



## USING HUMOUR IN TEACHING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE AT MORE ADVANCED LEVELS

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*Abstract.* The unique properties of humour make it a valuable tool in the process of teaching and acquiring English as a foreign language, especially when more advanced courses at the university level are concerned. In the first place, using humour based on language play (involving different aspects of linguistic structure) in a variety of teaching materials can be very beneficial to helping students improve their ability with language structures. Moreover, it is important that students develop an awareness of humour that is related to culture in order to achieve better command of English. In order to determine the effect humour has on students' level of attainment, a small-scale study was conducted at the English Department, University of Novi Sad in the course *Integrated Language Skills*. In the study, humour was used both as a tool, to improve the learning environment, and as a resource for teaching new vocabulary or revising grammatical structures. The results of the study indicate that humour can be applied to teaching a foreign language and improving students' proficiency level. Moreover, using humour both as a tool and as a resource affected students' motivation and willingness to study.

*Key words:* humor in education, teaching English as a foreign language, learning environment, teaching materials.

The main idea behind this study was to try to use humor both as a resource and a tool in teaching English as a foreign language at the university level. The idea that humor can be applied to teaching is certainly not a new one. Powell and Andersen (1985) advocate the idea that humor can increase attention and interest and help to illustrate and reinforce what is being taught. Furthermore, Davies (2003) claims that the challenge to the language learner in learning to participate fully in conversational joking is not only to acquire the appropriate social and cultural knowledge, but also to achieve an appropriate level of interpretive and productive expertise.

One of the rare quantitative studies in this field reports on the research conducted by Berk and Nanda (2006), who proved in their study that using humor in tests can lower test anxiety and improve performance, especially

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with under twenty-five age group. Combining humorous and serious versions of the same test content in the multiple choice task, they determined that humorous content can lower anxiety and improve test performance.

Assuming that humor can be beneficial to the process of learning a foreign language, the primary objective of this paper was to try to apply humor to teaching English as a foreign language. Humor was used as a tool for increasing group dynamics and achieving better class management, as well as a resource for different tasks oriented towards practicing grammatical structures, increasing vocabulary and learning more about culture related to English-speaking countries. This small-scale study was conducted on the second year students majoring *ELT* at the English Department, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Novi Sad, in the winter term 2009/2010.

This study was conducted in the course *Integrated language skills 3 (ILS3)*, which is an obligatory course, based on studying English using a communicative approach. The main challenge in teaching such a course at this level is to motivate students to maintain their initial interest in English and encourage them to take an active part in the process of learning. Infusing humor in the process of teaching/learning and in the input seemed to be a great incentive to enhancing students' knowledge.

At the advanced level, students should increase not only their communicative competence but the cultural as well. According to Davies (2003), knowing how the native speakers of a language use humor in their everyday situations can certainly foster students own 'conversational involvement'. Veatch (1998) claims that language and humor are interwoven on many levels, since language is implicated in humor, from lexical ambiguity to linguistic ill-formedness or stigmatized forms, from dialect features to linguistic arguments.

Although spontaneity and humor are closely related, the teacher should carefully incorporate any type of humor he/she intends to use in their lesson plan and make sure it is relevant to the objectives of the lesson. In light of organizing teaching materials used in the study, humor was classified into three broad categories: (a) universal, (b) culture-based and (c) linguistic, or word-based humor, following Schmitz's (2002) classification.

Researchers of humor admit that there are many difficulties related to defining humor. Attardo (1994) argues that humor should be regarded as a generic term that covers a semantic field including puns, wit, ridicule, mock, sarcasm, and fun. For the purpose of this study, we will use the cover term "humorous discourse" to refer to a variety of texts that are related but often have subtle differences: jokes, witticisms, quips, (wise)cracks, gags, puns, riddles, one-liners, etc. According to Long and Graesser (1988) humorous

statements are speech acts that have different functions in spoken and written discourse.

In accordance with Brown and Levinson's (1987) classification, verbalizations of conversational humor can be either face-threatening acts aimed at social control (denigration or exclusion from a social group) or face-saving acts (bonding, rapport-enhancement and mitigation). Poletto (2007) stresses that in an educational context, such as the language classroom, the former are to be prevented, the latter enhanced, to which both the teacher and the learner are committed.

