

The Role of Humor in the EFL Classroom in Japan

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INTRODUCTION

The positive aspects of humor in the classroom have been viewed with growing acceptance in recent years, although there are still negative reactions ranging from skepticism to outright disbelief. Some teachers feel that humor is a risky proposition, while others maintain that levity can undermine their ability to maintain control over the classroom, impose discipline, and assign bad grades. Still, the amount and variety of academic research on the use of humor in the classroom argues that it has potential value. Humor seems to have always found its way into my lessons; below are some reminiscences:

- The in-house textbooks at one school were so poorly written that it became routine to ask my students to find at least one major mistake in each dialog.
- Mr. Inai (稲井), a new student, complained that a homonym for his surname *inai* (居ない) means *absent*, creating frequent confusion in his office..
- When I asked a beginning-level class about the weekend, one man said he had ridden an electric car. I was lost until another student said that was a direct translation from *densha* (電車), the Japanese

word for *train*.

- My first experience with larger group lessons was in a vocational school. I was unfamiliar with Japanese names and maintained a “cheat sheet” indicating where the students were seated until they started deliberately changing places.
- In the first lesson after my usual summer trip to San Francisco, one student responded to a difficult question by poking my stomach gently to acknowledge an obvious gain of weight.
- One final, albeit admittedly out-of-the-classroom, example: I was visiting a former student who had pancreatic cancer he was emaciated but his stomach had become bloated. When I asked how he was feeling, he replied, “Like you. I’m pregnant.”

The foregoing examples serve to raise the question of what constitutes humor. Some were planned, some spontaneous; some were intended as humor, others were perceived as such; some utilized verbal humor, others humorous behavior; some are obviously humorous, but others fall under the “You had to be there ...” category. Collectively, they demonstrate the broad scope of *humor*.

In this paper I will explore the potential benefits of using humor both intended and incidental in any kind of language lesson. I will begin with a review of academic research on humor, in which I address the definition of *humor* and other relevant terms, and reflect on some ways in which humor has figured into my lessons.

LITERARY REVIEW AND DEFINITION OF TERMS

A great deal of attention has been devoted to the psychological aspects of laughter and how it relates to humor (Weisfeld 2006:8; Fry 1963; Monro 1963:35; Lefcourt & Martin 1986:2-3). But is laughter the only reaction to humor? McGhee points out that “people laugh and smile, or

make statements indicating their feelings about a joke, cartoon, pratfall, and so forth” (1979). Weisfeld sees humor appreciation as a process wherein “The recipient (of humor) indicates his gratitude through laughter, attention, or verbal acknowledgment” (2006:8). In fact, positive reactions to humor can involve verbal (compliments) and non-verbal (laughing) utterances, facial expressions (smiling, raised eyebrows), gestures (nodding, pointing), actions (clapping, snapping one’s fingers), and even thoughts.

But similar reactions to the same stimulus may differ in nature: I will sometimes laugh at a joke that I don’t find particularly funny because I don’t want to break the mood of the moment – this is laughing for the sake of laughing, which happens when peer pressure works on individual audience members. Words like *laughable* may sometimes be hard to apply because it is not necessarily clear if people are in fact *laughing at* a given situation or *laughing within the context of* (or *laughing in*) that situation (Menon 1931, cited in Monro 1963:14).

The Japanese word *omoshiroi* (面白い) is commonly used to refer to jokes, humorous anecdotes, puns, and comedy movies and performances. Japanese-English dictionaries translate *omoshiroi* as follows:

- Kinshusha: interesting; amusing, entertaining, funny, exciting (1996)
- Sanseido: interesting; entertaining, amusing, funny; pleasant, delightful (1985)
- Kenkyusha: 1) thrilling, fantastic, irresistible; 3) intriguing, fascinating, engrossing, enthralling, absorbing (2003)
- Shogakukan: 1) enjoyable, interesting, amusing, fun; 2) witty, funny

I have consolidated these lists into groups of synonyms. What is curious is the fact that not one of these dictionaries listed *humorous* (possibly because the existence of the loanword *yūmorasu* [ユウモラス]).

1. interesting, intriguing, fascinating, engrossing, enthralling, absorb-

ing

2. amusing, funny, witty

3. entertaining, pleasant, delightful, enjoyable, merry, fun

4. exciting, thrilling

The breadth of meanings can be seen using common reactions to each of them:

1. If something is interesting, a normal reaction is to think.

2. If something is amusing, a normal reaction is to laugh.

3. If something is entertaining, a normal reaction is to smile.

4. If something is exciting, a normal reaction is to inhale or palpitate.

Recent studies on kinds of humor used in the classroom include not only jokes, puns, anecdotes, and cartoons but also riddles (Bryant et al. 1979:112, Torok, et al. 2004, Wanzer et al. 2006), which many would probably characterize as more *fun* than *humorous* and therefore more likely to elicit smiles than laughter. Rather than trying to redefine the word *humor*, however, it might suffice to recognize its limited scope. Freud made a clear distinction between jokes (which he categorized as *wit*) and humor (Freud 1916, cited in Lefcourt & Martin 1986:12-13). It might be best to apply a broader category such as *wit and humor*.

