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Learning about and through humor in the second language classroom

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Humorous communication is extremely complex in both its forms and functions (e.g. Norrick, 1993; 2003). Much of the previous work that has put forth suggestions for incorporating humor into the language classroom (e.g. Trachtenberg, 1979; Deneire, 1995; Schmitz, 2002) has not examined these complexities in the detail necessary for the target audience (i.e. classroom language teachers) to be able to make informed judgments concerning its possible role in their classrooms. In addition, these researchers have not made use of naturally occurring interaction in making their recommendations. This article draws on data (interviews, participant observation and discourse analysis of audiotaped or videotaped interaction) collected from three research projects involving the use and understanding of humor by second language (L2) speakers in both classroom and non-classroom situations to illuminate what has so far been a largely theoretical discussion. I critique recommendations for pedagogical applications of humor in the L2 classroom, using examples to demonstrate how these are inadequate for determining what might be taught and learned and to whom. I then present arguments as to why it is appropriate to address L2 humor in the classroom and close with suggestions for incorporating humor into the language classroom.

Keywords: humour, L2 learners, language classroom

I Introduction

Language teachers are often encouraged to use humor in the classroom. Humor is presented as socially and psychologically beneficial to learners, helping to relax them, to create a comfortable classroom atmosphere, to create bonds among classmates, to raise student interest, and simply to make learning more enjoyable. In addition, humor has been touted as an excellent way for students to learn the vocabulary, syntax, semantics, and discourse conventions of the target language, as well as to gain insight into the culture of those who speak that language. In order to help language instructors make sense of humor and select appropriate examples to use in their classrooms, researchers have put forth typologies of humor and made recommendations for the appropriate levels of learners with which each type

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might be used (Richard, 1975; Trachtenberg, 1979; Holmes, 1980; Vizmuller, 1980; Berwald, 1992; Deneire, 1995; Schmitz, 2002).

These propositions are not without controversy. Humorous communication is extremely complex in both its forms and functions (e.g. Norrick, 1993; 2003), and much of the previous work has not examined these complexities in the detail necessary for the target audience – classroom language teachers – to be able to make informed judgments concerning the possible role of humor in their classrooms. In addition, these researchers have not made use of naturally occurring interaction in making their recommendations, instead relying on canned or pre-scripted jokes. Davies (2003) is a notable exception. Based on her study, discussed below, Davies has suggested that the classroom normally cannot provide the type of context necessary for learners to participate in and thus develop competence in second language (L2) humor. In this article, I argue that the classroom can be an appropriate place to address L2 humor:

- because many learners voice a desire for this;
- because access to humor is frequently restricted for L2 speakers interacting with native speakers (NSs) outside of educational contexts; and
- because recent work in second language acquisition suggests that playful uses of language may facilitate second language learning (SLL).

In the sections that follow I review typologies and recommendations that have been put forth with regard to the use of humor in the L2 classroom and point to several problems with these proposals, using data I have gathered in a variety of studies involving interviews and recordings of language learners' humorous interaction both in and out of the classroom to illustrate my points. I then present arguments in favor of addressing humor in the L2 classroom. I close with a new, but – given the relative paucity of research in this area – tentative set of suggestions for teachers.

II Proposals for the use of humor in L2 pedagogy

In addition to (and perhaps as a result of) the larger problem of the lack of naturalistic data used as a basis for making suggestions for using humor in the L2 classroom, the recommendations frequently suffer from the following three problems. First, the classification of humor into typologies greatly oversimplifies the way humor works in conversation. Related to this, certain types of humor are then often recommended for use with learners of a certain proficiency, which is again a misrepresentation both of humor and of our current understanding of proficiency. Finally, humor is often unnaturally divided into humor that is based within a specific culture and that which is claimed to be universal. Each of these problems is discussed in greater depth below.

