Marcia Segal

How to have PUN in the ESL Classroom

Punning has been said to be the lowest form of humour. For that very reason, perhaps, we tend to welcome the intention behind the pun rather than the pun itself. We groan but we smile as we do it; the conventional verb in English with a pun is to perpetrate it, as if it were a crime, and our jocularity is the response the perpetrator really wants. Segal recognizes how vital is the confidence that such relaxation and play can bring about when one is learning a second language, and takes the deadly risk of taking humour seriously by exploring a little - so that teachers may know the better what they are doing - the different forms of pun: the homographic, the homophonic, the phonemic, and the inter-lingual. And she demonstrates, using some genuinely funny examples, how effective they can be in such practices of language learning as reinforcing interrogative patterns, establishing certain points of syntax, and testing listening comprehension. The student's own wit, and wits, are brought into play.

The pun, that much maligned form of humour with which we are all too familiar yet to which we cannot fail to respond, whether with a groan, a giggle, or a gasp, can be a valuable pedagogical tool for the teacher of English as a second language. While the value of humour in the classroom has been recognized, I believe that the pun merits special consideration because puns can contribute not only to the students' mastery of English but also to an awareness of the ambiguities of language and the enjoyment to be derived therein. In this paper, I will review briefly the advantages of humour in general and then examine the pun in particular - its nature, its specific application in the classroom, and its special contribution.

The advantages of classroom humour

The virtues of joke telling in second language teaching in particular are extolled by Trachtenberg (1980:9), who encourages not only teacher humour but student humour as well. She points out that:

1. Jokes are short and are mini-lessons in grammar, vocabulary, and speech patterns.
2. They are rule governed.
3. They include a wide range of special patterns.
4. They are common to all cultures.
5. They are a means of transmitting the spirit of a culture.
6. They lead to speech behaviour with broad applications.
7. They are funny.

The primary value of jokes, however, according to Trachtenberg, is in the opportunity which they afford students to "be themselves in an English-speaking milieu." As she explains (1980:9-12), "teaching a language involves... a great deal more than just transmitting the linguistic code of the language," and even communicative competence is a means toward an end, that end being projection of personality.

There is an additional benefit to be gained from the pun in particular - the sheer joy of playing with the language, of realizing that language can be manipulated in unexpected ways. This manipulation can lead to an increased linguistic awareness and to a keener appreciation of language. Let us look now at the pun and how it works.

The nature of the pun

Puns have been variously categorized according to both their levels of grammatical ambiguity and their levels of appearance. What follows is a brief synthesis of the classifications made by Lederer (1981: 33-34), Monnot and Kite (1974: 66-68), and Hammond and Hughes (1978).

1. Homographic Puns

In homographic puns, a single sound or word has two different meanings, and the difference in meaning is not accompanied by a difference in spelling.

When is an eye not an eye? (When an onion makes it water.) Here the word "water" is used as both a noun and an infinitive, and the pun is created by syntactic ambiguity.

Why did your cat join the Red Cross? (It wanted to be a first aid kit.) Here the word "kit" has two meanings, "kitten" and "case", and the pun is created by lexical ambiguity.

2. Homophonic puns

In homophonic puns, a single sound has two meanings and two spellings.

What do you do if you smash your toe? (Call a tow truck.) Here, the sound "to" suggests both "toe" and "tow", creating a lexical ambiguity.

I'm on a seafood diet. Everytime I see food, I eat it. In this pun, there is a play on the sound "see", creating a syntactic ambiguity.

3. Phonemic or double-sounding puns

In these, the intentionality is the most obvious. One sound generates two meanings, as in homographic and homophonic puns, but the second sound, instead of being identical to the first, is merely related to it phonetically.

Why did the guru refuse to be treated with Novocaine at the dentist's office? (He wanted to transcend dental medication.) Here, the ambiguity is phonological (meditation/medication).

Who conquered the world and cuts? (Julius Scissor) Here the ambiguity is again phonological.

