No Laughing Matter: Why Educators Need to Take Humor More Seriously

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Abstract

Humor may make people laugh, but linguistically it is no laughing matter. This paper proposed to the educators, teacher preparation programs, and educational researchers who need to take humor and the related phenomenon of play more seriously in their approach to understanding the dynamics of classroom interaction and how challenging humor and play can be to interpret and navigate as they unfold spontaneously in teacher-student interactions. This study aimed to identify the kinds of metacommunicative awareness that teachers, particularly novice educators, need to develop to navigate the interactions they engage with successfully. Meta communicative awareness referred to a deep-seated understanding of how meaning in interaction is constructed and an ability to step outside one's immediate interpretive frame. The study was conducted between 2016 and 2018 in a community-based afterschool program. The program serves adults and children in the surrounding area who identify as Bangladeshi. The data were collected through audio-recorded interviews with 18 university participants, approximately 40 hours of audio-recordings of homework help sessions, samples of university students' notes and reflective writing from their time as volunteers, and samples of the children's schoolwork. The homework helpers were undergraduate and graduate students from two universities. Some of the homework helpers were pursuing master's degrees in education. They aspired to careers as teachers, and others had volunteered for the program to fulfil institutional community service requirements. At the program, these homework helpers were referred to as "volunteers," and they occupied both the institutional and interactional role of "educator" concerning the children. It can be concluded that humor and play-interpreted talk in educational settings quite challenging. Moreover, a failure to recognize talk as play could have serious consequences for what ultimately happens between teachers and students and how they come to see one another.

Keywords*: Humor, Laughing, Educator*

1. Introduction

Many teachers fear humor. They worry that if they allow students to make a joke or engage in light-hearted banter, mayhem will ensue. The teacher will lose control of the classroom and the students will openly disparage the teacher (e.g., Blackledge & Creese, 2009; Stanley, 2013; Wei & Wu, 2009). Yet, despite widely circulating beliefs that equate the presence of humor in classrooms with the loss of teacherly authority, many teachers use humor to exert their power. Some educators, for example, gently tease students to maintain orderliness, while others use their quick wit to build strong classroom relationships (Bullough, 2012). Although questions abound as to whether the use of humor can facilitate academic learning (see Martin, 2007, for review), research has suggested that it can create feelings of rapport, reduce anxiety, and increase students' commitment to and interest in their classes (e.g., Berk & Nanda, 1998; Garner, 2006; Wanzer & Frymier, 1999). Yet, in research on classroom interaction, spontaneous instances of classroom humor are often ignored or treated as ancillary to the serious business of schooling.

Ethnographic accounts of classroom interaction, however, have routinely illustrated that humor is a regular feature of interaction in educational spaces and a frequent and valuable resource for negotiating identities and power relations (e.g., Jaspers, 2005, 2011; Rampton, 2006). Moreover, studies of teachers' attitudes toward humor reveal that while many see humor as a potential resource for building rapport, managing classroom behavior, and diffusing tense situations, others note that humor – and particularly, spontaneous, student-initiated humor – can be hard to interpret and risky to engage with (Lovorn & Holaway, 2015). Yet, in the practice of education itself, few teacher preparation programs or frameworks for teacher evaluation include a focus on educators' use of and response to this powerful interactional tool (Bell & Pomerantz, 2016).

In this paper, I propose that educators, teacher preparation programs, and educational researchers need to take humor – and the related phenomenon of play – more seriously in their approach to understanding the dynamics of classroom interaction. To this end, I illustrate just how challenging humor and play can be to interpret and navigate as they unfold spontaneously in teacher-student interactions. In undertaking this analysis, I consider how much is at stake for teacher-student relationships as educators try to manage these seemingly small and "trivial" interactional moments. For as Waring and Hruska have observed, novice teachers "sometimes appear unable to think outside their own line of reasoning or take the students' perspective" (2012, p. 295). In institutional settings, like schools and supplemental educational programs, this "tunnel vision" can have serious consequences for students, as their efforts to signal complex meanings through humor and play may be read solely as acts of indifference, insolence, and even insurrection. Thus, my aim is not only to showcase what a careful look at humor and play can teach us about the workings of interaction in educational contexts, but also to make a case for the careful study of interaction in teacher preparation programs.