1 Typologies

Typologies of humor can certainly serve some useful functions, such as making teachers and students aware of the diversity of humor used, and to set parameters regarding what it means, for example, to tease someone. At the same time, however, typologies cannot be relied upon to illustrate how humor is used in interaction. There are two main problems with these heuristics. First, typologies intended largely for the teaching of conversational joking tend to be based on written or literary humor, or on intuition rather than on actual humor drawn from interaction. Trachtenberg (1979), for example, emphasizes the importance of jokes for the development of oral and aural skills, yet the texts she proposes using are all pre-scripted humor. Similarly, while acknowledging the importance of teacher-initiated spontaneous humor, Schmitz (2002) provides examples of texts drawn mostly from the *Reader's Digest* and the *Farmers' Almanac*. Following such suggestions may raise learners' awareness of certain linguistic and cultural aspects of English, but will providing learners with an arsenal of childish riddles and canned jokes help them perceive and construct humor in interaction? Bell (2002) found that in 541 examples of conversational humor extracted from conversations recorded by three advanced non-native speakers (NNSs) of English, pre-scripted jokes or riddles occurred in only six instances and in each case the participant had accidentally revealed that she was participating in a study about L2 humor, rather than providing the more general explanation that the study was about language learning. While there are surely circles in which jokes are commonly traded, these findings would seem to indicate that the humor suggested for use in the classroom bears little resemblance to that found in daily life.

Second, and related to the first point, typologies ignore the multifunctional nature of communication. In my own work on humor in intercultural interaction (Bell, 2002), when first attempting to categorize humorous initiations I relied on published accounts of humor that named types of humor and/or the functions of humor, and on previously established typologies. At first these appeared to be quite clear, and I set out to find puns, teases, insults, and self-deprecating jokes. In comparing these classifications to my own data, however, I quickly ran into the same problems as Norrick (1993, p. 15), wherein much of the humor did not represent 'pure' forms of traditional folk or literary breakdowns of humor. Instead of finding a 'tease' or 'an ironic statement,' I found 'ironic teasing.' Often the humor consisted of hybrids of two or more types and was thus difficult to categorize. The following is an example of this. Tanya is a native speaker of Russian. Her friend Mary has just said the three words of Russian that she knows and receives a humorous response:

Tanya: fa::bulous!
You can survive!
You don't even have to /?/ UHUH HUH HUH HUH HUH HUH

Although the final words of Tanya's utterance are obscured by loud laughter, it is clear that she is teasing Mary. Mary is clearly far from proficient in Russian, thus Tanya's tease takes the form of ironic compliments that exaggerate Mary's accomplishment, which creates an ironic hyperbolic tease. This type of construction is not presented in any published typology of humor, but is very common in interaction. Typologies may provide a useful starting point for understanding the diversity of forms of humor, but they cannot be taken as accurately representing conversational joking.

2 *Humor and proficiency*

Language teachers are often advised to use certain types of humor with learners of certain proficiency levels. For example, Schmitz (2002) divides humor into three categories, which he bases on Long and Graesser (1988): universal humor, culture-based humor, and linguistic humor. He claims that elementary-level students can benefit from use of the first type, intermediate students will appreciate universal humor plus some types of culture-based jokes, and advanced students can benefit from and appreciate all three types. The inadequacy of these classifications has already been discussed; here I describe the fallacy of attributing pre-determined types of humor as appropriate for different levels of proficiency.

Wordplay is an example of a type of humor that is often cited as difficult and best reserved for those of advanced proficiency (e.g. Richard, 1975; Berwald, 1992; Deneire, 1995; Schmitz, 2002). Data from my own study (Bell, 2002) revealed that wordplay was very rare. Of the three case study participants in my research, only one, the most highly proficient, employed wordplay, and of the 106 instances in which she initiated humor, only one of these was wordplay, suggesting that indeed this form of humor is difficult for language learners. Still, this does not mean that beginning learners cannot create or appreciate this type of humor. Wordplay comes in many forms and thus can be accessible to learners at all levels of proficiency, as the following example from one of my own beginning level ESL classes shows. I have just finished explaining the meaning of 'lethal' as in the movie title *Lethal Weapon*. Hong responds with a pun:

Hong: We – we have two weapons in this class: bomb and gun.
Ss: (Laughing)

The 'weapons' that he refers to are actually quite similar to the names of two of the students in the class. Not only has he quickly and appropriately constructed L2 wordplay, but the immediate laughter from the rest of the class shows that he is not alone in appreciating this humor (although it is important to acknowledge that some students may have laughed along with the others without understanding).

Another example drawn from this same class shows a learner playing with pragmatics by deliberately using a literal interpretation of my comment intended to encourage animated talk, accompanying this with a physical dimension:

Nancy: If you want to work together, talk, make noise. Noise is good in my class. I like noise.
Sang-Tae: All right. (Starts banging on desk, Ss laugh)

My comment occurred at the midterm when a few new students had entered the course and it was directed toward socializing them into the norms of the class. It also implies that joking is permissible, through the use of the term 'noise' to describe the students' talk. Sang-Tae, who had been in the class since the start of the semester, immediately picks up on this opening for further humor, and in doing so illustrates an aspect of the classroom culture.

