

LEARNING WITH LAUGHTER

Συντάχθηκε απο τον/την Άννα Ειρήνη

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When asked, most experienced language teachers will readily admit that they encourage humour and laughter in their classrooms and plan it into their lessons. So what is the role of unplanned and spontaneous humour – moments when the whole class momentarily erupts in laughter before returning to the task at hand?

In the early days of each course, when they meet their class for the first time, language teachers convey many hidden messages through their body language, their overall demeanour and the manner in which they address their students. One clear message (usually implicit) relates to the kind of atmosphere they wish to foster in their classroom.

In order to develop a spirit of informality within their classes such teachers attempt to reduce the social distance between themselves and their students by behaving in friendly and approachable ways. They smilingly encourage students to speak and applaud their efforts, being supportive when errors are made.

They may sometimes demonstrate in a humorous way that they themselves find unfamiliar sounds difficult to pronounce. If they make an error on the board (as most teachers do from time to time) they may make a quick quip to show that they are not embarrassed – and to demonstrate that mistakes are a natural part of the learning process.

When it is appropriate to pull individuals into line, teachers tend to do so firmly but with a light touch, returning to the business of the lesson as quickly as possible. (By disciplining students with humour, teachers reduce the risk of alienating potentially tricky individuals.)

Language learners quickly absorb the message that their teacher welcomes spontaneous laughter within the classroom (provided it is of the supportive 'laughing with' and not of the destructive 'laughing at' kind). Sensing that their teacher has given them permission to laugh, many classes start to relax and to behave in readily responsive ways.

They then find themselves laughing spontaneously at the myriad unexpected events, errors and misunderstandings that routinely occur in language classes. Once it is understood that laughter is acceptable, students will see the funny side of daily occurrences that an outsider might not

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consider amusing.

Not all language classes respond equally readily to the humorous initiatives of their teachers. For a variety of reasons students in some classes remain relatively unresponsive throughout their courses. Sometimes it takes longer for classes to relax and become readily responsive. Teachers can often pinpoint a particular moment when the class laughed spontaneously for the first time – often at a quite trivial event. When this happens the teacher relaxes, feels more confident – and is inspired to teach more imaginatively and enthusiastically.

Language teachers use a number of specific techniques to ensure that their classes continue to be laughter-filled. In the early days of their classes, experienced teachers are on the alert for quick-witted, extroverted individuals with whom they can develop a bantering relationship. Students who are prepared to act as the teacher's foil, even to the extent of light-hearted cheekiness, can provide a focal point for the class, enabling shyer individuals to enjoy the interaction by watching and listening and laughing on cue.

Over the years experienced teachers develop personal tried and tested techniques, in the form of facial expressions, exaggerated gestures, plays on words, well-worn quips and so on that they know from experience are likely to engender laughter and give a quick injection of vitality into the lesson. They know, too, which interactive language learning activities are likely to enliven the class. They are aware, however, that students can become overexcited and that laughter can get out of control.

As they progress, language classes develop their individual cultures: bodies of shared understandings about the personalities, passions, strengths, weaknesses and foibles of individuals within the class. Each class also develops a collective memory of the various incidents that have occurred within that particular class. This sense of friendly intimacy enables short bursts of laughter to be invoked by reference (either by the teacher or by a student) to previous events that the class found amusing.

Humour is, of course, a powerful force in any situation and a highly complex phenomenon. There are obviously times when humour is detrimental to the well-being of individuals. Teasing is a case in point. While some students are happy to be foregrounded (for example, by being given a nickname) others are not. Jokes that were funny first time round can quickly wear thin. Most teachers who include teasing in their personal repertoire of laughter-engendering techniques back off quickly if they see that they are causing offence.

Although it has the potential to be used unwisely, experienced language teachers see laughter as a positive force in their classrooms. They regard whole-class laughter as a welcome behaviour and cultivate it. For teachers, regular small bursts of laughter are a vital and reassuring sign that their class is functioning cohesively and responsively.

Experienced language teachers know that good teaching involves far more than technical proficiency: it involves encouraging each class to function as collectively as possible. Judicious use of humour is a great way to encourage classes to develop into friendly, lively, mutually supportive social groups.

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