In his study Saltman (1995) supports the idea that positive humor, particularly when relevant to the material, can help establish a climate conducive to adult learning, defuse stress, provide an effective message delivery system aiding retention of information, break down barriers between facilitators and learners, and foster cohesiveness.

Although most prominent linguistic theories of humor are grounded in cognitive and psycholinguistic empirical research, this field of study is still in need of an epistemic theory that would comprise the existing findings and fully account for the application of humour to the process of learning and acquiring knowledge.

#### *Humor used as a tool*

Certainly, using humor as a tool in foreign language teaching has its benefits and drawbacks. Humor can be a useful tool for achieving a wide range of different communicative goals and help establish a positive learning environment.

In the first place, if used carefully, the appropriate use of humor in class management can help hold students' attention and concentration for a longer period of time. Controlled amusement in class can affect students' motivation and willingness to participate in all activities with a bigger dose of enthusiasm and higher expectations regarding their own learning process. Generally speaking, the increase in attention and concentration will result in a far-reaching impact on positive attitudes towards the input material that is taught as well as the whole learning process, improving productivity and creative thinking.

Still, there are many risks that are involved in the whole process. Extra sensitivity is required on the part of the teacher in selecting the most appropriate kind of talk and managing the class effectively. Humorous and playful language should not be overused and the teacher has to attain a certain level of spontaneity alongside with experience in order to use such methods. Oth-

erwise, there is a risk that the students might misunderstand teacher's attempts or find some of the language used inappropriate. That is why such methods require the teachers take a cautious approach and students have a good command of foreign language that is taught.

Moreover, the teacher should always be aware of the lesson plan and timing since he/she has to control the whole situation. In case of some unintended or unplanned instances, which are quite likely to happen, the teacher should be quick at using these opportunities to his/her advantage and directing the students towards the tasks that were planned.

#### *Humor as a resource*

In this study humor was used as a resource for revising grammatical structures, for learning new vocabulary as well as developing students' awareness of nuances of meaning, expanding knowledge on word-formation and idiomatic expressions.

Since students at this level have covered all the most important grammatical issues in the previous courses and generally have a good degree of knowledge, in this course they basically revise these grammatical structures and learn how to use them in their own speech. A good way of revising tenses, phrasal verbs or any other topic that requires a lot of drill and is rather uninspiring for students at this level (since most of them assume that they know everything yet still make occasional mistakes) is to do this practice in the form of selected jokes that focus on particular grammatical points.

During the course, the teacher used a variety of different materials that were funny and entertaining. For instance, following the suggestions and examples offered in the *English Grammar Book with Laughter* (Woolard, 1999), which contains photocopiable exercises, the teacher can use either the given jokes or create some new regarding the specific points he/she should practice with the students. Furthermore, using funny cartoons that are followed by a caption that contains either a polysemous lexeme or a phrase that can be further used to elicit from the students lexemes or phrases that are related to it, turned out to be very useful. Additionally, an amusing selection of humorous texts, puns and jokes is analyzed in Ross (1998), which can be used as a resource for playing with language on different levels.

Furthermore, the teacher compiled a file of personal anecdotes, cartoons and stand-up comedian skits that could be adequately used when needed. During the course, students were encouraged by this approach so they started sharing their own anecdotes and jokes, as well as examples of linguistic humor or cartoons. The majority of material was in English, yet, if a

student gave an illustrative or amusing example in Serbian, the opportunity was used to compare and contrast Serbian and English structures on which humor was based, and the teacher prompted the students to suggest possible translational equivalents, though the discussions that followed these situations were rare and not exactly relevant since contrastive analysis and translation are not part of this course.

Nevertheless, wordplay was by far the most ‘laugh-provoking’ resource, regardless of the level of language on which it was based. Wordplay based on phonology was used for practicing pronunciation and spelling and when based on morphology it was helpful in drawing students’ attention to differences in meaning among different prefixes and suffixes. Yet, students enjoyed most wordplay based on lexis, especially when jokes or puns suggested a literal interpretation of a metaphorical expression. Additionally, authentic listening materials were used that either had humorous content or the speakers that were recorded spoke in a regional dialect that the students found funny.

