

Making Spanish funny: Using humor in the Spanish classroom

Clara Burgo

Loyola University Chicago

cburgo@luc.edu

Received: 11th October 2021

Accepted: 20th February 2022



Abstract

Humor is a communicative act that can be used in the foreign language classroom with different purposes. Humor comprehension has to be student-oriented and with an instructional purpose (Pentaraki & Burkholder, 2017). It should be implemented due to its multiple advantages like enhancing learning and making students more comfortable when learning a second language (L2). This article intends to present humor as an effective tool in the foreign language classroom, especially relevant during COVID-19, to facilitate student learning through jokes, irony, or memes. Therefore, instructors need to be trained to make sure humor is effective and beneficial.

Keywords: Jokes, comics, irony.

Resumen

El humor es un acto comunicativo que se puede usar en la clase de lengua extranjera con diferentes propósitos. La comprensión del humor tiene que ser orientada al estudiante y con un propósito instruccional (Pentaraki & Burkholder, 2017). Por tanto, debe implementarse debido a sus múltiples ventajas para mejorar el aprendizaje y para que los estudiantes se sientan más cómodos cuando aprenden una segunda lengua (L2). Este artículo pretende presentar el humor como una herramienta efectiva en el aula de lengua extranjera, especialmente relevante durante COVID-19, para facilitar el aprendizaje de los estudiantes a través de bromas, ironía o memes. Por consiguiente, los profesores necesitan ser entrenados para asegurarse de que el humor sea efectivo y beneficioso.

Palabras claves: bromas, cómics, ironía.

Introduction

Humor is a communicative act that is used in second language (L2) Spanish classrooms with different purposes. It can be used to lower anxiety levels or to be subversive, especially when discussing controversial topics. It is not the end, but rather the means to achieve specific pedagogical goals (Rodríguez, 2005). On the other hand, humor comprehension requires that the listener acknowledge the text as humoristic, and that they be able to interpret and understand the message (Hay, 2001).

Kim and Park (2017) conducted a survey in language courses in Korea and found that humor should be used in the classroom in a very careful and guided manner: related to the lesson and appropriate for the student and level. At basic levels, it is essential to develop students' metapragmatic competence to build their self-confidence and to contribute to their integration with native speakers (Linares Bernabéu, 2017). At advanced levels of language, however, humor can be the vehicle for the transmission of many linguistic and cultural aspects (Vegara Fabregat, 2018). In order to be proficient at a humoristic level in a language, one also needs to be proficient at the communicative, linguistic, and social level (Linares Bernabéu, 2018). Humor is as authentic and communicative as any other human reaction (Wanzer & Frymier, 1999). Authentic instances of humor must be used both as a topic of discussion and as a source of input. As a discussion topic, students should use humor contextual cues and pragmatic strategies to deliver humor; as an input source, comic strips can be used in collaborative activities (Heidari-Shahreza, 2021).

In short, humor has to be student-oriented and with an instructional purpose (Pentaraki & Burkholder, 2017). In order to be able to deliver efficient humor in the classroom, instructors have to receive some training on how to implement humor to enhance learning (Boukhelkhal, 2019). There are many more benefits than disadvantages to the use of humor in the classroom. Thus, it should be implemented to make students more comfortable when learning an L2 since learners request it. Precisely because they may not have opportunities to use the language outside of the classroom, humor helps acquire sociolinguistic competence (Bell, 2009).

1. Benefits and disadvantages of the use of humor in the language classroom

L2 humor is appropriate in the classroom since many learners ask for it, and it may facilitate second language learning (Bell, 2009). One of the main benefits of humor is to promote reflection on the use of the target language. In order to develop competency at the humoristic level, the L2 learner needs to display competency at the communicative, social and linguistic level (Linares Bernabéu, 2017). The positive effects of humor can be divided into four categories: physiological benefits, psychological benefits, pedagogical benefits, and cognitive benefits (Legény & Špaček, 2019). According to these authors, the physiological benefits make education healthier, the psychological benefits promote an inspiring environment, the

pedagogical benefits improve students' attitudes, and the cognitive benefits promote constructive debates.

