

Guidelines and Considerations for Incorporating Humor Into a Task-Based Language Teaching Curriculum

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Humor is a fundamental component of human communication, yet only recently has its role in language education begun to receive increasing attention. Although humor's potential for improving classroom atmosphere is clear, finding an effective way to teach not only *with* humor but also *about* it can be challenging. Moreover, language instructors frequently overlook or neglect humor's potential to enhance their learners' language ability as well as their intercultural awareness. For those seeking a pedagogical option that facilitates greater communicative competence among learners without sacrificing the core potential that humor has in its development, task-based language teaching (TBLT) provides a compatible approach. In this paper, we propose seven guidelines and considerations for those who wish to include humor as a core component of their task-based lessons.

ユーモアは人間のコミュニケーションの基本的な要素ですが、言語教育におけるその役割が大きな注目を集め始めたのはごく最近のことです。教室の雰囲気改善するユーモアの可能性は明らかですが、ユーモアを使って教えるだけでなく、ユーモアについて教えるための効果的な方法を見つけるのは難しい場合があります。さらに、語学教師は、学習者の言語能力と異文化認識を高めるユーモアの可能性を見落とし、無視したりすることがよくあります。ユーモアが言語発達に果たす中核的な可能性を犠牲にすることなく、学習者間のコミュニケーション能力を高めることを促進する教育オプションを求めている

人にとって、タスクベース学習 (TBL) は互換性のあるアプローチを提供します。本稿では、TBLレッスンの中核要素としてユーモアを取り入れたい人のために、一連のガイドラインとして構成されたさまざまな考慮事項を検討します。

Humor is a near-universal dialogic phenomenon that serves an important real-world function as a social lubricant (Mullan & Béal, 2021). Yet as a fundamental component of human discourse, its role in language education continues to receive only a minor degree of attention in pedagogical literature, teaching materials, and teacher training programs. This oversight is likely due to a variety of factors, including humor traditionally being seen as a fun yet inessential, or at least tangential, feature when compared to the main business of teaching a language. Moreover, using humor effectively can be a delicate endeavor for instructors, not to mention the possibility for embarrassment that comes from telling a joke that falls flat (or worse, offends someone). Askildson (2005) referred to this as the “double-edged sword” of humor, “capable of improving or harming the classroom learning environment depending on its employment” (p. 48). To further complicate matters, approaches to humor tend to be highly individualistic, leading to the possibility of those hearing the jokes not appreciating (or, in the case of language learners, not understanding) whatever the humor producer is attempting (Bell & Attardo, 2010).

Despite the various benefits of humor in English language teaching, along with its role in intercultural communicative competence, there remains a lack of a coordinated approach to consistently include a focus on humor in the classroom. This article thus provides one framework in an attempt to fill this gap by demonstrating how

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humor aligns with a task-based language teaching (TBLT) approach. We first provide an overview of how using humor in the classroom is compatible with the tenets of TBLT. Subsequently, we propose seven guidelines and considerations for integrating humor into a TBLT approach. Within these guidelines and considerations, practical, classroom-tested, humor-related tasks are shared, outlining how respective tasks can help to improve, for example, learners' communicative competence, digital literacy, and sociolinguistic awareness.

The Compatibility of Humor Within a TBLT Framework

Considering the aforementioned potential pedagogical pitfalls, it is therefore understandable if an instructor were inclined to take the safest approach to using humor in the classroom and to simply not try. Moreover, despite humor being a common rhetorical device that occurs frequently in real-world communication, it has typically not been well represented in language curricula or teaching materials (Rucynski & Prichard, 2020). Yet to ignore humor's role in language education is to deny the multitude of potential benefits, including its ability to ease learning anxiety (Bieg et al., 2019), its facility in creating a positive and relaxed learning environment (Lourenço et al., 2025), and its promise as a conduit to deeper cultural insight (Neff & Dewaele, 2023). And as approaches such as TBLT have increasingly come to mimic communication outside of the classroom, it is important, if not imperative, that such approaches include a component of humor in order to reflect the communicative needs of language learners.

