



# Laughing matters: On the theory and teaching of Western Humor, and how it can be utilized in the EFL/ESL classroom

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This paper deals with the use of humor in the English Language Teaching (ELT) classroom. It considers the meaning of *humor* and *humorous* and the range of positive reactions to humor. A study of Japanese-English translations reveals how a broader frame of reference such as *humor and wit* may be warranted. The paper analyzes the relationship between humor intended and humor perceived, cites examples of various ways in which they can interact, and introduces the concept of target audience for humor and how that correlates with total audience. It then introduces the concepts of spontaneous use of humor and intentional use of humor, dividing the latter into premeditated teacher humor and the teaching of humor and then citing examples of how each can be used.

この論文では、英語教育の観点から見た「ユーモア」の効用について論じる。まず、「ユーモア」(humor)と「ユーモアがある」(humorous)の語意、そしてユーモアに対する肯定的・好意的な反応の幅について論ずる。ある日英翻訳についての研究が明示しているとおり、英語の「ユーモア」の語意を日本語で理解するには、「ユーモアとウィット(“笑いを誘うおかしさ:ユーモア”と“知的なおかしさ:ウィット”)」のような幅広い枠組みで言及することが有益である。次に、意図的に使用されたユーモアと、認識されたユーモアの関係进行分析し、これらが相互作用する様々な事例を挙げる。更に、発信されたユーモアの標的聴衆である“ターゲット・オーディエンス(標的聴衆)”という概念を紹介し、この概念が、発信されたユーモアの全聴衆と、どう関係しているかについて言及する。最後に、偶発的ユーモアと、意図的ユーモアという概念を紹介し、後者を、教師が発した意図的ユーモアと、ユーモアに富んだ題材の教材とに分け、それぞれの効果的な使用の可能性について検証する。

It is considered a merit to be *witty*, *quick-witted* and *fun-loving*, and to *have a healthy sense of humor*, while it is anything but a compliment to describe someone as *humorless* or *having no sense of humor*. We all know (and probably admire) people who always seem to have an apropos joke or anecdote on the tip of the tongue, and how-to books on public speaking routinely include at least a chapter on how to

incorporate humor into speeches and presentations. In the field of education, the long-standing image of schoolteachers (or, more precisely, English teachers) as “dour, prudish individuals with no sense of humor” (Minchew, 2001, p. 58) as typified by Miss Watson from *Huckleberry Finn* and Mark Thackeray in *To Sir With Love* has been offset by educators with a sense of humor who reveal it either gradually (e.g., the title characters in *Goodbye Mr. Chips* and *Mr. Holland’s Opus*) or relentlessly (Robin Williams in *Dead Poets Society* and *Good Morning, Vietnam*). In fact, recent research shows that students have more favorable views of teachers who use humor than those who don’t (Bryant, Comisky, & Zillmann, 1979; Bryant et al., 1980; Gorham & Christophel, 1990; Torok et al., 2004; Wanzer & Frymier, 1999; Wanzer et al., 2006; White, 2001). The acceptance of humor in TESOL is evidenced by the many ELT websites with a humor corner or links to humor websites. JALT’s own publication *The Language Teacher* introduced a regular humor column in April 2005.

This article will focus on the definition of *humor* for educational purposes, study the relationship between intention and perception, consider the role of the target audience for humor, introduce kinds of classroom humor, report on research on classroom humor, and suggest ways in which humor can be introduced to the ELT classroom.

### Definition of terms

To establish a clear definition for *humor*, it can be enlightening to examine the Japanese language. The most common translation for *humorous* in six Japanese-English dictionaries is *omoshiroi* (面白). However, a reverse-dictionary look at

