

Book review

Rucynski, John Jr. & Prichard, Caleb (eds.). (2020). *Bridging the Humour Barrier: Humour Competency Training in English Language Teaching*. Lanham: Lexington Books.

Despite the rapidly expanding research on humour in education, humour is still faced with ambivalent feelings and resisted therein. Such reservations come as no surprise if we consider the fact that humour has for a long time been perceived as morally suspect, hostile, and inappropriate behaviour, and hence as undesirable, irrelevant, or inconsequential in/by institutions with ‘serious’, ‘practical’, ‘useful’, and ‘moral’ methods and goals such as education (see among others Cook 2000; Bell & Pomerantz 2016: viii; Tsakona 2013: 283-296, and references therein). It is only recently, and perhaps due to a “playful turn” in education (Bell & Pomerantz 2016: 5) and a broader cultural shift from negative to positive evaluations and perceptions of humour (Morreall 2010; see also Billig 2005), that scholars and teachers increasingly argue for the inclusion of humour in contemporary classrooms as well as for the benefits of such a change. Thus, humour is usually perceived and recommended as a classroom management tool smoothing and regulating student–teacher interaction, and as a facilitator of learning improving its outcomes.

The objections to using humour in class appear to remain strong when it is proposed that humour could become an *object* of study in language courses. It seems that so far very few studies explore the process of teaching students what humour is and how it works in communication. This is, of course, directly related to the fact that teachers have not been trained in humour theory or analysis and are usually unfamiliar with research concerning what humour is, how it works, etc., so they feel inadequate in teaching about humour as a pragmatic phenomenon during language courses.

All this could be described in terms of a vicious circle: negative evaluations and reservations against humour prevent it from being accepted as a useful resource for classroom management and/or for enhancing learning (i.e. *teaching with humour*). The subsequent absence of humour from educational settings further fosters such negative evaluations and reservations as students and teachers seem to naturalise the ‘insignificance’ of humour and its ‘non-serious’ quality. Hence, humour is undervalued and not welcome as an object of study (i.e. *teaching about humour*) and its functions and affordances remain unexplored and implicit among its users. This, in turn, takes us back to where we started from: the ‘non seriousness’, ‘inconsequentiality’, and ‘immorality’ of humour. Since humour is not part of language learning, there ‘must’ be something ‘unacceptable’, ‘insignificant’, and even ‘suspect’ about it (for a more detailed discussion, see Tsakona 2020: 139-162).

In this sense, teaching about humour appears to be one of the most powerful ways to break the vicious circle. If dispelling prejudice against humour is one of the goals of humour research in general, the analysis of humour in language courses should be promoted as a means to this end. The volume reviewed here aims exactly at dispelling prejudice against humour, and specifically concentrates on teaching about humour as part of courses of English as a second/foreign/additional (henceforth L2) language.

Taking into consideration the distinction between teaching with humour and teaching about humour (see above), the volume programmatically focuses on the latter, which is indeed a research area much less explored than the former. So, in their “Introduction” to the volume, the editors underline the need for what they call *humour competency training*, namely learners’ “sufficient ability to deal with humour both receptively and productively to meet one’s needs in the target language” (p. x). Humour competency involves recognising, comprehending, appreciating, responding to, and producing humour, and training in such skills is possible not only in class but also outside it, for example, during interactions with speakers who use the target language as L1 (i.e. first language or mother tongue). The editors also propose specific best practices for humour competency training, such as setting clear objectives related to learners’ needs and the curriculum, overviewing the potential functions, benefits, and consequences of humour, providing explicit instruction on the relevant microskills that need to be acquired, using numerous examples, offering extensive practicing opportunities, and encouraging reflection and feedback on the training process. They also come up with specific methodological steps which could help teachers and researchers conduct full empirical studies on teaching about humour, including, among other things, the use of authentic humorous data, pretests and posttests, and triangulation to assess the humorous material and learners’ reactions to it. What is underlined as the main point of the introduction but also of the whole volume is that humour competency training would rather become part of L2 teaching curricula and, to this end, it is necessary not only to deflect teachers’ reservations and objections, but, most importantly, to put forward specific teaching proposals and guidelines to convince and support them.

