

Using Humor in the English Classroom: The Language Teacher's Perspective

Jacob Schnickel & Milen Martchev

Abstract

This paper examines how several experienced English language teachers of various nationalities who work at Japanese universities use humor in their classes, according to their own subjective evaluations. We identify a set of characteristic attitudes that these instructors have in relation to classroom humor, as well as the range of humor types and techniques that they typically seem to employ. The discussion pays special attention to humor spontaneity, self-deprecating and personal humor, puns and language play, physical humor, as well as a special case involving use of teasing banter. We show that, while idiosyncratic in their attempts to bring laughter into the classroom, our survey participants have a good overall awareness of the major benefits and potential pitfalls of employing humor in language education; we also include plentiful quotes and examples from their reported in-class strategies involving humor.

1. Introduction

Humor is notoriously difficult to translate and inevitably encounters difficulties when it has to travel between highly contrasting cultures, much like when performing blood transfusion between people of different blood types. It should be no surprise then that this English word comes from the Latin *umor*, meaning “bodily fluid” (and thus related to “humid”), and that it can, on occasion, produce an adverse immunological response from the recipient. It also goes without saying that the receiver’s reaction will also depend on their “fluency” in the language used to express something funny. If we want to stretch the analogy a step too far, we might also note that, in a country where the least humid season is the winter, Japanese people will sometimes say “*Samui!*” in response to a lame joke that they have just heard ¹, which is also their word for “cold”.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the role of humor in language teaching and learning. We wish to investigate the ways in which instructors of English at Japanese

¹Although this seems to be a recent addition to the language and is attributed to comedian Hitoshi Matsumoto, according to the Wikipedia entry under the same name.

universities employ humor in their classes. More specifically, we seek to understand the rationales at play when instructors choose to use humor in their teaching. Greengross and Miller (2008) suggest that “rather than studying humor in general, it may be more productive to focus on specific types of humor used in particular social contexts” (p. 394). This is precisely what we aim to do.

We began by informally comparing our own experiences of using humor in our classrooms. Once it had become clear that we both value humor and laughter in our classes, we began to ask what kinds of humor we tended to use and under what circumstances. We exchanged anecdotes and began to roughly sketch out categories of humor we found in our classrooms. Though we both used humor in our classes, we found some relative differences in our styles. For instance, one of us (Martchev) likes to highlight humorous aspects of both English and Japanese by means of literal translation, while the other (Schnickel) favors humorous vignettes taken from daily life. With a sample size of only two, we became increasingly curious. Were we typical? Were other teachers' views on humor similar to ours? Were there any drawbacks to using humor? The questions kept coming, and the idea for this simple study was born.

In reflecting on our observations of and conversations with other English instructors in Japan, we had the impression that the use of humor in the classroom was probably quite widespread. Why? What drives our choice to attempt to bring laughter into the classroom? When considering this question, several obvious answers came to mind. Humor can enhance the class atmosphere. It can make the classroom a pleasant place to be. Humor can help students relax and perhaps participate more readily. If implemented skillfully, it can have a positive impact on learning the course material. In these three assumptions, as they are worded here, it should be clear that the benefits of employing humor in the classroom exist as potentials. Note the recurrence of “can” and the words “if implemented skillfully.” These indicate that certain risk is inherent in the use of humor. With both benefits and drawbacks in mind, we arrived at a seven-item self-report survey.

Our research sample is not large, but we believe that it does begin to give us a good overall idea about some characteristic attitudes that university language instructors have in relation to classroom humor, as well as the range of humor types and techniques that they typically seem to employ. It so happens that all participants in our survey were male, which is presumably only about half of the whole target population

of English teachers; at the same time, this fact might turn out to be useful if our work is followed by a similar study on humor and female teachers of English, possibly producing some interesting contrasts. For example, prior research already suggests that “In the classroom, men generally tell more jokes than women and do so more frequently, but male and female instructors may also be using humor to serve different functions” (Bryant et al., 1979; Sev'er & Ungar, 1997). Likewise, comparisons with studies on how humor tends to be used in classes that teach other languages might provide further interesting insights.

2. Literature Review

Martin Grotjahn (1957), describes the transformative power of humor in educational settings, stating, “What is learned with laughter is learned well” (p. ix). It may not be quite that simple, but the literature reflects support for the notion that humor enhances the learning process (see for example Garner, 2006; Wanzer and Frymier, 1999; Torok, McMorris and Lin, 2004). Moreover, personal experience as well as conversations with and observations of colleagues suggest that, within the specific contexts with which the authors of the current study are most familiar, humor is used frequently in language education.

