

Welcome to HELL: Humour in English Language Learning¹

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Abstract

Humour means understanding not only the language and words but their use, meaning, subtle nuances, the underlying culture, implications and unwritten messages. Humour does not often travel well from one culture to another, as each society has a somewhat different concept of what is funny (Dobson, 1987). In Foreign Language Learning (FLL), the ability to understand humour has been one of the parameters that helps us find out about learners' comprehension in both oral and written language.

In this article, the lighter side of English Language Teaching (ELT) is covered. The study is based on how humour can facilitate L2 learning. The focus is on the survey done on the selected jokes classified under three headings, *culture-based*, *language-oriented* and *meaning-based*. Some exercises with jokes will also be exemplified. The results of a research survey are discussed. A list of limitations and drawbacks is presented. The use of jokes is dealt with in regard to learners as well as teachers, to enhance in-class activities.

Key words: humour, jokes in ELT, communication skills

INTRODUCTION

Why do we use humour in language classrooms? Because life without humour is too awful a prospect to contemplate, but more fundamentally, because laughter lubricates learning. It makes both teaching and learning far more memorable for all concerned. This question urges us to investigate the use of real language in language classrooms. The study focuses on how humour can be an effective tool in creating a foreign language classroom environment more conducive to learning. It will also examine how non-native English speaking teachers (non-NESTs) can benefit from using humour in language classroom. Most teachers and learners are, at the beginning, reluctant to use jokes with much language content in them. That is why most teachers avoid using humour in ELT. However, the use of humour does not necessarily force the learners and the teachers to be comedians. The reason to use humorous texts is to enhance language learning and to increase student participation in classroom activities.

Most language teachers ask themselves how they can promote real communication and motivate students to listen and speak in English. First, it is to involve them in the dynamics of the class and interaction. Student-student interaction in small groups is often considered to offer a number of advantages:

- it reduces the dominance of the teacher over the class.
- it increases the amount of student participation in the class.
- it increases the opportunities for individual students to participate and use new features of the target language.
- it promotes collaboration among most learners.
- it enables the teacher to work more as a facilitator or consultant.
- it can give learners a more active role in learning. (Richards and Lockhard, 1994:153)

Moreover, humour can be used to promote student-teacher interaction and to increase the quantity and quality of student talking time (STT). This can also promote learner responsibility and autonomy and may be more relaxing than running back and forth between the units of a coursebook. This does not mean the course books are useless but activities using humour may be considered more appealing to students.

There are some arguments and counter arguments to be cited. Most arguments, to a certain extent, favor the use of humour in teaching English. Generally, humour might be considered the elicitation of learning, a teaching tool, thought provoking, a student motivator and learning activator.

¹ This paper was published online in ERIC - Education Resources Information Center ERIC Number: ED499225
<http://www.eric.ed.gov> 2007-Dec-6

As for the functional use of humour, Maurice (1988) quotes from Gagne (1977) and lists eight instructional events that are enhanced through the use of humour:

1. activating motivation
2. informing the learner of the lesson objective
3. directing attention
4. stimulating recall
5. providing learning guidance
6. enhancing retention
7. promoting the transfer of learning
8. eliciting performance; providing feedback (Maurice, 1988:20-25).

The literature stresses the importance of humour as a means of enhancing student motivation to learn English. It was Dulay and Burt (1977), who first introduced the concept of an affective filter. Afterwards, Krashen's (1982:32) Affective Filter Hypothesis emphasized that a low affective filter corresponded to high motivation, self-confidence and low anxiety. Krashen's hypothesis implied that our pedagogical goals should not only include supplying comprehensible input, but also creating a situation that encourages a low filter. In this respect, humour can help lower the affective filter, reduce anxiety in class, and encourage students' desire to take part in what is being said in the class.

