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Implementing Humor Instruction into English Language Teaching

I n my first year teaching English at a university in Japan, I (John) wanted to give my students something different for a Friday lesson: sharing one of my favorite episodes of the American television show *The Simpsons*. I selected about ten of the funniest jokes from the episode and envisioned jealous colleagues curious about the enthusiastic laughter coming from my classroom. Unfortunately, instead, my silent classroom probably made them wonder if I had given a test that day.

Why were *The Simpsons* jokes met with such silence? From a cultural perspective, humor may be a universal feature of all cultures, but what is considered funny varies greatly from culture to culture. From a language-teaching perspective, at least three key mistakes prevented the lesson from being a successful integration of humor and language teaching. First, not enough scaffolding was done. I mistakenly assumed that my Japanese students would be familiar with the show and its style of humor. Second, there was no connection between that particular episode and the class content. In other words, there was no goal of the lesson, other than merely wanting the students to appreciate American humor. Third, there were no opportunities for students to engage with the humor. It was a failed humor lesson of the teacher merely trying (more and more desperately) to explain why something was funny.

One reason we share this anecdote is that it reflects why some teachers avoid including humor in the English language classroom.

They claim that humor is simply too complex and will merely cause confusion. By writing this article, however, we argue that the benefits of implementing humor instruction in the English teaching curriculum far outweigh the disadvantages or difficulties. Considering this, I (John again) did not abandon *The Simpsons* or other forms of humor as part of English instruction. Rather, I made clips from the show part of a thematic unit on humor and American social issues (Rucynski 2011), but I greatly adapted my teaching approach, based on ideas described later in this article.

A farewell message I received from one of the students in the course two years later, when the student was graduating from university, perhaps best encapsulates why I attempted to use humor in my teaching in the first place. The student wrote, "After your class, I went on to watch almost every *Simpsons* episode. It kept me motivated to study English and helped me to communicate with Americans when I studied abroad. My goal is to someday

watch these episodes without subtitles." In this article, we will discuss the *why* and the (much more complex) *how* of implementing a focus on humor into English language teaching.

WHY INCLUDE HUMOR INSTRUCTION?

There is a common misconception that including humor in language teaching is merely a fun or frivolous element that is used to occasionally spice up classes. While humor does indeed have the power to make learning more fun and memorable, it can also serve a much deeper purpose in language education. A lack of understanding of the humor of the target culture can cause embarrassment or isolation for learners (Lems 2013). Learners are likely to encounter humor in conversations in the second language (L2) but suffer from anxiety about how to actively engage with the humor (Shively 2018). Helping our students become more familiar with the humor of English-speaking cultures thus empowers them by improving their intercultural communicative competence, as humor is a great way to bond with target-language speakers (Rucynski and Prichard 2020). As John's former student wrote, familiarity with *The Simpsons*, as just one example of American humor, helped him to communicate with American people.

L2 humor competence is an integral component of becoming proficient in a foreign language. This involves not merely appreciating the humor of foreign cultures, but also understanding how it is used. The timing, frequency, and purpose of humor greatly vary from culture to culture. When people use humor, there is often incongruity between the literal and intended meanings of their words. English language learners with a high level of humor competency have the ability to decode the message and to identify the true purpose of the humor (e.g., just making a joke, criticizing a person or situation).

On a related note, acquiring humor competency in a foreign language also helps learners develop critical-thinking skills.

English language learners will encounter a great amount of humor as they navigate the Internet and social media platforms. The ability to decipher the meaning of political memes and distinguish satirical news items from real news items is an essential component of the increasingly important twenty-first-century skills of digital and media literacy.

HOW TO IMPLEMENT HUMOR INSTRUCTION INTO LANGUAGE TEACHING

The first step in the process is determining the purpose of including humor. Is the goal to teach *with* humor or teach *about* humor? While the two goals often overlap, we refer to teaching *with* humor as the teacher using any humorous techniques (e.g., giving funny examples, telling humorous anecdotes) to improve the atmosphere of the class and make language learning more enjoyable and memorable. On the other hand, teaching *about* humor (the focus of this article) refers to helping learners improve their competency with humor of the target culture(s). An increasing amount of research has focused on teaching *about* humor in the context of language teaching. Research ranges from humor competency training on specific types of humor—including jokes (Pimenova 2020), satirical news (Prichard and Rucynski 2019), and sarcasm (Kim and Lantolf 2018; Prichard and Rucynski 2020)—to developing extensive taxonomies of microskills to help learners better understand L2 humor (Wulf 2010).

