

Teaching English through Humor: The Use of Dialog Jokes as a Technique in English Language Classes

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Abstract

This paper discusses the role of humor in the language classroom and more specifically, provides a seven-step-technique adopting interactional or dialog jokes in EFL language classrooms. At the outset of the paper, some theoretical backgrounds have been provided to account for the rationale behind the use of the (interactional) jokes in language learning classes. Their potentiality of lowering the affective filter, the possibility of incorporating them as meaning-based activities, and their authenticity are but some of the benefits of the use of humor in classrooms. The possibility of using them in role plays, adopting them as measures of comprehension and providing scaffolding when teaching with them could be mentioned as well. Then, having established the theoretical background, seven potential steps for implementing the dialog jokes as a technique in language classrooms will be proffered. For the sake of clarification, one dialog joke has been given and worked on practically as a sample.

Key words: Affective filter, authenticity, scaffolding, role-play, humor

Introduction and Theoretical Background

It goes without saying that humor is a prevalent feature of interaction in every language or dialect. This “specifying characteristic of humanity” (Nash, 1985, p.1) is present throughout social conventions and *cultural* artifacts, and its use is of high value in interactions between individuals (Ritchie, 2004). Teasing, banter, badinage, irony and sarcasm frequently surface in our quotidian talk, and interlocutors often get themselves engaged in amusing story telling if not outright joke-telling (Norrick, 2009). Grasping the meaning of the jokes is a part and parcel of the process of the first language acquisition; furthermore, jokes are part of the flavor that belongs to any language. Learning to understand jokes in a new language

is deemed to be both a cause, and also a consequence, of proficiency in a language (Cook, 2000).

Jokes are deemed to be a boon for learners in having them feel more comfortable and stress-free in their new language milieu (Waring, 2013). A shared minute of wittiness could decrease the affective filter—that covert hurdle or mental block that makes learners feel awkward and ill at ease (Lems, 2012) and hinders their efforts to use the input to internalize language (Chastain, 1988). Krashen (1982) theorized that a low affective filter is one of the key principles of successfully managing to pick up a new language by ameliorating the tension caused by the context. When classmates laugh *en masse*, the likelihood of learning better and more effectively might be augmented as well (Waring, 2013). Jokes which are based upon wordplay and assimilation have the additional benefit of constituting meta-linguistic awareness, or conscious awareness of the forms and elements of language which eventually, results in learning more language (Ely & McCabe 1994; Zipke, 2008; Lems, 2011). In a nutshell, jokes or on broader terms, language play can stretch one's sociolinguistic competence and destabilize the interlanguage system (Waring, 2013).

Having adopted jokes in the classes, as a meaningful or unfocused task, learners' attention can be principally focused "on the meaning rather than form" (Nunan, 1989, p.10). This might be due to the fact that they are rather hooked to get the punch line; though it is possible to have them notice some linguistic features as a focused task in jokes, too. This is in line with the top down process of language learning in which learners try to work out the meaning of a text by resort to their background knowledge and use of higher level, non-sensory information to predict or interpret lower level information present in the data (Richards & Schmidt, 2002). Performing in role play or telling a joke generally follows the pattern for storytelling; the major difference, however, lies in the expectation of laughter or being funny at the end. Jokes can be adopted as understanding tests, since not everyone necessarily gets every joke, and getting jokes involves background knowledge and rational processing (Norrick, 2009).

Jokes can be adopted as tests of comprehension, since not everyone necessarily gets every joke, and getting jokes involves background knowledge and rational processing (Norrick, 2009). That said, learning different genres pertaining to humor can go a long way in making native speakers in general, and second language learners in particular, well versed in grappling with different elements of the jokes for

better understanding of humor (e.g. sarcasm, irony, understatement, satire, banter, etc.). In this regard, different websites geared towards EFL learners can also provide a wealth of information on the topic (see for instance, <http://www.ef.com/blog/language/beginners-guide-to-understanding-british-humor/>, and <https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/sense-humour/>). Furthermore, in the field of language teaching, books such as “*What’s so Funny?*” penned by Claire (1984) offers key insights into American humor genres and provides plenty of examples for each genre or category

Possessing an up-to-date repertoire of linguistic information and background knowledge is a prerequisite factor to understand a joke, even for native speakers of a language (Aarons, 2012). Jokes that are based upon wordplay in another language may be challenging to grasp because they need be processed as quickly as possible. No one wants to be the last to laugh. In a social situation where everyone is standing around interacting, comprehending a joke can seem like a high-stakes test. Not being capable of getting a joke in this situation can make someone feel like a fish out of water and create a sense of isolation (Lems, 2013). In this regard, an important part of learning a new language is learning to enjoy its humor and it would be a bonus to be able to retell jokes in other contexts.