The volume is divided into three parts based on the topics of the individual chapters. Part I involves the development of humour competency outside the classroom. The opening chapter is written by Anne Pomerantz and titled “Working backward from funny: Preparing language learners to use humour in intercultural encounters”. The chapter is premised on the observation that most approaches to humour competency training have so far focused on humour reception, namely on learners’ making ‘proper’ sense of humorous utterances or texts, and on the cultural knowledge required to achieve this (pp. 2, 20). Instead of continuing this line of research, the author chooses to concentrate on humour production and, in particular, on providing some answers or guidelines concerning how to train learners to create “funny” as a possible social meaning (p. 2). To this end, she proposes that teachers could come up with activities cultivating four specific communicative skills directly related to the production of humour: 1) creating, establishing, and checking for shared knowledge through encouraging learners to rely on the immediate interactional context to produce humour in L2; 2) playing to and with generic expectations, namely training learners not only to recognise and employ humorous genres, but also to manipulate them for humorous purposes; 3) attending to the end game, that is, making deliberate discursal choices to indicate that their utterances or texts are meant to be interpreted as humorous; and 4) concentrating on delivery, namely using appropriate phonetic resources and paying attention to timing to achieve a humorous effect in interaction. Pomerantz also suggests that teaching for humour competency may significantly benefit from findings and theoretical assumptions coming from research on language teaching from an intercultural perspective. More specifically, viewing language and culture not as well-defined, finite, and unchanging sets of knowledge without internal variation, but as open resources allowing speakers to build a wide range of identities drawing from different linguocultural repertoires, could equip learners with “a much more flexible capacity to read people, situations and events” (Kramsch 2008: 391). Thus, learners could become capable of reflecting on their discursal choices and interpretations and of seeing meanings from multiple perspectives, a skill which is most pertinent to humorous communication.

In the chapter titled “Humour competency: The role of sociopragmatic knowledge in expressions of humour in intercultural interaction”, Jules Winchester highlights the fact that

sociopragmatic knowledge may be more helpful for humour processing in intercultural encounters than strictly linguistic knowledge. In order to analyse humorous instances coming from interviews with Japanese women speaking English as an L2 and living in Britain, she employs Meyer's (2000) distinction between *uniting* and *dividing* functions of humour. The first ones include *identification* for building rapport and reducing tension, and *clarification*, namely offering explanations concerning individual positions and social norms. The second ones include the *enforcement* of social norms through criticism, and *differentiation* through ridiculing outgroup members. Winchester argues that sociopragmatic knowledge may be more helpful and necessary in cases of dividing humour than in cases of uniting humour. In line with the rest of the volume, the author suggests that humour competency training in class is required to develop learners' ability to "explore the wider contextual issues that make [the] use of humour appropriate or inappropriate" (p. 41). To this end, she proposes different types of tasks: *awareness-raising tasks* based on exposure to, and comprehension of, humour; *interpretation tasks* concentrating on the prosodic, discursal, paralinguistic, etc. details of authentic humorous examples; and *communication practice tasks* encouraging learners to produce humour themselves.

In her chapter on "Feeling inadequate: Lessons from cross-cultural adaptation to help learners get over inadequacies in humour competency", Maria Ramirez de Arellano discusses how humour may enable L2 learners adapt to a new culture and how it could contribute to their intercultural competence; in other words, how humour could function as an assimilation tool, since it may assist L2 learners in familiarising themselves with the particularities of L2 culture. Even though more information on the methodology and specific goals of her data collection would be welcome, the examples coming from L2 learners of English originating in Spain and living in Ireland bring to the limelight their interpretations and strategies concerning how and why humour works (or does not work) in their interactions with Irish people. Ramirez de Arellano suggests that factors such as language competence, cultural awareness, cultural proximity, individual affinities and compatibility are significant for successful intercultural communication through humour. Still, humour miscommunication (i.e. humour failing to elicit amusement) and humorous miscommunication (i.e. utterances or exchanges perceived as humorous but not originally intended as such) are unavoidable in intercultural encounters. Finally, the author also makes suggestions about how L2 teachers could cultivate learners' humour competency. Among other things, teachers could raise learners' awareness of the cultural and linguistic aspects of humour, familiarise them with differences in cultural values, norms, and behaviours, and enable them to interpret, reflect on, and eventually learn from instances of humour miscommunication and failure in intercultural interaction.