Teaching *about* humor, however, certainly does not entail the teacher giving dry academic lectures about the humor customs of different cultures. Humor instruction can be implemented by using practical, engaging, and interactive learner-centered activities. Still, it is vital to establish the purpose and goals for introducing humor. As explained in the introduction, humor instruction should have a strong connection with the course curriculum. Bell and Pomerantz (2016) propose a backward design model when teaching learners about humor. In other

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words, just like the teaching of any language point, teaching about humor requires identifying the target results. Why does the teacher believe it is important for learners to understand this aspect of humor, and what are the best techniques for teaching it as part of the curriculum?

Bell and Pomerantz (2016, 170) also suggest four possible results of humor instruction:

1. *Identification*. Learners detect that humor is being used.

2. *Comprehension*. Learners are able to understand the intended meaning of the humor.

3. *Response*. Learners are able to properly react to the humor, such as commenting on the funniness (or "unfunniness"!) of the humor or replying with their own humor.

4. *Production*. Learners actually create their own humor.

Bell and Pomerantz (2016) further stress the importance of researching respective forms of humor. Just as a language teacher needs extensive knowledge of a grammar point in order to teach it, teachers who aim to provide instruction on a respective form of humor need to ask, "What linguistic structures, lexical items, and cultural understanding will learners need to achieve the desired results?" (Bell and Pomerantz 2016, 179).

Instruction on respective forms of humor does not always need to include a focus on all four desired results. For example, the ability to identify and comprehend English satirical news can help English language learners to improve their digital and media literacy, but

not many teachers would task learners with producing their own satirical news. While humor production in the L2 can be a creative and fun challenge for learners, Bell and Pomerantz (2016) stress that the end goal of humor instruction is not to produce "funny students," but "to familiarize learners with a variety of conventional practices around humorous interaction, so that they are better able to take part in it" (170).

A FRAMEWORK FOR INCLUDING HUMOR INSTRUCTION IN LANGUAGE TEACHING

Despite these clear potential goals of humor instruction outlined by Bell and Pomerantz (2016), it still can be difficult to imagine how to realize these goals from a practical standpoint. Teachers need to carefully consider which aspects of humor to include in language instruction, what kinds of activities and resources can best facilitate this instruction, and which of the four aforementioned results should be the focus (Rucynski and Prichard 2020). The teaching context is vital when considering humor instruction. In other words, the cultural background, proficiency level, and needs of your learners should greatly inform what aspect of humor instruction you implement into the curriculum. As an example, attempting to teach sarcasm to a group of absolute beginners would make little pedagogical sense. On the other hand, we often include a unit on sarcasm for our Japanese students who are preparing to study abroad, as they are likely to encounter this form of humor in English-speaking countries, and previous students have expressed confusion about it. It is important to help learners fill in the gaps in their humor competence.

We will now take a deeper look at three specific types of humor by explaining the

rationale for including a focus on each type and providing possible activities and resources for the relevant potential results of humor instruction. In addition, we will provide suggestions for modifying the instruction for learners of different proficiency levels. While there are countless types of humor to choose from, the forms of humor we will focus on in this article are verbal irony, memes, and satirical news. Teachers should consider their own teaching context when deciding which forms of humor to include; they should be able to answer "Yes" to the following three questions before making a respective type of humor a part of their humor instruction:

1. Are learners likely to encounter this form of humor when communicating (either face-to-face or online) in the target language?

2. Is this form of humor likely to be challenging for students to understand (e.g., because of a relative lack of the same humor in their native culture)?

3. Does instruction on this form of humor provide value beyond just humor (e.g., insights into the target culture)?

HUMOR INSTRUCTION FOR VERBAL IRONY

Rationale

In the context of English language teaching, learners would greatly benefit from a deeper understanding of verbal irony, including sarcasm (Prichard and Rucynski 2020). Learning a language requires much more than just memorizing vocabulary and grammar rules, as learners also need to differentiate between an interlocutor's actual words and *intended* meaning. This is no easy task, especially for learners who come from cultures with a relative lack of sarcasm. We were reminded of this several years ago when we were visiting the United States and boarded a long-distance bus. Just before departing, the driver looked back to see that the bus was only at about ten percent capacity and shouted out in a straight voice,

"No fighting over the seats!" In moments like this, we often put ourselves in the shoes of our current Japanese university students. A great majority of our students would understand every English word in that sentence, but may be perplexed by the intended meaning, considering that sarcasm is relatively rare in Japan and it is also uncommon to make such a joke with complete strangers.

