



Laughing all the way to learning

Using fun and games to ensure retention and fluency in the classroom

1. The importance of humor in language teaching

Victor Borge, a Danish comedian and pianist once said 'laughter is the shortest distance between two people'. The best educators and teachers who remain in our memory are the ones who made us laugh or made it easy for us to do so. This however, does not mean that we are talking about the quality of being a circus clown in the classroom, unless, of course, you are teaching a class of circus clowns. Nevertheless, numerous studies have proven the importance of humor on learning and language acquisition processes. This article focuses on how humor can be generated by using games in multicultural classes in tertiary education.

It is quite important to clarify from the beginning that humor does not necessarily mean just jokes. This is an important step in encouraging teachers to start using it more as a lot of the professionals in the field, fear it because it may lead to loss of authority, poor class conduct and management. The fear of looking foolish is also a predominant factor in avoiding humor in the classroom. The good news is that, as teachers, letting the students find their own sense of humor is enough to soften the atmosphere in the classroom and invite participation just as Watson and Emerson remarked as well (1988): 'when humor is planned as part of the teaching strategy, a caring environment is established, there is an attitude of flexibility, and communication between student and teacher is that of freedom and openness. The tone is set allowing for human error with freedom to explore alternatives in the learning situation. This reduces the authoritarian position of the teacher, allowing the teacher to be a facilitator of the learning process. Fear and anxiety, only natural in a new and unknown situation, become less of a threat, as a partnership between student and instructor develops.' (Watson and Emerson, 1988, p. 89)

A big challenge for teacher who choose to use humor in the classroom refers to the choice they make. It is of utmost importance not to hurt anyone's feelings or commit faux pas while having the best intentions. Knowing ones students and their cultures is an important factor in deciding how to approach the issue. At this point not only the language may be a barrier but also the traditions, expectations and overall culture of that specific country.

Going back for a moment to the importance of using humor in the classroom, it goes without saying that it helps students overcome anxiety and the mental block that prevents them from language acquisition. (Krashen, 1985) It is important to note that in such cases, even more so, the humor should never, under any circumstance, be based on the student's inabilities regarding the linguistic process.

Another argument in favor of humor deals with competence. According to Deneire (1995:286) in the ESL classroom, one can use humor ‘as a technique to introduce linguistic phenomena and cultural knowledge’ as well as ‘an illustration and reinforcement of already acquired cultural and linguistic knowledge’. Therefore, humor is not just a tool to loosen up a class and make it more enjoyable but it also serves as a great technique to employ cultural devices in order to enhance both the cultural and linguistic proficiency of the students. (Krause, 2014)

2. What happens in the classroom when the students have a good time

As teachers and learners of a foreign language, we unanimously agree that language acquisition happens when the learner is able to identify, interpret and understand humorous situations in the target language. We expect our students to be able to identify puns and wordplays to successfully communicate in the target language. When we are teaching multicultural classes, this becomes even more important not just for the enhancement of the students’ language skills but as a means of common communication across the classroom. Of course that nothing feels worse than when a joke falls flat because the student did not understand it. In order to avoid such situations – of which most of the teachers out there are afraid – we can resort to others making the pun or joke. Our goal as mediators would be simply to create the atmosphere for it.

At Skoda auto University (SAVS), being an internationally accredited business school, the classes we are dealing mostly with are multicultural and therefore humor attempts must be very carefully assessed to ensure that they translate across the classroom and most importantly, they do not offend any of the participants. This means, that a lot of the staff tends to shy away from approaching a fun environment in the classroom. Nevertheless, I have taken a chance on it but in a safe environment. In other words, if some of the more advanced students made jokes or puns, I encouraged it by laughing along and if needed, explaining the joke to the weaker students. What happened was that the student who made the joke received validation for his language input (through the teacher’s laughter) and was saved the awkward situation in which they had to explain the joke, leaving it up to the teacher to clarify and use as a teaching tool when appropriate. Such situations have a double advantage: they take away the pressure off the teacher while offering a good excuse to teach rhetorical devices or word associations in a funny context and they serve as excellent ice breakers without putting any of the students on the spot as they allow enough freedom to the students to come up with their own humorous inputs.

We have noticed at SAVS that even students who come from more didactical cultures (Finnish) and are used to a more serious approach, found the classes to be more productive and were willing to attend far more frequently the lessons than other courses which were structured in a more traditional manner. According to their feedback, they also found it much easier to bond with the French, Croatian, Russian or Italian students over the jokes and games made in class as they were based on a commonly known source which allowed them to come up with their own related funny situations, comments, jokes or anecdotes. Being somewhat of a shy person myself, as a teacher, I did not want to run the risk of making a fool of myself and therefore I chose, except for allowing my students to be as funny and creative as they pleased, to use well known television hosts and comedians to make the classes more fun while ensuring the students' learning process. There are plenty of fun games that can be easily played in class and that require a minimum of preparation and most importantly generate a lot of fun and competition.