Davies (2003) also showed how NNSs with limited proficiency exploited the linguistic and non-verbal resources at their disposal to create humor. Her examples included an instance of wordplay in which a learner inverted the greeting 'What's up?' to 'What's down?' It is worth noting that Davies also finds that these learners tended to rely on non-verbal, lexical, prosodic, and pragmatic resources in constructing humor. This provides much-needed empirical evidence from which to begin to relate humor use and understanding to proficiency.

In addition, Davies (2003) showed how the L2 speakers were supported in their creation of humor by the L1 speaker, who initiated and collaborated in the construction of humor. This can also be seen in the example above, in which Sang-Tae builds on my playful depiction of talk as 'noise.' On the other hand, Bell (2002; 2007) found that in interaction outside the classroom NSs tend to be accommodating and lenient with regard to NNS humor, adjusting their own humor use with regard to their interlocutor's status as L2 speaker and tolerating attempts at humor that they might find offensive coming from a NS. At the same time, however, they did not often provide the kind of scaffolding and support common in classrooms and found by Davies in conversation groups. In these groups the NSs were employees of the Intensive English Program and received ongoing training in cross-cultural communication. Efforts were made to make interaction in these groups unlike classroom communication, but, given the characteristics of the NSs, the conversations guaranteed a much greater amount of support than the NNSs were likely to find in other contexts.

Clearly, different types of humor are not categorically more difficult for learners of certain levels of proficiency. First, any type of humor can be constructed at any level of sophistication, from the simple 'What's up?/What's down?' joke above, to Tallulah Bankhead's description of herself as 'as pure as the driven slush' (cited in Ross, 1998, p. 18), which requires an understanding of the metaphor on which it is based, as well as the cultural understanding

of 'purity' in women. (Knowledge of the actress's lifestyle, though not necessary, adds another dimension!) The examples above have also shown that in addition to linguistic and cultural knowledge, the proficiency in the use and comprehension of L2 humor is co-constructed, depending as much on the NS interlocutor as on the L2 user. Proficiency is not a stable, linear condition; rather it is constructed in interaction (see e.g. Bremer *et al*., 1996). The fluidity of both constructs makes it impossible to determine what types of humor will be appropriate for what types of learners.

3 Universal vs. Culture-based humor

The distinction between humor with a broad cross-cultural appeal, called 'universal humor' by many scholars, and humor that requires culture-specific knowledge to understand and appreciate is often presented in articles providing recommendations for pedagogical uses of humor (e.g. Trachtenberg, 1979; Berwald, 1992; Medgyes, 2002; Schmitz, 2002). After questioning the existence of 'universal' or 'culture-free' humor, I will describe the way in which culture is treated in these recommendations.

I will focus on Schmitz's (2002) discussion, as the most recent and thorough treatment of universal and culture-based humor. He describes universal humor as 'obtain[ing] mainly from the context and the general functioning of the world' (2002, p. 93). The idea of a universal humor is problematic first because, as researchers (e.g. Tannen, 1984) have pointed out and as individuals can attest from their personal experience, humor is highly idiosyncratic. Schmitz (2002, p. 97) gives four jokes related to recreational fishing as examples of humor that he considers as universal:

- Last week I went fishing and all I got was a sunburn, poison ivy and mosquito bites.
- Gee, Dad, that's a swell fish you caught. Can I use it as bait?
- Are you fishing? No, just drowning worms.
- Do fish grow fast? Sure. Every time my Dad mentions the one that got away, it grows another foot.

Suspecting that these jokes drew on an American mythology of sport fishing, I presented these informally to the international students in one of my MA TESOL graduate courses. These students were from Egypt, Jordan, South Korea, Taiwan, and Japan. As graduate students, future English teachers, and current residents of the USA, they were highly proficient in English. Indeed, the only lexical item in the four texts that required clarification was 'swell.' Yet, when I shared these jokes with them (introducing them as jokes, thus priming them to find them funny), the only one that got a laugh was the third. The rest were met with puzzled looks and their attempts to interpret why these were recognizable as jokes for many Americans were far off-base. For example, one student suggested, with regard to the second that 'It has something

to do with women?' Thus, while the students understood the syntax and vocabulary, the cultural connotations, and thus the humor, escaped them.

