

## HUMOUR IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING

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*In this work we discuss humour and its uses in second language teaching citing examples from some European and African languages, more specifically Russian and Ghanaian humours. Our analysis suggest that there exist a common thread running through culture and humour in foreign language teaching since understanding humour is knowledge of the culture of the studied language. We conclude that humours should be used in foreign language classes as teaching material, especially at the advanced levels and should be one of the goals of teaching and learning. This is due largely to the motivational role that it plays in the teaching process. The type of humour to use in the teaching process depends on the level, age, culture of the learners as well as the pedagogical goals. For different traditions and countries there is different sense of humour. Although, there are some similarities in Russians and Ghanaians humour, many cross cultural humour differences can be observed in these cultures. A major challenge encountered in the use of humour in the teaching process is the sense of humour of the learner and inadequate knowledge of the culture of the studies language. General and specific recommendations aimed at finding out how and what kinds of humour can be used in foreign language teaching are also made.*

**Keywords:** foreign language teaching, culture, humour, motivation, atmosphere of classes, sense of humour, jokes

All over the world, people laugh by listening to humours. Interestingly, many people of different nations find their native humours to be the best in comparison with others. This may be partly attributed to the fact that they may often not understand the funny aspects of some jokes of other natives. There may even be situations where the humour in one language may not be funny in another language but rather offensive. According to some researchers humour aids the learning of not only the language and culture of native speakers, but also serves as a motivation, in that, it is easier to teach and learn anything including a foreign language in a humorous atmosphere.

Inspite of the many advantages that the use of humour offers in the teaching of foreign languages there appears not to be emphasis by instructors in the use of this pedagogical tool. One reason that may be attributed to this occurrence is the high recognition that the classroom is a serious place where humour plays no role. A major result of the partial negligence of this pedagogical tool is the production of students who find it difficult to fit into the countries of studied languages. Research questions that arise are: should

humour be used as a language teaching and learning material or language teaching and learning goal in the learning process? Which type of humours can be understood by beginners and which may not be understood even by advanced learners? Is there only a language barrier to the understanding of humours from other languages or there is something else?

In this paper we analyze the use of humour in the teaching of foreign languages, paying particular attention to its importance, challenges encounters in an attempt to use humour in the teaching of a foreign language and the methodological issues using examples from Ghanaian and Russian humours. Such discussions are quite important since it will provide instructors in the teaching of foreign languages guidelines for using this essential pedagogical tool. The paper is based on an extensive literature review on the topic as well as our experience in the use of humour in the teaching of Russian Language over the past decade.

The paper has 6 sections. Section 2 gives a situational analysis of the use of humour and culture in the teaching and learning of foreign languages, while Section 3 discusses the importance and choice of using humour in language classes. Section 4 provides some insight into how to use humours in the teaching of foreign languages. Section 5 presents how Russian humour is introduced in Russian Language Classes in Ghana and how do students appreciate it. The last section concludes the paper.

## Culture, Humour and Foreign Language Teaching and Learning

Descartes, the great French philosopher, the “Father of Modern Philosophy” said: “*Cogito, ergo sum*” which means *I am thinking, therefore I exist*. One can also apply his idea in studying cultures. What this implies is that as many different people there are, so also do we have many different thinking; as many different social groups there are so also do we have many different opinions or as many different nations there are, so also do we have many different cultures, etc. This to some extent explain the reason why sometimes people do not understand each other – they think differently and therefore have different expectations, measures, ethics, traditions, humour etc. Many researchers such as Gaydova (1999) or Jakabffy (2010), among others have studied and continue to study this issues.

This different thinking of individuals is well seen in foreign language learning. In language teaching, an instructor can easily see that students are often motivated differently, largely as a result of the different thinking and reasons for learning a language. While someone may learn a foreign language, because he/she may like the culture of the country where the language is spoken or just for the like of the language, others may learn a language because they want to acquire an additional language to make them bilingual and more competitive on the job market. In general, there are many reasons why people learn languages though majority accept the fact that languages are learnt mainly for communication purposes.