Part II pertains to integrated humour instruction, concentrating more on what happens (or may happen) in class when cultivating L2 learners' humour competency. Mohammad Ali Heidari-Shahreza's chapter on "Humour-integrated language learning (HILL): Teaching with and about humour" is the first one in the volume to provide specific examples of teaching activities including humorous texts. Before that, the author puts forward a model for teaching with and about humour simultaneously (see HILL in the chapter title). Drawing on Bell & Pomerantz (2016), he claims that teaching about humour and cultivating learners' humour competency involves training in identifying, comprehending, responding to, and producing humour. More specifically, identifying contextualisation cues for humour, comprehending its meanings through evoking the necessary sociocultural and linguistic knowledge, offering appropriate responses according to whether humour is perceived as successful or failed, and producing various forms and styles of humour with positive (pro-social) or negative (anti-social) functions are all important aspects of teaching about humour. The HILL instructional cycle includes three phases: *pedagogical outcomes*, namely the goals set by the teacher; *evidence of attainment*, namely the tools assessing whether the proposed activities had an impact on learners' performance; and *humour integration* consisting of

the learning activities designed to be implemented in class. The author offers three examples (i.e. a humorous short story, a scene from a sitcom, and a comic strip) to illustrate how HILL could be used to raise learners' humour competency. Finally, Heidari-Shahreza comes up with certain practical guidelines for the application of HILL. Among other things, he underlines the significance of investigating whether humour is deemed appropriate for language teaching as a prerequisite for humour integration in class, while he also insists on its constant and systematic implementation for best results, and on exploiting authentic humorous material either produced by the learners themselves in class or brought by them to class.

One of the most interesting and well-written chapters of the volume is Scott Gardner's "Junior high English textbook interactional humour: Pragmatic possibilities". Gardner sets out to investigate the instances of interactional humour included in a set of textbooks coming from different sources and addressing different sociocultural audiences. He points out that humour in general and interactional humour in particular are not easy to find in such material, because textbook creators are not convinced about the popularity and effectiveness of such uses of humour and/or because teaching pragmatic differences and functions in detail is rarely among the goals of L2 textbooks. In this context, Gardner isolates and classifies exchanges marked as humorous and intended to be perceived as such, and exploits Schnurr's (2010) three general functions of humour to analyse them: 1) reinforcing solidarity; 2) doing power; and 3) resisting and challenging. Gardner does not only provide in-depth analyses, but also offers insightful and helpful suggestions on how to use such examples for teaching the pragmatics of humour in class, so as to familiarise L2 learners with how humour is performed and, most importantly, what it means or entails for interlocutors' social relationships. Since the analysed material is obviously inauthentic and could hence mislead learners about how humour is employed in L2, teachers could, as Gardner suggests, complement it with interactional humour coming from real-life contexts and authentic texts or even attempt to produce humour themselves in their interactions with learners before, during, and after class. Thus, Gardner's contribution manages to establish a clear and strong link between teaching objectives (i.e. teaching humour competency as part of learners' pragmatic skills), the material used to achieve them, its pragmatic analysis, and its exploitation during the teaching process – and all this is presented in a critical and convincing manner.

The chapter titled "Reading jokes in English: How English language learners appreciate and comprehend humour" by Nadezda Pimenova reports on two studies investigating joke comprehension by L2 learners of English. For the purposes of these studies, learners were asked to rate the jokes' levels of funniness and easiness to understand, as well as to write down which words made comprehension difficult in each joke. The set of jokes examined includes not only American ones, but also jokes with references to learners' cultures, and jokes with cultural references from other cultures unrelated to those of the learners' ones. The findings of her studies, Pimenova claims, could assist L2 teachers in realising what may prevent learners from getting the jokes, so as to help them overcome such obstacles through L2 teaching. In accordance with previous similar studies, it is suggested that L2 proficiency (including vocabulary comprehension) as well as sufficient background knowledge are key factors for understanding jokes. Interestingly, jokes including disparaging humour appear to be easier to understand cross-culturally, perhaps because "disparaging humour is very common and may be present in many cultures" (p. 149), hence learners are most probably familiar with how it works. Pimenova concludes that, in order to enhance learners' humour competency and, in particular, their joke comprehension, teachers would rather concentrate on how to increase learners' sociocultural knowledge about the L2, offer opportunities for performing and recognising humorous texts in class, and improve their learners' vocabulary.

Part III comprises four chapters on explicit humour competency training, where contributors describe, analyse, and evaluate their own efforts as L2 teachers to cultivate L2 learners' humour