how *omoshiroi* translates to English reveals that it has a much broader range of meanings than *humorous* (or its synonyms *funny*, *amusing*, *comical*, and *laughable*) from *interesting* to *fun* to *exciting* to *queer* and even *not very good*. While these words have fairly distinct meanings in English, they are not mutually exclusive. For example, one might consider humor and laughter to have a causal relationship: laughter is a reaction to humor, and humor elicits laughter. However, we might all be able to recall times when we have laughed in response to something that was not funny. Monro (1963) cites nine kinds of “non-humorous laughter” (p. 20): tickling and laughing gas (physical stimuli that can cause laughter); nervousness, relief after a strain, and laughing it off (laughter operating as a defense mechanism); joyous laughter (well-being); laughter while playing (supporting the translation of Japanese *omoshiroi* as “fun”); and make-believe and contests (laughter as more of an action than reaction). Especially when it occurs as a response to external stimuli, the line of demarcation between humorous and non-humorous laughter is thin. Correspondingly, humor can evoke reactions other than laughter, from the more overt (smiling, shouting, clapping, pointing) to the more subtle (raised eyebrows, winking, simple eye contact, unvoiced thoughts). In other words, what makes us laugh is not necessarily funny and what is funny does not necessarily make us laugh. Rather than focusing solely on the narrow correlation between humor and laughter, then, it may be advantageous to take advantage of these fuzzy definitions by employing terminology that implies a broader range of both stimuli and responses. This seems to already be the case among some researchers: in categorizing kinds of humor used in the classroom, Bryant, Comisky, and Zillmann (1979), Torok et al. (2004), and Wanzer et al. (2006)

all list riddles together with jokes, puns, anecdotes, and cartoons. Unlike the others, riddles often elicit smiles rather than laughter, thus corresponding more to the translation of *omoshiroi* as “interesting.” It might therefore be more appropriate for this study to replace the term “humor” with the more inclusive “humor and wit.”

### Intention vs. perception

Just as the correlation between humor and laughter is a fuzzy one, the same applies to the relationship between the intention to create or convey humor and the perception of humor. As in all human communication, intention and perception often do not match. Even when people can clearly hear what we say or write, they do not always understand what we mean—even among native speakers of the same language, gaps can arise from ambiguity, lack of context, and misinterpretation. This can be of great comfort to learners of English who tend to assume that communicative disconnects are due to their lack of language knowledge or ability. While that may sometimes or even often be true, Figure 1 illustrates how other factors can be involved.

If someone says, does, or writes something intended to be humorous, it may elicit a positive reaction, a negative reaction, or no reaction. The following sections will analyze these potential reactions in more detail.

#### *Humor intended, positive reaction elicited*

While this might seem to be the ideal situation, it is not necessarily so because the reaction might not match the intention. There are three possible scenarios here:

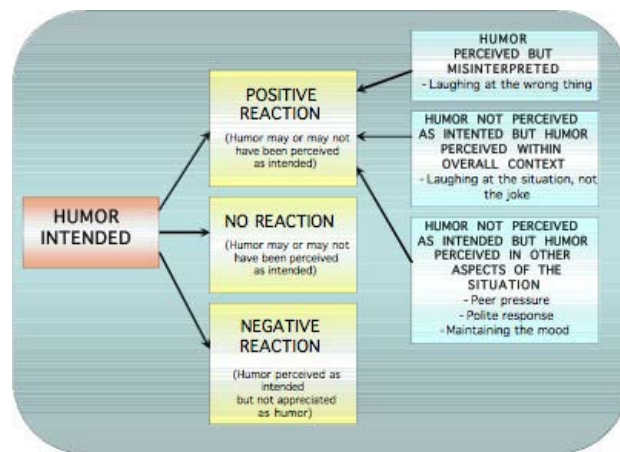


Figure 1. Humor Intended vs. Humor Perceived

- The audience perceived the humor as it was intended: the humorist’s objective has been accomplished successfully.
- The audience may or may not have perceived the humor intended, but misinterpreted something else as humorous even though it was not intended that way: In a course on mixed media, I sometimes do comparison and contrast activities using the movies “Romeo and Juliet” (1968) and “William Shakespeare’s Romeo + Juliet” (1996). In a recent lesson, I followed that with a viewing of the Reduced Shakespeare Company’s parody of Romeo and Juliet, then asked the students how the tragedy was transformed into a comedy. The most commonly cited factor was the use of an all-

male cast. Possibly exhibiting greater familiarity with the Trocadero than Kabuki and Noh, the students were surprised to learn there were no actresses in Shakespearean England; they had perceived humor in one aspect of the performance that was not intended to be humorous. To be sure, the actors take full comedic value of the cross-dressing, but the decision to use male actors in female roles was simply in keeping with Shakespearean tradition.