Many puns, of course, are ambiguous in more than one way. The name of the motel, the Dew Drop Inn, for example, combines syntactic ("drop" and "inn") and phonological-syntactic ("dew") ambiguity, and it is at the same time a homophonic ("inn"), a homographic ("drop") and a phonemic ("dew") pun.

The application of puns in the classroom

Sources for puns abound - riddles, "knock-knock" jokes, advertisements, greeting cards, slogans, definitions, and works of literature. When introducing puns, the teacher should ensure that the language is that of current English and that the selection is appropriate to the level of the class. Appropriateness is crucial. While "getting" a joke in a second language is a delightful experience, being bewildered by a too clever play on words can be frustrating. Some of the puns in this paper, for example, are appropriate to the readers of a professional journal, but not to an ESL classroom.

There are many ways in which puns can be used in the classroom. They can be applied at several stages of the lesson and to teach various skills. They can be presented, for example, **at the beginning of the class** as a device to gain the attention of the students and to establish a relaxed atmosphere. The teacher might ask a riddle, or write a definition or perhaps a message to the class on the blackboard.

What three keys have legs but won't open doors? (Monkeys, donkeys, and turkeys.)

A gossip is a person with a keen sense of rumour.

Merry Christmas/Merry Christmrs./Merry Christms./ Merry Christmr.

Puns can also be of service in **teaching new material or reviewing material previously taught.** Riddles, for example as Trachtenberg (980:10) has noted, often begin with "what." (It might be added that they also frequently begin with "why", "when", and "who".)

What is the definition of a farmer? (Someone who is outstanding in his field.)

Why did everyone want to be Hitler's secretary? (Because he was a great dictator.)

When is an artist someone to be feared? (When he draws a gun.)

Who takes less time to get ready for a trip - an elephant or a rooster? (A rooster. He takes only his comb while the elephant has to take his trunk.)

Trachtenberg (1980:10) remarks that "the beauty of it all is that you are reinforcing interrogative patterns and teaching vocabulary, all in the course of a real speech event, riddling. We may think of the riddle... as, essentially, models of questions. But the riddles... are not perceived by the students as having anything to do with grammar."

Riddles which are based on phonemic or double-sounding puns can be used in **presenting or reviewing units of pronunciation.**

Where do you put a dog when he's noisy? (In a barking lot.)

Why did the taxi driver keep on talking to this passenger? (Because he knew he had a cabtive audience.)

What did the cow ask the silo? (Is my fodder here?)

"Knock-knock" jokes, most of which present double-sounding puns, also offer an opportunity to practice correct pronunciation.

Knock, knock./Who's there?/Celeste./Celeste who?/ Celeste./Celeste who?/Celeste time I'll tell you.

Knock, knock./Who's there?/Apple./Apple who?/

Knock, knock./Who's there?/Apple./Apple who?/
Knock, knock./Who's there?/Orange./Orange who?/ Orange you glad I didn't say apple?

To present or review points of English syntax, homographic puns are an excellent aid.

What has four wheels and flies? (A garbage truck.)

Many syntactic puns can be found in advertisements, and Monnot and Kite in their article "Pun and Games: Paronomasia in the ESL Classroom" (1974) offer several good illustrations:

We're developing fast (Fotomat)

Our business is picking up (San Fernando Valley Garbage Co.)

Homophonic puns can be used in a lesson on homonyns and **spelling.**

What animal are you when you have a cold? (A little horse.)

How do you make gold soup? (Fourteen carats.)

By their very nature, puns are effective in fostering **listening comprehension.** Often, when one writes a pun, one has to decide which meaning to spell out and which to imply. In spoken punning, however, the listener must decide for himself (Hammond and Hughes, 1978:VIII). Students can also be encouraged, after they have been exposed to puns for a while, to create their own, and a class project might consist of composing, collecting, and compiling puns.

