Kristin Lems
UNITED STATES

Laughing All the Way: Teaching English Using Puns

Understanding jokes is part of the process of native language acquisition, and jokes are part of the charm that belongs to any language. Learning to understand jokes in a new language is both a cause, and a consequence, of language proficiency (Cook 2000).

The most obvious benefit of understanding jokes is that it can help students feel more comfortable in their new language. A shared moment of humor lowers the *affective filter*, that invisible barrier that makes learners feel awkward and uncomfortable. A low affective filter is one of the cornerstones of successfully learning a new language (Krashen 1982). If a class can laugh together, they are likely to learn better together, too. Jokes based on wordplay have additional benefits because they build *metalinguistic awareness*, or conscious awareness of the forms of language, and this, in turn, helps in learning more language (Ely and McCabe 1994; Zipke 2008; Lems 2011). In particular, metalinguistic awareness boosts reading comprehension and encourages higher-order thinking.

Even native speakers need to access a great deal of linguistic information and background knowledge to "get" a joke (Aarons 2012). At the same time, jokes that are based on wordplay in another language can be really hard to understand because they need to be processed very quickly. In a social setting where everyone is standing around chatting, understanding a joke that comes up may seem like a high-stakes test. Not understanding a joke in this situation can make someone feel like an outsider and create a sense of isolation. For all these reasons, an important part of learning a new language is learning to enjoy its jokes.

Puns: A special form of joke

Puns are a special form of humor based on double meanings. Puns are sometimes nicknamed "the lowest form of humor" and often greeted with groans, but in fact, the language knowledge needed to understand a pun is very sophisticated (Pollack 2011). Because they require processing the sound and meaning of words twice, puns demand considerable language

agility. Unlike humor based on sight gags, funny facial expressions, or amusing visual arrangements, the humor of puns is based on language play.

Puns are also language-specific. Every language has its own puns and wordplay, including languages that do not use alphabetic writing systems. Mandarin, for example, has puns based on the sounds and appearance of Chinese logograms. For example, the Mandarin word for "fish" creates a pun based on a close pronunciation with the word for "abundance," and for that reason, the fish occurs in many Chinese illustrations as a symbol of wealth. The similarity of the sounds creates the pun, and fluent Mandarin speakers understand it effortlessly.

Because it has been fed by many streams, English has a wonderful reservoir of sources for puns. Puns can be found not only in children's joke books and on TV, but also in environmental print found in daily life—in menus, newspaper headlines, billboards, websites, signs, advertising, and especially the names of small businesses. Since puns do not transfer between languages, they need to be taught; however, they are rarely included in lesson plans or content units. One reason for this is that humorous language is sometimes—wrongly—considered inappropriate for the language classroom. However, thousands of puns are perfectly appropriate for students of any age. Another reason is that teachers of English may not understand exactly how puns work and therefore feel hesitant to try to use them.

This article lays out four categories of English puns, provides some practice in classifying them, and suggests how they might be incorporated into the English learning classroom. The puns described here are found in environmental print and related venues around Chicago, Illinois, but they are representative of many settings and locales where English is spoken.

Four categories of English puns

English puns generally fall into four categories, three of which are well established and are based on homophones, polysemous words, and close-sounding words (Lems 2011). A fourth, newer category of puns is now emerging through texting and instant messaging and is based on the use of alphabetic, numeric, or simplified spelling. Using teacher-friendly terms, we will look at each of these categories in turn. It is important to note that there are other kinds of jokes and humorous word games that are not puns, and that not all puns fall into these four categories. However, thousands do, and that should be enough to warrant their use in the classroom.

Category 1: Soundalike puns (homophones)

Soundalike puns are based on *homophones*, words that sound the same, but have different spellings and meanings (e.g., *hair/hare*; *to/too/two*). In soundalike puns, a phrase or sentence contains a word with the same sound but two meanings. An example of a soundalike pun is the sign for a daycare provider that reads "Wee Care Day Care." The words *we* and *wee* are homophones, which gives "Wee Care" two meanings. On the one hand, the phrase "we care" serves as a statement of philosophy by the business to show that they care about the children they take care of; at the same time, the spelling of *wee* creates the compound noun "Wee Care," which means care of "little ones" or "children." The meaning of the compound noun, which can be paraphrased as "care of little ones," adds an appealing dimension to the name of the business. The combination of the two meanings conveys a bit of charm and humor and thus makes a simple name a lot more memorable.