Through use of humour, students may practice three skills: listening, speaking and reading, and the whole atmosphere in the class is relaxed. So, implementation of jokes into a unit randomly may help teachers create a more appealing atmosphere. Harmer (1984:39) describes using jokes as a "...balanced activities approach": The approach sees the methodology as being a balance between the components of input and output. Main justifications in using humour in language teaching are given by Medgyes (2002:5) as it:

- is a good vehicle for providing authentic cultural information;
- builds bridges between cultures;
- practices language items in genuine contexts;
- brings students closer together;
- releases tension;
- develops creative thinking;
- provides memorable chunks of language;
- reinforces previously learned items;
- generates a happy classroom;
- enhances motivation;
- enriches textbook-based courses;
- introduces a refreshing change from routine language-learning procedures.

There are some limitations in using humour as a teaching and practice tool. The use of humour may also be considered as supplementary activities related to a coursebook. In fact, using humour, if not done to the extreme, does not require much time in presentation and practice. In various cases, due to a teacher's consideration of humour in an ELT class and their struggle using it as an ice-breaking tool, it may sometimes place a burden. That not every teacher is innately a good joke teller, is another issue to be discussed. In general, using humour as a medium holds some advantages as follows:

1. Jokes are short and can be told within the space of a few minutes.
2. They are rule-governed...
3. There is a wide range of speech patterns within the single genre of a joke.
4. Jokes are common to all cultures.
5. Jokes embody a culture.
6. Speech behavior that is learned by listening to, and telling jokes, can be generalized to speech acts other than the joke.
7. Jokes are funny. They relax the tension in the classroom. (Trachtenberg, 1980:19)

Obviously, there are some linguistic barriers that foreign language learners might encounter while learning and practicing the TL not only in their native country but also in the target country. Presumably, to overcome such language learning difficulties, jokes are appropriate tools to be implemented in teaching. Most teachers and learners are fascinated when they see how well humour works in fostering teacher-learner-teacher interaction.

The following might be considered as advantages:

- The students like them, so they are a source of motivation.
- They lower the affective filter and create a relaxed atmosphere
- Most jokes are short so it does not require long periods of attention while listening.
- Many jokes are a good way of presenting cultural aspects of the language.
- We can help our explanations and understanding of the content by using gestures.
- Students react to what they have just heard. They show their approval or dislike of the punchline.
- If we choose the correct ones, jokes are easy to tell and easy to understand.
- Jokes integrate psychological, psycholinguistic, sociological, discourse and strategic components.
- They employ a variety of skills: first reading, second speaking, and third listening. (Vadillo, 2004)

"Humour can easily be seen as a way of activating motivation and directing attention, but it can also be used in other events as well, from stimulating recall to eliciting performance and providing feedback." is what Maurice (1988:20) emphasizes. Besides, he further on argues and highlights that "Telling jokes is a specialized skill that few EFL learners really need; however, the subskills that aid effective joke-telling can be important in other ways of communication"(ibid, 23).

TAXONOMY OF JOKES

In this study the jokes are idiosyncratically classified as *culture-based*, *language-oriented* and *meaning-based*. The rationale behind this taxonomy is to help both learners and teachers as to what to be expected from them functionally in regard to language and meaning. Nevertheless all jokes serve the same purpose in a language class to enhance students' practice of the target language. The *culture-based jokes* may require students as well as teachers to be familiar with the target culture. Otherwise students' comprehension may not happen and the linguistic function of the use of humour cannot be optimized. Due to their cultural motives of the language, such jokes are the most difficult ones and some students may have problems comprehending them. In such cases the EFL teachers play a critical role in getting students to comprehend the punchline. However, teachers, for the sake of comprehension, should be prepared prior to presenting the jokes. Second is the *language-oriented jokes* where the structure of the language is at issue, and the usage of the rules and structure has a great impact on catching the punchline. The last is *meaning-based jokes* in which word and sentence meanings play a major role. Since all jokes have certain connotations, the student must understand the content of the entire joke before they will understand the punchline. This is especially true with culturally oriented jokes. It should not be necessary to translate all the jokes to grasp the gist of it and the laughing point of the punchline. Teachers will be able to measure the success of using humour in an EFL class by the reaction of the students. Teachers are expected to classify the jokes whether they are *culture-based*, *language-oriented* or *meaning-based*.

