

LEARNING ABOUT HUMOR: TEACHING SECOND LANGUAGE  
HUMOR IN ESL

By

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To the Faculty of Washington State University:

The members of the Committee appointed to examine the thesis of  
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# LEARNING ABOUT HUMOR: TEACHING SECOND LANGUAGE

## HUMOR IN ESL

### Abstract

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Second language humor is something that many English as second language (ESL) learners have questions about, but do not usually have the opportunity to find a place for answers. A currently growing interest in applied linguistics research to incorporate humor into the language classroom suggests that playful uses of language may facilitate second language (L2) learning (Bell 2, forthcoming). Bell also considers the L2 classroom to be an appropriate place for discussing humor and letting students experiment with it in a safe atmosphere, which could help them think and make sense of L2 humor. This would potentially enable students to be better prepared to face spontaneous humor outside the classroom (Bell 14, forthcoming). Nevertheless, these assumptions lack sufficient empirical support, since there is not a significant amount of research about the benefits that the explicit teaching of humor can bring to L2 students. The present study contributes to offering empirical data on the teaching of L2 humor in the ESL classroom. Materials based on authentic American humor samples were created and taught to a group of ESL students. Results suggest that students benefit from the teaching of L2 humor by raising their

awareness of key elements and differences between L1 and L2 humor, exploring language play when attempting to produce L2 humor, as well as increase their vocabulary and learn about second language pragmatics by increasing their humor competence (Bell, forthcoming).

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## **Dedication**

To my wife Diana Romero: Thanks for being my guardian angel and even more.

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

The role of humor in language learning is a subject that has progressively been getting attention by second language acquisition research due to the facilitating action that humor may have in second language learning (Bell; Tocalli-Beller). This consideration mostly relies on the benefits brought by language play (Bell, “How”), which refers to the type of language commonly found in tongue twisters, rhymes, puns, riddles and some songs, whose main purpose is to engage in a creative and playful use of language rather than simply transmitting a message.

Humor itself can be defined as a competence (Attardo, Linguistic, 3), which is why appreciating and creating L2 humor requires a “sophisticated linguistic, social and cultural competence” from L2 speakers (Bell, “How” 28). Thus, humor is a complicated matter for second language students. Teachers have progressively been realizing this situation, which has led to a series of different sources that provide humorous texts for teaching purposes, such as websites with puns and jokes (Bell, forthcoming). I have occasionally used jokes, riddles and puns to introduce a specific language structure or to show how some humorous texts can only be understood by taking into account the cultural context surrounding them.

Because the use of humor involves a series of sociopragmatic rules that can imply a deeper understanding of the culture, a need for research in integrating this phenomenon into teaching has appeared (Bell, forthcoming). Bell doubts that humor per se could be taught but insists that teachers could make students feel more comfortable when dealing

with it, while allowing students to obtain analytical tools that will help them recognize certain recurrent patterns of L2 humor. This in turn will provide students with better criteria to judge the “funniness” of L2 humorous texts (Bell, forthcoming). Even though the importance of humor in L2 teaching has progressively been acknowledged little has been done to document and assess the creation and use of class materials aimed to teach second language humor in a formal classroom setting.

The interest in providing data on how humor may facilitate second language learning promoted a study about the inclusion of puns and riddles in L2 teaching (Tocalli-Beller), which presents information on how students co-constructed knowledge by “working out the meanings of puns and riddles.” However, L2 instructors’ attempts to use humor in their classes are still mostly based on intuitions (Bell, forthcoming). This issue raises the importance of creating didactic materials and approaching the teaching of L2 humor based on empirical data rather than intuition.

Given the complexity of humor itself, its presumed facilitating role in L2 learning, and the lack of empirical data on how to create and teach L2 humor materials, I was encouraged to approach this issue in the present study. Consequently, my research interest is focused on an attempt to answer the following two research questions:

### **Research Questions**

1. Does the explicit teaching of humor help ESL students understand or appreciate second language humor?
2. Does teaching humor facilitate second language learning?

In order to approach suitable answers to these two questions, this study presents its theoretical background in the chapter 2 and explains the methodology used to gather data in chapter 3.

The next chapter introduces important definitions and theories of humor that help understand humor better and allowed the identification of key components of humor that helped create teaching materials. The chapter also provides more information on previous studies about the implicit benefits of teaching L2 humor. Then, chapter 3 describes how data was collected through a class on humor, the designed teaching materials and interviews.

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Humor is a challenging subject to teach in a second language but it can prove to be rewarding for both teachers and students. It allows learners to engage in playful uses of language that may help L2 students learn new vocabulary or new meanings of words they would not probably get acquainted of by other means (Tocalli-Beller 165-166).

Studying L2 humor also enables students to tell jokes, riddles or puns to other people (Tocalli-Beller 166) because it not only gives them a better understanding of L2 humor but it also offers learners the possibility to gain valuable insights of the target culture (Tocalli-Beller 165).

For all of the reasons discussed above, Tocalli-Beller and Swain state that the greatest pedagogical challenge of teaching L2 humor “lies in finding material exemplifying language play that suits the specific needs of students” (167). This makes it necessary to define humor and use humor theories that allow a reasonable creation of materials aimed to introduce and foster a progressive and coherent teaching of L2 humor to the participants involved in the present study.

#### **A Definition of Humor**

Humor is not an easy term to define as can be seen in the literature that aims to look for a suitable definition. Attardo presents the difficulties on stating what humor is, in his introduction to his book Linguistic Theories of Humor (1994). This study will take the definitions and theories developed about humor from Attardo’s seminal work.

The discussion on defining humor is presented by Attardo in two sections. First, researchers in this field have determined that it is impossible to define humor as a general category without establishing what its internal subdivisions might be. Thus, a comprehensible attempt in providing a definition to what counts as humor and what not, can only come from the study of the characteristics that make a given humorous text funny or not. This would have to be based on the semantic elements presented in the text and a set of established relationships among them that are only present in humorous texts. Second, laughter cannot be a defining characteristic of humor since this is a physical reaction that could be produced by humor or other different types of stimuli such as tickles (1-13). On the other hand, laughing at humor depends on the ability for a subject to find a pun, joke or other humorous text funny or not. That is why humor can only be defined through the study of its features. From the need to define and explain what humor really is, Raskin proposed his Semantic Script Theory of Humor (SSTH) in 1985.

### **The Semantic Script Theory of Humor**

Raskin's SSTH advocates for the idea of a "humor competence," which has its origin in Chomsky's concept of competence used in his Transformative Generative Grammar Theory (1965). For this reason, it is important to define what the term competence implies. Competence is the implicit or explicit knowledge of a system (Omaggio 3), in this case a language or humor. Accordingly, defining humor as a competence implies the recognition of humorous texts by a speaker and his/her ability to produce them without necessarily being aware of the rules that govern humor. A speaker in this theory refers to a subject who possesses an ideal knowledge of the language and

humor competence. The following is Raskin's SSTH's main hypothesis as presented in Attardo's Linguistic Theories:

"A text can be characterized as a single-joke-carrying-text if both of the [following] conditions are satisfied:

- i) The text is compatible, fully or in part, with two different scripts
- ii) The two scripts with which the text is compatible are opposite (...).

The two scripts with which some text is compatible are said to fully or in part in this text" (197)

A script is a "cognitive structure," internalized by a speaker, which contains organized information about an entity that can be an object, an event, an action, a quality or many other concepts real or imaginary. The script contains information on how things related to this entity described by the script are done or organized, as well as any other type of information that could be associated with the script itself. (Attardo, Linguistic 198, Humorous 2). To give an example of the information contained by a script, Attardo presents the ideas commonly considered for the DOCTOR script. This information could be grouped within the categories of, activities, places, time and conditions. In the activities category, the script exhibits many of the duties performed by a doctor, such as receiving patients, visiting them, listening to complaints, treating patients, diagnosing diseases, prescribing treatments, curing diseases and even taking patients' money. For the places category, a doctor could be commonly associated with hospitals, medical schools, a doctor's office etc. Within the time concepts, the script could contain the ideas of many years of school or practice, every day appointments, immediate attention, among others.

In the condition category, the information could imply that a doctor requires physical contact with patients, as it is in most cases (Attardo, Linguistic 199).

This example shows some of the information that might be typical in the DOCTOR script that a speaker could have, meaning that a regular person in the western world could possibly have all or many of these ideas in mind when presented with the lexical item, doctor. Nevertheless, there is a distinction that Attardo points out when describing the contents of scripts, and that is the one between lexical knowledge and encyclopedic knowledge. Lexical knowledge refers to the contents that are directly associated with a lexical item, whereas encyclopedic knowledge relates to additional information that only a limited number of speakers could have.

The word music activates scripts that might be common to many people, but not all of these speakers know that Vallenato is a music genre played with accordions that is typical along the Atlantic Ocean coast of Colombia. This type of specialized knowledge is what Raskin identifies as a “restricted knowledge” script that is connected to the lexical script but is different because it presents specialized knowledge that might only be known by a few people. Raskin also introduces the concept of scripts that are organized chronologically, as seen on the macrosript example of RESTAURANT that could consist of chronologically organized scripts such as: DRIVE UP TO THE RESTAURANT, BE SEATED, ORDER FOOD and many others.

The other type of scripts are the ones that Attardo defines as complex scripts such as WAR that could be associated with other related scripts such as ARMY, ENEMY, VICTORY, DEFEAT, WEAPON among others (Attardo, Linguistic 200). The importance of this description lies on how scripts relate to each other.



The relationships between lexical and non lexical scripts are linked by what Raskin calls a “semantic network.” This network establishes relationships between the different scripts based on how they relate to each other. These relationships can be of synonymy, hyponymy, antonymy or some other kind. Accordingly, the script Don Quixote could be related to many different scripts like world literature, Spanish literature, narrative, novel, book, paper, library, Spanish Golden Age, Cervantes and many others. The number of scripts activated and what they are depends on the speaker’s knowledge and the number of possibilities that each script could be associated with. Hence, the script Don Quixote will not be easily related to the CAR script, but could possibly be closer to the HORSE script if the speaker knows about Don Quixote’s famous horse Rocinante.

A semantic theory then is based on the set of all scripts available to the speakers along with the links that relate them to each other, as well as a set of combinatory rules that evaluates the combinations that offer coherent readings producing “the meaning” of the text. After assessing a text through this process, the semantic theory considers it as “well formed.” Raskin’s SSTH considers an ideal speaker that has access to the complete semantic network of a language and the possible combinatorial rules in order to be able to evaluate the “well-formedness” of sentences, which will ultimately enable the speaker to determine whether a text is funny or not.

For the SSTH there is a basic condition that must be met in order to consider a text funny. First, there is the issue that a text could have more than one possible reading, as in a text describing a person getting up, fixing breakfast, leaving the house, etc. This text could relate to the GO TO WORK script or the FISHING TRIP script, as well as

many other possibilities (Attardo, Linguistic 203). However, there are some possibilities that appear closer than others.

Multiple scripts can overlap in a text, as in the example described before and the correspondence between scripts within a text could be total or partial, it depends on the specific contents in the text. In a joke, if there are overlapping scripts that are not completely compatible with each other, there must be a “script-switch” that actualizes the meaning of the text; thus, affording the speaker to come to a conclusion based on a different script that would not be commonly related to the first script in a different setting. To illustrate this Attardo uses the “doctor’s wife joke” that I decided to provide below to offer a clarifying example of the script relationships presented by the SSTH. “«Is the doctor at home?» the patient asked in his bronchial whisper. «No,» the doctor’s young and pretty wife whispered in reply. «Come right in» (Linguistic 206).

From the detailed illustration of the DOCTOR script, previously presented, it can be deduced that the man whispers because he is sick, the doctor treats sick people so the patient must be seen by the doctor. That is the reason why a patient would normally inquire about the doctor’s presence. The wife whispers too, even though she is not sick and invites the patient to come in, which contradicts the part of the DOCTOR script that requires the doctor to be present in order to treat the man’s sickness. Knowing that the patient is a man because the text mentions “his bronchial whisper” and that the wife is “young and pretty” the speaker’s traditional script for DOCTOR gets replaced by the LOVER script knowing that the text suggests an adulterous relationship that the wife implies when she invites the man to come in, taking into account that she whispers, which suggests a certain degree of discretion. This text is described by Attardo to be

compatible with two scripts DOCTOR/LOVER that present an opposition on the SEX/NO SEX basis (Linguistic 207). This script opposition is a condition that must be met according to what the SSTH postulates in order to assert a text's funniness. On the other hand, non humorous texts can also present script oppositions, so a particular type of script opposition must appear in a text in order to be considered funny.

Humorous texts' oppositions can not be of any kind but must be encompassed within one of the following categories: actual vs. non actual, normal vs. abnormal and possible vs. impossible, so these can be basically summed up in real and unreal situations (Linguistic 204). The following are some of Raskin's recurrent script oppositions that Attardo includes when describing the SSTH (Humorous, 20)

Figure 1. Common SOs

<p style="text-align: center;">Good/bad Life/death Obscene/non-obscene Money/no-money High/low stature</p>
--

Another important aspect of the SSTH to be considered is the pragmatic component that Raskin established through his four maxims of the communication mode of joke telling:

- “1. Maxim of Quantity: Give exactly as much information as is necessary for the joke;
2. Maxim of Quality: Say only what is compatible with the world of the joke;
3. Maxim of Relation: Say only what is relevant to the joke;
4. Maxim of Manner: Tell the joke efficiently” (Attardo, Linguistics 205-206)

This is what makes possible different types of script oppositions that are uncommon in non humorous texts. Referring back to the doctor joke described before, it could be interpreted as if the patient was looking for the doctor to be examined and eventually have his illness treated or as if he only were coming to attempt to seduce the doctor's young and pretty wife that is all alone, which in turn leads to a different type of script, the LOVER script.

### **The General Theory of Verbal Humor**

The SSTH offered a good possibility to study jokes, but since it was based on the joke structure, it would leave out other types of humorous texts. That is why Attardo and Raskin presented a revised version of the SSTH in 1991 that they called the General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH). This theory was created to account for any type of humorous text. The difference between the SSTH and the GTVH is that the first was created as a semantic theory of humor, focused on meanings, whereas the latter offers a linguistic approach that takes into consideration many different linguistic aspects, such as humorous texts' narrativity and pragmatics (Attardo, Linguistic 222).

The GTVH is not only based on one principle of assessing a text as funny or not but it also offers five more organizing principles that encompass humorous texts. These are referred to as knowledge resources (KR).

### **Language (LA)**

Language is the KR that contains all of the information necessary for the verbalization of a text and determines the relationships among lexical items within the text. Therefore, appreciating humor requires a certain degree of language proficiency for

a speaker to be able to understand a humorous joke. The language KR is responsible for the position of the different positions of the lexical items within the text.

### **The Narrative Strategy (NS) KR**

This KR accounts for the narrative organization presented in a humorous text, whether it is explicitly a joke or some other type of text. This KR could correspond to what literary theory defines as genre. As an example of this, I consider it important to describe the narrative structure of jokes.

A joke text begins by setting a context that will serve as the background for the joke, which can be omitted if it can be inferred from the text. Then, an element referred to as disjunctive, causes a reconstruction of sense within the joke, to a second sense that is opposed to the first one. In jokes this disjunctive commonly appears at the end of the text. This humorous ending of a text has traditionally been known as punch line. However, not all humorous texts present this structure. Consequently, Attardo introduces his neologism of jab line (Humorous 29) to name non final punch lines.

### **The Target (TA) KR**

The TA refers to the contents of the joke that point to a certain knowledge on groups or individuals that carry humorous stereotypes or mythical scripts (Attardo, Linguistic 224) easily found on humorous texts that make fun of specific groups of people or individuals based on beliefs and other preconceived ideas that are of common knowledge to groups of speakers of a language living within a given community.

### **The Situation (SI) KR**

This KR refers to the situation portrayed in the humorous text, which could be about a doctor's appointment, dancing, eating, etc. The SI includes all objects,

participants, instruments, activities among others. These are considered the props of the joke.

### **The Logical Mechanism (LM) KR**

A joke's LM is the parameter that establishes how scripts in a joke come together, by juxtaposing them, creating false analogies, or any other possibility that embodies a "local" logic within the joke (Attardo, Linguistic 226).

