Learning through Humor: Using Humorous Resources in the Teaching of Foreign Languages
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Introduction

Foreign language students sometimes get discouraged by the difficulties involved in learning a new language. Since mastery requires the development of reading, writing, listening and speaking skills, they must acquire a constantly growing body of linguistic and semantic information. Thus a language teacher needs to know how to engage students. Humor is an effective tool, as it develops and encourages creativity in the target language while helping to create an optimal learning environment.

Why Use Humor in the Classroom?

Humor is closely related to memory, as it is usually easier to recall an experience that occurred in a humorous context. When recalling a television commercial, or a political joke just heard on the subway, we are often surprised by the amount of aural and visual information we are able to retrieve. Given the lasting impact of humor, a teacher must consider what communicative and methodological objectives he or she wants to achieve in order to use it in the classroom. The humorous activity must be designed to fit both linguistic and cultural goals. “The funny teacher is not a clown figure. He is a serious, conscientious professional who believes in the meaningfulness and effectiveness of having fun while learning” (Tosta 2001:27). Whenever our students are amused and entertained during an activity, we as teachers are achieving our main goal: to encourage and motivate students and help them communicate in the target language.

There are many benefits to implementing humor in the classroom: it creates a cooperative atmosphere helping students to better relate to one another, and it focuses them more effectively. It adds a cultural frame to language by presenting a tone, expression and context to the material, thus increasing cultural knowledge. Humor facilitates the acquisition of vocabulary and helps distinguish figurative from literal meaning. Similarly, it helps develop visual memory and improves the capacity to solve linguistic problems. The devices that we can use to add humor to a language class range from idiomatic expressions, riddles or proverbs, to pronunciation games, comics, the use of realia, jokes or typical grammatical errors.

For instance, studying common errors can be turned into a humorous activity. Revising a list of typical mistakes can be very useful, since “error correction makes students aware of how to improve their level of performance by paying
closer attention to their own performance and expression” (Muñoz-Basols 2004: 32).

However, when introducing error correction one needs to think of a way to motivate students. What I did was to create a character using a Spanish cognate: detective. It was my expectation that this funny character would create in them a positive attitude and facilitate their learning in the process of identifying typical mistakes. Students love ‘to act as detectives,’ and carefully look for mistakes as if they were doing a crossword puzzle. By simply making an activity visual and humorous, we encourage students to be creative. As they learn while playing, they naturally feel more relaxed.

Mnemonic Devices and Strategies: Learning to Remember in a Playful Way

Traditionally, humor has not been regarded as a complement to grammar lessons. However, many publishing companies have lately considered including humor in textbooks as ‘serious business.’ In lieu of merely memorizing information, the ludic and humorous aspect of language can be exploited to make the learning process more enjoyable, and therefore much more productive.

The following is a playful way to remember the different uses of *ser* and *estar*, two Spanish verbs equivalent to the English verb ‘to be.’ Generally speaking, *ser* is used to describe, define or characterize a person, thing or place. It can be used to refer to occupations or professions, to identify nationality or origin, or to tell time and date. By contrast, *estar* is used to describe physical, mental or emotional states, as well as expressing location, and describing what is ongoing through the present progressive tense. The acronym ‘DON’T HELP’ indicates the different uses of *ser* and *estar*. The grammatical distinction is often considered to be a most difficult concept to master. Because this humorous shortcut is easy to remember, it helps students learn to distinguish how to use each verb.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DON ’T HELP</th>
<th>SER</th>
<th>ESTAR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Description** | *Juan es alto*  
John is tall | **Health** | *Juan está cansado*  
John is tired |
| **Occupation** | *Juan es policía*  
John is a policeman | **Emotions** | *Juan está nervioso*  
John is nervous |
Nationality | Juan es cubano  
| John is from Cuba |
|-----------------|----------------|
| Location | Juan está en Zaragoza  
| John is in Zaragoza |
|-----------------|----------------|
| Time | Son las dos  
| It’s two o’clock |
|-----------------|----------------|
| Present | Juan está comiendo  
| John is eating |

Another grammatical stumbling block is the subjunctive. This verbal mood is not used in English nearly as often as in Spanish. In fact, most students are not even aware that it exists in English. As teachers we need to create awareness that the English phrase, “If I *was you,” is grammatically incorrect and must be changed to “If I were you.” Another example would be the structure, “It is important that she go to the cinema,” which does not use the third person singular of the present tense ‘to go.’

**WEDDINGS**

| Wishes | Quiero que vayas al cine conmigo.  
| I want you to go to the cinema with me. |
| Emotions | Temo que ya hayan cerrado la tienda.  
| I am afraid that the store may have already closed. |
| Doubt | Dudo que María llegue a tiempo.  
| I doubt that Mary will arrive on time. |
| Desire | Prefiero que te pongas el jersey que te di.  
| I prefer that you wear the sweater that I gave you. |
| Imperative | Hable, no hable, entremos, no entremos, etc.  
| Speak, don’t speak, let’s enter, let’s not enter, etc. |
| Negative expressions | No creo que Juan tenga tiempo de ir al parque mañana.  
| I don’t think that John will have time to go to the park tomorrow. |
| Good | Es bueno que la gente sea tan amable aquí.  
| It is good that people are so nice here. |
| Surprise | Me sorprende que haya tan poca gente en la fiesta.  
| I am surprised that there are so few people at the party. |

The acronym ‘WEDDINGS’ can help students learn the most important uses of the Spanish subjunctive. As a funny way to illustrate grammar, it motivates students and enhances their awareness of how language operates. In the two examples mentioned, the teacher might challenge students to guess what the letters stand for, thus turning the acquisition of grammatical concepts into a game.

The last example comes from an elementary Spanish class in its second week of school. I gave students a list of Spanish verbs to memorize, and I encouraged them to look for ways to remember verbs in a useful and fun way. One student designed the following visual learning strategies to remember the meaning of the verbs:
Easy ways to remember Spanish verbs

**Bailar** – If someone pays **bail** for you it’s a good reason to **dance**

**Buscar** – If you have a **bus** and a **car** you probably are looking for something

**Cantar** – A **cantor** **sings** in a synagogue

**Comprar** – On a **COMputer** you can **buy** **PRAda**

**Contestar** – If you are a **contestant** on a game show you answer questions

**Descansar** – When you put something down to **SCAN** it you rest it on the scanner

**Esperar** – The young woman **dESPERA**tely waits for her love to arrive

**Llegar** – Your **lILlIllegs** help you **arrive** at a place

**Mirar** – You **look at** yourself in the **mirror**

**Tomar** – Tom **takes** two **tomatoes**.

**Trabajar** – Working on a **TRAin** is a **Bad Job**

**Terminar** – What do **exterminators** do? **End** bugs’ lives

In the process of associating each verb with English words that humorously convey the meaning of the Spanish verb, students are able to recall them more easily, thus taking charge of their own learning process. Such a learning strategy, besides facilitating the acquisition of vocabulary, increases the understanding of the figurative meaning of language, and improves the students’ capacity to solve linguistic problems. As teachers, not only do we have to teach linguistic information, it is our responsibility to encourage students to develop their own learning strategies. In this way they learn faster, and become conscious and responsible for their own learning.

**Conclusion**

Humor is a device that creates linguistic awareness in the classroom. Understanding and creating humor in a foreign language means that a language learner is consolidating knowledge and making progress. The different activities presented here are just some of the procedures to be explored in order to show students that learning a foreign language is actually fun. Humor transforms the ambience of the class when students enjoy sharing their playful strategies with others. When everyone benefits, the acquisition of a foreign language becomes “easy,” and learners become motivated and creative.
References