Within the domain of language education, the rise of interest in TBLT grew out of practitioners' decades-long interest in communicative language teaching and shares with it an emphasis on developing learners' L2 communicative competence (Ellis et al., 2019). TBLT classrooms differ from traditional language-learning environments in that, through the act of completing tasks, learners make the connection between language knowledge and language use in a manner that is natural and dynamic and that involves holistic use of the target language (Loewen & Sato, 2021). Defining *tasks* is beyond the scope of this paper, but looking at criteria developed by Ellis and Shintani (2013), we can see several that are compatible with the inclusion of humor in the learning process, including:

- primary focus on meaning
- use of nonlinguistic resources (facial expressions, gestures) by learners
- clearly defined communicative outcome

Whichever definition one uses for a task, one commonality is the inclusion of a goal that reflects the communication needs of everyday life as opposed to those confined to the language classroom. Of course, such goals can often be accomplished without any humor whatsoever, but considering the universal social nature of humor, to deemphasize or ignore it completely may be seen as a disservice to not only language learners but also to the principles of TBLT.

With these commonalities in mind, we have developed a set of both guidelines and considerations for instructors who are interested in exploring ways to include an element of humor in their (TBLT) lessons. Guidelines are presented first and provide concrete suggestions for implementing humor into TBLT lessons. Next, considerations include admonitions and points of awareness concerning humor usage. It should be noted that while we have chosen TBLT as a framework for this discussion due to its prominence in current language education practices and its compatibility with humor as a component of language education, many of the ideas we present about humor are not exclusive to TBLT methods and thus can also be applied to other L2 learning contexts.

Guidelines for Using Humor in TBLT Environments

Guideline 1: Maintain a Connection With the TBLT Curriculum

One reason that TBLT has risen in popularity recently is the inherent flexibility in what constitutes a task or a task-based curriculum. One widely cited framework, however, is that proposed by Willis (1996) consisting of a three-part sequence represented by:

- the pre-task phase, where the topic and task are introduced;
- the task cycle itself, where the learners work together to achieve the goals laid out in the first stage;
- the post-task language focus, where new language forms are taught or reviewed.

And while not every task-based lesson is going to fall neatly in line with this sequence, it is a useful structure from which to discuss the role of humor in a TBLT curriculum.

Within this framework, humor can be a central feature of a TBLT project or merely be tangential to it. Even in the latter case, it can still be easily incorporated into the task sequence, both through the instructor establishing an atmosphere where humor is allowed, and even encouraged, and through learners' interactions. Some examples include bringing levity into the warm-up activities when introducing the topic or using funny examples during the language focus stage. Creating such an environment gives

learners a sense of freedom to experiment with humor, both in their interactions with each other and with the instructor, so long as those interactions remain broadly on topic.

Humor can also be central to the aims of the tasks themselves. An instructor may introduce examples of currently popular memes, for instance, in a lesson that centers on cultural or social customs or issues and then assign learner groups the task of creating their own memes that reflect humorously on an issue of the day. Or more simply, groups of students who are planning a party could be required to incorporate games or activities that are creative and humorous. They might even be rated by other students according to their perceived success at being fun and funny. These kinds of engaging tasks that are rooted in advancing humor competency can help fulfill several TBLT goals, including raising cross-cultural awareness, improving learner collaboration, enlivening the classroom atmosphere, and encouraging the use of novel target-language forms.

For such tasks, learners need to be adequately prepared in advance by the instructor before embarking on their own attempts at humor. The instructor must clearly lay out task expectations and provide learners with an array of meaningful and easy-to-understand examples of similar humorous output. Moreover, instructors need to play an active role monitoring group discussion during the task cycle and giving guidance, feedback, and insight into humor in English. If developed carefully, a humor-focused task can bring out a new side of students and allow them to creatively flourish in new and unexpected ways in their use of the L2.

Guideline 2: Use Humor as a Window Into Culture

Culture is often referred to as the “fifth language skill,” and for good reason—the twin phenomena of language and culture are inextricably intertwined (British Council, n.d.). For the teaching of some languages, such as Hindi or German, it is easier to tie culture to a specific population group and/or geographic location, but for languages like English, spoken widely around the world as a second language and in a multitude of nations as a first language, defining culture can be more problematic. Nonetheless, if we consider Kachru’s (1985) Three Circles of English (i.e., inner, outer, and expanding), the cultural similarities among countries in the Inner Circle, where English is the most commonly spoken language (e.g., Canada, Australia, the UK), typically outweigh the differences. And while some humor will always be intensely local (Schmitz, 2002), it is also true that many English-language comedic films, online videos, and satirical websites find a great deal of universal appeal, even outside of the English-speaking world.

