# The role of humour in the development and maintenance of class cohesion

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#### **ABSTRACT**

This article focuses on humour and the role that it plays in the development and maintenance of class cohesion. The article presents selected findings from a two-phase qualitative study that (1) examined the belief systems of 28 experienced English language teachers, and (2) documented the social evolution of eight classes of adult language learners from a range of cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The theoretical framework of class cohesion that was developed in the first phase of the study was used to guide the collection, analysis and interpretation of the data gathered in the second phase. The study found that teachers placed a high value on humour and used humour in a range of ways to encourage the evolution of cohesive classroom atmospheres. The teachers valued class cohesion, believing that it enhanced both teaching and learning, and used whole-class laughter as an informal way of assessing cohesion levels in their classes. In their view, classes that laughed readily ranked highly in terms of cohesion, while classes in which students were reluctant to laugh rated poorly in terms of cohesion.

## Introduction

Practising teachers sense that humour operates as a powerful force within their classes. Some go as far as to say that they would find it impossible to teach without humour. When invited to talk about humour in their classrooms, teachers emphasise the social role of humour, explaining that humour draws classes together, makes students feel relaxed, encourages participation and so on. In the words of one teacher:

Humour is vital. It makes the connection between the teacher and the students at a different level – not intellectual, but in terms of human relationships. It adds an extra dimension, it breaks up a lesson, it relaxes them and makes them more open to learning. And it relaxes me too.

Teachers have difficulty, however, in recalling specific events or behaviours that have caused their classes to smile, chuckle or unite in collective outbursts of spontaneous laughter. Occurrences such as these are often so fleeting that they remain at the threshold of teacher consciousness, accepted as part of the fabric of classroom life but seldom actively focused upon.

Researchers have rarely examined the role of humour in the classroom. To date they have tended to focus on a limited range of interaction patterns, selecting those whose nature or frequency can most easily be related to specific learning outcomes. A notable exception is a study by Selleck (1991) which described teacher- and student-initiated humour in the ESL classroom. Selleck observed and tape-recorded nine ESL classes and noted whenever a 'humor act' (categorised by laughter or smiling) occurred. The study revealed interesting findings in terms of (1) the kinds of humour that were most likely to provoke laughter in the ESL classroom, and (2) the ratio of teacher-initiated to student-initiated humour (students being responsible for one third of all classroom humour). However, the study did not explore the relationship between the type, or frequency, of laughtergenerating behaviour and the overall atmosphere that developed within each class.

Korobkin (1988) draws attention to the prominent role played by humour in contemporary classrooms. She points out that humour in the classroom is a twentieth-century phenomenon, since earlier it was considered unscholarly to use humour as a teaching strategy, or even to show a sense of humour as a personality trait. She contrasts the situation prior to the twentieth century with the situation today, where laughter in the classroom is commonplace. According to Korobkin, although research exists in which humour has been empirically and descriptively explored, the association between humour and learning 'appears more linked with anecdote, myth and naïve optimism than with experimental findings' (Korobkin 1988: 154).

Current publications on humour in the classroom corroborate Korobkin's statement. A number of articles in teaching journals and proceedings from teacher conferences offer hints on how to use humour in the classroom (Guindal 1985; Berwald 1992; Weiss 1993), while a recent book by Woolard (1996) suggests that humour can be brought into language classrooms through jokes, cartoons and other devices. Such publications are not based on empirical research and display the following range of embedded assumptions:

- 1 A sense of humour is a desirable quality in teachers and forms part of their personal charisma.
- 2 Humour is an effective ice-breaker.
- 3 Humour relaxes students and makes them more susceptible to learning.
- 4 Students who feel relaxed are more likely to participate in interactive activities in which they may make errors in front of their peers.
- 5 Humour engages the affective domain and facilitates deep-level learning.
- 6 Humour draws people together because it is a universal that transcends cultural boundaries.

In sum, the prevailing folk wisdom amongst practising teachers is that humour is a valuable tool that enhances classroom learning in a variety of ways. However, how precisely humour operates within learning environments such as language classrooms remains largely unexplored. One of the objectives of the present study was to attempt to answer this question by examining the relationship between laughter-generating behaviour and the evolution of feelings of affiliation and solidarity within groups of language learners participating in short, intensive English language courses.

