Humour in the language classroom

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1 Funny starts

Everyone would probably agree that laughter improves the quality of life. We've got to laugh, haven't we? This section suggests ideas about how to introduce the topic of laughter with lots of light-hearted activities, including warmers, name games, number games and action games.

1.1 Wink first

Summary: Students learn each other's names by attention-

catching winks.

Level: beginner – pre-intermediate

Time: 5–10 minutes

Preparation: none

Procedure

1 Students stand in a big circle. Everybody lets their eyes wander over their classmates. When eyes meet, students wink at each other. They then go up to each other, shake hands and say:

Student A (Chandra): Hello, my name's Chandra.

Student B (Marek): Hi, I'm Marek.

Students all listen to the introductions and try to remember as many names as they can.

2 When everybody has introduced themselves to several partners, the game continues but, instead of introducing themselves, students greet each other:

Student A (*Chandra*): Hello, Marek. Student B (*Marek*): Hi, Chandra.

1.2 Funny names

Summary: Students adopt a funny word as their name.

Level: beginner – pre-intermediate

Time: 5–10 minutes

Preparation: none

Procedure

1 Each student writes down a couple of English words they find funny because of their sound or meaning, or both.

2 Everyone adopts as their name one of the funny words they have written down, and mills round, introducing themselves. For example:

Student A: Hi! My name's Slurp.

Student B: Hello! My name's Good-for-nothing.

Students try to remember as many 'names' as they can.

3 Follow the same procedure as in *Step 1*, but this time everybody should greet their partners by their adopted names. For example, if Student C's choice is *cupboard* and Student D's is *tomato juice*, they greet each other like this:

Student C: Hello, Tomato Juice.

Student D: Hi, Cupboard.

Follow-ups

1 Students spend a little time thinking about why they find their 'name' funny. You may begin by demonstrating your own choice, like this:

I love the word *pitta*. Do you know what it is? Well, pitta is a kind of bread. It's flat, and you can open it like a bag and put juicy stuff in it. Yum, yum. I also like this word because it sounds just like my first name: *pitta – Peter*.

Now give students the chance to explain their preferences.

2 For homework, students could turn their description into a silly poem. In class, volunteers read out their poem for the whole class to enjoy. Here is a four-liner for my favourite word:

'What is it you like to eat?

Tell us, tell us, Peter!

Soup or rice or cake or meat?'

'Nothing more than pitta!'

1.3 Hi, Harry!

Summary: This chain activity requires a great deal of

concentration.

Level: beginner – pre-intermediate

Time: 10–15 minutes

Preparation: Bring to class small coloured sticky circles.

Procedure

1 Explain that this is a unique class, because everybody has the same first name: *Harry*. Students should get used to their new name by playing a silly game, which goes like this:

Student A: Hi, Harry.
Student B: Yes, Harry?
Student A (pointing to Student C): Tell Harry.
Student B (greeting Student C): Hi, Harry.
Student C: Yes, Harry?
Student B (pointing to Student D): Tell Harry.
Student C (greeting Student D): Hi, Harry.
Student D: Yes, Harry? etc.

2 If someone makes a mistake, their name will change to *One Spot* – thus called because the teacher will stick some kind of stigma on their forehead. So if, for example, Student D above says *Hi*, *Harry* (instead of *Yes*, *Harry?*), she/he gets a spot on her/his forehead, and the game will continue like this:

Student C: Hi, One Spot.
Student D: Yes, Harry?
Student C (pointing to Student E): Tell Harry.
Student D (greeting Student E): Hi, Harry.

Student E: Yes, One Spot? etc.

3 Should someone make a second mistake, they get another spot, and so their name will become *Two Spot* (subsequently *Three Spot*, *Four Spot*), and so on until the whole class goes mad ...

1.4 Buzz

Summary: This counting game is not as simple as it looks.

Level: beginner – pre-intermediate

Time: 5–10 minutes

Preparation: none

Procedure

- 1 Ask the class what makes a buzz-buzz sound. And a zubb-zubb sound (*buzz buzz* backwards)? Anyhow, the name of this game is 'Buzz'.

