

THE HUMOUR STUDIES DIGEST BOOK REVIEW

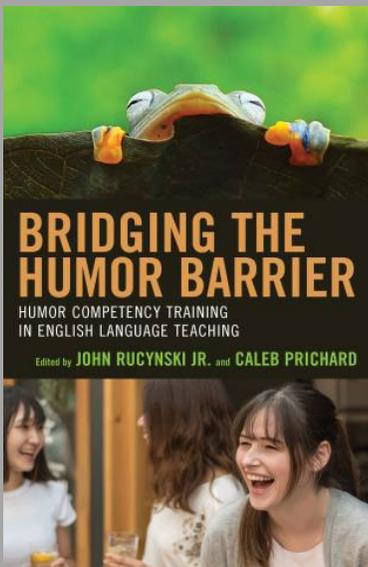
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John Rucynski Jr. and Caleb Prichard, eds. 2020. *Bridging the Humor Barrier: Humor Competency Training in English Language Teaching*. London: Lexington Books. 300 pp. ISBN (Hardcover): 9781498592000 ISBN (Paperback): 9781498592024 ISBN (eBook): 9781498592017.



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The introduction to this volume opens with an anecdote from co-editor Caleb Prichard on an instance of failed humour in the language classroom (p. vii), which resonates greatly with me. I have always instinctively used humour when teaching English as a Second/Foreign Language, French as a Foreign Language and Linguistics (see Aarons 2012 and Dubinsky and Holcomb 2011 on how to teach Linguistics through humour). However, I too have often experienced failed humour in my language classrooms – never to the extent of making a student cry, as in Pritchard’s example – but often where shocked or blank faces told me something had gone wrong or that it was “too soon” in the semester. A French colleague used to refer to such instances of failed humour as “des grands moments de solitude”, which requires no translation. Like Pritchard, I continue to use humour with my students. Unlike him, however, I have never thought to explicitly teach it. For that reason, I was delighted to discover this book (initially through recent AHSN conference presentations). Not only does it cover three of my areas of interest – L2 (second language) pedagogy, intercultural communication, and humour, it demonstrates how to combine them, based on tried and tested activities and/or empirical research.

The editors list, as part of their introduction to the text, the following aspects of humour competency: recognising, comprehending, appreciating, responding and producing (p. x). They go on to propose several guidelines for L2 humour competency training (pp. xii-xiv), outlining the complexity and the care that needs to be taken when implementing it, as well as offering guidelines for researching such training (p. vx). These guidelines are supplemented by the extremely

useful “Recommendations for Humor Competency Training” and “Recommendations for Research” sections at the end of each chapter. The volume contains ten chapters which present a range of L1s (first languages) and L2 English teaching contexts, as well as different aspects of humour competency and types of humour. The book is divided into three parts.

Part 1 is entitled “Humor Competence Development Outside the Class”, which, as is evident, focusses on how learners develop (or not) humour competency naturally in their daily lives. It opens with a chapter by Anne Pomerantz who uses French comedian Gad Elmaleh’s experience of taking his French stand-up act to the US to identify four important areas of humour production when performing humour interculturally: (1) creating, establishing, and checking for shared knowledge; (2) playing to and with expectations; (3) attending to the end game; (4) focussing on delivery. (I would argue these areas cannot be taken for granted intra-culturally either). This chapter contains a rich discussion on intercultural communication and competence, and its similarities with humour competency. Based on interviews with Japanese learners of English living in the UK, Chapter 2 by Jules Winchester focusses on the importance of developing sociopragmatic competence for successful intercultural humour (particularly in the case of divisive humour, which is more likely to cause a face threat), and for knowing whether or not humour is appropriate in a certain context. Maria Ramirez de Arellano (Chapter 3) approaches the topic from her own perspective as a native speaker of Spanish living in Ireland struggling to use humour. As a result of her study with other Spanish speakers, she proposes a theoretical model explaining L2 speakers’ use of humour in intercultural interactions and how this affects their process of cross-cultural adaptation.