The literature also reveals a range of benefits associated with humor being used in educational settings. Kher, Molstad, and Donahue (1999) demonstrated that humor can help reduce anxiety among students, particularly when they face challenging material. Ziv (1976) showed that it enhances creative thinking among students. Schmidt (1994) demonstrated that humor had a positive effect on remembering material presented in class.

Just as the above benefits are varied, so too are the types of humor educators may employ. In their review of forty years of scholarship on humor in education, Banas, Dunbar, Rodriguez, & Jie-Liu (2010) compile a list of twenty-three varieties of humor. Of these, seven are labeled as “appropriate” for classroom use, and just two are described as “inappropriate.” This leaves fourteen in their so-called “context dependent” category. In the first category, “appropriate,” we find “affiliative humor.” This variety has strengthening relationships and reducing tension among its goals. Also in this first category is “humor related to class material.” That these are considered appropriate is not surprising, and neither are there surprises in the “inappropriate” grouping, which

includes “aggressive, other-denigrating” as well as “offensive.”

The largest category in this taxonomy includes a range of humor types, including “laughing,” “puns,” “self-disparaging humor,” and “impersonations,” among others. It is of significance that this largest grouping of humor types carries the designation “context dependent,” which suggests that instructors must be judicious when using humor in the classroom—that there are times when these types of humor would be appropriate and times when they would not. Garner (2006) offers wise council in this regard, explaining that using humor “can be complicated because it may be highly personal, subjective, and contextual and we cannot always predict the way it will be received. [...] Everyone has a unique perception as to what is humorous, so prudence should be the guiding principle” (p. 178). Bearing this in mind may allow instructors to determine whether or not one of the “context dependent” varieties of humor would be appropriate. This very point is made by Bryant and Zillmann (1989), who state that the key to success in using humor to support learning is judicious application.

Banas, Dunbar, Rodriguez, and Liu (2011), based on their review of forty years of research on humor and education, explain that loss of credibility is a risk when humor is overused. In addition, Rhem (as cited in Garner, 2006, p. 178) “found that some instructors with only average student evaluations used twice as much humor as those faculty members who were more highly rated.” This suggests that overuse of humor can have adverse effects.

Given that the current study focuses on humor in language education, it becomes important to consider the interface of humor and culture. Martin (2007) has written: “the sounds of laughter are indistinguishable from one culture to another” (p. 3); thus, humor would seem to be particularly welcome in the second-language classroom, in which it could be seen as a unifying force. In contrast to this point, however, Zeigler-Hill, Besser, and Jett (2013) explain that “In general, individuals tend to be more responsive to those producing humor if they share similar experiences and backgrounds” (p. 219). The suggestion here is that, while humans may sound alike when laughing, laughter comes more readily among people with certain commonalities, a notion those teaching in cultures other than their own would do well to bear in mind. Banas, Dunbar, Rodriguez, & Jie-Liu (2010) point out that “Since many studies of humor in the classroom have been limited to United States classrooms, the findings may not apply to nonwestern cultures”

(p. 128). This suggests the need for culture-specific research. For instance, Zhang (2005), in one such culturally specific study, demonstrated that, among Chinese university students, the instructor's use of humor resulted in rising stress and discomfort levels.

3. Survey Details and Data Description

The data for this study comes from a survey we conducted with eleven English teachers (all male) working at different Japanese universities, mostly in Tokyo and the Kansai area. They can be said to be very experienced, each with at least 20 years of teaching experience and one recently retired. They also come from a variety of national backgrounds, as shown below:

Table 1 *Study Participants' Nationalities and Area of Employment*

T₁	<i>US (Tokyo)</i>	T₄	<i>US / Germany (Tokyo)</i>	T₇	<i>Bulgaria (Tokyo)</i>	T₁₀	<i>Canada (Tokyo)</i>
T₂	<i>US (Kansai)</i>	T₅	<i>US (Tokyo)</i>	T₈	<i>US (Tokyo)</i>	T₁₁	<i>England (Tokyo)</i>
T₃	<i>US (Gifu)</i>	T₆	<i>Canada (Tokyo)</i>	T₉	<i>US (Kansai)</i>		

The listing order of our study participants (i.e. **T₁₋₁₁**) for all subsequent tables in this paper will be the same as in Table 1. Everyone was asked the same set of 7 questions (given in Table 2), and we received written responses from nine teachers, with an additional two choosing to be interviewed orally instead. The content of those interviews was transcribed and added to the rest of the data, giving us a total of 8,800 words of written text to work with (as counted in Microsoft Word).