Using jokes in classes, no doubt, will be a demanding task for both students and teachers. Here are some guidelines in using jokes functionally in the English language classes:

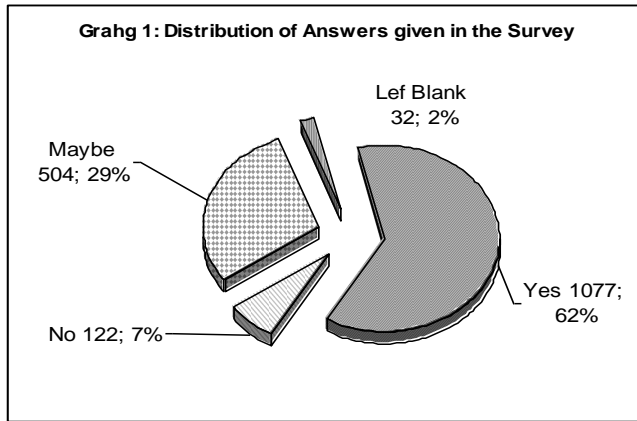
1. by making the students listen to and understand the punchline of the joke,
2. by providing them with part of the joke and asking them for their own ending,
3. or the student may choose the answer from three possible options (A, B or C),
4. pictures can help to understand the content of a joke.
5. another technique to be used could consist of translating ... jokes into English... (Leal, 1993:318)

The use of jokes is presented through various activities. Let us assume that if the jokes are meaning-based, the emphasis will be on the meaning unless they are culture-based. So, the idea is to choose an appropriate activity related to the jokes. If not, student's motivation may decrease and the outcome may not be achieved. The main aim is to enable students to use language functionally for communicative purposes.

To make the meaning comprehensible and to increase class participation, teachers can motivate the students to use the necessary components of target language. Telling jokes and presenting new structures in them, does not require much time, but it may help reduce teacher talking time (TTT) while increasing STT. Telling jokes is a supplementary activity that may help both learners and teachers increase enthusiasm and create a positive and enjoyable atmosphere as well as enhancing the implementation of the syllabus.

In some cases, joke-telling activities may cause some inconveniences, such as the students' mood toward jokes, the teacher's way of presentation, the appropriate time chosen, and the relevant type of jokes. However, teachers may encounter some unexpected failures in presenting jokes. These may be due to the jokes not being understood by students, not being able to clarify the objectives to be implemented and distracting the students' attention from the main points of the lesson.

DISCUSSION OF SURVEY RESULTS



A survey (appendix-B) on humour in English language teaching was done to set up a basis for this study. In the survey there are 13 items ranging from the use of jokes to implementing them in a course content. The respondents were from various schools and one university. These included three private high schools and a naval high school. There was a total of 147 respondents, thirteen of whom were NESTs (Native English Speaking Teachers) and the rest were non-NESTs. The demographic findings are given (see figure 3) in appendix-C. There were two blank responses. The total distribution of responses given to questions is shown in the figure

1 above. As for the distribution of the answers, 2% left few items blank; 29% agree with the items in the survey; 7% give negative responses and 62% of the respondents agree with the following points in the article. Below (figure 2) are the overall responses given to each item in the survey.

The rationale behind this preliminary research can be said to determine the reactions of active teachers both NESTs and non-NESTs relative to using humour as a language teaching tool.