Another important feature about jokes is their authenticity. Richards and Schmidt (2002) defined authentic materials as materials that are not originally developed for pedagogical purposes. Another commonly accepted definition of authentic materials is materials that have been produced to “fulfill some social purpose in the language community” (Little, Davit & Singleton, 1989, p. 25) – i.e., “materials not produced for second language learners” (Peacock, 1997, p. 146). Based upon the latter definition, jokes have that quality in the sense that they “fulfill some social purpose”. Widdowson’s (1990) defines authentic material as something designed for native speakers of English and used in the classroom in a way similar to the one it was designed for. Indeed, jokes can be deemed authentic material and can be used in classrooms as a kind of target task with learners. This is so because of the fact that they are an intrinsic part of a first language and their use is not confined just to the classroom.

Role play, adopted as a phase in the technique here (see below), is a very useful task to implement in the classrooms. According to Brown (2001), role plays involve (a) giving a role to one or more members of a group and (b) assigning an

objective or purpose that participants must accomplish. Drawing on Brown's statements, a role is given to each student in the class to act out or assimilate one character in the scenario. Nunan (2004) contends that "If learners are given some choice of what to say, and if there is a clear aim to be achieved by what they say in their role plays, they may participate more willingly and learn more thoroughly than when they are told to simply repeat a given dialogue in pairs" (p. 58). Therefore, the teachers might give the leeway to the students to somehow manipulate the language (of dialog jokes) for better learning.

The last point about the use of dialog jokes in class is the possibility of adopting scaffolding or "collaborative dialogue" (Swain, 2000). Ellis (2008) defines scaffolding as "an inter-psychological process through which learners internalize knowledge dialogically" (p. 235). Both the teacher and learners can provide "scaffolding" to clarify the meaning of the jokes and also to help other learners during the *role play* or assimilation stage in a "dialogic" manner, which, as a key principle governing the effectiveness of feedback, involves dynamic assessment of a learner's Zone of Proximal Development (Aljaafreh & Lantolf, 1994).

Ellis (2008) cites an original study carried out by Tocalli-Beller and Swain (2007) involving a pre-test, treatment, post-test design in which these researchers investigated the extent to which ESL learners were able to *collaboratively* figure out the meaning of the jokes. They showed that learners could interpret the meaning of the jokes jointly (even when the meaning of the key lexical item in the joke was not known to the learners) and as an upshot of this *collaborative* activity they internalized the meanings of the items as demonstrated in the post-test.

Before wrapping up, providing a definition for dialog jokes would be useful. Dialog jokes (or in British English, interactional jokes) are jokes which involve two interlocutors (for instance, student vs. teacher). At least one of the interlocutor's replies sounds funny or humorous. This funniness usually boils down to the use of the elements of surprise, wittiness or unusualness in replying. Observe the following example here:

Student: "Teacher, is it fair to punish someone for something they didn't do?"

Teacher: "Of course not!"

Student: "That's good . . . because I didn't do my homework!"

It has been adequately established that jokes, particularly interactional jokes, could be a rich source of input which is authentic, or as Widdowson (1979) puts it, “genuine.” In the following part of the article, we provide some possible steps for implementing interactional jokes in the classroom. For the sake of clarification, an example is given. Teachers may adopt their own procedures innovatively in class. An important point to be borne in mind about jokes is that “there is no accounting for taste.” Hence, there is a high possibility that some students may understand a joke but not find it that funny (or not funny at all!).

Pedagogy

Step One

As a warm-up activity, the teacher might ask the students to tell an interesting joke that they might have recently heard or retell one that they had worked on in the previous session. (Alternatively, anything interesting that may have happened to students during the week that could be mentioned in the class.) Seeing that students may be incapable of conveying a joke in the new language with ease- for instance, not possessing the essential linguistic repertoire- the teacher may pitch in to help.