Table 2 *Survey Questions*

Q₁	<i>How do you use humor in your classes? Is it something that you use deliberately, or something that arises spontaneously from time to time?</i>
Q₂	<i>Can you recount any specific humorous episodes in your English language classroom? Feel free to mention as many as you can, describing each situation as you see fit.</i>
Q₃	<i>Have you had any negative experiences using humor, unsuccessfully attempted jokes, etc.?</i>
Q₄	<i>What types of jokes or funny behavior would you say you tend to use?</i>
Q₅	<i>What, in your opinion, are the benefits of using humor in the classroom?</i>
Q₆	<i>What, in your opinion, are the downsides of using humor in the classroom?</i>
Q₇	<i>Is there anything else you would like to share on the subject outside the topics covered above (specific experiences, professional insight, etc.)?</i>

In the following few tables (Tables 3 through 7), we summarize each of the teachers' responses in as succinct a form as possible, in order to give the reader a quick reference guide to their opinions and practice. In Table 3, "J-puns" refers to puns that use Japanese, or the so-called "*oyaji-gyagu*" type of jokes, while "(J-)puns" indicates that the corresponding teacher uses puns, including *oyaji-gyagu*.

Table 3 *Types of Humor Used*

T ₁	all / self-deprecating / teasing, feigned attacking or shocking humor
T ₂	class-content related / avoids "silly" humor/ teaches special courses on humor
T ₃	exaggeration / facial expressions / puns
T ₄	self-deprecating / never uses students as props
T ₅	personal stories / acting out English expressions / (J-)puns / self-deprecating
T ₆	body & nonverbal / katakana pronunciation / "say the unexpected" / self-deprecating / riddles / jokes
T ₇	language play / (J-)puns / crazy English / crazy Japanese / personal stories / imitating other accents
T ₈	self-deprecating / intentional misinterpreting of student input
T ₉	exaggeration / no sarcasm or cynicism / J-puns
T ₁₀	physical humor / funny games & videos / fail videos / J-puns / self-deprecating
T ₁₁	"jokes that do not target any particular student" / mistakes everyone can make & laugh at

Table 4 *Spontaneous vs. Deliberate Humor*

T ₁	both
T ₂	spontaneous + some go-to jokes
T ₃	arising spontaneously + occasional recycling
T ₄	spontaneous / "I tend to use humor"
T ₅	spontaneous jokes / deliberate intent
T ₆	all improvisation / tailor humor to class
T ₇	spontaneous jokes / deliberate intent / some recycling
T ₈	spontaneous jokes / deliberate intent / some go-to jokes
T ₉	not deliberate / "I'm not a comedian"
T ₁₀	both
T ₁₁	both

Table 5 *Negative Experiences (responses to Q₃)*

T ₁	yes (joke fails)
T ₂	not so many
T ₃	not really
T ₄	no
T ₅	some (irritated students)
T ₆	yes (misunderstood jokes)
T ₇	not really
T ₈	“nothing comes to mind”
T ₉	not in particular, “students are forgiving”
T ₁₀	not really; is able to brush off and laugh at failed jokes
T ₁₁	no, except with rare negatively-minded students

Table 6 *Benefits of Humor*

T ₁	breaks students out of their Japanese mindset
T ₂	improving class atmosphere / more memorable learning / insight into foreign culture
T ₃	relaxation / improved motivation and attention
T ₄	relaxed atmosphere / easier communication with teacher
T ₅	friendly atmosphere / makes accepting mistakes easier / improved attention / improved teacher mood
T ₆	comfortable atmosphere / improved teacher-student relationship / “playing with language means thinking more about it”
T ₇	comfortable atmosphere / improved teacher mood and motivation / better student concentration
T ₈	comfortable atmosphere and better human connection
T ₉	enjoyable learning / better teacher ratings
T ₁₀	risk-taking encouragement / safety / good relationships / teacher popularity / kindness creation / caring and stress-free environment / encouraging student-to-student humor
T ₁₁	icebreaking / relaxed atmosphere

