## Humor in ELT (Part 2): Classroom Techniques

*by [John Rucynski](#)*

In the second part of this article series (see [Part 1 here](#)), I progress from the *why* to the *how* of humor in English language teaching (ELT). Most language educators are familiar with content and language integrated learning, or CLIL, but Heidari-Shahreza (2020) has also proposed the methodology of HILL (humor-integrated language learning). "Integrated" is a key word in this case, as humor in the classroom tends to be most successful when it contributes more than just a laugh. Before incorporating humor into my lessons, I consider these three questions:

1. Are my learners likely to encounter this type of humor when communicating in the English-speaking world?
2. Does learning about this type of humor have value beyond just being funny?
3. Can this type of humor be incorporated using communicative and collaborative activities?

The third question is vital because one reason humor fails is that teachers merely try to *explain* the humor instead of giving learners the opportunity to collaborate and *interact with* the humor. As demonstrated by Bell and Pomerantz (2016), humor instruction can involve any or all of the following results:

- recognition
- comprehension
- response
- production

Which results are focused on depends on factors such as the type of humor and goals of the curriculum. Here, I examine three types of humor and gradually move from the recognition to production stage along the way. Explanations for all three of these types of humor will feature classroom-tested interactive techniques.

## 1. Verbal Irony

Verbal irony is frequently used in the English-speaking world, whether in face-to-face communication or on social media. However, in an empirical study I conducted with Prichard (Prichard & Rucynski, 2020), multilingual learners (MLLs) struggled to identify nonliteral

statements. An understanding of how verbal irony functions in English is an important component of cross-cultural communicative competence, as it helps MLLs to

- bond with interlocutors,
- avoid misunderstandings, and
- differentiate between literal and nonliteral statements.

Though it is debatable whether or not we should provide instruction on how to *produce* verbal irony in English, our learners can greatly benefit from instruction on how to recognize, comprehend, and respond to verbal irony. Fortunately, this can be achieved using collaborative and fun techniques.

Verbal irony can be introduced by explaining that a speaker's literal words are sometimes the opposite of the intended meaning. This can be explained with the help of images (easily collected from Google Images or other sources). For example, show an image of a lightning storm with the caption, "Lovely weather we're having!" to demonstrate that these words sometimes actually mean the weather is lovely, but they also sometimes mean the opposite. It is important to point out that verbal irony includes both positive words with negative intent (sarcasm) and negative words with positive intent (jocularity). As an example of the latter, show an image of an exquisitely prepared meal with the following dialogue:



""Lovely weather we're having!"

> A: I hope you like the meal. I'm not so good at cooking.
> B: Yeah, right. You're such a terrible cook!

Explain that Speaker B is actually *praising* Speaker A despite the seemingly negative words.

One method for helping our learners to identify verbal irony in real-world communication is to provide an overview of verbal and nonverbal cues that may signal a sarcastic statement. Verbal cues include the following:

- elongated vowels
- exaggerated stress
- slower speech

Nonverbal cues include the following:

- averted gaze
- blank expression
- rolling eyes

These cues can be demonstrated by using a range of resources from the internet, including audio clips, GIFs, images, and memes (more on memes later in this article). For easier to understand examples (and perhaps a bit of comic relief), you can also demonstrate a range of verbal and nonverbal cues yourself.

To make the instruction more fun and collaborative, prepare a series of mini-dialogues (teachers can work together to prepare videos) in which learners need to identify whether Speaker B is being sincere or sarcastic. If the speaker is being sarcastic, learners also need to identify the cues given. For example:

> A: What's your favorite day of the week?
> B: I just loooove Mondays. (Rolls eyes)

In this case, there would be both a verbal (elongated vowel) and nonverbal (rolling eyes) cue.

Just as we teach communication strategies such as "I'm sorry, could you repeat that?", we can also teach expressions to help MLLs when they are confused by verbal irony, such as

- Are you being [serious/sarcastic]?
- Are you [joking/kidding]?

## 2. Joke Telling

Jokes serve an important function in communication, whether they are used to add humor to a basic conversation or a professional presentation. Introducing MLLs to some popular jokes of the English-speaking world can help them to

- understand typical joke patterns,
- deepen their understanding of cultural references, and
- learn proper reactions to jokes.

Jokes from a different culture can be difficult to understand not only because of the language, but perhaps more often because of the (unknown) cultural references. As a solution to this, Hodson (2016) demonstrates an activity where learners are invited (after the teacher explains the joke) to modify the joke to fit their own culture. This has the double benefit of making MLLs more familiar with joke telling conventions while also practicing producing their own humor. Consider this famous English joke:

> A tourist in New York realizes that he's lost and asks a passer-by, "How do you get to Carnegie Hall?" The passer-by replies, "Practice, practice, practice!"