The following list of known LMs<sup>1</sup> is taken from Attardo's Humorous Texts (27)

Figure 2. Known LMs

role-reversals vacuous reversal garden-path almost situations inferring consequences coincidence proportion exaggeration meta humor	role exchanges juxtaposition figure-ground reversal analogy reas. from false prem. Parallelism ignoring the obvious field restriction vicious circle	potency mappings chiasmus faulty reasoning self-undermining missing link implicit parall. false analogy cratylism referential ambiguity
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### **The Script Opposition (SO) KR**

This is precisely the same script opposition that the SSTH established to be present in all texts that are described as funny. The SO is the most abstract of the KRs and the one that will ultimately determine the conditions in which other KRs can occur. A humorous text according to the GTVG consists on the following six KRs and their relationships among them: Joke: {LA, SI, NS, TA, SO, LM}. Nonetheless, a hierarchy of KRs can only be presented in terms of the interdependence or independence among them, knowing that the values of LA and SI are limited, since these are given by the conditions created by the other KRs, which could have an ample range of possibilities. Then, taking

this into account, the hierarchy of KRs presented by Attardo is the following (Linguistic 227)

Figure 3. Hierarchical Organization of KRs



This figure presents the importance of the SO KR in a humorous text, showing that it is basically its defining feature but also how the SO appears right at the top of the KRs, since it functions as the main organizing principle that conditions the possibilities for the other KRs to occur.

Even though Attardo states that the GTVH is still under development, one of the clear advantages that it offers is that this theory allows the analysis of other types of texts different to jokes due to its ability to step out of the semantic aspect of humor and its attempt to provide explanations on other linguistic and non linguistic characteristics of humorous texts. These features of the GTVH make it an appropriate and less restricted theory to analyze L2 humorous texts that could qualify as “exemplifying language play” (Tocalli-Beller 167) samples.

The following section of this chapter will discuss second language humor teaching and learning. It will introduce studies that provide important information on the

pedagogical implications of teaching L2 humor, as well as it will support the importance of the humor theory just discussed.

### **Teaching and Learning L2 Humor**

Attardo emphasizes the importance of learning the social settings considered appropriate for humor as well as the mythical scripts. These, as mentioned before, are real or unreal beliefs about specific groups of people or things, which can be stereotypes or simply common beliefs. Attardo also insists on teaching specific areas of humor competence to L2 students, such as the scripts available in the L2 culture, the unavailable or tabooed scripts, as well as the appropriateness of humor within specific settings (Linguistic 213). Then, by teaching L2 humor, students are not only learning the scripts but also the pragmatics associated with them.

SSTH was aimed to be used in ESL by Vega (1989) basing the theory's application on the consideration of humor in L2 as being part of communicative competence (Attardo, Linguistic 211). Accordingly, the knowledge required to process L2 humor should be taught. For this purpose, the GTVH offers more valuable elements to understand humor that provide a theoretical framework to study second language humor, analyze it and determine an appropriate approach to teach it. For this reason, the GTVH should play a key role when deciding the contents and elements that students should be taught, as well as the difficulties that L2 humor might present to students. These considerations are fundamental to produce appealing and challenging pedagogical materials to teach L2 humor.

In creating materials to teach humor, I followed Bell's recommendations for teaching humor, and also some important elements of humor presented by the GTVH,



such as script oppositions, among other knowledge resources. Humor according to Bell, should be introduced by examining student's knowledge of L1 and L2 humor and its uses, based on their own experience. This is an important first step in raising awareness of differences and similarities between L1 and L2 humor. Students should be provided with different forms of humor in order to analyze their implied functions, and its constituent elements. Students should also be taught to account for script oppositions presented in the humorous texts, the type of narrative strategy and any other important feature presented by the text. By studying the key elements that make up humorous texts, and making distinctions among them, awareness of different ways in which humor can be realized may be developed (Bell, forthcoming).

Previous studies that have somehow involved the use of humor in L2 teaching suggest a series of positive outcomes in second language learning. Sullivan (2000) mentions the mediating role of humor between L2 students and the target language prompted by humorous collaborative narratives that emphasized playing with sounds and different meanings of words. In 2004 Belz and Reinhardt present a case study of German as a second language student who engaged in language play to experiment with new forms and functions of L2 to amuse himself, establish relationships with other people and reflect a positive attitude.

Davies (2003) explains how a collaborative construction of humor between native speakers and non native speakers of English occurs. Research was gathered from extra-curricular conversations between volunteer American student employees of an intensive English program and beginner learners of ESL. Davies suggests that native speakers support allowed participants to learn how to engage in the joking activity, and experience

its social meaning in American society (Bell, “How” 194). Yet, none of the studies previously described attempted to approach the teaching of humor as an integral part of the L2 curriculum within a formal classroom setting.

It was not until Tocalli-Beller and Swain (2007) that a study had looked into the potential of riddles and puns presented in task-based teaching activities (Tocalli-Beller 147). Their study provides a good example of the integration of humor within the ESL curriculum. Tocalli-Beller and Swain created a class titled “Understanding English Culture and Humor” that was taught as part of the English Conversation Program of a North American University. Participants had to decipher the meaning of puns and riddles in small groups. The class activities focused on meaning rather than language structures, which stands as a basic component of the input-interaction-output model (147). Students had to co-construct the possible meanings or interpretations of puns and riddles by interacting with each other and negotiating meaning among them. This type of collaborative dialogue used to co-construct knowledge through interaction is referred to as “languaging” (Tocalli-Beller 145).

Languaging originates from students’ attempt to define the semantic triggers, which are the words that generate the ambiguity that will lead a text’s scripts to be switched (145), which Attardo calls disjunctors as explained in the humor theories section. Not only did students have to define the semantic triggers in a punch or riddle, but they were also asked to use these words in a new sentence and ultimately explain the text to others. Hence, languaging for Tocalli-Beller and Swain is a source of second language humor (152) and it is also commonly associated with the development of problem solving skills (148).

Considering languaging a possible source of L2 humor, it is important to go back to the notion of language play and discuss how creative use of language may enhance L2 learning. Bell discusses how explicit learning situations related to humorous language play foster the possibility of different types of linguistic experimentation and play. Thus, playing with language is a necessity of advanced language proficiency, since it is part of everyday activities for language users (Tocalli-Beller 147) and helps L2 learners realize the multifunctionality of language, including its aesthetic and semantic functions (Bell, “How” 194). In addition, Sullivan suggests that language play raises learner awareness of L2 forms (Bell, “How” 194).

Language play occurs quite frequently in every-day language use even though it may be used for the purpose of entertaining rather than communicating an explicit message (Tocalli-Beller 146,147). Accordingly, humor is a part of everyday life and second language students will eventually be exposed to it (Tocalli-Beller 149), so materials and approaches to teach L2 humor should definitely be explored by researchers and teachers.

The next chapter will present how this study was done through the creation of didactic materials based on authentic L2 humor samples that were created according to the principles discussed in this chapter and taught to a group of ESL learners as part of their intensive language immersion program.

## CHAPTER THREE

### STUDY

Data for the present study were collected through a class based on humor contents that was taught by the researcher, to a group of Japanese students coming for a five-week language and culture immersion program at Washington State University<sup>2</sup>. The class was created with authentic samples of humor considered appropriate for an American university class setting, which means humorous texts that would not expose students to topics that might offend them or make them feel uncomfortable, such as crude, risqué or scatological matters that are commonly found in humor. The class was offered within the students' conversation slot, so students could have the possibility to go to a conversation class if they did not want to participate in the study. Yet, all students gave their consent to participate in the study.

The humor samples consisted of video, clips extracted from popular sitcoms, movies and comic strips. The samples were chosen based on their content, considering the appearance of recurrent humorous situations or topics that are commonly addressed by humor, such as driving, the weather, the family and work. All class materials were created based on the samples chosen for the course. The materials were taught in a humor class called "Learning about Humor." A DVD<sup>3</sup> with subtitles was generated for the video clips with the intention of exposing students to American humor. Handouts<sup>4</sup> showing different comic strips were also used to teach the class, introduce and analyze the video clips.

## The Class

The class consisted of five fifty-minute sessions taught in a regular classroom at Washington State University's (WSU) Intensive Language American Institute (IALC)<sup>5</sup>. Two extra activities were also done in the IALC's computer language lab. The purpose of the class was to provide subjects with samples of some common humorous situations that are easily found in American humor and see how students interacted with the created materials, as well as how much they were able to understand or appreciate American humor. The video clips came from popular contemporary shows or movies and they were shown in all classes. Subjects had to work in small groups and interact with each other to complete handouts based on the video clips or comic strips that appeared in the handouts. They had to analyze each humorous situation and express their opinion about it, saying whether they found it funny or not and why. Then, answers were shared and discussed as a whole class activity led by the teacher/researcher. From now on, I will also refer to subjects as students.

## The Students

All students<sup>6</sup> were coming from a Japanese University located in the city of Osaka. Their ages ranged from 19 to 21. Five of them were males and nine females. The following chart shows the specific information for each of them including their TOEFL score in the paper based version of the test.

Name <sup>7</sup>	Gender	Date of Birth	TOEFL
David	Male	08/03/87	457
Andrew	Male	03/14/87	463
Tyler	Male	10/21/86	530

William	Male	02/02/88	437
Ethan	Male	05/24/86	463
Samantha	Female	09/29/87	490
Lola	Female	08/02/87	513
Emily	Female	01/27/88	503
Christi	Female	03/03/88	457
Chelsea	Female	08/06/88	457
Sarah	Female	05/04/88	423
Ashley	Female	12/10/87	430
Sophia	Female	09/24/87	487
Madison	Female	08/19/88	463

### **Research Methodology**

Data collection was done in class through collection of the handouts that students used every session, and other class work that will be explained in detail below. All classes were also video taped. The last part of the project required students to be interviewed to get their impressions on the class, the materials and see if they felt they learned anything from this experience.

Handouts were collected each class and photocopied for research purposes. Nonetheless, students were also given copies of their handouts at the end of the course. The following is a brief description of the activities that were prepared and done each day. Details on the data collected through these activities will be discussed in the results section of this study.

**Day 1**

On this first day, the class was introduced to the topic of humor. Students completed handout #1. This handout was created with the intention of getting a first impression of what subjects knew or thought about humor in English. Students were asked to describe what they knew or understood about humor, different types of humor and possible differences between humor in English and Japanese. The main purpose of this handout was to make students think about humor, by exploring their own experiences with humor in their own culture and moving on to their experience with American humor if they considered they had had any.

In creating this handout, some considerations on Japanese humor were taken into account. Among these, it is important to discuss the implications that laughter might have in Japanese culture.

Japanese people have traditionally been recognized as a culture in which public displays of emotion are highly discouraged (Oda 15). Smiling and laughter are not precisely highly ranked among other emotions, since laughter is usually “placed below anger or grief” (Oda 17). However, the subjects involved in this project came from Osaka, a city that is recognized for having a different culture of laughter.

Inoue in his paper, “Osaka’s Culture of Laughter” points out that Japan shows two different cultures of laughter, the one associated with the seriousness of the samurai warrior that is commonly found among the people of Tokyo, and the merchant laughter cultivated in the city of Osaka (27). Osaka exhibits a long tradition of commerce and merchants that led Japan’s economic development from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century (27-28). Osaka is then known to be the city that has more comedians and people

more open to laughter than any other in Japan (28). An important factor that contributed to the creation of a unique atmosphere for humor in Osaka, lies in the fact that samurai culture did not have a big impact on the city's social structure. Even though Japan was mostly dominated by samurai culture during the whole Edo Period<sup>8</sup> (1603-1867), Osaka did not have a big number of samurais as other cities since the majority of its inhabitants were merchants. Consequently, the social hierarchy established by samurais was not dominant in Osaka and most people were regarded as equal, which in turn favored the culture's view of laughter as a tool that could help harmonize human relationships (28). Therefore, the group of participants of this study could likely have been more receptive to discuss and study humor than Japanese people from other cities.

Handout # 1 had a final survey in which students were presented with different scenarios and were asked to rank the different situations based on their judgment of the possibility of joking. Then, students were given handout #2 to be completed. This handout introduced participants to puns, a humorous narrative strategy (NS) that corresponds to wordplay. Japanese jokes based on wordplay that relies on the joke's context appear more frequently in Japanese humor than other forms of jokes (Takekuro 91-92). A video clip from the Simpsons<sup>9</sup> was also played and later discussed.

Students were also given their first assignment. It consisted in reading two comics that had puns in them and attempt to explain them in a paragraph. Then, students should ask their American roommates for help if they did not understand the comics. The last part of the assignment required students to write a conclusive paragraph summarizing their interpretation of the comics, after their roommate's intervention. This first assignment was checked at the beginning of the second class.



**Day 2**

Students were first encouraged to explain each of the two comic strips they had to analyze for homework. The comic strips were shown in a transparency so everybody could see them. After that, students worked on handout #3. This handout presented a recurrent theme in American culture, the CAR script, which of course comes along with the DRIVING script. Students were presented with two video clips, the first showed a man unsuccessfully changing lanes trying to get the fastest one during rush hour, parallel to an old man using a walker on the sidewalk. The old man could move a lot faster than the man in the car. The second video clip introduced the topic of the road trip, which led to a comic that related family road trips to contraceptive methods<sup>10</sup>. The last part of the handout had the same comic just described, but its last panel was blank for students to make their own version of it, which was their first serious attempt at producing L2 humor in class.

**Day 3**

In handout #4 students were introduced to two of the most common Script Oppositions presented by Raskin, the one that confronts good and bad. The idea was connected to the comics in the previous handout, the family. The video clip was from the Simpsons Movie (2007). It presented Homer as the bad father opposed to his neighbor Flanders as the good father. Another important form of humor introduced by this handout was the satire. For this purpose, the handout offered the following definition of satire: “a way of criticizing something such as a group of people or a system, in which you deliberately make them seem funny so that people will see their faults” (Longman). The satire example presented in this class was the topic of dysfunctional family relationships.

Students were explained that satire is used as a form of constructive criticism as defined above.

This handout had a homework assignment, which consisted of explaining some comic strips as was done in the other assignments described before. After class, students were taken to the IALC's computer lab to explore the Bill Zimmerman's website [Makebeliefs.com](http://Makebeliefs.com) (Zimmerman). Zimmerman's website has tools to create online comic strips that can be printed out. Handout #5 had instructions on how to get to the website and use its tools to create a comic strip that was the class' final project. This initial computer lab session was not for students to create the comic, but to get acquainted with the website and the possibilities it offered to create comics. They explored the URL in pairs and they actually created their comic on Day 4.

#### **Day 4**

Students were encouraged to explain the comic strips they had been given for homework one more time. Then, they completed handout #6, which presented two scripts commonly used to produce humorous texts in American Culture, SNOW and CHRISTMAS. The class also met in the afternoon to work on their projects in the computer lab. By that time students were already familiar with the tools provided by [Makebeliefs.com](http://Makebeliefs.com), so they did not require major assistance with their work. At the end of this session they printed their comic strips. Copies were made for this study and for students to prepare a short five minute presentation for each pair to explain their comic on the last class.

**Day 5**

The session started with each team's comic strip's presentation. Each pair went in front of the class to explain their comic. Last, students worked on handout #7, which presented the WORK script and many of the other scripts associated with it.

**The Interviews**

The last part of the study required participants to be interviewed in order to capture their feelings and opinions about the class, the materials, and ask them if they considered the class had helped them understand L2 humor or if it had allowed them to learn anything new in the target language or culture. The interviews<sup>11</sup> were done the week after classes had ended. Each student had an interview that lasted between 15 or 20 minutes. Students were interviewed individually. Four interviewers participated in this study. They will later be referred to as Interviewer 1, 2, 3 and 4. The interview protocol consisted of seven questions that directly addressed the subjects described above. However, it also gave students the possibility of answering by interacting with the interviewer by chatting in a relaxed atmosphere that made it clear to the participants that there was no right or wrong answer.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### RESULTS

The data presented and discussed in this chapter will attempt to provide answers to my research questions about the role that the explicit teaching of humor can play in language learning. The answer to the first question will be dealt with in the chapter's first section, titled Studying Humor, which shows how humor was a complicated matter for participants to define and understand, as well as how awareness of differences between L1 and L2 humor was raised among them. The second question will be answered in the section titled Learning Language and Culture, which provides data about how second language learning occurred while valuable cultural insights were given to participants throughout the study.