Table 7 *Downsides of Humor*

T ₁	students who do not appreciate the multi-dimensionality of humor (i.e. take things too seriously)
T ₂	misunderstanding or lack of comprehension / can be overused / cultural inappropriateness
T ₃	can be overused or forced
T ₄	no downsides if usage is brief and does not divert from lesson too much
T ₅	can be hurtful and a distraction (i.e. if “opportunistic” and done for self-satisfaction)
T ₆	humor can backfire or be hurtful, especially if stereotyped and culturally insensitive
T ₇	no downsides if combined with good teacher authority overall
T ₈	awkwardness and personnel issues to do with misconstrual
T ₉	violating local taboos, students not taking teacher too seriously
T ₁₀	class not taken seriously if overdone
T ₁₁	comprehension difficulties to do with differing languages, cultures or time periods / failure to identify humor as such / possible literal interpretation / potential over-reliance on students with good reactions may lead to perceived favoritism

4. Discussion

Only one of our eleven respondents stated that humor is not necessarily something that they consciously use in the classroom, quote: “*I don’t deliberately use humor in class. It’s English class not Comedy Central and I’m not a comedian. I’m not sure what the opposite of humor would be... a boring, tedious pedant? Obviously, that’s not a good way to approach a class either. I hope the students find me helpful, motivating, knowledgeable rather than just funny*” (T₉). However, we can see how even in this case the teacher is aware that tedium is not desirable in the classroom, and how he strives to be interesting and engaging beyond being “just funny”. So, given that the overwhelming majority of our study participants actively engage in humorous acts while teaching, let us look at some of the salient features of how this tends to be done.

4.1. The matter of spontaneity: under deliberation

One clear trend that emerges from our data is that teachers typically rely on spontaneity in attempting to employ humor in the classroom, although they will usually have a *deliberate intent* to say or do something funny if the right opportunity arises. Jokes will also occasionally be recycled if found to work, but there seems to be a curious “novelty” factor here. Despite the fact that when a joke is used in different classes the students are hearing it for the first time, presumably, the teacher will often find that it is not working as well as it used to. “*As I use the same joke over and over,*

it tends to get stale.”, says T₃, while T₅ notes about one of his classroom puns: *“This was one of the loudest and longest bursts of laughter I’ve heard from a class. My pun was completely unplanned; I’d never thought of it before. I tried the same joke later, and it was received with mild amusement but nothing approaching the first time.”* The fact that each class presents a unique situation and features a different group of people is certainly a big part of the equation; in T₁₀’s words: *“Many times what one class laughs at, another may not.”* Spontaneity means going with the flow and not forcing things. According to T₆, *“With some classes you don’t push the humor. Each class has its own persona. You tailor your humor to the class.”*, which is echoed by T₈’s comment: *“I try to feed off of / react to student input to add humor into the classroom.”*, while T₄ states that when he uses humor *“depends on the mood of the class at the time.”*

4.2. I humble myself before you: cultural sensitivity, self-deprecating humor and getting personal

Failed humor is undoubtedly part of every teacher’s experience, and significant cultural differences are naturally a very important contributing factor:

T₂: *“I didn’t understand the gap between TOEIC score and ability to understand complex humor from another culture.”*

T₁₀: *“I have had many failures ... many times, my jokes have gone over like a lead balloon.”*

T₁₁: *“Humor (in another language or culture or time) can be difficult to understand.”*

Most of our language instructors are acutely aware of how different cultures will interpret situations and jokes differently, if only because of a lack of comprehension. It is our view that the role of unsuccessful attempts at being funny is very important—failed humor is in itself a kind of self-reinforcing and stern education on the local culture that the foreign teacher has to go through. One study participant shared the following failed joke, which he told to his students as a supposed personal story a few months after he had arrived in Japan:

T₆: *“I’m working security at a department store at Christmas time and this blind man comes in. As he comes in, he reaches down and picks up his [guide] dog by the tail and starts swinging it around. So we run over and say, ‘What are you doing?! You can’t do that here!’, and the man says: ‘I’m taking a look around!’ ”*

This teacher then described the aftermath: *“They thought it was a true story, they didn’t catch on that it was a joke. It’s quite funny, but they didn’t get the punch line... They thought: ‘Oh, he hurt the dog! That’s very cruel to the dog.’ They didn’t take it very well.”*

