

SECTION 5

METHODOLOGY OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING. INNOVATIVE METHODS OF TEACHING ENGLISH AT HIGHER AND SECONDARY EDUCATIONAL ESTABLISHMENTS

USING HUMOR IN LANGUAGE TEACHING

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Have you heard the one about the mice?

A mother mouse was outside with her three baby mice. Suddenly a hungry cat appeared in front of them. The three little babies were afraid for their lives, but the mother mouse wasn't. She turned to the cat, looked him directly in the eyes, and shouted, "Bow wow. Woof, woof! The cat turned and ran away. The mother then said to her children, "You see. It pays to be able to speak another language."

It also pays to use humor when teaching a language. Some people might wonder why and how. This paper will give both affective and pedagogical for reasons using humor in language classes. It will then share five strategies with examples illustrating how to mindfully incorporate humor in language lessons.

Why should we use humor when teaching a language?

Affective reasons

- Laughter naturally relieves stress. It acts “as a release valve for the whole body” (Piore 2019) and can decrease student anxiety.
- Humor can build a positive classroom atmosphere. If students are laughing at the same time, it brings them together in a shared experience using a universal language—laughter—thus building a positive classroom atmosphere.
- Humor builds bridges between a teacher and students. It shows students that the teacher is human.
- Using humor provides a change of pace in a lesson plan and helps prevent boredom.

Pedagogical Reasons

- Laughter is a communicative human reaction. Scientists say laughing is our first way of communicating. Babies laugh before they speak (Borenstein, 2010).
- The use of humor is a social skill. Neuroscientist, Robert Provine, (Johnson 2003) says that when we laugh, it is most often a social response rather

than a reaction to a joke. Chiasson (n.d) writes that because humor is a communicative human reaction and social skill just like greeting and conversing with friends and since it plays a major role in every day social interaction, it should not be ignored in the language classroom.

- Humor encourages creativity. Activities with humor ask students to think outside the box.

- The use of humor helps with student recall. Neuroscientists have found that people's brains light up more when a person is looking at or listening to something humorous. This in turn is important to memory (Piore 2019).

- Humorous materials are often authentic materials which can motivate and engage students.

What do some teachers say about using humor in the classroom and what are my (B) responses?

A. I'm a teacher, not a stand-up comedian.

B. Using humor in the classroom does not mean a teacher stands in front of the class telling jokes. Humorous moments can come from interactions and creative activities. A lesson might not have any humorous moments, but adding them some of the time can be beneficial to students' learning.

A. I don't want chaos in my classroom.

B. Using humor does not cause chaos. Poor classroom management skills do.

A. I don't feel confident/competent enough to be humorous in my L2.

B. I understand this because I have taught my L2 French and L3 Spanish. I hope what follows will help teachers who feel this way see how they can change that feeling.

A. I don't have a humorous personality.

B. I understand this too because I think this about myself. That's one reason I became interested in this topic. The strategies below have helped me incorporate humor in lessons. They can help you too!

Strategies for incorporating humor into your lessons and classroom

1. Keep track of your or student's remarks, exaggerations, motions, and sounds that have elicited smiles or laughter from your students. These can be written in a notebook or on the page in a textbook where these remarks were used. This strategy is particularly useful for those who lack confidence in using humor or feel they do not have a humorous personality. By building a repertoire of these laughter evoking words and actions, a teacher can use them from year to year.

Here are two examples from my repertoire.

- When I ask a question and no one volunteers a response, I say, "*Volunteer or victim?*"

- If I make a mistake when writing on the board or in a handout and a student points it out, I say, "*Just checking to see if you're paying attention!*"

2. Twist typical themes in traditional tasks. Sometimes an activity is very predictable and as students work through it, it becomes a mindless task. How can teachers make the activity more engaging by adding a humorous element and changing what students expect?

Here is an example of a typical dialogue, and the same dialogue with a twist.

Teacher: Here's your homework. Student: Thank you. Teacher: Your assignment is very well done. Student: Thank you. I did my best.
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Teacher: Here's your homework. Student: Thank you. Teacher: Your assignment is very well done. Did anyone help you with it? Student: No, my father did it all by himself.
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Here is another example—some typical textbook topics for a process essay. There is nothing wrong with them, but if a teacher feels the class needs a change of pace, the second set of topics will do that. I have used both sets. The twisted topics required the students to think outside of the box. While still requiring the students to show they had grasped how to write a process essay, the content of their essays was less predictable. The essays were more interesting for me to read, and their peers got some laughs when essays were exchanged for peer comments.