Current methodologies in foreign language teaching are not only based on communication alone, but also on the culture of the people where that particular language is spoken. *Culture* in this context is defined differently by researchers (Csajbok-Twerefou, 2010a). We understand *culture* in this context as a summary of geographical location, language(s), political and social life, etiquette, traditions etc. of a nation.

There are humours that are international in nature, though many humours are normally confined to particular nations, often portraying their own culture and social norms. For example there exist jokes in different countries on the police, blonds, different religions, etc. Such humours can be considered as international. There are also humours that can be considered as international but are polished according to national culture and norms.

Jokes, anecdotes and funny stories often describing traditions, habits or norms of inhabitants of a particular country are national in nature. Also, many countries have their funny characters, such as *Moricka* in Hungary or *Vovka* in Russia around which jokes are created. In many situations, national humour often underlines the weakness of the state; humour of subcultures makes jokes on the weakness of the subculture etc.

### Importance and Choice of Humour in Language Teaching

The main goal of education is the development and self-development of the human being as personality in the teaching and learning process. In language teaching it can be illustrated with the saying: "One is worth as many people as the languages one knows".

Jokes and anecdotes of a culture or nation may be used in language teaching classes because they are humorous and very well describe the everyday life of the native speakers of the studied language. However, she remarks that the methodology of the use of humour in language teaching is not well developed. Ginman and Ungern-Sternberg (2003:73) observed that "humour can be used to lighten up the class and to provide variety" and therefore advisable to use them in all territories and levels of language teaching.

Using humour in classes helps to motivate students. Holmes and Marra (2002:1687) in their work stated that humour may help "to construct and sustain relationships which contribute to workplace harmony by expressing solidarity". However, one has to be careful with the use of humour since they can be used to express "subversive attitudes or aggressive feelings". Others believe that "there is much evidence to suggest that the message is more easily registered if presented with humour..." (Ginman & Ungern-Sternberg, 2003:76).

In tertiary education, one can say that the classroom is the workplace for students and lecturers as well. Therefore, carefully chosen humour can be used in classes to create a better working atmosphere. Some students do not want to speak or contribute in class because they are afraid that their colleagues will laugh at them. Additionally, the current world order has created tension in most working environments. People are stressed at home, on the streets, at their workplaces including schools. As Ghos (2009:7) put it, "all work and no play and relax make life very dull and moody". It is for this reason that humour becomes very important since in many cases it can lighten up or remove existing tension in the work environment.

Berk and Tan (2008) found that laughing reduces stress hormones. Therefore, when students observe that the class is organized in a humorous way, that is students and lecturers laugh together, those who are often shy to talk will relax and laugh as well.

Students in a "lightened" atmosphere will forget about their problem of being afraid to talk in class. While laughing, they have already "contributed", they have done the first step, stop thinking about their worries and will be able to speak without any fears.

If a foreign humour is different from that of the learners, it can also serve as motivation. Researchers have found out that a striking contrast between the studied and learner's languages helps the learners to acquire the new language (Putz, 2003). That is because the differences make the foreign language more interesting and attractive, which are motivating factors.

In teaching translation, humour can also play a motivational role. In addition it may also help to show the differences in the correct and incorrect variations of the possible translations. In some cases, one can illustrate how a translator may misunderstand or mistranslate something. For example in English-Russian translation *Mother Her, She is ill* will read like this — «*Окружи её заботой, она болеет*», and not «*Мать её, она больная*».

Although the use of humour is recommended in language classes, but the choice of humour should depend on the age, gender, religion, traditions etc. of the learner. The language instructor should know what is allowed and what is not allowed not only in the foreign language but also in the native language of the learners as well since the use of some kind of humour may be prohibited in some cultures. In multinational countries, for example, jokes on other nations may be very sensitive.

Some humour in the studied language can be understood by beginners easily. These include humours containing simple words and phrases; based on general human behaviour and characteristics, such as cleverness-stupidity, successfulness-misadventure, etc. Others such as jokes, used satire or sarcasm could be understood only by advanced learners.

