

A Place for Jokes in the English Language Classroom

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Why students should learn to understand humor in the foreign language classroom is because of its omnipresence. Humor is something that students will run into in everyday life abroad, be it at parties, in comics, on TV, in musicals, and of course in literature, and yet it is as Virginia Woolf said “the first of the gifts to perish in a foreign tongue.”¹ This is due not only to linguistic deficiencies on the part of the student; as those Americans who have traveled in other English-speaking countries know, they can communicate and they understand almost everything, except the humor. Humor is based on culture, and culture is the basis of language. It follows that in teaching language we are teaching culture and that in teaching culture we shouldn't be ignoring such an enjoyable part of it. I don't mean to suggest that humor is the most important, but simply that it is one, aspect of a foreign language that should be dealt with in the classroom.

That being said, there are drawbacks to the use of many kinds of humor in a classroom setting: the dialogue in TV shows and movies is spoken too fast, audio recordings such as Bill Cosby's monologues are even more difficult because they lack visual stimulus, and literary humor is both too long and too difficult for all but the most advanced students to discuss. What kind of humor can and should be used with Japanese college students? As far as length, degree of linguistic difficulty and the ease of presentation are concerned, riddles and jokes seem to be ideal. Unfortunately, most teachers who try these give up. Why? Because telling a joke without getting a laugh is one of the most humiliating social experiences a person can have, and explaining humor after the fact is one of the least satisfying experiences.

Does this make any attempt to include these forms of humor in a classroom session pointless? There are certain qualities in jokes that, if known, should allow the instructor to choose suitable ones for a particular class. As I mentioned before there are two barriers to comprehension facing language students: the linguistic and the cultural. The first barrier requires teachers to know a particular class's range of vocabulary and structure to judge whether the linguistic content of a joke is appropriate. Because jokes tend to employ a larger vocabulary than is found in basic, everyday speech, even a relatively simple joke like the following will fall on deaf ears without a thoughtful presentation.

A mother mouse and her three children crept out of their hole into the

kitchen and began feasting on some delicious bits of food. Suddenly, out of the corner of her eye, Mother Mouse saw a cat slinking toward them. The cat was between the mice and their hole. The mother mouse puffed up her lungs and went, "Woof! Woof!" The cat turned tail and ran.

With that, the mother quickly led her children back to safety in their hole. When they were settled and breathing normally, Mother Mouse said to her children, "Now, what's the lesson from that experience?"

"We don't know," the baby mice squeaked.

"It is this," said Mom Mouse. "It's good to know a second language." ²

In this joke the following words are likely to cause trouble: "crept", "feasting", "slinking", "puffed up her lungs", "Woof! Woof!", "led to safety", "settled", "what's the lesson from that experience?", and "squeaked". To render this story more comprehensible, familiar expressions such as "went", "eating", and "coming" can be substituted for the first three without changing the meaning. A flash of understanding is what telling jokes is all about: without it, there is no laughter and consequently no reason to tell a joke in the first place. A bit of acting gets across the meaning of "puffed up her lungs" better than any word substitution could do. "Woof! Woof!" must be explained to the students beforehand. Their own language has very different sounds for animals, and the humor of this joke hinges upon a recognition of the English sounds. The remaining words either can be replaced or, if inessential to the meaning, can be dropped.

In the above example some of my students have not been able to understand the link between the mouse imitating a dog's bark and the idea of a second language. Students must be aware of double meanings. I often give a couple of riddles to first-year college students to check their sensitivity to wordplay:

- (1) *What has four legs and a back but no head? Answer: a chair.*
- (2) *What has nine heads and catches flies? Answer: a baseball team.*

Notice that the word "back" would be translated by two different words in Japanese, "senaka" and "semotare". The fact that I haven't had a single class that hasn't been able to come up with the answer shows that most students have an ability to grasp double meanings outside their own language. In the second example there are two words that use double meanings, "catch" and "flies". The first meaning of "catch flies" would be translated as "hae o tsukamaeru" whereas the second would be "furai o toru" in Japanese. As a result, classes find it much more difficult. Once they are given the answer, however, they emit enough sighs for me to know that they have understood, if not appreciated, the humor. Unless a comparison with the mother tongue reveals too many differences that students need to be aware of at the same time, jokes or riddles that include puns can be appropriate material.

When telling a joke to a class of foreign students the teacher should plan on at least one repetition. Normally native speakers talking with their peers expect an immediate response from the listener. When this doesn't come they feel a certain unease, as if they have told the joke incorrectly. The listener is in the uncomfortable position of being expected to laugh at something that doesn't seem funny. When the joke is repeated and finally understood, it often leaves the listener with a bitter taste of failure in his mouth. Of course a foreign student will tend to react more slowly to the same joke, so a repetition of the joke is as much in order as a second playing of a listening comprehension tape. Given encouragement, the students will begin to feel more confident about grasping humor that is within their reach. Therefore, choosing jokes must be done with care.