- The audience may or may not have perceived the humor intended, but they perceived humor in another aspect of the situation: I have had occasion to appear in Christmas skits in which I've been costumed as everything from a sailor-suited high school girl to a gorilla in a Santa suit, and it would be difficult to gauge whether the laughter was more because of what I was wearing or because of who was wearing it.
- The audience perceived humor in the situation although no humor was intended: I recall an episode early in my career in Japan, when I was having a group of adult conversation students report on what they had done during the past weekend. One student's reply that he had ridden an electric car had me stumped until one of his classmates stopped laughing long enough to explain that the student had made a direct translation of *densha* (電車), or *train*.
- The audience did not perceive the humor as intended but responds favorably for other reasons—to avoid appearing out of place because everyone else seems to be laughing (i.e., from peer pressure), to show

respect for the attempt at humor (e.g., polite or muted laughter), or to try to maintain a positive mood already established (i.e., laughing for the sake of laughing).

### *Humor intended, no reaction elicited*

Not all reactions are visible or audible, so it can be easy to mistake silence for apathy.

- The audience didn't catch the humor: My freshman philosophy class in university was taught in a large lecture hall by an elderly man who spoke in a soft monotone; combined with the subject matter, this had quite a soporific effect on students. One day, the teacher suddenly stopped his lecture to talk about a man whose beloved daughter Ruth had died, after which all of the man's friends called him "ruthless." There was no reaction, and he resumed his lecture. I think it would be safe to assume that the majority of the class was asleep or wasn't listening.
- The audience caught the humor but didn't perceive it as humorous: Common expressions like "I fail to see the humor in that" and "You don't have a sense of humor" apply in this kind of situation.
- The audience caught and perceived the humor but was not sufficiently moved to react overtly: For example, me. I caught the joke and quite liked it, but didn't want to draw attention to myself in front of such a large audience by laughing out loud (the opposite of polite laughter).

### *Humor intended, negative reaction elicited*

Negative reactions cannot always be taken at face value.

- The audience perceived the humor but didn't appreciate it: This most often happens when the audience realizes it is the butt of the joke or is sympathetic with whoever is the butt of the joke. The most prominent example of this is the reaction in the Muslim world to editorial cartoons in a 2006 Danish newspaper featuring the prophet Mohammad. To be sure, as much humor is tendentious in nature (e.g., ethnic jokes, sexual jokes, sarcasm) and as such is anticipated, if not intended, to evoke a negative reaction.
- The audience perceived the humor and gave a negative reaction in mock disapproval: Even if the audience doesn't perceive it as being very humorous, they appreciate the overall performance and are playing the role of hostile audience. Common examples are groaning at bad puns, heckling, and booing at good-natured teasing of the audience.

### **Humor in the classroom**

All of the above applies to the ELT classroom as well as general communicative situations. Let us consider two fundamental ways in which humor can be brought into the classroom, and prerequisites for each one to be of optimal effectiveness. Classroom humor can be divided into *intentional use of humor* and *spontaneous use of humor*:

### *Intentional use of humor*

Like most things teachers do in the classroom, *intentional use of humor* requires a certain amount of preparation. Intentional use of humor includes (1a) the outright teaching of humor using humorous materials and (1b) premeditated use of humor in teaching. Preparation for 1a includes the development of materials and lesson planning, while preparation for 1b could include rehearsing a joke or anecdote, tailoring it to match lesson content, or bringing relevant props to the classroom. Within the context of the delivery itself, Ziv (1984) cites five ways in which the humorist can prepare the audience: the social situation, the humorous image of the speaker, comic appearance, facial expression, and verbal declarations.

### *Spontaneous use of humor*

Spontaneous use of humor includes (2a) the unplanned creation of humor by the teacher in word or deed, and (2b) the perception by students of humor in something the teacher says or does. Being created and delivered on the spot, it may not require outright preparation; however, it can be made more effective if there is some degree of preparedness involved. This is not to imply that teachers "have to be comedians to create an enjoyable classroom environment" (Minchew 2001, p. 67). Rather, preparedness is a mindset: being ready to find humor in various situations (e.g., being receptive to student humor, being alert to situations that can be exploited in humorous ways) and gradually establishing a classroom atmosphere conducive to humor.