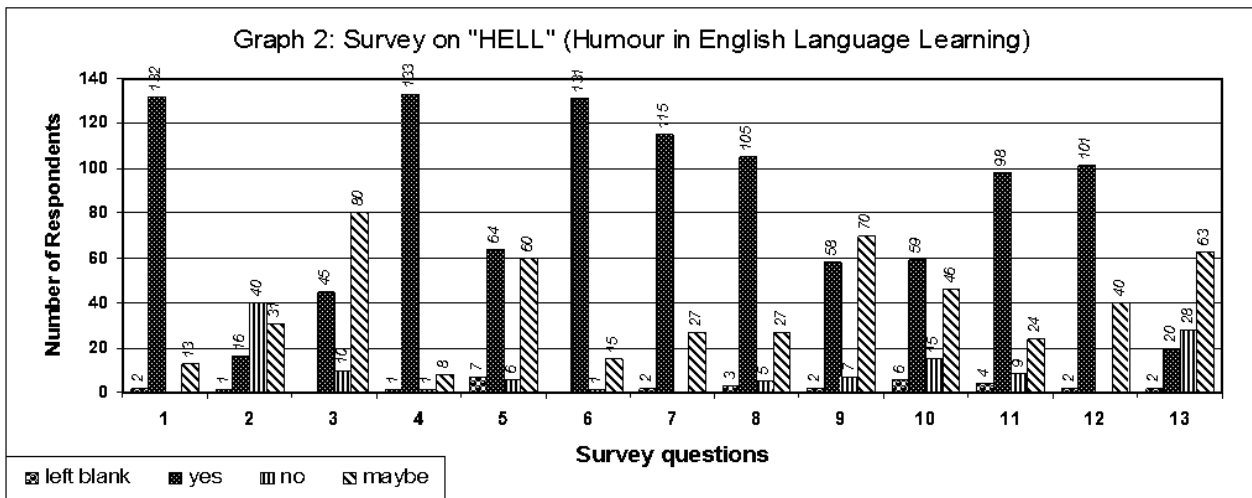


Figure 2: Overall distribution of survey results

- a supplementary teaching tool to enhance a text-book
- no need to be a professional joke-teller
- students may not role-play some jokes
- jokes help students to improve communication skills
- expose some challenges due to culture-based meanings
- help students overcome shyness and anxiety
- help in-class interaction continue
- humour may make some teaching activities easier
- increases STT, decreases TTT
- jokes could be included in the coursebooks
- some jokes may be translated into the native language

In the additional comment part of the survey, there were various comments by the respondents pinpointing that: 1. Teachers should have sense of humour. 2. Jokes should be carefully selected. 3. Humour is absolutely a short and good way to make students think and speak English 4. Rather than "avoiding play on words", jokes should be used as teaching opportunities.

Limitations to the study

According to comments above, some respondents have a tendency not to use jokes as part of a course format. The reason why they felt so may be due to their not being accustomed to telling jokes. The choice of jokes and appropriate activity which goes with the jokes seems to be limited. Another limitation was that the respondents were chosen randomly and the non-NESTs outnumbered the NESTS.

It is necessary to conduct an in-class pilot study to determine student reaction as well. Unfortunately, this has not been done yet due to time constraints except for a few jokes presented in the classrooms.

The exploitation of joke-telling is another drawback, as it requires some preparation such as appropriate time, students' motivation, lesson planning and choosing suitable jokes etc. Consequently, joke-telling is not a session but part of it during presentation of syllabus content.

In the following part, an example for each type of joke in the taxonomy is presented with sample activities. Other examples of activities mentioned in the study are given in the appendix A.

PEDAGOGIC IMPLICATIONS

“Jokercises”: Activities with jokes

Teachers may apt to create their own activities which suit to their needs and content in their lessons. In this study, activities with jokes, also named “jokercises” can be classified under various headings as in the following:

1. matching the punchline
2. guessing the punchline
3. “jocloze” test
4. reconstructing the dialogue
5. tense changing exercise
6. making up different/similar endings to the joke
7. matching two-line jokes
8. scrambled sentences

In the following part, an example for each type of joke in the taxonomy is presented with sample activities. Other activities mentioned in the study are given in the appendix A.