Although we emphasis on the use of humour in language classes as a pedagogical tool, knowing how to use foreign jokes is very important, especially at the advanced level of language learning. At this level, students should have enough vocabulary, grammatical and cultural knowledge on the language and the country whose language is being learnt. Jokes and humours are delicate parts of all foreign cultures. In view of the fact that advanced learners should be introduced to the nuances of language and culture, it is important for them to know how humour can or may be used in social interactions. Since they may have opportunities to use the studied language for communication in real situations, they may come across humour in everyday life. Humour reduces stress and therefore could be used in serious circumstances such as official or business meetings, difficult and unexpected situations, in comments, in communications between different generations or people of different social status etc.

A major challenge one might meet is the different sense of humour of the individual learners. As earlier was discussed, humour varies among different countries. Although humour is mostly welcomed in classes, it can be appreciated differently depending on the individual's sense of humour and the culture and traditions of his or her country. In some cases students do not understand the joke not because of the language barrier, but rather because of the cultural or individual's characteristics. In Ghana, for example there are different humours in Twi and in English; humour used in a society can change the sense of humour of the people. A joke in one language (for example in Twi – it is the main Ghanaian local language) can be funny for a person, but the same person may not laugh at the same joke if it is made in another language (in English or in Russian – in this case). Consequently, we can say that, mother tongue or official language influences the sense of humour of a person, which sometimes may affect the success of the use of humour in language classes.

## How to use Humour in Foreign Language Classes

In language teaching one can apply different kinds of humour. In the teaching of civilization or culture it can be used to show the differences between the studied and the native culture of learners. Moreover, using humour, one can illustrate and teach the culture of the studied country at the same time.

For oral classes, the most helpful humour can be found in short comedies or cartoons. It is not difficult to find a (part of a) film where the theme of the lesson is shown in a humorous aspect. The ideal thing is to use a complete cinema or a short film, though parts of the films may also be used. After the cartoon or film or a part of them has been shown, exercises should be given to the students that allows them to better understand the film. It is also important for instructors to note that using films in the teaching of a language requires some initial preparation from the instructor (Csajbok-Twerefou, 2010a).

In the teaching of grammar, funny pictures and caricatures are very helpful. Some texts and grammar books are full of funny illustrations that are very humorous. Even if the particular book used in the classroom does not contained such humorous pictures, adequate illustrations should be obtained from other books.

The view that reading is more interesting if there are illustrations is not new. However, reading becomes more interesting if the illustrations are humorous. A student may not understand the texts of a story, but the funny illustrations may motivate him/her to re-read the story again. The reason is that understanding why the rest of the class is laughing is a motivational factor for him/her to read the text again. In situations where the story is not humorous, the presence of caricatures makes reading the story interesting.

Funny cartoons can also be used at all levels of teaching, although in Ghana some students do not appreciate cartoons when they are first introduced. The general view in Ghana is that – cartoons are for kids and from this view comes the conclusion that they should not be used in tertiary education. This view to some extent confirms the findings of Ginman and von Ungern-Sternberg's (2003) which investigated the use of cartoons in companies' communication and concluded that for some people cartoons cannot be taken seriously because they are used as entertainment. In the midst of this view, the authors conducted an experiment by using cartoons in language teaching of beginners. The cartoon used is the famous *Nu, pogodi* (it is a Russian cartoon about a wolf and hare with very little speech but a lot of humour). Results of the experiment indicate that the little speeches, humours and the characters used in the cartoon were very useful in studying the language. They made it easy for the students to enjoy, appreciate and understand the cartoon.

The most appropriate cartoons in language teaching are those where the characters are based on national requirement of the human behaviour. Using those cartoons, one can teach not only the language but the traditional manners of the nation. In the near past, some new cartoons were made in Russia based on Russian history and legends (Prince Vladimir and others). These films are good not only for oral classes but for lessons in civilization as well. However, the language of the cartoons is not easy. Therefore it can be used only at advanced levels. Apart from cartoons there are other humorous films and stories which are useful for students at intermediate and advanced levels. For beginners the use of caricatures is also advisable in teaching, especially in teaching grammar and reading.