Linguistically speaking, humor may increase student proficiency, specifically in the skills of listening comprehension and reading (Schmitz, 2002). Additionally, humor fosters student interaction so that they feel motivated to participate, leading to a positive environment in the classroom (Ketabi & Simin, 2009). In a study conducted by Aboudan (2009), most students reported that jokes helped them to learn complex material and pay more attention in class. Hackathorn et al. (2011) also provided empirical evidence of the multiple benefits of humor. They found that students' performance on exams improved, and overall humor maximized learning outcomes.

In the communicative language classroom, humor can encourage social behavior (Manadé Rodríguez, 2018). Additionally, it is a tool to cover uncomfortable topics (Pomerantz & Bell, 2011) since it has the power to humanize teaching (Jeder, 2015). It can become a catalyst so that students can be aware of the process of learning (Schultz, O'Brien, & Schultz, 1994), and can help reduce anxiety towards the target language (Crawford, 2004). In sum, humor, along with other values such as social support, can enrich students' experiences (Moriña, 2019). Therefore, instructors who use humor are more appreciated than those who do not (Jones, 2010). In fact, teasing, for example, is usually welcomed by the audience. However, in the context of the classroom, students may not feel comfortable engaging in it with their instructors. Hence the importance of laughing with students instead of at them (Banas et al., 2011).

On the other hand, humor avoidance may limit students' access to the resources that humor offers; that is, humor competence (Ziyaemehr et al., 2011). How important is teaching humor competence then? If it is part of communicative competence, it should be taught in the language classroom (Vega, 1989). That means that if humor is not understood, communication fails. Therefore, it is essential in language teaching. Since joking is a sign of mastering a language, incorporating humorous content benefits L2 learners' performance.

If the use of humor is appropriate, it can be very beneficial in the classroom. According to Wanzer et al. (2006), the appropriate uses of humor include content-related humor, unrelated humor, self-disparaging humor, and unplanned humor. Nevertheless, if humor is inappropriate and is perceived in a negative way, it cannot be considered instructional (Banas, Dunbar, Rodriguez, & Liu, 2011) and can have an impact on the integrity of the academic effort (Azizinezhad & Hashemi, 2011). Then, what is and is not appropriate humor? Appropriate humor must be relevant and suitable; inappropriate humor is disrespectful (Bakar, 2020). Humor appropriately used has the ability to humanize, illustrate, reduce anxiety, and make people reflect (Torok, McMorris, & Wen-Chi Lin, 2010).

Despite all the advantages mentioned above, there are still a few disadvantages that instructors should keep in mind so that students do not feel frustrated or discouraged. As Nguyen (2009) argues, humor could be a disruption and could be misinterpreted, leading to student frustration. In fact, we have to be

very careful about not overusing it (Bilokcuoglu & Debreli, 2018). Thus, we should use it very cautiously. Lei et al. (2010) made a list of inappropriate uses of humor that should be avoided in the classroom: offensive humor, disparaging humor, and sarcasm. Inappropriate humor may be a problem because it can create a hostile environment; it could be alienating and subversive (Rothwell et al., 2011). Sarcastic humor may be confusing, and students could take on subversive roles as an effective way of challenging the instructor in a socially accepted way (Holmes & Marra, 2002).

In order to be able to understand how humor works in the classroom, we should distinguish between different types, styles, and dimensions of humor.

2. Types, styles, and dimensions of humor

Harris (2006) mentions three types of humor: incongruity, superiority, and relief; the first being the most influential. The incongruity theory refers to a surprise factor that provokes that reaction (Gaete, 2016). The superiority theory associates humor with power (Argüello et al., 2012). This becomes a malicious act because we feel superior (Ageli, 2018). The relief theory is based on the health benefits that humor brings in reducing anxiety and stress, and the social benefits for self-confidence (Villegas-Urbe, 2011). Humor can be rational in three ways: to show attitudes that should be avoided, to detect incongruities, and to release tension (Siurana, 2019).