Sample Activities with Jokes

1. Matching the Punchline

Type: Culture-based Joke (CBJ)

Level: Pre-intermediate – Intermediate

Duration: 10 minutes

Objectives: Sentence comprehension & punchline catching

Activities:

- Ss are allowed to set up groups and/or pairs.
- Discuss the answers and the meaning.
- No teacher interference.
- Ss are encouraged to role play.
- Ss are expected to make up similar jokes.

Sample Task:

Match the following sentences in column B with the ones in column A

A	B
Teacher: Willy, name one important thing we have today that we didn't have ten years ago. Willy:	<i>a) Good, because I didn't do my homework.</i>
Teacher: Are you chewing gum? Billy:	<i>b) Your name on this report card.</i>
Harold: Teacher, would you punish me for something I didn't do? Teacher: Of course not.	<i>c) Me!</i>

Harold:	
Sylvia: Dad, can you write in the dark? Father: I think so. What do you want me to write? Sylvia:	d) <i>What time do you usually get up?'</i>
Teacher: Well, at least there's one thing I can say about your son. Father: What's that? Teacher:	e) <i>No, I'm Billy Anderson.</i>
Judge: 'Have you ever been up before me before?' Defendant: 'I don't know, your honour.	f) <i>"I am the ninth letter of the alphabet."</i>
Teacher: Ellen, give me a sentence starting with "I." Ellen: I is... Teacher: No, Ellen. Always say "I am." Ellen: All right.	g) <i>With grades like these, he couldn't be cheating.</i>

2. Guessing the Punchline

Type: Meaning-based Joke (MBJ)

Level: Pre-intermediate – Intermediate

Duration: 3 minutes for each

Objectives: Guessing the punchline

Activities:

- Ss set up pairs and discuss the possible answers.
- Reading the whole dialogue aloud or reciting the joke.
- Teacher gives the correct answers afterwards
- Acting out the small dialogues.
- Ss' possible answers are discussed.
- Teacher elicits the answers

Sample Task

Teacher: If you had one dollar and you asked your father for another, how many dollars would you have?

Vincent: One dollar.

Teacher: (sadly) You don't know your arithmetic.

Vincent: (sadly)

Punchline: *You don't know my father.*

2. "Joclose"-Test

Type: Language-Oriented Joke (LOJ)

Level: Intermediate – Upper-intermediate

Duration: 10 minutes

Objectives: Close test procedure, oral practice

Activities:

- Ss are asked to guess the punchline.
- Ss are asked to retell the story.
- Ss paraphrase the story.
- Teacher helps students about the possible ending to the joke.

Sample Task

<i>him angrily shivering funny discovered grabbed embarrassed curses inside threw</i>

A Man and His parrot

A man got a parrot which could already talk. It had belonged to a sailor and had a large vocabulary. However, the man soon (1) that the parrot mostly knew bad words. At first he thought it was

(2) , but then it became tiresome, and finally, when the man had important guests, the bird's bad words (3) him very much.

As soon as the guests left, the man (4) shouted at the parrot,

- "That language must stop!" But the bird answered him with (5) He shook the bird and shouted again,
- "Don't use those ugly words!" Again the bird cursed him.

Now the man was really angry. He (6) the parrot and threw him into the refrigerator. But it had no effect. From (7) the refrigerator, the parrot was still swearing. He opened the door and took (8) out, and again the bird spoke in dirty words and curses. This time, the man opened the door of the freezer, (9) the bird into it, and closed the door.

This time there was silence. After two minutes, the man opened the door and removed the very cold parrot. Slowly the (10) parrot walked up the man's arm, sat on his shoulder and spoke into his ear, sounding very frightened:

- " ?"

Punchline: *I'll be good, I promise...Those chickens in there. What did they say?*

WHY HUMOUR IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM?

Some coursebooks on the ELT market include a few jokes in the context. The purpose of this inclusion is to implement the communicative aspects of the foreign language. But to what extent humour should be included in the content is another issue yet to be debated. The use of humour in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is to ensure student enthusiasm. If humour is designed in accordance with the context in a coursebook, the outcomes may be quite satisfactory.

