Techniques for Using Humor and Fun in the Language Arts Classroom

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Abstract: The authors, former middle and high school English teachers, review the rationale for using humor and fun in the classroom and provide detailed descriptions for teaching practices and activities that confer enjoyment and learning for language arts students. Although fun activities, these methods foster vocabulary development, grammar instruction, and techniques for illustrating the importance of word choice and clarity in composition.

Keywords: activities, fun, humor, motivation, vocabulary development

Educators recognize the value of humor and fun in the classroom (Boerman-Cornell 1999; Loomans and Kolberg 1993; McMahon 1999; Minchew 2001), finding that humor can motivate students, aid in their comprehension (Ruggieri 1999), and build self-esteem (Boerman-Cornell). Humor is said to relieve stress (Lazier 1991), help students discover universal truths (McMahon), and give them a sense of acceptance (Boerman-Cornell; Hill 1993). Despite the positive results that can be obtained when humor and fun are used in teaching, Shade (1996) points out that many educators still regard humor as inappropriate in the classroom. Indeed, Loomans and Kolberg point out that a survey of college students revealed most of them could not name even three teachers “who displayed enthusiasm and a sense of humor” (Minchew, 59).

Unfortunately, it is the English teacher who is most often stereotyped as humorless, even prudish. When we began teaching English, we wanted to dispel the stereotype and, like outstanding teachers from our pasts, infuse our classrooms with humor and fun. To that end, we chose creative activities that engage students in the learning process. In the following, we share some of the successful teaching strategies we have used to enhance learning and make it both enjoyable and memorable.

Having Fun with Word Study

Elevated Vocabulary

One interesting way to study vocabulary is through the use of trite expressions and elevated vocabulary (Minchew 2001). Students get in the habit of using certain expressions both in speech and in written assignments. Rather than ask students to delete these expressions from their papers, a teacher can use them to build vocabulary by asking students to think about each expression more directly. Students may enjoy rewriting these expressions using elevated language, with the aid of the dictionary and thesaurus. The cliché Birds of a feather flock together, for example, may be rewritten as Members of an avian species of identical plumage congregate. The old standby Beauty is only skin deep may become Pulchritude possesses solely cutaneous profundity. Needless to say, these are not ordinary vocabulary words. Students may not easily become proficient at this; however, through a supportive and fun classroom atmosphere, they will see the value of using words in different and interesting ways. Trite expressions from students’ papers are a good source of ordinary sentences students can learn to “elevate.”

English language learners (ELLs) benefit from this language experience as well. ELLs can be paired with

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native speakers to work toward proficiency in all levels of language use. The teacher may want to point out that the native speakers' experience of reading and comprehending the elevated version of each expression is analogous to some ELLs' experience with the trite expressions—both require a conscious effort to decipher the meaning. This will give the native speaker a clearer idea of how some ELLs struggle daily with the English language. Teachers can also invite ELLs to share some of the trite expressions found in their native languages. These expressions further the exercise by showing how language reflects culture.

Idioms and adages are also good for this purpose and provide humor. In English, the idiomatic expression You're pulling my leg is frequently used to describe someone who provides incorrect information or says something in jest. In Spanish, the analogous phrase is You're pulling my hair. This jest makes sense to students because they have probably had their hair pulled playfully, but not their leg. In English, we have the adage Where there is smoke, there is fire. It would be interesting to open class discussion by comparing and contrasting this expression with the Chinese saying Paper cannot wrap fire (J. Xu, pers. comm.). The essential meaning is the same—the truth will eventually be revealed or that usually if there are many signs of something, that "something" is probably happening. After the teacher has collected more of these expressions from students with other language knowledge, he or she may lead students through a discussion of possible meanings of each expression.

An activity that begins with elevated vocabulary and requires students to translate the examples into familiar expressions can also be an effective and fun way to teach vocabulary. For example, Male cadavers are incapable of yielding any anecdotes would be translated to Dead men tell no tales. Students can be paired for the activity and allowed to use dictionaries to aid in their translations. Timing the exercise and giving a prize to the winning team adds to students' enjoyment. This exercise helps students understand that a vocabulary that is too "elevated may, in fact, obscure meaning" (Minchew 2001, 64). Teachers should encourage students to discuss what has made the now trite expressions memorable; typically the expressions are concise, specific, and contain colorful metaphors and similes (see Minchew, 69, for the complete exercise). The interactive teaching styles represented by these activities are especially effective for ELLs who benefit from being more directly involved in the learning process (Curtin 2005).