Banas, Dunbar, Rodriguez, & Jie-Liu (2010) have pointed out that, for humor to be used successfully in an educational setting, students must be able to resolve the incongruity usually inherent in it. Students unable to manage this may experience frustration or confusion. Thus, having to navigate the dangerous waters of a foreign sea of conceptions and attitudes, which is also greatly complicated by a language barrier, it is no surprise that our teachers have learned to play it safe, one of the safest approaches to humor obviously being to direct it at oneself. Indeed, Bryant and Zimmerman (1989) have shown that if teachers establish that mistakes are acceptable by laughing at their own, students will perceive the classroom as a safer environment. Six of our respondents (i.e. more than half) explicitly mentioned using self-deprecating jokes. For example:

T₁: *“I do it all. However, I mostly use self-deprecating humor. Why? Because it just works well in the classroom.”*

T₄: *“I use self-deprecating humor and have found that this is the safest type and the type that students react to the best. I never use a student as a prop for my humor.”*

T₅: *“[Humor] lets students know this is a friendly place. It lets students know we can laugh at our own mistakes (I use self-deprecating humor and laugh about my challenges with Japanese).”*

T₁₀: *“I never make fun of students in front of the class, I make fun of myself.”*

Even when self-targeted humor is not mentioned per se, we usually see a clear intent on the part of the teacher to avoid “jokes that do not target any particular student” (**T₁₁**), or to avoid being “cynical or sarcastic” (**T₉**).

Furthermore, self-deprecation may be just one facet of a larger picture where personal stories, i.e. things that happened to the teacher himself, tend to elicit greater interest from the students than when talking about other people and things in general², as some of our teachers point out themselves:

² Which is demonstrable even in the above ill-fated “seeing eye dog” case.

T₅: *“Humor can wake up a sleepy group; I’ve noticed students really pay attention when I include personal stories (which are often somewhat funny).”*

T₆: *“Self-deprecating humor definitely works, like giving your own experiences. Like, ‘Oh, I remember this one time, I was at the sushi shop and I did this.’ You know, all these faux pas. Like, I stuck my chopsticks in the rice, or I put shōyu on my rice³. Stuff like that they find quite amusing. Personal stuff, especially if you can relate it to the culture.”*

T₇: *“I’ve noticed that telling them about real (funny) things that happened to me personally tends to elicit more interest.”*

4.3. Puns, intended, and language play

The English pun, although “still popular in ad campaigns and marketing” (Beck, 2015) and once beloved by literary masters like Shakespeare, has to a great degree fallen “from grace, to become the recipient of groans and moans” (ibid.) in our modern day and age. The very fact that we often encounter forced apologies after instances of playful language (as in the proverbial “no pun intended”) speaks for itself. Similarly, in Japan, puns (*dajare*) are often called *oyaji-gyagu* (literally, “dad jokes”), which are the kind of word play most likely to be met with the above-mentioned “*samui*” reaction and which are usually associated with older men.

In spite of the dubious popularity that puns “enjoy” in both linguistic cultures at present, male English teachers certainly fit the bill for becoming unabashed *oyaji* punsters: language is their tool of the trade (which they typically try to turn into as much fun as prudent), and they often happen to be at least twice the age of their students. Also, a pun probably has better chances to be found more of a “feather to tickle the intellect”⁴ in a context of foreign language education where the medium is literally the message. If the teacher attempts some simple play on words in the foreign language being taught, students will usually not have heard anything similar before and hence might enjoy the novelty factor; alternatively, if a classroom pun uses the local language, the very fact that it is a foreigner doing it might be enough to stir at least some interest. Language instructors also have the added benefit of, as **T₉** puts it, having “*a captive audience that will laugh politely.*” Even those students with

³ Sticking a pair of chopsticks in one’s rice is considered impolite in Japan, while flavoring white rice with soy sauce would be something that “only a foreigner might do”.

⁴ To paraphrase English writer Charles Lamb, who scathingly referred to the pun as “a pistol let off at the ear; not a feather to tickle the intellect”, circa 1826 in his “Popular Fallacies.”

little natural affinity for foreign language learning who are indeed “held hostage” in compulsory English classes may, under the circumstances, find an otherwise less than exciting pun somewhat entertaining. After all, as American writer Christopher Morley is said to have described it, a pun is “language on vacation” (Crystal, 1998, p.6).