#### **Studying Humor**

The class started by building on participants' knowledge about humor as Bell suggests (Bell, forthcoming). Reflecting upon humor made students aware of how difficult it was to describe what they understood about it. Students' struggles to provide a suitable definition for humor are demonstrated both by their answers to questions in handout # 1 and interviews. A good example of this is the following extract from Christi's (Chris) interview, in which she tells Interviewer 3 (I3) what she considers was the most memorable thing from the class.

Interview Extract 1 "it was very difficult question"

- 1 I3: Why why is that? Why do you remember that?
- 2 Chris: Because (.) because it was very difficult question and many Japanese couldn't

3 answer

4 I3: Mhm

5 Chris: (2) and uh (1) and mm well came by my dormitory

6 I3: Mhm

7 Chris: and asked my roommate

8 I3: Mhm

9 Chris: (1) even she couldn't explain what is humor

This sample shows how Christi feels neither she nor her peers seem to have an answer to define what humor is. Accordingly, Christi decides to ask her roommate, who is a native speaker of English, hoping to find an answer to this difficult question but her roommate does not have an answer either. This interview extract is an example of how second language learners are not the only ones having difficulties to define what humor is, but it suggests how both native and non native English speakers may have questions about it.

Making students contemplate what they may or may not know about humor was a first successful step to start studying L2 humor. Students' unfamiliarity with the subject of humor is demonstrated in the following attempts to define what humor is. Emily says, "We use this word «humor» with negative sentence but I can't find what is «humor»...." Other students offered more precise definitions that focused on humor's characteristics or effects, as Chelsea, when she says that for her humor is "to make people fun by using words." Another effort to provide defining characteristics of humor is shown in Samantha's idea that "humor is positive thing have us a lot of funs. It's kind of jokes or funny, interesting and silly things." For David "it is kind of joke, when someone is falling down, humor makes him fine." Students' answers to what they think humor is might not

do much to define what it is but they could point students to the importance of studying humor by making them acknowledge how unclear the concept of humor itself is for them, which may possibly cause them to have questions about it too.

Subjects were also asked to describe their experience with L2 humor in order to inquire about their beliefs, attitude or expectations with regard to second language humor. In his answer to this question Ethan showed interest in American humor by saying, “I like American humor because it’s different of ideas.” Other students referred to their experience when dealing with American humor, as Tyler explained, “Movie, we can hear the audience laugh at the same time when we can find the laugh or fun thing in American movie.” Ethan’s and Tyler’s answers make apparent some preconceived ideas about second language humor that may suggest differences with L1 humor, in Ethan’s words, this stands out because he specifically refers to a difference “of ideas,” but in Tyler’s answer it is more complicated to explain. Tyler indicates how other people’s laughter often occurs when something funny is presented, which may serve as a referent to reassure him of the funniness of a situation in an American movie that he might not equally need in his native culture. Thus, indicating a different behavior towards this specific situation in second language humor. Once more, the importance of these activities does not rely on how close students are to provide correct or incorrect answers, but to activate all the scripts they relate with both L1 and second language humor, as a starting point to foster a progressive awareness of how L1 might be different to L2 humor.

When students were asked whether they thought humor in English was different from their own culture’s, only Tyler and Samantha addressed this question, which

reinforces once more the idea of students' insecurity when dealing with L2 humor. Tyler acknowledges that humor in Japanese and English are different. However, in his answer he says, "Yes but I can't explain clearly." Samantha wrote: "Japanese uses humor by language. American uses humor by actions," which might be an unrealistic idea of a difference between L1 and L2 humor because American humor also has a lot of humor based on wordplay. Therefore, what Samantha mentions could maybe count as a similarity rather than a difference. However, Samantha's answer was given at the beginning of the first class' session, so she had not still been presented with the samples of second language wordplay introduced throughout the study.

Students' reasons made clear that the class needed to help them become more aware of possible differences and similarities between L1 and L2 humor by exposing them to authentic American humorous texts and discussing some of their features. Among these characteristics, the following were constantly discussed in class: how information was presented, the possible intention of texts, and what could make the texts funny or not. Hence, raising this awareness of differences between L1 and L2 humor among the participants would considerably contribute to their second language humor competence by providing them with analytical tools that could progressively enrich their understanding of it.

Studying humor allowed students to point out what they argued were differences between first and second language humor. An example of a difference that several students mentioned to have found between their L1 (Japanese) humor and American humor was the use of disrespectful language or situations that portray a case like the one

presented by the following comic, in which a little boy might seem to disrespect his parents or elders.

Comic 1<sup>12</sup> (Watterson 88)



Comic 1 is a Calvin and Hobbes comic that shows Calvin's father reading on the sofa while Calvin tells him that his campaign to stay as Calvin's dad is not going well, as if being a father were the same as a president getting reelected to remain in power. Calvin argues it is not the problems that are important for electors on this year's campaign but "it is character that" matters. Then, he pulls out an old picture of his father with a female and asks "who's the bimbo with you in this old prom picture?" The picture, according to Calvin, might be detrimental for his image on the campaign to remain dad. Then, the father realizes that the woman Calvin just called bimbo is precisely Calvin's mother. The mother, who just eavesdropped the word bimbo immediately asks, "Who's a bimbo?"

There are two main situations that this comic presents. One is the mockery of political elections in which being popular and showing a good image is a crucial factor for success. The other one is Calvin and his father "accidentally" calling the mother bimbo. Students only discovered the latter intention of the comic since its punch line was based on it. Some students like Tyler, found the comic inappropriate because the mother had been called bimbo and thought there might had been a problem with the comic's panel sequence. In his attempt to provide a written interpretation of the comic, he wrote:



“I can’t understand. I wonder if four cartoons is connected properly. I just think that his father should not express his wife as bimbo.” Then, after being helped by his roommate, he still thought the comic was inappropriate because a young boy should not use the word bimbo to call his mother. He wrote: “Bimbo is an attractive but unintelligent frivolous young woman. So the humor is that this son insult his wife as a bimbo and she happens to hear what husband says. I disagree. because like this young boy can not insult.” This example makes manifest how Tyler is not able to find the comic funny because he finds the boy’s attitude disrespectful by using what Tyler considers an objectionable word to call Calvin’s mother.

Emily admitted to like the way the boy speaks in the comic. In her first attempt to explain the comic on her own, she looked the meaning of the word bimbo in her electronic dictionary but still could not understand the comic. Then, after being helped by her roommate she wrote, “First scene he said « what’s wrong with you?» second «I think the important thing is not fashion trend, but character. Old prom picture is high school’s party? »... After finding what they said I like the way six year olds speak.” Tyler’s and Emily’s conclusive explanations about the comic are obviously different because Emily seems to like the language used by Calvin, whereas Tyler finds it inappropriate. Yet, both students refer to the language used by the young boy, which points to how Emily and Tyler suggest the language used in the comic as a striking feature for them.

The use of language was constantly mentioned as a difference between Japanese and American humor by students not only when referring to Comic 1 but in many other occasions. The following extract from Christi’s (Chris) conversation with Interviewer 4

(I4), is a good example of her perception of how the use of “bad words” were considered a main difference between American humor and her own culture’s.

Interview Extract 2: “cartoon content bad words, so bad words makes them interesting or funny”

1 I3: Did you learn anything in the class?

2 Chris: Uh hmm oh (3) Uh I can learn what is humor, I mean American humor or  
3 some a little difference

4 I3: Mhm

5 Chris: Between American humor and Japanese humor yeah so

6 I3: Can you explain that to me? Hmh? HHH ((I know)) it’s difficult

7 Chris: Yeah

8 I3: Cause you see you see some differences maybe

9 Chris: American humor sometimes American humor (5) is mixed bad words like  
10 like hmm

13 Chris: Like (.) like

14 I3: Like swearing?

15 Chris: Yeah sometimes=

16 I3: Like shit and things like that?

17 Chris: But Japanese ones have always hmmm I can’t explain but (2) American

18 hmm /cart/ cartoon content bad words, so bad words makes them interesting or  
19 funny, so I think

20 I3: Hmhm

21 Chris: it is a different

22 I3: so you you in Japanese cartoons you wouldn't see that kind of language.

23 Chris: Yeah

24 I3: REALLY?

25 Chris: Yeah so Japanese /pretty much/ cartoons is very (2) uh Japanese pretty

26 much cartoon is (1) /this/ stories always happy ending

27 I3: Huh

28 Chris: Not not bad things

Christi explains how she thinks American humor uses language that can usually be considered objectionable and then points out that this type of language does not commonly appear in Japanese humor. The other thing that stands out in this conversation is how she says that Japanese humor usually presents stories with happy endings, which could suggest that she may be referring to the format of the humor samples presented in class more than to the broader category of humor per se. This could be due to the great abundance of cartoons in the humor samples used in the didactic materials she was presented in class. However, if that were the case, those differences that she describes may or may not be completely real, knowing that a lot of Japanese anime is commonly charged with what could often be considered objectionable content such as sex or extreme violence.

The issue of American humor presenting situations that participants considered inappropriate to find funny, as seen in the possible use of what they thought as objectionable language, also arose the possibility of reflecting about satire and its use in Japanese and American humor. Students' response to Comic 2 confirms how some of them objected to an apparently disrespectful treatment for the elder.

Comic 2<sup>13</sup> (Watterson 88)

In the comic Calvin and Hobbes are talking about Calvin's grandfather. Calvin mentions how his grandpa argues that comics were better in the past when "news papers printed them bigger." Then, Calvin mentions that his grandfather thinks people should complain by writing letter to the news papers and that is why Calvin explains that his mom is "looking into nursing homes" for the grandfather. Comics might not be an important issue to discuss for many people; however, comics could be extremely important for comic characters like Calvin and Hobbes. The comic presents two main components, a metafictional factor used to critique comic strips and satire on the way society treats the elder. The metafictional component will be discussed later since it is satire that needs to be immediately addressed.

The comic introduces the issue of old people worrying about things without importance, which in the end brings a social criticism of how many societies in the western world do not value their elder but simply have a trend to see them as annoying old people that families should get rid of whenever is possible. The feelings that the comic's contents generate in students can be seen in Chelsea's first impression about it. She said, "This cartoon was little difficult for me. He said about his grandpa but it sound like he spoke ill of him." Once more, some students find the comic's contents inappropriate because of the way the grandfather is treated. The most common

conclusion that students drew from the comic was that the grandfather is going to be sent to a nursing home just because he is old and worries about unimportant things.

The comic is presenting this issue with the intention to criticize a society that does not value its elder but prefers to marginalize them because having them around in the house might be judged inconvenient by younger people. The purpose of this criticism is to reflect upon that attitude and leave the audience thinking about the possibility of making a social change, which is what satire is used for. Nonetheless, students did not seem to have perceived a correcting intention in the satiric treatment of this topic.

The inability for students to think of satire as constructive criticism might come from unfamiliarity with this type of humor. One of the reasons for this may be the uncommon appearance of satire in Japanese humor (Wells, "Satire" 193). Satire in the western world aims at showing the faults, vices of individuals or institutions to expose them and then leave the audience with the intention of generating a change that could purge these individuals or institutions from their evils. Thus, it has a clear intention of correcting the mistakes that are portrayed by the humorous situation (Wells, "Satire" 194). However, it may be that Japanese culture has traditionally had a different idea of satire.

This idea of satire as an unfamiliar form of humor in Japanese culture can be better explained by exploring the Japanese definition of this concept. "The Japanese word for satire is *fūshi*, (諷刺). It is an old word that came into Japanese from Chinese, and the characters with which it is written mean (the first character) to hint, suggest, insinuate, satirize, or lampoon, and (the second character) to stab" (Wells, "Satire" 195). The first character in this definition of satire seems to fit somehow with the western notion of the

term although there is no implication about the reforming nature of satire in this character. The second character “is unambiguous” because “satire in both Japanese and Chinese, involves using the knife” (Wells, “Satire” 195). Using a knife might not precisely be associated with any kind of constructive criticism in western cultures; at least it would not be an identifiable symbol of correction in American culture.

In order to explore a little further how students’ apparent inability to understand or appreciate Comic 2 might have been influenced by their unfamiliarity with satire as a type of constructive criticism, it is important to take into account some of Marguerite A. Wells’ considerations presented in her study of satire in Japanese culture (Wells, “Satire”). According to Wells, *kyōgen* (狂言), which is Japanese comedy in drama, usually presents country gentleman, servants, priests, doctors and the blind as a target of humor (Wells, “Farce” 131). However, the purpose of this comedy is just to cause laughter by making fun of common stereotypes but it does not have an intention of correcting any of the faults it may expose. It is only used for amusement purposes. As a result, Wells states that “the main extant Japanese genre that is generally classified as satire is not so at all” (198). Therefore, it is possible that Japanese culture’s common idea of satire does not entirely match the definition given to students in handout # 4<sup>14</sup>.

Evidence of students’ unfamiliarity with satire appears in the last section of handout # 7 when they were asked if they were acquainted with satire and if they thought this form of humor was common in Japan. Some students like Emily state how they think satire occurs more in American humor than Japanese. She says, “I don’t think that kind of satire is common as same as America. But I can see that in the magazine, news paper and so on.” Tyler also mentions how satire might occur but does not seem to be so sure about

it when he says that “Some comedian use a sarcasm for other person or something in the society, I think.” Both answers, Emily’s and Tyler’s show a certain degree of unawareness of satire, which does not seem to fall too far from Wells’ idea of a different concept of satire in Japanese humor. Moreover, Ethan’s response shows how according to him satire might not be commonly enjoyed by the Japanese: “In Japan, any people don’t like. But the famous Japanese entertainer; Kimimaro<sup>15</sup> (name of person) is accepted by people. He always use satire about old people. Especially old people like him.” Ethan suggests how the use of satire might be restricted to specific groups of people that use it or enjoy it. In her answer Chelsea mentions a taboo topic that she argues is not meant to be satirized. She explains, “In my culture, it’s taboo to satire about class.” This example again indicates how satire about certain topics might be found objectionable by some Japanese people. By presenting students with satire in second language, they could learn the use and function of satire in American humor, which also allowed me to realize how Japanese humor could present a concept of satire different to the one commonly known in the western world, as Wells argues.

The explicit teaching of satire in American humor may have progressively helped students identify it and understand it better as demonstrated by their explanations of comics 2 and 3. Comic 2 as explained before, represented a great challenge for students to understand and find its punch line. However, Comic 3, which appears right below, seems to have been a lot easier for them to handle.

Comic 3<sup>16</sup> (Adams 27)

All students mentioned to have understood the comic, as discussed in class and demonstrated in their explanations in the handout. A good example of how they described the comic and its punch line is Tyler's explanation of the comic. He says, "A man with a pair of glasses told the person to bring a new chair. But there're many stocks for people like him. So a man was suggested to take some classes for promotion of his status. Anyway it's a kind of sarcasm" The results presented by students' response to Comics 2 and 3 suggest a better appreciation of satire in the latter, taking into account that Comic 2 appears in handout # 4 when the concept of satire had just been introduced and Comic 3 was analyzed during the final class session.

Another good example of how differences between Japanese and American humor were appreciated by students comes from the use of comics that presented culturally bound scripts common of American culture. Comic 4 is a good example of this since students needed a lot of assistance to understand it, even though most of them used their electronic dictionaries to look for the words that were new to them.

Comic 4<sup>17</sup> (Watterson 107)



The difficulties experienced by students to understand this comic suggest how their lack of familiarity with humorous scripts that are culturally bound or restricted, play a key role in appreciating humor. Therefore, this comic may be easy to understand for adult Americans that grew up in a society in which children are taught to believe in an old white-bearded man that brings presents, even though later on, as they grew up, they learned that the presents had always been bought by real people like their parents. However, this might have not been the case for students. As discussed below.

Calvin talks to Hobbes about his decision of believing in Santa Claus even though he still thinks it is an absurd idea, because a risk analysis has determined that he could avoid the possibility of not getting presents by giving up his beliefs. Hobbes points out that his determination is cynically moved by material interests more than the innocence of a child that simply accepts that Santa exists without a doubt. Calvin replies that the spirit of Christmas is precisely based on materialistic and to an extent selfish ideas. This comic portrays a more abstract idea that opposes the idealized CHRISTMAS script, related to the traditional beliefs associated with this festivity, to the MATERIALISTIC script, among other possible scripts, such as CYNICAL, ENTERPRISING, etc. Calvin's attitude could suggest a more contemporary and realistic point of view of the celebration.

