

Using Humour in the Second Language Classroom

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Introduction

This article examines how humour can be an effective tool in teaching and in creating the affective second language classroom. It will also examine the reasons why humour is sometimes avoided, and will dispel the myth that one must be a comedian to use humour in a language classroom. The focus is on the use of cartoons with practical examples of how to use and adapt this particular resource. One doesn't have to be a gifted humorist to reap the benefits of using humour in the classroom.

"Classrooms in which laughter is welcome help bring learning to life." [\[1\]](#)

Much has been written in recent years about the importance of the affective environment in the second language classroom. Such classrooms are ones in which learners are not afraid to take risks and use their second language. Students are encouraged and praised for their efforts to always use their second language in class. Students don't face ridicule, nor negative criticism. Error correction is appropriate, timely, constructive and seeks to instill confidence in each student.

However, at times we overlook humour as an important element in teaching, in teacher training and how humour can contribute to a positive environment for learning. Students of education are not always given the opportunity to examine the impact of their own preferences of teaching style or their own willingness to use certain strategies, such as humour in the language teaching. Because of the lack of time to explore such personal views we may be missing an opportunity to enhance learning in our classrooms.

Kristmanson (2000) emphasizes this need to create a welcoming classroom for language learning;

"In order to take risks, you need a learning environment in which you do not feel threatened or intimidated. In order to speak, you need to feel you will be heard and that what you're saying is worth hearing. In order to continue your language learning, you need to feel motivated. In order to succeed, you need an atmosphere in which anxiety levels are low and comfort levels are high. Issues of motivation and language anxiety are key to this topic of affect in the second language classroom." [\[2\]](#)

Why Haven't We Been Using Humour in Our Classrooms?

For many the simple mention of humour condors up notions and protests of, "I'm not funny, I don't use humour." "I can't tell a joke; let alone use one in class." For others it is something to be feared, synonymous with classroom disorder and chaos. "I'm not about to start telling jokes, it will mean complete loss of control."

For some this resistance to using humour may simply be a lack of knowledge as to how one may use it effectively in class. "I enjoy humour, but I don't know how to go about using it, so I don't. I don't want to look foolish." Others associate humour and its use with non-productivity. Students can't be learning if they are laughing. Yet humour is as authentic and as communicative a human reaction and social skill as is greeting and conversing with friends.

Commercial language teaching methodologies have tended in the past to avoid the use of humour. It is one thing to train or explain to teachers how to teach the future or *passé composé*, however, it is a

more evasive concept to train teachers to have a sense of humour or even develop such a human characteristic. [\[3\]](#)

The humour discussed in this article however requires no form of humour training, nor requires that a teacher have the humouristic skills that would match the Robin Williams of the world. It will demonstrate a simple yet very beneficial use of humour, the use of cartoons in the communicative teaching of a second language.

Why Should We Use Humour in Our Classrooms?

Humour and laughter are areas that have not been closely studied. Their role in education and medicine has been briefly examined as far back as Wells (1974) to as recently as Provine (Dec. 2000) in, "The Science of Laughter", *Psychology Today* .

Loomax and Moosavi (1998) in an article on the use of humour in a university statistics class point out that anecdotal evidence in past studies consistently suggests that humour is an extremely effective tool in education. These same studies suggest that the use of humour in the classroom reduces tension, improves classroom climate, increases enjoyment, increases student-teacher rapport and even facilitates learning.

Regardless of what evidence there may be, we all have personal views on the value of humour, as depicted in the film "Patch Adams" and for years in Reader's Digest, "Laughter is the Best Medicine." Yet, there is little in literature that speaks of its pedagogical value and in particular in second language teaching and in second language teacher training.

According to Provine (2000) laughter is generally subdued during conversation. Speech will dominate and laughter serves as a phrase break creating a punctuation effect in language. Laughter therefore has a specific role in conversations and is not random. Therefore, as in authentic communication, humour in the classroom shouldn't be random. It shouldn't be used without preparation and a clear objective. It may be simple or complex in nature. It is your decision as to how, when and why you will use it.

One reason for using humour is that as a human trait it is a self-effacing behavior (Provine, 2000). It can allow the shy or timid student in your class to participate with the group. If it is used properly humour allows the student to feel a part of the class and possibly contribute without losing face, feeling exposed or vulnerable. This is of particular importance in a communicative classroom where the accent is on verbal authentic communication, participation and interaction. It's a way of reaching out to those students who are too afraid or nervous to attempt expressing themselves in their second language. Humour is as human and as authentic as the need to communicate. As with other facets of our lives it plays a major role in our every day social interaction. We should therefore not ignore it but instead make it part of our everyday classroom learning.

Laughter helps us forget about ourselves, our problems, our fears and allows us to lose ourselves momentarily. This momentary loss may be interpreted by some teachers as a loss of control, poor classroom management and therefore something to be avoided. However, humour as with all activities in the communicative language classroom, must be well prepared and have a specific objective.