 **Answers: a bee and a bee flying backwards.
- 2 Choose a taboo number, *five*, for example. Everybody stands up. The first student begins by saying *one*, the second *two*, the third *three*, the fourth *four*, but the fifth student, instead of *five*, says *buzz*. All multiples of five (10, 15, 20, 25 ...) say *buzz* as well. The counting proceeds as rapidly as possible. If someone should forget about buzzing when required, they sit down and drop out of the game. The last remaining student is the winner.

Variations

- 1 A more complicated variation of 'Buzz' is 'Buzz-Bizz'. The rules are the same as those for 'Buzz', except that there are two taboo numbers here. For example, *buzz* is substituted for *five* (and its multiples) and *bizz* for *three* (and its multiples plus all other numbers which contain a 3, such as 13). In addition, when it is the turn for someone to say, for example, *fifteen*, they should say *buzz-bizz*, as both *five* and *three* are involved.
- 2 Instead of saying *buzz*, students may do an agreed-upon action, such as clap their hands, tap on the desk, twiddle their thumbs, stamp their feet, etc.

1.5 Mr Roy's watch

Summary: Apart from the fun, this game practises intonation.

Level: beginner – pre-intermediate

Time: 10–15 minutes

Preparation: none

Procedure

1 Read out this series of exchanges:

Teacher: Mr Roy has lost his watch and number 8 has

found it.

Number 8: Who? Me, number 1? Teacher: Yes, you, number 8. Number 8: Not me, number 1. Teacher: Then who, number 8?

Number 8: Number 11, number 1. Number 11: Who? Me, number 8? Number 8: Yes, you, number 11. Number 11: Not me, number 8. Number 8: Then who, number 11? Number 11: Number 5, number 8 ...

Check whether students have understood the rules of the game.

- 2 Read out the conversation again and get everyone to repeat it sentence by sentence. Pay special attention to correct intonation!
- 3 The class stand or sit in a circle. While keeping Number 1 for yourself, give each student a number from Number 2 upwards. Do a few dummy runs, so that everyone gets the hang of it. Then play the game 'in earnest'. It is sure to cause lots of slips and laughter.

Variation

If you find that numbers are too impersonal, you may use the students' actual names or symbolic ones like names of colours, or fruits, or whatever else they would like to adopt for the period of the game.

1.6 O'Grady says

Summary: Students perform actions – or refuse to do so.

Level: beginner – pre-intermediate

Time: 10–15 minutes

Preparation: none

Procedure

- 1 Explain that you will need a volunteer to come forward and issue a series of simple commands. The class will only obey if the commands are preceded by the clause O'Grady says, but will stay put if O'Grady says is not forthcoming. For example, if the command is O'Grady says, 'Rub your nose', everybody rubs their nose, but if it is merely Rub your nose, nobody should lift a finger.
- 2 Before the game starts, everybody should jot down in their notebook ten simple commands which are easy to perform in the classroom. You may help those who get stuck with these commands. Depending on the language level of the class, here are two lists:

beginner cover your face fall asleep make a face pull your hair sing a song turn around	cross your arms lift your left hand open your mouth put your head on the desk sit down turn left	cross your legs lift your right hand pull your ear say 'bow-wow' stand up turn right
pre-intermediate clap your hands clutch your fist make a bow scratch your chin tap on the desk wink twice	clear your throat doodle in your notebook roll your eyes stamp your feet touch your right elbow yawn	click your tongue give out a shout rub your nose stick out your tongue twiddle your thumbs

3 A volunteer comes to the front of the class and reads out their list of commands, indiscriminately using and leaving out *O'Grady says*. When the first person has run out of commands, someone else takes over – and so on, until all the students have had their turn.

Variation

The volunteer performs the action even when omitting O'Grady says, in order to confuse classmates. In another version, she/he performs something other than what she/he is actually saying.

1.7 Five laughs

Summary: Students describe different laughs.

Level: beginner – pre-intermediate

Time: 10–15 minutes

Preparation: Ask friends and colleagues to produce five or six

laughs and record them on tape.

