

Using Jokes to Foster The Practice of English
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I teach English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in a Secondary school. My students are adolescents between 15 and 17 years old. There are about 30 or 35 boys and girls per group. Their mastery of the language can be described as elementary or lower-intermediate. We have three periods of fifty five minutes per week. I have to teach them the four basic skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. They are well-behaved students, and most of them are willing to learn English since they know it may have later influence in their lives (either in their career or at work). The problem is they do not feel self-confident speaking in English. As Malinowsky (1989:43) says: "A common complaint among teachers today is that students will not talk. To avoid the frustrations of a noncommunicative conversation class, teachers should work at setting up the students for real communication.

I keep on asking myself how I can promote that real communication, and motivate students to listen and to speak in English. I know I have to involve them in the dynamics of the class. As Abello Contesse (1995:2) points out: "Student-student interaction (also known technically as interlanguage talk) in small groups is thought to offer a number of advantages (Richards and Lockhart, 1994, Brown, 1994): it reduces the dominance of the teacher over the class, it promotes collaboration among learners, it offers a more comfortable, relaxed atmosphere, it enables the teacher to work more as facilitator or consultant, it can promote learner responsibility and autonomy... but its crucial advantage is that it can increase the quantity of student talking time (STT) in the classroom".

What I present in this article is the latest thing I have been using to promote student interaction in the class: the use of humor.

The literature on the topic stresses the importance of humor as a means of enhancing student motivation to learn English. It was Dulay and Burt (1977) who first introduced the concept of affective filter. Afterwards it was Krashen (1982:32) who noted that a low affective filter corresponded to high motivation, self-confidence, and a lack of anxiety. He explained that the Affective Filter Hypothesis implied that our pedagogical goals should not only include supplying comprehensible input, but also creating a situation that encourages a low filter. In this respect, humor can help lowering that affective filter, reducing anxiety in the class, and encouraging students' desire to take part in what is being said in the class.

Claire (1984:v) stresses the importance of humor: "The nature of the subject- humor-insures enthusiastic student involvement in in-class conversations. No other subject generates such lively participation, covering so many different linguistic skills".

Maurice (1988:20) states: "Humor can easily be seen as a way of activating motivation and directing attention, but it can also be used in other events as well, from stimulating

recall to eliciting performance and providing feedback." He further on argues, *ibid.*: 23: "Telling jokes is a specialized skill that few EFL learners really need; however, the subskills that aid effective joke-telling can be important in other ways of communication."

Students can profit from the language contained in jokes if we select them carefully and grade their level of difficulty. And several skills can be practiced: listening, speaking, and reading. As Valmaaa Iribarren (1992:39) points out: "At the end of the semester I realized that the students not only had improved their listening skills but also had learned to select jokes and read them to others appropriately and fittingly".

Poljaveric (1992:53) summarizes her whole experience with jokes as teaching materials in her English classes: "The pupils learned without being aware of it. They had to think and react quickly, which is not easy. In a very few minutes they had to select what was important to include and to discard what was not. They had to concentrate on the vocabulary, grammar, etc., and they did it without tension or fear. It was a game, and, as we know, learning through games is spontaneous and natural."

Leal (1993:318) points out how jokes can be used in our classes:

by making the students listen to and understand the punchline of the joke,
by providing them with part of the joke and asking them for their own end. For example, we give them the following: "Girl: I was ill when the school play was performed. Did it have a happy ending? Boy:

Or the student can choose the answer from three possible options (A, B or C),

Pictures can help to understand the content of a joke.

Another technique to be used could consist of translating Spanish jokes into English (we have to be careful with translations, though).

The advantages and benefits of using jokes for enhancing student participation can be found in Trachtenberg (1980:9) who mentions a number of points in favor of joke use:

Jokes are short and can be told within the space of a few minutes.

They are rule-governed...

There is a wide range of speech patterns within the single genre of joke.

Jokes are common to all cultures.

Jokes embody a culture.

Speech behavior that is learned by listening to, and telling jokes can be generalized to speech acts other than the joke.

Jokes are funny. They relax the tension in the classroom.

DeFelice (1996:43), working in a context similar to ours, writes: "Teaching in a monolingual/monocultural, non-English speaking environment can at times be frustrating. You want your students to genuinely communicate with each other in socially acceptable ways, and at the same time become more aware of cultural traits.../... What is needed in a classroom is a reaction that is real because it is spontaneous. This is where jokes and funny stories can come in handy."

So, both from the literature above and from my own point of view, I find several advantages in the use of jokes for the teaching of English:

The students like them, so they are a source of motivation.
They lower the affective filter and create a relaxed atmosphere in the class.
Most jokes are short so it does not demand long periods of attention while listening.
Many jokes are a good way of presenting cultural aspects of the language.
We can help our explanations and the understanding of the content by using gestures.
Students react to what they have just heard. They show approval or dislike of the punch line.
If we choose the correct ones, jokes are easy to tell and easy to understand.
Jokes integrate psychological, psycholinguistic, sociological, discourse and strategic components.
They employ a variety of skills: first reading, second speaking, and third listening.
Of course, not everything is advantages. There are some inherent risks for foreign learners in this word-play: the double meanings may not be apparent to our students, and without that sudden light bulb realization the joke may not seem clever or funny.

My personal experience went on like this:

Firstly, I started by getting hold of a series of jokes from different sources: There are several books containing jokes, puzzles and riddles: Clements (1976), Kilgariff (1987), Leadercramer and Morris (1988). Another source can be The English Teaching Forum which devoted an issue to the topic; it even contained a record with jokes and riddles read by a variety of native speakers of American English from various parts of the country. Finally, another source was the Internet. There is a useful Web Page, <http://www.aitech.ac.jp/~iteslj/quizzes>, where you can find this kind of material. I made printed copies of the jokes I had. I cut the papers in stripes, each one containing a joke, and I placed them on my table so that every student could take one. The students returned to their desks and started talking to their classmates. Each one tells his/her friend a joke which he/she must understand. As Valma Iribarren (1992) says: "They Laugh First Who Understand Best". Student reactions to the jokes can be comments such as: "That was a good one", "I am sorry, I did not like it too much", "It is really funny ", "I know a similar one ", etc.... The class really interacts as every student can tell the same joke not only to one student but to several. So the students are active and really listen and speak in English. From time to time, some students come to my table to look for new jokes to tell to the rest of the class. If some students do not understand by listening to their mate, they can ask for the paper with the joke on it. In this way reading can help to understand the content. Students can exchange papers with jokes.

The whole experience can be valued as highly positive and motivating for my students. They practice three skills: listening, speaking and reading, and the whole atmosphere in the class is relaxed. Harmer (1984:39) describes using jokes as a "...balanced activities approach" : The balanced activities approach sees the methodology as being a balance between the components of input and output.

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