

Humor in the English Language Classroom The Lubricant Which Smooths Out a Language Lesson

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〈研究ノート〉

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Abstract

What Is Humor? How Do We Define Humor?

Before we can discuss humor in the classroom, it is first necessary to define humor itself. What exactly is it? While this writer has his own opinions on the matter, it behooves us to start by consulting that time-tested authority of the English language, the dictionary. The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary says that humor is “a quality of action, speech, etc. which causes amusement; facetiousness, comicality; the faculty of perceiving and enjoying what is ludicrous or amusing; a sense of the ludicrous or amusing.” 1)

While the above dictionary definition may seem to carry weight, let us balance our investigation by checking how several other equally valid dictionaries define the term. The Cambridge international Dictionary of English defines it as “the ability to be amused by things, the way in which people see that some things are amusing, or the quality of being amusing.” 2) Both of these definitions would seem to be perfectly valid and, rightly so, as both are internationally recognized authorities on the English language. However, both of the above definitions seem to be excessively wordy and, somehow, to miss the point. Can't we find a more pithy way of defining what we mean? Yes, we can. The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English defines humor as “the ability to understand and enjoy what is funny and makes people laugh.” 3) Of the three definitions shown above, the third one stands out for its clarity, brevity and easy-to-understand simplicity. As classroom teachers, it is absolutely necessary to utilize humor in the classroom if we wish to achieve long-term survival as foreign language educators.

Key Words: Humor, Relaxation, Atmosphere, Learning, Positive, Cooperation

Humor In The Classroom: Why Do We Need It? What Happens If We Don't Have It?

To illustrate the importance of humor in the language classroom, let me give some examples from my early days in this profession. Rookie teachers always go through various trials and tribulations. When I was a new teacher trainee at a certain private language school in Sapporo, I was required, along with all the other rookies, to observe the classes of three of my experienced colleagues. This not only provided me with valuable examples of teaching methods used by other instructors, it was to convince me that a sense of humor is one of the most vital assets a language teacher can possess. Following are some descriptions and comments about the classes I observed:

Class 1

Level: Intermediate-advanced

Teacher: American man, Mr. L.

Students: 5

Topics: The teacher leads students in a free-ranging discussion of recent news topics.

Use of humor: Very little. The teacher makes some ironical comments about mistaken statements by Japanese politicians

Class 2

Level: Elementary

Teacher: Japanese-American female, Ms.A.

Students: 10

Topics: Proper dining etiquette when with non-Japanese people

Use of humor: Almost none, though the instructor gives her talk with a pleasant smile

Class 3

Level: Intermediate

Teacher: American man, Mr. D.

Students: 7-8

Topics: Differences in appearances of people such as hair styles, facial types, beards/mustaches, facial expressions and voice changes. Students laugh frequently.

The observation of those three lessons left an indelible impression on the mind of this rookie teacher. In all three classes, the foreign instructors were clearly well-qualified and had prepared for their lessons. The material they presented was useful, informative and factually correct. Students were attentive, polite and at least some of them took notes. So were all three classes equally good? Were all the classes equally effective? I think not. While the first and second classes were well-taught, there was something missing as far as class atmosphere. In the third class, however, there was a lively atmosphere, punctuated by frequent student laughter. Although the students in Class 3 may or may not have actually learned more than students in the other two lessons, they clearly had more fun. So what was the key difference between Class 3 and the other two classes? Humor. As one former colleague told me, "If you can't share a laugh with students, your class will never be quite relaxed. You and the students will never have heart-to-heart communication."⁴) From that day, I made a decision to be a teacher who communicates with humor!

Categories of Classroom Humor: How Humor Can Improve The Learning Atmosphere

Perhaps my first exposure to humor in the classroom came when I was taking 1st year Japanese (基礎日本語 1) at my alma mater, Portland State University. In class one day, our Japanese teacher was giving students some easy instructions in Japanese to check our comprehension. Since we had learned some basic verbs like *sawaru* (to touch) and *suwaru* (to sit down), and we already knew some basic nouns like *tenjo* (the ceiling) and *hondana* (bookshelf), our teacher began giving us sample directives such as “*Isu ni suwatte kudasai.*” (Please sit in the chair.) Then he injected a bit of humor into the class with “*Tenjo wo sawatte kudasai.*” (Please touch the ceiling.) The entire class burst into laughter. I think his use of humor greatly improved the class atmosphere and helped to make learning Japanese fun for the American students.5)

The above example is a case of in-class humor spontaneously generated by the instructor. For the well-prepared instructor, the classroom is full of opportunities to bring humor into play. The foreign teacher in Japan can use jokes in English, Japanese or, in the case of at least one American instructor at

Okayama University, a third language. This teacher decided to try something different at the end of his class one day. As he had studied Spanish previously, he finished the lesson by saying to the students, “*Asta luego.*” (See you later.) However, one girl in the class thought he had said in Japanese, “*Ashita no eigo.*” She asked him, “*Ashita no eigo? Douiimi desu ka?*” (Tomorrow’s English? What does it mean?) When he realized what she was asking, he laughed. She then realized her own mistake and laughed, too. Later, other students heard the story and a special joke was born. Although this humor stemmed from a misunderstanding, that teacher reports that that class showed an improved atmosphere following the episode.6)

Another category of classroom humor involves the use of particular jokes or anecdotes prepared before class by the instructor. American and Japanese teachers are not alone in injecting humor into their lectures. Professor Om Soryong of the Royal University of Phnom Penh reports that he often begins a new semester by sharing jokes with his students. In one case, he told students of the marriage counselor who asked a troubled husband, “Have you stopped beating your wife yet?” When he translates that into Cambodian, the students always laugh, he says.7) This writer has found prepared jokes and anecdotes so effective that he has consistently used them , both at our main campus and in English 1 and English 5 of the HIU Distance Education program. One student favorite of recent years goes as below:

Teacher: What do you think is the longest word in English? (英語で一番長い単語は何でしょうか。)

Students: Sorry, we don't know.