In Part 2 of the book, “Integrated Humor Instruction”, the chapters focus on humour in the English as L2 classroom. In Chapter 4, Mohammad Ali Heidari-Shahreza elaborates on the Humour-Integrated Language Learning (HILL) model he developed in 2019, providing several examples for teaching with and about humour, in order to develop both humour and language competency. He points out the balancing act required to achieve humour competency training while overcoming the realities of the L2 classroom, such as limited time, curriculum, and textbooks. A regular presenter at AHSN conferences, Scott Gardner undertakes a comparative study of examples of interactional humour in 32 junior high school textbooks in Japan, while proposing how to exploit these scripted dialogues as sources of cultural and pragmatic material (Chapter 5). Drawing on Raskin’s Semantic Script Theory of Humour and the Superiority Theory, Nadezda Pimenova studies L2 English learners reading then rating jokes from America and elsewhere for funniness as well as ease of comprehension (Chapter 6). Despite the acknowledged limitations of her study (useful in themselves for future research design), Pimenova found that, as we might expect, language proficiency and cultural knowledge play a large part in humour appreciation.

From humour competence development outside the classroom (Part 1), through humour instruction in the classroom (Part 2), the volume moves logically to the final Part 3, “Explicit Humor Competency Training”, in which the authors present and evaluate activities they designed and implemented to develop specific aspects of humour. Editors Caleb Prichard and John Rucynski Jr. open this section with Chapter 7, focussing on sarcasm

and jocularity, two areas of humour that can often be misunderstood by native speakers, let alone learners – especially if these devices are not used often in their L1. This reinforces the need for explicit training in these areas, given they are used frequently by most English speakers, both in spoken interaction and on social media. In Chapter 8, Richard Hodson reports on lessons learned from three of his previous studies measuring the success of activities he designed to teach his students how to understand, appreciate and produce humour, including rewriting an original joke in English – a simple but effective strategy for conveying the notion for cultural context. The third study reports on students taking a fifteen-week elective in English humour, which, while successful to a degree, highlights the length of time required to attain humour competence in one's L2. Maria Petkova uses diary writing to research and develop humour competence in her L2 learners (Chapter 9). She started by keeping her own humour journal for six months, both as a way of understanding what she was asking her students to do, and of reflecting on the humour she encountered. The students' journals (accompanied by some limited but explicit humour instruction) allowed for similar reflection and learning in classroom discussions, as well as highlighting future humour training needs. The editors conclude the volume, in Chapter 10, with a report of their study training English language learners to recognise online satirical news stories. Not only is satire a form of humour used in many English-speaking cultures, recognising it can also raise political awareness, increase media and digital literacy, and promote critical thinking. This study added an interesting and important qualitative element, where (albeit only five) students were interviewed about various aspects of satirical news, the results of which informed a later study and the humour competency training activities detailed at the end of the chapter.

Overall, this is a very interesting and valuable book which makes a significant contribution to humour studies, language learning, and intercultural communication. Indeed, as several contributors observed, successful intercultural communication and humour competencies have a great deal in common, both revolving around language and culture. My own understanding and appreciation of humour in the various countries referred to was enhanced through the explanations of several amusing jokes and entertaining anecdotes. Humour in intercultural communication is shown to be extremely important, not only to avoid misunderstandings, but to actively enhance intercultural relationships and to foster understanding and trust across cultural divides, something greatly needed in our current times. Furthermore, many chapters emphasised the complexities and subjectivity involved in both humour and cultural awareness, highlighting the importance of avoiding essentialist notions of culture.

While it did not detract from my overall enjoyment of and regard for the volume, one minor quibble I had was that the editing was not as rigorous as it should have been. Several spelling, grammatical and general editorial errors (e.g., incorrect referencing) crept in throughout the volume, which I found distracting. Nevertheless, this text provides a broad overview of the complexities of humour in its various forms and functions, and serves as a great source of references. Clearly, humour competency training is not for the fainthearted, given its many intricacies, but for those who wish to give it a try, reading this volume is an excellent first step. The contents will surely inspire and help more language teachers to tackle humour competency training and to conduct further

research. I look forward to implementing some of the strategies in my own L2 classroom, if only to try and reduce my own “grands moments de solitude”.

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