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# **Is Humour Worth a Try In The Language Classroom**

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For traditional language teaching, activities providing students with various learning routines tend to dominate the class. Though the primary goal of teaching is to have students experience the use of language, it is often detrimental if the class overemphasizes rote learning, especially for lower motivated students. Most language classes suffer from this mode of teaching as it creates tension in class and also a great deal of boredom. This may lead to negative feelings about language learning and in turn hinder learning.

In order to help language learners acquire the target language, the pedagogical goals should include not only providing linguistic input but also creating a non-threatening environment that motivates students to learn. It has long been acknowledged that a more comfortable, relaxed classroom atmosphere will contribute to diminish learning anxiety and facilitate language acquisition.

The use of humor, for example, jokes and riddles, is viewed as a complementary means of creating a more pleasant class atmosphere. The incorporation of a playful dimension to class will motivate students to learn, and will make learning more effective and enjoyable. For some new teachers, who have trouble in stimulating students to learn, knowing how to use humor may prove useful. By using humor in class, it does not

mean that teachers tell students silly jokes or riddles all the time. Rather, teachers should know how and when to use different types of humor. If used wisely, riddles and jokes can make a difference in learning.

## **How to implement humor in the classroom**

Not only can humor be used to create a relaxed atmosphere for class, but it can provide excellent supplementary sources of language input as well. This is because it consists of a kind of thought-provoking message. The language contained in jokes or riddles, if chosen carefully, can be used to teach vocabulary, grammar, listening, pronunciation, etc. with great fun.

The following are some ideas for making learning more meaningful and pleasurable and for promoting optimal learning by using jokes and riddles.

Let us consider the following joke.

1. *I was arrested at the airport. Just because I was greeting my cousin Jack! All that I said was "Hi Jack", but very loudly.*

This riddle works very well when spoken. The teacher may first check students' comprehension by raising questions, such as "Why was the speaker arrested?" Here, it can be used to introduce

to students the word “hijack”. This is one way to enrich vocabulary knowledge. Instead of teaching this word directly by giving its definition, this joke offers students vocabulary in a funny context which will contribute to long term retention as it is “memorable”.

The following riddles can be left on the blackboard to draw students’ attention in a lesson.

2. *Q: Which is faster: hot or cold?*

*A: Hot, because we can catch a cold.*

3. *Q: Can a kangaroo jump higher than the Empire State Building?*

*A: Yes, because the Empire State Building can’t jump.*

These riddles provide unexpected but amusing solutions. Indeed, students are not expected to give the exact answers. Rather, these humorous riddles are intended to increase the students’ participation in class and encourage them to share their ideas with the class in a friendly relaxed atmosphere. It helps students improve their oral skills and critical thinking skills as a by-product. As they try to solve the riddles, they unknowingly search for clues and express their opinions to help reach a solution. This will also help establish a good rapport between the teacher and students and between students themselves.

In order to teach students about comparative adjectives and sentence structure, riddles containing a comparative form can be used as well. The teacher may leave the riddles on the blackboard and then have the students think about the solution. It will create more pleasurable learning and get

the students ready for the lesson they are going to learn. The second riddle can also be used, more specifically, to teach students the expression “*catch a cold*.”

Teaching listening and pronunciation in a sound laboratory is often a boring task. Drills suffer from this, as they create a great deal of boredom. But, again, we can add some jokes or riddles into listening practice to cope with an undesirable boring teaching mode. The following joke can be brought into class to teach students to distinguish /l/ sound and /r/ sound with fun.

4. *“Emiko shared a house with an American guy and his dog. Every month, he put some flea medicine on this dog. One day, when he was putting on the medicine, he told Emiko, “This flea medicine is expensive.” She was confused and asked him, “Expensive? Didn’t you just say it was FREE?”*”

This short joke works well when it is read out loud by a student first. If the class cannot understand the message, the teacher will read it out loud again and stress the words “flea” and “free” to help the students differentiate between the sounds /l/ and /r/. The teacher has no need to explain anything the first time but some unfamiliar vocabulary may be explained. By doing this, students will know how to discriminate the two sounds inductively. This may be followed by a teacher’s explanation. It also serves as a great way to introduce some new vocabulary items.

