Using Humor and Language Play in the Classroom to Enhance English Language Learning

American English Webinar Series
How does a farmer count a herd of cows?

With a cow-culator!

Did you understand that joke?

Department of Applied Linguistics
Georgia State University
Atlanta, GA, USA
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pre-Webinar Poll Questions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Do you consider yourself to be a funny teacher?</td>
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<td>2. Can humor promote language learning?</td>
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<td>3. Can beginner learners benefit from humor in the language classroom?</td>
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<td>4. Have you ever tried to use humor in your language classroom?</td>
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Overview

- Define humor and language play
- Describe theoretical reasons for using humor and play in the classroom
- Provide examples for implementing humor and play into the language classroom
What is Humor?

“...humor is a broad term that refers to anything that people say or do that is perceived as funny and tends to make others laugh, as well as the mental processes that go into both creating and perceiving such an amusing stimulus, and also the affective response involved in the enjoyment of it.”

(Martin, 2007, p. 5)
What is Humor?

1. The **thing** that is funny
2. The **person** who creates the humor
3. The **responses** hearers have:
   - laughter
   - smiling
   - more humor

*Humor is a very **broad** concept!*
What are some reasons why teachers might use humor in the classroom?
Functions of Humor

• Making students feel comfortable
• Establishing and maintaining relationships
  – between teacher and student
  – between student and student
• Coping with difficult topics and situations
• Stress relief and relaxation
• For fun
Types of Humor

• **Narratives**  
  – scripted stories with humorous endings

• **Puns**  
  – humor using words with double meanings

• **Riddles**  
  – humorous linguistic and cultural puzzles

Raise your hand if you are familiar with any of these types of humor.
Narratives

• Very short stories with humorous endings

• Scripted and planned in advance

• Typically end with a **punchline**
  – the final phrase or sentence of a joke or story that causes the humor
A man walks into a library and says to the librarian, “I’ll have a cheeseburger and fries, please.”

The librarian responds, “Sir, this is a library.”

The man then says, “Oh, I’m sorry.” He then whispers, “I’ll have a cheeseburger and fries, please.”
Puns

• “Puns are a special form of humor based on double meanings.”
• Puns contain double meaning
• Double meaning of two words that
  – sound very similar
  – sound the same
  – look the same

(Lems, 2013)
• A skunk fell in a river and **stank** to the bottom.

• **Q:** What kind of flower grows on your face?
  • **A:** **Tulips!**

• **Q:** What kind of bird is found at a construction site?
  • **A:** A **crane!**

**STANK** sounds like **SANK** (two lips)
Riddles

• Riddles are cultural and linguistic puzzles

• The answer to a riddle is funny because
  – it is unexpected
  – it requires seeing something differently
  – it may involve using words differently
What is brown and sticky?
– A stick!

What has a face, two hands, but no arms or legs?
– A clock!
Word Play

- Playing with the **form** or **meaning** of words and phrases
- **Form**
  - written appearance
  - sound
- **Meaning**
  - ambiguous meaning
  - multiple meanings

Playing with language promotes language knowledge and learning

(Cook, 1997)
Word Play

• Narratives
  – play with meaning (*this is a library*)

• Puns
  – play with forms (*tulips and two lips*)

• Riddles
  – play with meaning (*sticky = like a stick*)
Humor, Play, and L2 Learning

• Sociocultural Theory
  – Lev Vygotsky
  – Social activity pushes development

Raise your hand if you have heard of Vygotsky.
Sociocultural Theory

- Different types of people to interact with
  - someone more capable
  - someone equally as capable
  - someone less capable
  - and yourself

It is through all of these forms of interaction that learning can happen
Sociocultural Theory

• Play leads to development
  – “in play a child always behaves beyond his average age, above his daily behavior; in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself”

• In other words...
  – playing allows people to engage in difficult learning tasks

• Humor and play is an affordance (or possible use)
  – it allows for learning in certain situations

(Vygotsky, 1978, p. 10)
For Example: A Leaf

A leaf offers different affordances to different organisms:

- crawling on for a tree frog
- cutting for an ant
- food for a caterpillar
- shade for a spider
- medicine for a shaman, and so on....
Humor, Play, and L2 Learning

- **Interaction**
  - language learning occurs when learners are interacting in meaningful conversation

- **Negotiating Meaning**
  - working to be understood
  - working to understand

- **Modifying Language**
  - changing what was said to help understanding
Learner Cannot Understand

• Stephen: Excuse me, Dave, but are you free right now?
• Dave: Am I free? What does that mean?
• Stephen: Dave, are you busy right now?
• Dave: Oh, no, I’m not busy!