PEDAGOGICAL APPLICATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

There are two ways in which wit and humor can be introduced into the classroom: the deliberate introduction of intentional humor or humorous teaching materials or topics, and the use of incidental humor. The former have different purposes: intentional humor includes things the teacher plans to say or do in order to relieve stress, change the classroom atmosphere, etc.; humorous teaching materials are used to teach language, train language skills, and gauge the students' reaction rather than to elicit an intended reaction. This paper will focus on in-

tentional humor and incidental humor.

Everyone can recollect painful or embarrassing experiences that demonstrate the difference between intention and perception. A compliment is taken as a slight; a whisper is seen as part of a conspiracy; someone speaking animatedly is told to calm down and not be angry. These kinds of incidents happen all the time, often involving humor. Below are actual incidents in which humor was intended (or allegedly intended) but not necessarily perceived:

- On a radio talk show, New York State Senator Alfonse D'Amato criticizes Japanese-American Judge Lance Ito for his handling of the O.J. Simpson murder case, speaking in a stereotypical Japanese accent (Wikipedia).
- During a press conference, President George W. Bush asks a journalist who was wearing sunglasses, "Are you going to ask that question with shades on?" and adds, "For the viewers, there's no sun," only to learn later that Peter Wallsten of the *Los Angeles Times* has Stargardt's disease and is legally blind (CNN.com).

In both cases, the remarks in question, which both might have been defended with the words, "I was only joking," can scare off teachers contemplating the use of humor in the classroom. But it is important to realize that all humor has an intended target audience, and only those in the target audience can be anticipated to exhibit the desired reaction (Ziv 1984). In general, it shouldn't be taken for granted that everyone in the audience will have the same reaction to any bit of humor—some may not think it's funny (e.g., black humor), some may not have understood it (children or non-native speakers), and some may not even have heard it (due to distracting noises or inattention). On the other hand, humor is sometimes perceived where none was intended:

- In greeting a colleague upon his return from a trip to the Philippines,

I was shocked to hear my boss ask what Filipino women were like. I later discovered that he was asking about the (political) situation: *josei* (女性) means *woman/women*, while *jōsei* (情勢) means *situation*.

- A group of students told me a teacher new to Japan had behaved inappropriately by calling them “foxes.” When I inquired about the incident, the teacher said he had greeted them with “Hi, folks!”

In both cases, while none of the principals saw any humor in the situation at the moment, I was able to enjoy my discovery of the cause of confusion.

A university philosophy class I took was taught in a huge lecture hall, which combined with the subject matter to have a soporific effect on many students. One day, I noticed the teacher stop his lecture and begin a story about a friend of his whose beloved daughter Ruth suddenly died, after which the man’s friends called him “ruthless.” The joke was met with silence, and the teacher resumed his lecture. It was entirely out of character for him to tell a joke, so nobody was listening for one. If, on the other hand, a teacher has a reputation for having a healthy sense of humor and often tells jokes, students will be more attuned for humor remarks or actions. A joke is more likely to be perceived by students if it is not a rarity. This is not to say that teachers should be comedians or entertainers (Minchew 2001). Rather, it suggests that humor may occur more naturally if the teacher has demonstrated the ability to produce, perceive, and appreciate humor.

DISCUSSION

Any classroom situation, especially a new class with a new teacher, perhaps with new classmates and even in a new school, offers ample doses of the unknown to create a potentially great deal of stress for students. This “fear factor” is amplified in English lessons in Japan, where

a variety of factors have created the impression that English is especially difficult for Japanese learners. And the intimidation may increase in direct proportion to the amount of English the teacher uses.

Can enjoyment on the part of the students enhance the educational effects of the lesson? Lundberg and Thurston describe it as a chain reaction: "If (the students) know something funny might happen at any moment, they listen. When they listen, the teacher is more effective" (2002). However, this chain reaction cannot take place in the language classroom without certain provisos. For some, level of competency is an issue it is widely believed that humor should be reserved for more advanced and/or more mature learners. Moreover, EFL students are generally primed to "be taught," to receive a language lesson with designated target language points. Intentional humor, in the form of humor written into the lesson (a pun in a reading passage, a humorous situation in a dialog) is often subtle, and even if the humor is not perceived it is entirely possible to complete the lesson. When humorous teaching materials are used, lower-level students will of course be more likely to recognize and respond to visual humor than verbal humor. Verbal humor often appears in formatted jokes (e.g., knock-knock jokes, riddles, puns). But what about incidental humor? The logical fear is that lower-level students will simply fail to hear and therefore comprehend jokes told by the teacher. However, incidental humor by nature can be understood by the students because it is contextually relevant to them as one form of authentic communication.