2. Why is humor challenging for educators?

One reason the humor that spontaneously arises in classroom interaction presents difficulties for educators is its co-constructed, emergent, and unpredictable nature. From a linguistic perspective, one might think about such humor not as something that resides permanently within particular words or bits of language, but rather as a meaning that gets constructed within and through interaction and emerges in its moment of use. As experienced teachers know, students can find just about anything funny – from the sound of a word, to the use of a specific gesture, to the sequential ordering of two turns at talk. Utterances aren't by nature humorous; they get presented, oriented to, and taken up as funny by language users. And, though we may think about humor as something that can be broken down into particular categories (e.g., jokes, puns, teases, one-liners, hyperbolic statements, parodies, apocryphal stories, etc.), these kinds or genres of conversational humor merely represent repeated and socially recognizable instances of language use that over time have come to be equated with their humorous intentions and interpretations. This is why people sometimes start to smile or laugh when they hear an instance of formulaic language that they associate with the beginning of a joke (e.g., "so a man walks into a bar…"). This is also why a joke that is so successful in one instance can fall flat in another. It's not the joke itself that is funny; the humor emerges and gets negotiated between the interlocutors in the joke's moment of enactment (Bell, 2015).

These characteristics of spontaneous classroom humor, however, are not the only things that make it challenging for educators. Humor also has numerous social functions. For example, Figure 1 illustrates some of the ways humor can be used in educational contexts.

Amuse	Aggravate
Build rapport and intimacy	Destroy rapport and intimacy
Mitigate face-threats and tensions	Escalate face-threats and tensions
Uphold social norms and conventions	Subvert social norms and conventions
Highlight and maintain relations of power	Highlight and redraw relations of power

Figure 1: Some contrasting functions of humor

As Bell and Pomerantz (2016) point out, some of these functions -- like those in the left-hand column of Figure 1 -- are "norm-upholding" and serve to maintain the prevailing social order. Others, like those in the right-hand column, are "norm-challenging" and can disrupt or redraw existing relations of power. In addition, spontaneous classroom humor can be both "affiliative" and "dis-affiliative." That is, it can both build rapport or feelings of camaraderie, as well as create social distance and discord. Here it is worth noting that not only can humor accomplish more than one function on the above list at once, opposing functions can be enacted simultaneously. For example, an act of humor that one student perceives as diffusing social tensions can be experienced as escalating tensions by another. Thus, the ambiguous, polysemous, and at times contradictory functions of humor can also make it very tricky to use and interpret in educational settings.

It is important to recognize, however, that some who study spontaneous humor in educational settings from an interactional perspective think about humor as a subset of the broader category of playful talk (e.g., Lytra, 2007). Figure 2 represents this hierarchical relationship. This way of thinking adds an additional layer to humor's complexity, as it sometimes occurs within a larger sequence of playful interaction.
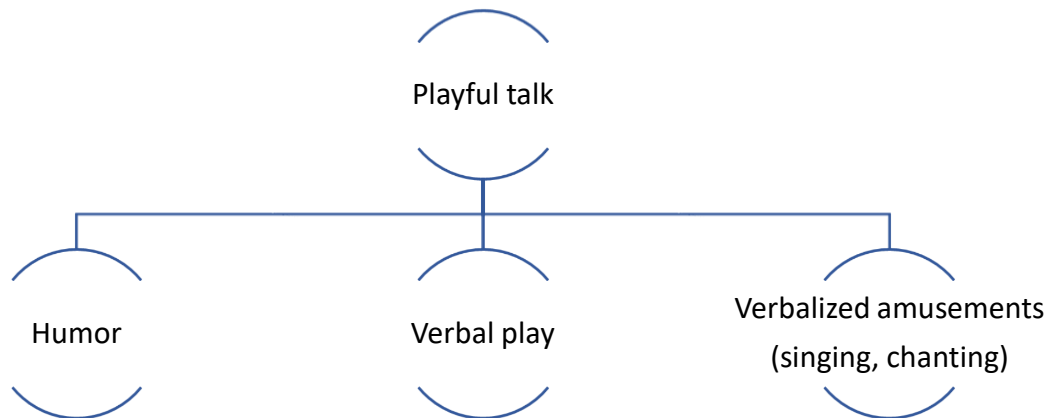
Figure 2: Humor as a category of playful talk