Students needed an introductory explanation of how the comic relied on the scripts described above to create a punch line. Evidence of how participants were able to understand the comic after being explained how the previously discussed scripts opposed, can be observed in some of their explanations. Samantha said: "He do pretend to believe in Santa clause exists because he does want a lot of presents. Actually he doesn't believe in." Tyler argued that "He tries to believe the existence of Santa Claus, though he doesn't

believe in it at all. Because he doesn't want to have any risks for not getting a lot of presents if Santa Claus will know about his belief." As observed in other comics, some students appeared to show a moral concern that prevented them from finding the comic funny, as demonstrated by Andrew's response: "I don't think it is funny. Cuz he is just greedy." This reinforces the idea of students perceiving a difference between American and Japanese humor, which is the frequent use of contents they often found objectionable.

Before moving on onto the discussion of how the teaching humor contributes to language learning, there is still one last observation that a student made about Comic 2 that must be discussed. That is precisely the presence of metafiction in this comic, as said before. The comic introduces a metafictional factor because it refers to comics as fictional creations and the act of making comics all through the use of a comic. Metafiction in this case is seen as a self-reflexive narrative "that narrates about narrating" (Imhof 9). Then metafiction uses fiction within fiction to reflect upon the process of creating fiction, which allows a self criticism process in this case. Samantha's conclusion shows how she is aware of the metafictional factor of this comic when she says "The boy's grandpa doesn't like comic strip but they are comic strip characters." This could be considered to be a kind of criticism similar to that of satire presented before, which may make this feature appear as a difference between L1 and second language humor. However, establishing parameters of what may be realistic or unrealistic differences between American and Japanese humor is beyond the objectives and findings of this study as will be discussed in the next lines.

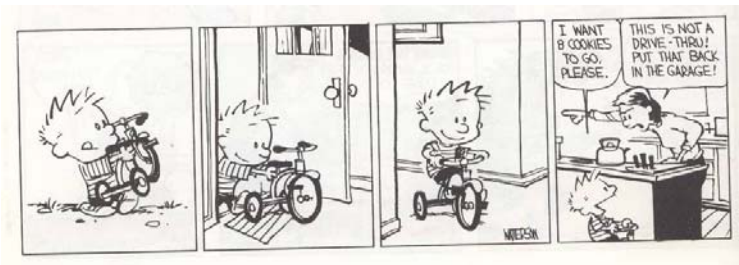
Many issues appear as possible realistic or unrealistic perceptions of what counts as differences between American and Japanese humor and this study does not attempt to explain either of those or assert their authenticity due to the limited amount of data collected because of the fixed characteristics of the study described in chapter 3. However, what these examples show is that students started to perceive that L1 and second language humor are not completely similar, and their perception of possible differences are of many sorts as demonstrated before. In some cases they mention a possible use of contents or language often considered objectionable by them. In others, the use of forms of humor less common in participants' L1 humor, like satire. Another characteristic of humor they experienced relies on how the knowledge of specific culturally bound scripts influences the understanding of humorous texts. Yet, the connection between the teaching of humor and the learning of the target culture remains to be discussed when evidence of this is presented in the next section.

All of these data just analyzed serves to provide a partial answer to my first research question. This study did not gather enough information to specifically say how the teaching of humor helps second language learners understand L2 humor but it suggests how an awareness of differences between first and second language humor was raised among participants by a systematic study of humor, which might be a first step towards a better understanding of L2 humor. The next section will deal with another beneficial characteristic of teaching humor, which has to do with how humor is culturally bound.

### Learning about L2 Culture through Humor

As previously discussed in this study, humor also presents students with the opportunity to learn about culture because appreciating and producing humor requires an advanced cultural competence (Bell, “How” 28). The following comic used to introduce the importance of cars and driving in America, was recalled by Sarah during her interview when asked if there was something that she had learned from the class.

Comic 5<sup>18</sup> (Watterson 34)



This comic emphasizes how Americans are used to drive-thru take-out windows for a source of fast food. Interview Extract 3 shows part of Sarah’s conversation with Interviewer 4 (I4), when she refers to this specific comic and concludes with how America is a car culture, which indicates how the contents presented by the handout helped her build the CAR and DRIVING scripts commonly found in American culture.

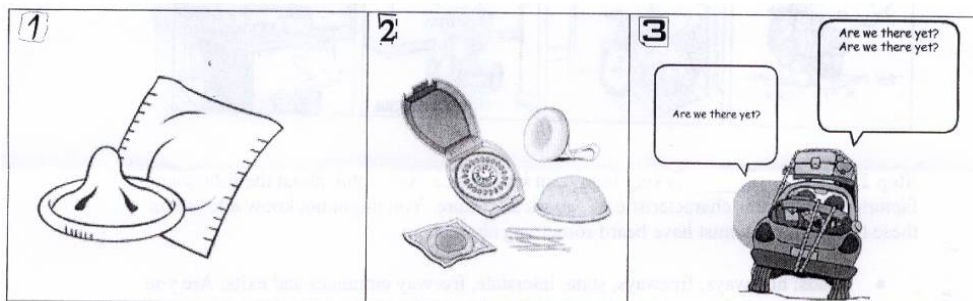
Interview Extract 3: “I think America is car culture”

- 1 I4: Did you learn something from the class? Did you learn anything, do you
- 2 think?
- 3 Sarah: from the class?
- 4 I4: Yeah, and (1) so what did you learn?
- 5 Sarah: Hmmm, American culture (5) and American personality.
- 6 I4: Oh. Ok... because you learned about American culture and American



In her interview Sarah explains how she has learned that America is a car culture. It is a fact that Americans rely on their cars for transportation in many different cities all across the country, with the exception of people that live in bigger cities where public transportation is not only reliable but also a better option, at least cost wise. Japan relies more on public transportation than individuals' cars as Sarah explains. The Japanese use trains a lot as their daily means of transportation and if they were to joke about commuting or transportation, maybe a TRAIN script would appear more often than the CAR script commonly used to create American humor.

The importance of cars in American culture was then related to the ROAD TRIP script, which led to the production of students' first attempt to produce L2 humor in class. In order to make a smooth transition between scripts, a clip from Shrek 2 (2004) was played. The clip showed the main characters of the movie, Shrek, Fiona and Donkey going on a road trip in a coach pulled by horses. It is important to mention that Donkey is a character well known for being annoying at times. Another important thing to consider is that the trip is long since they are going to Princess Fiona's Kingdom of Far Far Away. Donkey keeps asking the question "Are we there yet?" repeatedly, being so persistent that it absolutely exasperates Shrek. Right after watching this short clip students were presented with the following "Birth Control Methods<sup>19</sup>" comic.



The comic has three panels. The first panel shows a condom. Panel two shows another condom, pills and other contraceptives. The comic's topic is birth control methods. Then, the third panel has a family in a car that has luggage all over it and children asking "Are we there yet?" which apparently occurs all through the road trip. This last scene can easily be interpreted as another birth control method for Americans familiar with long road trips. It suggests that the idea of how constantly hearing the same annoying question during a road trip will certainly discourage people about having kids. The comic relates the DRIVING and CAR scripts to the script opposition of having CHILDREN vs. NOT HAVING CHILDREN.

In the next step of the handout, students were given the same comic previously described, but panel three was blank. They had to draw their own version of this panel showing a scene that could easily be understood by a Japanese person. The following are some of the drawings made by students. They appear organized in three different groups that I classified based on the script oppositions they present.

#### **Group 1- PARENT/NON PARENT**

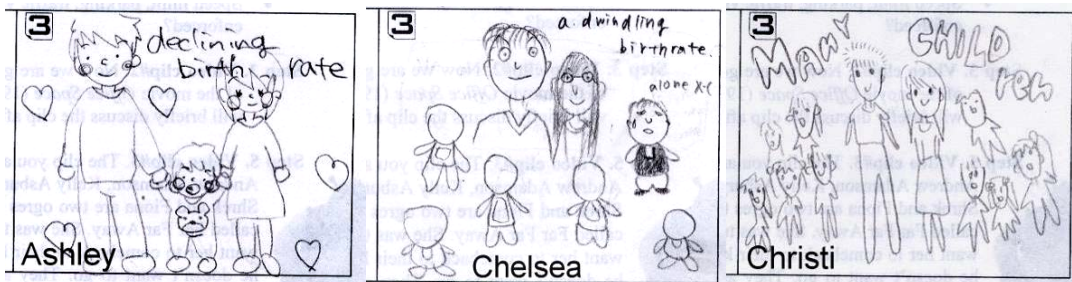
These drawings show scenes that suggest a common cultural knowledge of scripts between first and second language humor because they represent a situation similar to the one portrayed in the initial comic. They all present an opposition of the PARENT vs. NON PARENT scripts. Each comic portrays a situation that demands parents' attention, in contrast with the benefits that not having children could represent. Emily explained her drawing saying that the couple was going to have sex, but the baby interrupted them, which killed the moment as symbolized by the broken heart. The other two drawings present the issues that a parent might encounter when dealing with children, such as a

spoiled child in David's drawing and waking up in the middle of the night to see why a baby cries in Samantha's.



### Group 2-DECLINING BIRTHRATE/INCREASING NUMBER OF CHILDREN

Three students made drawings that show either many children or just one child, presenting an opposition between the DECLINING BIRTHRATE and INCREASING BIRTHRATE scripts. A declining birthrate is acknowledged to be one of the big issues Japan currently faces, since people are getting married at a later age and most Japanese couples are not inclined to have big families or any children at all because of their busy schedules, costs of living or both.



This is what Chelsea said when she was asked to explain her drawing during her interview: "In Japan decreasing number of child serious problem."

A declining birthrate in Japan is a problem so serious that government officials, along with business people have created a coalition to face it. Japan shows a growing number of elderly people that moved from 7.1 percent of the total population in 1970 to 14.1 percent in 1994 and then 20.8 percent in 2006 (Statistics Bureau). However, Japan's

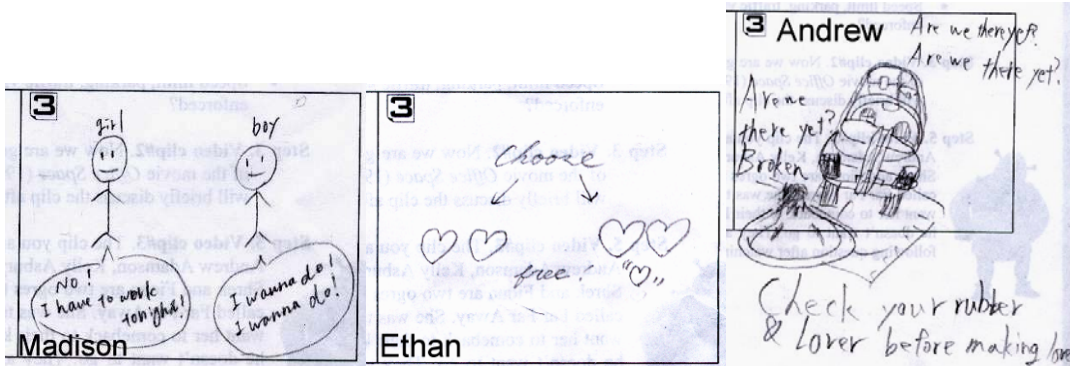


birthrate has shown a falling trend in the later years, getting to a low record of 1.25 percent of the population in 2005, which is below the 2.08 percent required to maintain the population (Japan Times). “The natural increase rate in 2006 was 0.1 (per 1,000 population), higher than -0.2 of the previous year, which was the first minus recorded since 1899” (Statistics Bureau). These numbers explain the concern that Japanese people might have about having children, in a country in which the number of elderly inhabitants are increasing as the birthrate decreases. Unemployment among people below 25 and other factors are making the Japanese think twice before considering they are economically stable enough to get married and have children (Japan Times).

The following is an extract from Ashley’s interview in which she explained her drawing: “Japan has a problem all people to have sex for fun not to make baby. In Japan people are getting married when they’re older. More old people than middle aged. Less babies,” said Ashley when she talked about her drawing. In fact, “in 2005, 47.7 percent of men and women in their early 30s were not married” (Japan Times). These drawings then, are a good Japanese version of the original comic, showing a two-fold concern for the Japanese. On one hand the government is encouraging couples to have children in order to increase the country’s birthrate. On the other hand, people are worried about having children because of Japan’s elevated cost of living and the busy lifestyles typical of middle class citizens. These samples contain cultural scripts that can easily be understood by the Japanese but must be learned by a non Japanese audience who is not necessarily aware of other countries’ main concerns.

### Group 3-SEX/NO SEX and Possible Consequences

Other students drew scenes related to interpersonal relationships, sex and sexually transmitted diseases. I classified these comics within the SEX vs. NO SEX script opposition, because they are related to practicing the sexual act or not and its possible consequences. These are three samples.



Andrew's comic as explained by him in the interview means "If you don't want to listen to «Are we there yet?» all the time, check your rubber & lover before making love."

Madison's comic shows a man eager to have sex while the girl seems more interested in working. Ethan's comic gives two options to choose from, free love or love that would result in procreation.

All of the previous examples show how these students were able to produce their own version of the last panel of the "Birth Control Methods" comic, which demonstrates that they were able to understand the comic's punch line by relating the culturally bound scripts associated with America being considered a car culture, then moving on to road trips, which finally led to the idea of the possible inconvenience of having children. The information on these culturally bound scripts enabled students to produce drawings that could represent the same idea introduced to them by the original comic. This whole

process was only possible because students were guided step by step on how these scripts could relate to each other through the explicit teaching of L2 humor.

Another cultural aspect that a student claimed to have perceived was the frequent use of body language in American humor as opposed to the lack of it in Japanese humor. Interview Extract 4 indicates how Sarah tells Interviewer 4 (I4) about this.

Interview Extract 4: “American humor is «*GESTURE!*»”

- 1 Sarah: American humor (.) I don't know about American humor but I think uh
- 2 American humor is so many gestures
- 3 I4: Oh. Ok
- 4 Sarah: Uh Japanese humor is
- 5 I4: Mhm
- 6 Sarah: they are talking talking talking
- 7 I4: Oh what [is it they that they say?
- 8 Sarah: [(xxx) is talking talking always they are talking talking talking=
- 9 I4: Oh!
- 10 Sarah: *Then* maybe funny
- 11 I4: Oh! Ok
- 12 Sarah: But American humor is *GESTURE!*
- 13 I4: GESTUR[ES!
- 14 Sarah: [*gestures IS FUNNY!*
- 15 I4: So in Amer- Japanese humor you don't look at gestures?
- 16 Sarah: Sometimes it's gesture but not so much funny
- 17 I4: It's mainly words

18 Sarah: Yeah talking talking talking talking

19 I4: Interesting! Oh I didn't know that

20 Sarah: It is called Manzai you know?

21 I4: No!

22 Sarah: Two or three people talking about funny story

23 I4: Ok

24 Sarah: Then maybe is maybe's /sees/ a comment a /shock/ like /shock/ they maybe

25 laughing

Sarah noticed a use of gestures that according to her is not commonly present in Japanese humor, which she insists has a bigger emphasis on words rather than body language. She tries to address the importance of words in Japanese humor by describing *manzai* (漫才) as a reference for verbal humor. *Manzai* is as Sarah says, a stand-up comedy that originated in Osaka and consists of a pair of comedians, one being the *tsukkomi* or straight man who interacts with the *boke*. The latter is the funny man that responds to the *tsukkomi*'s statements with incongruous replies that suggest a misunderstanding of the *tsukkomi*'s words (Inoue 29). *Manzai* is what Japanese know for stand-up comedy and as Sarah points out, it is based on words more than body language.

One more time the results presented in this section suggest how the teaching of humor offered other types of L2 learning opportunities for students. In this particular case, how students learned about second language cultural features such as the importance of cars in American culture and how American humor commonly uses body language. In addition, the data provided in this section showed how students' L1 cultural issues might emerge in their attempts to create second language humor.

The next section will discuss some examples of how second language learning occurred throughout the study.

### Language Learning

Language play had previously been mentioned as a possible source of new vocabulary (Bell, “Exploring”). Comic 2 confirms how students were presented with new vocabulary in the didactic materials created for the humor class.

