

Humor in the Language Classroom : 3 Ways to Let Them Laugh

by [Jolene Jaquays](#) and [Sara Okello](#)

Humor is crucial in learning and understanding a second language. Students often feel frustrated with learning new grammar or vocabulary and incorporating these items in their language use. Incorporating humor in the classroom can empower students to overcome their frustration and develop the syntax and semantics of a language (Berwald, 1992).

At the TESOL convention in Baltimore in April 2016, we presented a teaching tip entitled “Going Beyond the Borders of Language With Humor.” This teaching tip described humorous activities that can enliven the classroom and motivate students to learn, several of which are included in the new TESOL Press book, *New Ways in Teaching With Humor* (John Rucynski, editor). Here, we’ll share with you how to use humorous pictures, family tree construction, and commercials and videos in your English language classroom.

1. Picture Activities

Pictures can be a powerful medium to help students describe experiences because pictures represent people, places, and things (Wright, 1989). One way to incorporate pictures in the class is through humorous advertisements that contain cultural and pragmatic information; these are “an interesting way to teach language and culture to students of all levels of instruction” (Deneire, 1995, p. 93). In fact, using pictures that are strange, funny, or contain people help students to remember the image better (Bond, 2011).

Writing Prompts

Picture activities that can be used in class include writing and speaking prompts, “Caption This!”, cause and effect, and “What’s wrong/unusual with this picture?” In these picture activities, students describe photos or advertisements that are humorous, are unusual, or have people in them (see [Appendix 1](#)). These picture activities enable students to utilize target vocabulary or grammar points to communicate a humorous, meaningful message.

Family Tree

Another activity that incorporates the use of pictures is the family tree. To introduce the vocabulary of family, a teacher can “build” a family tree right before the students’ eyes using magazine pictures that are put on the board or wall. Begin with a picture of the central character and write a name such as *Mary*. After introducing Mary, introduce various siblings, parents, cousins, and so on. After each family member is added to the tree, ask simple questions such as, “Who is Mary’s husband?” “How many children do Mary and Mark have?” The humor comes from the chosen pictures—pictures of unusual-looking and/or famous people. The students think it is funny to see, for example, Michael Jackson marry Miley Cyrus, or for Popeye to be given the name of a male teacher in the department (see [Appendix 2](#)).

2. Using Humorous Commercials

Using verbal humor in second language classrooms offers opportunities for students to increase their linguistic and cultural knowledge by observing and participating in humorous exchanges (Ziyaemehr & Kumar, 2014). In this next activity, students watch humor in commercials, which creates a lighthearted environment, while examining the cause-effect relationship between the events in the commercials using the necessary grammar and vocabulary.

To introduce or review the basic concept of cause-effect and the words used (e.g., *because, due to, since, as a result*), we like to use the humorous [series of commercials](#) created by DirecTV. The cause-effect episodes present examples of logically false slippery slopes. Begin by previewing vocabulary in the video (See [Appendix 3](#)). Show students a DirecTV commercial while students complete a cause-and-effect chart (See [Appendix 4](#)), and discuss how one event leads to the next. Show another clip; then repeat the process. Next, students work with a partner and create their own example of slippery slope. For example:

Completed homework → doorbell rang, so left paper on table → cat jumped on table and pushed paper off table → assignment fell into dog's food bowl → dog ate homework → no homework to turn in.

Another humorous commercial is the “[Chef Boyardee Whole Grain Beefaroni](#)” commercial about body language. In this commercial, the parents have a whole conversation without saying a word, just through using gestures and facial expressions, trying to keep a secret from their daughter; a hilarious nonverbal conversation results. This commercial can be used to show students how body language can be used effectively in a conversation.

3. Using Humorous Videos

The final activity for incorporating humor in the classroom uses funny videos, such as the “I Love Lucy” video where Lucy tries to teach Ricky how to pronounce the “-ough” sound in various words as he is reading a children’s story (available on [YouTube](#)). Ricky encounters the words *bough, rough, through, and cough* and does not understand the English pronunciation system, which does not have consistent sound-letter correspondence. This funny video can be used to lead into a lesson on the pronunciation of difficult letter groups.

Another humorous video clip is “[Phoebe’s Smaller Bag](#)” from the TV series *Friends*. The teacher can ask students what types of items they carry in their bags or backpacks to practice using the indefinite articles *a* and *an*. Then when the clip is played, the students can identify the items in her bag using the correct article.