Schmitz (2002) claims that these texts are universal as they 'deal with real world situations, human behavior (lying, exaggerating, bragging and asking obvious questions)' (p. 97). While I would not deny that the types of behavior he lists are likely to be found in human societies around the world, the situations in which they will be found vary greatly. Certainly some jokes do travel better across languages and cultures than others (see, for example, the penguin joke in Trachtenberg, 1979, pp. 93–94), but culture is present not only in the topic, but in connotations of words, manner of telling, and context in which the humor will be deemed appropriate.

It is perhaps in recognition of this that authors have devoted so much time to discussions of humor as a means of teaching culture. Trachtenberg's (1979) assertion that 'jokes embody a culture, and as such, are a means of transmitting the spirit of our own culture to our students' (pp. 90–91) is a typical description of the value of humor in L2 pedagogy. 'Culture,' however, is rarely defined in these articles, its meaning for the author left implicit. For example, in describing uses of recorded comic sketches for language learning, Holmes (1980) presents examples in which comedians' work provides 'culture capsules' (p. 199), presenting humorous takes on xenophobia, life in a butcher's shop, unemployment in Quebec, and French-Canadian driving habits. For him, culture seems to be information about and attitudes of inhabitants of the target community. Deneire (1995) focuses on the sociolinguistic aspects of joke-telling, advocating that students are not simply exposed to jokes, but are taught 'the social rules that regulate the use of humor' (pp. 293–294). In this case, culture is closely tied to communicative competence. Berwald (1992) takes this relationship further, regularly mentioning the two simultaneously, making no apparent distinction between language and culture.

Schmitz (2002, p. 91) takes the unusual (for this type of discussion) step of defining culture. He cites Erickson (1987, pp. 12–13), who provides three perspectives on school culture: '(i) culture as pieces of information, (ii) culture as a set of symbols and concepts, and (iii) school culture as an arena of different meanings formed as a result of political and social struggle.' Schmitz's use of Erickson's work is apparently for the purposes of demonstrating the diversity of individual views that can exist within a single classroom, and how '[w]hat may be acceptable in one group may not be in another' (Schmitz, 2002, p. 91). Erickson's quote, however, indicates a deeper set of issues involved in the teaching of culture. While existing treatments of L2 culture and humor have touched upon (i) and (ii) above, (iii) gets little attention, yet raises important questions about the use of humor in teaching culture.

Given Erickson's definition above, as well as similar current constructivist views of culture (e.g. Kramsch, 1998), we can understand that culture

is not simply a unified and pre-existing body of knowledge shared by a group. Rather, it is something that is continually recreated and contested. Schmitz (2002) touches upon this when he provides this joke about the US holiday of Father's Day: 'Father's Day always worries me. I'm afraid I'll get something I can't afford' (2002, p. 103). He suggests that this quip contains implications regarding men as stereotypical wage-earners, women as stereotypical spenders, materialism, and attitudes toward gift-giving. This may already be a great deal of information for a learner to cope with, depending on his or her familiarity with these concepts. In addition, interpretations of this joke by NSs are likely to vary according to how they feel about the holiday, gift-giving, and the ways in which the joke positions men and women. In addition, the teller of the joke, in particular whether he or she agrees with its message, will also influence the joke's reception. In fact, the message itself is not likely to be perceived as the same for all.

Examples provided by Holmes (1980) include much more contentious topics rendered humorous by comedians, such as French-Canadian attitudes toward smaller minorities, or parallels between the French-Canadian position in society and that of African-Americans. Certainly it is common for comedians (professional or otherwise) to draw on serious social issues for humor and this is often successful with their audience. However, the ways in which social, class, and race relations are constructed are subtle and steeped in historical context, and this can make the humor inaccessible to learners. This type of humor purposefully leaves much to be implied and in doing so is able to convey complex, multilayered messages. Holmes' examples bring to mind the controversial humor of David Chapelle, whose racial satires include the tale of Clayton Bigsby, a blind African-American raised to believe he was white and who became a white supremacist. While this example is unlikely to be used in a classroom it does serve to illustrate a point. To what extent does humor illuminate L2 culture and when might it simply add an extra layer of meaning to be grappled with, thus obscuring the point? Without a certain depth of understanding about the target culture, how are learners to sort out *what* exactly is being made fun of?

