

The role of humour in the English language teaching classroom

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Once, being asked the question “What makes a good teacher?”, my students mentioned a sense of humour among the most important characteristics of an ideal teacher. In fact, they gave humour priority and valued it on a par with knowledge. Why is it so? We can state that a good teacher is usually a perfect diplomat – they can maintain discipline and find a way out of conflicting situations by using either their authority or a joke, thus resorting to the students’ sense of duty or their sense of humour, which is actually universal.

This article is devoted to the discussion of the place and role of humour in the English language teaching. Humour as an important ingredient in the language classroom should be viewed from various angles. First of all, as we can see, it is a powerful instrument in maintaining harmony in the teacher-student relationship, or so-called “rapport”. But what is a harmonious relationship? What underlies this type of cooperation and communication in general and in the classroom in particular? The notion of “harmony” brings us to the notion of *emotional compatibility* since it is usually defined as the *agreement of feelings*, interests, opinions, etc. Humour is one of the most effective ways of establishing an emotional communication, of achieving this agreement of feelings and emotions.

Since humour is one of the central aspects of our everyday life and conversation, people daily and quite naturally come up with humorous speech and behaviour. A sense of humour is something only people are endowed with; it is a person’s most admirable attribute which accompanies us in all possible life situations, even the most tragic (as a specific type of defence or pain reliever). The process of acquiring knowledge is no exception. The role of this aspect in teaching and learning types of activity is also very important. Scholars believe that this concept should be systematically studied, discussed and analyzed in much more detail (Eken, 2000, p. 31).

All these arguments seem to be both rational and logical. Yet, according to M.K. Morrison (see Morrison, 2008), although it is highly valued in everyday life and situations, humour, paradoxically, is not treated seriously in educational contexts: we tend to abstain from, or rather avoid discussing its use and role in the classroom as a powerful instrument, as a means of maximizing learning. Still there are a number of interesting investigations proving that the use of humour in the process of teaching a foreign language (any subject, in fact) not only facilitates the process of establishing the good rapport between teachers and their students but also positively affects all other aspects of “the educational space”, including those of understanding and knowledge acquisition, as well as such an important psychological aspect as stress and/or apprehension alleviation (see, for example, Lavern, 2009). Being a universal form of communication, it can be used in all contexts and with all groups of learners. When used thoughtfully and expediently, humour can be an effective tool – a means of students’ encouragement and involvement, a specific catalyst of their progress in studies.

Thus, among the functions of humour as a “facilitator” in the teaching process, the following major ones can be singled out: it can be used as a means of activation, relaxation, motivation, as feedback, and illustration. And finally, humour is needed to maintain the human ability to think flexibly and find solutions to various difficult and/or extraordinary problems. And this is also something which makes it akin to the very process of teaching and learning.

The second important aspect of the role of humour in studying a foreign language is connected with quite a different sphere of its application in the process of language acquisition. As is known, humour is not only a psychological category, it is also a linguo-cognitive category. Being a form of the comic, humour underlies the pragmatics of any type of comic discourse that comprises various literary and non-literary genres/text-types. And among different means of producing a comic effect the verbal means are of primary importance in the context of language studying. The author of this article has often faced the problem of students’ inability to understand some humorous type of text or its part, be it comic fiction or a commercial, advertisement, a newspaper article title (all of which often resort to various types of word/language play). The students’ poor or inadequate knowledge of the language usually underlies such comprehension failures, but this is not the only reason.

The primary aim of a person who strives to master a foreign language is to be able to understand a foreign text/speech, i.e. to interpret it in such a way that there will be no misunderstanding in terms of “meaning – sense” correlation. In other words, the main aim is to neutralize possible ambiguity in both text production and perception. However comic types of discourse are meant to aim at ambiguity, which leads to the possibility of various interpretations. To use V. Raskin’s terms, a text is funny because it has 2 different “scripts” that stand in opposition to each other, which results in ambiguity. So the first and most obvious difficulty for language learners is their limited knowledge of possible semantic contexts of the words that are involved in the creation of a joke. Yet this problem could be more or less easily coped with if it were not closely connected or intertwined with other aspects of language use. Apart from the problem of existence of types of linguistic items which allow for such non-discrimination or confusion (and they are numerous, such as homonyms, polysemous words, words used metaphorically as opposed to those used literally, set phrases vs. free syntactic combinations with superficially identical components, etc.), there are two more, no less serious problems – those of inadequate *background knowledge* and of cultural differences that usually lead to misunderstanding in various spheres of language functioning, the comic discourse being among the most obvious spheres.