When it comes to issues related to culture, apart from culture based jokes, stand-up comedians’ skits turned out to be very useful, particularly those that referred to specific cultural models, norms, customs, stereotypes or tradition related to the UK and the USA. For example, the performance *Dress to Kill* (1998) by the British stand-up comedian Eddie Izzard was very interesting and insightful because he compared and contrasted the American and British history, tradition, culture and stereotypes in an amusing way.

### *Methodology*

In order to get a better insight into the interface between humor and language teaching, a small-scale study was conducted on second-year students in the course *Integrated Language Skills 3*. The study lasted one semester or 60 classes of 45 minutes. This course is designed specifically to cater for the needs of second year students at the university level, who have attained B2 level and are supposed to reach C1 level of the *Council of Europe Framework* at the end of the academic year.

The main objective of this course is to expand students’ knowledge of vocabulary, especially when it comes to vocabulary dealing with specialized topics, help them achieve a better control over grammatical structures, particularly more complex ones, increase their writing and reading skills. Besides, the aim is to develop their speaking skills, enable them to communicate effectively and effortlessly using both informal and formal language. Every four to six weeks students’ level of attainment is tested.

Both qualitative and quantitative methods were used in the study, because we wanted to check whether there are any considerable differences in class management and students' attention and participation in in-class activities besides their level of attainment in tests. Hence, two groups of twenty students were in focus, one as a control and the other as an experimental group. The qualitative method was based on teacher's observation, recorded in a journal, while the quantitative method pertained to comparing the average results students from the control and experimental group scored in the tests. The average result was calculated as the arithmetic mean both in the case of the total score obtained in a test and in the case of specific tasks. The results are analyzed in percentage terms because a hundred percent is the maximum one can score in a given test.

Due to specific requirements that should be met and taken into account (the course is obligatory for the whole second year, approximately 80 students who have to be assessed at the end of the semester using the same criteria), members of each group were chosen at random, i.e. the groups were not arranged with respect to their specific abilities. The groups were selected randomly. Communicative approach was used in both groups and they were exposed to the same vocabulary and grammatical structures.

Using humor in the control group was not banned if it occurred spontaneously on the part of students, yet it was never encouraged or used by the teacher. However, the students in the experimental group were extensively exposed to humor in different ways. First of all, the teacher used humor having the following aims in view:

- to improve group dynamics,
- to motivate students to be more eager to participate in class activities,
- to build up students' self-confidence, fluency and skills in speaking,
- to help students learn new vocabulary/grammatical structures in an easier and more effective way as well as reinforce the structures that were already familiar to them.

Following these objectives, the methodological approach used to teach the control group was to some extent redesigned and adjusted in order to achieve these aims. The use of humor in the classroom was carefully planned by the teacher. It must be stressed that all kinds of derogatory humor that could offend any member of the group on any basis was strictly forbidden (that included jokes or any reference to ethnic, racial, gender issues, scatological humor, and similar).

Students had five classes of *ILS 3* a week, divided into 90 or 135 minute sessions. Basically, in the experimental group the teacher followed the same class procedure as in the control group. Nevertheless, the teacher was

ready to insert a playful element at appropriate moments during the teaching session. For instance, after greeting the students, the teacher would make an allusion to a funny topical event before the warm-up activities and engaged the students or elicited from them comments related to the event using the structures or vocabulary used in the previous class, or directed the lead-in to the input that had to be done. At the very beginning of the class, when the students' concentration was at the peak, the focus was on teaching whatever was planned in the syllabus for that particular day, using the same methods as in the control group, like pair/group work, individual turns etc. Then, depending on the topic, the learnt material was practiced in an amusing context. To be more precise, if learning new phrasal verbs was the main grammatical unit that had to be done, the teacher chose exercises that were based on jokes or cartoons containing the verbs that had to be learnt. Of course, all new vocabulary or grammatical structures were taught in advance, prior to focusing on specific tasks.

### *Testing*

In total, students did three tests. The first test was done in the third week after the beginning of the course and it served as a basis for comparison. Since the students did not do a placement test prior to organizing them in respective groups, this test was used to compare the average level of attainment of the control and experimental group, as well as their scores related to specific tasks. The results of the first test indicated that the control group was slightly better since they scored on average 0.8 % more than the experimental group, however, this difference is not that significant to claim that students in the control group were better students in general. Regarding specific tasks the difference between the scores of the control and experimental group were insignificant.