Stephen’s changes allowed comprehension
Learner Cannot Be Understood

- Dave: I do want food for eating.
- Stephen: What are you saying?
- Dave: I am hungry.
- Stephen: OK, let’s go eat!

Dave must change his output to be understood
Humor and L2 Learning

• Encourages interaction and social activity
  – helps interact with different capabilities
  – students are more comfortable

• Prompts negotiation
  – conversation is realistic and meaningful
  – explaining and understanding humor
  – consider different forms and meanings of words
What are some possible challenges when using humor in the classroom?
## Challenges

1. Humor is too personal
2. Humor might offend someone
3. Humor is not serious language
4. Humor requires cultural knowledge
5. Humor is only for advanced learners
Addressing Challenges

• **How does humor fit in?**
  – Humor does not have to be the goal of the course
  – Use humor to help meet your course goals

• **Backwards Design**
  – Where do you want to go?
  – How do you get there?
  – How do you know you are there?
Backwards Design

- **Beginning**: Learners will be able to exchange greetings and introduce themselves to others

- Humor can be an effective “ice breaker”
  - makes initial introductions more comfortable
  - gives students something to use outside the class
Four Ways of Using Humor

1. Identifying Humor
2. Comprehending Humor
3. Producing Humor
4. Responding to Humor

(Bell and Pomerantz, 2016)
Identifying Humor

- **Purpose**
  - Build students’ ability to recognize humor
  - (may not understand humor)

- **How**
  - Analyze scripted examples of humor
  - Ask students: *how is humor being signaled in this example?*
Knock-Knock Jokes

- Originated in the 1920s, during the period of American history called *Prohibition*
  - "Speakeasys"
  - Patrons had to have a code to get in
    - Often they would go to the door and knock twice.
    - The operator would ask, “Who’s there?”

Raise your hand if you know what a knock-knock joke is.
Knock-Knock Jokes

- Fixed Structure
  - Knock, knock
  - Who’s there?
  - *noun*
  - *noun* who?
  - Punchline

Good for younger and less proficient learners
Knock-Knock Jokes

**Example 1**
- Knock, knock!
- Who’s there?
- Cow says.
- Cow says who?
- No silly, a cow says Mooooo!

**Example 2**
- Knock, knock!
- Who’s there?
- Boo!
- Boo who?
- Don’t cry, it’s just me.

When learners hear “knock, knock”, they know to expect something humorous
They can build upon each other

**Knock, knock... Who's there?**
- Nose... Nose who?
- I nose another “knock-knock” joke.

**Knock, knock... Who's there?**
- Ears... Ears who?
- Ears another “knock-knock” joke!

**Knock, knock... Who's there?**
- Chin... Chin who?
- Chin up! I’m not gonna tell you anymore “knock-knock” jokes.
Knock-Knock Jokes

• Teachers can use them as transitions between stories, activities, or tasks

• Shared humor
  – builds rapport
  – anticipates fun
  – captures attention
Comprehending Humor

• **Purpose**
  – Students can both identify *and* understand examples of humor

• **How**
  – Teacher provides background knowledge necessary to understand examples of humor
  – Teacher prompts students to consider meaning of certain words
Pun Comprehension Activity

1. Teach learners different types of puns
   - puns that sound very similar
   - puns that sound the same
   - puns that look the same

2. Ask students to identify pun types
   - if necessary, highlight key words in the puns
   - students explain what causes humor in the pun

3. Ask students to explain the double meaning in the pun

(Lems, 2013)
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| **Question:** How do you stop a *charging* bull?  
**Answer:** Take away its credit card. | **Meaning 1:** running  
**Meaning 2:** purchasing |