Put simply, playful talk can be defined as "any manipulation of language that is done in a non-serious manner for either public or private enjoyment" (Bell & Pomerantz, 2016, p. ix). An understanding of spontaneous conversational humor as a subset of playful talk presents yet another challenge for educators, as it brings to the fore an additional set of questions about meaning. As the anthropologist Gregory Bateson (1972) noted, one peculiarity of play is that "the messages or signals exchanged in play are in a certain sense untrue or not meant" (p. 183). Thus, when educators are confronted with humor within a larger interactional sequence of play, they must ask not only "what does this mean?" but also "is what is being communicated through this use of humor for real"? In other words, the presence of humor can signal that the larger interaction within which it resides should be understood as play. Yet, humor can also be a "one off" or momentary divergence from the serious talk surrounding it and not serve to signal that the surrounding interaction is playful. Thus, when encountering humor in the classroom, educators often struggle to discern the boundaries of the play frame in which it is embedded.

3. The study

The data I present today were collected as part of a larger study that looked at a university-community partnership in which university students served as "homework helpers" for children enrolled in a community-based afterschool program. Of interest in the larger study were the interactional patterns that emerged in these homework help sessions and how a focus on these patterns might be used to help new teachers become more attuned to the interactional dimensions of their work, particularly as they work one-on-one or in small groups with students. In other words, this study was aimed at identifying the kinds of metacommunicative awareness that teachers, and particularly novice educators, need to develop in order to successfully navigate the interactions in which they engage. By metacommunicative awareness, I am referring to a deep-seated understanding of how meaning in interaction is constructed and an ability to step outside one's immediate interpretive frame.

The study was conducted between 2016 and 2018 in a community-based afterschool program. The program serves adults and children in the surrounding area who identify as Bangladeshi. It was founded by a couple from Bangladesh who felt that the children in their community were not receiving the academic and linguistic support they needed to succeed at school. The homework helpers were undergraduate and graduate students from two universities. Some of the homework helpers were pursuing master's degrees in education and aspired to careers as teachers, others had volunteered for the program in order to fulfill institutional community service requirements. At the program, these homework helpers were referred to as "volunteers" and they occupied both the institutional and interactional role of "educator" with respect to the children. Whereas some of the volunteers came to the center on a regular basis over a fixed time period (one semester, an academic year), others came only a handful of times. Thus, although many of the children were long-term participants in this program, the volunteers were often more transient figures with little prior experience in similar educational settings.

In order to understand what was happening in the interactions between the volunteers and the children, the following data were collected: audio-recorded interviews with 18 university participants, approximately 40 hours of audio-recordings of homework help sessions, samples of university students' notes and reflective writing from their time as volunteers, and samples of the children's schoolwork. Although the initial study protocol called for formally interviewing the children, this aspect of data collection proved to be unfeasible given limitations on the children's time and difficulties obtaining permission from parents.

Phase 1 of the analysis consisted of identifying the themes that emerged from the recordings and artifacts. One frequent theme in the interview data and the volunteers' reflections was the difficulty of sense making, particularly as it related to

1) understanding what was going on in one's interactions with others, and

2) how to respond in a way that was consistent with one's institutional role.

As one of the volunteers succinctly noted in an interview, "You have to read them [the children] and read how they're reading you. And then, as the adult, like try to – you know – meet in the middle somewhere" (interview, Liz, 2017). Indeed, in both the interviews and the written artifacts, playful talk emerged as a kind of interaction that the volunteer homework helpers had specific difficulty "reading" and navigating in their roles as educators. Whereas some volunteers spoke and wrote about noticing and appreciating these relaxed, joyful moments, others questioned how committed the children were to their schoolwork and noted how difficult it was to keep the children focused on their assignments. That is, the latter group tended "to read" playfulness as evidence of the children's lack of interest in academics or as a token of their own inadequacies as adults charged with providing homework assistance. And, as novice educators, they weren't sure what to do about this.

Similarly, in the preliminary review of the audio recordings of the homework help sessions, playfulness stood out as a salient feature of much of the talk. Laughter, light-hearted banter, jokes, silly sounds, and teases featured prominently in the interactions between homework helpers and children. Much of this playful talk was initiated by the children and the volunteers varied in their responses to it. Although some went along with the playfulness and participated in it, others implored the children to focus or tried to negotiate deals to get the children to do their work efficiently. Thus, a second review of the audio recordings was undertaken.