In a gist we have demonstrated that humour should be used in language classes. However, efforts should be made to ensure that the serious part of the language teaching and learning process is not affected by the use of humour.

### Russian Humour in Russian Language Classes in Ghana

*“In Ghana, to refer to a comedian as a fool is not an offense but a firm approval of his mastery of the art of making others laugh at their own follies”* (Adam, 2010:1). This is because of the influence of the main local language – Twi – on English. In Twi, there is no word for comedian; the word *gyiminii* ‘fool’ is used. For foreigners, mostly those “fools” acts as clowns. They dress in white, paint their faces in white and mainly speak in Twi. The Ghanaian public really like them and laugh at their programmes.

Feinberg (1978:15, 68) noted that, in Ghana superiority often takes place in humour. He refers to a Ghanaian student, who said that Ghanaians insult people because of their physical imperfections. Many students today disagreed with that statement, because in many Ghanaian cultures there is a belief that if someone makes humour from another person’s physical problem, then the “joker” himself will have the same problem in future. Also, people often call others “obolo” because they are fat. In Ghana to be called “fat” in the past was more likely not to be an insult but rather used as a sign of affluence. The situation is changing today as many females do not want to be fat. Also, as Nsoah and McVey (2002:4) noted in their orientation to Ghanaian culture, one should be careful to compare people to animals, such as “as cute as a monkey” or “as dirty as a pig” because it is not accepted.

According to Adam (2010:2), some Ghanaians believe their own comedians have no sense of humour. As he noted the “taste” of Ghanaians has changed. Now jokes are often said in English and the comedians are people who have returned home from abroad. Their programmes are really different from the face-painted comedians.

Even though Ghanaian culture is very rich, westernisation exists at many levels of the Ghanaian life. Not only comedians are returning from abroad, but also “simple” Ghanaians as well, who brought with themselves some western culture. In addition to this, the official language – English – also plays a major role in today’s Ghana. Therefore in this African country humour is now a mixture of Ghanaian and western cultures (Csajbok-Twerefou, 2010b).

In Russia there are many short funny stories or anecdotes. Most of them describe the life of people in a humorous way. Sometimes some of the areas of the country's life are not open for criticism. In such cases humour helps to say what is not accepted to be said in serious forms. During the soviet era these types of criticisms were quite developed in the Soviet Union. Today, they are still being used in many areas, such as government, police, schools, health, among others though to a lesser extent. Apart from this, Russia is also a multinational country and as such there are many jokes about the different nationalities. Russian humour is mostly ironical and less direct. To understand Russian humour, foreigners need to know many lingua-cultural features of the country.

In the past, students at the intermediate level in Russian language were introduced to Russian humour in a few ways. They used grammar textbooks that had some jokes and funny pictures at the end of almost every lesson. The textbook used in oral classes is based on the famous Russian "video journal" *Yeralash*.

At the second year of their study, students are confronted with the challenge of knowing the similarities and differences in Ghanaian and Russian humours. Many students do not understand the caricatures in the text books because of the cultural differences between Ghana and Russia. Here come some examples from the grammar textbook used in class. Some of the pictures and jokes are clear for all.

*The teacher is pointing on the map with a pencil:*

*„What is this?“ – he asked.*

*„This is a pencil“ – answered the student.*

Or

*An old woman is addressing a young salesman in the Eye Clinic:*

*“Good morning, young lady. Are my glasses ready?“ she asked.*

As one can see, these jokes contain very simple vocabulary and humour. This is very important for the students because they meet (foreign?) humour in an easy way. It also helps to introduce more complex humours in future, where the words are more difficult, or one needs some background information to understand the humour.

