

Name (in Romaji):	→
Student Number:	→
Class Day + Period:	→

HUMOR IN LANGUAGE LEARNING CONTEXTS

PART 1

First, think about humor. What is it? Why do people laugh at things they find humorous? What do you think is funny? What makes you laugh? Ask and answer these and other questions related to humor with a classmate or in small groups. You may take notes on the lines below.

PART 2

Humor is universal. It transcends cultures and languages and can act as a form of social communication. People encounter and use humor daily, for it can be a source of entertainment, social bonding, and stress relief.

In education, humor can be a powerful pedagogical tool. Many teachers use humor to break the ice, reduce students' anxiety, and create a positive classroom atmosphere. Numerous research studies show that humor fosters a dynamic and interactive learning environment that not only encourages students to participate and take risks in their second or foreign language but also helps them retain grammar and vocabulary. Consequently, this makes their language learning more effective and enjoyable.

While humor can — and should — be used in all learning situations (e.g., because it can help build rapport between teachers and students), it is particularly important in language classes.



Many learners experience negative emotions such as anxiety or self-doubt when trying to master a new language. Humor relaxes students. It provides relief and promotes a more open learning environment. It can also bridge cultural gaps and help students understand and appreciate the nuances of the target language and the cultures in which it is spoken.

PART 3

Broadly defined, humor is a quality that provokes laughter or amusement. Although explanations of humor can become very complicated, humor in language-learning contexts is typically divided into two broad categories: **verbal** and **non-verbal** humor.

Common types of verbal humor include jokes, puns, wordplay, satire, and humorous stories. Verbal humor is especially relevant in language learning because students must engage directly with the target language, thereby enhancing their linguistic and cultural competence.

Non-verbal humor relies on physical actions like body movements, facial expressions, and gestures. These are non-linguistic elements. Used well with good timing, these can be used to create amusing scenes. Examples include slapstick comedy, mime, and visual jokes (e.g., cartoons like comic strips). Although non-verbal humor does not allow students to directly engage with linguistic elements, it transcends language barriers and illustrates concepts. This makes the learning environment more engaging (and fun!).

PART 4

Humor is valuable, but it also presents challenges in classes where a second or foreign language is being taught and learned. These are not necessarily major problems, but they can complicate the effective use of humor in language classrooms, and relatedly, they can make it difficult to teach a course that has humor as its main subject.

Problem #1: Humor does not always translate well

What is funny in one language may not be funny — or even understood — in another (e.g., lawyer jokes or mother-in-law jokes, which are commonly told by native English speakers). This is often but not always a cultural issue.



Problem #2: Jokes can be difficult to understand

Not all listeners can grasp a pun or catch a pop-culture reference. This is true for both language learners and native speakers alike. Language learners in particular need a high level of proficiency to understand complex humor.

Problem #3: Jokes are not funny if you need to explain them

Explaining a joke detracts from its humor. This is true when jokes are told between native speakers of a language, and it is particularly true when explaining a joke or something humorous to people of a different language or culture. As one can imagine, this might be the biggest drawback to teaching a course on humor. With the possibility of having to explain so many jokes, a course on humor might end up not being funny at all!

Problem #4: You cannot force humor

If you can understand Problem #3 above, then Problem #4 should make sense. A joke explained is not funny (even if it is understood eventually). Just as you cannot expect someone to laugh at a joke that has been explained to them, you cannot expect someone to laugh at all the humor that you throw at them. People have different senses of humor. Some people love puns while other people only groan at them. Some people enjoy watching slapstick comedy, yet others find it too violent. There is no accounting for taste.¹ Even with that said, there are jokes that are offensive (e.g., racial jokes), and as a rule of thumb these should be avoided. Just know that jokes and humor work best when they are spontaneous and contextual (and not explained).

¹ 1 たで 蓼食う虫も好き好き。

Information adapted from these sources:

<https://eflcafe.net/the-role-of-humor-in-efl-esl-language-learning/>

<https://www.theteflacademy.com/blog/using-humour-in-the-efl-classroom/>



===== QUIZ =====

Ask and answer the questions with classmates. You may use the lines at the bottom of the page to take notes on your answers.

1. According to Part 1, what are three benefits humor provides in everyday life?
2. Why might humor help students retain grammar and vocabulary better than a traditional lecture?
3. Find a synonym in the text for the phrase “build connections between.”
4. List two examples of non-verbal humor mentioned in the handout.
5. Problem #3 says jokes are “not funny if you have to explain them.” How could this affect a course that focuses on humor?
6. What is one reason some jokes do not translate well between cultures?
7. In your opinion, which type of humor (verbal or non-verbal) is easier for language learners to understand? Give one reason based on the handout.
8. What does the expression “There is no accounting for taste” (Problem #4) mean? Explain in your own words.