**What language skills are being used in this activity?**

| How does a farmer count a herd of cows? With a *cow-culator!* | **Meaning 1:** an animal (cow)  
**Meaning 2:** a device (calculator) |
Cooperative Learning and Humor
Wake Up and Go to Sleep
Classroom Setup

**Step 1.** All students start “asleep.” They are closing their eyes with their heads down.
Classroom Setup

Step 2. Teacher tells student 1 to “wake up.” That student looks and memorizes a word the teacher is showing.
Classroom Setup

Step 3. Teacher tells student 1 to go back to sleep.
Step 4. Teacher repeats steps 1-3 with each student, using a new word each time.
Classroom Setup

Step 5. All students wake up and form a sentence with their memorized words.
For Example

Student 1: Dave and Stephen

Student 2: teachers!

Student 3: are

Student 4: the best

Answer: Dave and Stephen are the best teachers!
Riddles

1. Many stories are built around riddles

2. Riddles have been used to educate, to test problem-solving skills, and provoke discussion

3. Choose riddles carefully – good lead-in and can serve as comprehension questions about a story

(Baltuck, 1993, p. 110)
Fairy Tale Example

- **Fairy Tales**
  - cultural stories with lessons

- **Three Little Pigs**
  - three pigs each build a house
  - one is brick
  - one is stick
  - one is straw

- A wolf tries to blow down all their houses
  - only the pig who spent time using brick keeps his house
What did the first little pig say after the wolf blew down his house?

Student 1: straw!"

Student 2: the

Student 3: "That’s

Student 4: last
What did the first little pig say after the wolf blew down his house?

“That’s the last straw!”
Producing Humor

• **Purpose**
  – Develop learners’ ability to produce humor
  – Gain more language skills and knowledge
  – Grow different ways of using second language

• **How**
  – provide students with topics or frames to create humor

• **Narratives**
  – teaching narratives allows production
Joke Completion Activity

1. Teacher gives students puns that are missing a single word
2. Students are given several options to complete the joke
3. They are asked to choose the word that will create humor
   - follow up – ask students to explain why their answer is funny
Joke Completion Activity

Q. What school supply is the ______ (bug, pet, king) of the classroom?
A. The ruler.

Q. Why did the _____________ (bear, dog, student) sit on her alarm _____________ (bag, bug, clock)?
A. Because she wanted to be on time for school

Q. Which _________________(word, spot, song) in the dictionary is ______ (seen, spelled, smelled) incorrectly?
A. The word incorrectly is!
Joke Completion Activity

Q. What school supply is the _____ (bug, pet, king) of the classroom?
A. The ruler.

Q. Why did the _____________ (bear, dog, student) sit on her alarm _____________ (bag, bug, clock)?
A. Because she wanted to be on time for school.

Q. Which _____________ (word, spot, song) in the dictionary is ______ (seen, spelled, smelled) incorrectly?
A. The word incorrectly is!
Knock-Knock Joke Interaction

1. Provide students with examples of knock-knock jokes
2. Then provide empty frames of knock-knock jokes
3. Students work in pairs to think of nouns + who that will create a funny knock-knock joke
4. Students then tell their jokes to each other
   – most likely will have to explain their jokes to each other
Instructions:
Can you and your partner think of a noun that will make a joke when combined with who?

Consider both the sound and the meaning when thinking of a joke.

Now share your knock-knock jokes with your classmates. Be ready to explain your joke if others don’t understand!
Responding to Humor

• **Purpose**
  – Grow learner ability to participate in humor

• **How**
  – Provide situations for learners to (safely) engage in a humorous discussion
  – requires identifying, comprehending, and producing

• **Check the Ning for examples**
A Unit on Humor
Example: Business English

• Businesses use puns in advertisements to attract customers
• Curricular unit on recognition and production of puns and word play in advertising
  – ask students to find examples of puns
  – ask students to create puns for fictional products
Overview Check

• Define humor and language play

• Describe theoretical reasons for using humor and play in the classroom

• Provide examples for implementing humor and play into the language classroom
Thank You!

• The conversation is not over!
• We look forward to covering more humor and language play topics in our post-webinar Ning discussion!
References

