



Humor in ELT (Part 3): Online Teaching Techniques

by [John Rucynski](#)

From the spring of 2020 until the summer of 2021, all of my English classes were online. Even as I grew accustomed to this (for me) completely new teaching format, I also realized an integral part of the classroom experience was sorely missing: the sound of my students' laughter. I thus found myself sadly nodding my head (and I know I wasn't alone) when reading [an article](#) by Henderson (2021) in which he discussed the negative impact of online teaching on humor use. He argued that humor is more difficult to incorporate in the online format because of, among other reasons,

- missed context cues,
- poor audio or video connections, and
- less contagious laughter.

In the classroom, humor is a powerful tool that teachers can turn to in order to lighten the atmosphere, make speaking in the target language less intimidating, and enhance the teaching of grammar or vocabulary. Though the spontaneous joking that helps to improve the atmosphere of traditional language classes is indeed much more challenging when you are speaking into your computer and looking at video thumbnails (of webcams which may or may not be on), it is not all bad news. Humor merely needs to be modified, not eliminated, when it comes to online teaching. Additionally, there are some advantages to the online format. The online teaching format can provide

- a safe environment for experimenting with humor,
- more time for learners to digest the humor, and
- the opportunity to focus on the importance of how humor is used online (e.g., on social media).

In the third (and final) part of this series on humor in English language teaching (ELT), I introduce practical techniques that illustrate these three potential advantages of humor in online teaching. (Read [Part 1](#) on the benefits, misconceptions, and risks of using humor in ELT, and [Part 2](#) on classroom techniques.)

1. Online Teaching Provides a Safe Environment for Experimenting With Humor

Pomerantz and Bell (2011) argued that “engagement in spontaneous humorous performances can provide rich opportunities for language use and development, beyond those habitually found in more tightly controlled classrooms” (p. 157). Though I wholeheartedly embrace this approach, many of my students still hesitate to engage in humorous interaction in the classroom, either because they lack confidence or aren’t sure if the humor lacks appropriateness.

When I assigned my students to prepare and share prerecorded speaking videos for the class LMS in my online courses, I encouraged them to relax and have fun. A very pleasant surprise was that students actually incorporated humor into their speaking tasks *more* than in the traditional classroom. I had a number of “this probably wouldn’t happen in the regular classroom” moments. One of these occurred in a video presentation in which students had to design a themed tour of Japan for international tourists. One student chose *natto* (fermented soybeans infamous for its gooey, stringy texture and strong odor; see Image 1) as the focus of his tour. I have often advised my students that starting a presentation with humor is a great way to get the attention of the audience. Instead of yet another presentation starting with “My name is ____ and I will talk about ____,” this student opened a fresh package of *natto*, then demonstrated the gooey texture as he stretched the beans right up to the camera and explained the theme of his tour. He got my attention!



Image 1. *Natto*.

The great thing about this student’s use of humor is that it was contagious. Because they were mostly taking lessons from home, other students started incorporating humorous props into their speaking videos. As stressed in [Part 1](#) of this series, humor should not only be teacher centered. Though the teacher may encourage the use of humor, it is often much more effective when it is learner initiated, as this inspires other students to include humor in their own speaking tasks. The important thing to remember about humor, however, is it should be used to *enhance*, and not

replace, learning. The *natto* student got an A on his assignment because his humorous and attention-getting introduction was just one aspect of a high-quality presentation.

Though we may lose the contagious laughter in online teaching, classes like this one still featured a lot of (or even more!) humor. Additionally, in self- and peer evaluations, students wrote comments like, “Because I wasn’t in the classroom, it felt more natural to use humor” and “Other students’ funny videos cheered me up during COVID-19.”

2. Online Teaching Gives Learners More Time to Digest the Humor

Humor can be a double-edged sword in the classroom. Some language instructors avoid using humor because they worry that it can be both motivating and demotivating—students who understand the humor benefit, but students who don’t understand the humor may lose confidence and feel frustrated. It takes a lot of time to get humor in a foreign language, and it should be a step-by-step process in the language teaching classroom.

One way to give learners more time to digest the humor is to create online humor “quizzes” (e.g., on Google Forms). One type of humor that works well with this approach is satirical news. As explained in [Part 2](#) of this series, humor instruction works best when it has value beyond just a laugh. A deeper understanding of English satirical news helps multilingual language learners (MLLs) to improve their

- digital literacy (e.g., understand the types of humor that are shared on social media),
- media literacy (e.g., differentiate between real and “fake” news), and
- understanding of English-speaking cultures (e.g., get insights into how humor is used to critique contemporary issues).