An example of this problem arose during an eight-week study I conducted during the fall of 2004, in which seven graduate students in TESOL kept humor diaries and met biweekly with me to discuss their insights as a group. One of the students from Korea had seen a sketch on a comedy show that portrayed George Bush as Godzilla. She described how he had stomped through Tokyo, stopping to urinate laughingly on the city. She and the other participants found this both puzzling and offensive, framing it as a callous illustration of uncaring American dominance. Why would Americans find the denigration of another country amusing? While I could understand the participant's chagrin at this, given the surface message of unconcern for other countries, I saw the sketch as satirically pointed at Bush/the US Government, criticizing *them* for their policies and their manner of conducting foreign

affairs. Discussion of this example did not greatly clarify what I saw as the message and it did nothing in terms of their appreciation of the humor.

Thus, while humor is frequently touted as a means of facilitating cultural understanding, opportunities to discuss culture deeply and critically may get overlooked or avoided. In addition, humor may simply obfuscate the cultural points that the teacher hopes to bring out. Despite these and the other reservations regarding propositions for using humor in the L2 classroom that I have presented in this section, I do feel that humor is of value in language learning. Below I explain why.

III Why address humor in the classroom?

Davies (2003) has suggested that developing an understanding of the sociolinguistics of L2 humor is not possible in most L2 classrooms. She sees language learning as socialization and does not consider that the appropriate conditions can be created in the classroom, as joking normally takes place under egalitarian conditions, which do not obtain in an educational context. She points out that even when the teacher strives to reduce the power differential in her classroom, international students who come from more openly authoritarian cultures may resist this leveling. In fact, however, we know that humor does occur in L2 classrooms (Selleck, 1991; Medgyes, 2001, p. 116; Senior, 2001; van Dam, 2002). Davies' points are important to consider, but we must also remember that all over the world individuals have gained high levels of proficiency through classroom learning. I would suggest that if other types of linguistic behavior can be learned under these conditions, why not humor? Four main reasons exist to take advantage of the humor that occurs in the classroom and to encourage its creation and discussion: student wants, needs and goals; nature of the classroom itself as a site for experimentation; complexity of humor; potential of humor to facilitate language acquisition.

1 Student goals

While assertions that humor relaxes L2 learners and makes learning more enjoyable (Berwald, 1992; Medgyes, 2001; 2002; Schmitz, 2002; Senior, 2001) may be true within the classroom context, outside the classroom in interaction with NSs, students often express discouragement with respect to the use and understanding of L2 humor (Bell, 2002; Morain, 1991). The L2 users in both of these studies, international students studying at universities in the USA, described feelings of alienation that occurred when they could not participate in L2 humor and they emphasized the importance of learning to do so in order to create and maintain social relations with NSs. The idea of jokes as a kind of knowledge test (Sacks, 1974; Norrick, 1993), while questionable in general, seems particularly applicable for NNSs, with their frustration deriving from their repeated failure to 'pass.' Almost universally,

the students with advanced proficiency that I have interviewed, as well as those interviewed by Morain (1991) specify culture as the biggest challenge in understanding humor.

Despite the misgivings I expressed above about the use of humor to teach culture, I feel that taking students' wants and needs into account is crucial and that this alone provides justification for discussing humor and its mechanisms in the L2 classroom. Obviously we cannot prepare our students for the spontaneous humor they will encounter, but we can provide them with new ways of thinking about and trying to make sense of humor – e.g. Raskin's (1985) script opposition – and a safe place to ask and experiment with it.

2 The nature of the classroom

The possibility for experimentation is built into the classroom, where their positions as learners allows students the freedom to test and question. It is assumed that they are there to receive information about the target language that will be appropriate to their level in a safe environment. It is understood that they will have difficulties with comprehension and will need extra time to formulate utterances. While teachers should take into account Davies (2003) words of caution regarding possible student resistance, ideally, being positioned as a learner can be liberating and allow for play with the target language. As discussed above, it may not be the case that L2 users interact with supportive NSs outside of the classroom. A comparison of the L2 user language play in and outside the classroom as it has been reported in recent studies suggests that the classroom may at least encourage different types of play and humor.