As regards inadequate background knowledge, it is a problem that university lecturers and instructors start to face more often these days than they would expect. Its solution is connected with very many different aspects of general school education. One apt quote that comes to mind is from E. Waugh’s “Brideshead Revisited”. He thus describes the paradox: “The trouble with modern education is you never know how ignorant people are. With anyone over fifty you can be fairly confident what’s been taught and what’s been left out. But these young people have such an intelligent, knowledgeable surface, and then the crust suddenly breaks and you look down into depths of confusion you didn’t know existed” (Waugh, 1945, p. 193). The era of the internet seems to exacerbate the situation by replacing knowledge with information. But here we shall not elaborate on the pluses and minuses of modern secondary education leaving these issues to be dealt with by professionals.

Our concern now is the problem that can be and should be tackled within the realm of advanced level language teaching. We cannot ignore it, nor can we neglect it, for language means communication. And communication cannot be separated from the culture of the language that is being studied. Here we also have to deal with several interrelated issues.

As is known, cultures differ from one another, among very many aspects, in that the words (i.e. symbols) they choose to denote concepts are arbitrary. It means that words are open to a variety of “translations”/interpretations. It also means that a word can have a similar sounding equivalent in one’s mother tongue (as is the case with international words) but can mean something quite different or slightly different for representatives of other cultures. When foreign words are taught, students are provided with translations, explanations, and – preferably – the context of usage (words’ “surroundings”), but not always is due attention paid to the cultural connotations of this or that verbalized notion.

As far as the immediate verbal context of words is concerned, this can be easily provided. Apart from traditional types of sources (fiction, mass media, etc.), there is at the learners’ disposal such a powerful resource (for specific studying purposes) as corpora (BNC or COCA). As regards cultural connotations and, furthermore, cultural realia, the situation looks much more problematic. Cultural differences (for example, what is funny in one culture may not be so in another) and the lack of culturally specific knowledge are two major stumbling-blocks to progress in general language acquisition (and in forthcoming professional contacts/intercultural communication) as well as in the process of text perception and comprehension in and outside the language classroom. The latter is most intensely experienced by both teachers and students when they deal with types of text we have spoken of above, i.e. those that have several semantic layers and intentionally aim at ambiguity that underlie their specific effect.

As we know, words can express something beyond their literal meaning, or convey several meanings simultaneously. When we “play” with words and structures, we manipulate various language levels, akin to what poets, those language stuntmen, do when they resort to verbal experiments. And to understand such “manipulations”, we need both *a high degree of language awareness and background knowledge*. The analysis of these types of texts or phenomena (puns and the like) in the English class is definitely an effective exercise and a challenge for students.

Wordplay is now ubiquitous. Ours is an epoch of globalization, with intertextuality being its major sign. So when we deal with ambiguity in some facetious text, its creation can also involve the use of extralinguistic facts. And it is here that not only students’ knowledge of the language, but also their quick wit/sharp mind and general intercultural erudition are needed. Besides, students should realize that multiple meanings are likely to lead to misunderstanding that can cause laughter and embarrassment – in conversational contexts and in more professional – translation, interpretation – spheres of language application.

The American professor Kristin Lems devoted one of her articles to the problem of teaching English by using puns (Lems, 2013, pp. 26 – 33). She categorizes puns into 4 groups for teaching convenience: soundalike puns (homophones), lookalike puns (polysemous words), close-sounding puns and texting puns (alphabetic, numeric, and simplified spelling)) and quotes some useful materials that can come in handy for teachers of English. She writes that English has a wonderful reservoir of sources for puns. They can be found in media texts and in environmental print in daily life – in advertising, in menus, signs, billboards, and the names of small businesses. Hence, the problem of a source of teaching materials of this sort does not exist. But her main point (and actually, the aim of her article) is that puns *need to be taught in class* since they *do not transfer between languages*. However, “they are rarely included in lesson plans or content units and sometimes – *wrongly* – are considered inappropriate for the language classroom” (Lems, 2013, p. 27).

