



## Humor in ELT (Part 1): Benefits, Misconceptions, and Risks

by [John Rucynski](#)

In this three-part series, I examine the role of humor in English language teaching (ELT), starting with a general overview and progressing to classroom-tested techniques for incorporating humor into your teaching. In a nutshell, I will attempt to answer the two most common questions about using humor in our teaching:

- Why?
- How?

I have often joked that if you ask 10 different teachers why and how they use humor in their classes, you will get 10 different answers. In the [survey](#) on the role of humor that Neff and I administered to language teachers, however, we discovered this wasn't a joke! (See Neff & Rucynski, 2021.) So, I would like to start this series by providing an overview of the most common benefits, misconceptions, and risks when it comes to using humor in language teaching.

### Benefits of Humor

#### 1. Humor Has a Positive Impact on Classroom Atmosphere and the Learning Process

First, the good news: Learning English is an exciting challenge that can empower multilingual learners (MLLs) and open doors to foreign cultures. Learning a language, however, is also a notoriously difficult process that can take years to master. Our learners often struggle with a lack of confidence, enthusiasm, or motivation. It is no surprise, therefore, that the main reason for using humor tends to be affective factors. This has been voiced in the research (Bell & Pomerantz, 2016), and these benefits were also confirmed by MLLs in [another survey](#) about humor in the classroom conducted by Neff and I (Neff & Rucynski, 2017). Humor has the potential to

- bring the teacher and students closer together,
- improve the class atmosphere,
- increase student participation, and
- make learning more fun and memorable.

## 2. Humor Mimics Real-World Language Use

Have you ever read English as a foreign language coursebook dialogues and thought, “People don’t really speak that way”? That’s because they don’t! In his seminal [book on language play](#), Cook (2000) argued for a more creative and free approach to language learning. This not only makes learning more fun, but also prepares MLLs for the randomness and spontaneity that distinguishes real-world language use from coursebook language use.

I like to compare language learning to learning to play a musical instrument. Just as musicians need to learn notes and scales, language learners need to master grammar rules and vocabulary. To become proficient, however, musicians and language learners alike need to learn how to *improvise*.

## 3. Humor Provides Insights Into the Target Culture(s)

In my more than 20 years as a language teacher, I have worked with a lot of students who have studied internationally. Despite their impressive scores on English proficiency exams, one of the most common regrets I hear from returning students is: “It was hard to communicate because I couldn’t understand the humor.” Shively’s (2018) [book on humor use during study abroad](#) shows that this struggle is obviously not limited to English learners, but also learners of other foreign languages. An awareness of the humor of the target culture can help MLLs to

- bond with target language speakers,
- improve their cross-cultural communicative competence, and
- avoid misunderstandings.

## Misconceptions of Humor

In his 2001 article, Tosta argued that the “funny teacher” is more than just a “clown figure.” Still, two decades later, misconceptions about what it means to use humor in language teaching persist. So, let me discuss three of these common misconceptions by explaining what humor in ELT should *not* be.

### 1. Humor Should Not Only Be Teacher Centered

When I have given presentations about humor, more than one teacher has confided in me, “I want to use humor in my teaching, but I don’t have a good sense of humor.” I will state here for the 629th and final (I hope!) time that you do not need a good sense of humor to use humor in your teaching. Though there certainly are benefits to having a good sense of humor (in teaching and in life), using humor in the classroom is more about creating a safe environment, or safe house, for learners to experiment with understanding and producing humor in English (Pomerantz & Bell, 2011). This could entail anything from helping learners understand different forms of humor in English (to be covered later in this series) to encouraging them to engage in language play (see Cook, 2000, again) in funny student-created dialogues or stories.

### 2. Humor Is Not Only for Advanced Proficiency Learners

Though there is always the risk (more about risks later) that humor will cause misunderstandings in the language classroom, this certainly does not mean that humor can and should only be used with higher level learners. In fact, lower level learners who lack motivation to study English may appreciate a healthy dose of humor in the classroom even more. In the previously mentioned survey about the role of humor in the classroom (Neff & Rucynski, 2017), the most common reason lower level learners endorsed humor in the language classroom is that it made learning English more interesting.