How to make your favorite dish from your culture How to plan the perfect party How to prepare for a disaster How to pass the TOEFL

How to convince your roommate to cook all the meals How to fail a test Surefire steps to have customers complain to the manager How to guarantee no second date
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3. Collect anecdotes, jokes, and riddles to be used for activities. These authentic materials can be found online, in magazines, and on sign boards. There are many ways they can be used for language practice while adding an element of humor.

One way is to use an anecdotal text as a listening or reading task. Give the text without its ending, and have the students predict the ending. Here is an example that could be used in an intermediate to advanced lesson on social media.

Directions:

1. Tell students that they will listen to a passage on social media and making friends. Before they listen to the passage, they should discuss these questions.

a. Are you on Facebook? Why or why not?

b. If you are on Facebook, how do you use it?

2. Tell students they will hear three principles (in this case, ways Facebook is used) with examples. They should write down the principles.

3. Read the text, except for the last sentence.

4. Discuss the three principles with the students.

5. Tell students to take notes on the examples given for the three principles. Read the text again, except for the last sentence.

6. With a partner, students discuss the examples.

7. Read the text again, except for the last sentence. With their partners, ask students to discuss what they think the last sentence of this text is.

8. Have pairs share their answers with the class. Then read the story again with the last sentence. Be sure students have understood the humor.

Text (Source: Image-store.slideshare.com)

I am trying to make friends outside of Facebook while applying the same principles.

Therefore, every day I walk down the street and tell passers-by what I have eaten, how I feel at the moment, what I have done the night before, and what I will do later and with whom.

I give them pictures of my family, my dog and of me gardening, taking things apart in the garage, watering the lawn, standing in front of landmarks, driving around town, having lunch and doing what anybody and everybody does every day.

I also listen to their conversations, give them the “thumbs up” and tell them I like them.

And it works just like Facebook! [I already have four people following me: two police officers, a private investigator, and a psychiatrist.]

Another example is to use jokes for grammar practice. These examples are from *Grammar with Laughter* by George Woolard. <https://www.scribd.com/document/9694578/Grammar-With-Laughter>

The Present Simple: Use do, does, don't or doesn't to complete the jokes.

1. What type of car _____ your dad drive?

>I _____ know the name, but it starts with a P.

That's strange. Our cars start with a key.

2. _____ you ever have problems making up your mind?

>Well, yes and no.

Here are some other ways to use anecdotes, jokes, and riddles.

- Give an anecdotal text without punctuation. Have students put in the punctuation needed.
- Scramble the sentences of an anecdote. Have students put them in order.
- Use an anecdote for a dictation.
- Give students anecdotes or jokes to practice and tell classmates.
- Have students find the punchline to jokes/answers to riddles.

4. File funny pictures, signs, and comics according to theme for use in a lesson.

Funny pictures and signs abound on the Internet. The ones below came from a quick search. A variety of comics can be found <https://www.gocomics.com/>.



Examples of a few ways to use them follow.

- Use them to introduce a topic, a concept, or a holiday.
- Use them to teach or elicit vocabulary.
- Have students practice oral or written storytelling based on pictures or signs.
- Hang pictures around the classroom and have students write captions.

- Have students make their own comics using <https://www.makebeliefscomix.com/>.

5. Consider using humorous video clips, skits, and games to supplement a lesson.

Although sitcoms such as the American one “Friends” provide comprehensible input, it is time consuming to look for clips to supplement a specific lesson. Some sites have videos especially made for English Language Teaching such as Simple English Videos <https://www.simpleenglishvideos.com/>. An example of a funny video clip from that site is “How to Handle Calls When You’re Busy”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=76suoGC9gQA&feature=youtu.be> .

Depending on the level of the students, they can write their own skits and give them a “twist” as explained in point 2 of this article. Games, such as charades or Pictionary, require little preparation and no extras. Student take turns acting out a word or sentence or drawing it while their classmates try to guess it. All of these supplemental activities can aid learning while lightening lessons.

Conclusion

This article gives five plans of action for strategically implementing humor in language teaching. Even teachers who feel they do not have a natural sense of humor should be able to incorporate these painlessly and successfully. Teachers who use any or all five of these strategies will discover that adding humor to some tasks some of the time can foster learning and make lessons more engaging for their students and themselves.

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