Procedure

- 1 Students listen to the five people laughing on the recording. Which of them make the class laugh? Which is the funniest?
- 2 Put these adjectives in a list on the board. Help students understand their meaning.

bitter	cruel	hearty	hyste	rical	ironical	loud
nervous	polite	scary	silly	soft	unnatural	

Students get into pairs and listen to the recording again. Stop after each laugh to give students enough time to choose and write down in their notebook the adjective which suits each laugh best.

3 Individual students offer their choice of adjectives laugh by laugh. Record votes for each objective on the board. In the end, summarise the results.

Variation

In more advanced classes, the list above may be supplemented with verbs such as:

cackle	chortle	chuckle	giggle	guffaw	snigger	titter
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Can students describe any of the recorded laughs with the verbs of laughter on the board? Can they name situations where giggling, tittering, etc. would be appropriate?

Follow-up

Should you have a bold class, volunteers may be willing to produce a laugh for their classmates to examine. Before they act it out, they should make up their minds about the kind of laughter they want to produce. Having listened to the laugh, the others describe it with suitable adjectives. Does the 'laugher' agree with the judgments?

1.8 The laugh epidemic

Summary: Students attempt to make each other laugh.

Level: pre-intermediate – intermediate

Time: 10-15 minutes

Preparation: none

Procedure

1 Students get into pairs. Explain that Partner A in each pair is very serious, determined not to laugh; Partner B is the 'funny guy'. Pairs stand up and face each other. Partner B has one minute to make Partner A laugh by grinning, gesturing, singing a silly song, telling

- a joke, reciting a nonsense rhyme, imitating someone they both know everything is permitted! Partner A tries to keep a straight face throughout, but if she/he breaks into laughter, Partner B gets a point. At this point they exchange roles.
- 2 After a few minutes, stop the activity and ask how many times Partner B managed to get Partner A to laugh. What tricks triggered the heartiest laughter?
- 3 After students have exchanged roles, they analyse the situation as in *Step 2*.
- 4 Volunteers entertain the whole class with the trick that worked best on their partner.

Variation

Everyone chooses to be either a 'serious guy' or a 'funny guy', and then behaves accordingly. Students stand up and begin to circulate. Any funny guy may stop any serious guy and do their best to make them laugh. When the serious guy eventually breaks into laughter, she/he has caught the laugh epidemic, as it were, and has also turned into a funny guy. Thus as the number of funny guys increases, so the number of serious guys diminishes. When there are only a few serious guys left in the class, they will be surrounded by several funny guys, all collaborating to pass on the disease. The activity ends when everybody has caught the laugh epidemic (or when you have run out of patience).

Acknowledgment

The main activity is based on an idea by Griffiths and Keohane in *Personalizing Language Learning* (Cambridge University Press).

1.9 Catch them laughing!

Summary: Each student observes a classmate and then describes

her/his laughing habits.

Level: intermediate – post-intermediate

Time: 20–25 minutes (in class)

Preparation: none

Procedure

1 Ask students these questions:

- Do you laugh every day?
- What kind of things in particular make you laugh?

- Who in the class is best at making others laugh?
- Who has the nicest/heartiest laugh?
- 2 Launch a 'laughing project'. Everyone observes a classmate of their choice for one month. What are her/his laughing habits? In what situations, how often and how does she/he usually laugh? When the month is up, each observer writes a short essay on their experience without supplying the name of the person under surveillance. Students then take it in turns to read out their essay, with the others trying to guess the person observed.

1.10 Laugh till you drop

Summary: Students read a text on a bizarre laughing contest.

Level: intermediate – post-intermediate

Time: 10–15 minutes

Preparation: Make a copy of Box 1 and Box 2 for each student.

(You could make a transparency of Box 1.)

Procedure

1 Students look at the woman in the picture and guess why she is laughing.



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2 The answer is provided in this extract. While students read the text, help with any unknown vocabulary.

BOX 2

Linda Lutz is laughing because she has just discovered she is the winner of the 'Laughing Contest', an annual competition in San Diego, California. Linda won two prizes simultaneously. One for the longest continuous laugh (she has been laughing for four hours and one minute) and the other for the most hilarious laugh. For her stunt, she received prizes and a free pass to the San Diego Zoo.