Interestingly enough, Provine (2000) also discovered that even though both sexes laugh a lot, females laugh more. It might explain why the females in our classes seem to enjoy more the humour used in the classroom. Although, as Provine points out, males appear to be the initiators of humour in any culture, beginning in early childhood.

As was stated earlier, Kristmanson (2000) stressed the importance of the affective environment in second language teaching. It can't be emphasized enough that students are more willing to participate and take risks in using their second language in a classroom that allows them to do so without fear of criticism and ridicule. It's important for the teacher to create a "positive atmosphere" for learning. Humour, by decreasing anxiety and stress can, contribute to this positive

classroom, to class unity and learning.

"Indeed, the presumed health benefits of laughter may be coincidental consequences of its primary goal: bringing people together." [4]

Guidelines for Using Humour

"The job of the teacher is to get students laughing, and when their mouths are open, to give them something on which to chew." [5]

Although the above quote is an interesting and humorous way to describe the use of humour, it is not our role as teachers to be stand-up comedians. Nor will we all use humour in the same way, or use the same humour. With this in mind there are certain points to consider before using humour in your classroom. Proper preparation is key as in all language teaching preparation. In so doing we really will have something for the students to "chew on."

1. Don't try too hard. Let humour arise naturally, encourage it, don't force it. Don't be discouraged if the first time it doesn't meet your expectations. As Provine (2000) states, your reaction to their non-reaction (to a cartoon for example) may be the most amusing part. Like all things, proper preparation is needed for proper delivery.
2. Do what fits your personality. Never force it, it won't work. You might want to venture outside your comfort zone and try a different genre, cartoonist, or style of humour. Remember your class is made up of individuals with different tastes.
3. Don't use private humour or humour that leaves people out. Your goal is not to become a comedian. The humour described here is through cartoons. It doesn't make fun of any particular group, nationality, etc ... Private humour, if you use it, should be for affective reasons as well, used carefully, never demeaning or sarcastic.
4. Make humour an integral part of your class, rather than something special. Humour works best as a natural on-going part of classroom learning. Be careful not to over use it, it could lose its value and effect. With practice you will develop a style and comfort zone with humour.

The use of humour will depend on the content you are teaching and the availability of appropriate humorous material. Have specific goals or objectives in mind. Using humour, like teaching, has to be well prepared. With time you will become more and more at ease, or self assured with its use. Allow yourself time to experiment and see what works well.

"When humour is planned as part of the teaching strategy, a caring environment is established, there is an attitude of flexibility, and communication between student and teacher is that of freedom and openness. The tone is set allowing for human error with freedom to explore alternatives in the learning situation. This reduces the authoritarian position of the teacher, allowing the teacher to be a facilitator of the learning process. Fear and anxiety, only natural in a new and unknown situation, becomes less of a threat, as a partnership between student and instructor develops." [6]

5. Humour and cartoons should be related to what you are doing in the classroom. Humour may be used to solicit dialogue, conversations and develop vocabulary. At times you may want to use it as a break before going on to something else. However, the cartoon should always be of an appropriate nature and interest to your students.

It is useful, on occasion, to present a cartoon on an overhead projector as students come into class. The humour can relax and re-energize the students for class. It can also prepare them to converse in their second language. The cartoon can become the signal that they are now in French or ESL class. To help the students shift from their first language to their second language they could enjoy a lighthearted moment of discussion or interpretation of the cartoon. This interaction is

authentic and can stimulate real discussion and or debate, so much so that at times you may have to bring the discussion to a close to proceed with the class.

6. The extent to which you use humour will vary on your class. Interpretation, discussion and analysis will vary on the proficiency of your class. The humour must be comprehensible, with themes that your students can relate to.

As with all communicative learning activities, prepare your students. Begin by discussing cartoons; what are their favorites, what are yours. Tell them you are going to use cartoons to illustrate what they are learning and to have fun. The pedagogical reasons for their use can be known by you. What the students will know is that the cartoon will help them better understand and learn the language.

Remember, it is important to keep it simple, with a specific objective. Don't attempt to use, for example, the future, *passé composé*, verb agreement and the use of idiomatic expressions all at once. You may want to use a specific cartoon again to illustrate another point. Although I recommend that you use a different cartoon and enjoy the humour more.

A Practical Example

In the past I have generally used cartoons with multi panels. They provide more material for communicative questioning and discussion. However, the choice of cartoon that you choose to demonstrate or practice a particular point will naturally depend on the theme, grammatical or cultural component you are teaching or examining. It is important to decide beforehand why you want to use it and how you want to use it. Ask yourself the question, "What knowledge do I want the students to demonstrate by interpreting this cartoon?" As mentioned previously try not to deal with multiple aspects at one time. Perhaps you simply want to illustrate or have the students demonstrate their knowledge of vocabulary or expressions related to emotions. However, nothing is stopping you from returning to the cartoon at a later date to talk about intonation and stress in the language and how it can change the meaning of what is said. As before, don't overuse the cartoon. I suggest you keep it simple and use other examples to illustrate supplementary points.