# Phase one

The objective of the first phase of the study was to develop a theory that would explain why language teachers have such strong emotions about their classes, and feel excited and exhilarated when they emerge from certain classes, and physically and emotionally drained when they emerge from others. In order to answer this research question, I conducted extended, open-ended interviews with 28 experienced English language teachers, the majority of whom taught on one of three different intensive English language programs. Using the constant comparative method of data collection and analysis, I generated the following grounded theory:1 teachers define the quality of their classes in terms of the degree to which they function as cohesive groups.<sup>2</sup>

During the course of their interviews, many teachers made passing reference to humour in their classrooms. One teacher lamented the fact that a particular class had failed to react to her humorous initiatives by saying, 'They weren't responding at all. It was like walking into a black hole. It was just dead', while another teacher complained that a previous class he had taught had been 'bland', with 'no spice, no flavour, no variation'. This same teacher then commented on a class he had recently finished teaching, which he considered the best class he had ever had:

There was so much laughter, spontaneous laughter, and not reliant on the teacher to initiate or instigate it.

Statements such as these indicate that teachers believe that responsiveness to humorous initiatives taken by themselves or others is an important tool for assessing not only levels of class cohesion, but also the very teachability of language classes.

### Phase two

The objective of the second phase of the study was to establish precisely how classes of language learners did or did not develop into cohesive groups by addressing some important questions. As teachers are able to say with such certainty

that some classes develop a spirit of social cohesion while others do not, then what kinds of teacher and/or student behaviours are likely to enhance the process? Conversely, what kinds of behaviours are likely to impede the development of social cohesion in a class? I hypothesised that a general willingness on the part of teachers and/or individual students to encourage their classes to laugh might be one of the factors that leads certain classes to become more cohesive than others. With this hypothesis in mind, I decided to record as many laughter-generating occurrences as I could during my lesson observations.

For the second phase of the study I selected eight distinct groups of adult language learners who were starting a ten-week intensive English language course. I observed each class on a weekly basis, from the first to the final week of each course, spending an average of three hours a week in each classroom. I observed a total of 80 lessons and also interviewed each teacher on a weekly basis about behaviours that I had observed and the events of the previous week.

The classes were located in five different institutions, some privately run and some publicly funded. Four of the classes were ELICOS<sup>3</sup> classes of fee-paying students who would return to their home countries after studying in Australia, while the other four contained migrant students who had arrived in the country within the past two years. Each group of students was taught by a different teacher who saw them for an average of 15 hours a week. The proficiency levels of the classes ranged from beginners to advanced. The students in the lowest class knew only isolated English words before starting their course, while the students in the highest class had sufficient command of the language to view current affairs programs and discuss issues arising from them. Limited levels of English did not, however, prove to be a barrier to humorous interaction in any of the classes.

The classes contained students from a range of ethnic, cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The majority of the students in the migrant classes were refugees from the former Yugoslavia, while the majority of the students in the fee-paying classes were from Japan, Korea and Switzerland. A total of 25 nationalities were represented in the study as a whole. In some classes one particular ethnic group predominated (90 per cent of the beginners class, for example, were from the former Yugoslavia), in others there was a mix of European and Asian students, while one class contained 14 different nationalities. The classes ranged in size from ten to 20 students with the average size being 17.

The teachers who participated in the study (six female and two male) were all native speakers of English, had considerable language teaching experience, and regularly incorporated communicative activities and small-group work into their teaching programs. Apart from these features they had little in common, varying widely in terms of their ages, teaching backgrounds, countries of origin and experience of living and/or working overseas. The personalities of the teachers

also differed: some of them were highly extroverted while others behaved in a more low-key manner. All eight teachers, however, were relaxed, open and friendly towards their students, using an overall demeanour which suggested that they wished to be considered as helpful and approachable facilitators rather than as traditional authority figures.

Each teacher had a range of preferred strategies for encouraging the development of a spirit of humorous rapport with their classes. They differed, however, in the lengths to which they were prepared to go to encourage their students to laugh. One teacher was a natural comedian who made comic remarks from the very start of his class, while others seemed happier to allow a spirit of camaraderie to develop in a more organic way. The classroom behaviour of all eight teachers revealed a willingness to laugh along with their students when an appropriate opportunity presented itself. Such behaviour suggests that the teachers intuited the need to be accepted as 'insiders' within their class groups (for a discussion of this issue see Senior 1999: 159–68).

# The findings

#### USING HUMOUR TO SET THE OVERALL TONE OF THE CLASS

Early on in their classes, the teachers used a range of humorous techniques to create friendly, accepting classroom atmospheres which paved the way for the development of class cohesion. These included smiling readily, making expansive gestures or using exaggerated intonation patterns. Some teachers had evolved specific techniques for making their students laugh. One teacher pretended to 'shoot' students who made basic errors and made regular quips such as, 'There goes another student's legs cut off!' when drilling started up outside the classroom window. In this particular ELICOS class, the students became so responsive to humorous initiatives taken both by the teacher and individual students that they would sometimes laugh before anything amusing had even happened.

