

# TAKING HUMOR SERIOUSLY IN THE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

Tema

Humor spielt eine zentrale Rolle in der sozialen Interaktion – nicht nur als Mittel zur Unterhaltung, sondern auch, um andere soziale Ziele zu erreichen, etwa den Aufbau von Beziehungen und den Abbau von Spannungen. Obwohl Humor als universell gilt, können sich Humorstile, Themen und Signale sowie der Zeitpunkt und die Personengruppen, bei und mit denen Humor eingesetzt wird, je nach Kultur unterscheiden. Darüber hinaus werden in interkulturellen Interaktionen die Hintergrundinformationen, die zum Verstehen und Wertschätzen von Humor erforderlich sind, möglicherweise nicht zwischen den Humorproduzierenden und ihren Gesprächspartnern geteilt. Aus diesen und weiteren Gründen kann es für angehende zweisprachige Sprecherinnen und Sprecher schwierig sein, Humor erfolgreich zu verstehen und selbst zu produzieren. Gleichzeitig zeigt die Forschung zu Humor in einer zusätzlichen Sprache (L2), dass Sprecherinnen und Sprecher auf allen Niveaustufen der L2-Kompetenz kreativ auf ihre kommunikativen Repertoires zurückgreifen können und dies auch tun, um in unterschiedlichen Kontexten Humor einzusetzen – etwa in Alltagsgesprächen, in computergestützter Kommunikation sowie in Interaktionen am Arbeitsplatz und im Unterricht. Dieser Artikel beleuchtet die Herausforderungen, denen Sprecherinnen und Sprecher beim Einsatz von Humor in der L2 gegenüberstehen, erörtert, wie Lernende Humorkompetenzen entwickeln, und zeigt auf, wie Lehrpersonen Humor gewinnbringend in den Sprachunterricht integrieren können.

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## Introduction

Humor plays an important role in social interaction. Not only do we use humor to have fun and amuse others, but humor also helps us achieve other goals like building relationships and lightening the mood. Comprehending and using humor in an additional language (L2) can be challenging for a variety of reasons. Newcomers to a community may not have all the background information necessary to understand humorous quips. Further, what people joke about, how they indicate that they are joking, and with whom and in what social settings humor is expected can all vary from one society to another. Despite these potential challenges, L2 speakers at all proficiency levels do, in fact, engage in humor, leveraging the linguistic resources at their disposal to joke around with others. In this article, I begin by discussing what makes humor difficult to comprehend and produce for L2 speakers. I then report on research about how L2 speakers develop their humor skills. Finally, I suggest how humor

can be taught and how it can facilitate learning in the language classroom.

## L2 humor comprehension and production

As mentioned above, L2 speakers at all proficiency levels can and do use humor (e.g., Davies, 2003). However, some instances of humor may be more difficult to comprehend than others. In conversation, speakers create humor based on their hypotheses about what hearers believe and know. When interacting with L2 users, supportive speakers may adjust humor to make it more accessible by providing explanations, choosing vocabulary the hearer knows, and slowing down (e.g., Bell, 2007; Norrick, 2007). They may also avoid certain types of humor perceived to be difficult like irony (e.g., Shively, 2018). In contrast, non-interactive texts intended for a first-language speaker audience (e.g., stand-up comedy, television shows) may be more challenging for L2 speakers. Humor comprehension requires

general vocabulary and lexical knowledge but also requires the ability to go beyond literal meaning to detect and resolve the incongruity that creates the humorous effect. Developing L2 proficiency, becoming familiar with specific humorous genres, and participating in extended interactions in the L2 are all ways that L2 speakers can improve their humor comprehension (e.g., Sharadakova, 2016).

Turning to humor production, speakers at all L2 proficiency levels can successfully use humor, but the linguistic and cultural resources that they draw on differ. For instance, Tiv et al. (2019) observed that higher-proficiency speakers used sarcasm more often in L2 French. In Sharadakova's (2010) study with L2 Russian speakers, only at the advanced level of proficiency did they begin to incorporate grammar-based humor. Experience interacting in the L2 can also influence how L2 speakers use humor: Shively (2018) discovered that L2 speakers of Spanish studying abroad in Spain shifted in how they employed humor as they got to know Spanish-speaking host families and language partners. They added new linguistic resources to their humor and adjusted their humor based on past experiences regarding what their interlocutors found funny. Engaging in conversations in Spanish allowed those students to try out humor, observe how L1 Spanish speakers employed humor, and notice how their own humor was received. Despite many such success stories, L2 speakers also face challenges when attempting to joke around. In some cases, L1 speakers may position L2 users as incapable of using humor (Bell, 2006), whereas in others, attempts at humor by emerging bilinguals may be perceived as a language error (Chiaro, 2009). Another difficulty is that conversation may be too fast paced for L2 speakers to formulate and deliver a humorous quip at the opportune moment (Bell & Attardo, 2010). Hearers may also misinterpret L2 humor as serious if L2 speakers do not signal through cues like tone of voice or facial expression that they are joking (Shively, 2018).

