.) u:m(.) what *giftsday*?
T: when you get a lot of presents in your birthday, it is your giftsday. Isn't it?
SS: ☺ ha ha hahhh ☺ yes huh [that's right yes ha huh]
S2: ☺ my giftsday u:m is in July.
T: how many gifts do you get in your giftsday?
S2: I get *ma:ny* gifts.
T: you get *many* gifts, lucky you! For example, what kind of gifts do you get?
S2: I have..ehh.. I get scarf, eh t-shirt, money, gold.
S3: I get a *ca:r* in my gifts day.
SS: ☺ ha ha huh huh he he
T: you get a: ca:r in your giftsday?! *Wo:w*!
SS: ha ha huh huh he he
T: such a bi:g gift!
S4: maybe it is a heehhh *toy* ca:r?!
SS: ha ha ha huh huh huh
S5: tea:cher, eh(.) giftsday also u:m partyday he he huh huh because we have a party in our birthday
T: *Yes*. It is also a party day ☺ very good!
S5: teacher u:m huh I get an apa:rtment in my partyday
SS: ha ha ha he he he
T: O:h you are very lucky!
S3: my gifts are very bi:g ha huh er always
S6: my family no:t mm-hm genere…
T: generous?
S6: *ye:s* my family not generous they don't buy I bi:g gifts
SS: he he he he he he
T: ok, what else do you get in your giftsday?
S7: I get toys eh (.) dolls u:m
T: you get toys in your birthday?!
SS: ha ha huh huh

S3: Are you *ba:by*?!
    SS: ha ha ha ha ha

For instance, one of the students says that she gets a car for her "giftsday" and another student asks in a funny way whether it is a toy car and the whole class burst into laughter. Another learner says she gets an apartment for her birthday. The students engage in a kind of competition about the gifts. Then one of the students complains that her family is not generous and they don't give her big gifts in her birthday. After responding to the teacher's play with the word "birthday", they try to create more examples of this kind of play. For example, one of the students says that the birthday can also be called a "partyday" because they have a birthday party on that day. The learners follow the teacher's footsteps and start asking wh-questions by playing semantically with this new word. Therefore, this kind of play gives the learners a practice or a "rehearsal" (Lantof, 1997) in the second language, which is learning how to ask wh-questions.

Furthermore, while doing the language play-oriented activities, the students collaborated with the teacher and with each other to produce more examples of language play. For instance, the oral narrative play initiated by the teacher in the following example about "*A day in the forest*" changed the practice of a serious focus on form activity into a playful narrative which enriched the teacher's lesson with a verbal pleasure accompanied by lively practice of grammar (Sullivan, 2000). This kind of play is very similar to the creation of imaginary scenarios but it may or may not contain the element of fiction in it.

Extract 2: A day in the forest!

T: It was Friday. We went to a picnic. It was very exciting. The weather was hot and sunny. The jungle was…
S1: Sca:ry!
S2: Ni:ce.
T: The weather in jungle was…
S3: COLD!
S4: No!, ha ha ha huh huh it was *warm* ! Cold weather not good?! ☺
SS: ha ah ah huh huh huh
T: haha huh huh what did you do in the jungle?
S5: made *ba:rbecue*
T: After the lunch, suddenly the weather got angry!
SS: huh huh huh huh huh huh huh huh
T: the sky started to cry!☺
SS: huh huh huh huh huh huh huh huh , ☺ (all as a chorus) it rains!

In this example, the learners continue the story and they do it in a funny way. They seem to compete with each other in answering the teacher's questions. From time to time, the teacher intervenes and asks more questions to secure that all the learners have a say in continuing and writing an end to the story. The teacher engaged the whole class in a language play activity and the students collaborated with each other to continue this play. "The students try to use all their ingenuity", believe Cekaite and Aronsson (2005), "to secure the attention and maintain the interest of their co-participants" during collaborative language play. These researchers maintain that when the students help each other in constructing a playful activity, they practice the language forms.

4.2 The impact of language play on the learners' recall of the grammatical items

The second research question addressed the recall of the items by the learners in playful and non-playful language-oriented activities. As the written post-test illustrated, the participants in the experimental group did better in the post test than the other learners in the control group. It may imply

that the learners in the experimental group recalled the items better than the learners in the control group. This may imply that language play helped the learners to recall the items for a long time. This is in agreement with Bell (2012) when she says that the learners retain a particular linguistic point for a long time when they focus on it playfully.