Predictably, more than half of our study participants (six, to be precise) mention consciously using puns, as well as *oyaji-gyagu* specifically (in four instances). They can range from well-timed one-liners, such as T₅ spontaneously referring to his balding head hairstyle as *chō-hage* (“extremely bald”), after a student gave him the Japanese name for the samurai topknot (*chonmage*), to pre-worked out mini-exchanges, such as T₇’s: “*How many seasons do you have in Japan? Four? ‘Shi-ki’, as you say in Japanese? No, that’s not true. Definitely not true! You are forgetting your rainy season! But you really don’t want to admit it, because ‘go-ki’ [i.e. “five seasons”] doesn’t sound so good, does it? It sounds terrible! Imagine meeting someone for the first time in a whole year and saying ‘Goki-buridesu ne⁵ !’—just terrible!*”

The last example also reminds us that the combination of a second language classroom and a foreign teacher presents good opportunities for using the otherwise rare bilingual pun. T₆ provides a good example: “[I’ve done this in class:] *I’m standing outside this fire station. And there were six firefighters and they were all [saying], ‘O-rai, o-rai⁶ .’ And then I say, ‘Why are they doing that? Why would they use English for something like that?’ We actually say, ‘Back up, back up...’ But if you say that fast, it sounds like ‘Baka, baka⁷ ...’ A little bit of humor there.*”

Other language play strategies reported in our survey include attempting to use students’ names to comic effect (T₃, T₇, T₁₀, T₁₁), playing with registers (for example, T₂ saying to his students in fluent Kansai dialect that he doesn’t understand Japanese at all, T₄ pretending to be in the wrong class on the first day of the semester and speaking to his English-language class students “*only in German*,” or T₇ imitating other accents of English, including non-native speakers), playing with katakana pronunciation⁸ (T₆, T₇), saying the unexpected and using riddles (T₆), exploiting contrasting conversational

⁵ A play on *Hisashi-buri desu ne!*, meaning “Long time no see!”, with *gokiburi* being the Japanese word for “cockroach”.

⁶ This is the *wasei-eigo* (i.e. “Japanese-made English”) phrase, which would correspond to “All right, all right!”, used in Japan when backing up a vehicle.

⁷ Literally, “Stupid, stupid”.

⁸ T₆’s example: “*Just like you say ‘salad’ wrong in Japanese, ‘sarada’, you have to say ‘karaoke’ wrong in English—‘carry-oakey’.*”

patterns in the domestic and foreign languages (e.g. situations in which Japanese people reply “Yes” whereas English will typically have “No”, following a negative question) (T₁₁), re-interpreting student input (e.g. intentionally “mishearing” things) (T₈), and pointing out “crazy English” (such as “walking up and down the floor”, etc.) (T₇).

4.4. Punching the punchline: the physics of humor

Most of our survey subjects (nine different teachers) also report using physical humor in one form or another. Our working hypothesis would be that, the lower the English comprehension level of his or her students, the more physical humor a teacher would have to employ. (We do, however, need more and better-structured data to confidently make that claim). For example, T₆ explicitly states that, due to the relatively low proficiency of the students at one of his universities, “*you have to use your body and slapstick more, nonverbal communication because of their level.*”

Exaggeration, acting, physical self-deprecation and ad hoc exploitation of spontaneously occurring comical situations seem to be common features here, although, again, we would need more data to better support this observation. For our current purposes, it may be useful to give a selection of various examples of physical or nonverbal humor that our teachers report having engaged in:

T₃: *“I always move students toward the front. Sometimes they really don’t want to move. So I melodramatically say it’s very lonely for me at the front when everyone is sitting in the back. I also over-enthusiastically tell them how the front seats are certainly the best seats; everyone should want them. This act, while not hilarious, gets some chuckles.”*

T₄: *“I pretend to be a different teacher whom they know and act out the teacher’s mannerisms.”*

T₅: *“Acting out the difference between ‘throw the ball to me’ and ‘throw the ball at me’.”*

T₇: *“I sometimes tell my students about an old high-school teacher of mine, whose lines of text on the board were more arcs than straight lines. She often forgot to take a step to the right as she was writing, and so her text would start to go down in a circular fashion. Then I will act the whole thing out...”*

T₇: *“An alarm went off and it was a fire drill alarm, but sounded mysterious, more like an alien ship in an old sci-fi movie. When I pointed that out, there was much laughter...”*