As for the guidelines for using humour, implementing teacher's own way of using them for enhancement and the way they should be used are other issues to be raised. However, the following points are emphasized:

3. Don't try too hard. Let humour arise naturally, encourage it, don't force it. ...
4. Do what fits your personality. Never force it, ...
5. Don't use private humour or humour that leaves people out. ...
6. Make humour an integral part of your class, rather than something special. ...
7. ... Humour may be used to solicit dialogue, conversations and develop vocabulary.
8. The extent to which you use humour will vary on your class. Interpretation, discussion and analysis will vary on the proficiency of your class. (Chiasson, 2004)

CONCLUSION

Using jokes, however, may bring some advantages to the classroom as well as the teachers' teaching performance. The following points may be considered as outcomes of implementing the use of jokes that;

- it breaks the ice during teaching.
- it reduces TTT but increases STT.
- it can contribute to a positive learning environment.
- it also helps students improve communication skills.
- learner inhibitions quickly disappear and it helps develop a positive self-esteem.
- For a limited time, it helps teachers stay away from the routine use of a coursebook.
- it may also bring a new insight to a teacher's teaching performance.
- finally, it enables students to make use of foreign language skills.

In some cases, using jokes in EFL has some limitations that both teachers and learners should overcome as follows:

- it requires an effective joke-telling skill that most teachers are afraid of.
- it requires subskills such as cultural understanding and catching the punchline in the first instance.
- jokes should be refined by teachers and classified.
- due to meaning ambiguity and a play on words, some jokes may be difficult to understand.
- some jokes are thought provoking and the teacher should be patient enough to motivate students to comprehend hidden meanings.

Despite the limitations, the standpoint is that students can profit from the language contained in jokes if they are carefully selected and graded in accordance with students' language level. Several skills can

be practiced including, listening, speaking and reading, as well as, at certain levels, translating some jokes into the native language.

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Appendix –A

4. Reconstructing the Dialogue

Type: Meaning-based Joke (MBJ)

Level: Intermediate – Upper-intermediate

Duration: 10 minutes

Objectives: Rewriting the dialogue, and role-play

Activites:

- Steps are given by teacher.
- Ss do not work in groups. If needed, they may work in pairs
- Role-play is encouraged.
- Language-related or culture-based aspects are made clear by teacher.
- First student who completes the dialogue can be rewarded.

Sample Task

The Farmer's Divorce

A farmer walks into an attorney's office to file for a divorce...

Attorney: "May I help you?"

Farmer: (1) "....."

Attorney: (2) ".....?"

Farmer: "Yeah, I got about 140 acres."

a) "No, I don't have a Case, but I got a John Deere."

Attorney: "No, you don't understand. Do you have a

b) "Well, sir, does your wife beat you up or anything?"

case?"

Farmer: (3) ""

Attorney: (4)"?

Farmer: "Yeah I got a grudge! That's where I park my John Deere."

Attorney: "No sir, I mean do you have a suit?"

Farmer: (5) ""

Attorney: (6)"?"

Farmer: "Nope, we both get up about 4:30."

Attorney: "Okay, let me put it this way... why do you want a divorce?"

Farmer: (7) ""

c) "Yes, sir, I got a suit! I wear it to church on Sundays.

d) "Well, do you have any grounds?"

e) "Well, I can never have a meaningful conversation with her."

f) "Yeah, I want to get one of those dayvorses."

g) "No, you still don't understand! I mean do you have a grudge?"

5. Tense Changing Exercise

Type: Culture-Based Joke (CBJ)

Level: Elementary – Pre-intermediate

Duration: 10 minutes

Objectives: Tense practice, personal pronouns, guessing the punchline

Activities:

- Ss are encouraged to practice tense changes
- Ss are asked to change the pronouns from third person to first person.
- Teacher sets the scene and students role play.
- The first student who guesses the punchline correctly is rewarded.
- If needed, teacher explains the structure.
- Ss paraphrase the joke as a story.