Teacher: The answer is *smiles*.

Students look puzzled.

Teacher: Why *smiles*? It's because between the first 's' and the last 's' there is a mile. (S と S の間に一マイルがあるから)

At this point, some students laugh, though others just smile or nod their heads. By starting off my lessons with what I call "Today's Joke" our class usually gives students a chance to relax before getting into that day's study topics.8)

A further category of classroom humor involves the use of special props by the instructor. While many Japanese colleagues no doubt feel uncomfortable with this approach, I know several foreign teachers who utilize props effectively in their classes. One former colleague used a whistle to get the attention of noisy or unruly students. Another fellow teacher uses a bell which he rings whenever a student manages to answer a question correctly. In fact, some students reportedly expressed dissatisfaction when he stopped using the bell. They were looking forward to getting a "Ding!" whenever they got the right answer. I myself often use a pillow (cushion) with English writing on it. When I suddenly toss the pillow to a student, he or she can get a bonus by catching it. The student who drops it, however, gets no bonus. This cushion can also be used to

gently (?) whack the heads of any students who are caught sleeping or appear close to dozing off in class. The cushion is known as McLarty's pillow (日本語でマックラーテイの枕) In the foregoing discussion, we have identified several different categories of classroom humor. Let us reiterate by clarifying them below:

- 1 Spontaneous humor created by the instructor's words, actions or gestures
- 2 Prepared jokes or anecdotes given by the teacher
- 3 Humor created by misunderstandings during class exercises, etc.
- 4 Humor initiated by the teacher's use of special props, tools, materials or equipment

Although these four categories can account for a very significant amount of all classroom humor, readers could easily be forgiven for getting the impression that there is something important missing from this discussion. Indeed, there is. We have not even mentioned student-generated classroom humor. Without touching on the students' contributions to such humor, we can hardly claim to have covered this subject adequately. During well over two decades as a teacher in Japan, I have seen numerous examples of student humor in the classroom. Let me give several pertinent examples from recent years. Several years ago in an English 5 class, we were using a textbook written by this author on English idioms.9) One of the idioms was *hit the books*. I noticed several students looking puzzled by this

expression. Being aware of the tendency of Japanese students to try direct translations of such phrases, I wrote two examples on the blackboard. One example said, “The student is studying very hard for a test.” Example two had a crude stick figure with a fist and a book. I asked the students which they thought was the correct meaning. They began smiling and looking at each other knowingly. After class one student came up to me, took out his text and posed, sardonically, with his fist raised. Everyone enjoyed a laugh together and some of his classmates took photos with their cell phones.¹⁰ Students who demonstrate a sense of humor, like that young man, do wonders for the class atmosphere. That particular student was a junior (3rd year), but even freshmen (1st year) pupils have shown an ability to use humor. Let me give an example from this school. In one English Expressions 1 class, I had told the students to call me “Mac” both because my real name, McLarty, is difficult to pronounce for non-native speakers of English and because it reminds them of the Apple Mac of computers. When I called the roll for class , one clever boy took advantage of this connection. As I called out student names, some kids answered with “Hello Mac!” but he facetiously responded with “Hi Windows!”

Conclusions-A Classroom With Humor Will Remain in Students’ Hearts and Minds

Long after students have graduated from HIU and gone their various ways as members of adult society, certain memories of their

college/university days will remain with them. Long after test scores, grades and employment seminars are all forgotten, certain happy memories of what I call *the human factor* will still be there. At Portland State University, my physical education teacher and my Japanese language instructor provided classroom humor which, I now believe, was even more important than the actual contents of their fine lessons. Their light-hearted approach allowed us students to know their human side. For that reason they were universally loved by their pupils. Surely the same thing can be said for HIU students. Next to the friends they make at our school, faculty members probably have the biggest impact on youthful minds. Professors who show a sense of humor can help students to relax and not take academic matters too dead seriously. I believe that a mentally relaxed student is a student who can concentrate better. The American teacher who advocated using a humorous approach (alluded to earlier) is still an active educator after three decades teaching in Japan. When we were colleagues, he was consistently rated the most popular teacher in student surveys. While his lessons were timely, I believe it was his ironic sense of humor which endeared him to the pupils. Years (or even decades) after taking his classes, many students still remember him and mention his name to me. He was a true communicator who broke the barriers between human beings. While the technology students learn at HIU is important, I strongly believe that, for their future lives as a whole, the human communication they experience here is equally

vital. We of the faculty have an opportunity to make a huge impact on youthful minds. Let's all aspire to be barrier breakers!

Teaching HIU Students Idioms in English 5 and 7 Classes". Volume 18, Number 1, September, 2006, pp. 91-104.

Notes

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