One strength of TBLT is that it can offer insight into a particular culture when the task and topic are being introduced (Yang et al., 2025). Taking the aforementioned planning a party task as an example, the instructor can explain the norms of social events in a particular country and even contrast them with those of other countries (including those of the learners) as a way to elevate their cross-cultural awareness. In this, humor may also play a role. In another TBLT example that highlights the intersection of humor and culture, groups could be tasked with finding satirical content in English. They could then either contrast it with their own culture’s satire or quiz their classmates about the intended meaning (Prichard & Rucynski, 2019).

In addition to satire, understanding verbal irony is an important part of humor competency, and yet sarcasm, for example, can be practiced very differently in English when compared to Japanese (Okamoto, 2007). Finding examples of these differences in various media and then presenting or practicing them in their taskwork allows learners to engage with authentic materials (i.e., another commonly cited principle of TBLT) in a way that simultaneously increases their intercultural and language competencies. Tasks for recognizing and responding to verbal irony can take the form of either face-to-face (Prichard & Rucynski, 2020) or online (e.g., social media) communication (Prichard & Rucynski, 2022).

Guideline 3: Allow for and Encourage Learner-Initiated Humor

Reflecting recent shifts in language education as a whole, TBLT is an unambiguously learner-centric approach to language education. While the instructor has an essential role in setting up the tasks, monitoring learner progress, and reviewing key language forms, the bulk of the time is used for learners to engage with each other, hopefully using the L2 as a medium of communication, in order to complete the assigned tasks. As stated earlier, teacher-initiated humor can help to create a relaxed and friendly atmosphere, but when possible, allowing and encouraging learners to initiate humorous output themselves can empower them as effective users of the language under study (Dávila, 2019).

The encouragement of learner-initiated humor ties into some of the principles proposed by Nunan (2004) for TBLT instruction. Specifically, Nunan emphasized the need for learners to actively use the language they are learning, to creatively reproduce models provided by the instructor, and to engage in “learning by doing” (p. 12). Because humor is a natural part of human communication, it only makes sense that communicatively oriented approaches such as TBLT would encourage learners to

incorporate it into the task cycle. Whether this incorporation is an explicit part of the task goals (e.g., develop a television commercial that uses humor to convey an important social message) or implicit within the framework of the task (e.g., interview classmates about their favorite comedic movie), focusing on humor as a powerful communicative device can lead to experimentation with humor in the L2, such as by using puns or double entendres, visual gags or funny props, impressions, and humorous voices. These can be modeled first by the instructor in order to provide a framework for learners to understand, follow, and then creatively fill in with their own attempts at levity, which connects to another of Nunan's (2004) principles—the importance of scaffolding in TBLT. Scaffolding can also provide an opportunity to introduce the cultural element of humor for language learners, as discussed earlier.

Guideline 4: Include Post-Task Peer Review and Teacher Feedback

Referring back to the three-part TBLT framework proposed by Willis (1996), the final sequence should include feedback from the teacher on language use. While it may seem odd to provide feedback on humor use, the appropriate production of humor can be evaluated just like other language points such as grammar and pronunciation. In fact, Pomerantz and Bell (2011) argue that the language learning classroom is a “safe house” (p. 148) for students to experiment with creative and humorous language use. This feedback could come in the form of both student understanding and production of humor.

Using as an example a task in which learners are asked to differentiate between satirical and real news—and then identify the target of the satirical items—one easy way to provide feedback is to simply supply learners with the correct answers. However, this is also a teaching moment, as the teacher can provide additional guidance on items that were more difficult overall. This may involve, for example, providing more cultural background on the humor, as it is often the case that culture rather than language is the main obstacle to understanding such intent and meaning.

One way to provide both peer review and teacher feedback on the student production of humor is to task learners with creating their own memes based on famous examples. Image macros, or memes, with an image and a setup in the top line and a punchline or catchphrase in the bottom line, work well with foreign language learners because they follow set patterns (Han & Smith, 2023). Some of the most famous examples (listed here from easier to more complex messages) include *Success Kid* (a pudgy child at the beach clenching sand to signify a small victory), *Bad Luck Brian* (a yearbook picture of an extremely unfortunate teenage boy), *First World Problems* (an image of a crying

woman with messages about “difficulties” only faced by people in richer countries), and *Condescending Wonka* (a smirking image of Gene Wilder from the film *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory* with highly sarcastic messages). Ohashi (2016) outlines practical examples of activities involving memes classroom-tested with Japanese learners of English. For a form of peer review, students could (either individually or in pairs) create their own memes (using sites such as memegenerator.net) and share them on a class-designated LMS. Students can also like or write comments on memes deemed the most humorous. Although the production of humor should not necessarily be turned into a popularity contest, this reflects real-world interaction, where a good sense of humor can be an important lubricant in smooth communication. Just as a teacher would provide feedback on the correct use of grammar or vocabulary items, they can also provide feedback on whether students produce humor and language that appropriately fits the pattern of the respective meme.