For this paper, I will refer to the ones that work best and engage the students the most. They can be adapted and used either as revision games or ice-breakers or to 'wake-up' a disengaged classroom. These games are mainly focused on vocabulary but they will inevitably generate grammar structures as well along with employing communication skills such as conversation management, presentations or negotiation and persuasion.

Another advantage of using these in the classroom with the help of the video promotion – as mentioned, these are activities promoted by comedians and TV hosts – is that the teacher does not need to struggle and explain the rules. They are simplified and very clearly expressed taking away the pressure of breaking the instructions down for the students. The rules of the game are also demonstrated in activities with celebrities. The advantage of this is that all the students in the classroom will have known at least one of the people involved making it easier for them to relate and therefore retain more information as it becomes more personal than if stated by the teacher. The other benefit is that more than once, my students have mentioned going back to their dorms and continuing to play the games. This promotes language acquisition outside the classroom which is one of the goals we all, as teachers, are aiming for.

In the next section, I will describe each of these games and I will also include a link to the video that can be used to demo them. In the classroom, I usually announce that there is going to be a fun game promoted by [insert name here] and what will be the point of it. Most of the time, the games will be focused on specific structures or vocabulary that I would like my students to master but there are, of course, also free speaking situations which aim simply at revising their active vocabulary or their language communication skills.

So, in the next lines, without further ado, here are the games.

3. Watch and learn

Word Sneak is probably one of the easiest games to set up and it generates a lot of discussion. Promoted by Jimmy Fallon from The Tonight Show, this game is really easy to prepare and it can generate a lot of fun. The purpose of the game is to engage the learner's conversation management skills as well as their global use and understanding of the language. Great as a warmer, interlude or wrap-up. It can contain selected words, phrases, idioms or other structures deemed important by the teacher, but I prefer to use absolutely random words for the sake of the comic effect. The students love how the conversations flow and they mentioned that it forces them to resort to their active vocabulary and sometimes new vocabulary in order to steer the conversation as they need. It also allows the teacher to make notes of the recurring mistakes and correct them afterward. Win- Win

WORD SNEAK (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JqZ6YjrK5fs>)

How it works: each student gets five cards with random words on them.

The goal: use the words in a conversation as casually and seamlessly as possible.

The rules: there are no rules

What you need: paper/cardboard, markers/pens (5 cards/player)

In the same spirit, the next game is great to promote fluency and accuracy as well as logical conversation flow. Ideally, you will have the students play this in pairs. The game also promotes team spirit.

3 WORD STORIES (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DCataNWjw-Q>)

How it works: the students take turns telling a story, three words at a time.

The goal: steering the conversation in such way that the counterpart will say the word on the card

The rules: none of the players knows the words in the card deck. They can't say the word on their card and they cannot use more than three words each round

What you need: paper/cardboard, markers/pens (5 cards/pair)

Another game that is great to practice synonyms, promoted again by Jimmy Fallon, is Password. This is again a game that is fun, engaging and promotes team play.

PASSWORD (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hERzvxp5ab0>)

How it works: each team gets a password then each member can give one word to get their partner to get the password. Each password is worth its double in points (1st pass – 2 pt, 2nd pass – 4 pt, 3rd pass – 6 pt etc)

The goal: get the partner to guess the word. Collect the highest number of points

The rules: each player may use only one word. If the clue is deemed illegal (by a third party, it must be called out and the team forfeits their turn

What you need: paper/cardboard, markers/pens (2sets of 5 cards – the same for both teams)

CATCHPHRASE (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8VNTTzQMK48>)

How it works: the players in each team face each other. The one who starts the game presses the buzzer and draws a clue from the pile.

The goal: get the teammate to guess the clue as fast as possible and pass the buzzer to the person on the right

The rules: cannot use the clue or any word from the same family. Can use gestures to express what they mean. The team holding the buzzer when it goes off loses that round

What you need: buzzer (any type of timer can work), paper/cardboard, markers/pens (10 cards/ game)

Similar to Catchphrase, is Taboo, a game with which probably most of the teachers are familiar. There are plenty of ready-made cards that can be found online as free downloads. I use this video from Ellen Show for the instructions as it is also a good exercise for the students to practice their listening and comprehension skills. Another game played by Ellen, is **Heads up!** The version of the game, which is essentially Taboo, can be played using any Apple device/Android (phone or tablet) and the app. It is a fun game to promote and have the students play it outside the classroom. As this version of Taboo requires specific hardware, we will focus on the classic version, also promoted by Ellen DeGeneres.

