

## Humor, language, and pedagogy: An introduction to this special issue

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Despite much research on the role of humor in the L2 classroom (see Bell, 2017; Bell & Pomerantz, 2016 for reviews), the conclusion of several major meta-analyses of the field of humor and teaching (Martin, Preiss, Gayle, & Allen, 2006; Banas, Dunbar, Rodriguez, & Liu, 2011; McMorris, Boothroyd, & Pietrangelo, 1997) is that, as Bell and Pomerantz (2016) plaintively put it, “it has been difficult to connect the use of humor to increased learning” (p. 101). The reason behind that difficulty is, as Martin et al. (2006,) state: “Although students report enjoying learning and they report that they believe they have learned course material, objective measurements of the recall associated with humorous lectures are rather minuscule” (p. 305). Banas et al. strike a marginally more optimistic note, concluding that “the empirical evidence for the effects of humor on learning is considerably more mixed, with some scholars finding that humor enhances learning (. . .) and others finding no relationship between learning from humor” (2011, p. 131).

One of the fundamental points that emerge from the meta-analyses mentioned in the previous paragraph is that humor is not a monolithic object. There are different kinds of humor, such as affiliative and disaffiliative humor, i.e., building an in- or out-group, respectively (Attardo, 1994, pp. 323-329). Humor may also address taboo topics (sex, death, class membership, and racial or ethnic membership, for example). Humor may be aggressive or soothing. The people involved in the humorous exchanges may have different personalities, preferences, and interests. Thus, one cannot help but agree with Kirsch and Kuiper’s conclusion that, “Any further implementation of humor in the classroom (. . .) should first be validated by research which more clearly elucidates the exact nature of sense of humor as a construct” (2003, p. 35; see also Kuiper & Olinger, 1998).

This special issue collects the selected works of scholars who participated in the North-East Texas Humor Research Conference on “Humor and Pedagogy” (see [www.tamuc.edu/humor](http://www.tamuc.edu/humor)) in February 2014, and comprises three articles and three book reviews that represent the efforts and interests of researchers in the United States, Mexico, Italy, and Australia. The articles in this issue try to move forward the agenda on humor, language, and pedagogy, looking at various ways in which humor may happen in the classroom, while also considering such parameters as age and social class.

In the first research article, “*Is This a Joke? Metalinguistic Reflections on Verbal Jokes During the School Years,*” Karina Hess Zimmermann analyzes the metalinguistic reflections of children and adolescents on different types of verbal jokes. The author shows how humor production and comprehension develop during the school years and highlights differences between participants’ ability to identify, understand, and analyze different types of jokes. The results of this study confirm previous findings on humor and irony development and will inform future teaching practices regarding the use of humor in the classroom, as the results constitute a useful set of parameter for selecting the most appropriate types of jokes based on students’ cognitive abilities and age.

In the second article, “*The Risks and Rewards of Teaching with Humour in Western Sydney: Adapting Pedagogy to Complex Demographics,*” by Adrian Hale, the focus shifts towards the pedagogical value of humor as a motivator and as a topic in the language classroom. Hale presents his experience using humor as a topic as well as a delivery method to teach linguistics courses in Sydney, Australia. In this article, the author describes the benefits and pitfalls of such an approach regarding students’ enrollment, retention, motivation, and engagement in a region characterized by low income households, social disadvantage, and low English proficiency. A comparison of data from institutional student surveys, students’ grades, and attendance rate on courses taught with and without a specific focus on humor reveals that humor was instrumental in improving students’ experience and outcomes.

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In the third article, “Humor in the Teaching of Writing: A Microethnographic Approach to Developing Critical Thinking,” Hempelmann discusses the value of humor as the central topic in three critical thinking and writing courses for undergraduates in the United States. The author begins by highlighting the benefits and risks of using humor in the classroom and then describes in detail the design of the first original course and its subsequent adaptations, the materials used, and some of the students’ outcomes. The goal is to provide L1 and L2 teachers with a set of resources that can be used in their own classes. These resources include: the evidence to support the pedagogical decision of integrating humor in the course design, the materials to do so, and some possible student outcomes to assess the pedagogical value of humor.

The three book reviews cover recent publications in the field of humor studies. Forabosco reviews the *Encyclopedia of Humor Studies*, which I edited. Banas reviews Nancy Bell’s groundbreaking *We Are Not Amused: Failed Humor in Interaction*. Finally, I review Delia Chiaro and Raffaella Baccolini’s edited collection *Gender and Humor* to wrap up the issue.

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