Several teachers used humour to make the point that errors were part of the language-learning process. One teacher had a standing joke with his class, saying 'I am not the Buddha' whenever he made a mistake or was unable to answer a student's query on the spot. Another teacher established class rules through humour. She explained that she always purposely arrived late during the first week and said 'Good evening everybody!' in a dramatic voice as she entered the room. Generally speaking, the teachers demonstrated a willingness to behave in uninhibited ways. One teacher danced the *cha cha cha* when she entered the room after break-time and found her students listening to music on the radio.

In summary, in the early days of their classes the teachers used a range of laughter-inducing strategies in an attempt to create a warm and friendly social

atmosphere within their classes. They demonstrated that, although they were in authority by virtue of their assigned roles as teachers, they also wanted to be liked and accepted by their class groups. Students did not, however, necessarily respond to their teachers' humorous initiatives by becoming more outgoing themselves. In some classes students remained reserved or withdrawn for the duration of their courses, preferring to remain within the comfort zones of their own cliques, and seldom contributing to the social life of their class groups. When classes showed few signs of becoming cohesive, teachers tended to take fewer humorous initiatives.

# ENCOURAGING CERTAIN STUDENTS TO DEVELOP THEIR LAUGHTER-GENERATING POTENTIAL

In the early days of each new class the teachers were keen to identify not only the linguistic levels of their students, but also the personality traits of individual class members. They were quick to pinpoint students who were prepared to be the focal point of class laughter and who could therefore contribute to the ongoing social development of their class groups. In one class, a student quickly assumed the role of teacher's helper, bowing and smiling broadly as he held open doors or offered to carry piles of books. This student would spring up to rub the whiteboard so quickly that everybody routinely burst out laughing. The teacher was so sure of this student's group-building potential that, on learning that he was to be in her class for a further ten weeks she said, 'With Alex coming in I knew I'd have a good class'.

Many teachers are familiar with the notion of the 'class clown' and value the presence of such a person in their classroom. There were several examples of students spontaneously drawing attention to their personal attributes or weaknesses and making their classes laugh. In the beginners' class, a lady with a broad girth frequently drew attention to her weight, exclaiming on one occasion, 'No dinner!' when asked by the teacher when she normally ate her evening meal. Humour can, of course, be used to mask feelings of inadequacy, and there were also examples of students making their classes laugh in order to save face. One student caused his classmates to guffaw by hitting himself on the head and exclaiming, 'Stupid Yugoslav!' after making a mistake.

In the early days of their classes the teachers sought to identify students with whom they could strike up a humorous rapport. They tended to do this by gently teasing a selection of students and assessing how each student reacted. If the reaction was positive, with the student indicating that he or she was happy to be teased, then the teacher would tease that person a little more. Several teachers created humorous sobriquets, such as 'Mr Mobile' for the student with the mobile phone or 'Señor Incognito' for the Spaniard who wore dark glasses in class. Others

remarked on students' clothes, hobbies, or personal foibles. Sometimes students answered back in such a way that a bantering relationship developed between themselves and their teacher. In one class, a student and a teacher engaged in ongoing repartee about the relative merits of cricket and soccer. Whenever the teacher and this particular student engaged in light-hearted banter, the rest of the class watched and listened, laughing and smiling at appropriate moments.

In summary, in the early days of each new class the teachers kept an eye out for individuals whom they hoped to enlist as allies in the group-development process. Once students sensed that their group-building and group-maintenance skills were valued by others, their humorous initiatives became more frequent.

# DEVELOPING A COMMON CLASS CULTURE THROUGH SHARED JOKES AND UNDERSTANDINGS

In some classes shared understandings developed early. In one class the nickname of 'Superman' was suggested by the teacher for a Korean student who wished to be known by the name of Clark (the hero of the *Superman* series). When I met the class for the first time, the student's friends pointed to him and looked at me, calling out 'Superman, Superman!'. I had the distinct impression that by ensuring that I was privy to this particular shared understanding, the class was somehow welcoming me into the class 'club'.

In a number of the classes, both teachers and students spontaneously told jokes, especially towards the end of the courses. It was also common for 'in' class jokes to evolve. These took the form of reference to shared knowledge that, if subsequently alluded to by a class member, would provoke collective laughter. In one class, students parodied a cartoon character in a particular language teaching video on a number of occasions, having established with their teacher that the characters in the video were, in the teacher's words, 'a bit off'. Reference to shared knowledge about individuals – ranging from the fact that they routinely forgot to bring their dictionary to the fact that they loved eating chocolate – was a strategy used by both teachers and students to induce whole-class laughter. Often it was enough for individuals to spontaneously act either particularly in character or particularly out of character in order to provoke whole-class laughter. For example, one class burst out laughing when a normally reticent student unexpectedly called out the word 'kill' in a loud voice.