All language lessons can involve some degree of authentic communication greetings are a matter of relatively universal etiquette ("relatively" because some students seem to feel that greetings are for friends and classmates and not for teachers, while some teachers prohibit tardy students from greeting their classmates), first-day self-introductions al-

low new classmates to get to know each other (and provide teachers with an early indication of the students' speaking skills), and questions to the teacher are designed to enable the students to proceed with the task at hand with greater confidence. It is worth considering whether or not these things happen as a matter of course or only when the teacher encourages them, whether or not they happen in more teacher-centered lessons than in more student-centered lessons, whether they are more likely to happen in content-based, communicative lessons than in textbook-based lessons, and the extent to which they might be more prevalent among older and/or higher-level learners than among younger and/or lower-level learners. Younger learners are conditioned to speak only in response to prompts from the teacher. In lower-level classes, most of the speaking done by the teacher tends to consist of either instructions, explanations, or models for the students to repeat there is always a purpose, but it is almost always related to telling the students what to do during the lesson. The only other opportunity for authentic communication to enter the classroom is in the form of incidental speaking aka ad libs or asides. These are sometimes addressed to individuals or groups rather than the entire class; however, when spoken sotto voce, it can be argued that the teacher is talking to himself/herself rather than to the students.

If a teacher is open to injecting humor into the authentic communication that takes place in every lesson, it can establish in the students' minds the fact that this teacher has a sense of humor and is likely to exhibit that sense of humor during lessons in other words, humor will have a role in this course. Rather than suggesting that teachers become comedians, teachers can look for opportunities to use levity to encourage their students to relax and enjoy their lessons. Below are some general approaches I have employed (with specific examples cited):

- Teasing students: I sometimes omit individual students (e.g., not giving them a handout, not assigning them a group for a group assignment).
- Self-deprecation: I have a miserable time trying to pronounce the Japanese syllable *tsu* (ツ). I gave up on trying to address one student by his surname of Tsutsumi, resorting to the nickname “Mr. T.”
- Playing against expectations: I often structure tasks so that speakers have to choose the next speaker but are prohibited from choosing someone sitting in an adjacent seat.
- Fostering the concept of *laughing with someone* instead of *laughing at someone*: Moody explains that “In cruel laughter, in laughing at someone, we exclude him from the network of love, understanding and support; in laughing with someone, we enfold him within it” (1978). I want to enjoy teaching as much as I want my students to enjoy learning, so I try to be good-natured and am quick to laugh during lessons. Students are sometimes taken aback to hear me laugh when they make mistakes, and I have heard students say to their friends in Japanese, “He’s laughing!” However, the fear of humiliation is greatly eased when it becomes clear that I am laughing in a good-natured way, laughing not at any and every mistake made, rather at mistakes that can provoke thought. One common example is the students’ tendency to say, “Good morning” to me at the beginning of an afternoon class. As a direct translation from Japanese, this is a perfectly understandable mistake. However, drawing attention to it in a lighthearted way can provide a situational mnemonic for students.

The foregoing is not a list of suggestions, simply a list of things that I personally have done. While everyone has a sense of humor, everyone has their own way of displaying it. There are few experiences more un-

comfortable than being an audience for forced humor. Indeed, many studies have revealed that inappropriate use of humor by teachers can have a variety of negative effects ranging from distracting students from the lesson and creating skepticism about its relevance to insulting, intimidating, or demotivating students (Torok et al. 2004:17-18, Bryant et al. 5/1979:111, Chaisson 2002, Wanzer & Frymier 1999).

Also to be explored further is the use of intentional humor, especially in the form of humorous teaching materials. If humorous teaching materials are used, will that dissuade teachers from trying to use incidental humor within the same lesson, in an effort to strike a better balance in atmosphere? Or would the backdrop of humorous content foster a greater amount of spontaneous humor on the part of both teacher and students?

Maintaining a more relaxed classroom atmosphere is not every teacher's desire: some prefer to maintain a professional distance with the students, some feel that a relaxed atmosphere might undermine their control over the class, and others simply feel that the demands of the syllabus don't permit them to take anything other than a business-like approach. Still, students are sensitive to their teachers' moods and attitudes, younger learners even more so. If displaying a sense of humor can engage the students' attention, relax them, and contribute to a less threatening classroom atmosphere, then laughing may not be a laughing matter after all.

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