Failure to detect or understand sarcasm can quickly lead to confusion or embarrassment. However, sarcasm remains a ubiquitous feature of conversation in English-speaking countries. Some may argue that sarcasm is merely a negative form of humor that is best avoided in the context of the language classroom, but it is more complex than that, as verbal irony can include both sarcasm (positive language with negative intent) and jocularity (negative language with positive intent) (Rothermich and Pell 2015). So, without a proper understanding of verbal irony, an English learner could easily be confused by sarcasm, such as being told, "Nice job!" when making a mistake. They could also be hurt by well-intentioned jocularity, such as if they humbly say, "Sorry, I'm not a good cook," after preparing a delicious meal and being told, "Oh yeah, you're such a terrible cook!"

Identifying sarcasm

Before teaching students the strategies for identifying sarcasm, teachers can show simple literal and nonliteral examples. In pairs or groups, learners can try to induce which ones are sarcastic, and they can try to identify cues they notice or share other cues that they know (Prichard and Rucynski 2020).

The teacher can then highlight the various verbal and nonverbal cues that learners could not identify on their own. Vocal cues (prosody) include exaggerated stress or intonation, elongated syllables, a monotonous tone, and slower speech. Visual cues include a blank face, averted gaze, glaring, and winking (Rothermich and Pell 2015). Teachers may make use of a range of visuals and audio or video resources to demonstrate these

cues without needing to rely on technical terminology. We highly recommend introducing sarcasm not with fast-paced scenes from movies or TV shows, but instead with examples that are easier to understand, especially in the initial recognition stage. Proper scaffolding with numerous examples helps prevent the humor-instruction failure described at the beginning of this article.

Teachers can also demonstrate verbal cues for the class. To make the instruction interactive, teachers make two similar statements, one sincere and one sarcastic. The class then attempts to identify the sarcastic remark. One example John uses with his class is the following:

> **Statement #1:** I love baseball. It's so exciting.
>
> **Statement #2:** I love soccer. It's sooooo exciting.

The learners guess alone, then discuss their answers with a partner or group. They can also share which cues they identified. The teacher then goes over the answer. (The elongated stress in the second statement reveals that John finds soccer to be boring and prefers baseball.)

Teachers could also demonstrate visual cues, but a plethora of online examples are accessible. A search for "sarcastic expression" on Google Images will provide hundreds of examples. Again, to make the lesson more interactive and engaging, the teacher could provide images of several different faces and task learners with identifying the ones that are most likely to express sarcasm.

For learners less familiar with sarcasm, teachers can provide written dialogues to help train learners to identify illogical statements that do not fit the context. One example is the following:

> A: How's your day going?
>
> B: Not bad. And you?

A: I failed my math test, my girlfriend broke up with me, and then I got stuck in the rainstorm without an umbrella.

B: It sounds like you're having a wonderful day!

The final line by Speaker B should easily be identifiable as a sarcastic statement.

In addition to identifying the sarcastic statement, learners could be given two short, similar dialogues and asked to identify the one that includes sarcasm.

Dialogue #1:

> A: Do you like your new teacher?
>
> B: He gives a lot of homework, never smiles, and doesn't remember my name. Yes, I love my new teacher.

Dialogue #2:

> A: Do you like your new teacher?
>
> B: She has an exciting teaching style, and the class time always goes by very fast. Yes, I love my new teacher.

Again, this could be a collaborative task with the purpose of developing competence. The teacher can guide learners, as needed. (The incongruity in Dialogue #1 could help learners to identify its sarcasm.)

Comprehending sarcasm
We may assume that if a speaker is being sarcastic, then the true meaning is just the opposite of what was said, but this is not always the case. The literal meaning may be simply an exaggeration or understatement of the speaker's true meaning. Moreover, students should understand the various implications and roles of sarcasm, which could be to amuse, to lighten criticism, to bond with a peer, or to achieve some other purpose (Prichard and Rucynski 2020).

The teacher can give the learners several examples, and students, working in pairs or groups, discuss the speaker's true meaning. For example, for the following dialogue, they may discuss whether Speaker B liked the movie and the reason.