Why the following story usually elicits a satisfying response for the teller can be explained by students' familiarity not only with the vocabulary but also with the cultural aspects of this tragic comedy.

It was this businessman's birthday. He wasn't feeling too good about it anyway and then neither his wife nor his children even said, 'Happy Birthday.' It was as if they had forgotten it altogether. But when he got to work his secretary wished him 'Happy Birthday' and suggested they should have a birthday lunch together. He had always wanted to get on friendlier terms with his secretary so he was very pleased. They had lunch in a rather smart restaurant and then his secretary said, how about going back to her place for a coffee. This made him pretty excited... she had been very friendly during their lunch and he couldn't believe his good fortune. They drove back to her house; she took him into the sitting room and poured him a whisky. She said she wanted to go into her bedroom to put on some nicer clothes. He thought, this is it ! As soon as she had gone out he took all his own clothes off and finished off his whisky. Then she called out from the next room, 'OK, you can come in now !' He flung the door open, ran in and found the room full of his colleagues and his family singing 'Happy Birthday to You.' ³

Here are social stereotypes close enough to be understood in the context of the officework society of big-city Japan: the neglected husband, the obliging secretary, and the temptation that the businessman succumbs to. Because the humor is based on the situation rather than on the language, students find it easier to follow than jokes based on wordplay. This is probably why silent film comedy is universally appreciated.

Jokes often depend on wordplay rather than on situation for their humor. The following is an example that demands familiarity with a particular phrase which is rarely if ever used outside one context, that of speech-making.

A well-known professor was being honored at an open-bar reception, and he had had too much to drink. When he was introduced, he rose from his chair, staggered, and fell. The audience gasped. But the professor, as he lay on his back, said, clearly and cordially, "I think I shall dispense with my prepared remarks and simply take questions from the floor." 4

The likelihood of students being familiar with the phrase "take questions from the floor" is very small. This joke could only be used just after students were exposed to the necessary vocabulary in another, unconnected manner. Otherwise, any explanation before the joke is told would rob it of the surprise that humor demands to be effective. The punchline must never be touched before the joke is told!

I would like to look at a joke told to me by a Scot about the Scots, who have a reputation for thriftiness. The characters appear to be universal: here is the man who laughs at another's misfortune and the man who has his price. Judging from the situation alone this joke should be comprehensible.

A couple of men were relieving themselves in a large outhouse. When one of them took out his handkerchief to dry his hands, a penny dropped out of his pocket and fell into the muck. The other man chuckled and said, "It isn't your lucky day, now, is it?" The first man said nothing but took a pound note out of his wallet and dropped it into the muck. The second man was horrified and said, "Now what did you go and do that for?" The first man replied, "You don't think I'm going to reach down into that muck just for a penny now, do you?"

The main difficulty for the students seems to be in their inability to understand the first man's absurd action. They identify too much with the second man, but it's only in the context of the first man's answer that his action makes any sense. It's the fact that this man not only has his price but goes ahead and raises the money himself that makes us laugh. Absurdity in a language classroom, however, runs the risk of being taken seriously—when we don't understand something in a foreign language, our last thought is that what the other person is saying is ridiculous. Therefore, absurdities are generally very difficult to get across.

The absurd itself is not always beyond the comprehension of our students as can be seen in this equally absurd question-answer joke.

Question: What would you do if you swallowed your pen?

Answer: Use a pencil.⁵

Here the humor mechanism is simple: answering a question that hasn't been asked

while ignoring the obvious meaning. Being so short, the joke is immediately understood and successful. We see it again in two common jokes:

Angry Customer: "Waiter, what's this fly doing in my soup?!"

Waiter: (taking a close look) "I think he's doing the breaststroke."

"Why do birds fly south for the winter?"

"Because it's too far to walk."

From these examples we can see that certain puns, embarrassing situations, social stereotypes and slight absurdities in logic are comprehensible to Japanese students. Ethnic jokes, however, are not immediately appreciated by anyone from a society such as Japan which doesn't acknowledge the existence of ethnic groups within itself. These jokes have arisen in western countries due to the proximity of and the competition between at least two groups, usually one in the majority and the other in the minority: the Irish in Britain, the Poles in the U. S., the Arabs in France, etc.

Whether or not this particular type of humor is considered funny, it does exist as a major theme in popular western jokes, and at its best its practitioners aim at wordplay that supersedes the premise of the joke. For example:

There was a perfectly square park and in the middle of the park was a pile of pure gold. Now, in one corner of the park was Santa Claus, in one corner was the Easter Bunny, in one corner was a stupid Australian and in the last corner was a smart Australian. They all set off at the same time and ran to get the gold. Which one got the gold? Answer: The stupid Australian. Why? Because everyone knows there's no such thing as Santa Claus, and everyone knows there's no such thing as the Easter Bunny, and everyone knows there's no such thing as a smart Australian.