In phase two of the data analysis process, a close examination of the interactional unfolding of these moments was undertaken from an interactional sociolinguistic perspective (see Rampton, 2017, for discussion). Here, focus was on the contextualization cues that were deployed to co-construct specific interchanges as playful and/or humorous. Lytra (2007) offers the following list:

- Laughter, smile voice
- Change in pitch, rhythm, volume
- Repetition
- Unconventional language choices
- Mimicking, re(voicing), styling
- References to pop-culture (song lyrics, movie lines, memes)
- Inversions of truth relations

The analysis below focuses on the ways in which these and other contextualization cues were deployed, oriented to, and taken up by the participants in these interactional moments.

Example 1

In example 1, Eva, a graduate student from China studying to be an English-as-a-second-language teacher (ESL) and MP, a 9-year-old child are working together in an afterschool setting. They have worked together in the past and recordings of their prior interactions show that they have developed a pleasant, lighthearted rapport. The following interaction ensues:

11.10.16 (from 38:47)

Eve (volunteer),MP (child, 9 yrs)

1	MP	↑ Ee:vahh (.)
2		[oI needo he:lp. (1)
3	Eve	[Alri:ght
4	MP	Uuhh Miss Eva (.)
5		I need help with my expla:nation thingy. (3)
6		I need my explanation >thingy thingy<

In line 1, the child asks for assistance by calling the teacher's name, Eva, and making an explicit request for help, "I need help." Yet, in both naming the teacher and making the request, the child elongates the vowels, thus rendering her pronunciation somewhat marked. The teacher acknowledges the child's turn by responding with an assent, "alright" (line 3). Yet, in so doing, the teacher too elongates the vowel in her one-word utterance. The child then responds by calling the teacher by her name again, this time with the courtesy title "Miss" appended, followed by two additional requests for help (lines 5 and 6). The first in this pair of utterances (line 5) again features the elongated vowel sound seen in the previous turns, but it is upgraded with the addition of "thingy" to refer to the homework assignment. The child then repeats the beginning of a request formula "I need," followed by the repetition of "thingy," with "thingy" reduplicated in the final line.

What are we to make of this interaction? In one sense, it features a constellation of contextualization cues that past research has associated with playful language use and thus play: exaggerated pronunciation of particular sounds, repetition and mimicking of one speaker's communicative move by another (elongated vowel by child then teacher), use of unconventional language forms

("thingy"), and reduplication ("thingy thingy"). Thus, one might understand this as a serious request for assistance softened or made less direct by the use of playful elements. For example, one might interpret the child's use of these tokens of playfulness as evidence of her understanding of the facework involved in asking for help and her attempt to protect her own face and manage the teacher's face by using some playful elements as mitigators (see Goffman, 1967, on the role of facework in interaction). At the same time, one might also interpret this sequence as a serious request for help dressed up as play to make it more noticeable and actionable. After all, in an afterschool setting such as this one, there are many children simultaneously vying for the volunteers' attention. In framing her request as playful, the child may be trying to make it stand out. Indeed, one might also take the use of playful elements here as indexing something about the child's relationship to the volunteer and how comfortable she feels in playing around with this adult. For example, the volunteer's response in line 2 suggests that she has picked up on the playful elements in the child's turn, as she too dresses up her turn at talk with an elongated vowel.

Whereas one or all of these interpretations might be reasonably applied to this instance, it is worth noting that the question asked here was "what does this playfulness mean?" not "is this play?" And, in none of the above interpretations is the illocutionary force of the dominant speech act – a request for help – challenged. In other words, the interpretive issue at hand is not "is this a serious request for help," but rather, "why make this request in a playful way?" Put simply: Why play here? Why now? What does this playfulness mean?

Example 2

The kinds of interactions that take place in educational settings, however, are often more ambiguous than what was presented in example 1. Very often, teachers are not sure how to understand the interaction that is unfolding in front of them, particularly when those interactions involve not just playfulness, but humor.

Example 2 features Rocky, an undergraduate from the United States, interacting with CS, a 9-year-old child. This is Rocky's first time volunteering at the program. Throughout the 44-minute recording of the homework help session, Rocky can be heard imploring CS to do his math homework, as well as asking CS a series of calculation questions presumably intended to provide some sort of interactional and intellectual scaffolding (e.g., "What's 3 x 6?"). Here, it should be noted that Rocky and CS are seated at a table with another tutor, Dexter, as well as other children. Although Rocky's interactional contributions consist primarily of moves designed to encourage CS to attend to and complete his math homework (e.g., "Alright, alright, alright… let's focus in, let's focus in"), Dexter attends more to interacting with the children socially and involves them in various games and lighthearted, non-homework related conversations.