### Teaching about humor

Language teachers can provide vital support to students by incorporating instruction about humor into their classes. L2

classrooms ideally offer students a comfortable space to discuss and analyze humor, ask questions about humor, and test out their own humor. Indeed, research suggests that instruction about humor can be effective in boosting L2 learners' humor comprehension and production. Regarding humor comprehension, instruction has helped students improve their ability to interpret irony in television shows (Shively et al., 2022), puns in comic strips (Lucas, 2005), and humor in stand-up comedy and satirical news (Petkova, 2013; Prichard & Rucynski, 2019), among others. Similarly, instruction focused on L2 humor production assisted students in being able to use humor in new ways (Petkova, 2013; Shively et al., 2022) and produce funnier responses (Prichard et al., 2024).

**“L2 speakers at all proficiency levels can and do use humor.”**

To help students develop their humor comprehension and awareness skills, teachers can guide students in analyzing the features of humorous texts in the L2 such as memes, comic strips, and television and film comedies. Some of those features include:

- What topics people joke about
- What makes particular humorous quips funny
- What humorous genres are used (e.g., irony, puns)
- Who is the target of the humor (i.e., the “butt” of the joke)
- What language resources are deployed (e.g., exaggeration, understatement, mock imitation, quoted speech, manipulation of grammar)
- What verbal and non-verbal cues people use to signal that they are using humor (e.g., smiling, laughing, facial expression, intonation)
- How those who hear the humor respond (e.g., laughing, adding more humor)

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Additionally, teachers can point out what sociocultural knowledge from L2-speaking societies is necessary to understand cultural references in humor (e.g., popular culture, history, art, cultural practices and beliefs). Regarding humor production, teachers can invite students to say or write something humorous, for example, telling a funny story or posting a playful ironic comment on a (fake) social media post (Prichard et al., 2024).

I conducted several research projects focused on teaching humorous irony in Spanish to intermediate- and advanced-level L2 and heritage learners in either the language classroom in students’ home country (Shively et al., 2022) or during study abroad (Shively, 2024). In the case of the former, a group of US-based L2 Spanish learners received 2.5 hours of lessons about irony, which were delivered in Spanish and based on information from published research. The goal of instruction was for students to be able to both comprehend and produce irony in Spanish. The first lesson began with ironic memes to catch students’ attention and encourage them to start thinking about irony. Next, students discussed in small groups questions in Spanish related to irony such as: Do you consider yourself an ironic person? Do you think people in the US are very ironic? What about Spanish speakers? How do you know if someone is being ironic? Has it ever happened to you that someone didn’t understand your irony? I asked some students to share their answers with the full class, and we engaged in additional discussion of these questions.

After this introductory phase, I provided students with samples of irony in Spanish and asked them to analyze examples of humorous irony from authentic texts. We then talked about how tone of voice can indicate that what is said should be interpreted ironically. I asked students to analyze Spanish speakers’ tone of voice when being ironic in video clips from Spanish-language films and then to practice in pairs using tone of voice to signal irony. I next presented students with a series of linguistic resources commonly used in irony in Spanish (e.g., superlatives, rhetorical questions, marked word order) and asked students to identify which of those linguistic resources appeared in examples of irony from authentic texts. The final step in the lessons was giving students the opportunity to practice saying something funny and ironic in response to various scenarios, each designed to elicit a humorous and ironic comment.

In my and my colleagues’ research about this project (Shively et al., 2022), we discovered that, after instruction about humorous irony, students were better able to accurately interpret irony in Spanish and to identify tone of voice as a cue for irony. In terms of irony production, after the lessons, students incorporated new linguistic resources into their ironic responses.

### Teaching with humor

In addition to teaching *about* humor, teachers can also teach *with* humor—for example, integrating humor into classroom activities by making funny comments and using humorous examples. The potential benefits of sprinkling humor into classroom practices include: building rapport with students; reducing student anxiety; increasing student motivation and enjoyment; enhancing attention; and making material more memorable (e.g., Bell, 2011; Bell & Pomerantz, 2016; Neff & Dewaele, 2022). Most research suggests that students appreciate when teachers use humor that contributes to a positive classroom environment. Humor that is related to the course material and is relatable to students, in particular, is linked to positive learning outcomes (Bieg & Dresel, 2018; Fyrmier & Wanzer, 2021). Students do not expect or desire that their teachers perform a comedy routine

but enjoy humor employed judiciously (Neff & Dewaele, 2022). At the same time, not all types of humor are conducive to learning. Disparaging and offensive humor can produce a negative affective response in students and reduce student motivation (Fyrmier & Wanzer, 2021). Playful teasing of students by teachers appears to be common (e.g., Shardakova, 2017; Shively & Mir, 2019) but can be risky as being laughed at may reduce willingness to communicate for some students (Barabadi et al., 2023).