This easy joke gives MLLs the opportunity to modify either the location (New York City), the destination (Carnegie Hall), or the punch line ("Practice, practice, practice!"). Although Hodson used this activity in university English language classes in Japan, Pimenova (2020) also proposes having learners in a multicultural English as a second language setting share jokes from their own country as a method for cultural exchange.

A simple joke like the Carnegie Hall joke could be used to share respective cultural references. For example, learners could easily manipulate the location and destination to introduce prestigious concerts halls or sports tournaments, among other examples, in their country:

> **Location**: Mexico City
> **Destination**: Sala Nezahualcóyotl
> **Punch line**: No change

Learners could even progress to manipulating all three elements of the joke (as demonstrated by one of Hodson's Japanese students):

> **Location**: Tokyo
> **Destination**: Tokyo University
> **Punch line**: "Study, study, study!"

As also explained about encountering verbal irony, provide learners with a range of expressions to teach them to respond to jokes (be it showing appreciation or confusion), including the following:

- That's a good one.
- I [have/haven't] heard that one before.
- That's [funny/hilarious].
- Sorry, I don't get it.
- What does ____ mean? (If a vocabulary item or idiomatic expression isn't known)

## 3. Memes

Memes are a ubiquitous form of humor frequently shared on social media, whether for eliciting a simple laugh, referring to the latest viral current event, or making social commentary. Incorporating memes into ELT can help MLLs to

- improve their digital and media literacy,
- deepen their awareness of cultural references used in memes, and
- learn to comment in English on social media.

Although our learners will likely be familiar with memes, it is helpful to provide them with some popular examples and patterns from the English-speaking world. One of the most common forms of memes are image macros. These generally feature a line of text (in all caps) above (an introductory line) and below (the punch line) an image. Image macros are a comprehensible

introduction to memes for MLLs, as they feature popular characters with repeated patterns. Famous examples (as briefly introduced in the first part of this article) include "Bad Luck Brian," "Condescending Wonka," "Grumpy Cat," and "Success Kid." All of these (and many more!) are explained on the useful Know Your Meme website.

Henderson (2016) and Ohashi (2016) suggest making use of the repeated patterns of image macros to introduce memes in the classroom. For example, share the images of three memes, such as "Bad Luck Brian," "Grumpy Cat," and "Success Kid," and task learners with connecting sample top lines of the memes with bottom lines and identifying the corresponding meme character, such as the following:

| Top Line | Bottom Line |
|---|---|
| 1. BUYS IPHONE 12 | A. TO GET ME TO RISE AND SHINE |
| 2. GOT TO WORK LATE | B. IPHONE 13 COMES OUT THE NEXT DAY |
| 3. THERE'S NOT ENOUGH COFFEE IN THE WORLD | C. BOSS ARRIVES EVEN LATER AND SEES ME HARD AT WORK |

The answers would of course be: 1-B ("Bad Luck Brian"), 2-C ("Success Kid"), and 3-A ("Grumpy Cat").

Though abundant examples can be found on the internet, you should carefully monitor these for appropriate content. In addition, you can easily write your own captions in order to give examples that are more connected to the lives of your learners.

Once learners are familiar with the patterns, they can also experiment with writing their own lines of texts for popular memes, either individually or in small groups. You can also create a class-only section in an LMS where learners can practice sharing and commenting on class-created memes in a safe environment. As with the other forms of humor, provide learners with sample expressions (and in this case, abbreviations) for commenting on the various memes, including:

- I love this one!
- This is so funny because….
- I can relate to this because…
- LOL (laugh out loud) / OMG (oh my God) / SMH (shaking my head) / HIFW (how I feel when)

## Part 2 Conclusion

These are just a few ideas for how to include some humor in your classroom. Your respective teaching context (and the type of humor) will determine the desired result, be it helping learners

to recognize, comprehend, respond to, or produce humor. As explained in Part 1 of this article, teachers do not need to have a great sense of humor to incorporate these ideas. Additionally, Bell and Pomerantz (2016) explain that the goal is not to make our students become like "professional comedians," but rather "the aim should be to familiarize learners with a variety of conventional practices around humorous interaction, so that they are better able to take part in it" (pg. 170). As I've stressed, humor has a range of benefits in ELT, but it also works best when it has value beyond the humor. That includes providing MLLs with the skills to improve their cross-cultural communicative competence.

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