Example 2.1.

2.15.18 (from 11:37)

Rocky (volunteer), CS (child, 9 yrs)

1	Rocky	But (.) if you finish it tod:ay ↑ ,
2		then you can go home and you can (.) have ↑ fun (.)
3		↑ right? For the rest of the day (1)
4		then you don' t have to do it ↑ later (2)
5		Right (.)
6		if you finish it all today you can go home and have fun (.)
7		right? (1)
8		and you don't have to do it later
9	CS	>I'm just gonna cheat
10		and use a calculator<
11	Rocky	N:o ↓ (.) come on ↓
12	CS	o ↑ Ju:st kiddingo

In lines 1-8, Rocky initiates yet another attempt to convince CS to finish his homework, invoking the logic of "if you finish it today" (lines 1 and 6), "you don't have to do it later" (lines 4 and 8) and "you can go home and have fun" (lines 2 and 6). Here, he repeats his argument twice, in each case using nearly the same linguistic formulations to state his case. Although CS does attend somewhat to his homework, throughout the session he can be heard interacting with Dexter and the other children. In line 9, CS responds to Rocky's argument by stating "I'm just gonna cheat and use a calculator." Here, CS's claim that he will "cheat" or misbehave by using a presumably unauthorized tool to complete his homework (the calculator) is hard to interpret. Is this a serious threat? A playful threat? A tease? As in example 1, this utterance does show some playful elements: it describes a hypothetical course of action and it is uttered in a cadence that contrasts with the speed of Rocky's previous turns. These playful

elements continue in line 11, as Rocky responds with a "no" in which he elongates the vowel sound and dramatically drops his intonation. This is followed by a "come on" with a similar falling intonation pattern. CS then responds in line 12 with "just kidding," uttered with rising intonation and an elongated vowel.

In example 2.1, it is difficult to tell whether CS's move is simply a playful threat (or perhaps tease) or a serious, albeit humorous, rebuke of Rocky's institutional authority. Indeed, as Bell (2015) has noted, the "just kidding" defense is often used as a face saving or de-escalation move when an utterance is oriented to as failing to amuse. Likewise, Bateson (1974) observed that the contextualization cues signaling play are often similar to or the same as those which signal combat. Thus, unlike in example 1 where the serious speech act of requesting assistance was uttered in a light, playful manner, example 2 is harder to interpret. Although both Rocky and CS deploy numerous contextualization cues to suggest a playful framing of the interaction is warranted, CS's use of humor injects some additional complexity. Indeed, less than a minute later, a second episode ensues in which Rocky tells CS that he has done one of the problems with CS and now it is CS's responsibility to do the rest of the problems.

Example 2.2
2.15.18 (from 12:42)

1		
2	Rocky	No ((laughs)) No I did this one wi-with you so now you've gotta do the rest
3	CS	I don't have a pencil oover thereo
4	Rocky	(But) ↑ Wha:t do: you mean?

Here, CS's claim not to have a pencil in line 3 seems to further contextualize his use of humor in example 2.1 as a rebuke. Although CS may have been "kidding" about resorting to cheating to finish his math homework, he seems to be serious about not submitting to Rocky's orders. Indeed, as the interaction continues to unfold, the pattern of Rocky imploring CS to finish his homework and CS claiming that he cannot or will not do it for various reasons proceeds unabated. Indeed, within the 44-minute recording, this pattern occurs six times prior to CS's humorous threat to cheat and eleven times after the pencil incident. Thus, in noting the emergence and recycling of this interactional pattern, one might wonder why Rocky continues to take CS so seriously. In fact, it is rather ironic that Rocky's argument for why CS should do his homework now is predicated on the idea that CS can have fun at home later, as CS seems to take much delight in the present moment in playing at Rocky's expense.