competency in class. In their chapter titled “Humour competency training for sarcasm and jocularity”, Caleb Prichard & John Rucynski Jr. begin with a theoretical discussion of the difficulties in detecting and comprehending forms of verbal irony such as sarcasm and jocularity, which can lead to miscommunication not only in cross-cultural interactions but also among speakers of the same L1. Given that in English such phenomena appear to be more common than in some other languages, L2 learners of English would rather be trained to detect and understand them in discourse as part of their humour competency. The authors distinguish between sarcasm and jocularity. The former involves ironic criticism, namely positive language with negative intent; the latter involves ironical praise, namely negative language with positive intent (pp. 167, 169). They also underline the importance of verbal, prosodic, and visual cues for identifying and framing discourse as ironic. Based on empirical data coming from two studies, Prichard & Rucynski suggest that explicit teaching about verbal ironic phenomena in L2 courses may indeed yield positive results: L2 learners usually improve their skills in identifying verbal irony through the analysis of prosodic, visual, or contextual cues. The discussion is rounded up with certain guidelines for such training. They propose that teachers would rather use numerous examples of sarcasm and/or jocularity coming from authentic (con)texts, whether oral or written ones. Teaching is expected to be done in simple language (i.e. to avoid specialised terminology that learners may find hard to understand) and to place emphasis on the diverse cues used to frame utterances as sarcastic or jocular. It would also be beneficial if L2 learners were offered opportunities to produce sarcastic or jocular utterances themselves and to reflect on their sociopragmatic functions and potential (positive or negative) effects in interaction.

In his chapter titled “Theory, content knowledge, input, and output: Elements in the teaching and learning of humour competence”, Richard J. Hodson begins with the observation that, even though relevant research highlights the significance of cultivating L2 learners’ humour competency, teachers often perceive it as a challenge due to their own lack of confidence or time, their focus on subjects other than humour which are deemed as easier to teach, their inability to find suitable materials, etc. It is exactly in this context that Rodson presents three studies he conducted exploring ways to raise L2 learners’ humour competency. This, he suggests, can be achieved through 1) familiarising learners with the main theories of humour (incongruity, superiority/aggression, relief); 2) enhancing their sociocultural knowledge on the target language and community; 3) providing appropriate examples for analysis; 4) offering opportunities for producing humour and evaluating the funniness of the texts produced by learners (p. 195). Therefore, the studies described concentrate on both humour comprehension and production, mostly through canned jokes and cartoons. In the third study, in particular, the author discusses the structure, process, material, and results of a 15-week course dedicated to humour competency and addressed to Japanese learners of English, which is among the rare accounts of courses of such length that can be found in the relevant literature (see also Hempelmann 2016; Wee et al. 2019). The course included a wide variety of teaching activities aiming at enhancing learners’ skills in identifying, comprehending, producing, and appreciating L2 humour, and eventually highlights the importance of dedicating enough time and energy to such an endeavour.

Maria Petkova writes about “Using diaries to research and develop humour competence in a second language”. Extensive research in L2 teaching suggests that diaries constitute an effective tool as they provide “deep insights into language learners’ feelings, learning processes, and communication needs” (p. 217). Diaries usually serve four main goals: 1) they allow learners to reflect on their own learning experiences; 2) they assist them in developing analytical, critical, or problem-solving skills, especially when learners detect crucial linguocultural differences between L1 and L2; 3) they help learners cultivate their creativity and writing skills; and 4) they allow them to plan their future action, to prepare their next learning steps, and to monitor their progress (Absolom & De Saint Leger 2011: 190). Given the above, and inspired by Bell (2009), Petkova

argues for the exploitation of diaries to enhance L2 learners' humour competency. In her study, she uses multiple methods to investigate and analyse the effects and perceptions of teaching about humour to L2 learners of advanced proficiency, in particular, of familiarising them with its interactional uses, functions, and contextualisation markers. One of these methods is learners' diary keeping. The topics commented upon in learners' diary entries involved potential differences between the contexts of humour use in L1 and L2, the topics perceived as taboo ones therein, learners' positive or negative experiences with humour in L2, the kinds of humour they find more or less hard to understand in L2, whether they prepare in advance their humorous turns, etc. The data analysis reveals that learners appreciate both learning about humour in the L2 and exploring L2 humour via journal writing. They also report on their preferred strategies when they fail to understand L2 humour (e.g. laughing just to fit in socially, searching the internet or asking someone else for explanation, using a dictionary, figuring out the humorous meaning by oneself, or just letting it go). It therefore seems that diaries could bring to the surface important ethnographic information and data that may otherwise be inaccessible to L2 teachers, while at the same time diary keeping may encourage learners to reflect and critically frame their L2 learning and experiences.