At this point, the teacher should provide students with some collocations and idiomatic expressions germane to the topic of joking (e.g. *to crack a joke, to get a joke, make jokes, take a joke, beyond joke*, etc.) and also introduce some expressions for stating their opinions on the quality of the jokes. For instance, after listening to a joke, students might say that it was “*totally/really/absolutely/pretty funny,*” “*hilarious,*” or “*boring,*” “*dull as ditchwater,*” “*offensive*” etc. They could learn and practice them when they are paraphrasing the jokes or are role-playing (if it is not performed verbatim). Furthermore, students may adopt “*hedges*” –certain kinds of expressions to show that they are sticking to the “Gricean maxims” while being cooperative participants (Yule, 2010). These include phrases or words like “*as far as I know,*” “*correct me if I am wrong,*” “*kind of,*” and “*sort of,*” etc.

Step Two

Before beginning to read the jokes, the teacher provides the students with the definitions of some words that students may have difficulty understanding and draw their attention to the meaning of the words and useful phrases, grammatical or phonological points as well. It could happen both before and after the joke. In

order to help students get the joke and not confuse them, however, the pre-teaching of the selected vocabulary items is preferred. This is in line with the pre-task phase of TBLT in which students are prepared to perform the task in ways that will promote acquisition. It is also consistent with Skehan's (1996) suggestion that, in the pre-task stage, linguistic factors be emphasized.

Both first (L1) and second (L2) language educators and researchers concur that mastering vocabulary is of great importance in one's becoming a mature language user (Siyanova-Chanturia & Webb, 2016). It might be a good idea for English language learners to be taught key vocabulary, or brick words, prior to a lesson (in this case, prior to reading/hearing the joke), in order to assist them in their language development. For example, whatever concept we are teaching, it is recommended that those vocabulary items be included that will make the content more comprehensible to the learner. In the following scenario, words and expressions like "*exasperation*," "*demonstration*," "*pick up*," "*and to have lots of nerve*" ought to be taught *before* reading the joke. The less advanced the learners, the more elaboration is favored. Armed with the definitions of these words and expressions, the learners can probably be sufficiently prepared to grapple with the text.

Little Ernie was having a problem with his homework . . .

"Dad," he asked, "what is the difference between '*anger*' and '*exasperation*'?"

"Well, son," said his father, "I'll give you a *practical demonstration*."

His father *picked up* the phone and dialed a number.

"Hello," said a voice at the other end.

"Hello," said Ernie's father. "Is Melvin there?"

"There is no one called Melvin here," the voice replied. "Why don't you look up numbers before you dial them?"

"You see?" said Ernie's father, "That man was not at all happy with our call. But watch this!"

He then dialed the number again, and said, "Hello, is Melvin there?"

"Now look here!" the voice said angrily. "I told you there is no Melvin here! You *have got a lot of nerve* calling again!"

"Did you hear that?" Ernie's father asked. "That was '*anger*'" "Now, I will show you what '*exasperation*' is!"

He dialed once again, and on hearing the voice at the other end, Ernie's father said, "Hello! This is Melvin. Have there been any calls for me?"

The teacher negotiates with the students the meaning of the unknown words to make the meaning of the words as crystal clear as possible to students. They can focus on the features like the pronunciation of the words (for instance, by repeating the word for the learners either as a model or playing a track of a native speaker doing so) or providing synonymous words and idioms with close meanings and examples of the use of the word in context.

Step Three

The teacher either reads or has one of the students read the joke out loud (and clearly). Owing to the fact that students' locus of attention is on the meaning and they are anxious to catch the punch line, this could be a meaningful activity. It should be noticed that while reading the joke, pronunciation, stress pattern, and intonation should be taken into account. Unless these matters are taken care of thoroughly, the learners may not possibly get the meanings of the jokes as easily as they should. The teacher should provide a model for the intonation pattern and cadence and should zero in on the pitch and volume. For instance, in the given example, considering the way Ernie's father talks and the manner with which the recipient of the call speaks (most certainly not happy!) is of paramount importance, and the person who is reading the joke out loud or students who are doing the role play should constantly change their vocal pitch and tone to convey the meaning as clearly as possible. Given the clarity of the context and *schemata* in this scenario, they will get the joke; sometimes, nonetheless, the picture may not be entirely successful and consequently some scaffolding may be required (particularly if culture is involved). Additionally, in this scenario, they will come to understand the distinction between "exaggeration" and "anger" (e.g. the former being more extreme) in a meaningful context.