Poetic Word Play

Because educators more frequently focus on the serious side of poetry, poems can be especially effective for infusing the classroom with humor. Consider the connotations of words in the following poem by Mary Ann Boyd Bean Arnold (Carroll 1995):

Call a woman a kitten, but never a cat; You can call her a mouse, cannot call her a rat; Call a woman a chicken, but never a hen; Or you surely will not be her caller again.

You can say she's a vision, can't say she's a sight; And no woman is skinny, she's slender and slight; If she should burn you up, say she sets you afire, And you'll always be welcome, you tricky old liar.

The following anonymous piece "My Resume" uses word play throughout:

My first job was working in an orange juice factory, but I got canned, couldn't concentrate.

Then I worked in the woods as a lumberjack, but I just couldn't hack it, so they gave me the ax.

After that I tried to be a tailor, but I just wasn't suited for it, mainly because it was a so-so job.

Next I tried working in a muffler factory but that was too exhausting.

Then I tried to be a chef, figured it would add a little spice to my life, but I just didn't have the thyme.

I attempted to be a deli worker, but any way I sliced it, I couldn't cut the mustard.

My best job was being a musician but eventually I found I wasn't noteworthy.

I studied a long time to become a doctor, but I didn't have any patience.

Next was a job in a shoe factory; I tried but I just didn't fit in.

I became a professional fisherman, but discovered that I couldn't live on my net income.

I managed to get a good job working for a pool maintenance company, but the work was just too draining.

So then I got a job in a workout center, but they said I wasn't fit for the job.

After many years of trying to find steady work I finally got a job as a historian until I realized there was no future in it.

I could have been a Violinist, but I'm too high-strung.

A Bowler, but it's not up my alley,
A Magician, but the urge vanished,
A Librarian, but I shelved the idea,
A Plumber, but it was only a pipe-dream.

My last job was working at Starbucks, but I had to quit because it was always the same old grind.

So I retired, and I found I am perfect for the job.

The best method for using this piece is to read the first section out loud, stopping to emphasize the choice of words that reflect back to the speaker's occupation, for example "canned" and "concentrate" are a play on "working in an orange juice factory." After that brief explanation, read each verse with emphasis on the choice of jobs, stopping on each word that follows it.
to allow students to guess the intended puns. Students catch on quickly and, with eyes rolling to illustrate how silly they think the piece is, have great fun in calling out suggestions when the reader stops. Because puns are often problematic for ELLs, students may need to be paired to get the greatest benefit from this exercise. Students may find it funny, however, that even some of their native-speaker classmates do not always understand. This is frequently the case with puns and only helps to add to the humor. Allowing students to try to explain the puns after the exercise is completed gives them a chance to articulate what makes humor humorous—not an easy task (see Tatum [1999] for additional pun activities).

Church Bulletins

Unfortunately, there is no way to give credit to the compiler of the church bulletins that frequently make the rounds on the Internet. These compiled lists of error-laden announcements are taken from various church bulletins, publications printed for weekly distribution. Whether they are real or fabricated, these hilarious statements—full of grammatical and word-choice errors—can be used in classrooms to illustrate the importance of both grammar and correct word choice and how they can both be a source of miscommunication. Students find these statements funny, and because the errors are obvious, students' awareness of the need for purposeful word choices when writing improves their own proofreading efforts.

Church bulletin excerpts can be used effectively in two ways. The following examples are excellent choices for opening classroom discussions regarding aspects of using careful word choices to communicate meaning effectively:

1. Ladies, don’t forget the rummage sale. It’s a chance to get rid of those things not worth keeping around the house. Bring your husbands.

2. Please place your donation in the envelope along with the deceased person you want remembered.

The church bulletins can also be used to illustrate the drawbacks of relying on spell-check, which will not help proofread for word-choice errors. The following example illustrates this effectively with humor: The church will host an evening of fine dining, super entertainment and gracious hostility. Obviously, the correct word is hospitality, not hostility. Students can add to this list by relating other funny examples of how they used incorrect words in speech and writing with disastrous results. A recent list of church bulletin faux pas follows:

1. The Fasting and Prayer Conference includes meals.

2. The peacemaking meeting scheduled for today has been canceled due to a conflict.

3. Don’t let worry kill you off—let the Church help.

4. For those of you who have children and don’t know it, we have a nursery downstairs.

5. The Rector will preach his farewell message after which the choir will sing: “Break Forth Into Joy.”

6. Irving Benson and Jessie Carter were married on October 24 in the church. So ends a friendship that began in their school days.