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- 3 Ask these questions:
 - Did you guess right?
 - How do you think Linda was able to laugh for more than four hours?
 - Would you be able to beat her record?
 - Could such a contest take place in your country too, or is it typically American? Why?

Acknowledgment

This is based on an activity from When in Britain by Nolasco and Medgyes (Oxford University Press).

1.11 Laughing quotes

Summary: Students discuss witty sayings on laughter.

Level: intermediate – post-intermediate

Time: 15–20 minutes

Preparation: Make a copy of Box 3 for each student. Make a

transparency or copy of Box 4.

Procedure

1 Distribute copies of Box 3. As students read the quotations, provide help with any unfamiliar words.

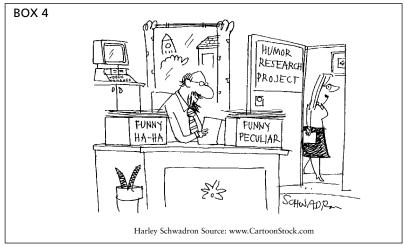
BOX 3

- 1 The most wasted day is that in which we have not laughed. (French writer Sebastien Chamfort)
- 2 A good laugh is the best pesticide. (Russian-American writer Vladimir Nabokov)
- 3 The sound of laughter is the most civilised music in the world. (British writer Peter Ustinov)
- 4 Laughter is inner jogging. (American journalist Norman Cousins)
- 5 Laugh and the world laughs with you; weep and you weep alone. (American poet and writer Ella Wheeler Wilcox)
- 6 The human race has only one effective weapon, and that is laughter. (American writer Mark Twain)
- 7 People who laugh a lot live longer. (Anon.)
- 8 Laughter is the best medicine. (Anon.)
- 9 He who laughs last laughs best. (Anon.)
- 10 Smile is the shortest distance between two people. (Anon.)

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In groups, students discuss the meaning of each quote. They then choose the one with which they agree most.

2 Now show the class Box 4. Encourage students to make up a quotation which would suit the cartoon best.



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Who would fancy working in a company which specialises in humour research? Can they name a particular project they would like to launch?

Follow-ups

1 Encourage students to make up their own witticisms about humour and laughter. You may like to offer these two examples:

Humour is the yeast of life.

Humour is no laughing matter.

2 Some students may have been inspired by the cartoon in Box 4. Can they draw a cartoon to illustrate any of the quotes and sayings in this activity?

1.12 A sense of humour

Summary: Students discuss the concept of a sense of humour.

Level: pre-intermediate – intermediate

Time: 10–15 minutes

Preparation: none

Procedure

1 Challenge students to define what a sense of humour is. Then tell them this joke:

Woman: The trouble with you, Brian, is that you have no sense

of humour.

Man (*after thinking about it for a moment*): Well, I don't think that's funny.

Ask why Brian needed time for his answer.

Suggested answer: Because he is slow and humourless.

- 2 Students discuss these issues in groups:
 - Do you know people with no sense of humour? What do you think of them?
 - How would you react if someone told you that you had no sense of humour? Would you accept this judgment?
 - Do you know anyone with a marvellous sense of humour? Can you describe this person?
 - Who have a better sense of humour: men or women?
 - Maltese-British writer Edward de Bono said: 'Humour is by far the most significant phenomenon in the human mind.' If you agree, explain why.
 - Is it important for a teacher to have a sense of humour? Why/not?

1.13 He who laughs last ...

Summary: How good are students at getting the punch line?

Level: pre-intermediate – intermediate

Time: 10–15 minutes

Preparation: none

Procedure

1 Tell the class this well-known proverb: 'He who laughs last laughs best.' Is there an equivalent saying in the students' mother tongue?

- 2 The proverb was paraphrased by the American humorist Terry Cohen like this: 'He who laughs last is generally the last to get the joke.' Ask students:
 - In your mother tongue, are you quick or rather slow in getting punch lines?
 - What does your reaction time depend on?
 - If you miss the punch line, do you sometimes fake a laugh?
 - If yes, why? To save face or to please the joke-teller?
- 3 Test students' reaction time with this joke:

I heard a new joke the other day. I wonder if I told it to you. Is it funny?