My colleague and I researched teachers' spontaneous use of humor in beginning-level Spanish as an L2 classrooms (Shively & Mir, 2019). Some teachers may be skeptical about using humor with beginning L2 speakers, believing humor is too difficult for students at this level. However, we found that many of the 15 Spanish instructors who participated in our study did, indeed, successfully teach with humor at the beginning level. Teachers made humorous self-deprecating comments, joked about the topic of class discussion, and playfully teased students. Most of the time, it was the teacher who initiated the switch from a serious to a humorous frame in the classroom. In our data, we also found students using humor in full class discussions, but student humor usually occurred in exchanges in which teachers had already initiated humor, suggesting that students followed the teacher's lead regarding when being playful was appropriate. Indeed, we found that in classrooms where teachers joked more often, students were also more likely to joke; this finding suggests that teacher use of humor may encourage students to likewise give it a try.

An example humorous exchange from one teacher's classroom is shown below. It begins in line 1 with a question to the teacher from a student, which was part of a structured activity. The student asked the teacher, whose pseudonym is Kirk, if he had watched any television that week. In response, Kirk described in an exaggerated and dramatic fashion that he had watched many hours of *The Bachelor* because his wife enjoyed the show. In line 13, one student playfully teased the teacher, calling him a "poor man" for having to watch *The Bachelor*. Kirk, in turn, played along with the gag and added additional humor, pretending to cry like a baby in line 15.

- 1 Student 1:  
*¿esta semana has mirado televisión?*  
have you watched television this week?
- 2 Kirk:  
*sí, yo he mirado mucha televisión con mi esposa.*  
yes, I've watched a lot of television with my wife.
- 3 *a mi esposa le gusta el programa (.)*  
The Bachelor  
my wife likes the program (.) The Bachelor
- 4 Students:  
((laughter))
- 5 Student 2:  
*tres horas*  
three hours
- 6 Kirk:  
*tres horas*  
three hours
- 7 *yo he mirado tres horas lunes con mi esposa* The Bachelor  
I watched The Bachelor for three hours on Monday with my wife
- 8 *y el día siguiente otra hora* ((speaking loudly and enunciating carefully))  
the following day another hour  
((speaking loudly and enunciating carefully))
- 9 *yo he mirado otra hora*  
I watched another hour
- 10 *cuatro horas de mi vida con mi esposa mirando* The Bachelor  
four hours of my life with my wife watching The Bachelor
- 11 Students:  
((laughter))
- 12 Kirk:  
*ok, ¿qué más? más preguntas*  
ok, what else? more questions
- 13 Student 3:  
*pobre señor*  
poor man
- 14 Kirk:  
*pobrecito que soy, ¿eh?*  
I'm a poor little man, eh?

- 15 *al final* ((he gestures like he's crying with fists to his eyes))  
at the end ((he gestures like he's crying with fists to his eyes))
- 16 *no, no, está bien, está bien.*  
no, no, it's ok, it's ok.
- 17 *es television.*  
it's television.
- 18 Students:  
((laughter))

While the humor shown above is not particularly sophisticated or witty, teachers in our study viewed exchanges such as these as opportunities to build positive relationships with students and make their classes engaging and fun, among other goals.

For practical advice for teaching both *with* and *about* humor, Bell and Pomerantz's (2016) book *Humor in the classroom: A guide for language teachers* is an excellent resource. The book delves into greater detail about how to incorporate humor into the language classroom and provides helpful advice to teachers on this topic.

### Conclusion: Why take humor seriously?

Humor has important functions in social life beyond amusement, such as building rapport, easing tensions, and coping with adversity. Both inside and outside the classroom, humor is a key part of our communicative repertoire. For some L2 speakers, being funny and demonstrating a good sense of humor is an integral part of their identity (e.g., Shively, 2018). In the classroom, humor can humanize pedagogy (Qin & Beauchemin, 2022) by centering emotion and relationships, while also being a resource to critique social norms. Finally, humor can enhance learning, motivation, and enjoyment. Although serious talk has traditionally been the focus in educational settings, non-serious language is worth taking seriously.

**“Both inside and outside the classroom, humor is a key part of our communicative repertoire.”**

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