This better recall of the items through language play may lead to the conclusion that language play helped the learners to notice the gap in their own knowledge (Bell, 2012). As the sociocultural theory posits, when the learners interact with each other, they notice the differences between their own linguistic knowledge and a more proficient L2 user and they try to compensate for this gap in their knowledge and as they intend to do so, they become more proficient. Language play could be a useful tool in attracting the learners' attention to this gap. Bell's (2012) findings lend support to this claim when she considers language play as a type of interaction that draws the learners' attention to form-meaning relationships. She is of the opinion that language play shows learner proficiency and the more proficient learners are engaged in language play more than the other learners (Bell, 2005).

This better recall of the items in the experimental group could further be connected to the element of humor in this class. The presence of fun and humor during these activities might have helped the learners to remember the items better. Some of the language play-oriented activities such as syntactic play included strange and bizarre structure of words and this was funny for the learners. It might have helped them to remember the items better. This is in line with Keenan, MacWhinney, and Mayhew (1977) say that the unusual or emotionally laden sentences are remembered more than the other types of sentences. The effect of humorous sentences on the recall of the items could be further supported by Bates, Kintsch, Fletcher and Guiliani (1980) who conclude that bizarre language is more remembered in intentional learning environment. Also, Mc Daniel, Einstein, DeLosh, May, and Brady (1995) say that bizarre sentences are remembered more than common sentences. The following extract calls the learners attention to the syntactic play about "*The dinner*" and the language focus of the task is on the *present simple tense.* Syntactic play includes playing with the grammatical order of the sentences (Belz, 2002). In this example, the teacher initiated this kind of play by asking this question "As the clock thirty after 6 shows, do you get up?" instead of asking "Do you get up at six thirty?" and thus played with the order of the question. Later, the teacher encouraged the students to ask questions in the same way and play with the structure of the language.

Extract 3: The dinner!

S1: What time do you have dinner?
S2: As the clock, ehh, a quarter after one shows, should I have dinner.
T: (surprised) at one o'clock! You eat dinner? It is interesting!
S2: Ye:s! ha ha huh huh
T: (asks other students) do you eat dinner at one o'clock too?
S3: ha ha huh huh NO, we sleep at one o'clock   ☺
SS: ha ha ha he he huh huh
S4: ha ha huh huh u:m tea:cher I watch TV at one o'clock.
T: huh huh☺   instead of studying your lessons, you watch TV?! ha ha huh huh ☺ don't you have exams?!
SS: ha ha huh huh huh
S4: but it ha ha huh huh enjoyable u:m to watch TV when you have exams he he he

Following the teacher, the learners try to play with the language syntactically. The first student asks the other one about the time she has dinner and the second student answers by changing the order of the sentence.

It may be concluded that language play is beneficial in better recall of the items in terms of grammar. It may imply that teachers need to subscribe to language play in their classes more.

4.3 The learners' attitude toward playful and non-playful form-focused tasks

The third research question was concerned with the attitude of the learners toward planned focus on form in playful and non-playful activities. To answer this question, the learner's opinion toward focus on form has been investigated in both groups.

The learners written comments illustrated that the students in the experimental group showed more interest for focus on form activities and enjoyed it more whereas the learners in the control group found these activities boring and difficult to manage. For example, one of the students in the experimental group stated:

"I didn't have stress when I was finding the answers to the activities, I was relaxed and I was not afraid of saying the wrong answer."

Another student said:

"I didn't like grammar at first but when we did the activities together in the class by playing with the words, I wanted to do more of these activities because playing with the words was interesting and funny."

While the learners in the experimental group showed satisfaction for language play-oriented tasks, the learners' comments in the control group on these tasks were not in line with that of the experimental group. For instance, one of the learners in the control group said:

"I think we have enough exercises for grammar and they are difficult enough, so we don't need extra exercises for grammar."

Some other students stated that they didn't like grammar in general and they don't want to do exercises related to them.

"Thanks for coping and bringing these tasks to the class but I don't like grammar, it's boring, it's not your fault!"

The learners' comments in the experimental group showed that they had a positive attitude towards form-focused tasks.