Sample Task

Crossing the border

While crossing the US-Mexican border on his bicycle, the man was *stopped* by a guard who *pointed* to two sacks the man *had* on his shoulders. "What's in the bags?", *asked* the guard.

"Sand," *said* the cyclist.

"Get them off – we'll take a look," *said* the guard.

The Cyclist *did* as he was told, *emptied* the bags, and proving they *contained* nothing but sand, *reloaded* the bags, *put* them on his shoulders and *continued* across the border.

Two weeks later, the same thing *happened*. Again the guard *demand*ed to see the two bags, which again *contained* nothing but sand. This *went* on every week for six months, until one day the cyclist with the sand bags *failed* to appear.

A few days later, the guard *happened* to meet the cyclist downtown. "Say friend, you sure *had* us crazy", *said* the guard.

"We *knew* you were smuggling something across the border. I *won't* say a word – but what is it you *were* smuggling?"
""!

Punchline: *Bicycles*

6. Making up a Different/Similar Ending to the Joke

Type: Meaning-based Joke (MBJ)

Level: Pre-intermediate-Intermediate

Duration: 10 minutes

Objectives: student generated endings to the jokes; vocabulary study.

Activities:

- Ss are asked to make his/her own ending to the joke.
- Teacher reads aloud the possible endings and chooses the closest ones.
- Teacher may ask the students to paraphrase the story.
- Teacher gives the original ending to the joke.

Sample Task

Ten Men, One Woman

There were 11 people hanging on to a single rope that suspended them from a helicopter trying to bring them to safety.

Ten were men; one was a woman. They all decided that one person would have to let go because if they didn't, the rope would break and all of them would die. No one could decide who it should be. Finally the woman gave a really touching speech, saying how she would give up her life to save the others, because women were used to giving things up for their husbands and children and giving in to men.

.....

Punchline: *All of the men started clapping.*

7. Matching Two-line jokes

Type: Meaning-based Joke (MBJ)

Level: Beginner – Elementary

Duration: 5 minutes

Objectives: dialog formation, meaningful matching

Activites:

- Ss may work in pairs or groups.
- Teacher scrambles the sentences and asks students to form the dialog.
- After each match, teacher lets the students recite the dialog.
- Roleplay activity is encouraged.
- Ss are also requested to create their own dialog.
- Teacher may help students with clues.

Sample Task

Patient: Doctor, doctor! My small son has just swallowed a roll of film.

Doctor: Don't worry. Let him rest a bit and we'll wait and see what develops. (Jackson, 1999: 49)

8. Scrambled Sentences

Type: Meaning-based Joke (MBJ)

Level: Beginner – Elementary

Duration: 5 minutes

Objectives: Sentence comprehension; meaningful order;

Activites:

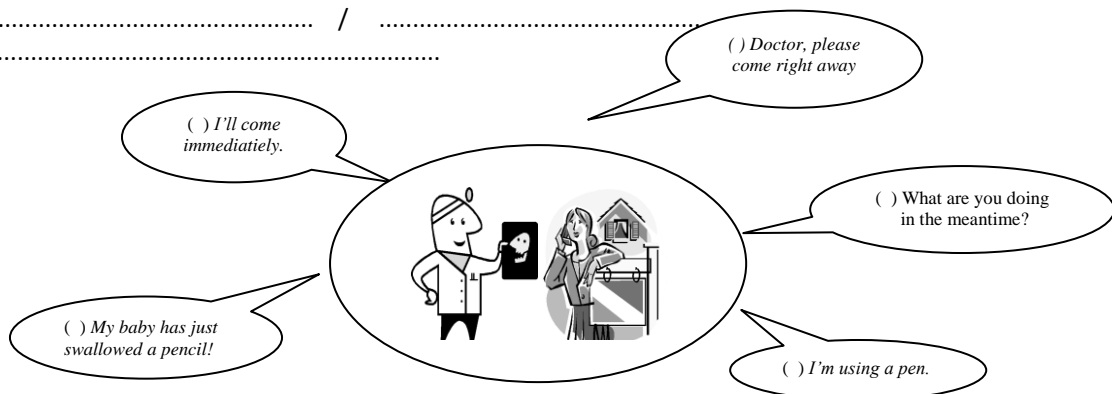
- Ss are allowed to put the sentences into a meaningful sequence.
- Teacher may ask students to find the punchline first.
- Ss role play the dialogue
- Teacher may reward the student who form the dialogue first.