The three advanced L2 participants in Bell (2002) initiated 204 instances of humor in their recorded spontaneous interactions with NSs. Of these, the most common (35.3%) was the humorous narrative. Teases and amusing observations followed, consisting of 22.1% and 20.1%, respectively. Just over 10% of their humor was self-teases and the other 12% of the corpus consisted of a variety of other types of humor. Notably absent from this list are two types of humor that have been found regularly in the language classroom: wordplay and the creation of alternate realities. As for the former, only one instance of wordplay occurred, which involved semantic ambiguity. The latter, which refers to the construction of fantasy scenarios, was found on only six occasions.

As a site where metalinguistic awareness is heightened, the classroom may encourage humorous experimentation with a range of L2 forms. For example, although wordplay was far from common among my participants, others have found learners initiating such play in a variety of L2 classrooms (Selleck, 1991; Sullivan, 2000; Tarone, 2000; Broner and Tarone, 2001; Belz and Reinhardt, 2004; Pomerantz and Bell, 2007). Play with phonology, completely absent in my data, has been found in many of these studies.

Classroom studies of language play have also found students spontaneously constructing humorous alternate realities, in particular by experimenting with new L2 voices and personas (Tarone, 2000; Broner and Tarone, 2001; van Dam, 2002; Pomerantz and Bell, 2007). Although the research on L2 humor and language learning is just beginning, the preliminary findings suggest that the types of play found in and out of the classroom tend to be different. Because of its very nature and structure, the classroom may well be the best place for learners to experience humorous and creative uses of the L2.

3 Complexity of humor

Humor cuts across all aspects of language. It can be created at the level of phonology, syntax, semantics, speech acts, or discourse. It can make use of a particular style or register. The cues that signal it are multiple and vary according to context and to type of humor (cf. Attardo *et al.*, 2003). Any topic can be dealt with humorously, although who may do so, when, and under what conditions may be highly restricted. As noted above, humor is created through many, often overlapping types. In addition, many jokes are multifunctional, for example, serving to demonstrate affiliation with one person while simultaneously criticizing another.

Let's look at one example that illustrates the complexity that is common to humor. Here, Judith, a native speaker of Spanish, is meeting with her professor to discuss a paper. The professor had given the students folders in which to keep their writing for the term. The folders had previously been used by other students and still had their names on them. The students in Judith's class had all written their names on the folders, but had not crossed out the previous student's name, so the professor covered the old names with stickers. While Judith recognizes that the professor is attempting to joke, she does not understand the humor:

1	*Professor*:	I'm just like 'okaHHy' like noHObody crossed it out like I thought they
2		were gonna cross it out
3	*Judith*:	[no well
4	*Professor*:	[so I just put stickers on them because I was like 'I can't take it' uhHUH
5		I got bHUH – it it has to be neat! uhhuh
6	*Judith*:	(2) yeah I mean it looks better
7	*Professor*:	uhhuh huh
8	*Judith*:	I mean I never I never cro– (professor hands her back a paper)
9		thank you. this is what?

The professor's comment in lines 1–2 is an indirect, but clear criticism of the students (although softened by the laughter), and of Judith in particular

since, although she speaks of the students as a group, she has just handed Judith her folder with the brand-new sticker on it (which is what prompted this exchange). Lines 4–5 seem to be an attempt to mitigate the force of her criticism, this time by turning the lens to herself, saying that she 'couldn't take it' because the folders were too messy. The folders and how they are labeled is now presented not so much as a problem of the students, but rather of the professor, who pokes fun at herself and her own over-concern with the appearance of the folders. Thus, the professor's joking comments serve to mitigate the criticism of the students, show why she wanted the names crossed out (neatness), and at the same time demonstrate her own awareness of the ridiculousness of her obsession with the neatness of the folders.

While this humor will be easily recognizable to most NSs of American English, it contains numerous nuances that would be difficult for NNSs to understand. First, the multifunctionality of the professor's humor has been noted. In addition, the hearer must be familiar with the cultural norm by which preoccupation with unnecessary or cosmetic details is open for ridicule in the USA. In order to understand the professor's comments it is first necessary to know the positive social value placed on being 'easy-going' rather than 'uptight' in the USA. It is also necessary to understand that while the value 'neatness' is not regarded negatively, 'excessive neatness' often is, with individuals who exhibit this trait being labeled with derogatory phrases, such as 'anal retentive' or 'Type A.' Finally, the NNS must know that joking (of some types) is appropriate in this role relationship. In many countries professors would not be expected to joke with students, nor especially would they be expected to use self-deprecating humor.