> A: Did you like the movie I suggested?
>
> B: I slept through half of it. I just love three-hour movies … ! Next time, you should invite me to a *four*-hour movie. Ha ha. (*smiling*)

Students may deduce that Speaker B didn't enjoy the movie because it was too long. They then brainstorm the purpose of the sarcasm (perhaps to lighten the mood despite the criticism). The teacher can help point out cues the students could not recognize.

Responding to sarcasm

Training learners to respond to sarcasm is complicated, as sarcasm *can* be a rather negative form of humor. Sarcasm, however, takes many forms and is not always used to criticize the interlocutor, but rather another target. So the speaker may merely be expecting agreement. When it comes to jocularity, the speaker may actually be complimenting the interlocutor, but by using negative words with positive intent.

It is best for the teacher to advise learners that they should not feel forced to agree with sarcasm when it is political or biting, but that with more casual topics, people tend to play along with sarcasm as a conversational norm (Colston 2017). For example, a common conversation starter in England is the sarcastic statement, "Lovely weather we're having." If the interlocutor takes such a greeting literally, they might be tempted to reply with something like, "Actually, I don't like the rain." The social expectation, however, is to simply agree with a similarly sarcastic response such as, "Yes, lovely, isn't it?"

Learners should also be informed, however, that when they get to know someone well, it is perfectly natural to either play along with or disagree with sarcastic statements. One way to practice this would be for the teacher to make an obviously sarcastic statement and ask learners to state their agreement or disagreement with the intended meaning. Learners could be given a range of responses for either category, as shown in Table 1.

Producing sarcasm

Some teachers may question whether they want to teach their students how to be sarcastic. However, practicing sarcastic and sincere statements can reinforce the sarcasm cues introduced by the teacher while making the class more engaging. A simple way to do this is to ask each student to prepare a pair of statements that include one sincere and one sarcastic utterance (similar to the popular "Two Truths and a Lie" icebreaker). Students should start with conversational topics that they have a common understanding about, such as sports, musicians, or actors. As with our previous example, students could say they like two sports (or two musicians, etc.), and their group members need to guess the sincere and sarcastic statements. To add to the activity, students could be tasked with using a different cue each time (e.g., a verbal cue such as exaggerated intonation for one statement and a visual cue like eye rolling for another). However, the teacher should warn the class about the risks of having their sarcasm misunderstood.

Sarcastic statement (teacher)	Responses for agreeing	Responses for disagreeing
I just love watching soccer. It's sooooo exciting.	• I'm not into soccer, either. • Yeah, soccer is boring, isn't it? • Yeah, I'd rather watch _____.	• Hey, soccer *is* exciting! • Actually, I love watching soccer. • Are you being sarcastic? Soccer is a great sport!

Table 1. Examples of responses for agreeing or disagreeing with a sarcastic statement

Suggestions for different proficiency levels

For lower-proficiency learners, teachers can provide much more visual support to show contextual cues clearly. For example, show a picture of a rainstorm or blizzard with the statement, "Lovely weather, isn't it?" to illustrate that verbal irony expresses the opposite of the true intention or reality. In addition, students do not need to be taught the technical vocabulary for visual cues of sarcasm (e.g., blank face, averted gaze), as these can easily be demonstrated. Finally, the teacher can provide transcripts for any practice dialogues to ensure that learners catch and understand all the necessary vocabulary.

While more-proficient learners will also benefit from an overview of visual cues, the teacher can give authentic examples with verbal cues and vocabulary that are more sophisticated. The teacher can also provide examples showing how sarcasm is used for serious topics. For example, speakers often use sarcasm to criticize political figures or comment on social issues.

HUMOR INSTRUCTION FOR MEMES

Rationale

Social-media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter provide English language learners the opportunity to interact in English with millions of people around the world. Memes rapidly spread with the progression of the Internet and are now a ubiquitous feature of social media. *Image macros*, a popular form of memes, are easily recognizable by their template of a single image with text in all caps above and below the image. Image macros can range from funny comments about trivial daily events to biting criticism about social issues or political figures.

English language learners benefit from a deeper understanding of English memes for several reasons. First, social media offers free opportunities for English learners, and they will certainly encounter memes if they use social media in English. Improving their ability to comprehend and respond to memes can make learners more active and confident social-media users. Second, memes generally offer short messages, giving students the opportunity to learn vocabulary and English expressions in context. In addition, memes offer insights into English-speaking cultures, as they often feature images of famous figures, ranging from sports figures (LeBron James) to movie characters (Willy Wonka) and even to Muppets (Kermit the Frog). Finally, familiarity with memes can deepen understanding of how humor is used in different cultures, as memes are often used as commentary on social issues.