Sample Task

Woman: /

Doctor: /

Woman:



Appendix B
Survey

1. Non-native English Speaking Teacher a) (Non-NEST) : b) Native English Speaking Teacher (NEST):
2. Years of experience in ELT: a) 1-3 b) 4-6 c) 7-10 d) 11 – over
3. Teaching group: a) Young learners b) Young adults c) Adults
4. Teaching institution: a) Elementary school b) High school c) University d) Other : (please specify)
-

No	Survey Questions	Yes	No	Maybe
1.	Do you think humour can be used as a supplementary teaching tool in ELT so it enhances text-book based courses?			
2.	Do you think it is necessary to be a professional joke-teller in using humour in ELT classes?			
3.	Do you think students may have difficulty in role-playing while telling jokes for communication purposes?			
4.	Using jokes at any level in ELT classes may sure help students to improve their communication skills.			
5.	Telling jokes in ELT class is considered to be challenging due to culture-based meanings in them.			
6.	Do you agree that jokes may also help students to overcome their anxiety and shyness in ELT classes?			
7.	Telling jokes does not always help students to understand the complete meaning in them but it helps interaction go on in the classroom.			
8.	Joke telling should be considered as a supplementary activity in ELT classes because they are not the part of core syllabus in the course books.			
9.	Humour is the easiest way of presenting a structure, new vocabulary and dialogue recitation and other components.			
10.	Students should not be encouraged to understand the joke completely to catch the gist in Punchline.			
11.	While telling jokes increases Student Talking Time, it decreases Teacher Talking Time.			
12.	Jokes should be integrated into course book syllabus to enable students to understand the Target Culture as well as the language.			
13.	Students learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) may have some problems in understanding the original jokes from L1 so the jokes should be translated into students' native language.			

Additional comments (if any):.....

Appendix –C

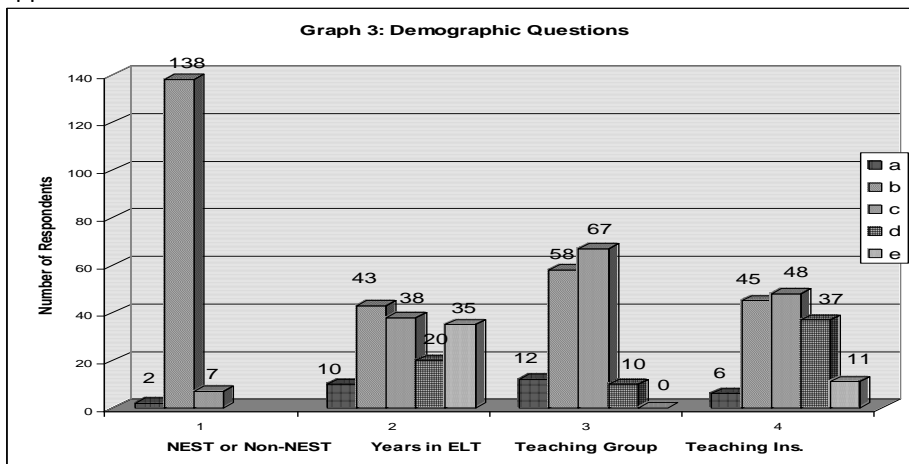


Figure 3: Answers to demographic questions