Example 3

A third example serves to further illustrate the challenges and uncertainties novice teachers face with respect to humor and play. In the following instance, Hannah, a U.S. born graduate student studying to be an ESL teacher, is working for a second time with Rob, a 15-year-old boy from Bangladesh who has lived in the U.S. for approximately five years. In Rob's previous homework session with Hannah, he repeatedly claimed that his teachers had not covered the material asked for in the assignments and that he did not have the materials necessary to do his homework. Hannah responded by giving him considerable support and assistance, particularly in the areas of science, Spanish, and history. Yet, despite Rob's repeated claims to "helplessness," a careful look at this session shows that he also used humor in ways that indicated he was more quick-witted and linguistically dexterous in English than his attitude and engagement with his schoolwork might suggest. Example 3.1 provides an example. It features a humorous quip Rob uttered while Hannah and a 15-year-old female student, Trish (also a recent Bangladeshi immigrant), worked through a math problem:

Example 3.1

2.13.17 (from 1:55:30)

Hannah (volunteer), Trish (teen, 15 yrs), Rob (teen, 15 yrs)

1	Trish	>So it's< x equal (1) plus 3 divided 30
2	Hannah	Well 30 divided by 3?
3	Trish	I mean >30 divided by 3<
4	Hannah	A:h Let's find out (2.5) 30 divided by 3 (.5) [[10?
5	Trish	[[10?
6	Hannah	Um (.) ((Trish and Hannah laugh))
7	Rob	10 times 3 is 30
8	Hannah	Yeah we ((laughs)) neither of us was thinking of that.hh
9	Rob	I was thinking for a second but I stopped when you bring out the calculator

In example 3.1, we see in line 9 just how attentive Rob is to the interaction unfolding around him and how sharp he is with the form and placement of his joke, despite his repeated assertions in the session that he does not know anything and that he is ill-prepared to do his homework.

Example 3.2 took place one month after Hannah's first homework help session with Rob and featured many of the same claims to ignorance and ill-preparedness that characterized the first session. Here, Rob once again asserts that he does not know the material. At this point, however, it is important to note that Trish, too, often prefaced her bids for help from Hannah with similar claims about teachers "not teaching" the material featured in the homework. Unlike Rob, however, Trish seemed invested in and committed to doing her homework assignments as independently as possible. Although she too sought help from Hannah and often asked Hannah to confirm whether her assignments were completed correctly, she did not rely on Hannah to provide her with answers and seemed eager to show what she did know. Rob, in contrast, displayed a kind of helplessness that seemed heightened and perhaps even exaggerated with respect to Trish's actions and stances. In the following example, Hannah takes issue with Rob's "not knowing."

Example 3.2

3.13.17 (from 6:18)

Hannah (volunteer), Rob (teen, 15 yrs)

1	Hannah	↑ So >what about the first one<
2	Rob	I don't know what they say (.5) I have no idea
3	Hannah	Ok >well do you know any of these words?<
4	Rob	No
5	Hannah	Not a single one I think you'd know [[some of them
6	Rob	[[I know es-etra?
7	Hannah	Esta what's that
8	Rob	Extra something-I don't know (.) I can't do that
8	Hannah	↑ Ok (3)
10	Rob	(Cause) a long time (ago) I learned and (.) now I can't remember
11	Hannah	↑ Mmm hum

In line 2 and again in line 4, Rob positions himself as helpless by repeatedly claiming to have "no idea" what any of the words on his Spanish worksheet mean. When Hannah questions the limits of this claim, "I think you'd know some of them" in line 3, Rob responds by first claiming to know one of the words while stumbling over its pronunciation (line 6) and then returning to his claims of not knowing and not being able to do the worksheet independently (lines 8 and 10). Much like in the excerpts in examples 2.1 and 2.2, what stands out here is not only how many times the same interactional pattern occurs, but also how strong Rob's claims are. Indeed, the interchange in lines 6-10 is particularly notable, as "está" is the third-person, singular, present tense form of the verb "to be." This verb figures prominently in all published Spanish language curricula and Rob is now seven months into his study of Spanish. From this perspective, it seems somewhat improbable that he would have "no idea" what this word means. Thus, one might ask if Rob truly doesn't know this word or if he is artfully and intentionally playing dumb, as Hannah seems to be indicating in line 11 with her "mm hmm," in order to procure a level of assistance that she might otherwise not be willing to give.