It could be argued that one of the immediate effects of language play in the learning environment is that it reduces the anxiety of the students and creates a warm and relaxing atmosphere for their learning. For example, the language play initiated by the teacher in the present study changed the role of the teacher and the students and in this way, the social distance between the teacher and the learners diminished and the students felt free to talk and to participate in classroom activities. This echoes Tarone (2000) when she posits that language play lowers the affective factor in the learning environment. Language play in the present study helped the teacher and the students to free themselves from the dominant discourse prevalent in most of the language classrooms (Forman, 2011). This finding is also in harmony with what the teacher did in Sullivan (2000) by changing a dry classroom practice into an interesting activity. The same thing happened in Pomerantz and Bell (2007)

where the teacher and the students collaborated with each other by playing with the boring conversation topic and created emotionally charged, linguistically rich discussion in the class.

Additionally, language play reduced the learners' anxiety in the experimental group by giving other identities to the learners and helped them to save face. Concerning this issue, Vandergriff (2009) argues that through language play, the learners gain new identities and interact with their friends with that identity. In this way, they can interact with others with the fake identities they have created for themselves and save face. Along similar lines, Warring (2012) believes that when the learners are given situational, relational and personal identities, they enter another universe which is not restricted by defined roles and classroom setting. She discusses that the learners have an equal participation when play is included in the conversation. For example, in the extract presented above about the pragmatic play of the learners during this study, the learners feel free to talk in a relaxed way with each other, they practice the present continuous and they play with the language but they take a different identity and this makes them feel comfortable. The following example represents pragmatic play which is about "*The place of foods*". One type of pragmatic play includes playing with the identity and is defined by Vandergriff (2009) as a type of pretend play that allows the speaker to take on a different identity and speak with the voice of someone else. For instance, in the task that focused on *the present continuous*, the teacher took the role of the father of the house and asked the students playfully "What are you doing in the TV room?" thus talking to the learners with a different voice while making a connection between the living room and watching TV semantically. Or the teacher asked the students "What are you doing in the restaurant of the house?" by taking the role of the mother as another different voice. The teacher encouraged the students to take the role of other family members as different voices and engage in pragmatic play.

Extract 4: The place of foods!

S1: What are doing in the *place of foods*?
S2: I talk huh huh huh with the foods ☺
T: (surprised) You talk with the foods?! What do you say?!
SS: he he he huh huh huh ☺
                     [say ha ha which one of you huh huh u:m delicious?!] ☺
S2: ha ha huh huh I say I come and EAT you
T: ☺ so you say to the foods "I will come and I will eat you!"
S2: Yeah ha ha I say I am eating you!

Following the teacher's example, the leaners play with the language pragmatically. One of the students takes the role of the mother of the house and refers to the kitchen as "the place of foods". The second student answers playfully by saying that she is talking with the foods. Pragmatic play like parodying or double-voicing, believes Vandergriff (2009), frees the learners from a pressure dominant in language learning classes and is considered to be a comic relief. Warring (2012) echoes the same opinion by arguing that stepping outside one's current situational identity upgrades the laudability of his/her language performance.

Furthermore, language play increased the learners' intrinsic motivation. As was stated by one of the students in the experimental group, the learners wanted to do grammar exercises more because they were playing with the language and it was funny for them. The following extract shows a type of language play which is called the creation of imaginary scenarios and it is about "*The toothbrush in a rush*". In this type of play, imaginary worlds of fiction are created which are not real (Cook, 2000). In this extract, the learners ask *wh-questions* related to the picture of a toothbrush. First the teacher asks one of the students about the time that her toothbrush is in a rush to brush the learner's teeth.

Extract 5: The toothbrush in a rush!

T: when is your toothbrush in a rush to (the students' laughter interrupts the sentence)
SS: ha ha ha huh huh huh
S1: heeehhh tea:cher can toothbrush *hurry*?!
T: ☺Ye:s ha ha ha why not?! ☺
S2: huh huh I no brush my tee:th
SS: ha ha ha ha ha
T: Lucky toothbrush! So it is always resting?!
SS: ha ha huh ☺
          [always on a picnic]
T: ok, how about others? When is your toothbrush in a rush to brush your teeth? Imagine that you are running and the toothbrush is following you and it says plea:se brush your teeth
SS: ha ha ha ha
              Huh huh huh [playing hide and seek with the toothbrush!]
S3: my toothbrush is in a rush *every* day
S4: my toothbrush u:m is in rush huh huh *one* time a year
SS: ha ha ha ha huh huh huh
T: ☺ interesting! ☺you brush your teeth only *once* a yea:r?! poor your teeth!
SS: ha ha huh huh huh
S4: ☺ yes huh huh once a year
S5: tea:cher I chew a gum eh no need for brush.. so my toothbrush is not in ru:sh huh huh huh
SS: ha ha ha huh huh huh
T:☺ it is so strange! ☺ but we need to brush our teeth every day, don't we?
S6: ha ha ah NO eh we put perfume on teeth ☺
SS: ha ha ha huh huh huh
T: Come o:n! It's not a good idea?!
S6: ye:s it is very good smell
T: (surprised) *Really*?!
S6: No, I ha ha huh huh u:m I am joking