Identifying and comprehending memes

For this form of humor, the stages of identification and comprehension can be combined. After all, students should be able to instantly recognize a meme, but the bigger challenge is to identify the different common memes and comprehend the set message conveyed by different established memes. As suggested by Henderson (2017) and Ohashi (2017), a good starting point for identifying and comprehending memes is to familiarize learners with some of the most well-known examples of English memes, making use of the popular image-macro type of meme.

Match the Meme Character in Column 1 With the Text in Column 2	
Bad Luck Brian	1. YOU LOOK HAPPY STOP IT
Grumpy Cat	2. LATE TO WORK BOSS WAS EVEN LATER
Success Kid	3. FINDS WATER IN THE DESERT DROWNS

Table 2. Matching activity using popular image-macro memes

The answers are Bad Luck Brian (3), Grumpy Cat (1), and Success Kid (2).

Teachers should select the memes that they feel would be most comprehensible and interesting for their learners, but three examples to start with could be the famous meme characters Bad Luck Brian (an awkward teenager whose unlucky experiences are the punch line), Grumpy Cat (an angry-looking feline that shows displeasure with everything), and Success Kid (a child grasping his fist to show his pleasure at a small victory). To help learners become familiar with the pattern of each meme, teachers can ask learners to match the character with a sample text (Henderson 2017). The text should be displayed to indicate the top and bottom sections of each meme. See Table 2 for an example. (At this stage, learners can be allowed to check their dictionaries for any unknown vocabulary.)

To help students improve their ability to understand English punch lines, teachers can task students with matching the top and bottom captions for the same meme character (Ohashi 2017). Again, learners can use their dictionaries at this stage, if necessary. See Table 3 for an example using Success Kid.

Responding to memes
Compared to sarcasm, responding to memes should be an easier challenge for language learners, considering that they are a written form of humor shared on social media, giving learners more time to process the humor than the natural speed and randomness with which sarcasm is used in conversation. One safe and interactive way to have learners practice responding to memes is to create a class-only online site or make use of a learning management system (LMS). An LMS restricted to only students and the teacher is also a safe place for learners to share memes they find and like and express confusion or ask for clarification if they do not understand certain memes. Learners could be tasked with responding to their classmates' shared memes and asking for clarification, as in Table 4.

Producing memes
Memes also provide a safe and friendly format for learners to practice producing their own humor. Many people make their own memes, and English language learners can certainly do the same, with enough support and training. There are free websites where students can easily learn to create their own memes and share them with classmates (see, for example, https://imgflip.com/memegenerator and https://makeameme.org/).

Activities can progress from more restricted (all class members creating a meme based on a well-known meme character or two) to more open. Humor instruction is most effective when the humor is not merely humor for the sake of humor, but when it complements or expands on other aspects of the language-learning curriculum. If the teacher gives students a writing assignment about a happy or lucky experience, creating a meme using Success Kid is a fun way for learners to visualize and share the contents of their writing. Additionally, writing about an unlucky experience could be complemented by an original Bad Luck Brian meme, and an activity about pet peeves could be expanded with a Grumpy Cat meme.

Match the Top Text in Column 1 With the Bottom Text in Column 2	
1. PUT CANDY BAR IN SHOPPING CART	A. DIDN'T GET SAUCE ON IT
2. ATE SPAGHETTI WHILE WEARING A WHITE SHIRT	B. GOT INVITED OUT TO DINNER
3. FORGOT TO GO GROCERY SHOPPING	C. WITHOUT MOM NOTICING

Table 3. Example of Success Kid activity matching top and bottom text
The answers are 1/C (children often plead with their parents to buy them candy while grocery shopping); 2/A (we often unluckily spill food on our clothes when we are wearing white); and 3/B (this describes the feeling of something lucky happening after we make a mistake).

Suggestions for different proficiency levels

Of the three types of humor explored in this article, memes are likely the most accessible for lower-proficiency learners, as they include visual support (the main image), employ short messages (only two lines of text), and often feature repetition (famous characters that are always used to convey similar messages). As a result, most of the activities described in this section should be appropriate for lower-level learners.