According to Martin et al. (2003), there are four styles of humor: affiliative, self-enhancing, aggressive, and self-defeating. Affiliative humor refers to telling jokes to attract attention and establish relationships. This approach is usually taken in higher educational roles that involve supervising diverse programs (Grace-Odeleye & Santiago, 2019). Self-enhancing humor refers to the use of humor to face hardships. It is based on a positive perspective. Aggressive humor, however, is potentially offensive since it is meant to criticize others. Finally, self-defeating humor tries to gain others' acceptance by making fun of oneself. In terms of dimensions, we can distinguish four humor dimensions: Creative, social, revolutionary through a critical position, and constructive to achieve a positive and relaxed atmosphere (Barrio & Fernández, 2010).

3. Humorous discourse and other pragmatic resources

Regarding humorous discourse, it can be divided into three groups: universal, culture-based, and linguistic humor (Butler-Pascoe, & Wiburg, 2003). Why are jokes important? The use of jokes is very practical, since jokes increase solidarity and can enact positive politeness that is usually associated with supportive humor (Holmes, 2006). This resource may enhance students' listening and speaking skills (Pujiastuti, 2009). Another great benefit beyond the linguistic gains is the emotional impact they have on students by reducing their stress and anxiety (Montañés Sánchez, 2018). Irony and humor are very similar in the sense that both are based on incongruity (Colston & O'Brien, 2000), but irony is completely pragmatic (Attardo, 2001).

As educators, we can use social satire in the classroom to build a bridge between the pessimism of satire and the hope that we can foster among the students

(Hayes, 2016). Larson et al. (2019) showed how sarcasm can be used to develop critical understanding and good relationships between instructors and students. Nevertheless, we should be very careful when using sarcasm because it may be alienating, and ultimately this could become detrimental for the students (Alexander & Mariko Wood, 2019).

In the same vein, another linguistic and pragmatic tool that can become very efficient to attract students' interest and attention can be the use of comics to improve students' reading and writing skills (Arnold, 2000). They are based on stereotypes that are aimed at enhancing narratives (Boxman-Shabtai & Shifman, 2015). In the same vein, memes can attract student attention and create the expectation of a relevant outcome. These can be a remixed or a stable image (Yus, 2021).

The pandemic has immersed all of us into emergency remote learning, and as a consequence, humor has become more important than ever due to the emotional and stressful learning and personal situations both instructors and students have faced. How can humor be used when teaching online?

4. Humor in online teaching

During COVID-19, online teaching has been the norm for most educators. Therefore, it is crucial to know how to adapt humor to the online classroom. What humor is most appropriate for online contexts?

In online learning, it can be challenging to engage and motivate students. Therefore, humor is a powerful tool to develop positive emotions (Yang, Lavonen, & Niemi, 2018). Humorous elements increase motivation, reduce stress, and ultimately produce a positive impact on learning performance. In fact, ignoring humor in an online setting may be harmful and negatively affect student engagement (James, 2004). Banas et al. (2011) mentioned some characteristics that helpful humor should have. It should be appropriate, short, and directly related to the content of the class. Using humor in an online setting is a chance to be closer to the students, but it requires more craft and it is intentionally constructed (Smith & Wortley, 2017). Unfortunately, it is not as common as in face-to-face instruction, and mainly because of the technical issues that we usually experience or the fact that students are often muted on platforms such as Zoom (Gordon, 2020). Additionally, a shared virtual environment does not have the same impact in terms of humor as a physical environment (Morreall, 2009). Humor does not flow as naturally. Finally, humor is important in supporting learning in remote education (Goldsmith, 2001).