Haskins (2000) characterizes *immediate behavior* as when “a teacher uses a more direct style of teaching. That is, the teacher displays behaviors that reduce physical and psychological distance between himself or herself and the student” (p. 23). Specific examples include standing/sitting in a relaxed position in front of students, making eye contact with the entire class, smiling, standing or moving away from barriers that can separate teachers from students, and attracting the students’ attention through verbal expressiveness. Research by Gorham and Christophel (1990) on the role of humor in teaching immediacy suggests that “more immediate teachers do use more humor and do engender more learning” (p. 60). Among the reported benefits of teacher humor are that it makes students more attentive, lowers tension and boosts morale, facilitates understanding, and makes the teacher more likeable (Torok et al., 2004). Respondents in studies by White (2001) found that humor can relieve stress, motivate students, provoke thinking, gain attention, handle unpleasant situations, reinforce knowledge, create a healthy learning environment, help students develop a good self-image, and help students understand other cultures. It should be noted that some of these benefits translate into improved classroom atmosphere more than increased learning (Ziv, 1988). In other words, humor that may have no obvious relevance to the lesson at hand can still be of long-term benefit.

### *Research on classroom humor*

Much of the research on teachers’ use of humor in the classroom has focused on (1b), (2a) and (2b) above—i.e., *teaching with humor* as opposed to *teaching humor*: Bryant

et al. (1980) found that the most common forms of humor used by teachers included jokes, riddles, puns, funny stories, and humorous comments (Appendix 1), with a full 65% of reported instances regarded by students as being spontaneous rather than intentional. An earlier study found that teachers introduced humor into their lessons in one form or another an average of 3.34 times per 50-minute period, with only 20% of the teachers involved employing no humor at all (Bryant, Comisky, & Zillmann, 1979). Research by Torok et al. (2004) found that the most common kinds of humor used by teachers were funny stories, funny comments, jokes, professional humor, and sarcasm, at a rate of about three times per lesson.

### *Target audience*

Whether spontaneous or intentional, underlying each situation is the intention to create or convey humor; whether spur-of-the-moment or long-gestating, each expression of humor is the result of a decision based in large part on the humorist’s familiarity with the audience. The stylistic and subjective nature of humor provides a stark contrast to the more straightforward delivery and objective content of, for example, a news report—e.g., there are more potential barriers to communication ranging from language and cultural background to age and gender to religious, political and sexual beliefs. If the objective is to reach (i.e., entertain) as much of the audience as possible, it stands to reason that the humorist will try to produce the kind of humor that most if not all of the audience may understand and appreciate. While *actual audience* simply means whoever is in a position to hear or read what the humorist produces,

*target audience* means the portion of the actual audience that it is anticipated (or hoped) will understand and appreciate the humor. That anticipation is based on the humorist's intention which, as we have already seen, does not always match the audience's perception. The chances of *success* are arguably higher when the topic is familiar to the students (someone they know, including themselves), is contextually clear (relevant to the lesson or task at hand), or has a familiar antecedent (something from a previous lesson). Correspondingly, jokes and anecdotes that are completely out of context are more risky.

In a study of student perceptions of advertising, Hobbs (2004) found that students who had been taught about media literacy perceived the target audience for selected TV ads more narrowly than demographically similar groups without training in media literacy. Shown an advertisement featuring two young, well-dressed African American men, one holding a saxophone and the other a can of beer, the group with media literacy training were more likely to identify young African American men as the target audience, rather than young men, men in general, or people in general. With that in mind, it is understandable that teachers who want as many students as possible to laugh will use humor with a broader lower common denominator. One example is visual humor, including slapstick.

### *Potential pitfalls*

Mismatches between teacher's intention in using humor and student perception can result in misunderstanding, abuse, misuse, and overuse of humor.

### *Misunderstanding of humor*

Misunderstood humor was explained above: intended humor might not be perceived as humorous, humor may be perceived in the overall situation, and humor may be perceived where none was intended.