Another important role of the teacher in the feedback stage of TBLT (when humor is involved) is to provide guidance on appropriate humor use. For example, the ability to detect and comprehend sarcasm and other verbal irony is an important aspect of communicating with people from English-speaking countries. Students, however, need to be made aware of when the actual production of sarcasm is appropriate, just as foreign language learners should be aware of when to use more polite speech. Using sarcasm with a friend from the target culture(s) who has a particularly sarcastic personality would be appropriate, but randomly attempting to produce sarcasm in English with teachers or authority figures should be warned against.

Considerations When Using Humor With TBLT

Consideration 1: Be Mindful of Learner Proficiency and Task Complexity

Until recently, one common view about the introduction of all but the simplest humor into language learning was that it was best saved for learners of advanced proficiency (Deneire, 1995). However, that perception has been changing (Bell & Pomerantz, 2015; Tianli et al., 2024), and if anything, the inclusion of all types of humor has been shown to be quite effective with less proficient learners, provided their use is carefully considered by the instructor. Just as the content and goals of a TBLT lesson can be scaled up or down depending on the learners' capabilities, in-class humor, whether teacher- or learner-initiated (see Guideline 3), should also be level-appropriate to be effective (Bell, 2009; Qi & Wang, 2025).

In addition, the complexity of the task and how humor is integrated is of key importance. Task complexity includes several considerations, such as those proposed by Duran and Ramaut (2006), that define characteristics such as “processing demands” (p. 55) for adequate task performance as well as the difficulty of “linguistic input” (p. 51). Because one frequent function of humor in language learning (and elsewhere) is to lighten the mood and create a low-stress atmosphere that facilitates communication, conscientious TBLT instructors need to choose the right moment or activities that can accommodate a degree of levity. This is especially true with extended tasks that take up multiple class days (or whole terms). Thus, it is important to incorporate humor at the right time in the TBLT sequence when learners are less likely to be overwhelmed with task complexity. Intersperse less cognitively demanding tasks or subtasks with a dose of humor and focus less on levity with tasks that demand a higher cognitive load.

Consideration 2: Understand Humor’s Limitations

While we propose creating a learning environment that allows for and encourages student-initiated humor, that is different from a classroom that requires it. Not everyone has a natural proclivity for making snappy witticisms, putting on funny faces, or even laughing very much, and it is crucial that the instructor take this into account when planning lessons. As language education has shifted toward learner-centered approaches, so has the realization that one size does not fit all. This is especially true of humor, which can manifest in ways both subtle and outrageous, physical and verbal, cheerful and biting, and so on. In our own prior research into how language teachers use humor, we found a surprisingly wide variety of humor strategies that instructors take into their language classes (Neff & Rucynski, 2021), with some spurning approaches that others swear by and vice versa. Several participants also mentioned the need for instructors not to overdo humor at the expense of learning, as well as the fact that teachers who do not rely on humor can be just as effective as those who do. We find these insights to be true for learners as well.

One caveat about encouraging learner-initiated humor is that students should never be made to feel as if they need to tell jokes as part of their classroom discourse. Everyone approaches humor in the L2 a little differently and at their own pace, and students who are more reticent about using humor can still perform tasks just as effectively as those who are less inhibited. Even when humor is a part of the task itself, assessment should not take into account how many laughs a particular student gets but rather their engagement and diligence in achieving the task goals. And while the students may not walk out of the classroom cracking jokes in English, with the right introduction to

humor use through TBLT tasks, they will have gained a degree of humor competency that many other learners in Japan may lack.