In conclusion, this article intends to present humor as an effective tool in the foreign language classroom due to its multiple advantages to enhance learning and make students more comfortable, especially relevant during the COVID-19 pandemic, in which instructors have needed to reinvent themselves to facilitate student learning through jokes, comics, or even pragmatic tools such as irony, sarcasm, or memes. However, in order to do so, they need to be trained to be sure the humor is appropriate and students will benefit from it.

5. References:

- Aboudan, R. (2009). Laugh and learn: Humor and learning a second language. *International Journal of Arts and Sciences*, 3(3): 90-99.
- Ageli, N.R. (2018). Humour as used and perceived by instructors in EFL teaching at the University of Bahrain. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 7(2): 9-20.
- Alexander, S., & Mariko Wood, L. (2019). No news is good news? Satirical news videos in the information literacy classroom. *Libraries and the Academy*, 19(2), 253-278.
- Argüello, C., Willis, G. B., and Carretero-Dios, H. (2012). The effects of social power and disparagement humor on the evaluations of subordinates. *Revista de Psicología Social*, 27(3): 323-337. Retrieved from <http://doi.org/10.1174/021347412802845504>
- Arnold, J. (2000). *La dimensión afectiva en el aprendizaje de idiomas*. Madrid: Colección Cambridge de didáctica de lenguas.
- Attardo, S. (2001). *Humorous Texts: A Semantic and Pragmatic Analysis*. Boston and New York, Mouton de Gruyter.
- Azizinezhad, M., & Hashemi, M. (2011). Humour: a pedagogical tool for language learners. *Procedia: Social and Behavioural Sciences*, 30. 2093-2098.
- Bakar, F. (2020). Appropriate and relevant humour in the university classroom: insights from teachers and students. *European Journal of Humour Research*, 7(4). 137-152.
- Banas, J. A., Dunbar, D., Rodriguez, D., & Liu, S. (2011). A review of humor in educational settings: four decades of research. *Communication Education*, 60(1). 115-144.
- Barrio, P., & Fernández, S. (2010) Educación y humor: una experiencia pedagógica en la educación de adultos. *Revista Complutense de Educación*, 21(2). 365-385.
- Bell, N.D. (2009). Learning about and through humor in the second language classroom. *Language Teaching Research*, 13(3). 241-258.
- Bilokcuoglu, H, & Debreli, E. (2018). Use of humour in language classes: an effective 'filter' for affective filter? *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, 14(3), 347-359.
- Boukhelkhal, O. (2019). Humor in the EFL context: An investigation of Algerian second-year LMD students' and teachers' attitudes at Medea University. *International Journal of English Language, Literature in Humanities*, 7(7). 1095-1129.
- Boxman-Shabtai, L., & Shifman, L. (2015). When ethnic humor goes digital. *New Media & Society*, 17(4). 520-539.
- Butler-Pascoe, M. E., & Wiburg, K.M. (2003). *Technology and teaching English language learners*. MA. Pearson Education. http://dx.doi.org/10.1300/J025v20n01_09