Indeed, Hannah's questioning of Rob's not knowing continues as the interaction unfolds. Two-minutes after to the interaction in example 3.2, the following interaction occurred around Rob's Spanish homework:

Example 3.3

3.13.17 (from 7:52)

1	Hannah	S:o (4) cuando >do you know that<?
2		>That's one of the< (.) um (.5) >you did that the other week< (.)
3		Cuando ↓
4	Rob	I don't think I >remember it< (.) uh (.5) I did?
5	Hannah	It's like one of the- it's (.5) u:m (.5)
6		you had it on the list with the other question words? (2.5)

7		Cuando ((soft mumble, papers shuffling))
8	Rob	Cuando? (1)
9	Hannah	> ↑ Mm ↑ hm< (.5) Cuando ↓ (8)
10		So where's- do you have a list of question words like when what (.) who (.3)
11		[>those sort of words<
12	Rob	[↑ O:h (.) those?
13	Hannah	Yeah (.) that should be on there with those ↓ (1.5)
14	Rob	I (.) I have to look for it
15	Hannah	Cause ↑ you had it last time

In line 4, Rob's claim to not know the word "cuando" ("when") in Spanish is met with disbelief by Hannah and some evidence that he indeed encountered this word in a prior homework help session with her (lines 5-7, 9-11, 13, 15). Rob at first claims that he doesn't "remember" the word (line 4) and expresses surprise at Hannah's claim in line 2 that he was working with this word "the other week." Soon, however, he acknowledges some familiarity with the "list of question words" that Hannah has referenced (line 10) and states that he needs to "look for it" (line 14). Hannah then adds a new piece of evidence, claiming that Rob had the worksheet in question "last time" they met (line 15). From Hannah's response in line 15, it seems like she is again casting doubt on Rob's claim to not know this word and not have the requisite materials.

Taken alone, there is little evidence in examples 3.2 and 3.3 of the kinds of contextualization cues featured in the previous examples to suggest that these interactions are playful or that Rob is trying to put one over on Hannah. Yet, Rob's persistent claims of not knowing, not remembering, and not having materials seem to take on a performative flair by virtue of their frequency and degree. In both examples 3.2. and 3.3, they are uttered with little mitigation or shame. Likewise, they the feature the same kind of cyclical interactional patterning that we saw in examples 2.1 and 2.2. Thus, they present some uncertainty with respect to how they should be understood and oriented to by Hannah..

4. Discussion

Although the preceding examples represent some ways in which a serious take on humor and play might help educators to interpret and navigate the kinds of interactions they encounter in their work, Bateson highlights another dimension of play that makes instances like those featured in examples 2 and 3 particularly tricky for educators. As Bateson points out, some more complex forms of play leave people wondering if the interaction in which they are participating is indeed play. As Bateson (1974) put it,

… this leads us to recognition of a more complex form of play; the game which is constructed not upon the premise "This is play" but rather around the question "Is this play?" (p. 182).

For instance, in examples 2.1 and 2.2 a pattern emerges in which Rocky implores CS to do his math homework and CS uses a variety of strategies to resist Rocky's admonitions. Whereas CS seems to delight in his various and continuous acts of minor rebellion, Rocky's utterances show a continued and largely unsuccessful effort to get CS to finish his assignment. Indeed, Rocky's failure to see the interaction as a form of play seems to make it all the more appealing for CS, as Rocky never manages to break out of the interactional role that CS has crafted for him. Similarly, in examples 3.2 and 3.3, Rob repeatedly claims ignorance and lack of preparation in order to procure Hannah's assistance. When she begins to question the veracity of his claims, he holds the line and the cycle continues. Here, like in example 2.1, Rob seems to delight in this interactional pattern and Hannah's call outs only seem to make it more enjoyable. Thus, in both cases, we get instances of talk that have a game-like quality to them, as the participants take part in a kind of verbal sparring, albeit with somewhat different perspectives on what is happening.

At the same time, it is important to note that the talk in examples 3.2 and 3.3 is less overtly playful than the talk in example 2.1 and 2.2. Here, the contextualization cues that might signal play are far more subtle in that they occur at the level of discourse patterning. Likewise, the interpretation "this is play" is tempered by the fact that Rob does struggle to do his Spanish homework and that he told Hannah in their first session that he had failed his Spanish midterm exam. Thus, throughout the interaction, it remains unclear whether Rob is playing at not knowing the words and not having his materials, as Hannah seems to be suggesting, or if he truly does not have the knowledge or materials necessary to do his Spanish assignment independently. In which case, the play may be serving as a sophisticated face-saving strategy for Rob, who must solicit assistance from Hannah while not actually appearing to be as challenged as he actually is by his homework assignments. That is, by playing dumb in a such an exaggerated way, he may be artfully signaling that he is not dumb, even though he struggles mightily with his homework assignments. For Hannah, this presents a challenging interactional dilemma, as she must figure out how to fulfill her institutional obligations as a volunteer educator while simultaneously paying attention to Rob's face needs.

