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Make 'em Laugh: Using Humour to Promote Learning in Language and Literature Classrooms

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Summary

Humour makes us think – it creates a relaxed environment where instructors and students contribute to learning. However, as recent research has shown, we tend to forget the benefits of humour when teaching in a university classroom (Pomerantz & Bell, 2011). This workshop focuses on the uses of humour in second language acquisition learning and the instruction of world literature. It draws on research on humour as a teaching tool as well as the impact of low-inference teaching behaviours. Also, it elaborates on the cultural differences found in language and world literature classrooms, and it encourages instructors to use humour to overcome cultural and language barriers. Humour, the workshop stresses, is a safe teaching technique for both the instructor and the student by which the classroom comes together in a respectful environment.

Keywords

second language acquisition, world literature, humour, teaching, learning

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Make 'em Laugh: Using Humour to Promote Learning in Language and Literature Classrooms

Jaime Roman Brenes Reyes, Western University

Make 'em laugh

Make 'em laugh

Don't you know everyone wants to laugh?

From the film, "Singin' in the Rain" (1952)

SUMMARY

Humour makes us think – it creates a relaxed environment where instructors and students contribute to learning. However, as recent research has shown, we tend to forget the benefits of humour when teaching in a university classroom (Pomerantz & Bell, 2011). This workshop focuses on the uses of humour in second language acquisition learning and the instruction of world literature. It draws on research on humour as a teaching tool as well as the impact of low-inference teaching behaviours. Also, it elaborates on the cultural differences found in language and world literature classrooms, and it encourages instructors to use humour to overcome cultural and language barriers. Humour, the workshop stresses, is a safe teaching technique for both the instructor and the student by which the classroom comes together in a respectful environment.

KEYWORDS: second language acquisition, world literature, humour, low-inference teaching

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this workshop, participants will be able to:

- discuss the role of humour in teaching and learning as a teaching technique;
- implement humorous teaching practices in language acquisition and world literature classrooms;
- integrate humour into their teaching practice with the aim of creating relaxed and collegial classroom environments.

REFERENCE SUMMARIES

Berk, R. A. (2003). *Professors are from Mars, Students are from Snickers: How to Write and Deliver Humor in the Classroom and in Professional Presentations*. Sterling, Virginia: Stylus Publishing.

Berk's work on humour as a teaching tool is explained concisely and, obviously, in a humorous tone. The book begins with a brief introduction on the benefit of humour as an ice-breaker between instructors and students. Berk cites research that shows the ways humour "(a) decreases anxiety, tension, stress, and boredom; (b) improves attitudes toward the subject; (c) increases comprehension, cognitive retention, interest, and task performance; (d) increases motivation to learn and satisfaction with learning; and (e) promotes creativity and divergent thinking" (p. 8). These points could be used in the

workshop during the research section. Berk also includes several examples and ways of using humour in the classroom such as multiple choice items, top ten lists, anecdotes, and skits and dramatizations, which can be very useful for the techniques and topics section of the workshop. Two main points that the workshop should pay special attention from Berk's experience are:

- *High-risk versus low-risk humour*: Berk warns the reader against using what he calls 'high-risk' humour, and rather to concentrate on the 'low-risk' model. High-risk refers to jokes that make fun in an offensive or diminishing way of people or sensitive issues such as race, gender, religion, etc. Berk is not joking when he states that "Offensive humor shuts down communication and erects a barrier to learning" (p. 23). Berk suggests using low-risk humour because it does not rely on a single punch-line and hence it does not run the risk of being misunderstood. Low-risk can include personal stories and anecdotes. More on the reasons to avoid offensive humour can be found in the Handout #1 (Appendix 1; to be distributed during the workshop), which has been adapted from Berk.
- *Self-effacing humour*: Rather than looking for people or issues to make fun of, Berk suggests for the instructor to make fun of himself/herself! For the workshop, it should be stressed that self-effacing is not the same as self-degrading. Self-effacing humour illustrates to students that the instructor is comfortable making mistakes to the point that he/she is able to share these experiences with the classroom. This could be useful when it comes to language learning because it demonstrates to the students that mistakes will happen no matter what. As Berk points out, self-effacing humour "doesn't diminish [the students'] respect for you; in fact, it increases their respect, because you project a sense of confidence and security by being able to poke fun at yourself" (p. 47). Thus, it creates a model for students to feel confident of their skills in an environment to overcome linguistic and cultural barriers.