- Colston, H. L., & O'Brien, J. (2000) Contrast and pragmatics in figurative language: anything understatement can do, irony can do better. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 32, 1557–1583.
- Crawford, J. (2004). Language choices in the foreign language classroom: Target language or the learners' first language? *RELC Journal*, 35(5). 5-20.
- Gaete, T. (2016) Tensiones entre humor, lenguaje y etnia. Una revisión de estudios académicos sobre humor e interculturalidad. *Revista temas sociológicos*, 20, 137-159.
- Goldsmith, D (2001) Communication, humor and personality: Students' attitudes to learning online. *Academic Exchange Quarterly*, 5. 108.
- Gordon, M. (2020). Synchronous teaching and learning: On-Ground versus Zoom. *International Journal of Education and Human Developments*, 6(3). 11-19.
- Grace-Odeleye, B. E., and Santiago, J. (2019). Utilizing humor to enhance leadership styles in higher education administration. *International Journal of Educational Leadership and Management*, 7(2): 171- 202. DOI:10.17583/ijelm.2019.3912
- Hackathorn, J., Garczynski, A. M., Blankmeyer, K., Tennial, R. D., & Solomon, E. D. (2011). All kidding aside: Humor increases learning at knowledge and comprehension levels. *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 11(4). 116-123.
- Harris, J. C. (2006). Should humor be a desired disposition for teacher candidates? *Teacher Education Journal of South Carolina*. 67-74.
- Hay, J. (2001). The pragmatics of humour support. *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*, 14(1). 55-82.
- Hayes, N. (2016) Satire as an educative tool for critical pedagogy in the public affairs. *Classroom, Administrative Theory, & Praxis*, 38(4). 251-266, DOI: 10.1080/10841806.2016.1240464
- Heidari-Shahreza, M.A. (2021). Humor in the language classroom: Pedagogical benefits and practical considerations. *TESOL Journal*, 12. 572. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tesj.572>
- Holmes, J., & Marra, M. (2002). Over the edge? Subversive humor between colleagues and friends. *Humor*, 15(1). 65-88.
- Holmes, J. (2006). Sharing a laugh: Pragmatic aspects of humor and gender in the workplace. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 38. 26–50.
- Ketabi, S., & Simin, S. (2009) Investigating Persian EFL teachers and learners' attitudes towards humor in class. *International Journal of Language Studies*, 3(4). 435-452.
- Kim, S., & Park, S-H (2017) Humor in the language classroom: A review of the literature. *Primary English Education*, 23(4). 241-262.
- James, D. (2004). A need for humor in online courses. *College Teaching*, 52(3). 93–120. <https://doi.org/10.3200/CTCH.52.3.93-120>.

- Jeder, D. (2015). Implications of using humor in the classroom. *Procedia- Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 180. 828- 833.
- Jones, P. M. (2010). *Laughing and Learning: An Alternative to Shut up and Listen*. Maryland, Rowman and Littlefield Education.
- Larson, J., Morris, T., & Shaw, K. (2019) Sarcasm as pedagogy of love: Exploring ironic speech acts in an urban high school English classroom. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 63(2). 169-177.
- Legény, J., & Špaček, R. (2019). Humour as a device in architectural education. *Global Journal of Engineering Education*, 21(1). 6-13.
- Lei, S. A., Cohen, J. L., Russler, K. M. (2010). Humor on learning in the college classroom: evaluating benefits and drawbacks from instructors' perspective. *Journal of Instructional Psychology*, 37(4). 326-331.
- Linares Bernabéu, E. (2017) La apreciación y la producción del chiste en E/L2. Un salto cognitivo y metapragmático. *ELUA*, 31. 211-231. doi: 10.14198/ELUA2017.31.11
- Linares Bernabéu, E. (2018) La competencia humorística en el aula de E/L2. *Convergencia y*
- Transversalidad en Humanidades - *Actas de las VII Jornadas de Investigación de la Facultad de Filosofía y Letras de la Universidad de Alicante, España*, 83-89.
- Manadé Rodríguez, C. (2018). *La enseñanza del humor y la ironía como elementos culturales en el aula de ELE para estudiantes japoneses: estudio y propuesta didáctica*. PhD Thesis, Universidad de las Palmas de Gran Canaria.
- Martin, R. A., Puhlik-Doris, P., Larsen, G., Gray, J., & Weir, K. (2003). Individual differences in uses of humor and their relation to psychological well-being: Development of the humor styles questionnaire. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 37. 48-75.
- Montañés Sánchez, M.V. (2018) El humor, la risa y el aprendizaje de ELE: una revisión desde la Psicología y la Didáctica. *ENSAYOS, Revista de la Facultad de Educación de Albacete*, 33(1). 129-143.
- Moriña, A. (2019). The keys to learning for university students with disabilities: Motivation, emotion and faculty-student relationships. *Plos One*, 14(5). <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0215249>.
- Morreall, J. (2009). *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Nguyen, S. (2009). *Class Clowns – Laughing While Learning*. Available in: <http://yahoo.com/class-clown-laughing-while-learning-4538861.html>.
- Pentaraki, A., & Burkholder, G. J. (2017). Emerging evidence regarding the roles of emotional, behavioural, and cognitive aspects of student engagement in the online classroom. *European Journal of Open, Distance, and E-learning*. 20(1), 1-21.
- Pomerantz, A. & Bell, N. D. (2011). Humor as a safe house in the foreign language classroom. *The Modern Language Journal*, 95, Supplementary Issue. 148-161.