7. Potluck supper Sunday at 5:00 PM—prayer and medication to follow.

8. The ladies of the Church have cast off clothing of every kind. They may be seen in the basement on Friday afternoon.

9. This evening at 7 PM there will be a hymn singing in the park across from the Church. Bring a blanket and come prepared to sin.

10. Low Self Esteem Support Group will meet Thursday at 7 PM. Please use the back door.

Who Wants to Be a Millionaire

A fun game show that can be a source for humor in multiple-choice-testing situations is Who Wants to Be a Millionaire. On the show, the first question is often used to break the ice with the contestant by supplying a funny, throwaway answer for choice d. The audience and contestant often chuckle at this answer, and it serves to make people comfortable so they can engage in and enjoy the high-stakes game. Here are two examples from the online version of the game (Who Wants to Be a Millionaire 2007):

According to the old saying, what is “the root of all evil”?

a. ambition
b. intolerance
c. money
d. rutabagas

What is the term for the set of controls that flies a plane without human assistance?

a. autopilot
b. computer crew
c. e-flight
d. magic wings

Throwaway answers could also be used in a multiple-choice test by placing them in some of the questions at the same answer position, preferably d. The teacher may first want to read an example with the class to enjoy a chuckle with them and explain why humor is injected in a serious academic task. Multiple-choice tests are certainly not a game, but students may appreciate the use of humor to defuse test anxiety. The teacher may also want to point out the obvious—students can eliminate the humorous answer as incorrect, which should further alleviate test anxiety. Another method for adding interest to a multiple-choice test is to include fun factoids about students in the class as possible choices. For example, the aforementioned question “What is the term for the
More Carson Techniques

The question included in the envelope would be: What is the part of speech that is a person, place, or thing? After the answer is matched with a question and the class decides it is correct, the “Carnac” for this question would then pass the hat on to the next “Carnac.” Answers and questions can be made as difficult as the grade level and purpose of the exercise necessitates.

The Fumble Rules of Grammar

A humorous list of grammar mistakes often circulates in bits and pieces on the Internet. William Safire compiled this list in Fumble Rules (1990a) and How Not to Write: The Essential Misrules of Grammar (1990b). Fumble rules are defined as “a mistake that calls attention to the rule” (7). A few fumble-rule examples are the following: “Verbs have to agree with their subjects” (66) and “Avoid commas, that are unnecessary” (63). Begin your fumble-rules classroom exercise by introducing students to Safire’s New York Times Magazine column “On Language.” Safire collected and compiled fumble rules after introducing them in his column. When his readers sent him other fumble rules, Safire “culled, winnowed, beefed up and edited” (7) them for his book Fumble Rules.

After students are introduced to the rules, you can ask them to write their own fumble rules if they make the same error in two consecutive writing assignments. Writing their own rules of grammar will help students remember them and apply them to their writing successfully. A class list of new fumble rules is often an effective way to review grammar, and students enjoy the unique ways their classmates have rewritten the standard rules of grammar. The following is a list of some of our favorite fumble rules, but a more exhaustive list is in Safire’s books:

1. No sentence fragments.
2. Avoid run-on sentences they are hard to read.
3. Use the semicolon properly, always use it where it is appropriate; and never where it isn’t.
4. Reserve the apostrophe for it’s proper use and omit it when its not needed.
5. Don’t use contractions in formal writing.
6. Don’t overuse exclamation points!!!
7. Never, ever use repetitive redundancies.
8. If any word is improper at the end of a sentence, a linking verb is.

Conclusion

Some teachers view humor as inappropriate for the classroom, believing it is their responsibility to teach, not to entertain. On the contrary, while humor should not be used for its own sake, it can be used effectively as a tool to engage students, to enliven the classroom, and to enhance learning (Garner 2006; Minchew 2001). Humor can be the avenue by which one grabs the attention of disinterested students and those who claim they dislike English. Not only can interesting, fun activities and creative teaching approaches spark students’ interest, but such activities can also promote learning (Boerman-Cornell 1999; Garner; Loomans, and Kolberg 1993; McMahon 1999; Ruggieri 1999) and help students gain new perspectives on old concepts (Minchew).

REFERENCES