Step Four

Having completed articulating the joke, and having become certain that everybody has got the meaning, the teacher asks the students why the joke was or was not funny and tries to elicit students' opinion on the joke. She may also ask several display questions (i.e. questions which their answers are already known to the

questioner (Ellis, 2003)). The teacher asks the students to air their opinion about the content of the jokes by adopting the collocations and idiomatic expressions provided as a model. Furthermore, they could go on defending why it was or was not funny. If in doubt, they could practice using *hedges* by uttering sentences like as far as I know, to my best of knowledge that part and etc.

This phase echoes Long’s Interaction Hypothesis (Long, 1981) which indicates that the best input for language interaction is the one which pops up when there is an opportunity accessible to learners to negotiate meaning in exchanges when communication problems (i.e. difficulty getting or understanding some parts of the joke) have arisen. He goes on to emphasize the role that negotiation of meaning of this kind plays for providing comprehensible input.

Step Five

At this point, the teacher may give the learners (in pairs or small groups) an opportunity to each tell the joke (with script in hand or on the board/screen). Then the teacher may call on a volunteer to retell the joke in a paraphrased form. Other students may help him/her in trying to retell the story; they have the *choice* to adopt the newly-learned words in their rendition as well. The teacher could provide scaffolding and feedback at this phase to help students reach their full potential in completing the task. An interesting phenomenon involved here is that although, as Swain (1995) puts it, “learners... can fake it, so to speak, in comprehension, but they cannot do so in the same way in production” (p. 127). In production, learners are required to process syntactically and have to pay some attention to form (Ellis, 2004). This also concurs with the above-mentioned statement that jokes can be used as measures of comprehension.

Step Six

Having gone through the above mentioned steps, students may role play the joke in pairs. They should pay particular attention to the intonation and rhythm of the language; when to raise or lower their voice to convey the meaning of the joke as effectively as possible. This phase is a little bit difficult and sometimes challenging for both teachers and students alike. In the above example, one student could act out the role of the father and another student might take the son’s role. Either the teacher herself or another student, can be the voice at the other end;

though in this scenario, a more proficient person is preferred, given the fact that he/she could play an “angry voice” more easily.

Step Seven

In the last phase, the students are given a cloze-test and practice the newly-learned word, idioms and expressions. For instance, different collocations taught at the outset of the lesson can be worked on by giving one part (e.g. adverb) and having students match it with other parts (e.g. verbs), or giving the whole phrase and having students fill in the blanks. Alternatively, the students might be asked to give other examples of the use of that particular collocation. For instance, in this article we pre-taught some collocations and some words and expressions that students could have difficulty understanding or may not know at all. Drawing on these words and expressions, teachers can both practice and test as to whether students have learned the expressions or still need some practice. Look at the following sample adapted from the above example:

Complete this dialogue with words or expressions from the list below.

<i>Take</i>	<i>told a dirty joke</i>	<i>told</i>	<i>cracking</i>	<i>joking</i>
<i>embarrassing</i>	<i>hilarious</i>	<i>not easy</i>	<i>no joke</i>	

- A: You must be ——! Tell me about it, what happened?
- B: You know, he just —— a dirty joke about my family and that really made me angry.
- A: Is that it? Seriously dude, can't you —— a joke? You were annoyed just because of that?
- B: Somebody has got to tell him that —— a *joke* like that about anyone's family is very rude.
- Everybody should know that these matters are —— —— and make people reply in exasperation! Have you got any idea how infuriated I was?
- It is —— —— trying to control oneself in situations like this, but I did my best!
- A: For sure! Last night, he —— —— —— —— about me too, but I kept my cool. But I could take it no more and stormed out when his girlfriend said “that was ——!” and started laughing her head off.

Conclusion

Cracking jokes can be a very flexible component of language teaching classes in all levels of proficiency which introduces a particular challenge that brings about so many rewards. Jokes can create an invigoratingly comfortable milieu for English language learners in which they would be exposed to authentically enriched input provided by the exposure to a wealth of valuable vocabulary, idioms, and other language features imbedded in funny jokes, in this case dialog jokes. Once students grasp the rudimentary structure of the jokes and are engaged in telling and hearing jokes, the whole class will get the last laugh.

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