- Pujiastuti, A. (2009). A spark of humor in English classrooms: Contribution and consideration. *Journal of English & Education*, 3(2). 97-104.
- Rodríguez, V. G. (2005). A la lengua con humor: un ejemplo práctico a través de los cómics. La competencia pragmática y la enseñanza del español como lengua extranjera. *Actas del XVI Congreso Internacional de ASELE*. 343-352. Retrieved from http://cvc.cervantes.es/ensenanza/biblioteca_ele/asele/pdf/16/16_0343.pdf
- Rothwell, E., Siharath, K., Bell, S., Nguyen, K., & Baker, C. (2011). Joking culture: The role of repeated humorous interactions on group processes during challenge course experiences. *Journal of Experiential Education*, 33(4). 338-353.
- Schmitz, J. R. (2002). Humor as a pedagogical tool in foreign language and translation courses. *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*, 15(1). 89-113.
- Schultz, J. T., O'Brien, S. B., & Schultz, M.C. (1994) A pilot study to assess the effects of humor in relationship to teaching effectiveness. *Faculty Symposium on Teaching Effectiveness*. 113- 128.
- Siurana, J. C. (2019). La argumentación y el humor desde la ética del discurso. *Caminando con Karl-Otto Apel más allá de Apel. Daimon. Revista Internacional de Filosofía* 78. 187- 205.
- Smith, V. D., & Wortley, A. (2017) "Everyone is a comedian." No really, they are: Using humor in the online and traditional classroom. *Journal of Instructional Research*, 6. 18-23.
- Torok, S. E., McMorris, R. F., & Lin, W.C. (2004). Is humor an appreciated teaching too? Perceptions of professors' teaching styles and use of humor, *College Teaching*, 52(1). 14-20, DOI: 10.3200/CTCH.52.1.14-20
- Vega, G. (1989). *Humor Competence: The Fifth Component*. (Unpublished M.A. Thesis). Purdue University.
- Vegara Fabregat, L. (2018). La traducción del humor como herramienta pedagógica en el aula de L2. *Enseñanza & Teaching*, 36(2). 91-104.
- Villegas-Urbe, C. (2011). *Psicogénesis de la risa: la risa como constructora de cultura*. PhD Thesis, Universidad Complutense de Madrid. ISBN: 978-84-694-1432-3 Retrieved from: <http://eprints.ucm.es/12204/1/T32596.pdf>
- Wanzer, M. B., Frymier, A. B. (1999). The relationship between student perceptions of instructor humor and students' report of learning, *Communication Education*, 48(1). 48-62.
- Wanzer, M. B., Frymier, A. B., Wojtaszczyk, A. M., & Smith, T. (2006). Appropriate and inappropriate uses of humor by teachers. *Communication Education*, 55(2). 178-196.
- Yang, D., Lavonen, J. M., & Niemi, H. (2018). Online learning engagement: Factors and results-evidence from literature. *Themes in eLearning*, 11(1). 1-22.
- Yus, F. (2021). Pragmatics of humour in memes in Spanish. *Spanish in Context*, 18(1). 1-19.

Ziyeemehr, A., Kumar, V., & Abdullah, M. (2011) Use and non-use of humor in academic ESL classrooms. *English Language Teaching*, 4(3). 111-119. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/elt.v4n3p111>