Also, because some learners are more naturally fluent with using humor (or at least perceive themselves to be), an environment where humor is encouraged might allow them to shine, but potentially at the expense of less outgoing but otherwise quite capable classmates. This is especially a concern for TBLT lessons that intensely depend on interaction and learners completing tasks effectively as a team. Instructors need to be wary of those more inclined toward levity playing too dominant a role or hijacking valuable class time and thus taking task completion off track. Careful monitoring is key, and it is not difficult to sense when there is a little too much laughter coming from one group or another. A gentle admonishment to overenthusiastic joke tellers can get learners back on track, and by the same token, an encouraging nudge to less outgoing students is important to remind the group that, in the TBLT classroom, everyone has a role to play, regardless of their ability to elicit laughs.

Consideration 3: Provide Value Beyond Humor

As stressed in the previous consideration, students may have a negative reaction to humor if it feels forced or plays too large a role in the classroom. Additionally, Bell and Pomerantz (2015) warned, “We do not intend that students work like professional comedians to master the art of humor and improvisation, nor do we think that the end goal of teaching humor should be ‘funny students’” (p. 170). The actual production of humor is only one possible goal of the inclusion of humor in language teaching, as other important goals include guiding learners to detect, comprehend, and respond to L2 humor (Bell & Pomerantz, 2015; Rucynski & Prichard, 2020). Using authentic materials and real-world humor examples is one way to make the inclusion of humor compatible with TBLT lessons and ensure that the humor provides more benefits than just fun and laughter.

One benefit of exposure to humor is that it helps language learners to recognize nonliteral language that is used in communication (Prichard et al., 2024). Verbal irony, for example, is a ubiquitous feature of English-speaking cultures, but it can be difficult for English language learners to comprehend in real-world communication, especially for learners who come from cultures with a relative lack of this form of humor. The functions and frequency of verbal irony in Japan, for example, can greatly differ from usage in English-speaking countries (Okamoto, 2007). Fortunately, speakers provide a range of hints when they are being ironic, including both verbal (e.g., elongated

vowels, slower speech) and nonverbal (e.g., blank face, rolling eyes) cues (Kim & Lantolf, 2018). However, research also indicates that markers for using ironic utterances can vary between Japan and English-speaking countries (Okamoto, 2007). The teacher can demonstrate several of these during the pre-task phase, then assign a task where students need to guess whether their partner is being, for example, sarcastic or sincere. Students should include one or more of the verbal or nonverbal cues for nonliteral statements (e.g., “It’s lovely weather we’re having” with an exaggerated “o” sound to indicate that the weather is not lovely at all).

Another potential benefit of humor is its role in increasing digital and media literacy (Lotherington & Jenson, 2011; Qamar et al., 2025). One example of this is satirical news websites, a popular form of humor in English-speaking countries, including *The Daily Mash* (UK), *The Onion* (USA), and *The Betoota Advocate* (Australia), which is less frequent in Japan (Prichard & Rucynski, 2019). Satirical news is often mistaken for real news, so one sample task would be supplying learners with a selection of satirical and real news headlines (as they are viewed on social media sites) and to task learners with differentiating between the two types of news (Prichard & Rucynski, 2019). A follow-up task would be for learners to identify the *target* of the satirical news items. Identifying exactly who or what respective satirical news stories are parodying or criticizing also increases awareness of the target culture(s). As research indicates that people who enjoy satirical news are more aware of contemporary issues (Becker & Bode, 2018), English language learners could reap the same benefits.

Conclusion

Despite the increased interest in humor in language education, researchers and teachers still struggle to identify its exact role in the classroom. Unfortunately, humor is sometimes dismissed as merely a flippant technique for, say, starting or ending the class with something fun or different. Much of the research on humor in language education continues to focus on interpersonal benefits, such as its positive impact on class atmosphere, learner participation, and teacher immediacy. While these benefits are clearly worthwhile, we argue for a stronger focus on the pedagogical possibilities that humor brings to the language classroom. Humor has the potential to empower language learners by providing a window into other cultures, an increased understanding of real-world communication, and opportunities for creative language output (with feedback from the teacher), among other benefits. Still, even language teachers who agree with these potential advantages of humor may struggle with ways of actually incorporating a healthy dose of humor into their curriculum. With that issue in mind, this paper is an

attempt to highlight how humor use is compatible with the established TBLT approach. As the use of humor can easily fail when teachers do not properly consider important details such as learner proficiency levels or the connection between the humor and the curriculum, we provided seven guidelines and considerations for the implementation of humor, along with practical, classroom-tested suggestions.

Bio Data:

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