Yes.

Then you haven't.

Who was the quickest to get the punch line? And the slowest? Is there anyone who missed it altogether? Can somebody explain it to her/him?

Follow-up

Students in groups test each other's reaction time with one joke each. Who is the quickest member of the group to get the punch line? Challenge this person by asking them to explain the joke.

Extra

Provide funny paraphrases for the proverb 'He who laughs last laughs best.'

He who laughs last has the last laugh.

He who laughs last thinks slowest.

He who laughs last is an Englishman.

After reading the paraphrases, students may like to add some of their own to the list.

1.14 Look into the mirror!

Summary: This activity examines students' ability to laugh at

themselves.

Level: pre-intermediate – intermediate

Time: 10–15 minutes

Preparation: none

Procedure

1 Put on the board these quotations and help with any unknown vocabulary:

- 1 Blessed are those who can laugh at themselves for they shall never cease to be amused. (Anon.)
- 2 You might as well laugh at yourself once in a while everyone else does. (Anon.)
- 3 If you can't laugh at yourselves, make fun of other people. (Anon.)

Students discuss what connects these three quotations and what distinguishes them.

Suggested answer:

What connects them is the topic of self-irony. The first two quotes stress the importance and indeed the fun of being self-critical, whereas the third one stresses people's unwillingness to adopt a self-critical attitude. If the three were graded on a scale of wickedness, the first would be the least and the third the most wicked.

- 2 Ask students these questions:
 - Which do you find more fun: to laugh at your own follies or at other people's?
 - When was the last time that you laughed at yourself? Why was
 - Have you ever witnessed a famous person mock herself/himself in public? Did you think more or less of her/him afterwards?

Extras

1 Ethnic jokes can be offensive, but if we replace the country and the nationality with non-entities, they can be quite funny. Like the ones on the next page:

1 Friend: Have you heard the latest joke about the Udopian?

Peter: Be careful! I come from Udopia. Friend: OK. I'll tell it slowly then.

2 Friend: Tell me, is it true that Marpians are lazy?

Peter: No, no! It's the Piltians who are lazy. We Marpians are

stupid.

Ask which of the two jokes is better. Why? In the students' culture, who are more frequently the butt of jokes: their own fellow-citizens or rather people from other countries and cultures?

- 2 Read out the following two quotations by American comedians:
 - No one ever went broke underestimating the taste of the American public. (H.L. Mencken)
 - California is a fine place to live if you happen to be an orange. (Fred Allen)

Ask students what, in their opinion, the implications of these quotes are.

Suggested answers:

Americans have awful taste and California is an awful place for human beings to live.

1.15 Smiles and jokes

Summary: Two poems are compared to find features they have

in common.

Level: intermediate – post-intermediate

Time: 20–25 minutes

Preparation: Make a copy of Box 5 and Box 6 for each pair of

students.

Procedure

1 Divide the class into pairs. Give Partner A in each pair the poem 'Growing smiles' (Box 5) and Partner B 'Once upon a time' (Box 6).

BOX 5

Growing smiles

A smile is quite a funny thing, It wrinkles up your face, And when it's gone, you never find Its secret hiding place. But far more wonderful it is To see what smiles can do; You smile at one, he smiles at you, And so one smile makes two.

He smiles at someone since you smiled, And then that one smiles back; And that one smiles, until in truth You fail in keeping track.

Now since a smile can do great good By cheering hearts of care, Let's smile and smile, and not forget That smiles go everywhere! *Anon*.

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BOX 6

Once upon a time

Once upon a time there lived a small joke in the middle of nowhere.

This small joke was dying to share itself with someone

but nobody came to hear this small joke.

So this small joke told itself to the birds

and the birds told this small joke to the trees and the trees told this small joke to the rivers and the rivers told this small joke to the mountains and the mountains told this small joke to the stars

till the whole world started to swell with laughter

and nobody believed it all began with a small joke

that lived in the middle of nowhere.

