

Book Review

A Review of New Ways in Teaching with Humor

*Reviewed by Davida Jordan, Portland State University
and Portland Community College*

Rucynski, J. (2017) *New ways in teaching with humor*, Alexandria, VA: TESOL Press.

Editors' Note: ORTESOL would like to thank TESOL Press for providing this book free of charge.

My first thought about this book about humor was, if you need to read a book about humor, you might be in trouble. Humor is natural and innate, isn't it? Yes and no. Some teachers are naturally funny, while others struggle with feeling comfortable enough in their own skin to venture into the world of humor in the classroom. Wherever you are on the humor spectrum, as an ESL teacher, you can find something useful in *New Ways in Teaching with Humor*, edited by John Rucynski, Jr. and published by TESOL Press.

New Ways in Teaching with Humor is a compilation of over 100 ESL lesson plans arranged in seven different humor categories such as "Wordplay and Puns," "Comics and Cartoons," and "Sitcoms and Movies." The editor received a three year grant from the Japanese government to research humor in teaching and learning language, and there is quite a bit of other research being done in this field as well. For example, by reading this book, you will explore Schmitz's three types of humor: universal or reality-based humor, culture-based humor, and linguistic or word-based humor. You may already be familiar with Hofstede, but by reading *New Ways in Teaching with Humor*, you will learn about his work as it relates to differences in humor between cultures. Finally, you will be introduced to Washington State professor Nancy Bell, who has done a great deal of work regarding humor in the ESL classroom and whose writing is referenced in many sections of this book.

Once you have been convinced that there is solid academic research that supports using humor in the ESL classroom, you will be ready to put some of this theory into practice. *New Ways in Teaching with Humor* contains quite a few suggestions for how to analyze American and British humor with your students. For example, teachers can study all about humor by reading Quock's JALT presentation, "Laughing matters: On the

theory and teaching of Western humor”, and how it can be utilized in the EFL/ESL classroom, and then screen several episodes of the hit American sitcom *Seinfeld* for their students to see if they can identify what makes Jerry and his friends’ interactions so funny.

New Ways in Teaching with Humor also provides a wealth of creative ideas to bring life into your classroom by having fun and being funny while not necessarily engaging in any kind of dissection of what makes it funny. For example, how about teaching pronunciation through humorous posters that gently point out mistakes: “parking at the beach” vs. “barking at the peach”? This silly image might be just what a student needs to remember to attend to his/her pronunciation.

Using humor can help us with practical tasks that need to be accomplished, such as reading the syllabus. One contributor suggests a syllabus quiz, which many of us already do, peppered with jokes such as “How often should you bring chocolate to the teacher?” to make sure students are reading carefully. Another lesson plan expands on a typical method of practicing pronunciation: tongue twisters. Instead of simply teaching students tongue twisters, why not have them write their own, focusing on the target sounds? The results might be funnier than the original! An inventive writing lesson, “Humor and Digital Literacy: Teaching Cohesion through Tonight Show Hashtags,” compares hashtags to topic sentences and tweets to supporting sentences. What an interesting way to bring the five paragraph essay into modernity!

Overall, *New Ways in Teaching with Humor* serves its purpose, but I had a few complaints. Some sections were a bit repetitive and could have been improved by removing lessons with overlapping themes. Bypass the section on first-world problems and memes unless you are prepared to enter into a discussion on how class, geographic location, race, and gender play a part in what kinds of problems we have. Otherwise, you may end up with a bewildered class filled with students who do not understand why not having the latest version of the iPhone qualifies as a problem. Likewise, many of the ambitious teachers who contributed lessons to this book attempt to teach rather difficult concepts in humor such as sarcasm and irony, concepts which have always fallen flat when I have tried to teach them. They do not offer any magic formulas for how to make these subtle forms of humor more clear, probably because there aren’t any! I also would have liked short bios on each contributor. Seeing as our background informs our sense of humor, it would be interesting to see how each contributor’s context informed his/her lesson.

I often tell my students that they will know they have arrived at their next level of fluency and proficiency when they start dreaming in English. Rucynski and his contributors posit that perhaps understanding a joke in English is just as significant of a milestone. The cultural and linguistic competency required to laugh heartily at a joke in

another language is a true accomplishment. Perhaps you will find a humorous idea in this compilation that will help set your students on the path to English success.

References and Further Reading

- Bell, N. (2007). How native and non-native English speakers adapt to humor in intercultural interaction. *Humor, 20*(1), 27-48.
- Bell, N. (2009). Learning about and through humor in the second language classroom. *Language Teaching Research, 13*, 241-258.
- Bell, N., & Pomerantz, A. (2016). *Humor in the classroom: A guide for language teachers and educational researchers*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Bryant, J., Comisky, P.W., Crane, J.S., & Zillmann, D. (1980). Relationship between college teachers' use of humor in the classroom and students' evaluations of their teachers. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 72*, 511-519.
- Hofstede, G. H. (1980). *Culture's consequences: International differences in work-related values*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Pomerantz, A., & Bell, N.D. (2011). Humor as safe house in the foreign language classroom. *Modern Language Journal, 95*, 148-161.
- Quock, T.H. (2007). Laughing matters: On the theory and teaching of Western humor, and how it can be utilized in the EFT/ESL classroom. In K. Bradford-Watts (Ed.), *JALT2006 Conference Proceedings*. Tokyo, Japan: JALT.
- Rabab'ah, G., & Al-Qarni, A.M. (2012). Euphemism in Saudi Arabic and British English. *Journal of Pragmatics, 44*, 730-743.
- Rucynski, J., Jr. (2017). *New way in teaching with humor*. TESOL Press: Alexandria, VA.
- Schmitz, J. R. (2002). Humor as a pedagogical tool in foreign language and translation courses. *Humor, 15*(1), 89-114.
- Torok, S.E., McMorris, R.F., & Lin, W.-C. (2004). Is humor an appreciated teaching tool? Perceptions of professors' teaching styles and use of humor. *College Teaching, 52*(1), 14-20.

David Jordan has taught ESL for over 15 years. She currently teaches at Portland State University and Portland Community College. She currently serves as Co-Chair of the Advocacy Committee on the ORTESOL Board. Her goal is to learn all of her students' languages, a list which keeps growing!