Dawson, D. L., Dimitrov, N., Meadows, K. N., and Olsen, K. (2013). *Bridging the Gap: The Impact of the 'Teaching in the Canadian Classroom' Program on the Teaching Effectiveness of International Teaching Assistants*. Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario.

This research is of special interest to this humour workshop because it shows the importance of addressing language and cultural barriers in academic professional development programs. Issues regarding the Canadian classroom and International Teaching Assistants are pertinent to this workshop because most second-language instructors and, in some cases, world literature instructors are most likely to be non-native English speakers. The authors mention one issue in particular in which humour can be used: communication apprehension; that is to say, "public speaking anxiety" (p. 11). The authors argue that "[t]raining for ITAs should specifically address communication apprehension among ESL speakers and alleviate fears that ITAs often have about their accents, making grammatical mistakes in class, and not understanding their students' questions well enough to answer them" (p. 11). In other words, ITAs, whether native or non-native English speakers, have a mine of self-effacing humour at their disposal. Rather than feeling ashamed about their

accents or language mistakes, the workshop shows the potential for these errors to animate class discussion and encourage creative thinking.

Murray, H. G. (2007). Low-inference teaching behaviors and college teaching effectiveness: Recent developments and controversies. In R. P. Perry and J. C. Smart (Eds.), *The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education: An Evidence-Based Perspective* (pp. 145–200). Dordrecht: Springer.

Based on research conducted at Western University, Murray suggests that teaching effectiveness can be rated by analyzing the frequency with which a faculty member engages in specific behaviours such as maintaining eye contact, speaking expressively, or telling jokes or humorous anecdotes. Murray refers to these instructor behaviours as “low-inference classroom teaching behaviors” (p. 147). Low-inference behaviours, Murray argues, are “the point of direct contact between teacher and student, and thus (it would appear) are more likely to have a direct impact on student development than high-inference teacher characteristics such as subject knowledge, goals, planning” (p. 147). Bell (2005, 2009), Berk (2002, 2003) and Skinner (2010) describe similar behavioural characteristics in their discussions on using humour as a teaching tool. Humour scholars would agree with Murray when he argues that “the extent to which the student enjoys the course, studies a lot or a little, does well or poorly on the final examination, and enrolls in further courses in the same subject area appears to be determined, at least in part, by specific low-inference teaching behaviors of the instructor” (p. 153). From this perspective, the use of humour is a key teaching strategy that builds the instructor/student relationship and deeply impacts the student learning experience.

Pomerantz, A., Bell, N. (2011). Humor as Safe House in the Foreign Language Classroom. *The Modern Language Journal*, 95, 148-161.

Pomerantz and Bell focus on interactions between non-native English speakers as students. They argue that humour is “a rich resource for the construction of spaces in which students can experiment with particular classroom identities, critique institutional/instructional norms, and engage in more complex and creative acts of language use” (p. 149). This sentiment can be extended to language and literature instructors who, in many cases, are also graduate students. Also important for this workshop is the concept of humour as a ‘safe house’; that is, humour offers the space and time for learners “to address a broad range of concerns: their identities as different kinds of language learners; their relationships both in and out of class to other participants; and the interactional norms of this classroom in relation to other institutional constraints on their daily lives” (p. 158). As a safe house in which learners and teachers feel free to overcome barriers and constraints, humour appears as a self-reflection strategy for everyone in the classroom.