The second test was done in the seventh week, the students from the experimental group scored on average 2.58 % better than the students from the control group. Specifically, in the *multiple-choice cloze task* 3.4 % more than in the control group, in the *gapped sentences task* the experimental group scored 1.6 % more than the control group and in the *key word transformations* they scored 2.1 %.

The third test was done at the end of the course. On average, students from the experimental group did better by 2.63 %, or, in the tasks such as *multiple-choice cloze task* they scored 3.2 % more than in the control group, in the *gapped sentences task* the experimental group scored 1.9 % more than the control group, and in the *key word transformations* they scored 2.8 %

more than the control group. In all three tests, there was no significant difference in the results the students from both groups scored in reading comprehension and listening tasks.

The tests contained the types of exercises that were done in the class, such as open cloze, multiple choice, multiple matching, word formation, reading comprehension, key word transformations, and similar. All the students were tested under the same conditions.

### *Results*

Using humor as a means in language teaching has manifold consequences. In this study it was beneficial to making the learning material more interesting, especially in cases where such material focuses on revision, since for students revising usually means doing some routine and mindless work. When given in the form of jokes, all the structures that had to be repeated sounded more interesting and meaningful. Students enjoyed puns and jokes based on wordplay and jokes that were based on cultural models prevailing in the English speaking countries, since they showed them what the native speakers laugh at. Furthermore, humor helped creating an environment in which everyone was more relaxed. The teacher increased rapport with the students, and it is well known that the whole learning process depends to a large extent on the effectiveness of the teacher in establishing a particular relationship with students. By creating an atmosphere that was more like real than artificial, the teacher had less difficulty in dealing with the students' willingness to take part in various activities. Besides, humorous discourse helped the teacher handle occasional fits of tiredness, and lack of motivation, which sometimes posed a serious problem in longer teaching sessions. Moreover, it was much easier to put the students at ease and make the teacher more approachable.

All this had a considerable impact on group dynamics, creating a positive learning environment in the classroom and establishing better understanding between the teacher and the student. The teacher used many occasions to make fun of herself, and as a result, students gradually lost their fear of "saying something wrong" or being laughed at by the rest of the group. Thus, students' self esteem was built up and they were encouraged to speak at longer individual intervals. According to teacher's observations, the whole group was in total more cooperative than the control group and more willing to share ideas and experiences.

Specifically, their attention span on average was rather longer than the attention span of students from the control group, the lapses into disinterest oc-

curred more rarely when compared to such occurrences in the control group. Students were more absorbed in their tasks and more willing to take part in any speaking activity, which was not the case in the control group where, apart from a couple of students, most of the others had to be prompted by the teacher to talk about a given topic. Apart from affecting students' motivation to work and participation in in-class activities in general, this overall supportive and playful working atmosphere encouraged even the more introvert students to prolong their individual time span of talking about a certain topic.

Using quantitative analysis, an attempt was made to measure the impact humour had on students' performance in the test, which was used to assess their level of attainment. Basically, the tests contained tasks that focused on their ability to use a specific word in a given context or an appropriate grammatical structure and tasks that checked their reading and listening skills as well as comprehension.

Judging by the results given above, students from the experimental group did better in general (by 2.58% in the second and 2.63% in the third test), in particular in the tasks in which they had to retrieve specific vocabulary items-/grammatical structures from their memory, as in multiple choice, gapped sentences or key word transformations. Thus, applying humor to prompt students' attention and concentration, as well as using new words and phrases in a humorous context affected their level of attainment. Obviously, this method had a significant impact on expanding students' range of vocabulary and the ability to retrieve the remembered items from their working memory.

No noticeable difference was found between the achievement of two groups in the reading comprehension and listening task. In the first place, these tasks are more complex in the sense that they require of the student to activate both his/her general and specific knowledge and at the same time they have to select, compare and summarize given information. Yet, since both reading and listening tasks depend largely on the knowledge of vocabulary and grammar, it would be insightful to undertake a follow-up study in which students' reading and listening skills are tested after the learnt material has become part of their long-term memory.

### *Conclusions*

Although this study should be repeated under stricter conditions and on a larger scale, it is obvious that this approach aided retention of new material and production of that material in the tests. When used as a tool, humor can affect group dynamics, the relationship between the teacher and the students and increase students' motivation to be actively engaged in the activities in

class. The use of humor in the classroom had a significant impact on the overall atmosphere, which was much more relaxed, playful and creative, yet at the same time quite serious when it comes to learning new material or revising things that had been learnt.