T₈: *“My age. If it comes up, I get students to guess. They used to guess well low of the actual age, but recently, the guesses are closer. Once my age is out, I immediately crouch into an old man pose and walk with an invisible cane for a few steps.”*

T₁₀: [Upon the CD starting to skip during TOEIC listening:] *“I began pretending that I was a hip-hop DJ to the students’ amusement.”*

T₁₀: *“Physical humor (for example, my balding head, my weight, old age, bad memory, funny faces)... Pretending to get angry is something students find funny.”*

T₇ and **T₉** also report deliberately using comedy material that mainly features physical humor for language-production purposes. For example: *“I often use Mr. Bean clips in class. But the main purpose is to get the students to produce language, explaining what Bean did in the clip”* (**T₉**).

Interestingly, one teacher stated that he actually avoids *“exaggerated reactions or gestures—in other words, just silly/goofy humor with no connection to class or the English language”* (**T₂**), adding that *“One reason is this is the stereotype many students have of American/Western humor—loud and over the top. That’s not really my personality and I also find that type of humor a bit insulting for university-age students.”*

4.5. If you over-use it, you lose it

Here, we would like to briefly indicate a couple of important points regarding teachers’ management of the amount of class humor. Most of our study participants are alert to the fact that, while humor is generally a very beneficial add-on, it should not be overused. A common concern is that if the teacher jokes around too much, his class will tend not to be taken too seriously, a point made by Gruner (1967). Our most experienced instructor also identifies another interesting point: *“Asking the same students (those with good reactions) may lay the teacher open to charges of favoritism”* (**T₁₁**). Two other teachers explicitly warn against using humor *“just for the teacher’s own amusement”* (**T₂**), or “opportunistic humor”, as one of them calls it, *“which is simply getting laughs for self satisfaction”* (**T₅**).

4.6. An interesting outlier: the curious case of pushing your buttons

This subsection will focus on one particular teacher, **T₁**, interesting not because his is a representative case, but for precisely the opposite reason—his unique (in our sample) approach to classroom humor. **T₁** reports frequently using a “teasing” technique to engage students in conversation:

"I will tease them. So it's just like, for example, 'Oh, you've lived in America? Where? Georgia? That's not America! Where in Georgia? Atlanta? Come on, give me a real city!' And they are kind of shocked by that. 'Come on, I'm from New York. Have you ever travelled to New York?' And they're like, 'Yes, it's pretty amazing!'—'Of course it's amazing!' Even students who know me are still shocked by this. And I want them to be shocked. I'm doing the good 'shock and awe', I'm doing it on purpose. And other students don't realize that this is a demonstration."

T₁ is quick to point out that he does not tease every student but chooses suitable candidates for this kind of dialogue, usually after asking his class participants simple innocent-sounding questions and thus, unbeknownst to them, judging their English level and personality. T₁ goes on to say:

"I want this type of exchange, I'm pushing their buttons in order to get this kind of exchange. I'm manipulating them for a certain goal. My goal is to get them to a certain point. And the Japanese [students] will see this and sometimes after a couple of classes they'll take a chance, and they'll say something provocative. And they see that 'This guy is not pissed off about this. This is kind of interesting.'"

Ironically, this teacher also uses much self-deprecating humor, perhaps as an antidote to his confrontational method:

"Why? Because it just works well in the classroom, since I try to create a 'hostile' environment in which students can openly 'attack' (with words only, of course), in an attempt to break them out of the Japanese mindset. So, if I call myself a fool and make fun of myself, and provoke certain students to do so [too], and they do without any anger from me, and I laugh at their rebuttal. Others who are afraid, timid, etc. will get the message that they can do so as well. On so many levels, psychological, cultural, societal, etc., this technique works wonders."