The absence of a title or any written dialogue allows your students to use their imagination and express themselves orally or in written form (I have primarily used cartoons to stimulate oral expression. I have used writing as a possible extension, a re-investment of the activity). Such an exercise allows students to defend their point of view and also to explore their interpretations of possible dialogue and scenarios.

It is motivating and interesting to have students suggest a before and after sequence to the situation illustrated by the cartoon. Students willingly offer possible "before" and "after" segments and delight in coming up with the most original. This particular aspect of the lesson can take place after each individual panel or once all panels have been shown.

To add variety to the use of such cartoons you may want to present the first several panels together and solicit an ending to the story or an interpretation of the story. Presenting the panels one at a time makes the activity more communicative and intriguing as students confirm or don't confirm their interpretations of what will happen next. More discussion and fun is had as the story unfolds with each segment. Anticipation builds as you approach the final panel. The ending takes on a greater value as everyone waits for the true ending!

Another approach is to ask your students to actually create, or imagine the dialogue for each panel. It could be an opportunity to introduce or review expressions of emotion, in this case, anger and despair. For example one could use a cartoon that depicts, what one would assume, is a mother scolding her child. However, in the final panel we discover that it is the house pet. If the class was an ESL class students could possibly come up with the following examples of ways to express displeasure and disappointment:

- "I'm not very happy with you."

- "I'm very upset with your behaviour."
- "I'm very saddened, unhappy, disappointed, bitterly disappointed..."
- "I'm very annoyed."
- "I'm very disillusioned, discontented, heavy-hearted..."
- "I'm so ashamed, pained, ..."
- "We (speaking for both parents) are so weary, tired, disgusted..."
- "We are furious, incensed, infuriated, enraged by this behavior..."
- "We feel blighted, dejected by this whole affair."

You may want to examine the role of intonation, stress and syllabication related to such a situation, on another occasion or at another point in your lesson.

Vocabulary work begins immediately with the presentation of the first panel, when the class begins to describe the scene and brainstorm what they see and understand to be happening. Examples of open-ended communicative questions that force students to go beyond a simple "yes" or "no" could be:

1. "Describe what you see in the first panel." "Where does the story take place?"
2. "To whom is the woman speaking?" "Imagine what she is saying."
3. "What do you think happened before this story began?"
4. "How will the story end?"

As with the multidimensional approach we seek to have students reinvest what they have learned by completing an extension activity or enrichment activity. A possible example suggested by Lavenne (1988) and enjoyed by students is to write the story as if reporting the news for a newspaper, if the cartoon can be adapted for such a reinvestment. If students aren't aware of the structure of a newspaper article it would be good to review it and provide authentic examples. Students can then model the style correctly in writing his or her own news report. Another option is to have students write out the dialogue. As in the case of this cartoon, researching and writing the dialogue to share with the class could be fun and entertaining. Such an exercise is motivating and enables you to see if students have mastered, in written form, the point of grammar, structure, vocabulary or expressions of emotions you have taught and have examined with them.

Conclusion

Humour can contribute a great deal to the second language classroom. It enables you not only to create an affective or positive environment, but is a source of enjoyment for you and your students. Language is seen in authentic and real life situations. Humorous situations allow your students to express themselves without fear of ridicule and criticism. Anxiety and stress is reduced and your students are encouraged to take more risks in using their second language.

As with all language activities care must be taken to prepare students before the activity and guide them along the way. Although the teachers may perceive the exercise as a lighthearted moment in the course of their lesson plan, humour should be an integral part of a positive learning classroom environment. Specific goals and objectives must be pre-established and clear in the mind of the teacher. Humour, along with encouragement and praise should be one of the many useful tools used by language teachers to make their classrooms more inviting and conducive to learning.

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Footnotes

- [1] Dickinson, D., "Humor and the Multiple Intelligence", New Horizons for Learning, Seattle, WA,
<http://www.newhorizons.org/rech-mi.html>, (2001).
- [2] Kristmanson, P., "Affect*: in the Second Language Classroom: How to create an emotional climate", *Reflexions*, 19, (2000): 1
- [3] You may be interested in determining your "Humour Type". The "Wil-Burn type Humour Test is available on line (<http://www.cheersproject.com/wil-burn.htm>). Try it! It will make you laugh and give you a possible insight into "your" sense of humour.
- [4] Provine, R.R., Ph.D. (2000): " The Science of Laughter", *Psychology Today* , 33 (2000): 61.
- [5] A quote by Tom Davis, in Elaine Lundberg & Cheryl Miller Thurston (1997): "If They're Laughing ...", Cottonwood Press, Inc., Retrieved on the World Wide Web: "Guidelines for Using Humor in the Classroom", <http://venus.cottonwoodpress.com/extra/ideas/humor.htm>
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