Skinner, M. E. (2010). All Joking Aside: Five Reasons to Use Humor in the Classroom. *The Education Digest: Essential Readings Condensed for Quick Review*, 76(2), 19-21.

Skinner discusses recent findings on the usage of humour in the classroom. This short article can be useful for the workshop leader in order to prepare himself/herself for questions from the audience. Skinner stresses that humour “[f]ar from being a detriment ... facilitates the teaching-learning process” (p. 21). Skinner adds that “students in classes that integrate humor rate their instructor significantly higher than students who participate in classes with no little or no humor” (p. 21). Facilitators can be distribute this article after the workshop to supply the participants with more information regarding research on humour and teaching-learning, and invite their comments on it.

CONTENT AND ORGANIZATION

DURATION (MINS)	SUBJECT	ACTIVITY	PURPOSES
5	Introduction	Ice-breaker: the presenter tells a friendly, inoffensive, easy-to-follow joke. If presenter is a non-native English speaker, I suggest he/she attempts to translate a joke from his/her native language. Then, invite audience participants to share similar jokes, especially those that need to be translated or that participants have heard from other languages.	Participate actively in the workshop and develop a relaxed environment that humour helps to create in the academic classroom. Jokes from other languages expose the linguistic nuances involve in the translation of humour. Examples for jokes and funny stories can be found in Handout #3 (Appendix 3), to be distributed later during the workshop.
20	Research on Humour, and Teaching and Learning	Drawing from the references, presentation of research on humour as a teaching tool. Depending on the workshop leader and the audience, this presentation may take a theoretical approach on teaching and learning (causes, i.e., humour as a safe house) or a hands-on perspective (effects, i.e.,	This brief introduction into the literature of humour and teaching/learning shows the benefits of using humour as an active learning technique rather than evading as off-task behaviour. Also, the workshop leader should distribute the handout about avoiding offensive humour (Appendix 1).

		higher students' instructor assessment).	
10	Funny Teaching and Learning Situations	In connection to humour as a self-reflection activity, participants – in pairs or groups of three – share experiences from teaching and learning that made them laugh. Then, they discuss and try to identify what it was that sparked the laughter at those specific events. Depending on the flow of the discussion, the instructor can offer examples of situations to discuss in pairs.	Self-reflection on humour in teaching and learning situations. Some questions the presenter can offer to lead this activity can be: Did this situation challenge some ideas you had about your language and/or culture? Was there something 'special' that makes you remember this situation? Can this situation be explained to others? Why/not?
5	Break	Coffee time!	It allows time for the workshop leader to get into costume (see humorist techniques and topics section below for details).
20	Humorist Techniques and Topics	Presentation of different humorist techniques to use in language and literature classes. It includes dressing up, personal anecdotes and stories, and the complexities of double-meaning words and idioms within and between countries. More information on the techniques and topics is given in the Handout #2 (Appendix 2).	For this section of the workshop, it is very important for the leader to act out the techniques being presented. Show the performative aspect of teaching, and lessen participant anxiety by demonstrating how much fun it can be to use these techniques. A good way to start can be by actually dressing up in extravagant clothing (e.g., king or queen paraphernalia).
25	Role-playing	Participants practice the techniques previously discussed in pairs or group of three. Depending on the	Once stress has been diminished with the leader acting as a role-model, the participants take the lead to

		<p>number of participants, this section can be divided into three components: (a) participants discuss and share in pairs, or groups of three, situations they have encountered in their classes – 5 minutes; (b) then, for the same amount of time, participants practice a skit to approach one of the situations they have discussed (important: the skit should include everyone in the group); (c) for the remaining fifteen minutes, participants are encouraged to act out their skits at the front.</p>	<p>practice skits and dramatizations techniques. This activity aims at demonstrating two main points about humour in the classroom: (a) it is not very hard to do because humour is part of our daily life; (b) but at the same time it requires practice when attempting to use it as a teaching tool. Make sure that all participants are feeling comfortable. If some participants are hesitant about acting, encourage them to take part as the hypothetical students.</p>
5	Closing Comments	<p>The workshop leader distributes Handout #3 (Appendix 3) and explains the resources cited. Draw the participants' attention to the humour in the final handout, which describes resource readings as if they tasty foods. In closing, the workshop leader should emphasize the importance of humour as a method for involving students and for creating a relaxed environment within the classroom and beyond.</p>	<p>Food analogies are familiar and funny which allows the workshop leader to end on a positive note, and model another way of incorporating humour into the classroom (i.e., through handouts).</p>
Total time: 90minutes			

