

From Mario Rinvoluceri
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To Peter Riddelsdell
CMDT
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cc Damian

Dear Peter,

I enclose 900 words on HUMOUR IN EFL + a pic
+ bio-data as we agreed.

Our marketing dept will send you the brochure
of our accompanying advert in due course.

Happy New Year.

Mario Rinvoluceri

Biodata: Mario, who was a founding member of Pilgrims,
has in the last 10 years done training sessions in
various DTO's, including Valencia, Madrid and Barcelona,
Kyoto and Tokyo and, in the autumn of 1996, Seoul, Pusan
(cosy little one) and Cairo. His most recent books are
MORE GRAMMAR GAMES, with Paul Davis, CUP, 1995, and
LETTERS with Burbidge, Levy and Gray, OUP, 1996.

HUMOUR IN EFL

Mario Rinvoluceri, Pilgrims, Canterbury.

I wonder how often you have provoked others to laughter
by making some hilarious mistake in a language you are
trying to speak? There is frequent, spontaneous humour in
the marvellous, idiot things people say as they grapple
with a new language. I remember my French wife gurgling
with mirth when I invented a new collocation and asked
her for a " corbeau a papier " when I meant "corbeille a
papier " or waste paper basket. " corbeau " unfortunately
means "crow" !.

You may have already seen the list of bizarre English
sentences that Air France collected from signs around the
world:

" Ladies are requested not to have babies in the bar "

MAY

(in a dry cleaner's window) " Drop your trousers here for good results "

(in Alpine hotel) " It is strictly forbidden to perambulate the corridors in the boots of ascension "

(in Yugoslav hotel) " Our chambermaids will flatten your underwear with pleasure."

I have got CAE students reading this list and had the pleasure of listening to studious silence splinter into titters that turned into giggles and then broke into roars of laughter- there were tears running down some faces!

(This exercise was excluded from CUP's MORE GRAMMAR GAMES because there were editorial doubts about its PCness.)

Humour in the "Honeymoon period "

You may have noticed that new learner groups often go through a sort of honeymoon period, a period at the start of the year when people are interested in each other, in the subject and in you.

You can heighten this honeymoon effect by using exercises that tend to provoke humour, as laughing together is a very bonding activity. If you teach in the evenings you will find that laughing can be an excellent release for the fog of tiredness people often come to class in.

The rest of this article offers you some humour-triggering exercises that you may find effective with your groups. I would, incidentally, be very interested to hear of an culture-specific exercises you know that generate laughter in a given country.

1. Meaningful or senseless ?

a) ask the students (intermediate up) to turn their pages longways and rule three columns. Each column has a separate headings:

MEANINGFUL IFFY MEANINGLESS

b) Tell them you are going to dictate a few sentences and they are to put each sentence in the column where, in their individual judgement, it should go. They put it under IFFY if they really can't decide if it is meaningful or meaningless.

Here are some suitable sentences:

- If I've dialled the wrong number why on earth did you pick the phone up?
- I used to be indecisive, but now I'm not quite sure.
- If you don't help look for it, I'll lose it.
- Oh, dear, my toothbrush is pregnant again.
- Do not put statements in the negative form.
- Shut up so that I can hear you!
- Well, the man's broken all his legs
- When we want your opinion, we'll give it to you.

c) ask the students to work in small groups and compare their classification of each sentence.

The humour of the sentences you dictate hits the students as they are taking down the dictation. This exercise provokes smiles and wry laughs rather than guffaws.

2. Guided Feedback

a) have a large sheet of behavioural adjectives ready to put up on the board (at advanced level words like " whimsical, cantankerous, thrilled, peeved, paranoid ")

b) Get a volunteer who is ready to talk to the group on a topic or tell a story. Ask him/her to face the group and not to look behind at the board. Put the adjective list up.

c) tell the volunteer s/he will shortly begin speaking but is to stop if s/he sees any odd reactions in the group. When this happens s/he has to guess the adjective they are portraying by their behaviour. Tell the group they are to portray the adjective you ring on the sheet.

d) let the volunteer speak for a bit and then you ring one adjective. The volunteer then guesses what mood the group are in. S/he continues with their text until you ring the next adjective.

This game can frequently be hilarious. Gill Johnson learnt it at an NLP week-end and I learnt it from her; this is often how exercises travel.

3. Stop the Teller

a) distribute the students in closed, seated circles of 10-12.

b) in each circle ask one person to mentally prepare to tell a story. It needs to be a light story, not a tear-jerking one.

c) Explain to the other people in each circle that their job is to stop the story-teller by asking him/her fatuous questions. The questions must be about the story and the teller must answer all the questions, however briefly. For example:

Teller: There was this man who had an old bicycle ...

Interrupter: What colour was it?

Teller: Green.... yeah , he had a green bicycle.....

(In a lower intermediate class it makes sense to ask a couple of people [in a class of 20] to come to the next class ready to tell a story of their choice. At higher levels it is OK to spring the exercise on them as suggested above.)

If the students are in the right mood, this looney, discourse-rule-breaking situation provokes gales of laughter. I learnt the activity from Andre Fonck, a master teacher from Belgium.

4. Rate the story

a) prepare to tell three very different jokes.

b) Ask the students to listen and give each a mark on a 1 to 10 rating.

c) Run a general discussion on what makes a good joke.

Why doesn't some one in one of the DTO's write a book on humour in EFL teaching? It could be a health-enhancing best seller.

No

Not

some-