Upon hearing this question, the whole class burst into laughter. Then, one of the students asks whether it is possible for a toothbrush to be in a hurry. Then another student responds to the teacher's question by saying that she doesn't brush her teeth. The teacher regards her toothbrush as lucky and says that her toothbrush rests all the time. Another student says that her toothbrush is in a rush once a year. One of the students contends that chewing a gum is enough and she doesn't need to brush her teeth and finally, another student suggests that using a perfume can make the teeth smell good.

As is seen in the above extract, learners were motivated to continue the story and do more exercises. Deci and Ryan (1985) consider play as one of the main features of intrinsically motivating behavior. Similarly, Bushnell (2009) points out that language play acts as a motivator and facilitator in learning a second language. It is argued that the learners don't negotiate for meaning in the classroom because it is a face threatening act for them but when they engage in language play, they create a non-real world for them and they can negotiate for meaning easily. In this way, language play plays a role in improving the grammatical accuracy of the learners by motivating the learners to practice more.

Also of note is the fact that language play helped the learners to socialize better in the second language and to participate more in the activities. As the playful interactions of the learners illustrated, the participants interacted with each other and with the teacher during these activities and played with the language. Forman (2011) points out that the teacher-led language play may have a positive impact upon students' engagement in the learning process. Also, according to Bushnell (2009), language play provides affordances for learners to engage in social interaction.

As the results illustrated, language play improved the grammatical accuracy of the learners during the present study, it also helped them to recall the language items better and finally, it caused the learners to have a positive attitude towards form-focused activities in the classroom.

5. Conclusions

The present study sought to determine the effect of language play-oriented tasks with planned focus on form on Iranian EFL learners' accuracy in controlled writings. The effect of language play on the learners' grammatical accuracy was measured through a post-test. In addition, the learners' classroom interactions were recorded and transcribed as a qualitative measurement to further shed light on the findings of the study. Moreover, the attitudes of the students toward planned focus on form was investigated in playful and non-playful form-focused tasks.

The results showed that language play could be employed in language classes as a means of teaching and learning grammar. In the present study, the teacher used language play-oriented activities to help the learners to understand the grammatical points better. Also language play acted as a provider of feedback to the learners, as a useful tool of initiating collaboration among the learners and the teacher, was considered to be an aid to memory by helping the students to retain the items for a long time, reduced the participants' anxiety during the class, saves their face, increased their motivation and helped them to socialize better in the classroom.

6. Implications

The first implication of the present study concerns EFL teachers and learners in Iran. Education in Iran is without fun. When observed, teaching grammar is considered a boring activity by many teachers and learners in the classroom. Most of the students get bored after some routine teaching and start talking with their classmates or they play with their mobile phones. Teachers and material designers should find techniques to address the attention span of the learners. One of these ways may be the inclusion of language play and fun as a spice in the classroom. Teachers could employ language play in almost all the activities they do in the classroom. In this way, language play could help to keep the students involved in the class and it may lead to peer-assisted noticing of language forms.

Furthermore, to be able to communicate efficiently in the second language, the learners need to be accurate grammatically but most of the school students in Iran do not like grammar and they consider English classes as boring and exhausting. However, to be accurate and fluent in a second language, the students need formal instruction and the teachers have to be loyal to the school book and teach it to the learners without using any other material in the class. The language teachers may make the teaching of grammar funny and humorous for the learners by integrating the activities present in the school's book with language play types without the need to another source other than the school's book.

Another implication of the present study to the field is that language play and fun could become an integral part of textbooks and material developers may embed language play types in the books as a major activity. As a consequence, the books will not be boring and routine for the learners and they will enjoy learning.

Finally, the present study is a new contribution to the line of research on focus on form in the EFL context of Iran. The effect of language play on focus on form activities is an under - researched area in Iranian EFL context and it is hoped that the present study could pave the way for further research in this area.