PRESENTATION STRATEGIES

The workshop leader should keep in mind that teaching requires performance. Thus, the presenter should aim at impersonating the humorous strategies being discussed throughout this presentation. If the objective is to communicate the beneficial aspect of humour for teaching and learning, the presentation should showcase these strategies by making use of them. The objective would be defeated if the presenter did not to use techniques such as

story-telling (how did it happen that the idea of humour come to the presenter's mind?), self-effacing (how many cups of coffee did the presenter drink to prepare this workshop?), and body language (yes, the presenter does have an accent and moves his/her hands like he/she is swimming butterfly!).

ADDITIONAL REFERENCES

- Bell, N. D. (2005). Exploring L2 Language Play as an Aid to SLL: A Case Study of Humour in NS-NNS Interaction. *Applied Linguistics*, 26(2), 192-218.
- Bell, N. D. (2009). Learning about and through humor in the second language classroom. *Language Teaching Research*, 13(3), 241-258.
- Berk, R. A. (2002). *Humor as an Instructional Defibrillator: Evidence-based Techniques in* Fovet, F. (2009). The use of humour in classroom interventions with students with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties. *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties*, 14(4), 275-289.
- Matthews, M. L. M. (2011). *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Hippocampus: The Effects of Humor on Student Achievement and Memory Retention*. (Doctoral dissertation). Arizona State University. Retrieved from UMI Dissertation Publishing.
- Medgyes, P. (2002). *Laughing Matters: Humour in the language classroom*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Morrison, M. K. (2008). *Using Humor to Maximize Learning: The Links between Positive Emotions and Education*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Education.

APPENDIX A: Handout #1
Why Avoid Offensive Humour?

	In the classroom (instructors)	Outside the classroom (comedians)
<i>Purpose of humour (in general)</i>	To create a relaxed environment in the classroom and build relationships with students.	To entertain.
<i>When is offensive humour appropriate?</i>	Never.	Comedians are paid for their comedy, and some build a reputation on offensive humour.
<i>Why avoid offensive humour?</i>	Offensive humour sets a bad example for students, is not inclusive, may create barriers or upset students.	Offensive humour limits the audience to a reduced group of followers.
<i>Possible responses to offensive humour</i>	Students will be uneasy about attending class, and some may even consider not attending or withdrawing.	If they choose, viewers can stop attending shows, or simply turn off the computer, TV and/or radio.

Adapted from Berk, R. A. (2003). *Professors are from Mars, Students are from Snickers: How to Write and Deliver Humor in the Classroom and in Professional Presentations*. Sterling, Virginia: Stylus Publishing.

APPENDIX B: Handout #2
Techniques and Topics

Activity #1: Dressing Up!

Topics – Language acquisition: Noun gender, and harmony between article, noun, and adjective. Literary studies: Adaptation of dialogues into performances.

One of the main difficulties I have found while teaching introductory Spanish is for students to remember that nouns can be either masculine or feminine in Romance languages such as Spanish, French, Italian, among others. For sentence construction, the noun gender informs the article and any adjective attached to it: they must all correspond to the noun. An efficient way from my own teaching experience is to underscore noun gender by alternating exaggerated costumes – perhaps a floppy red hat to indicate feminine nouns and a dark grey fedora for masculine nouns. By wearing different clothes while presenting vocabulary, students may be able to retain the gender of the noun. And they laugh!