5. Conclusions

As the data presented in this paper show, humor and play make the interpretation of talk in educational settings quite challenging. Moreover, a failure to recognize talk as play can have serious consequences for what ultimately happens between teachers and students and how they come to see one another. Whereas Eva (example 1) was able to successfully navigate a playful request for help, both Rocky and Hannah seem to have trouble navigating the more oblique instances of play they encounter in their sessions.

Rocky's attempts to get CS to complete his math homework, for example, were met with various strategies, ranging from a playful threat or tease, as we saw in examples 2.1, to more overt refusals to engage. Although Rocky marshaled various arguments and negotiation tactics, he ultimately failed to get CS to complete his math assignment. In a word, CS won the game, but he lost the war. He was able to best Rocky, but he never did finish his math homework. Although an interview with Rocky might have shed some light on his perspective toward this interaction, it is hard to imagine that he walked away from this experience feeling confident about his talents as an educator or with a positive impression of CS as a student.

In a similar vein, Hannah remained perplexed throughout her time as a volunteer as to whether Rob was truly as helpless as he purported to be in their sessions. Despite these doubts, however, she continued to provide him with extensive assistance, often looking up materials for him on the internet and guiding him step-by-step through the completion of his assignments. Although their interactions became more overtly playful over time, the same interactional pattern persisted and Hannah's fear that she was being played only increased. Thus, as she expressed in an interview, she ended her time as a volunteer frustrated by how the structure of the tutoring sessions did not create a context in which students could gradually become more independent workers. Likewise, she expressed fear that she had unwittingly contributed to Rob's helplessness (interview, Hannah, 4.19.17). Although Rob's mother insisted that he participate in these homework help sessions (fieldnote, 6.11.17), it is difficult to know what he really gained from the experience.

At the beginning of this paper, I proposed that educators need to take humor more seriously. What would taking humor – and play—more seriously mean for educators, teacher educators, and the relationship between linguistics and education more broadly? First, it would mean acknowledging that humor and play are a frequent and legitimate aspect of interaction in educational settings and something worthy of attention. As I noted in the introduction, non-serious talk is often treated as unimportant or irrelevant to the serious business of education, but as we have seen here, it has real consequences for how teachers and students interact and ultimately come to see one another. Second, it would mean providing both pre-service and in-service teachers with an opportunity to look closely at interaction and to hone their skills as discourse analysts, particularly as they relate to complex forms of talk like humor and play. Rather than presuming that people are naturally experts at analyzing interaction, such an approach would give teachers a vocabulary and a set of skills for make sense of the interactions in which they participate (cf. Rampton, Maybin, & Roberts, 2015). Moreover, it would help teachers to step out of their interpretive frames and see interaction from the perspective of students. This would allow for a more sophisticated understanding of classroom interaction and perhaps provide a more subtle response to the kinds of "antics" that children are often sanctioned for in institutional settings. Finally, to those interested in "language matters," I close with this: humor may make us laugh, but linguistically it is no laughing matter.

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Appendix A

Transcription Conventions

(.5)	The number in brackets indicates a time gap in tenths of a second.
(.)	A dot enclosed in a bracket indicates a pause in the talk of less than two tenths of a second.
(( ))	A description enclosed in a double bracket indicates a non-verbal activity, for example ((banging sound)).
-	A dash indicates the sharp cut-off of the prior word or sound/
:	Colons indicate that the speaker has stretched the preceding sound or letter. The more colons, the greater the extent of the stretching.
?	A question mark indicates a rising inflection. It does not necessarily indicate a question.
Under	Underlined fragments indicate speaker emphasis
CAPITALS	With the exception of proper nouns, capital letters indicate a section of speech noticeably louder than that surrounding it.
°	Degree signs are used to indicate that the talk they encompass is spoken noticeably quieter than the surrounding talk.
> <	"More than" and "less than" signs indicate that the talk they encompass was produced noticeably quicker than the surrounding talk.
=	The "equals" sign indicates contiguous utterances.
[	Square brackets between adjacent lines of concurrent speech indicate the onset of a spate of overlapping talk.

Adapted from Wooffitt, R. (2001). Researching psychic practitioners: Conversation analysis. In Wetherell, A., Taylor, S., and Yates, S. (Eds.), Discourse as Data (p. 62), London: Sage.