7. Limitations and suggestions for further research

One of the factors that posed limitations on the generalizability of the present study was that some participants were not engaged in language play activities or produced a few instances of language play and this factor limited the generalizability of the study. This might be due to the fact that these students are accustomed to serious language learning environments and when they are exposed to this kind of learning, they do not feel comfortable and prefer to be silent in the class. It is well-known that students have different learning styles. Some students learn in a serious setting and some others learn by joking, fun and games in the classroom. Bell (2012) relates this to the different personality and learning styles of the learners. Another reason could be the fact that the learners were not familiar to each other at the beginning of the class and it took them some time to get used to each other and start playing with the language in their pair-work activities. The learners avoided joking with new acquaintances because they did not want to be misunderstood (Bell, 2012) or they might simply had a strong desire to save their public face. It is suggested that future research on language play be carried out with only interested learners in language play by giving them a questionnaire and investigating their interest in games and the presence of humor in the learning environment.

Another limitation of the present study is the sample because it was carried out with only two elementary classes in a private language institute where most of the learners were motivated to learn English and it was not an obligatory subject for them. It is possible that more clear results would be obtained if the present study is replicated with school students whose language classes are mandatory for them as part of their education. Although the students took language proficiency test at the beginning of the treatment, the classes were intact and no random selection of the participants were done.

Also, the present study was done with only female participants and gender was a control variable in the present study. It calls for further research to examine the effect of language play-oriented tasks on the grammatical accuracy of male and female learners during focus on form activities.

And finally, it was not possible to record the pair-work interactions of the learners individually because of the policies of the language institute in which the study was carried out and the whole classroom session is recorded. The researcher relied on field notes when transcribing the learners' interactions with their peers and with their teacher. Future research may record the classroom interactions of the pairs and it may yield better results.

Acknowledgements

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Appendix A. Transcription conventions (Bell, 2012)

.   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[rds   overlapping speech

[words

=   latching

•   intake of breath hhh   aspiration

HHH   aspiration/laughter while speaking

(quietly)   description of voice quality or non-verbal action

(...)   intervening turns at talk have been omitted

(.)   pause of $^1/_2$ second or less

(7)   pause of this many seconds

☺great ☺   smiling voice quality

Planlanmış Biçim-Odaklı Öğretime Dayalı Dil Oyunu-Yöneltimi Görevlerin İranlı İngilizce Öğrencilerin Denetimli Yazma Üzerindeki Etkisi

Öz

İkinci dil öğreniminde dil oyunu ve etkilerine son yıllarda birçok bilim adamı tarafından, hem sınıf içi hem de sınıf dışı olarak tanımlanmış dil oyunu örnekleriyle, dikkat çekilmiştir. Ancak çok az bir kısmı sınıf içi etkinliklerle birlikte dil oyunları ile bütünleştirilmiştir ve bu çok az kısım sadece öğrenen etkileşimlerinin nitel analizleri için yeterli olmuştur. Bu çalışmada, planlanmış biçim-odaklı öğretime dayalı dil oyunu-yöneltimi görevlerin İranlı İngilizce öğrencilerin denetimli yazmaya olan etkisi incelenmiştir Ön-test son-test yöntemi kullanılarak, çalışmanın kullanıcılarına özel dilsel özelliklere odaklanmış bir dizi anlamlı görev uygulanmıştır. Dil oyun türlerinden anlamsal oyun, hayali senaryoların oluşturulması, sözlü anlatım oyunu, sözdizimsel oyun, edim bilgisi oyun, dilsel oyun ve sözlü düelloyu kapsayan görevler özel bir okuldaki İngilizce öğrencilerine ile birlikte 12 hafta boyunca yürütülmüştür. Alan notlarının yanı sıra verilen uygulama yöntemlerini gösteren görev ve bölüm örneklerinin, zaman zaman kayıt altına alınan, ses kayıtları da alınmıştır. Bulgular dil oyunu görevlerin dil oyunu olmayan dil öğrenimi aktivitelerine karşı üstünlük taşıdığını, oyun görevlerin daha iyi hatırlandığını gösteren öğelerle ortaya koymuştur. Bu çalışma İngilizce sınıflarında dil oyunu görevlerinin, tasarlanmış biçime odaklı öğretim ile bütünleştirilmesini gerektirir ve İngilizce öğretmenlerinin bir dizi buna bezer görevlerle birlikte sınıflarında eğlenceli ve rahatlatıcı bir atmosfer oluşturmalarını sağlar.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Dil oyunu; ikinci / yabancı dil öğrenimi; görev temelli öğretim; biçime odaklanma; mizah

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