Due to the fact that humor plays an important role in communication in any language, it is clear that it cannot be avoided in foreign language teaching. As a resource, it can help students obtain a different viewpoint and better insight into the use of language and another culture. Moreover, it can make students more sensitive towards understanding and appreciating a foreign language in its full complexity. Furthermore, humor enables students to have a better insight into the culture and different values native speakers of English share, which is certainly of great significance for students at this level. If students are confident enough with the level of attainment that they have accomplished, playing with the language they are studying can boost their self confidence related to using the language in everyday situations.

However, further research into this area should be undertaken in order to develop specific techniques and methods that could be used in teaching as well as measuring the effects humor has on this process.

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Диана Продановић Станкић  
УПОТРЕБА ХУМОРА У НАСТАВИ ЕНГЛЕСКОГ ЈЕЗИКА  
КАО СТРАНОГ НА ВИШИМ НИВОИМА

*Анстракт*

Управо због својих особености, хумор се може користити у настави страних језика на вишим нивоима и као извор за додатне материјале и као начин да се побољша радна атмосфера у учионици. Наравно, за наставу страног језика, у овом случају енглеског, посебно је значајан хумор заснован на језику, али и култури везаној за језик који се учи. Да бисмо проверили колики и какав је утицај хумора на процес извођења наставе и учинак студената, када је реч о наученом градиву, спровели смо истраживање мањег обима. У истраживању су испитивани студенти друге године енглеског језика и књижевности на Одсеку за англистику, Филозофског факултета у Новом Саду. Експериментална група је на курсу Обједињених језичких вештина била изложена мноштву примера који су комични, а који су засновани на поигравању са различитим нивоима језика (граматиком, лексиком, морфологијом, синтаксом). Поред тога, на часовима је подстицана употреба хумора и у процесу учења и предавања. У поређењу с контролном групом, експериментална група је показала боље резултате на задацима провере наученог градива. Осим тога, студенти из експерименталне групе били су знатно расположенији и више мотивисани да учествују у активностима на часу, што је у великој мери утицало на општу атмосферу у учионици. Иако је потребно спровести више истраживања у овој области, показало се да је значајан утицај који хумор има на извођење наставе енглеског језика.

*Кључне речи:* хумор у настави, подучавање енглеског језика као страног, наставни материјали.

Диана Проданович Станкич  
ИСПОЛЬЗОВАНИЕ ЮМОРА В ОБУЧЕНИИ АНГЛИЙСКОМУ ЯЗЫКУ  
КАК ИНОСТРАННОМУ НА ПРОДВИНУТОМ УРОВНЕ

*Резюме*

Благодаря своим специфическим особенностям, юмор пригоден для использования в обучении иностранным языкам на продвинутом этапе, и как источник дополнительных материалов, и как способ поощрения трудовой атмосферы в классе. Разумеется, в деле обучения иностранным языкам, в нашем случае английскому языку, особое значение имеет юмор, основывающийся на языке и на культуре страны изучаемого языка. Для того, чтобы проверить, каким образом и насколько юмор влияет на процесс реализации обучения и на достижения студентов, мы провели небольшое исследование, в котором приняли участие студенты второго курса английского языка и литературы Отделения англистики Философского факультета в Нови-Саде. Экспериментальной группе на курсе Объединенных языковых умений было предложено множество примеров, комический эффект которых создается благодаря игре с разными уровнями языка (грамматикой, лексикой, морфологией, синтаксисом). Кроме того, на занятиях поощрялось использование юмора и в процессе обучения, и в само-

стоятельной работе. По сравнению с контрольной группой, экспериментальная группа добилась более хороших результатов на заданиях, рассчитанных на проверку усвоенного материала. Следует иметь в виду и факт, что студенты из экспериментальной группы отличались более хорошим настроением и более высокой мотивацией для участия в работе на занятиях, что в большой степени влияло на общий психологический климат в аудиторной группе. И хотя необходимо провести ряд исследований в данной области, можно прийти к выводу, что юмор в значительной мере воздействует на эффективность обучения английскому языку.

*Ключевые слова:* юмор в обучении, обучение английскому языку как иностранному, учебные материалы.