TABOO (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mPPOHVLcrlg>)

How it works: the players face each other. There is a time limit of 45 seconds and 6 cards/ player. Each card has a main word and a set of related words which cannot be used.

The goal: the other member of the team must guess the main word on the card

The rules: while explaining the main word, it is not allowed to use any of the other words on the card nor the main word. If a player uses one of the words, the team forfeits the round.

What you need: a timer (kitchen timer or mobile phone), taboo cards (6/player)

The following two games, one promoted by Jimmy Fallon and the other one by Ellen DeGeneres follow the pattern of Scattergories (this is a game available to purchase) so it aims at refreshing existing vocabulary as well as enhancing it. Can easily be used as a filler, ice-breaker or just as a revision lesson. The 5 second rule game is available to purchase as a board game as well.

KNOW IT ALL! (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WLznqkTsRNk>)

How it works: players choose a category then take turn naming something in that category. If the player cannot think of anything in that category, they can make something up. If their opponent calls the bluff they must press the buzzer and the challenge will be decided by a side judge. An opponent can also challenge the other one if a word has been said before.

The goal: say a word from the category within the 20 second frame

The rules: do not repeat the words said before. If the player cannot come up with a word within the time frame, he/she forfeits the round.

What you need: a timer, a buzzer (a squeaky toy will work), paper/cardboard, markers/pens, a timekeeper (in my class, the shy students are eager to take on this job), a side judge (either a student or the class)

5 SECOND RULE (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p4ucUTDr1Xw>)

How it works: players are given a category and they must name three things in that category in a 5 second time frame. If the player cannot think of anything/ enough things in that category, they lose the round. The timer stops after three words/ things were said.

The goal: say three things from the category within the 5 second frame

The rules: do not repeat the words said before. Fit in the given time. Win as many rounds as possible

What you need: a timer, a buzzer (a squeaky toy will work), paper/cardboard, markers/pens, a timekeeper (in my class, the shy students are eager to take on this job)

The last game engages the students' persuasive, negotiation and communication skills as well as their ability to use all the vocabulary they have at hand, hedging, discourse markers, linkers and evasive discourse. This is also a great exercise to practice cold sales techniques and sales pitches. Promoted by Ellen DeGeneres, this game is called Pitch, please! It also promotes question formation and suggestion making as it is supposed to be played in pairs. I prefer to play this game with a pair as the sellers and the

rest of the class as ‘helpers’. The results are hilarious as the class is in full control of what they want the sellers to say. You can have even more fun by asking the students to bring a ‘product’.

PITCH, PLEASE! (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AZiwjk51_JU)

How it works: the players must describe what a product is and why people should buy it. The player/s do not know what the product is. The rest of the group can see it and use it to ask questions to help the sellers sell it.

The goal: convince the audience to buy the product

The rules: the sellers cannot see the product. Another team or the class must ask questions/ make comments to encourage the sellers to talk more about the product without hinting what the product is.

What you need: any realia

4. Final thoughts

As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, humor is not just jokes. They are a great vessel for humorous activities but laughter may be achieved in many other ways. The games listed here are a foolproof way to achieve that. However, it is worth mentioning that for the games to work flawlessly, the target learning group must have at least an intermediate level of the target language. Ideally, the games are designed for upper intermediate and advanced groups. Nevertheless, they can be adapted for lower levels but it takes a lot more effort from the teacher’s side to simplify the language and get the same humoring effect.

In any case, whether we use games, jokes, anecdotes, self-irony, many researchers will agree that it will relax the students and will have a positive effect on their ability to learn as opposed to the anxiety and its negative effects which are experienced in the classroom. As Krashen claims, ‘acquisition requires meaningful interactions in the target language – natural communication – in which speakers are concerned not with the form of their utterances but with the messages they are conveying and understanding... The best methods are therefore those that supply “comprehensible input” in low anxiety situations [...]’ (Krashen, 1982)

Humor is an excellent tool to help improve the atmosphere especially for the shy speakers or learners concerned about making mistakes. And finally, there is something to be told in remembering jokes: if they are funny, we remember them and the same happens in the learning or revision process with the language. The students are more open to recalling and retaining information in a fun and relaxed context than otherwise.

Resources:

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