For more-proficient learners, the teacher can introduce memes that illustrate messages that are more complex than those conveyed through famous characters such as Success Kid. For example, another famous meme character is Condescending Wonka. These memes depict a screen capture of Gene Wilder in the movie *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory* and feature heavily sarcastic messages. The teacher could also introduce political memes, especially during an election cycle, to help learners raise their awareness about how humor is used to comment on social issues in English-speaking countries.

HUMOR INSTRUCTION FOR ONLINE SATIRICAL NEWS

Rationale

Satirical news can refer to either satirical TV news programs such as *The Daily Show* or satirical digital media such as *The Onion*. In this article, we will focus on the latter format, as we find it to be a more accessible form of humor for English language learners. Online satirical news is another ubiquitous feature of social media in the English-speaking world. Satirical news mimics real news to mock or satirize everything from trivial daily matters (e.g., shopping manners) to serious social issues (e.g., politics and elections). *The Onion*, published in the United States, is now arguably the most famous satirical news site in the world, with over 6.3 million likes on Facebook. This form of humor is also common in other English-speaking countries, with popular examples including *The Daily Mash* (U.K.), *The Beaverton* (Canada), and *The Shovel* (Australia).

English language learners can benefit from exposure to online satirical news. One reason is that they are likely to encounter satirical news on social media, but they may mistake it for real news if they are not familiar with this type of humor. Again, it is important to use types of humor that are challenging (for linguistic or cultural reasons) for students to understand, but then provide humor instruction to make this type of humor more accessible. Mistaking satirical news for real news can cause confusion or embarrassment for learners. Another reason is that the ability to recognize different forms of news (e.g., satirical news, fake news) is an increasingly important part of the twenty-first-century skills of digital and media literacy. Finally, as with other forms of humor, exposure to satirical news provides cultural insights into English-speaking countries. Learners can improve their understanding of important figures and events and see how humor is sometimes used as social criticism.

Identifying satirical news

Satirical news items can be tricky to recognize, as they are designed to mimic the

Expressions for Liking a Meme	Expressions Asking for Clarification
That's a good one!	What does _____ mean?
It took me a while, but now I get it!	I'm not sure I get this one. Why is it funny?
That's (funny / hilarious / hysterical)!	I don't get it. Can you explain what the joke is?
I know how (he / she) feels!	Does this mean that _____?
HAHA / HEHE / LOL / ROTFL	Is this funny because _____?

Table 4. Expressions for liking a meme and asking for clarification

appearance of real news. We will introduce two possible approaches to training English language learners to recognize satirical news, one involving stylistic cues and one involving critical-reading and critical-thinking skills. Although satirical news does mimic real news, cues about the appearance and writing style can also help learners to distinguish between satirical and real news. One hint is in the headline. Many satirical news sites might use particularly large font sizes and capitalize all words in the headlines (even articles and prepositions), giving a more tabloid-like appearance. Other stylistic hints include casual headlines (e.g., using slang expressions that might not be used in headlines of real news) or vague details (e.g., referring to a "local man" rather than using a name).

As mentioned, the ability to recognize different forms of media is an important aspect of digital and media literacy. A second approach to helping learners recognize satirical news is to focus on the content of the articles and use critical-reading and critical-thinking skills to determine whether the respective stories could be real news. Several cues could be part of training to assist learners in improving their ability to detect satire. As a starting point, learners can consider the following two questions when trying to recognize different forms of media:

1. Is the article newsworthy?

2. Is the article believable?

About the first question, consider a sample headline from *The Onion*: "Grandfather A Man Of Few Shirts." Would a story about a grandfather's wardrobe really make the news? To address the second question, learners can be informed that one device used by satirical news writers is to put famous figures in absurd or incongruous situations. For example, a headline from *Onion Gamers Network* (a section of *The Onion* devoted to video games) in 2020 read, "While Abraham Lincoln Was Great In Many Ways, We At OGN Must Examine His Troubling Legacy Of Never Playing Video Games." It is an obviously

absurd and unbelievable headline, considering that Lincoln was president of the United States roughly 100 years before the first video game was even created!