Comic 6<sup>20</sup> (Watterson 32)



In this comic Calvin calls Hobbes, his toy tiger and asks him if he wants to see an antelope. Hobbes comes running expecting to see a horned, hoofed and herbivorous animal, but he finds Calvin looking at an ant hill instead. Then, Calvin explains that an ant is actually going down a ladder to meet her boyfriend so they both can elope. The punch line of this comic resides in the ambiguity of the word antelope, which could be the animal or could also refer to an ant eloping, as it is the case. This particular joke required students to know the three words, antelope, ant and elope, so they could easily call on the scripts associated with these words and find the punch line by analyzing the scripts available and how these overlapped, offering the possibility of an alternative interpretation.

Students first were asked to read the comic on their own and explain it in a short paragraph for homework. None of them could do it by themselves, as demonstrated by

the handouts and class discussion. The next step of this assignment required students to ask their roommates to help them understand the comic, which was followed by writing a few conclusive lines with their own ideas about the comic, after their roommate's explanation. Most participants got the punch line after being helped by their roommates.

Students' participation in a class discussion about the possible interpretations of the comic two days later demonstrated how most of them were able to understand the comic's punch line. Christi's conclusion is a successful explanation of the comic's punch line. She said, "Antelope is an animal. Tiger eats meat of animal, it wanted to eat that. But a child means «ant» and «elope». So tiger feel bored." Learning of new vocabulary was confirmed by students explanations of the comic in class, relying on the meaning of the three key words mentioned before and the scripts that each of them activated.

Another good example of the learning of new vocabulary was presented by Comic 1, which was discussed in the first section of this chapter. This comic required most of the students to inquire about the word bimbo, since it was new to them. Emily mentions how she learned this word in the following interview extract when she tells Interviewer 3 (I3) what she learned in the humor class.

Interview Extract 5: "Yeah bim:bimbo"

1 I3: Well did you learn anything?

2 Emily: Mmm mm HHH

3 I3: Was it about humor? Or maybe you just learned something uh (.) you know  
4 vocabulary or something

5 Emily: Yeah bim:bimbo I know

6 I3: Oh *bimbo!*

These previous examples show two of the specific cases in which students benefit from learning about second language humor by the introduction of new vocabulary, which occurred in participants' attempts to find the comic's punch lines among them and through interacting with their roommates as the information gathered by the handouts suggests.

Another opportunity that the teaching of humor offered to second language learners in this study was the appearance of unusual syntax produced by language play, which may serve to make students reflect upon the correct uses of grammatical structures they are used to. Tyler's explanation of Comic 7 provides an appropriate example of this. Comic 7<sup>21</sup> (Schulz 22)



All students could easily find this comic's punch line, although not all found it funny. Tyler explains "I think that this humor is in what Charlie Brown make a mistake of the progressive form. It is correct if Charlie said «I'm looking it»" Thus, Tyler explains the comic by presenting the CORRECT GRAMMAR vs. INCORRECT GRAMMAR script oppositions which is due to his perception of incorrect syntax in the comic's punch line and serves to reassure his grammar knowledge. Moreover, students were successful in understanding wordplay, as long as they were familiar with the words involved in it and the punch line created by what might be considered an improper use of syntax in the progressive tense, which results from the little girl's repeated use of the phrase "look it."

One last advantage that students mentioned about the possibilities that the class offered for second language learning or practice was the exposure to authentic materials, which presented cartoon characters speaking at a speed that can be described as normal for native speakers meaning that it was not adapted for teaching purposes. This required students to make a bigger effort while keeping up with the language they were listening, which might have also been due to their interest in the presented materials. Most students mentioned that one of the things that they had liked or enjoyed the most from the class was watching the Simpsons. However, I must clarify that English subtitles were used in all clips because it made it easier for students to understand most of the humorous texts presented. In the following interview extract, Andrew points out to Interviewer 3 (I3) how the class' didactic materials gave him the opportunity to exercise his listening skills.

Interview Extract 6: "it was too tough for me to listen"

1 A: Uh (.) in the movie the characters talk (.) to talk to each other as well (.) as fast as  
2 they Americans[do usually=

2 I3: [yeah

3 A: so it was too tough for me to listen so

4 I3: Yeah

5 A: But but /it/ I like it but I like it /be/cause /it/ I want to used (.) get used to listen to  
6 normal speed English so it was god for me.

The presentation of authentic materials offered students like Andrew the challenge of listening to video clips addressed to a native English speaker audience, so all characters spoke at a speed that might not be commonly found in textbooks and class materials aimed to provide language adapted to intermediate ESL students' proficiency.



The results presented in this chapter provide valuable information to address my second research question and confirm that the teaching of humor may facilitate the learning of second language and cultural issues related to the target culture by making culturally restricted scripts available to students. This was made possible through providing students with a guided and progressive immersion in culture by using pedagogic materials specifically designed for this purpose. Also second language learning occurred through the introduction of new vocabulary in the comics that introduced the wordplay characteristic of puns. Language play also presented students with the possibility of applying their grammatical knowledge as seen in Tyler's response to Comic 7, in which he points out to the punch line's syntax that he finds incorrect. Hence, the teaching of humor in second language is worthwhile because it can lead to a better understanding of L2 humor, as well as it fosters the learning of second language and target culture.

The following chapter will discuss the results related to the teaching of humor specific to this study, while it will also provide helpful information for the teaching of second language humor in general.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **SUGGESTIONS FOR TEACHING HUMOR**

The data presented in this chapter will address the main issues that arose from the use of the didactic materials created for this study and how the teaching of second language humor was approached throughout the Learning about Humor class.

In doing this, I must first refer to this study's limitations, since the materials were taught to a group of Japanese students and this restricts the cultural aspects presented by the data. However, most of the pedagogic materials were designed aiming to teach humor in English, which in the case of the present study is more precisely American humor. The idea was not to produce materials focused on a particular audience, but to generate pedagogic resources that could easily be presented to any kind of ESL students, coming from one specific culture or mixed cultural backgrounds. Nonetheless, a few handouts were designed having Japanese culture in mind due to the cultural specificity of the participants.

The following paragraphs will discuss how the subject of humor was approached by the class, the difficulties that the idea of teaching second language humor usually brings to students' and instructors', what this study found to have been helpful to achieve this teaching goal, as well as the specific areas that could be changed or improved now that these pedagogic materials have been piloted.

Humor has a tradition of being usually considered unteachable and frivolous (Tocalli-Beller 149) due to the difficulties learning about it represent. Therefore, second language humor has not traditionally being taught in the ESL curriculum per se, maybe it

has just been used to introduce a grammatical structure or a word, as discussed in chapters 1 and 2. For all of these reasons some students found it unusual and maybe unnecessary to have a class only about humor, as Emily mentioned in her interview when she explained that she did not understand why they were being taught this class, she simply thought the class was not as important as her regular language classes.

For all of these reasons, as a first recommendation I must insist on Bell's idea of approaching the teaching of second language humor by building on students' previous knowledge of humor and their experiences with L2 humor. Reflection upon humor in first and second language makes students think how much they know about humor, which is a good start to make them consider that they could possibly need to learn about it, particularly L2 humor. Hence, several participants of this study mentioned that L2 humor was a challenging subject for them when they were asked to define what humor was. Most participants also indicated that, so far none of the ESL courses they had taken, had exactly attempted to provide explanations or tools to help them understand and produce L2 humor.

Samantha explained this concern when she gave her opinion about the humor class in her interview. This is what she said:

“Yeah hmm sometimes it's difficult but hmm it's good experience because there are other classes just to reading and pronunciation class and writing so I can learn of humor hmm /in/ this class for me so (2) it was good!”

Interview Extract 6, presented below, presents how Samantha (Sam) elaborates on her reason to consider the humor class to have been a good experience, as she explains it to Interviewer 2 (I2).

Interview Extract 6: “good but huh sometimes /I/ was hard to understand what’s humor”

- 1 I2: How was your experience in the class?
- 2 Sam: In the class? Hmm (2) Uh
- 3 I2: Was it good? Was it bad?
- 4 Sam: Hmm, good but huh sometimes /I/ was hard to understand what’s humor
- 5 (.) huh
- 6 Sam: sometimes I:I couldn’t find humor easily and (1) find (.) IT funny /but/
- 7 Sam: (2) huh (incomprehensible sound) too find funny point is difficult but
- 8 also so (.) I (1) expression to why is funny /so/ is more difficult to, for me
- 9 so (3) good, good experience
- 10 I2: It was a good experience=?
- 11 Sam: = Yeah
- 12 I2: Ok good (1) so why was it a good experience?
- 13 Sam: /be/cause (3) in Japan I (5) I didn’t=I haven’t ever [rid] or watched /that/
- 14 American comic or movie before so I (.) this time I could (.) saw the
- 15 movie and /the/ comics (.) and (.) also understand its is funny (2) why it’s  
funny

Another student, Andrew, also mentioned that this had been the first time he had watched cartoons or read comic strips in a class, so he thought his friends in Japan would be amazed if he tells them about it, which suggests two common beliefs about the teaching of humor mentioned before, how it appears to be a subject uncommonly taught in a language class and how its teaching might seem unimportant.

The examples provided before prove that asking students to think about humor and try to describe what it was, offered a good start for the class because it gave students the feeling that they really did not know much about humor, which justified the teaching of this class and could also facilitate the formulation of questions about L2 humor among them.

Evidence of this is demonstrated in the attitude of students like Samantha and Andrew who saw the class as an opportunity to learn about what seemed to be a topic not widely explored by them in their L2. This introductory approach showed that second language students usually have questions about humor, and the best place to provide examples of L2 humor and give students analytical tools to help them understand or appreciate it should be their language classroom.

An important characteristic of this study, mentioned before, but that is worth highlighting again when presenting results is that its participants shared a common background knowledge of L1 humor because they all came from a similar cultural context, which allowed me to draw on Japanese humor research to create introductory materials that would address issues presented by scholarship as defining features of Japanese humor. One of these culturally oriented activities was the creation of a chart designed thinking about some of the main differences noted by Japanese humor researchers, which referred to social appropriateness to engage humor depending on the place and people where a humorous attempt might be tried (Takekuro 95). However, these distinctions are clearly not exclusive of Japanese Culture (Bell, forthcoming).

The chart had six different situations, so students had to give a number that indicated how likely they would joke in each situation. The numbers were 1 through 5, 5

meaning extremely possible, 4 very possible, 3 possible, 2 not very possible and 1 practically impossible. Figure 4 below, shows the results. The situations are ranked starting with the one identified as the most suitable for engaging in humorous interaction, going down to the one considered less appropriate by participants. The numbers in the right column represent the average rating for each situation.

Figure 4. Results on Humor Background Survey

Situation	Average
You are at your parents' house and your brother or sister does something funny.	4.6
Your friendly neighbor comes to ask you to watch her pet and you both talk for about fifteen minutes.	3.1
You are at work talking to a coworker while you both are doing your job.	2.6
You are with your boy/girlfriend watching a movie at your place and you realize that the cookies he/she was making are burning in the oven. This always happens whenever he/she tries to cook something but he/she is not mad about it.	2.5
You are walking towards the bus stop. Someone you don't know comes running to catch the bus but the bus leaves. This person smiles at you and makes a comment about his/her alarm clock not working.	2.3
You are at a very important work meeting and something happens that you could easily use to make up a little nice and friendly joke to break the ice.	2.2

The results shown on figure 4 illustrate two things, the first one is that most subjects agreed on the appropriateness of joking among people that are closely related to them, whereas joking in a formal situation seems not to be likely to happen.

Laughter is commonly associated with an unconscious sense of appropriateness of the occasion, which is based on how serious the situation might be. Therefore, laughter can be a common practice among friends in an informal situation and would seem inappropriate at a work meeting (Oda 18), different from American culture that tends to use jokes to break the ice in work-related situations. A good idea to enrich this activity

and help raise students' awareness of differences between L1 and L2 humor, would have been to make students ask their American roommates about engaging in humorous interaction in each of the situations presented in the chart, because this could have made students see an English native speaker's judgment of appropriateness in each case. This suggestion could be explored in a future study.

One more thing useful to interpret the results presented by figure 4 is that a strict set of sociocultural norms condition Japanese people's behavior when deciding on the appropriateness of telling a joke or not (Takekuro 95). This decision is not only made by judging the formality of the situation but also the perception of interpersonal relations among the people that someone interacts with. Of course this practice is common in American humor too, but it appears to be more restrictive in Japanese humor.

Takekuro mentions three different groups based on the degree of proximity that a subject has with the members conforming each of the groups. The first group called *uchi* (内) includes family members, close acquaintances and partners. The second group, *soto* (外), comprises colleagues, business acquaintances and neighbors. The last group *yoso* (余所) includes strangers and people with whom a person has almost no contact at all.

Thus, Japanese humor allows a bigger possibility to joke within *uchi* that progressively decreases in *soto* and makes it very inappropriate in *yoso* (Takekuro 95).

Another important consideration that stands in students' ratings of the situations presented by figure 4's results is that students seem not to be eager to laugh at a boyfriend or girlfriend whose cookies got burned. This could be linked to the idea that being laughed at has a tradition of being a serious concern in Japanese culture for many

years as described by Oda (16). Maybe these students would be more supportive than critical if presented with that scenario.

This introductory activity given to students in handout # 1 proved to be effective to make them think about their response to possible situations in which joking would be a common practice in L2. This initial survey was a good way to start raising awareness of possible differences and similarities of the appropriateness to engage in humorous interaction in L1 and second language.

In the process of raising awareness of differences and similarities between L1 and L2 humor one of the participants, Samantha, mentioned that Japanese humor relies more on “humor by language,” as seen in the previous chapter. To address this, it is important to state that wordplay is the most common source of humor in Japanese culture (Takekuro 91-93; Heiyō 75; Wells, “Satire” 193). This form of humor is known as *sha-re* (洒落) in Japanese. For an appropriate concept of this form of wordplay, Heiyō introduces Nakamura Akira’s definition of *sha-re* as “a rhetorical manipulation of language that makes the indicative function of utterance complicated, introducing words whose pronunciations are homonyms, or very similar, but whose meanings differ” (75).

Now that a clear definition of *sha-re* has been given, it is important to define what puns are for this study due to their structural similarity with *sha-re*. According to Partington, verbal puns are considered plays on sounds that resemble each other within a text and that originate from words or phrases contained within it (113). This wordplay could come from words whose sound resemble but offer different meanings when puns are homophonic, or identical words that have different meanings when the pun is homonymic. Another important characteristic of puns is that they are authored, which



means they are created by someone who alters the characteristics of an utterance in order to force a different reading of the generally implied understanding of the words used in the pun (Partington 114).

For all of the reasons given above, an important conclusion drawn from research on students' L1 humor led to my decision of introducing students' to the study of L2 humor by presenting them with puns, since scholarship on Japanese humor suggests that wordplay is the most common form of humor in this culture as discussed before.

Japanese *Sha-re* then coincides with the narrative strategy (NS) of puns, which were a recurrent element in this class due to the similarity that *sha-re* and puns present in both American and Japanese humor. The common appearance of puns in Japanese humor is evidenced in how students relied mostly on punning when creating their comics for the class' final project. The following comics are three examples of punning.

“Mouth and Mouse” created by Tyler and Ethan, is a good example of how students drew on their first language humor's recurrent patterns to engage in a simple but serious attempt at second language humor.

“Mouth and Mouse<sup>22</sup>” by Tyler and Ethan



For Tyler it is difficult to make a phonetic distinction between the words “mouth” and “mouse” when pronouncing them, so he created his comic intentionally drawing in the phonetic similarity of these words to create a pun. The possibility of saying one word instead of the other is high because they are minimal pairs, which means that they differ

in just one phoneme. In the case of these words it is their last phoneme, which is /z/ in mouse and /ð/ in mouth. This difficulty is demonstrated when he explains the comic in front of the class. The transcription of Tyler's conversation with the teacher (T) shows how he mistakenly says "mouse" when he means "mouth" just because he got confused while giving his explanation.

Tyler's Explanation of "Mouth and Mouse":

- 1 Tyler: He's looking for a piece of (2) looking meat, meat
- 2 T: For food?
- 3 Tyler: Yeah food. He wants to eat a mouse, so he's uhh looking for a big mouse and
- 4 uh so he ask, he ask hmm where (.) where it is and then hmm (7)
- 5 T: So what's with the frog? (5) Why is there a frog?
- 6 Tyler: Yeah the big mouth uh (Tyler points at his own mouth) mouth (.) mouth (.)
- 7 mouse uh (somebody laughs and he realizes that he just said the word mouse
- 8 instead of mouth, so he laughs too. Then, the whole class laughs)

The emphasis on wordplay and how much the subjects are able to appreciate this type of humor appears evident in the previous example when the other students' laugh at Tyler's confusion between the words mouse and mouth.