This joke should also be spoken. It can be used to teach how to say it correctly in British English.

5. Q: *How many legs does an ant have?*  
 A: *Two, the same as an uncle. (Hint: ant = aunt)*

As silly as they seem to some, jokes and riddles can help students foster language skills. Utilizing thought-provoking material in this way will create a challenge for the students. It is useful not only for providing basic language features (grammar, vocabulary, structure) but also for helping students develop critical thinking skills.

The following 4-step procedure for implementing riddles or jokes in a language classroom is typical:

- A). The teacher writes down riddles or jokes on the blackboard or reads them out loud.
- B). The teacher then asks the students to guess their meaning or otherwise interpret them.
- C). If the class cannot come up with the solution, some additional clues are given.
- D). The teacher checks the students' understanding and explains some aspects they cannot understand.

If there is some confusion or questions concerning the solutions to some riddles or jokes, the teachers should try to clear them up. If the explanation is so complicated that it cannot be given successfully in the target language, it is possible to do this in the students' mother tongue.

An alternative is to provide a print copy of jokes or riddles for students. They can work on the problem in pairs or small groups using the target language to discuss the problem or work out the solution. Or the teachers and class may discuss the problems

together. This will give students an opportunity to share their ideas with the class, establish a cooperative learning atmosphere, and provide ample opportunities to increase student-talk which will promote learning.

### **When to use humor**

Jokes and riddles are applicable to many teaching situations. They may be used as a warm-up activity in order to prepare students for the lesson. Employing riddles or jokes can focus students' attention and stimulate them to focus and be ready for learning. For example, before teaching reading, teachers can tell some jokes relating to the reading text. In addition, teachers can present some humorous stories containing vocabulary found in the reading text the students are going to read.

When teaching for a long period of time, both teachers and students may easily get bored and tired. Humor may serve as a practical solution to this problem. The teacher may ask students to share humorous stories with their classmates followed by some discussion during class time or in time set aside each day for a class break. During that time, ask students to tell or read their jokes. This will at least keep all students involved and break the monotony of the teaching routine.

### **Where to obtain sources of humor**

Humor for a language classroom can be gathered from many sources. There are many books which contain jokes and riddles for use in language classes. However, the easiest way is to search the Internet. Several web pages contain humor for language teaching. Examples are:

[www.iteslj.org/l/joke-riddles](http://www.iteslj.org/l/joke-riddles)

[www.geocities.com/informalenglish/riddles](http://www.geocities.com/informalenglish/riddles)

[www.aitech.ac.jp/~iteslj/quizzes](http://www.aitech.ac.jp/~iteslj/quizzes)

Additionally, teachers may ask students to collect jokes or riddles on their own and then share them with the class. This is an alternative method of collecting a variety of jokes and riddles, and the students will also gain a sense of participation in the process of learning.

### **Words of caution**

Humor can be used as a tool to present language and the problems to be solved. However, the primary aim of exploiting humor is not to force students to find out an exact answer to this kind of humorous material. Rather, it is intended to engage students in an enjoyable activity and to create an environment in that they feel comfortable to learn. Therefore, it will be useful only in cases where students find it interesting. The effectiveness of any humor

can be determined by the interest it evokes in the students. Well-chosen riddles and jokes are, therefore, of necessity.

What sometimes does not work, is to give students difficult jokes or riddles without proper grading and expect them to reach solutions without additional clues. The language input may be so far beyond their level that is too difficult for them to achieve any comprehension. For instance, if the students encounter too dense an amount of unknown vocabulary in jokes, they may not understand the message and then be discouraged. In addition, issues concerning cultural differences and religious beliefs should be taken into account. Those which are offensive to students must be avoided.

If you want to make your classes more dynamic and lively both for you and your students, don't forget to include a variety of activities in your, including a touch of humor.

Have fun!

### **The Author**

Pramarn Subphadoongchone is currently an English instructor at Chulalongkorn University Language Institute. He obtained a bachelor's degree in English from Silpakorn University, and a master's degree in Applied Linguistics from Mahidol University. His interests include learning strategies, language testing and material development.