One activity we have used in our English reading courses is to design practice tests that include a mixture of satirical news items and offbeat but true news items. The teacher can provide a mix of items with just the headline and a blurb from each article. Just providing a segment of the articles is sufficient, for two reasons. First, this mimics how satirical news items appear on social media. Second, readers can usually identify satirical news from just the headline or the first line or two of an article. For example, two of the following articles are offbeat but true news items, while two are from satirical sources:

1. Bear necessities? Furry visitor on the prowl in California store

2. World's scientists admit they just don't like mice

3. 'UFO' in Congo jungle turns out to be Internet balloon

4. Study reveals: Babies are stupid

Using the previous two critical-thinking prompts, learners can hopefully identify that number two and number four come from satirical news. (Both satirical items are from *The Onion*, while the true stories come from the "Oddly Enough" section of Reuters.) Hints that could be used to identify the different forms of news include the following:

• #1 is believable, as there are often news stories about wildlife encroaching on human communities.

• #2 would be absurd, as professional scientists would not state that they do not like rodents.

• #3 is also believable, as it is common for UFO sightings to later be followed by a rational explanation.

- #4 is also absurd. In addition, a slang or offensive term like "stupid" is not commonly used in real news articles.

Comprehending satirical news

While teachers can provide learners with cues to help them recognize satirical news with some practice, actually comprehending the humor is a more challenging task. In addition to common English challenges like vocabulary, understanding satirical news often requires a high degree of cultural literacy and awareness of current events. Still, this should be seen as a worthwhile challenge. Examining the humor of a culture can also lead to a deeper awareness of and interest in politics and social issues. This is also an example of how humor instruction can have value beyond just the humor. Exposure to politics or social issues through satirical news leads to increased background knowledge and empowers English language learners to improve digital and media literacy.

Increasing comprehension of English satirical news can be promoted by classroom collaboration, both student-to-student and student-to-teacher. For example, the teacher can provide learners with a selection of satirical news headlines and task them with writing an explanation of the meaning. In other words, what is the article really expressing? Who or what is the target of the humor? In the safe environment of the language classroom, learners can enjoy the process of comparing ideas and answers until the teacher offers a final explanation. This process could start with teacher-selected articles and progress to students selecting their own articles from a range of satirical sites suggested by the teacher. One out-of-class assignment we have set is tasking students with choosing a certain number of articles they find humorous and a selection of articles they find confusing. Learners compare the types of humor they find funny and collaborate to decipher the difficult examples.

Responding to satirical news

Again, failure to recognize satirical news on social media can be confusing or embarrassing for English language learners. As with memes, however, the language classroom provides a safe environment where students can share and respond to satirical news. A class-only online page is easy to create, as we also suggested for sharing and responding to memes. Considering that this is a safe environment for learners to examine and deepen their understanding of English humor, class replies can include either an appreciation of the satirical news examples posted or questions to clarify the meaning of the examples. While it is best to allow learners to interact freely with their classmates, the teacher can also supply explanations or additional resources when necessary.

Suggestions for different proficiency levels

As with verbal irony and memes, satirical news is a form of humor used to mock anything from daily trivial matters to serious contemporary social issues. Teachers can focus on the former when introducing satirical news to lower-proficiency learners. Such satirical items usually use relatively simple vocabulary, and if not, the vocabulary can be simplified. The teacher can also focus on helping lower-level learners notice stylistic hints. For example, satirical news sites are more likely to use features such as all caps in headlines and odd photos that are obviously edited in some way. Meanwhile, teachers can give more-proficient learners freedom in searching for and discussing their own examples of satirical news items. In addition, the teacher can introduce satirical news to explore complex topics, such as politics and media literacy.

CONCLUSION

Humor is a powerful tool that makes the language-learning experience more interesting, memorable, and engaging. In addition, humor instruction about popular forms of humor in English-speaking cultures can be integrated to supplement any of the traditional four language skills. Moreover, our research demonstrates that training helps learners improve their humor competency regarding satirical news and sarcasm (Prichard and Rucynski 2019, 2020). However, the opening anecdote serves as a warning that humor instruction is not something to randomly tack on merely to

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make English classes more interesting. Proper humor instruction involves careful scaffolding, selection of materials and resources, and design of activities.

While a growing number of researchers advocate including a component of humor instruction in the language-teaching curriculum, our aim in this article is to provide one practical framework for how humor instruction about three common forms of English-language humor can be carried out in the classroom. Considering the multifaceted and complex nature of humor, teachers still need to take great care in implementing humor instruction that is appropriate for the proficiency level, curricular needs, cultural background, and language-learning goals of their students. A deeper understanding of the humor of the target culture(s) empowers English language learners as they acquire more competence and confidence in communicating, both face-to-face and digitally, in English.

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