If a seeming misunderstanding does occur, T₁ is careful to approach students during the class or in private afterwards, and make sure they understand that there are no hard feelings. However, he also states that *"it's rare for things to escalate."*

It has to be mentioned that **T₁** usually works with fairly advanced students (it's difficult to see this method working with beginners!) and frequently gets a partly international audience (foreign exchange students) in his classes. His personality is also quite unique and enables a “positively tense” class atmosphere that would probably be hard to create for most other teachers. Does all this count as humor? It depends on how one looks at it, but one of us (Martchev) has had the opportunity to observe **T₁** at work multiple times, and can testify to the fact that, while the above type of activity goes on, there is often plenty of laughter in the classroom, as well as very high concentration levels on the part of the students! **T₁**'s (in his own words) “*shock and awe*” approach has been controversial at times, but most students accept him for who he is, go through a hard-to-forget experience in his courses and generally achieve very good results, with some of them staying “*in touch*” long after graduating. As a whole, **T₁**'s case lends support to Frymier et al (2008)'s suggestion that instructors with a high humor orientation (i.e., having a natural tendency to use humor) may be able to use offensive forms of humor without the negative consequences, as well as Aylor and Oppliger (2003)'s research indicating that students are more likely to engage out of class with professors they perceive as having a high humor orientation.

5. Conclusion

The results of this study on humor in language education suggest that our respondents, regardless of exposure to related research, have an awareness of the benefits of employing humor to enhance the classroom experience, both for their students and for themselves. In addition, while recognizing the benefits of humor, respondents demonstrate knowledge of the potential harm done to individuals and the overall classroom atmosphere if humor is used inappropriately. It seems likely that a general understanding of how humor can enhance the student experience as well as knowledge of some potential pitfalls would be of value to language educators.

Studies such as ours may also be of use to language instructors in that they offer a platform for sharing thoughts and actual experiences regarding teachers' attempts to bring laughter into the classroom, which gives us all added opportunities to learn from one another's idiosyncrasies and to possibly expand our own in-class humoristic repertoires, to give a good name to plain old joke theft.

References

- Aylor, B., & Oppliger, P. (2003). Out-of-class communication and student perceptions of instructor humor orientation and socio-communicative style. *Communication education*, 52(2), 122-134.
- Banas, J. A., Dunbar, N., Rodriguez, D., & Liu, S. J. (2011). A review of humor in educational settings: Four decades of research. *Communication Education*, 60(1), 115-144.
- Beck, J. (2015). Why do puns make people groan? *The Atlantic*, Jul 10, 2015. URL: <http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2015/07/why-do-puns-make-people-groan/398252/>
- Bryant, J., & Zillmann, D. (1989). Chapter 2: Using humor to promote learning in the classroom. *Journal of Children in Contemporary Society*, 20(1-2), 49-78.
- Crystal, D. (1998). *Language play*. University of Chicago Press, 2001 edition.
- Frymier, A. B., Wanzer, M. B., & Wojtaszczyk, A. M. (2008). Assessing students' perceptions of inappropriate and appropriate teacher humor. *Communication Education*, 57(2), 266-288.
- Garner, R. L. (2006). Humor in pedagogy: How ha-ha can lead to aha!. *College Teaching*, 54(1), 177-180.
- Grotjahn, M. (1966). *Beyond laughter: Humor and the subconscious*. McGraw-Hill.
- Gruner, C. R. (1967). Effect of humor on speaker ethos and audience information gain. *Journal of Communication*, 17, 228-233.
- Kher, N., Molstad, S., & Donahue, R. (1999). Using humor in the college classroom to enhance teaching effectiveness in 'dread courses'. *College Student Journal*, 33(3).

- Kuhle, B. X. (2012). It's funny because it's true (because it evokes our evolved psychology). *Review of General Psychology*, 16(2), 177.
- Martin, R. A. (2010). *The psychology of humor: An integrative approach*. Academic press.
- Martin, R. A., Puhlik-Doris, P., Larsen, G., Gray, J., & Weir, K. (2003). Individual differences in uses of humor and their relation to psychological well-being: Development of the Humor Styles Questionnaire. *Journal of research in personality*, 37(1), 48-75.
- Schmidt, S. R. (1994). Effects of humor on sentence memory. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition*, 20(4), 953.
- Wanzer, M. B., & Frymier, A. B. (1999). The relationship between student perceptions of instructor humor and students' reports of learning. *Communication Education*, 48, 48-62.
- Zeigler-Hill, V., Besser, A., & Jett, S. E. (2013). Laughing at the looking glass: Does humor style serve as an interpersonal signal?. *Evolutionary Psychology*, 11(1), 201-226.
- Zhang, Q. (2005). Immediacy, humor, power distance, and classroom communication apprehension in Chinese college classrooms. *Communication Quarterly*, 53(1), 109-124.
- Ziv, A. (1976). Facilitating effects of humor on creativity. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 68(3), 318.