In their volume on humor in language teaching, Bell and Pomerantz (2016) suggested forms of humor for different proficiency levels. These range from puns and knock-knock jokes for lower level learners to sarcasm and self-deprecating humor for advanced learners. It is important to note, however, that even within specific types of humor, there will be a wide range of jokes—and teachers need to consider the appropriate level for their learners. Take the example of popular meme characters. [“Condescending Wonka”](#) employs sarcasm as the humorous device and thus may puzzle lower level learners. On the other hand, characters such as [“Grumpy Cat”](#) and [“Success Kid”](#) may be more accessible for lower level learners.

### **3. Humor Is Not Only for a Laugh**

Don’t get the wrong idea. Humor *is* good for a laugh. The misconception, however, is that a quick laugh is the only purpose of humor in language teaching. More than one teacher has told me, “I like to start or finish my class with a joke.” Though I certainly do not disagree with this use of humor, humor is not something that should merely be tacked on to start or finish lessons with something fun or different.

A growing number of teachers and researchers argue that humor should have a larger role in the English teaching curriculum, with Wulf (2010) even proposing a humor competence curriculum. In addition to interpersonal benefits, humor can also be used in the language classroom to

- improve learners’ cross-cultural communicative competence,
- provide insights into the target culture(s), and
- raise awareness about social issues in the target culture(s).

These benefits and uses will be discussed in more detail later in this series.

## **Risks of Humor**

Meyer (2000) aptly described humor as a double-edged sword in communication. The same can be said of humor in the classroom. While I praise the benefits of humor in every article I write about humor in ELT, I am always careful to also mention the risks. Humor can have countless benefits, but it also can backfire in these ways.

### **1. Humor Can Be Overused**

In life, we often fall back on the “dinner party rule” about how much food to serve, arguing that “It’s better to have too much than not enough.” Do *not* follow this rule when it comes to serving up humor in your language classes. Though students often have a negative view of teachers who are overly strict or serious, they may equally question teachers who are *never* serious. In my own research, I have had the opportunity to interview dozens of students about the role of humor in their English classes. Though these students have almost unanimously endorsed humor, they have also frequently warned that humor has its limits and should not be overused.

Though it is difficult to state how much humor is too much, the important thing to keep in mind is that humor should only be *one* of many tools in your teacher toolbox. Humor can indeed improve the class atmosphere and your relationship with your students, but so can treating students with kindness and patience, designing well-organized lessons, and clearly explaining language points.

## **2. Humor Can Be Over Our Students’ Heads**

I previously argued that humor is not only for advanced-level learners, but we still need to be careful about using level-appropriate humor for our respective classes. So much of language teaching is properly scaffolding language and gradually building up our learners’ confidence and proficiency.

One of my early disasters with trying to incorporate humor into my English classes was including scenes from an episode of the popular American sitcom *Seinfeld*. Though I had good intentions of sharing a part of my own culture and giving my learners a break from the usual class routine, the random cultural references and in-jokes made the “material” way too difficult. Instead of happily laughing at this humor from the English-speaking world, the message I got from my poor students’ eyes was, “How are we ever going to speak English with real people if this is the way they talk?”

## **3. Humor Can Lead to Misunderstandings**

As an American, three popular forms of humor I instantly think of are:

- joke telling (“Have you heard the one about....?”)
- sarcasm and other forms of verbal irony
- satirical news

These are also three forms of humor that are relatively infrequent in my current teaching context of Japan. An essential part of using humor in your classes is also being familiar with the humor of your students’ culture. This can go a long way in knowing not only what types of humor may be difficult for them but also, more importantly, what types of humor may cause offense. I had thought my first teacher trainer ever was being overdramatic when he warned us that “everything that comes out of your mouth is a potential disaster.” But this *can* be the case even when it comes to (what may seem to *you*) simple and natural humor.

Humor can easily lead to misunderstandings if it is

- too advanced for your students,
- relatively infrequent in the students' native culture, or
- taboo in the students' native culture.

## What's Next?

At this point, you may rightly be asking, "But how do I actually use humor in my English classes?" That will be the focus of the next two articles in this series.

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