In the event that the comic had not been understood, Tyler's confusion while giving his explanation could transform the comic into a justified or motivated pun (Partington 116), since all participants could immediately relate the pun presented by the comic to the difficulties they might experience when pronouncing the two words "mouth" and "mouse." Thus, students could easily appreciate the comic's punch line.

The next comic also is another example of wordplay created by students.

“Untitled” by Sophia and Christi



Sophia and Christi’s untitled comic is another attempt at second language humor through punning. In the first panel, the young boy tells the dog, “RUN RUN!” while the dog feels uneasy because he thinks that he hates running. In the second panel, the boy tells the dog again, “RUN!!!RUN!!!” but the dog thinks he is not good at running. In the last panel the boy tells the dog to keep running by saying “RUN RUN!” one more time, which leads to the comic’s punch line where the dog says, “I’m good at saying WAN! WAN!”

Sophia and Christi explained that Japanese dogs make a “WAN WAN” sound when they bark, which for them resembled the “RUN RUN” sound. This comic, different to “Mouth and Mouse,” could had resulted in a non-motivated or hollow pun (Partington 116), for people not familiar with the Japanese sound associated with dogs, at least for me because I had to be taught that dogs in Japan make a “WAN WAN” sound. Therefore, I needed an explanation that could activate the Japanese dog sound script for me to understand the comic.

Another comic presenting a pun structure is the following.

“By myself” by William and Chelsea



In William and Chelsea’s “By myself,” a winged man (Bird-man) comes from Japan and has just arrived at WSU to study English. He meets Maki, who asks him, “Did you come here by plane?” Bird-man replies, “No! By myself,” which causes great surprise among the other characters because Maki’s question refers to the means of transportation that Bird-man might have used to get to WSU. However, Bird-man makes use of the same prepositional structure to answer that he had come all alone.

Maki uses a “by phrase” frequently found in passive voice when it serves to add important information, as in this case, the vehicle that transported Bird-man to WSU’s campus. In the last panel Bird-man replies using the preposition “by” with the reflexive pronoun “myself” (Azar 123, 229) to indicate that he came all alone and by his own means, which results in the comic’s punch line that presents a script opposition between two possible uses of elements that exhibit the same syntax but are semantically different, which refers to the explorative use that language play promotes as discussed in the previous chapter.

The data presented above shows that introducing students to pun structure and wordplay helped identify a common source of Japanese humor and led them to producing L2 humor within the same humorous text pattern.

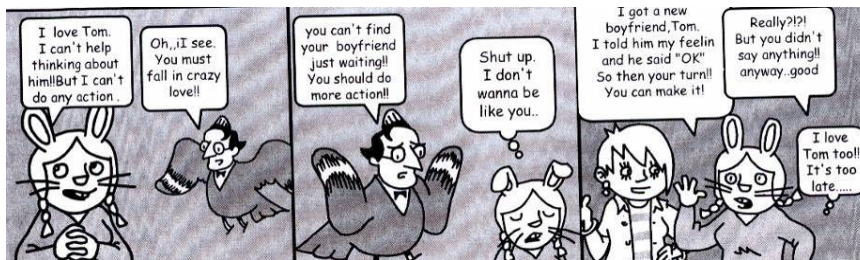
The success of the initial use of punning strongly suggests the great advantage that research in students’ L1 humor offers to instructors wishing to incorporate humor

instruction in their classes. Nonetheless, many classes tend to have students coming from different cultural backgrounds, so I would not say this is extremely necessary but it certainly makes a difference when deciding how to approach humor teaching.

Another thing to point out is that this study's teaching materials were not intentionally designed to favor the use of other types of humorous texts that somehow managed to surface due to their frequent use in Japanese humor. As an example of how this occurred, some other students created comics that presented a narrative strategy that favored a story-type form of narrative, having jab lines rather than punch lines.

The following comic illustrates how the story narrative emerged.

“Love is suddenly....?” By Samantha and Emily



This comic fits the structure of a Japanese *rakugo* story. *Rakugo* (落語) refers to a humorous story telling tradition that dates back to the end of the seventeenth century. *Rakugo* uses a single performer sitting on his knees, representing all characters in a story that might last twenty minutes approximately. These are brief stories and most of the *rakugo* repertoire comes from ancient stories that originated in the preaching and teaching of Buddhist priests that saw *rakugo* as an amusing way to provide their people with enduring sermons that had a serious moral teaching and were fun at the same time (Ōshima 99). Even though, *rakugo* is an oral presentation, Samantha's and Emily's comic

shows a structure that is less common in western humor but that is typical among *rakugo* stories.

*Rakugo* starts with an introductory section called *makura* (pillow in English). The *makura* introduces the story by providing a situation that gradually takes the audience into the *hanashi* which is the moral teaching of the story. The last part of the story is the *ochi*, which can mean both “to drop” or “to let down” and contains the jab line. The word *kusuguri*, which means tickle and could also be translated as “jab of laughter,” refers to the narrative’s funny lines that are found throughout the whole story (Ōshima 102-103).

The first panel of this comic, introduces the story by showing the girl with rabbit ears (Rabbit Girl) stating that she is in love and feels reluctant to take any action about declaring her love to Tom. Then, the winged man (Bird-man) restates the fact that she has fallen in “crazy” love. In the second panel Bird-man is telling Rabbit Girl not to wait and encourages her to make a move to get what she wants, in this case, Tom. This part could be interpreted as the *hanashi* or teaching of this comic. The *hanashi* can be a serious or sad event designed to make the punch line stronger, such as Bird-man’s words.

Nevertheless, the girl thinks she will not take any action because she does not want to be like Bird-man (notice a thought balloon is used instead of a talk balloon). The last panel shows another girl talking to Rabbit Girl about her new boyfriend, Tom. This new girl mentions that she told Tom about her feelings and how he was receptive to them, so they are together now. That last part could also be a sort of punch line since Rabbit Girl is shocked at the news. However, in the end Rabbit Girl gives the other girl a supportive statement about her new situation by saying “good,” even though she is sad about it. Last,

she realizes the mistake she made by not telling Tom about her feelings and knows it is already “too late” to take some action.

When Samantha and Emily explained their comic they were not sure about its punch line, because maybe it just did not have one. However, Samantha and Emily both agreed that the story had a teaching as the title suggests. *Rakugo* also tends to show stereotypes commonly associated with human beings. Among these characters Samantha and Emily present Rabbit girl who could fit the stupid or clumsy stereotype, Bird-man could represent an authority figure and the other girl could be a smart and reliable character stereotype usually portrayed by *rakugo*. The other important characteristic of this form of story telling that relates to the comic is the fact that *rakugo*’s characters tend to be non-human.

The following comic shares the same type of story narrative strategy as the one presented above.

“Stranger” by Madison and Sarah



The comic begins with a woman not giving credit to the winged man’s (Bird-man) ability to fly. The jab line may appear when the Bird-man confirms that indeed he can fly and says, “Look at me!!” which results in the girls’ amusement and later discomfort when one of them realizes that Bird-man might be a stranger and strangers are sometimes dangerous. As a result, one of the girls insists on calling the police. The comic

might not seem funny but it seems to accomplish *rakugo*'s purpose of having a teaching, which could be interpreted as how girls should beware of strangers. Samantha and Sarah agreed on the comic being a story rather than a regular joke.

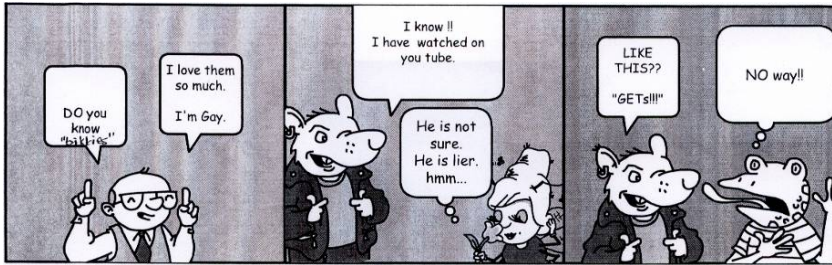
These humor samples created by students show that teaching materials aimed to teach L2 humor should not be restricted to a specific type of humorous texts but should also consider that students' L1 humor might elicit the use of structures that are not as common in L2 humor. The samples could also prompt class discussions of L1 and second language humor aimed to analyze the presence or lack of script oppositions and other key elements of humor described before. These results again reinforce the idea of the benefits that knowing about students' L1 humor imply. Another issue that might be crucial when designing effective teaching L2 humor materials deals with creating focused assignments such as the "Birth Control Methods" task, which could present students with a fixed pattern that appears to be recurrent in the target language or culture and make them engage L2 humor through its use.

One situation worth noticing from this study is the evident appearance of what Attardo refers to as a special humorous knowledge that needs to be known in order to understand or appreciate humor. He refers to a special set of scripts that he calls mythical scripts and belong to cultures specifically. A speaker needs to be familiar with these specific scripts in order to assess if a text is funny or not. This of course puts the teacher or researcher in the dual role of not only teaching but also learning about students' L1 humor.

The following comic had to be explained to me and the rest of the non-Japanese audience that was present during the last class, due to the lack of knowledge of scripts.



“Pretend to know” by Ashley and David



In the first panel of this comic, the old man asks: “Do you know «bikkies»? Then he insists that he loves bikkies so much and that he is gay. Students explained that “bikkies” is a popular Japanese comedian’s catch phrase that he constantly repeats while he moves his hands with both index fingers pointing upwards like the old man does. Then, in the second panel there is a mouse saying that he has watched something on Youtube<sup>23</sup> and the woman does not give any credit to his words by saying that he is a “liar.” Last, for no reason, the woman disappears in the third panel and there is a frog instead of her. The frog thinks “NO way!!” when the mouse says, “LIKE THIS?? «GETs!!!». This part had to be explained to me.

“Get’s” is the Japanese comedian Dandy Sakano’s (Dandy) famous catch phrase that he repeats while moving his hands the same way the mouse does. Neither of the non-Japanese people in the room seemed to understand or appreciate the humor in this comic, but all of the students were familiar with the two comedians, so some found it funny. Andrew even mocked Dandy Sakano, but I still could not understand the comic. People not familiar with these two Japanese comedians and their catch phrases would not be able to understand or appreciate the comic, even though according to students’ response it seemed not to be the funniest, but at least they could understand what was going on.

As seen in the previous example, most scripts are culturally bound, which proves that not only the students could experience lack of understanding of L2 humor, but also how unfamiliarity with the scripts involved in the joke impaired the non-Japanese audience in the room to understand the joke implied by the comic and possibly find it funny. Consequently, teachers should also be willing to play a learner's role when attempting to understand the students' L2 humorous attempts. Some of the culturally bound scripts were easy to handle for students such as the car script, but there were also others in which students needed a lot of help.

This study also provided information on how the systematic and guided introduction of culturally specific scripts helped students make sense of second language humor. The "Birth Control Methods" comic and Comic 4 activities presented in chapter 4 are a good example of this.

The way Comic 6 was introduced and taught proved to be an effective approach to teach humor that contains specific cultural scripts.

Comic 6<sup>24</sup> (Watterson 105)



The comic contains scripts that are familiar to people that know specific information about the celebration of Christmas in the U.S or Canada. The comic required students to activate several scripts, such as the SANTA CLAUS, the CIA and the SPOOK scripts for them to be able to appreciate the comic's punch line.

This comic shows Calvin listening to the traditional American Christmas carol, Here comes Santa Claus. The carol insists on how Santa can see and know basically everything a child does to see if the child has been bad or good in order to decide if he/she gets a present or not. Calvin decides to turn off the radio and points to the fact that Santa could be a CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) spy instead of a kind old man because he spies on everything children do.

Students were first given the words to this Christmas Carol as they listened to it, as well as they were explained what CIA and spook stood for, so they could relate all three scripts. Lola's explanation of the comic summarizes what most subjects said about it: "He regards Santa Clause as CIA or elf because Santa Clause watches his behavior all the time and knows everything about him. For him, Santa Clause is like a spy." David explanation goes a little further in explaining the script opposition implied by the comic's punch line. David says, "He don't know santa is good man or bad man." Familiarity with culturally specific scripts helped students understand the comic better and frame the punch line in terms of the good/bad script opposition. Other students like Chelsea, Sarah and Sophia came with a different possible interpretation of the comic's punch line. They mentioned the fact that Calvin, being so young knew what CIA stood for, which leads to the possible /impossible script opposition. This is what Sophia wrote: "He is smart. Why did he know «CIA»? Almost children won't think about it like him." Again, Sophia expresses how a little child would not probably know the meaning of CIA. Tyler's explanation presents the script opposition of possible vs. impossible but in terms of Calvin's atypically childish behavior when he says, "So it is funny about his dishonesty and not childish thought

(idea)” (Tyler). Therefore, all of these examples demonstrate how the progressive introduction of the unfamiliar scripts helped students appreciate the humor presented in this comic.

This study also relied on the participants’ native speaker roommates to help them understand the punch lines presented in the comics. However, not all of the native speakers proved to be reliable as the teaching materials show in some of the students’ explanations of comics. Among these, the best example of what I call “unreliable native speakers” comes from Comic 6, which was discussed in the language learning section of chapter 4. The punch line in this comic is based on the knowledge of the words ant, elope and antelope as explained before. Here are some of the subjects’ conclusive explanations that suggest their roommates were “unreliable native speakers”:

“My roommate says «antelope it can’t ride the car.» And the word of antelope divide «ant» and «lope». This is a mistake of listening. So it’s funny” (David).

“The boy made a mistake. He called an ant eater an antelope” (Samantha).

“The boy made a mistake. He intended to say “an anteater” (Sophia).

These students’ answers seem to show that their English native speaker roommate might not be familiar with the scripts associated with the three words needed to consider the opposition that the comic presents between the ANTELOPE and the ANT ELOPING scripts. All three answers are not successful in providing the generally accepted explanation of the comic’s punch line. This could be due to the roommates’ lack of knowledge of the meaning of one or more of the punch line’s key words. Instances such as these might be exploitable for teaching purposes by creating activities that could make students experience how the scripts available for humor among members within a same

given culture may vary. This type of activities could also promote the discussion of how individuals' responses to humor might demonstrate how their idiosyncrasy influences their sense of humor. The previous example highlights the importance of learning about L2 humor in the classroom where the teacher can provide culturally appropriate interpretations for humor (Tocalli-Beller 167).

Another important consideration for teaching humor within a classroom setting is the beneficial use of language that peer interaction offers in negotiating meaning due to how language students make a bigger effort to communicate among them because of their need to understand their fellow language learners and transmit a message that can easily be understood by others. On the other hand, native speakers have the tendency to offer a supportive scaffolding to understand non native speakers (Bell, "How" 194), which results in a less challenging language learning experience (Sato 141). Sato and Lyster state that learners "tend to employ more beneficial interactional moves when they interact with each other rather than with native speakers" due to how language learners feel native speakers can easily guess what they mean (Sato 141). The humor class and its didactic materials encouraged both learner-learner interaction, as well as learner-native speaker interaction but unfortunately there is not sufficient data to further explore the benefits of both and as previously explained in this chapter, other ideas such as making students specific questions to native speakers would probably provide information worth being analyzed.

The class was designed having in mind the use of materials that could easily be used in an American University classroom setting without making any of the subjects uncomfortable by the use of risqué content such as sexual references, scatological matters

or language commonly found objectionable even though this type of content is so frequently found in humor. However, an attempt to produce L2 humor with risqué contents also appeared in one of the comics created by students.

Andrew's and Lola's comic is a good example of this.