### *Abuse of humor*

Abuse of humor can result in the abuse (or perception thereof) of students. Noting that humor is generally classified as either tendentious or harmless, Bryant, Comiskey, and Zillmann (1979) found that "nearly one-half of (college teacher humor) is used to convey hostile or sexual messages" (p. 116). Torok et al. (2004) found that students found some teacher humor potentially offensive, reveals potential ethnic or sexual bias, and distracts from the lesson. Wanzer et al. (2006) categorized humor that students considered inappropriate for the classroom into disparaging humor targeting students, disparaging humor targeting others, offensive humor (dealing with topics such as sex, vulgar language, drinking, personal life, drugs and other illegal activities, morbidity, and sarcasm), and self-disparaging humor. In a study by White (2001), at least one respondent perceived humor by a teacher as intending to embarrass, intimidate, control, or retaliate against students.

### *Misuse of humor*

At the other end of the scale, there is also potential risk for those unaccustomed to using humor: "Teachers with very low overall immediacy ... may not benefit from increasing the proportion of positive humor if they do not increase

their use of other immediacy behaviors as well” (Gorham & Christophel 1990, p. 60). Ziv (1988) puts it more bluntly: “not all teachers should be encouraged to use humor. Some, because of their personality, believe that humor may present a danger or are embarrassed by it, in which case they had better not use it at all” (p. 15). That might have been the case with my aforementioned philosophy teacher. Or the teacher I once observed who adopted a drill sergeant persona and spent the entire period bellowing at the students and berating them for not responding quickly, not being active enough, speaking too softly, not having the textbook, and other infractions. The teacher ad-libbed a joke late in the lesson, drawing no response from the students. Afterwards, he speculated that they had not understood his joke. To me, everything the teacher did up until that moment created such a tense atmosphere that students who understood the joke were not sure how they were supposed to react. The teacher had established a Spartan atmosphere but then confused the students with a moment of levity.

### *Overuse of humor*

Gorham and Christophel (1990) caution that “the volume of humor alone is not as important as the composite of humor used” and that “Teachers with very high overall immediacy... might experience ‘overkill’ if they continue to add to the number of stories they tell” (p. 60). Indeed, overdoing it puts teachers “at the risk of losing stature and of being perceived as jokers” (Zillmann, et al., 1980, in Gorham and Christophel, p. 60).

### **To teach or not to teach**

It might seem prudent to some teachers to avoid the risks altogether by simply avoiding humor and its inherent ambiguity. This is a direct corollary to some teachers’ concerns about subject matter: at the Teachers College Columbia University MA TESOL Program in Tokyo, participants have voiced concerns over topics ranging from certain diseases (for fear of upsetting students who have lost loved ones to them) to mobile phones (because students who can’t afford one can be embarrassed) to Christmas (if any students’ parents are not Christians). Some teachers would rather circumvent the risk by censoring lesson content. This can be an overreaction, however. Furthermore, uncomfortable topics can provide students with experience in communicating about sensitive matters, voicing deeply felt emotions, and contribute to the process of maturation. We will now look how humor can be used in the classroom, and actual examples of both teaching with humor and teaching humor.

### *Examples of teaching with humor*

Even if the decision to make an off-the-cuff joke or humorous remark is by nature unrehearsed, the decision to use humor in general should be deliberate and thought-out. It is better used from the start, not as part of a mid-course makeover—experimenting with humor can be useful, and out-of-character humor can be extremely effective (e.g., a teacher known for a dour disposition performing in a musical comedy for a school festival), but if a teacher has established a more formal and serious teaching persona, it can be confusing to suddenly become more casual and jocular



during the term. As with all human communication, there is always a chance that students—regardless of age or level—will misunderstand or fail to understand teacher humor. And, like any experimentation, teachers need to be open to some degree of trial and error. The bottom line is that students sense and respond to not only a teacher’s knowledge of the subject matter and teaching ability but also personality and humanity. By extending the concept of preparedness for humor to include the students as well as themselves, a teacher can decrease the potential risk.

Of the specific examples of teacher humor below, some may not immediately seem to be humorous but can be perceived by students as humorous within the context of the lesson. Regarding the difference between spontaneous use of humor and intentional use of humor, it should be noted that most of these can be planned ahead of time, but they can also be improvised.