Why should wordplay/language play be one of the materials to work on, the focus of a teacher’s attention in an advanced class of English as a foreign language? Linguistically, the mechanism of punning (in its broadest meaning) is quite complex. Punning is always a type of

intertwining of various shades of meaning. Furthermore, it is difficult to delimit the “area” of its activity. Here the role of context comes to the fore, because to understand a pun one needs both **linguistic and cultural background knowledge**. That is why *wordplay is one of the most efficient tools and means of practising and improving students’ language and reading comprehension skills as well as their knowledge of the country and its culture.*

To illustrate the points let us analyze some examples.

As wordplay in the majority of cases is based on the use of one word-form in two or more meanings, one of the meanings is often metaphoric, i.e. puns frequently exploit idioms which are modified, transformed and/or violated. So to be able to understand humour, students have to be very good at idiomatic English, and this is not an easy task for non-native speakers. Puns based on idioms require advanced language proficiency. For example, in one of the newspaper articles that described a popular beauty salon for dogs (!), the author resorted to such a pun speaking about its clients: “*They were dressed up to the canines*”. If students do not know the word “canine”, they should definitely look it up in a dictionary. But this will lead them nowhere – they will not recognize the pun if they do not know the idiom “*to be dressed up to the nines*”, which means “to be elegantly dressed”. This is a case of paronomasia (*canines – nines*) which aptly and with humour characterizes the author’s slightly ironic attitude towards such a kind of “public institution” for pets. So the task of the teacher is to emphasize the importance for students to go on “digging” if they feel that there are some hidden meanings, something they cannot make out even if all the words are familiar to them.

There are, on the other hand, types of language play, humorous texts which presuppose that for their understanding students must be knowledgeable in the socio-cultural sphere of the language functioning, i.e. they should be aware of some general British/American realia (political figures, names, events, history, literature, etc.). So, apart from advanced language proficiency, this type of wordplay *requires background knowledge and culture exposure* to be understood. Let me quote one more example from the internet: “*Regis Philbin recently drew up his will. Who wants to be a million heir?*” Any American will smile reading this joke. But the pragmatic effect is sure to be lost on students if they are not willing to look for information about Regis Philbin. Only then, on finding out that he is an American media personality, actor and singer, known for hosting talk and game shows since the 1960s, one of which is *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*, will they understand the essence of the joke and the mechanism of the pun – a play on the homophones “*million heir*” and “*millionaire*”.

The examples that follow are taken from the well-known and popular humorous rubric “Foreign hotel signs”, which usually contain ambiguous phrases employing both lexical and syntactic types of ambiguity based on polysemy, homonymy, etc.:

- *In a Copenhagen airline ticket office: We take your bags and send them in all directions*
- *In an Acapulco hotel: The manager has personally passed all the water served here.*
- *In a Norwegian cocktail lounge: Ladies are requested not to have children at the bar.*
- *In a Budapest zoo: Please do not feed the animals. If you have any suitable food, give it to the guard on duty.*

As we see from the examples, an imperfect knowledge of the language results in double meanings, often funny and hilarious, and sometimes even verging on the improper.

To conclude, we can state that wordplay/puns of various types can be and should be used in the language classroom for several very important reasons. Learning to understand

jokes is both *a cause, and a consequence, of language proficiency* (see Cook, 2000: quoted in Lems, 2013, p. 26). So, **first**, verbal humour helps to build metalinguistic awareness, or conscious awareness of various language forms, which promotes reading comprehension and encourages high-order thinking. **Second**, jokes improve the classroom atmosphere and may help motivate disaffected students. **Third**, the ability to use and understand a joke fights the feeling of isolation and of being an outsider in the situation of native – non-native speakers' communication (both small-talk and professional). And **finally**, understanding jokes in a foreign language is part of one's professional competence, including intercultural competence of practitioners in various fields (education, business, diplomacy, social work, health care, etc.).

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Аннотация

Роль юмора в обучении английскому языку

В статье поднимаются вопросы, связанные с местом и ролью юмора и юмористического текста в обучении иностранному языку. Рассматриваются различные аспекты данной проблемы, в том числе роль юмора как психологической составляющей процесса обучения, а также необходимость использования юмористического текста в языковом классе как эффективного средства развития языковой, коммуникативной и межкультурной компетенции студентов, будущая профессиональная деятельность которых непосредственно связана с английским языком как иностранным.