Everybody kept saying it was me it was me. *John Agard*

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Ask students to read their poem to their partner, so that they leave out the key word, *smile* and *joke* respectively, each time it occurs. They can use *bimp*, *bimps* and *bimped* instead. The listener in each pair tries to guess the word omitted.

2 Students in pairs show each other their poem and compare the two poets' messages. What distinguishes them but, more importantly, what do they have in common?

Suggested answer:

As far as their commonality is concerned, both smiles and jokes spread fast.

3 Say this proverb: 'Laugh and the world laughs with you; cry and you cry alone.' Ask the class if it is true. Is it also true that smiles, laughs and jokes are contagious, as it were? If someone smiles at them in the street, do they smile back? If someone begins to laugh, do they join in the laughter? If someone tells a good joke, do they pass it on to somebody else? Can they recall situations to exemplify the chain effect of smiles, laughs and jokes?

Acknowledgment

The poem by John Agard is from *The Penguin Book of Utterly Brilliant Poetry* (Penguin Books).

1.16 Funny news

Summary: Students design a magazine page full of funny items.

Level: intermediate – post-intermediate

Time: 20–25 minutes (in class)

Preparation: Have some reusable adhesive or sticky tape ready.

Procedure

1 Ask students to browse through newspapers and magazines written in their mother tongue and cut out funny bits and pieces, including articles, headlines, jokes, cartoons, photographs, advertisements – anything is welcome as long as it is funny! Needless to say, humour

magazines are the best sources. Everyone designs a 'fun-page' from their cutouts, pasting the pieces on a sheet, the same size as an ordinary newspaper or magazine. Students should strive to make the layout look like a page in a real newspaper or magazine. In addition, they should prepare to summarise the content of the pieces in English.

- 2 Students bring their 'fun-page' to class. They get into pairs; in each pair Partner A plays the role of the 'editor' while Partner B plays the role of the 'foreigner'. As Partner B cannot read in L1, Partner A has to translate the gist of each piece, paying particular attention to the underlying humour. After a while, partners change roles.
- 3 Everybody displays their 'fun-page' on the wall and leaves it there for a couple of weeks for general entertainment.

Variation

In a multilingual class, the task is more authentic in that translation is really necessary for the partners to understand the content of the items on the 'fun-page'. On the other hand, L1 newspapers and magazines may not be so readily available.

Acknowledgment

For this activity, I was inspired by 'Happy News' in Sanderson's *Using Newspapers in the Classroom* (Cambridge University Press).

1.17 The Crazy Award

Summary: A certificate is awarded to anyone who proves to be

crazy enough.

Level: pre-intermediate – intermediate

Time: 10–15 minutes

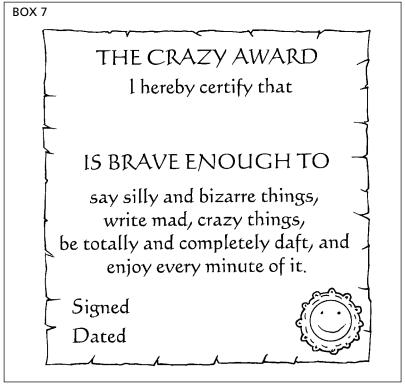
Preparation: Make a copy of Box 7 for each student.

Procedure

1 Elicit from students synonyms and near-synonyms for *crazy*. Write them on the board and supplement the list with these if students ask for more:

childish absurd bananas bonkers daft dumb foolish idiotic loony ludicrous mad nuts ridiculous round the bend silly stupid witless

- Point out that bananas and round the bend are often used with go, as go bananas and go round the bend.
- 2 Discuss with the class whether they agree that some of the most imaginative and creative people in the world have been a bit nutty. Can they give examples from their own experience?
- 3 Show students a copy of 'The Crazy Award' in Box 7.



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Announce that this certificate may be awarded to anyone who has repeatedly proved herself/himself 'crazy'. For someone to be considered, two classmates have to put forward a written proposal explaining why the candidate is worthy of the award. If you accept the recommendation, sign and date the certificate, and hand it over in a mock ceremonial manner.

Acknowledgment

The idea of 'The Crazy Award' is inspired by 'The Licence' in Cranmer's *Motivating High Level Learners* (Longman).