Cat videos are always entertaining to watch and can provide practice in the language classroom. This funny [cat video compilation](#) can provide practice for prepositional phrases. For example, you can ask the students, “Where is the cat?” Answers include on the carpet, in the bathtub, next to the alligator, in the bucket, and so on.

A great resource for videos that can be used in class is the [America’s Funniest Home Videos](#) YouTube channel. There are a variety of videos on this website that include categories such as *Best Dog Videos*, *All Time Cutest*, and *Funniest Fails*. A good future-tense activity using the

“Funniest Fails” videos involves showing the first part of the video and then pausing and asking your students what they think will happen next. For another activity, you can show a video and ask the students, “What is happening?” to practice present progressive. You can also talk about American humor and ask students if they think the video is funny and why it is funny.

These humorous activities require minimal preparation time but enliven the classroom and motivate students to learn. The activities can lower students’ affective filter and increase their language learning. Using humor in the classroom transforms language learning from a sometimes tedious, monotonous exercise to an enjoyable, engaging enterprise.

References

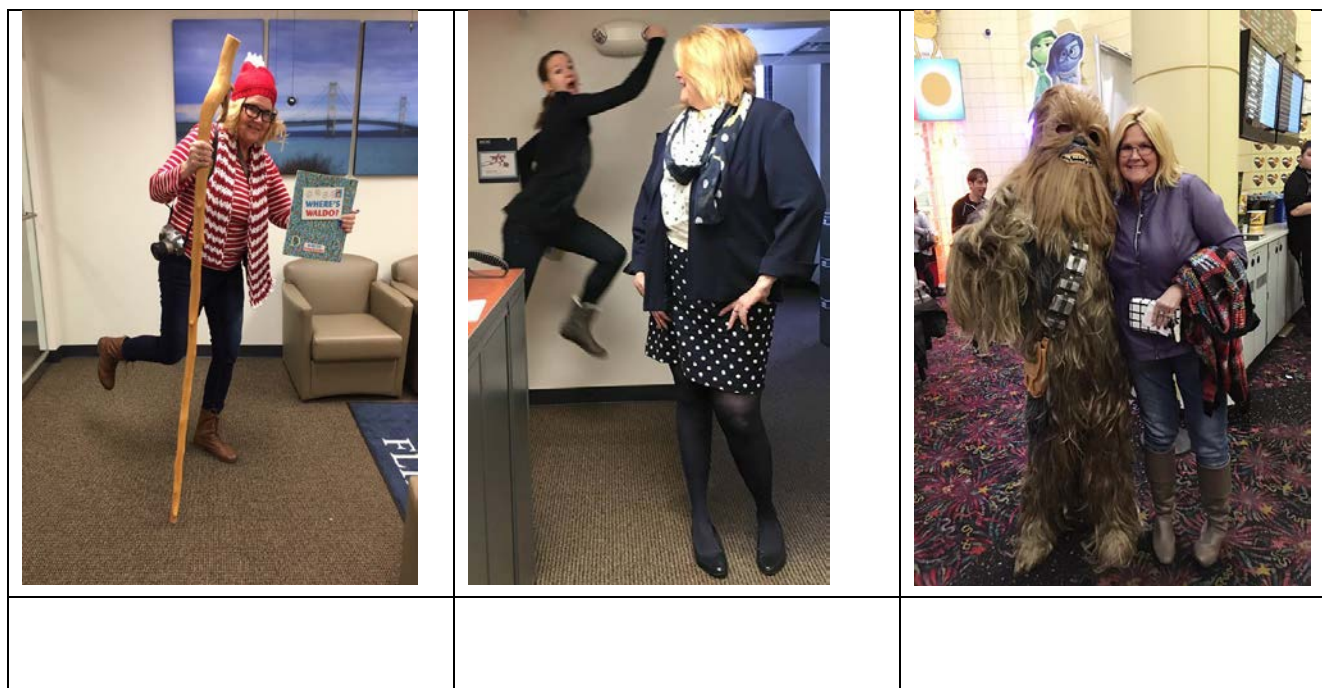
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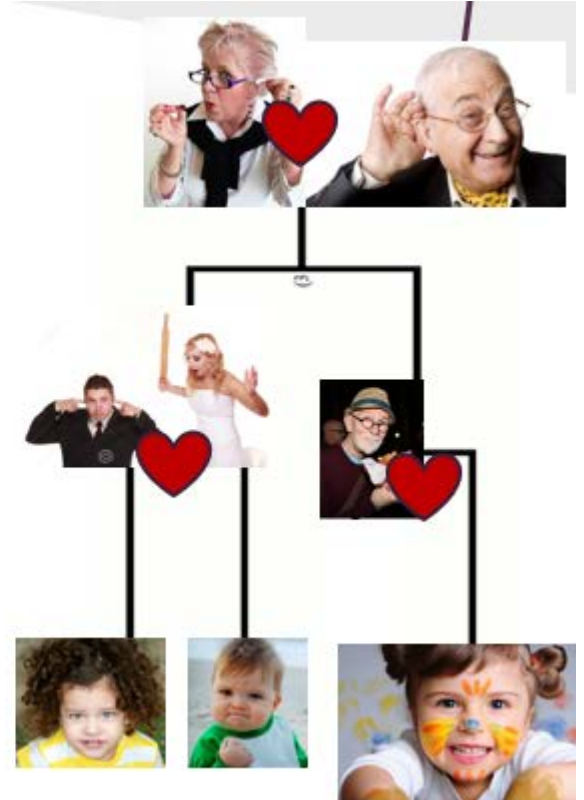
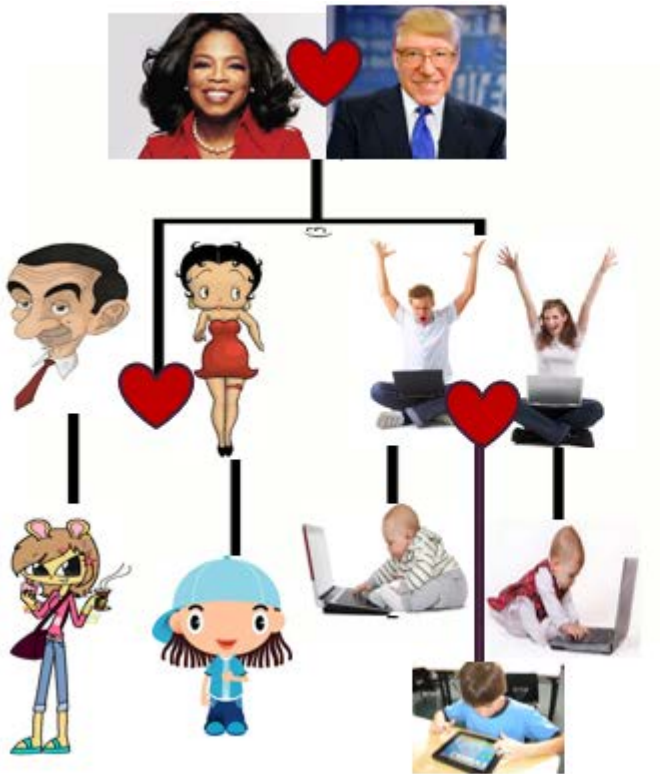
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Appendix 1. Humorous Pictures

Caption This!


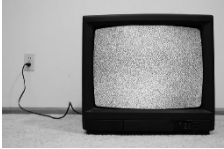
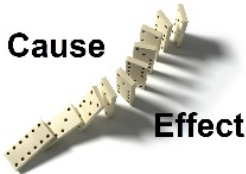




Appendix 2. Sample Family Tree



Appendix 3. Cause and Effect with DirecTV

This example uses the DirecTV commercial “Don’t Chase Imaginary Butterflies,” available on [YouTube](#). Use this chart to preteach vocabulary and help students understand the commercial.

DirecTV: Don't Chase Imaginary Butterflies Into Something Illegal	
have cable TV	
cable's on the fritz	
one thing leads to another	<p>Cause</p>  <p>Effect</p>
chasing imaginary butterflies	
doing something illegal	

Appendix 4. Cause and Effect with DirecTV Template

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The image shows two identical templates for a Cause and Effect activity. Each template consists of a horizontal row of four empty rectangular boxes. Above each box in the top row is a blue curved arrow pointing downwards and to the right, indicating a flow or relationship between the boxes. The bottom row is identical but lacks the arrows.