Follow-up questions: Is there a grammar of gender in your language? If so, what is your experience in teaching? And, what has been your experience in learning 'non-gender languages'?

Activity #2: It happened to me, too!

Topics – Language acquisition: Class instructor's anecdotes about learning his/her non-native language. Literary studies: Sharing of experiences in the reading of a literary text.

Making mistakes is a natural component when learning a language. Also, diversity of opinions or confusion regarding a literary text may be in the writer's agenda. Personal anecdotes of, for example, mistakes done when using a non-native language and first time impression of the literary text being discussed in class can animate discussion. It also shows that the teacher knows in advance that mistakes will happen and diverse opinions about the same novel or story will persist. By encouraging the students to practice the vocabulary and read the story again, we learn and have more fun.

Follow-up questions: Were you involved in 'funny' or 'embarrassing' situations when learning a new language? Do you think that sharing your stories may help your students? Is there something you remember from a literary author that 'you didn't understand'?

Activity #3: Slang and double-meaning

Topics – Language acquisition: To introduce cultural differences between countries and regions with the same language. Literary studies: Discussion of the double meaning of expressions and words.

The question seems to be the same when reading a novel: what did author X mean here? Rather than focusing on specific meanings, the complexity of humour can show the different perspectives at work in the same sentence. This is very useful when teaching a language,

and exposing the double-meanings of the same word across and within borders presents a rich cultural picture of the linguistic world. For example, chabacano means 'apricot' in to Spanish speakers in Mexico, but 'vulgar' to Spanish speakers in Spain. The words for 'straw' and 'popcorn' also vary throughout Spanish-speaking countries.

Follow-up questions: Are there expressions in your language with more than one meaning? Do non-native speakers tend to use 'funny' translations? How many meanings can you identify in a quote from your favourite author?

APPENDIX C: Handout #3

Make yourself laugh!

Heat in the microwave for thirty seconds only.

Websites

1st International Collection of Tongue Twisters: <http://www.uebersetzung.at/twister/>

- Tongue twisters can be a yummy way to practice pronunciation and introduce vocabulary.

Annals of Improbable Research: <http://www.improbable.com/>

- For the instructors who need a bit of entertainment, this “journal” catalogues sweet and sour “findings.”

Journal of Irreproducible Results: <http://www.jir.com/>

- More entertainment for the instructors while having lunch.

The Onion: <http://www.theonion.com/>

- News a bit more delicious than normal.

PhD Comics: <http://www.phdcomics.com/comics.php>

- A tasty look at PhD student situations translated into comics. They also have a movie!

Articles

Pinker, S. (2007, October 8). What the F***? Why We Curse. *The New Republic*. Retrieved from <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/politics/what-the-f>

- For the connoisseurs out there, this is a hilarious article on the origins of cursing. Combine with your beverage of choice!

Dewaele, J. M. (2004). The Emotional Force of Swearwords and Taboo Words in the Speech of Multilinguals. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 25(2-3), 204-222.

- But don't run too fast after eating! As Dewaele points out, “it is probably better not to put too much tomato (or pepper) in the soup, and to taste it oneself before serving” (220).

Skinner, M. E. (2010). All Joking Aside: Five Reasons to Use Humor in the Classroom. *The Education Digest: Essential Readings Condensed for Quick Review*, 76(2), 19-21.

- Excellent (and short) review of literature on humour and teaching-learning. Eat it, pray it, love it.

Books

Berk, R. A. (2003). *Professors are from Mars, Students are from Snickers: How to Write and Deliver Humor in the Classroom and in Professional Presentations*. Sterling, Virginia: Stylus Publishing.

- Suitable for all occasions, Berk paraphernalia on humour will turn your classes (and by extension, your meals) into adventures of laughter and enjoyment.

Medgyes, P. (2002). *Laughing Matters: Humour in the language classroom*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

- Medgyes supplies the reader with several activities to practice humour when teaching and learning (that is to say, digesting) a new language.