

# Laugh and Learn: Thinking over the "Funny Teacher" Myth

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One of the key elements of success in a foreign language class is the possibility for that class to be not only an instance of learning, but also a moment of fun. Generally speaking, foreign language classes all over the world have incorporated a playful dimension, which may be to a certain extent attributed to the spread of the Communicative Approach and its present variations. Activities such as games, for instance, already contain a significant playful element, and that adds to the joyful tone which foreign language classes must have. Nevertheless, the myth of the funny teacher is still a concern for many of our colleagues.

Stop for a second and think about how you would describe yourself as a teacher and how your students would describe you. Does the adjective funny come up in your list of qualities? If so, congratulations! If not, for you the word funny, when used in an educational context, might convey inappropriateness or irresponsibility. Whether you are already a funny teacher or not, it is still relevant to discuss why it is important to laugh in the foreign language classroom.

## Why use humor?

The answer is in the title of this essay. When you laugh, you learn better. But there is a lot more to it than this simple answer. The use of humor makes the class atmosphere more pleasant, increases interaction among teacher and students, makes learning more meaningful and enjoyable, is a useful tool to get students' attention, motivates learners, and most of the time, pleases students. Finally, as proponents of the Natural Approach would put it, using humor lowers the affective filter.

Teachers have long been aware that motivating students and lowering their anxiety are important. So why don't more teachers utilize humor in their classes? There are many answers to this question. First, many teachers believe humor is too personal for the classroom, where there is a group of individuals with differing beliefs. Thus, they fear they might easily offend someone. Second, others see the use of humor as something that could lead to discipline problems and, as a consequence, to the teacher's loss of control of the class. Also, some argue that humor is time consuming, increases teacher talking time, and may increase learner dependence. Another common reason is a disbelief in the seriousness of humor. The idea of the teacher as a performer may not sound professional to some of us. "Are students really learning anything?" these skeptics would ask.

All of these concerns are valid and they must be taken into consideration. Too often, however, preconceived attitudes against using humor prevent both teacher and students from having a more pleasant and meaningful learning experience, which we all search for in our daily practice. Let's begin by defining what we call the funny teacher and what we mean by using humor in the classroom.

## **The "funny teacher" myth**

The funny teacher is not a clown figure. He is a serious, conscientious professional who believes in the meaningfulness and effectiveness of having fun while learning. Thus, he always tries to provide his students with opportunities for a pleasurable journey through learning, promoting the use of humor in his class. By using humor, I do not mean entertaining students with silly jokes all the time. Although jokes, if used wisely, may contribute to the repertoire of his teaching kit, the funny teacher is not an entertainer. He is an educator interested in the progress of his students. He either tries to add a touch of humor and an element of fun to everyday class activities, or to use activities that are essentially humorous, such as games, jazz chants, auctions, or Total Physical Response.

Teachers who naturally have a good sense of humor should use it, but that is not at all a requirement to be a funny teacher. You may not consider yourself a funny person, and still be classified as a "funny teacher." In other words, it is more important that the class itself be fun than the teacher be funny, since it is never a good idea to try to change one's personality traits.

## **Making activities fun**

There are many ways to make an activity fun. The element of surprise, for instance, frequently adds joy to class. Well-chosen pictures, cards, and other visual aids, as well as realia in general, are usually of great help. The use of music and sounds can also do the trick. Have students sing songs in different rhythms or tones of voice, for instance. It is always a good idea to have students change seating arrangements, work in groups, and complete short activities. Assign activities in which they must walk around and use body language and mimicry to express themselves and their feelings. Remember to please not only the mostly visual and auditory learners but the kinesthetic ones as well. All that will help the class to be more dynamic, and therefore, more fun.

Moreover, try to create humorous situations for role-plays and dialogues. Changing the context of that tedious role-play in the textbook to a fun one that allows the same structure to be practiced will make quite a difference in the end. You may also have students change the tone of their voices and dress differently, reinventing the character, while role-playing. Another nice technique is to attribute students' names to the characters in role-plays and skits. You can always throw in one or two intelligent jokes every now and then, and, above all, play games.

The use of games as an effective learning tool is inestimable. Diane Larsen-Freeman (1986:129) rightly points out that "games are important because they have certain features in common with real communicative events—there is a purpose to the exchange." There are many other reasons to use games. However, it is necessary to make sure that the games turn out to be fun, as they are meant to be, and not a source of problems. A good way to prevent this is to choose games that focus on the "exchange," to use Larsen-Freeman's word. Use cooperative games, in which the participants work toward a common objective, instead of competitive games, in which the objective is to finish first. This is a polemic issue, since one may argue that competition itself adds more fun to the class. Competition can be fun, but such consequences as embarrassment and a lack of discipline may arise out of such games. Still, they may be worth a try, especially if

the teacher plays an active role during the game and students learn to focus on cooperation rather than winning.

## A humor questionnaire

Perhaps you have changed your mind and now believe you are a funny teacher after all. You might even have decided to join the club at last. But before you start laughing and learning, see how ready you are by answering the following questionnaire (see Appendix below), which I prepared together with my colleague Lynn Mallett. Tally your results when you are done. Good luck and have fun!

## Conclusion

You should not take this questionnaire too seriously. The underlying message is simply laugh and learn. Make sure you differentiate between what is appropriate and what is not for each group of students you teach. Do not miss a chance to make their learning more pleasurable and meaningful, but select and plan your activities carefully. The few suggestions provided here for making your class activities fun are only meant to provide you with ideas so you can start improvising and making your own classroom a fun place to learn.

## Reference

Larsen-Freeman, D. 1986. *Techniques and principles in language teaching*. New York: Oxford University Press.

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## Appendix

### How Humorous are You?

1. Would you tell jokes or funny stories in class?

Not at all. I don't have it in me.

If I'm in the mood.

Sure. Anything to grab their attention.

2. While clarifying vocabulary would you use funny mimes or gestures?

No, never.

If it's appropriate.

Whenever I have the chance.

3. Would you use rhymes or riddles, even if they involve the students' native language, as a memory aid?

No. I refrain from using L1.

If it helps them remember..

They always like silly rhymes.

4. Would you use funny names for characters in role-plays?

Never thought of that.

Sometimes.

Yes, most of the time.

5. Would you have boys play girls' roles and vice versa in an activity?

Of course not. That would be ridiculous.

If they are having a good day.

As often as possible. They love it.

6. Would you lower the volume while playing a song or jazz chant to allow students to sing by themselves?

Not as a rule.

Yes, if the song is appealing to them.

Sure, all the time.

7. If you used pictures of animals to form groups, would you refer to the animal when calling on the group? For instance, "What answer did the cows get?"

No, they might be offended.

Possibly, if it's done in a light hearted way.

Why not? There's no reason to get offended.

8. Would you use drawings or funny pictures for students to grasp the meaning more easily?

No, I can't draw.

I try to.

I illustrate all examples with pictures.

**Give yourself:** 0 points for every a answer.

3 points for every b answer.

6 points for every c answer.

**Score descriptions:**

0 - 14

You must have had a tough childhood! We'd highly recommend a sojourn to Disney World. Whatever you do, try to bring out the child in you. Who knows? You might even like it.

15 - 40

You have a good sense of humor and you also seem to be sensible enough to judge the appropriateness of certain techniques. If your

score is at the lower or higher end of this range, read that other score description, too. Which one most applies to you?

Above 41

You should be on the stage or maybe in the circus, who knows? We are sure your students have a ball in your classes, but be careful! Make sure you draw the line between teaching and performing.