All this is to say that learners cannot be expected to advance in their use and understanding of L2 humor without the kind of support that can be offered in a classroom situation. As I noted earlier, NSs are not always sympathetic interlocutors. Furthermore, they are not usually trained to provide feedback and metalinguistic commentary. In fact, Bell (2006) suggests that in humorous communication NSs may tend to *over* estimate the extent to which conversational adjustments are necessary for the NNS to understand. These excessive adjustments can have the effect of marginalizing the L2 user, positioning him or her as lacking proficiency. Rather than leave learners to struggle alone to discover the nuances of L2 humor, it is the responsibility of instructors and textbook writers to take advantage of the growing research base on humor in native English speaker interaction to help their students as they grapple with this aspect of the L2.

4 Facilitating language acquisition

L1 researchers have long acknowledged the importance of language play for linguistic development (e.g. Weir, 1962; Chukovsky, 1963 [1928]; Cazden, 1976; Kuzcaj, 1983; Nelson, 1989). Currently, a growing body of research

suggests that humorous language play is also likely to facilitate L2 learning (Cook, 2000; Sullivan, 2000; Tarone, 2000; Broner and Tarone, 2001; van Dam, 2002; Belz and Reinhardt, 2004; Bell, 2005). As mentioned above, these studies have pointed to the viability of language play as a means of drawing learners' attention to L2 forms and helping them develop sociolinguistic competence (Tarone, 2000; Belz and Reinhardt, 2004). In addition, Bell (2005) has suggested that humorous language play may aid in the acquisition of L2 vocabulary and semantic fields in particular, by allowing lexical items to be processed more deeply, making them more memorable.

Lantolf (1997) focused on language play as practice, rather than as fun, providing the following examples to his participants: 'talking out loud to yourself in Spanish; repeating phrases to yourself silently; making up sentences or words in Spanish; imitating to yourself sounds in Spanish; having random snatches of Spanish pop into your head' (p. 11). Many of these clearly have the potential also to be humorous for the learner. Based on responses to a questionnaire, Lantolf found that learners who play with (in the sense of 'rehearse') language gain confidence in using the L2. While Tarone (2000) has suggested that the role of language play in SLL is facilitative, but not necessary, Lantolf puts forth the somewhat stronger argument that language play alone is not sufficient for SLL, but that 'without language play learning is unlikely to happen' (1997, p. 19). We must acknowledge that there remains a great deal of exploration to be done regarding the role of language play in L2 acquisition, including teasing apart the relationship among learning and the type of play that is 'fun,' versus the type of play that is 'practice' that does not include a sense of amusement. Still, the work done thus far examining language play in both senses strongly suggests that it should be encouraged in the L2 classroom.

IV Recommendations

In this section I present several ideas for incorporating humor into the classroom. Many of these fall under the class of awareness-raising or inductive activities that have grown out of the focus-on-form research and which research has suggested can facilitate second language acquisition (Crandall and Basturkmen, 2004; Lucas, 2005; Huth and Taleghani-Nikazm, 2006). One example of this is having learners collect and analyze samples of humor using discourse analytic techniques, as Riggenbach (1999) has suggested for other types of language. By collecting their own examples they would be able to choose samples from a particular person whose humor they found difficult and become more familiar with that person's style of joking. In this way, the problem of the idiosyncratic nature of humor could be mitigated.

The instructor might also provide video or tape recordings for analysis and discussion. Students might learn about different types of humor and then be asked to match the type with the video clip. With sitcoms, the studio

laughter that accompanies jokes would take away the burden of identifying the presence of a joke, leaving the student with only the task of determining the type. Television or movie clips without laugh tracks might be used for more advanced learners. Using such extracts as a means of identifying ironic statements, which appear to be difficult for many NNSs (Nelms, 2001), and the contextualization cues that frame them as such (see Attardo *et al.*, 2003) could prove beneficial in helping NNSs recognize them in interaction.

Learners might also benefit from the opportunity for inductive analysis of humor to determine various types, functions, and the contextualization cues used to frame different types as play. Medgyes' (2002) volume on using humor in the language classroom also contains suggestions for integrating humor in ways that could be useful for raising learner awareness of the different types and functions of humor. For example, he suggests recording different types of laughs and providing students with a list of adjectives (bitter, nervous, polite, hearty, hysterical) to match with each laugh (2002, p. 5). Such an activity suggests to learners that laughter is not always an indicator of a feeling of mirth. Using, discussing, and analyzing humorous interaction in a variety of ways and through different types of activities may contribute a great deal to L2 learners' linguistic and sociolinguistic development.

