

# Dos and don'ts of using humour in business English

Annabelle Baptista-Baumann gives some sound advice on using humour in the business English classroom.

*A dog walks into a bar and asks the bartender, "Do you have any jobs?" The bartender says, "Why don't you try the circus?" The dog replies, "Why would the circus need a bartender?"*

If you didn't find the above joke funny that's okay, humour is not easy, it's a bit idiosyncratic. According to Collins Advanced Dictionary: "It's the quality in something that makes you laugh, for example in a situation, in someone's words or actions, or in a book or film." However, what we laugh at is cultural as well as social, which is why exposing our students to humour is a gateway to a deeper understanding of how English works and helps them "to create and maintain social relations with native speakers" (Bell, 249). In addition, studies have shown that humour reduces tensions and even fires up the brain to learn. It even releases dopamine and serotonin into the blood stream; endorphins that give the brain pleasure and reward, i.e. you get an 'aha' moment when you understand the meaning of a joke.

Some of my business English students have expressed a fear of using humour, and some have felt alienated when they have not understood a joke. I would suggest that we give them access to more humour and opportunities to use it: "Obviously we cannot prepare our students for the spontaneous humour they will encounter, but we can provide them with new ways of thinking" (Bell, 250).

Here are some dos and don'ts of using humour in the BE classroom:

## Dos:

1. Do pick a joke or cartoon that relates to the theme you are teaching or is telling of the business culture. Different

students will understand the humour only at the utterance level before they are able to go deeper into the subtext of a joke.

2. Do explain the social potency of being able to understand and make jokes, and that jokes in a culture tell us what is important or laughed at in that culture. It is how we develop rapport, build trust, and create immunity against difficult situations.
3. Do explain the joke's setup if you need to. There are often double meanings created by a play on words or cultural understanding. Jokes play with expectations and create a sense of surprise. The brain thinks it knows where the road is going; but then suddenly there is a cliff. For example, in the joke above we might accept the idea of a (talking) dog working in a circus, but might not have considered that a talking dog would want a 'real job'. Therefore, our initial understanding has been replaced by our new understanding of what is possible.
4. Do let them know that practicing humour builds creativity. Being able to make connections that others may have not seen is a valuable skill to foster. Humour has been related to making complex decisions as well as managing social interactions better.
5. Do bring in humorous video clips and music to accompany lessons. If you're working on banking vocabulary, why not play Aloe Blacc's *I Need A Dollar* which plays on the idea of poverty or the cultural understanding of 'the man' as an institution in American culture. (Lyrics and video here: <https://goo.gl/98LWpx>). Let the students tell you what they

understand the music to be saying. Or the colloquial language of the boss man and paycheck as it relates to the seventies, we can laugh at the recession now and looking back we can even laugh at poverty. You could do the same with Abba's, *Money, Money, Money*, even contrasting the two songs with the idea of wealth. Ask what songs your learners know in their language about money.

## Don'ts:

1. Don't ask too much of your business English students. If they don't get the joke, explain it and why you thought it was relevant, but don't feel you need laughter to have a lesson. The lesson is still valid based on the language and culture aspect which is gleaned from the activity.
2. Don't make fun of your students or use them as a punchline for your jokes because it may cause tension or embarrassment.
3. Don't use controversial humourists who joke about politics or put down women or different nationalities.
4. Don't use too much self-deprecating humour. Making fun of yourself may lighten the mood if there is a technology snafu, but don't put yourself in the position where your students are questioning your competence.
5. Don't try to teach people to have a sense of humour, that is beyond the scope of ELT, but we can give them examples of humour, expose them to our culture of humour, and let them experiment with creating humour in their L2.

If you are naturally someone who jokes you may feel more comfortable with setting up a punch line. If you don't feel naturally funny, start slowly. Bring in a cartoon or a play on words and let your students figure out why it's funny.

The possibility of exposing our students to

deeper layers of language using humour may be worth the deadpan stares when they don't understand. This is where the lesson starts. Don't deny them this moment in the learning process. We can only provide them with new ways to think about situations and in the case of bad jokes, increase their tolerance to pain.

## Reference

- Bell, Nancy D. (2009) Learning about and through humor in the second language classroom, *Language Teaching Research*, 13(3):241-258, <https://goo.gl/Qiuwue>



***"BY GOLLY, MR. GIBSON, I BELIEVE YOU'RE JUST THE MAN WE'VE BEEN LOOKING FOR!"***

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