The next caricature in the textbook and the accompanying text belong to the above mentioned type. In this case, the background information is necessary for the students to understand the humour because of the difference between Ghanaian and (in this case) Russian cultures and societies.

*A girl is reading a feminine magazine in bed.*

*“Shhhh! She is studying!“ – says the mother to the father.*

No Ghanaian student will laugh at this picture. Why? In Ghana children's life differs from that of Europe. To judge, whose quality of life is better – a Ghanaian or an European child's is not part of this study. However, it is important to know that, in Ghana children are involved in many household chores. Therefore, in some Ghanaian families performing household chores by the child to some extent is more important than studying. In many cases children can study only when they finish their household chores. In other words, nobody cares about a peaceful environment while a child is studying. Furthermore, in the above joke, the girl is even not learning but reading a feminine magazine.

The following examples further illustrate the differences between Ghanaian and Russian cultures. It is important to know that, in Ghana men mainly take decisions on several key issues.

*Two women are talking:*

*“My husband has stopped smoking.”*

*“Wow! He has a really strong character.”*

*“He hasn’t! I have it!”*

Or

*“Mum, please give me 50 kopeks”- the son asked the mother.*

*“I also need one ruble” – said the daughter.*

*“Darling, could you please give me thirty rubles?” – asked the husband.*

*“What has happened?” – asked mother.*

*“Did you forget? Today is your birthday.”*

In many families in Ghana, especially in the rural areas, only the husband works and gives the women money to take care of the family. Therefore, the above situation hardly happens. More over birthday celebrations are mainly for kids and not as common for adults as it is in Europe.

Another caricature, where a *father is sitting with the kids and trying to entertain them* with the following text : *“When mum is not at home”* was also not funny for the Ghanaian students. This is because in traditional Ghanaian families, it rarely happens that the father has to take care of the children. If the mother is busy, there is often another woman from the family – sister, aunt, grandmother etc. – who can help. Also, in Ghana the extended family system permits generations to live together and most houses employ house-helpers or nannies. Thus, hardly will there be a situation where the father takes care of the children alone at home.

With regards to the *Yeralas*, the short Russian films for oral classes, it is important to note that the first films were shot in the 1970s. The actors are children but the stories are not only for kids. One film is made up of 2-3 minutes funny story, mostly with an unexpected funny ending.

Using those films, the atmosphere in oral classes was quite “lightened”. Students were relaxed and contributed actively. Since the language of the used films is very simple or the same phrases are repeated several times, students were able to memorise new vocabulary quickly. Moreover, the films are humorous and students were able to quickly remember some of the jokes and even used them after classes.

Most of the lessons and the films became students’ favourite even though some of them did not understand the jokes. The inability of a few of the students to understand some of the films can be attributed to the language barrier though the cultural differences also played a significant role.

In future the book, written in Hungary by Russian and Hungarian colleagues, will hopefully be translated and adopted for Ghanaian (African) students, who study Russian language as a foreign language. However, we think that the use of the textbook and those films were useful because in class students were introduced to the Russian culture and language through some Russian humours.

## Conclusion

The use of humor in foreign language teaching processes is very important though many instructors have not made it one of the pedagogical goals. In this work, using our experience in the teaching of Russian language we discuss humour and its uses in second language teaching citing examples from Russian and Ghanaian humours. Our analysis suggest that there exist a common thread running through culture and humour in foreign language teaching since understanding humour is not only linked to the level of understanding of the language but also knowledge of the culture of the studied language.

We conclude that humours should be used in foreign language classes as teaching material, especially at the intermediate and advanced levels and should be one of the goals of the teaching and learning processes. This is due largely to the motivational role that it plays in the teaching process. The type of humour to use in the teaching process depends on the level, age, culture of the learners as well as the pedagogical goals. For different traditions and countries there are different humour expectations. Although there are some similarities in Russian and Ghanaian humours, many cross cultural humour differences can be observed in these cultures. A major challenge encountered in the use of humour in the teaching process is the sense of humour of learners and inadequate knowledge of the culture of the studied language.

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