A linguistic finesse of this particular joke is in the use of "everyone knows there's no such thing as a ...", a phrase which is generally unfamiliar to most students. It's this repetition of the same childlike denial of the mythical beings' existence, as if a smart Australian were just as rare as the Easter Bunny, that gives the joke its punch.

This joke was told to me by a New Zealander, so the Australians (their immediate neighbors and most frequent visitors) took the brunt of the joke. No particular stereotype of the Australians was used; they were shown to be stupid as a group. This is typical of most ethnic jokes and many of these jokes do not have such imaginative wordplay to smooth over their coarse message. There are those who maintain that xenophobic, racist and colonialistic emotions create these jokes

so the jokes themselves should be banned. From another point of view, however, isn't the overdone stereotype an effective way of showing how much of a mismatch the prejudice and the reality are? I also find that because the idea of making fun of a particular ethnic group is foreign to the Japanese, an explanation of this kind of humor gives them an insight into strong racial and ethnic antagonisms that exist in multiethnic societies, an insight that a standard lecture might be unable to get across with equivalent power.

Jokes are often the perfect way to introduce cultural values without dwelling on them, especially as pre-teaching material for a joke, and then presenting the new vocabulary in a humorous setting may help the students to retain it. This approach is possible as long as the mechanism of the joke, the punchline itself, is not compromised in the explanation. In the following Russian joke, Japanese students will become familiar with the English renditions of "Moscow", "Russian", "Hebrew", and the English term for "Bible", as well as the heavy Russian sarcasm that came from living in a police state.

It was 3 a.m. in Moscow, and Igor Abramovich was secretly studying the Bible in his apartment.

*The door was suddenly kicked in, and some KGB men entered.
"Why are you reading this book in Hebrew?" demanded the senior agent.
"Because when I die and go to Heaven I want to know how to speak the language," said Igor.
The agent smiled wickedly. "And what if you go to Hell?"
"I speak Russian already," Abramovich replied.⁶*

Admittedly this story may soon be history if the present changes in the Soviet Union continue, but it shows how people cope with intolerable situations through humor. Unlike ethnic jokes, this requires specific knowledge, in this case that the Soviet Union has a powerful police organization which seeks to stamp out religion. The students must be aware of this before the joke is told so that the situation can be understood as soon as the joke is heard. This is where the teacher must decide how much time can and should be spent on efforts to make students understand humor. If the level of the class requires a lengthy explanation from the teacher, this is not a joke for that group.

The following are representative of what we could call "humor by definition".

(Someone describing a famous politician) "How can you tell when he's lying?" "When his lips are moving."⁷

"What is a net?" "Holes tied together with string."⁸

The first one, because it is describing a certain kind of social character, can be universal as long as that character has the same qualities in both the culture of the student and the teacher. In this particular case the joke succeeds because the politician is regarded in both countries as less than honest. The second joke gets its humor from its originality; it looks at something commonplace and describes it from a completely different point of view. Because this kind of joke relies on an unexpected answer, the teacher must be sure that the students have a sufficient grammatical base to catch the meaning quickly enough to appreciate the humor.

The key to humor is in its presentation and this will vary depending on the teacher. Although jokes are sometimes recorded in writing in anthologies, they are traditionally a spoken form of humor so they lend themselves to being used as listening material. The easiest jokes can be told as they would be to a class of native speakers if the teacher believes that the majority of students will understand. With a more difficult joke the first half can be used as a traditional dictation exercise to ensure greater comprehension so that when the punchline comes it hits the target.

I have mentioned several types of humor and tried to pinpoint what qualities make jokes appropriate or poor choices for the English language classroom. From my own experience language is the major stumbling block for students: their ability in the language doesn't allow them to understand quickly, and without speed humor is dead. Pre-teaching can help the teacher get around this particular problem, and by dictating the joke up to the punchline, the teacher will bring his students within grasp of the meaning without giving it away; in this way the surprise necessary for an effective joke will remain unweakened. There will still be times when students can't understand the joke, but with encouragement and steady exposure students will gradually build up their confidence in their listening ability, their vocabulary, and at the same time their understanding of an enjoyable part of western culture.

NOTES

- 1) Quoted from A. Wright, How to Be Entertaining (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) p. x.
- 2) E.W. Johnson (ed.), A Treasury of Humor (New York: Ivy Books, 1989) p. 67.
- 3) Wright, Ibid., p. 41.
- 4) Johnson, Ibid., p. 162.
- 5) Wright, Ibid., p. 25.
- 6) Johnson, Ibid., p. 155.
- 7) Wright, Ibid., p. 23.
- 8) Ibid., p. 25.