You can create an out-of-class online quiz that mixes satirical news headlines with real (but offbeat) news headlines. Students complete a Likert-style survey in which they rank each item from 1 (definitely satirical news) to 6 (definitely real news). Sample items I have used before include the following:

1. Namco unveils potato chip-flavored cola (real news: [Sora News 24](#))
2. Teen boasts of drunken driving on Facebook, arrested (real news: [CNET](#))
3. Study Reveals: Babies are Stupid (satirical news: [The Onion](#))
4. BREAKING NEWS: Husband Cooks for Wife (satirical news: [The Rising Wasabi](#))

See the [full quiz](#), which I created in Google Forms for my students in Japan ([answer key here](#)). Doing this humor quiz online takes away the pressure of having trouble understanding this form of humor. Though students may need to enter their name, student number, or alias to get credit for the assignment, their classmates cannot see their answers.

Whether teaching face-to-face or online, you should provide guidance to help learners better detect and comprehend satirical news. Simple tips that can help to differentiate satirical news items from real news items include

- rhetorical cues (e.g., not newsworthy, absurd situations) and
- linguistic cues (e.g., informal style, more nouns in the title).

After providing humor construction on detecting satirical news, I highly recommend giving a second quiz featuring new items. In previous research I did with Caleb Prichard (Prichard & Rucynski, 2019), students were able to significantly improve their ability to detect satirical news after just one class period devoted to humor instruction.

3. Online Teaching Provides an Opportunity to Focus on How Humor Is Used Online

As I have stressed in this three-part series, a deeper understanding of the humor of the target culture(s) is an integral component of cross-cultural communicative competence. However, this includes both humor that takes place in face-to-face communication and online communication. Social media and other Web 2.0 platforms provide countless free opportunities for MLLs to develop their English language skills, but the frequent use of humor by users can impede language learners' ability to fully comprehend some content.

In [Part 2](#) of this series, I explained the importance of understanding verbal irony in intercultural communication. However, detecting and comprehending online ironic statements (e.g., sarcastic comments on social media or other platforms) is equally important because

- irony is frequently used on such platforms,
- cues to normally detect irony are missing (e.g., verbal and nonverbal cues), and
- a lack of understanding of ironic statements can lead to embarrassment or misunderstandings.

With regards to cues for detecting irony, we have all likely had frustrating experiences when reading an email message or Facebook comment and not being completely sure whether the other person is serious or joking. Decoding whether written language is ironic or sincere is even more challenging when reading in a foreign language.

As an introduction to helping learners detect true intent, prepare easy examples with visual support and task learners with differentiating between ironic and sincere comments. Again, learners can do the activities anonymously using online tools such as Google Forms or a class LMS. You can even use the same “model” for multiple examples, such as with my family’s dog Ziva, shown here in Images 2 and 3:



Image 2. Good Ziva.

Caption: My dog Ziva is such a good girl.

[ironic / sincere]



Image 3. Naughty Ziva.

Caption: My dog Ziva is such a good girl.

[ironic / sincere]

Though verbal (e.g., exaggerated intonation, flat tone) and nonverbal (e.g., winking, rolling eyes) cues are missing in online ironic comments, different cues are available. In another study I conducted with Prichard (Prichard & Rucynski, 2022), we shared some tips with learners, including the following:

Cue
/s = sarcasm
BiG aND sMaLL lEtTeRs = sarcasm
Emoji and comment do not match ("I love rainy days... 🙄") = sarcasm
Laughing emoji 😂 or LOL does not <i>always</i> mean sarcasm.
Stressing a word (CAPS). ("I TOOOTALLY love <i>natto</i> .") = maybe sarcasm
If a person says something very different than you expect = maybe sarcasm

It is important to stress that some cues only *sometimes* mean irony or sarcasm. For example, the laughing emoji could follow either an ironic comment or a humorous, sincere comment. After the simple cues (e.g., /s = sarcasm, BiG aND sMaLL lEtTeRs = sarcasm), move on to more complex tasks like identifying incongruity, or detecting comments in a social media thread that

do not seem logical. Create fictional threads (featuring either two or multiple commenters) and task learners with identifying whether the final comment is ironic or sincere. Here is an example:

Thread 1

A: I have to take the TOEFL test this weekend!

B: Don't worry. I'm sure you'll do great! **[ironic / sincere]**

Thread 2

A: I have to take the TOEFL test this weekend!

B: That sounds like a fun weekend. I envy you! **[ironic / sincere]**

As any MLL can tell you, Thread 2 features the ironic comment!

Again, designing this type of humor quiz online not only exposes MLLs to the types of ironic online comments they may encounter, but also provides an anonymous format to give learners the opportunity to practice detecting humor without potential embarrassment. Having all student answers on a platform such as Google Forms also makes it easy for you to track which types of humor are more challenging for your learners.

Conclusion

Although this part of the series focused on online teaching, these three advantages are important regardless of teaching format. Whether you are teaching face-to-face or online, it is important to provide a safe environment for learners to experiment with humor, give learners time to digest humor, and include a focus on how humor is used both in face-to-face communication and online. Though Henderson (2021) was certainly correct in arguing that using humor in online teaching does have some obstacles, I also agree with Anderson (2011) that using humor is still a way to “take the distance out of distance education” (p. 80).

References

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