Of particular use in encouraging students to play with language could be the use of drama in the language classroom. Drama licenses, and indeed, requires, such play through the exploration of different voices and ways of communicating (for an example and further discussion of this in a university L2 Spanish classroom, see Pomerantz and Bell, 2007). With drama, students can learn through imitating others and through memorizing routines. Eventually, imitation and memorization often naturally give way to appropriation and innovative use. This is common among NSs, as well, as when a favorite line from a movie or song is memorized and repeated, then used creatively in a new type of context, often as a joke. As Cook (2000, p. 197) suggests, incorporating play into the L2 classroom could give a new, positive life to unfashionable activities such as rote learning and memorization.

Humor often derives from comments that are rude or otherwise inappropriate (or at least would be had they not been framed playfully). Behaving appropriately in an L2 entails knowing when and how to be rude, something that learners do not normally have occasion to experience in their L2 classrooms. In this case, humor found in both video and drama may aid in teaching expressions of anger, for example. Holmes (1980) relates how an American learner of French managed to rebuke the advances of a man with the phrase 'Fous le camp!' ('Get outta here!'), which she had learned from watching comic French sketches in the language laboratory.

In some cases, the use of written communication in the form of email or synchronous online chatting may encourage creative and humorous uses

of the L2. Based on their analysis of the email chat exchanges of a group of college students studying first-semester French, Kern and McGrath (2002) believe that this mode of communication might naturally encourage creative play with language. They observed that these students were much more playful in their online chats than in class and suggest that this may be due to the anonymity of the medium, the time that it afforded them to construct responses, and to the greater amount of control that the students could take over the interaction. Similarly, Belz and Reinhardt's (2004) case study of an American college student learning German found a wide variety of humorous language play serving multiple functions for this learner. They show how computer-mediated communication facilitated this type of play. Students' tendency toward creativity in this medium might be encouraged by the fact that electronic communication contains linguistic aspects of both written and spoken language (Murray, 2000, pp. 400–401), thus allowing the students a greater pool of resources from which to draw. In addition, the fact that it allows a bit more time for processing than oral interaction seems crucial. As many of the students I have interviewed have noted, they can think of and understand humor, but always too late. Computer-mediated communication may afford them the time needed to practice their jokes.

Finally, teachers should be prepared for explicit discussions, which I mean in both senses, if they are to deal with humor in their language course. First, instructors should be familiar with the basic findings of sociolinguistic humor research, for example the ways in which humor is contextualized, the variety of functions it can serve, and the situations in which joking is appropriate and with whom. In this way they can provide their students with information that is not based solely on their own intuitions and they will be familiar with a vocabulary with which to discuss humor. Second, as mentioned above, humor is often constructed around risqué topics and uses profanity. Instructors who do not feel they can provide clear, unambiguous information about these things should consider carefully which activities to use to raise their students' awareness of L2 humor and how.

V Conclusions

Several years ago, while teaching an advanced ESL speaking/listening course, my students and I engaged in several minutes of playful talk at the beginning of the class involving why our chalkboard, which was green, was referred to as a blackboard. Partly because I was undergoing an observation by my supervisor on that day, but mostly because I wanted to move responsibly on to the 'work' of language learning, I quickly moved the students into the day's (official) lesson. Later, my supervisor noted that some of the richest language use and the greatest engagement of the 80-minute class had occurred during those first minutes. Rather than embrace my students' interest and encourage their play with English, I had viewed this as a fun, but unnecessary sideline to

the planned lesson on expressing opinions in small groups. For many, humor certainly has this bad reputation as being frivolous and even unnecessary.

In this article I have provided reasons why humor should be incorporated into the L2 classroom. My pedagogical suggestions remain tentative and should be viewed equally as invitations to further research in this area, which must evaluate these and other approaches. I would suggest that, in particular, advanced NNSs, who otherwise find their proficiency to be adequate, may avoid some of the frustration they often feel due to the lack of understanding that can accompany 'frivolous' talk if they recognize the complex nature of humor. And, if the arguments I have presented here are not convincing, we can turn to Medgyes, who entreats us to think of the students, saying that 'school without laughter is sheer torture' (2001, p. 110).

VI References

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