“Lovely nipple” by Andrew and Lola



The first panel shows a mature man describing how his breasts have recently gotten smaller and worrying about getting a new bra. Then, in panel two, a young man “suddenly” appears and tells the mature man that he (the young man) has a good bra and asks him to come along. The mature man seems surprised and says, “Really!?!? I want this one!!” possibly referring to a bra. Panel three shows the mature man and a young man that appears to be the same one from last panel but is dressed differently. Three weeks have already passed, as the sign in the panel indicates. The mature man mentions how his nipples are multiplying every day and asks the young man if he can see his other nipples, while the mature man keeps his thumbs in his vest’s pockets. In the last panel, the mature man talks to a young man that again appears to be the same young man from panels two and three but is wearing different clothes. This panel is marked as the comics’ end by a sign at the top of it. The young man says, “Gotta go away!!! Yeah---!!!” while the mature man seems upset and says, “My breast milk doesn’t stop!! F\*\*K U!!!.” This last line word appears incomplete, suggesting a sense of censorship that might be due to

how this seems to be what Americans commonly call the “F” word, which is considered objectionable in many different situations, particularly in a classroom setting.

This comic presented the issue of the appropriateness or inappropriateness of the content and language used to create second language humor. Andrew and Lola at first seemed a little shy when I first approached them in the computer room where they created the comic. They did not originally create this comic as their class’ final project because they were actually planning to submit a different one. Nevertheless, I insisted that they could submit a comic they could feel satisfied with so they finally decided to keep “Lovely nipples.” After they saw I did not object to the comic’s content or language, Andrew and Lola seemed to have felt reassured and their comic eventually turned out to be the most popular one when the class had a vote to decide which comic they all liked best.

This comic’s content could have been an opportunity to discuss how risqué topics in second language humor might not be appropriate in certain situations and explore the cultural aspects related with the sense of appropriateness and inappropriateness of engaging in this type of humor. However, this discussion did not take place in class even though I was willing to discuss this issue. Unfortunately, I was unable to do it due to the limited time we had and the activities that were already planned. The class and its didactic materials had been carefully planned avoiding any type of humorous text that could contain risqué topics, but somehow they managed to show up in class. Thus, instructors planning to include humor in their second language curriculum need to keep this in mind and consider how to deal with such a situation.

Engaging in the creation of L2 humor that contains risqué topics presents second language learners with the risk of being disapproved by others. This suggests that the second language classroom could definitely be a better place to discuss this issue, rather than trying it outside of the classroom with other L2 speakers who could certainly take offense. Moreover, students might be safer if they decide to experiment with this type of contents within a controlled classroom atmosphere that has a teacher whose knowledge of L2 and culture can easily tell them what the risks or possibilities of producing humor with risqué topics might adduce.

The didactic materials and the class created for this study were designed taking into consideration previous research on Japanese humor, which offered the possibility to find a convenient way to introduce second language humor through wordplay, which is acknowledged to be the most common form of humor to occur in Japanese culture. Therefore, punning proved to be a successful approach to start presenting American humor. Another important factor in teaching second language humor was the systematic recognition of key elements of humor such as script oppositions. However the materials seemed to restrict humor genres and narrative strategies, as seen in the cases in which story-like narratives surfaced, which proves that students' L1 humor forms can be commonly found in their attempts to produce L2 humor. Also it might not be possible for instructors to get acquainted with students' L1 humor in many cultures due to lack of scholarship in this area.

Two other important considerations mentioned in this chapter, address how the pedagogic materials favored students learning and creative exploration of second language humor. The first consideration is that a systematic introduction of culturally



specific scripts proved to be a successful way to help students become aware of these scripts and possibly appreciate second language humor. The second one relates to how the use of risqué topics to engage in producing L2 humor might appear possibly due to how there seems to be a cross-cultural trend to draw on this type of contents to create humor. This implies that an instructor planning to incorporate the teaching of second language must have this issue in mind and be ready to discuss it with the students, since students' language class might be a better place to address that situation because the instructor's knowledge of L2 humor and culture might help them be aware of the risks that this type of humor imply in the target culture.

## CONCLUSION

Discussing this study's limitations is definitely of paramount importance before considering the information it provides. The class was taught to a group of fourteen students, who were all Japanese and among 18 and 21 age range. In addition, students came from Osaka, which is known to be a city more open to humor than any other in Japan. Time limitations are also worth mentioning, since it only consisted of five fifty-minute sessions and two extra sessions of approximately twenty minutes in the computer lab.

All of these features limited the study to time and cultural constraints. Thus, findings might be very different in a mixed cultural group. Time for discussions was very limited so research considerably relied on homework assignments to gather its data. Nevertheless, the study provided valuable empirical data on how the explicit teaching of second language humor served the purpose of raising awareness of the differences between L1 and L2 humor, as seen in the examples presented above. Among these differences students mentioned that American humor seemed to compromise the use of objectionable language more frequently than Japanese humor, even though Andrew's and Lola's comic introduces risqué content that suggests how the use of objectionable language and content might emerge even if it is not part of a humor class plan. Some students also mentioned their dissatisfaction with humorous texts that showed disrespect from children to their parents or the elder. This can be associated with their unfamiliarity with satire as used in American humor.

Students' drawings to complete the last panel on the birth control methods comic showed scripts that could be easily understood for any speaker when referring to the inconveniences that having children represents for any parent, as well as other drawings contained culturally bound scripts that required the specific knowledge that Japan is currently facing a declining birthrate.

The teaching of these materials also enabled L2 learning by making students learn new vocabulary that compromised their understanding of the comics' punch lines, as well as see other possible uses of grammatical structures that would make the comics funny as in the case of Comic 7 when Charlie Brown (the boy) utters the expression "I'm lookiting" as a response to the girl's repetition of the expression "look it."

The use of risqué content to create the "Lovely nipples" comic presented students with the pragmatic matters that humor competence encompasses when judging the appropriateness of using language or content usually considered objectionable depending on the context in which the comic is going to be presented. Another important language learning feature of this study that must be considered is how students had to interact among them in class and with their native speaker roommates in order to explain the comics. However, this might need to be further explored as Tocalli-Beller and Swain did so in their study of the use of riddles and puns in the ESL Classroom.

Class materials addressed to teach second language humor should be based on samples of recurrent themes portrayed by L2 humor, which can be easily taught in class but offer a good opportunity to explore key elements characteristic of L2 humor, such as common narrative strategies, script oppositions among others. A humor class should foster humorous interaction without restricting students' explorative uses of language or

structures. Teachers must also be willing to take an active learning role to learn about students' L1 humor since this is often reflected in their attempts to produce L2 humor.

This study certainly suggests several ideas that researchers or language instructors interested in integrating the teaching of humor to their language classes might find useful, such as the progressive introduction of culturally specific scripts as in the case of Comic 6. Nonetheless, the findings provided by this study suggest further exploration of the use of different narrative strategies for teaching second language humor, as well as a deeper study of the recurrent forms of humor that commonly appear in the target language, in order to create class materials that address second language learners' needs better. In fact, there is still a lot of research that needs to be done with regards to the teaching of humor.

## NOTES

1. For a detailed explanation on each of these Logical Mechanisms refer to Humorous Texts by Attardo (Chapter 1).
2. WSU's Intensive American Language Center (IALC) provides this language and culture immersion intensive course for Kansai Gaidai students once a year.
3. The contents of this DVD can be seen in the video synopsis provided in the appendix section
4. All handouts used in this study are attached to the appendix.
5. The IALC had arranged room and board for the students, which included a careful selection of American roommates that would help and take care of each international student. These roommates sometimes helped subjects with their Humor Class assignments.
6. Washington State University requires all procedures and requirements of participation to be explained in a written consent form, as well as the time requirements and possible risks and benefits. All participants signed the consent forms. It was explained to all participants that the purpose of the study was to examine if the explicit teaching of L2 humor would help ESL students understand/appreciate humor or if it would facilitate the teaching/learning of L2. I obtained written permission to video and audio tape classes and interviews, as well as to use any written materials collected in the class. I also asked permission of all subjects before turning on the tape recorder or camcorder.

7. All names are pseudonyms chosen from the Popular Baby Names section of the Social Security Administration website (Social Security).
8. The Edo period refers to the years of 1603 to 1868, when the Tokugawa Dynasty reigned (Encarta).
9. For more explicit information on the activities that each handout had, as well as the content of the video clips refer to the corresponding handout and video clip synopsis in the appendix.
10. You can see this activity and the comic explained in the Results section.
11. See Interview Protocol and Interview Schedule.
12. Comic 1 appears in handout # 4.
13. Comic 2 appeared in handout # 4, which is when the concept of satire had been introduced.
14. See handout # 4 in the appendix.
15. Kimimaro must be a comedian named Ayanokoji Kimimaro. He was born in Osaka (Japan-Zone).
16. Comic 3 appears in handout # 7.
17. Comic 4 appeared in handout # 6.
18. Comic 5 appeared in handout # 3.
19. This comic was re-created using an idea from Elizabeth Siler, an ESL specialist from WSU's English Department.
20. Comic 6 appeared in handout #2.
21. Comic 2 appeared in handout # 2.

22. All of these comics created by students were done as the class' final project as explained in chapter 3.
23. [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)
24. Comic 6 appeared in handout # 3.

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Washington State University  
Intensive Language American Institute  
February 2008  
Learning about Humor  
HANDOUT#1

**Please use ink**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

**Time:** 12 minutes to complete the handout and 12 minutes for discussion = 24 minutes.

1. Discuss and answer the two following questions in pairs:

a. What do you know about humor?

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b. What different types of humor can you identify? (think about humor in English and Japanese)

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2. In your experience studying English as a Foreign Language, you must have come across many different humorous situations in English. From these previous encounters with humor in English, what is your opinion about it? How do you feel about it?

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3. Do you think humor in English is different to your own culture's? Explain why.

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4. Do you particularly find any difficulties in understanding humor in English? If so, can you name some?

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5. Read the situations presented in the following chart. For each mark an **X** on the numbers from **5** to **1** indicating how possible would it be for you to make a joke or humorous comment when interacting with these people in those imaginary situations.

**5** = extremely possible  
**4** = very possible  
**3** = possible

**2** = not very possible  
**1** = practically impossible

SITUATION	POSSIBILITY				
You are with your boy/girlfriend watching a movie at your place and you realize that the cookies he/she was making are burning in the oven. This always happens whenever he/she tries to cook something but he/she is not mad about it.	5	4	3	2	1
You are walking towards the bus stop. Someone you don't know comes running to catch the bus but the bus leaves. This person smiles at you and makes a comment about his/her alarm clock not working.	5	4	3	2	1
You are at work talking to a coworker while you both are doing your job.	5	4	3	2	1
Your friendly neighbor comes to ask you to watch her pet and you both talk for about fifteen minutes.	5	4	3	2	1
You are at a very important work meeting and something happens that you could easily use to make up a little nice and friendly joke to break the ice.	5	4	3	2	1
You are at your parents' house and your brother or sister does something funny.	5	4	3	2	1

Washington State University  
 Intensive Language American Institute  
 February 2008  
 Let's Learn About Humor  
 HANDOUT#2

**Please use ink**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

**Video clip# 1**

We are going to watch a little video clip from the Simpsons, a very popular cartoon show, not only in the U.S but in many different countries.



**Here is a little background info on the Simpsons (by Matt Groening):** Homer is the father, he works at a nuclear plant and he is not the best father or employee, he is also not precisely very smart. Marge is the mother; she is a very hardworking homemaker. Lisa is the older daughter. She is an excellent student and cares about the environment as well as other things that would make this world a better one. Bart is the son. He is a trouble maker and only thinks about having fun. Maggie is the baby.

The clip that you are going to watch also includes Mr. Burns, a greedy, selfish old man who owns the nuclear plant where homer works and Mr. Smithers, Burns' assistant.

VOCABULARY BOX
<p><b>core meltdown or nuclear meltdown:</b> is a <a href="#">slang</a> term for a severe <a href="#">nuclear reactor</a> accident. (Wikipedia)</p> <p><b>less gifted employees:</b> less talented, less intelligent.</p> <p><b>pun:</b> an amusing use of a word or phrase that has two meanings, or of words that have the same sound but different meanings [= <a href="#">play on words</a>]. (<a href="#">Longman Dictionary On-line</a>)</p>

**Step 1.** Watch this short clip once and pay close attention to what is going on, as well as the language used by the characters.

**Step 2.** Mention two or more situations that you find funny in this clip, if any, and explain why you think they are funny.

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**Step 3.** Write the missing word in the conversation between the nuclear inspector and Mr. Smithers. Then answer the questions.

**Inspector:** Is there a Homer Simpson present?

**Smithers:** No, I'm afraid he couldn't \_\_\_\_\_ here.

1. What is the joke in this line?

- 
- 
- 
2. This type of humor is called a **pun**. Puns are very common in any English speaking country. Are puns common in your culture? If so, do they work in a similar way?

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**Homework.** Read each of the two following comics, analyze it and try to see what would be funny about it. In your comments write your personal opinion about each of them (do it on your own). Then ask a native speaker to give you a hand and explain what he/she finds funny. In the conclusion space, write what the native speaker told you and say if you agree or not with his/her explanation.

**1. Calvin and the antelope.**



**Your comments:**

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**Conclusion:**

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**2. Lookiting.**



**Your comments:**

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**Conclusion:**

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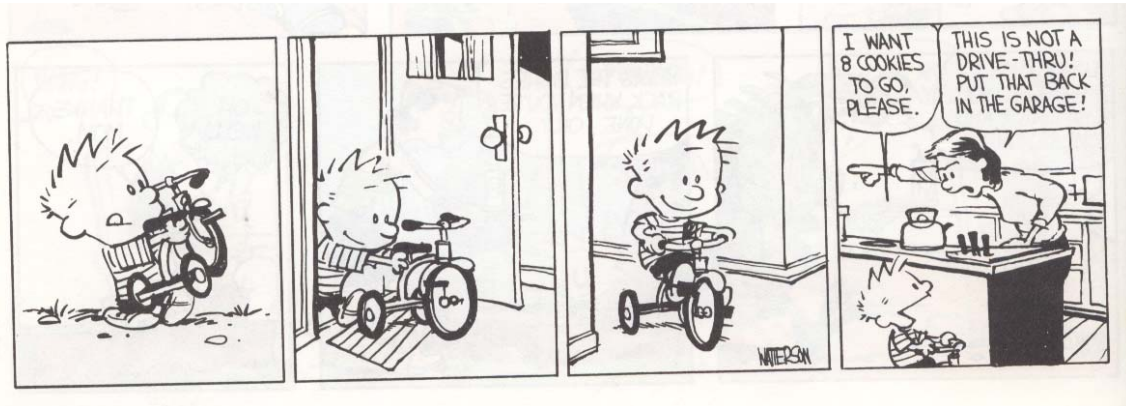
Washington State University  
 Intensive Language American Institute  
 February 2008  
 Let's Learn About Humor  
 HANDOUT#3

**Please use ink**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

**Step 1.** Get in pairs and discuss the two following questions in the comic below.

- Do you think it's funny? Why?
- What do you think shows a very common situation in American culture?



**Step 2.** \_\_\_\_\_ is very important in America. Now think about the following factors related to this characteristic of American culture. You might not know a lot about these topics but you must have heard something about them.

- Roads: highways, freeways, state, interstate, freeway entrances and exits. Are you familiar with the way American roads work?
- Driver's license. How important is it?
- What is traffic like in big cities such as Seattle and Los Angeles?
- Speed limit, parking, traffic violations, tickets, the police. How are driving rules enforced?

**Step 3. Video clip#2.** Now we are going to watch a video clip that shows the beginning of the movie *Office Space* (1999) by Mike Judge. Pay attention to the images. We will briefly discuss the clip after watching it.

**Step 5. Video clip#3.** The clip you are about to see is from the movie *Shrek 2* (2004) by Andrew Adamson, Kelly Asbury and Conrad Vernon. This again, shows a road trip. Shrek and Fiona are two ogres that got married. Fiona is the princess of a kingdom called Far Far Away. She was turned into an ogre by an evil spell. Now her parents want her to come back to their kingdom and Shrek thinks this is not a good idea so he doesn't want to go. They are traveling with their friend, donkey. Answer the following question after watching the clip.

