

Sense of humour

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For me, one of the most under exploited and neglected areas within language learning is humour. How many course books have a section on humour? How many syllabi include the ability to tell or understand a joke? Yet understanding the sense of humour of a people is a key element of understanding the culture and language and perhaps even more importantly of developing relationships with people from that country.

Humour and culture

The humour of a nation or individual is an integral part of that person or nation's culture and we need to help students to appreciate the humour in order to help them understand the culture and language. To try to define the 'humour' of a nation is always going to be an impossible task, as different people within that nation are always going to have their own individual sense of humour, but we can help our students to explore this area.

- One way of doing this is to look at the kinds of TV comedy programmes which are popular within that country. What kinds of topics are they based around? Are they similar topics to those of the students' own country?
- Looking at popular joke genres can also be useful. Some examples of common genres within the UK are, 'Knock knock' jokes, jokes which have the structure " what do you get if you mix [X] with [Y] a [Z], Jokes which begin "A man walked into a bar .." There is certainly no shortage of these kinds of jokes to be found in the Intranet joke sites so if you would like to find suitable examples, it won't be difficult.

Humour and classroom dynamics

Many researchers, and particularly Stephen Krashen, have written about the negative effects of anxiety on students' ability to learn. Using humour can play an important part in helping to relax students and help them overcome stress and nerves and so make them more receptive to learning. Humour can also help to improve the classroom atmosphere particularly for students who are worried about making mistakes or nervous about their speaking abilities. It is, however, very important that we learn with our students to laugh 'about' mistakes rather than at the people who make them.

A few ideas

Here are a few ways in which I've tried to integrate humour into my classes.

- **Telling a joke**
Just telling a joke can be a great listening activity for your students and really there's no need to prepare anything. Every joke comes with its own comprehension task. If the listener laughs at the end of the joke then they have understood it.
- **Translating a joke**
Sometimes I try to get students to translate jokes from their own country to retell in English. They can then either try telling them to me or their classmates or send them to one of the many joke websites on the Internet. Sometimes I

have got students to collect the jokes together to publish in a small class joke book.

- ***Humour and prejudice***

Jokes and humour can form the basis of serious class discussions. Many jokes in many countries mask some quite negative underlying prejudices and stereotypes about people from different regions of the country or different sectors of the society. Exploring these prejudices can be a first step towards overcoming them.

- ***Quotes about humour***

Looking at quotes about humour can provide useful discussion for students. They can try to decide what they mean and which ones they agree with most, try to translate some from their own culture or even try to write their own. Here are some examples.

- "He who laughs last laughs longest."
- "Always leave them laughing."
- "Friendship: a building contract you sign with laughter and break with tears."
- "One can never speak enough of the virtues, the dangers, the power of shared laughter."
- "Laughter is the shortest distance between two people."
- "Laughter is not at all a bad beginning for a friendship, and it is far the best ending for one."
- "If you can look into the mirror without laughter, you have no sense of humour. "
- "A person without a sense of humour is like a wagon without springs, jolted by every pebble in the road. "

- ***Joke websites***

As a reading activity you could try getting your students to each look for one joke on a website that they like, try to memorise it and then come to class and tell it. Be sure though that the site you choose has jokes which are suitable for the types of class that you have, as many have 'adult' content on.

- ***Video***

If you have access to TV or video recordings of popular comedy programmes, these can form a fantastic resource for exploitation in the language class. They can be used in many ways, for general listening activities or you could just focus on one particular part and explore the humour. A lot of humour on TV is very rich in cultural references and this too can be an interesting, though very challenging area to explore.

When the laughter stops

One of the negative sides, particularly when I have had younger or less mature students, of using humour in the classroom, is its potential to undermine my role as the manager of the class and my students' respect for me in that role. I have tried to be very careful when creating a balance between providing an atmosphere that my students enjoy and feel relaxed working in and what can sometimes be a decent into chaos. I haven't always been successful and have at times worked hard to re-establish the balance between enjoyment and getting some work done. Things have worked best when I have had specific times when humour has been appropriate, usually nearer the end of a class when things can bubble over into break times or home time.

Conclusion

I think it's important to remember that not everyone is, can be or wants to be funny. As teachers I think we should, above all, genuinely be ourselves and if that doesn't include being a person who tells jokes then that is fair enough. I do believe though that there is a genuine need for our students to understand this integral part of the culture and language they want to understand and it is an important part of our role as teachers to help our students address this need.

References

Krashen, Stephen D. Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition. Prentice-Hall International, 1987.

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