- Suspension of belief: The teacher asks if any of the students has a pet. Several students raise their hands, and the teacher says, “Where is it?” and pretends to look for animals in the classroom.
- Teasing students: The teacher overtly skips one student when distributing handouts, then asks for payment when the student requests a copy.
- Self-deprecation: The teacher makes disparaging comments about themselves (e.g., about being overweight when having difficulty squeezing between classroom aisles, about needing glasses when misreading something).
- Making oneself the butt of humor: The teacher exhibits great difficulty in trying to model English tongue twisters or attempting to recite Japanese tongue twisters.
- Doing the unexpected: While walking around the room, the teacher suddenly stops at the back of the room and continues the lesson while standing behind the students.
- Fostering the concept of *laughing with* someone instead of *laughing at* someone: The teacher laughs good-naturedly in reaction to a mistake made by a student. This may seem risky, especially with younger Japanese students with little confidence in their English, but if the teacher has consistently fostered the proper mood, this can relieve tension (i.e., laughing it off) rather than create it (humiliation). Moody (1978) 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” (p. 109).

### Examples of teaching humor

Most academic research on humor in teaching, and most of this paper, has dealt with spontaneous and premeditated use of humor in the classroom. We will now look at some examples of teaching humor. It is often said that having to explain the meaning of a joke takes away its impact and ruins the audience’s enjoyment. This is in part because the audience is unable to experience the joy of comprehending the point of humor—the moment when the light bulb turns

on. Especially when it comes to learners of English, the focus should be not in explaining the humor afterwards but in planting seeds beforehand for the students to understand—i.e., pre-teaching or, in terms of humor theory, including the students in the potential target audience. One example is teaching students the discourse patterns involved in telling knock-knock jokes (“Knock-knock” as onomatopoeia, “Who’s there?” as a standard way of asking for the identity of someone unseen, *n*- “who?” as a way of asking for a surname). Understanding the pattern is different from understanding the humor, of course, and the potential gap between intention and perception means that some students may not see the humor in certain puns.

Unlike spontaneous use of humor and premeditated use of humor, the teaching of humor deals with authentic materials. The average comedy movie, TV series, standup performance, or song might require more lesson time and preparation time than most teachers can afford. However, there is a wealth of shorter material available, including one-to-four-panel comic strips from daily newspapers and TV commercials. It is also possible to find relatively self-contained scenes from movies and TV shows that focus on single jokes. In a press conference to promote his 1999 movie *Bicentennial Man* in Japan, Robin Williams demonstrated some knowledge of sumo by mentioning Wakanohana, a popular wrestler at that time. Upon being told that Wakanohana had retired, Williams responded with a mock tantrum. After calming down, he asked if Wakanohana’s brother Takanohana was still active. Receiving an affirmative response, he said the name “Takanohana” again, then sang it to the melody used for the title of the 1966 Sandpipers song *Guantanamera*.

Considering that Williams’ audience was almost completely Japanese, even his own entourage was not necessarily familiar with either the song or sumo, and there was no buildup to the joke at all, it is entirely possible that Williams didn’t expect a single person in the actual audience to understand it—in other words, he might have had a target audience of none (little did he know I was watching on television). Even so, my university students (some of whose parents were at most teenagers in 1966) have understood the joke after identifying the title of the song, understanding that it is a five-syllable word, and hearing the refrain enough to remember the five-note melody. They have been able to join the target audience. This is not to say that they can understand everything Williams says during his performance—the focus is on that particular joke.

My personality lends itself to a relatively relaxed classroom atmosphere involving a certain amount of levity, and my personal interest in humor has led me to teach and research this area. Even for teachers who are not so inclined, humor in one guise or another can offer a variety of benefits in terms of teaching language and culture, engaging and motivating students, improving classroom atmosphere, and enhancing teacher job satisfaction.

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## Appendix 1

### Kinds of Humor Used by Teachers Cited in Research

KIND OF HUMOR	Bryant et al.	Torok et al.	Wanzer et al.
Jokes	0	0	0
Riddles	0		0
Puns	0		0
Funny stories	0	0	
Humorous comments/ One-liners	0	0	0

Kinds of humor grouped under “Other” by Bryant et al., plus others cited by Torok et al. and Wanzer et al.

KIND OF HUMOR	Bryant et al.	Torok et al.	Wanzer et al.
Sarcasm		0	0
Cartoons		0	0
Physical antics (e.g., “a contrived, prolonged sneeze”)	0		0
Nonverbal behaviors (including “a series of Donald Duck-like sound effects”)	0		0
Professional humor		0	