1. Is there anything that you find funny in this clip? Describe it.





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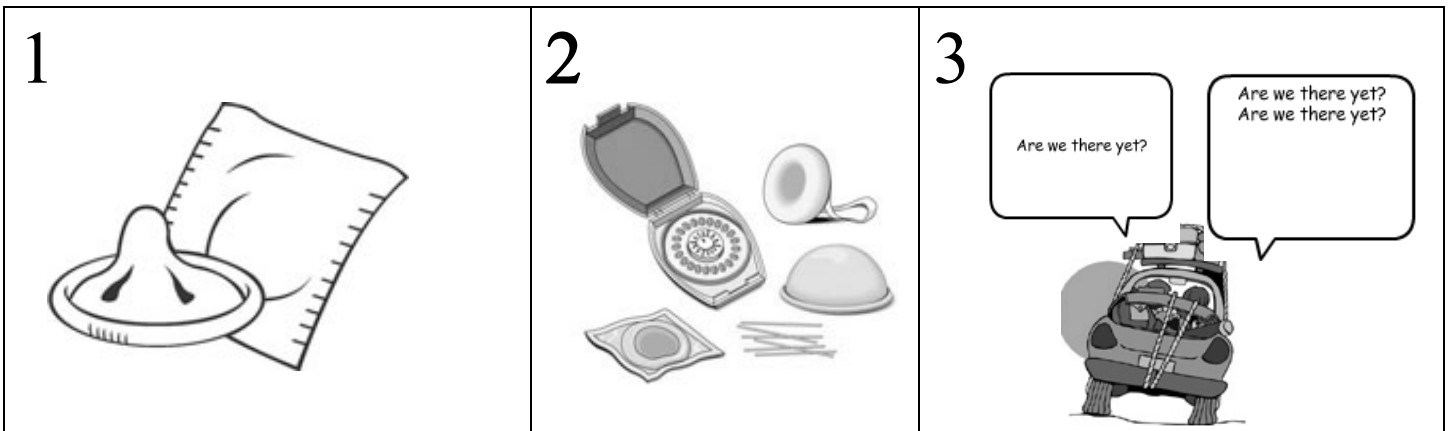
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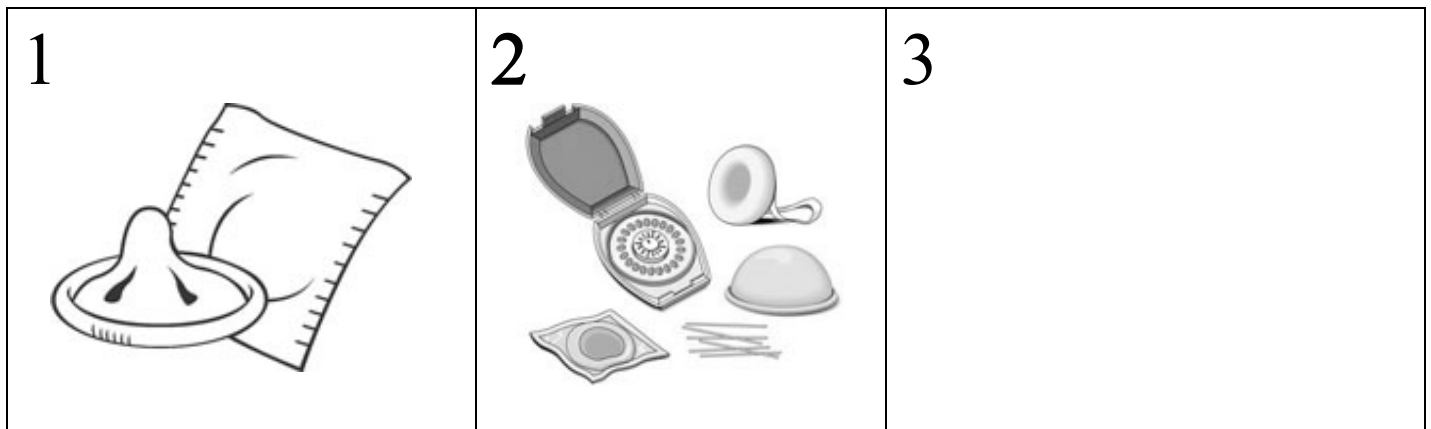
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Humor in any language is absolutely related to its speakers' culture. Driving is a very remarkable characteristic of life for many Americans, so it is a common theme you will see embedded in many jokes, funny movies and many other humorous situations.

**Step 6.** Take a look at the following comic. Do you find it funny or not? Why could Americans find it funny?



Now think about your own culture. What could be the corresponding image for box # 3 in Japan? Draw it!



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 February 2008  
 Learning about Humor  
 HANDOUT#4

**Please use ink**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

**Step 1.** In pairs, take a look at the comic below and discuss the following topics:

- What is going on?
- Why does the father say that to the mother?
- Do you find this comic funny?
- Is that a normal reaction from a parent?

**Time:** 5 minutes



**Step 2.** Make a list of some of qualities you think a good father should have:

**Time:** 7 minutes

- |          |           |
|----------|-----------|
| 1. _____ | 6. _____  |
| 2. _____ | 7. _____  |
| 3. _____ | 8. _____  |
| 4. _____ | 9. _____  |
| 5. _____ | 10. _____ |

**VOCABULARY BOX**

**dysfunctional:** not following the normal patterns of social behaviour, especially with the result that someone cannot behave in a normal way or have a satisfactory life: *dysfunctional family relationships*

**frown:** the expression on your face when you move your EYEBROWS together because you are angry, unhappy, or confused.

**nibble:** a small bite of something

**satire:** a way of criticizing something such as a group of people or a system, in which you deliberately make them seem funny so that people will see their faults.

**snug:** someone who is snug feels comfortable, happy, and warm:  
*The kids were warm and snug in their beds.*

**wuss:** *spoken-* someone who you think is weak or lacks courage.  
 (Longman Dictionary On-line)

**Step3. Video clip#4.** We are going to watch a clip from *The Simpsons movie* (By David Silverman). In this clip we are going to see how many of the fatherly qualities that you just mentioned Homer has. Pay close attention to family relationships and, specially to Homer and Bart as father and son.

**Time:** clip = 6 minutes + answers and discussion 5 minutes. Total time = 11 minutes.

**Step 4.** Answer the following questions about the first part of the clip.

1. Is there anything that you find funny in this part of the clip?

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2. What do you think of Homer as a father?

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Humor in English uses a lot of satire. It is used about many situations related to everyday-life. A recurrent theme satirized is related to family relationships.

**Time:** clip = 5 minutes + answers and discussion 5 minutes. Total time = 10 minutes

**Step 5.** Watch the rest of the clip and describe the relationship between homer and Bart. In the end, do you think this is a healthy relationship or would you say it's dysfunctional? Time: 5 minutes.

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**Homework.** Read each of the two following comics, analyze it and try to see what would be funny about them. In your comments write your personal opinion about each of them (do it on your own). Then ask a native speaker to give you a hand and explain what he/she finds funny. In the conclusion space write what the native speaker told you and say if you agree or not with his/her explanation.

**1. Who's the bimbo?**



**Your comments:**

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**Conclusion:**

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**2. Grandpa**



**Your comments:**

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**Conclusion:**

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 Learning about Humor  
 HANDOUT#5

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

**Time:** 10-15 minutes.

## Class Project

**Step 1.** Choose a classmate you would like to work with for the class project.

You will create your own comic strip showing a funny situation similar to the different humor examples that we have covered in class.

Today we will explore an online tool that will help you with this. Your comic strip will be presented to the whole class on February 21<sup>st</sup> (our last class). I will help you with your comic today and next class if you need any assistance.

**Step 2.** Go to [www.makebeliefscomix.com](http://www.makebeliefscomix.com) and explore all your options.

This website, created by that Bill Zimmerman, will allow you make your own comic strips with just a few clicks of a mouse and the characters will say the words you want.

This is the screen you will see:

**Explore characters' emotions and other options**

**number of panels**

**characters you can choose**

MakeBeliefsComix.com © 2007 By Bill Zimmerman, Guarionex Press Ltd.

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 Learning about Humor  
 HANDOUT#6

**Please use ink**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

**Step1.** In pairs, take a look at the following cartoon and discuss the following questions.

- Do you find something funny in this cartoon? What is it?
- Is there any snow where you live during winter?
- Are you familiar with heavy snow storms?
- What do you think about the snow here in Pullman?

**Time:** 5 minutes



**Step. 2. Video clip#5.** Now we are going to watch some clips from the *Simpsons Movie*. They show the Simpsons in Alaska. Pay attention to how snow is used to produce a humorous outcome in every case. **Time:** clip = 2:21 minutes + 3 minutes for discussion. Total time = 5:21 minutes.

Is there anything funny in these clips? If so, what is it?

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**Step 3.** Talking about snow, let's see a couple of comic strips about Christmas. Make your best effort to explain them.

**Time:** 10-15 minutes.

**1. Santa Claus is coming to Town**



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**2. The spirit of Christmas.**



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Weather is another everyday life factor that appears as a recurrent theme in English speaking humor.

The rest of the class we'll be working on the class project.

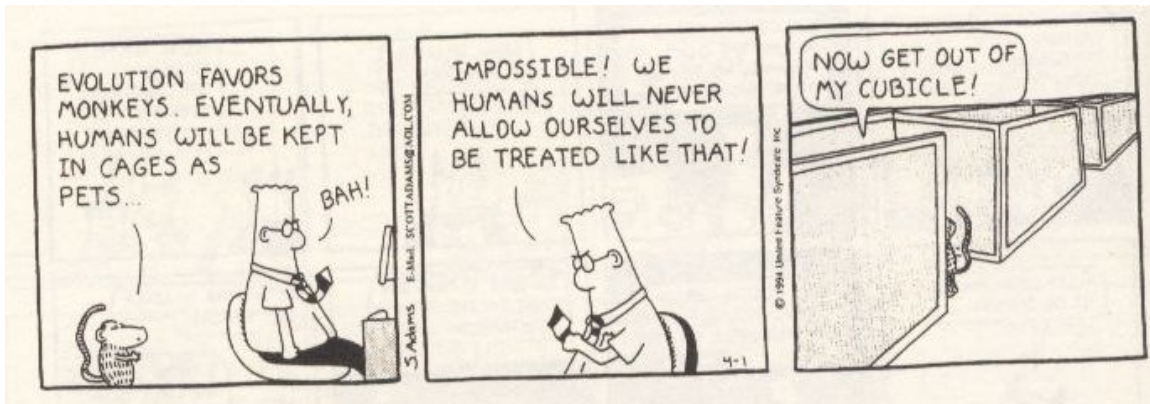
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 Learning about Humor  
 HANDOUT#7

**Please use ink**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

**Step 1.** The following comic strip was taken from *The Dilbert Principle* (1996) by Scott Adams. In pairs, discuss what the comic implies and guess what the class is going to be about.

**Time:** 5 minutes.



**Step 2. Video clip#6.** We are going to watch a very short clip from a British show called *Creature Comforts*. What they do for this show is they ask people walking on the street their opinion on common topics related to every day life and other things; then, they recreate the interview situation by giving life to plasticine animals that talk using real people's voices. Then answer the following questions:



**Time:** clip = 1 minute + 3 minutes to answer the questions and talk about them.

1. What is your opinion on the topic discussed by these animals?

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2. Do you agree with the dolphin's or the dog's point of view?

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**Step 3. Video clip#7.** The next clip is from the movie *Office Space*. Watch it and answer the following questions.

**Time:** clip = 8 minutes + 2 minutes for discussion. Total time = 10 minutes.

1. Do you find anything funny in this clip?



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- 
2. What do you think might happen next?

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**Step 4.** Watch the rest of the clip and find out what happens.

**Time:** clip 0:40 minutes + 5 minutes for discussion. Total time = 5:45 minutes.

**Step 5.** Now answer the following questions.

**Time:** clip 10 minutes to answer and 5 to discuss.

1. Can you explain the following comic strip?



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2. As we saw before satire is commonly used to criticize many different things such as the family, work, the country as well as many other things. Is this type of satire, full of sarcasm common in your culture's humor?

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## **Interview Protocol for Humor Class**

### **Instructions for the interviewer:**

First of all I want to thank you for volunteering to help me out with these interviews.

Please take the following things into account:

- You have been given a boom box and three 60 minute audio tapes for recording all interviews.
- Two tapes are labeled with your name and numbers one or two.
- These might be enough but you also have an extra tape just in case.
- Each tape is ready to record on side A.
- Make sure the input selector is set to tape before starting.
- Make sure the microphone is in a place where it can easily capture the interviewee's and your own voice.
- Press pause, then record and remember that tapes don't actually start recording after 12 seconds.
- Pause the tape every time you finish an interview and change the tape to side B when you need to.

**The following are open ended questions that might lead to other things so do your best to elicit some kind of response (I know some of the students tend to be very quiet).**

**Please begin the recording by saying interview 1, 2 or the number that corresponds, just to make my transcription job easy.**

1. What's your name? (This is for me to get the student's name for transcription purposes)
2. How was your experience in the class? (What did you think of the class?)
3. Did you learn something from this class?
4. How would you describe this class to a friend?
5. What is the thing that you remember the most from the class? (wait for a response – don't ask both at once) And why?
6. How do you feel about American Humor now?
7. Can you explain your drawing in the last panel of the comic on birth control methods? (You will be given each of your subject's handout # 3. I will talk to you about this part. Just make sure you show each student their own drawing)

**Learning about Humor Interviews**  
**February 26<sup>th</sup>, 2008**

**Interviewer 1**

1:10	David
1:30	Ashley
1:50	Sophia
2:10	Madison

**Interviewer 2**

1:10	William
1:30	Ethan
1:50	Samantha
2:10	Lola

**Interviewer 3**

1:30	Andre
1:50	Emily
2:10	Christi

**Interviewer 4**

1:30	Tyler
1:50	Chelsea
2:10	Sarah

## Transcription Conventions

.	sentence final falling intonation
,	clause-final intonation (“more to come”)
!	animated tone
?	rising intonation (not necessarily a question)
-	glottal stop: sound abruptly cut off; self-interruption
<i>italics</i>	emphatic stress
CAPS	much louder
:	after a vowel indicates elongated vowel sound
::	more elongation
/words/	in slashes indicate uncertain transcription
wo[rds [words	overlapping speech
=	latching
hhh	aspiration
HHH	aspiration/laughter while speaking
(quietly)	description of voice quality or non-verbal action
.	intervening turns at talk have been omitted
(.)	pause of ½ second or less
(7)	pause of this many seconds
“words”	speaker is quoting another person or adopting his/her voice
[fəneɪk]	phonetic transcription
((great))	smiling voice quality

(xxx)

Inaudible sound/unable to transcribe

## Video Synopsis for All Clips

### Video clip#1

The first clip is taken from *The Simpsons*. The nuclear plant is having a surprise inspection on worker competence by the nuclear security commission. Homer is one of the worst employees the plant has; therefore, he is secluded in a basement to avoid his competence being checked by this commission. In the end he appears before the inspectors by accident and he is finally tested. He makes everything go wrong and makes the impossible happen, a nuclear meltdown in a simulator that had no radioactive material.

### Video clip#2

This is a very short video clip taken from the movie *Office Space*. It just shows the main character driving during rush hour and how frustrated he feels to see how slow traffic moves.

### Video clip#3

This clip is taken from *Shrek 2*. Fiona and Shrek are traveling to Fiona's kingdom of Far Far Away. They travel with their friend donkey who keeps asking "Are we there yet?" the whole time.

### Video clip#4

This clips are taken from *The Simpsons Movie*. They show what a terrible father Homer is in the way he treats his son Bart. He dares him to do dangerous and very inappropriate things that get Bart in trouble with the police. Homer doesn't take responsibility of any of these things, so Bart begins to find his neighbor Ned Flanders is a more understanding and nicer father. That is why Bart wants to be part of the Flanders family but in the end Homer wins his son back by letting him do whatever he wants to do.

### Video clip#5

These are several clips taken from *The Simpsons Movie* too. They all show the Simpsons in funny situations related to snow in Alaska. In the first one there is an avalanche and Homer and Marge get isolated from the kids by a big wall of snow. Then the second one shows how Homer gets home pulled by a truck while he slides in the ice and snow using his shoes. The last one shows Homer making a long trip using a dog sled. He whips the dogs all the time so badly that the dogs attack him as soon as he gets them off their leash.

### Video clip#6

This clip shows several plasticine animated animals that talk about work and express their various opinions on what is satisfying for them and what not.

### Video clip#7

These clips are all from the film *Office Space*. The main character is very dissatisfied with his office job. He has a terrible day in which everybody points out a silly mistake he made while filing some reports. The last clip shows the end of the movie, when he smiles as he sees the whole company burn in a huge fire.

\*All of these video clips were carefully edited and none of them contain explicit words.