A special type of pun, the inter-lingual pun, can profitably be introduced in a second language class where most or all of the students share the same mother tongue. This is often the situation in Quebec, where there are occasional divisions between the anglophone and francophone communities. In reference to this, Maureen Peterson, Gazette Theatre Critic, recently provided her readers with a good pun (1983:C2). In reviewing a show in which there is no spoken text, she wrote: "This is a show for anglophones and francophones - and those too young yet to have a phone." Fortunately, those who are beginning to acquire a second phone need not rely on an absence of words to share a good laugh with members of the other group. They have a direct line of communication in the inter-lingual pun. Newman (1980:203) gives these examples:

May we? Mais oui.

"I'm lonely,", she said, and pointed to a button she was

wearing that bore the words, "Kiss me. I'm Irish."

"I'm hungry," he said, "Quiche me. I'm French."

She gave him instead a pastry consisting of thin layers of puff pastry inlaid with a cream filling. He cut off a corner and ate it.

"Very good," he said. "Also the first square millefeuille I've had all day."

An advanced class will surely appreciate reading passages from Luis d'Antin van Rooten's book Mots d'Heures: Gousses, Rames: The d'Antin Manuscript.

"Chacun Gille/Houer ne taupe de hile/Tôt-fait, j'appelle au boiteur/Chaque fêle dans un broc, est-ce crosne?"

The author offers the literal translation: Each man named Gille, while hoeing, uncovers a mole and part of a seed. Quickly finished, I call to the limping man that every pitcher has a crack in it. Is it a Chinese cabbage?

The verse, however, is not meant to be translated but rather to be read as is. It reads, of course, in English as: "Jack and Jill/Went up the hill/To fetch a pail of water/ Jack fell down and broke his crown." The author, by arranging French words to form homonymic approximations of familiar English rhymes, has created a joke in French "of which... only English speakers can see the point (Time, 1967:110)." It is precisely this sort of language play which makes the pun so valuable in the ESL classroom.

The special contribution of the pun

In the pun, the joke is in the words. It is the words themselves that fool you. You expect them to mean one thing and they mean another (Schwartz and Rounds, 1978:27). In other forms of humour your expectations are also played with but the joke is not necessarily a verbal one. Contrast, for example, the following riddles:

Why did the fly fly? (Because the spider spied her.)

Why does a stork stand on one leg? (Because if he lifted the other leg, he'd fall.)

The first riddle is a pun, and language oriented, and the second one is not. Certainly many types of riddles, jokes, and humorous games have their place in the language classroom, but the pun is particularly instructive because it is dependent upon linguistic ambiguities. Puns are words at play, and because they are jokes which focus on language, they have two unique advantages.

Firstly, they show students that language itself can be a lot of fun. Students can be shown how to sport with the language, to manipulate it, to delight in it.

Secondly, puns can impress upon students that knowing words is simply not enough. It is how one uses them that is important. Hammond and Hughes, in their book Upon the Pun have included the observation that "the fact that people and trees and elephants and cars all have trunks just proves that there are more things than there are words."(1978:XXI) There are many words in English with multiple meanings, the word "order" for example -

"There is the order that the salesman tries to get, which is quite different from the order that a captain gives to his crew. Some people enter holy orders. There is order in the house when Mother has finished tidying up; there is the batting order of the home-team; there is an order of ham and eggs" (Hayakawa 1963:7-8).

What these examples illustrate, of course, is that the meanings of words are not inherent in the words themselves but in our own semantic reactions to them. Granted, as second language teachers, our aim is not to create semanticists, but how much richer the experience of learning English can be if the students, despite themselves, and with a great deal of enjoyment, begin to achieve an awareness of the wonder of words.

Afterword

What's the definition of a person who tells jokes while walking ropes? (A punambulist)

Knock, knock./Who's there?/Arthur./Arthur who?/Arthur any more jokes?/No. You've been pun-ished enough.

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Marcia Segal, who teaches English part-time, both at Concordia University and in Adult Education at Westmount High School in Montreal, is also studying for a certificate in teaching English as a second language.