#### AFFIRMING CLASS SOLIDARITY THROUGH GROUP LAUGHTER

There were frequent examples in the study of classes spontaneously laughing at remarks, behaviours or events that an outsider would not even find funny. Teachers could sometimes identify a critical moment during the life of a class, sensing that a subtle mood swing had taken place and that the class had begun

to display a collective sense of humour. These critical moments could occur as early as the first day of the course or as late as the final week. One teacher identified a moment when she considered that her class had begun to 'melt'. The catalyst for the thawing of the class atmosphere were the words 'Forget it!' (made by a Swiss student in response to a question about whether or not a transplant surgeon in a Swiss hospital would ever give a foreigner a Swiss heart).

Most classes began to laugh more readily and more frequently once they had understood that their teachers valued laughter and welcomed its presence in their classroom. The range of student behaviours that could engender whole class laughter was extremely wide. Unusual single-word responses had laughter-generating potential (such as 'Napoleon!' called out in response to a teacher's request for the names of drinks), as did incorrect answers to teachers' questions ('Together' in reply to, 'How well did you sleep last night?'). Sustained laughter could be caused by students misunderstanding the meaning of words (mistaking 'Porsche' for 'porch', for instance) or making incorrect associations (believing that the word 'think tank' had something to do with armies). Some classes developed creative ways of enlivening potentially dull lessons, such as attributing truth-value to de-contextualised sentences. The teacher of a lower intermediate class encouraged her students to do this, so that statements such as, 'I'm 64 and I'm retiring next year', made by one of the youngest students in the class, could easily generate laughter.

In sum, there was abundant evidence that in classes in which a spirit of social cohesion prevailed, both teachers and students found ample opportunity to make their classes laugh. In the classes that were not considered cohesive by their teachers, there were also occasional bursts of laughter. These moments were, however, relatively rare, and the teachers did not consider that humour operated as a bonding agent in the same way that it did in cohesive classes.

# Conclusion

The results of this study suggest that, when classes of adult language learners are examined from the perspective of their ongoing social development, humour plays a pivotal role. It can be seen that in the early days of language classes, teachers make a variety of humorous initiatives and encourage outgoing students to collaborate with them in creating relaxed and friendly classroom atmospheres. Then, once a critical mass of students has understood that class group laughter is valued by the teacher, the social evolution of the class begins. Each class proceeds to develop a unique social identity, such that its own jokes and shared understandings serve to reinforce a feeling of social cohesion. Finally, in classes that have developed into cohesive groups, spontaneous whole-class laughter occurs with increasing frequency and serves to affirm the spirit of well-being and camaraderie within the class.

Although it has yet to be proved that students learn more effectively in cohesive classes, teachers assume that class cohesion enhances learning. They use whole-class laughter, not only as a way of developing cohesive class atmospheres, but also as an informal measure of the current level of cohesion of their class.

Humour is, nevertheless, a tricky construct. What exactly is it, and how, precisely, does it operate? Is laughter a reliable indicator that a person understands what is amusing in a situation or a remark? Does humour automatically encourage inclusion? Is it not equally often used to exclude individuals (including the teacher) from the dominant class group? Does group laughter sometimes coerce people into behaving in ways that are alien to them? What happens to the person who is the catalyst for the laughter? Might they be feeling confused, aggrieved or affronted, even if they display outward signs of appreciating the joke made at their own expense? Might individuals get tired of having a clichéd view of themselves projected for the duration of the course? Can spontaneous whole-class laughter be indicative of negative feelings, such as panic or frustration, rather than of positive feelings such as comfort and relaxation? Do teachers sometimes use humour as a means of repressing individuals by belittling them in front of their peers, rather than as a means of drawing them out? Is there not sometimes too much laughter and fun in language classes, so that students worry that valuable learning time is being lost? Questions such as these might usefully be addressed in further studies of humour in the language classroom.

#### **NOTES**

- A grounded theory is a theory that is generated at the grassroots level by collecting and concurrently analysing large amounts of data until key patterns begin to emerge. The advantage of a grounded theory is that it fits the data exactly because it has been developed from the data themselves. For an introduction to grounded theory development procedures see Strauss and Corbin (1990).
- I use the term 'cohesive group' to mean a group that possesses a sense of togetherness or community. This definition reflects one provided by Corey and Corey (1997: 150).
- <sup>3</sup> English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students.

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