In the last (but not least) chapter of the volume, which is titled "Teaching English language learners to recognise English satirical news", John Rucynski Jr. & Caleb Prichard discuss the reasons, processes, and potential benefits of using online satirical news to enhance L2 learners' reading and critical skills. This seems to be one of the most interesting, original, and well-written chapters of the volume, as it involves a genre that is not often explored for such purposes. Furthermore, it is the only study in the volume that pertains to L2 learners' critical skills as part of humour competency. As the authors demonstrate, the main difficulty in exploiting such material in class relates to the distinction between *satirical news*, which report on incongruous and fictional 'events', and *off-beat news*, which include strange but true stories. Such a distinction is not problematic only for L2 learners but also for L1 speakers. Failure to distinguish between the two may result in more or less serious misunderstandings and embarrassment. On the contrary, detecting the evaluative dimension of such satire could significantly enhance learners' humour competency and critical perspective on media texts. The two studies presented in the chapter account for the parameters affecting learners' ability to make the above-mentioned distinction, such as previous experience with satirical news and L2 proficiency, as well as for learners' assessments of the funniness of such texts and of their potential to become teaching material and foster critical discussions in class. Rucynski & Prichard finally put forward "classroom-tested tips" (p. 261), which could assist teachers and researchers in further exploiting such texts as teaching material. Among other things, learners could discuss the newsworthy and (un)believable qualities of satirical news so as to be able to distinguish between them and 'real' news stories. They could also focus on the stylistic features typical of the genre (e.g. vague details, slang, informal style, and profanity), work in groups and, most importantly, bring to class satirical news of their own choice for analysis and critical discussion.

All the chapters of the volume begin with a narrative from authors' personal experiences as L2 learners or teachers, when they had to deal with L2 humour. This is indeed an engaging opening and unveils a common secret among (most, if not all) researchers: the significance of our own stories for the development of our professional identities. All the chapters also provide rich references for researchers or teachers interested in further reading as well as more or less concrete suggestions for raising L2 learners' humour competency. Furthermore, the multiple perspectives and approaches discussed could cater for different learner needs and educational environments.

Concentrating exclusively on L2 teaching and L2 learners' humour competency certainly enhances the coherence of the volume and strengthens its argument, but one cannot help wondering: What about L1 humour competency? Aren't L1 speakers in need of raising their

awareness of what humour is, how it is created, how it functions, etc.? After all, failure in L1 humour and the ensuing miscommunication and embarrassment are not rare phenomena, hence the “humour barrier” (see the volume title) does not exclusively pertain to L2 communication. If, as mentioned in the beginning of this book review, teachers and curricula are reluctant to consider humour as an object of study within language courses, at least in L2 teaching the discussion has been open for some time now and the number of relevant studies increase every day. This does not, unfortunately, hold for L1 courses, where research on students’ humour competency is scarce (see Archakis & Tsakona 2012: 155-163; Stamou 2012; Tsakona 2013: 283-333, 2019, 2020: 139-188; Tsami 2018). Exploring both L1 and L2 humour competency training may reveal not only differences in teachers’ practices and students’ needs, but also significant similarities, especially when it comes to familiarising them with the contextualisation cues, the sociopragmatic functions, and the critical aspects of humour. After all,

with the increasing student diversity in classrooms, scholars are currently advocating for a shift towards thinking beyond L1/L2 binaries and enacting pedagogies based on translanguaging and multiliteracies [...], which draw on students’ repertoires across languages

(Hempelmann 2016: 44).

Another aspect of the volume that enhanced its coherence but simultaneously limited its scope involves the focus on English language. This practically overlooks approaches and practices from other linguocultural and educational environments, which could enrich this discussion and offer valuable insights and feedback to common problems and needs in recognising, understanding, responding to, and producing humour.

Most of the chapters emphasise the importance of using authentic material and material coming from learners’ own experiences and brought to class by them. This is definitely an important step away from constructed and decontextualised texts (e.g. often in the form of ‘universal’ humour), but further steps are expected towards a wider variety of humorous genres beyond canned jokes and cartoons. Humour infiltrates many oral or written genres and is all over the digital sphere, hence learners are constantly exposed to its diverse forms, functions, and meanings.

In this context, the very concept of *humour competence* could be further problematised and move away from structuralist approaches to language and language teaching. Humour competence as the “ability to deal with humour both receptively and productively” (p. x, see above) seems to be rather close to Chomsky’s (1965) *linguistic competence*. Instead, a more pragmatically and socioculturally oriented definition could be proposed so as to include speakers’ ability to “recognise the meaning-making potential of particular communicative resources and how they might go about bringing these elements together for the purposes of amusing others” (p. 3). Thus, humour competence training would rather aim to develop speakers’ intercultural orientation and critical capacity through contextualising and scrutinising the humorous material exploited (Bell & Pomerantz 2016; Tsakona 2020).

In my view, the volume under review contributes to the open debate on teaching and/about/with humour via offering interesting theoretical discussions and creative teaching suggestions. It is therefore highly recommended not only for researchers and students working on language teaching, linguistics, pragmatics, and intercultural communication, but also for language teachers who could be inspired and motivated by the different approaches included therein.

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