Category 2: Lookalike puns (polysemous words)

Polysemous words are spelled and pronounced the same and have related meanings (e.g., "ruler" as a measuring stick or a king; "mole" as a burrowing mammal or a spy). Polysemous words create lookalike puns. An example of a lookalike pun can be found in a sign for a small business, observed by the author while driving in Montana: "Blind Man—Window Blinds of Every Kind." This lookalike pun attracts the attention of drivers going by on the road by implying that a blind man lives nearby and they ought to drive more slowly (American street signs often alert drivers that a blind or deaf resident lives on that block). A second meaning of "blind," however, is window blinds, and put together with the word "man," it forms a compound noun, "blind man," or "a man who sells window blinds." The second meaning identifies the nature of the small business

(the graphic on the sign showing horizontal slats reinforces the idea of window blinds). The combined effect of the graphic and the lookalike pun is that a person driving by the sign reads it, ponders its two meanings, is momentarily amused, and is more likely to remember and patronize the business—or at least that is what the owners hope!

As one can see, soundalike puns and lookalike puns may be based on a single word or one word within a larger unit, such as a compound noun.

Category 3: Close-sounding puns

A third kind of English pun comes from the confusion generated by similar sounding words. When one word is substituted for another that sounds like it, whether the substitution is for a single word or part of a phrase, that can create a close-sounding pun. An example of a close-sounding pun is a sign seen on a van in Chicago: "Ex-stink Sewer and Drainage." This humorous title for a plumbing business is based on the close pronunciation of "Ex-stink" and the word *extinct*. By looking at the words on the van (which also has a painted picture of a toilet!), we can figure out that "Ex-stink" must indicate that the business will get rid of the bad smell, or stink, in one's plumbing, and the words "sewer and drainage" on the side of the van confirm that. However, the second meaning, with a slightly altered pronunciation, is "extinct," which suggests that the unpleasant smell will not just go away, but, like an extinct species, disappear forever. As is the case for the other two examples, this small business achieves humor through its signage, and the humor of the sign makes it memorable.

Category 4: Texting puns (alphabetic, numeric, and simplified spelling)

Alphabetic, numeric, and simplified spelling can create texting puns. These are based on the increasingly common practice of using the sound and/or spelling of alphabet letters, numbers or symbols, or simplified spelling as a way to represent or "spell" a word. Examples might be "cre8" for the word *create*, or "@mosphere" for *atmosphere*. When we see a texting pun, first we try to silently decode it, and if we cannot figure it out, then we silently "sound it out" in our minds, imagine how it would sound, and then understand the joke.

Texting puns are being created every day as people play with their wireless devices and look for ever more economical, nuanced ways to convey their messages. An example of a texting pun is found in the popular American car insurance advertisement that reads "0 CRDT CHX." To understand this, we mentally change the first symbol into the word *zero*, then insert the missing vowels for the word *credit*, and insert the missing vowel and correct the spelling for the third set of letters, to obtain the word *checks*. Put together, the phrase "Zero Credit Checks" informs potential customers that they can purchase this auto insurance without going through any credit checks, something which people with bad credit records will be glad to know!

Simplified spellings save money for sign makers, so they are always looking for ways to convey the message of a product or service using fewer letters. It is easy to simplify spelling in English because English bears many spelling patterns from its Germanic and Old English origins. Many English words no longer look like they sound, so it is possible to find other ways to represent the sounds of the word. For example, *doughnut* is often written as *donut*, and the word *light* is increasingly spelled as *lite* when referring to the reduced calories found in processed food and beverages. Another example of simplified spelling is the name of the eyeglass company, "SPEX." It takes a word for glasses, *specs* (a short form of the word *spectacles*), and simplifies its spelling by swapping in an "x" for the spelling pattern "cks."

Additional pun examples

As an aid to differentiating between puns, Table 1 contains additional examples of puns classified into the four specified categories.

Puns inside idioms

Many pun jokes can also be made using English idioms, which are a rich source of pun humor. The difficulty level of these puns is often high, as they require more advanced language proficiency, background knowledge, and cultural exposure to be understood. Here are two examples of puns used in idioms:

- "Ben Franklin used to fly his kite in the storm because he got a charge out of it."

This is a lookalike pun on the phrase "get a charge out of something," which means

Four Categories of Puns
Soundalike Puns
1. Teacher: Tell me something that conducts electricity. Student: Why, er… Teacher: Yes, wire! Now name a unit of electrical power. Student: A what? Teacher: Yes, a watt! Very good.
2. Two peanuts were walking down the street, and one was a salted (assaulted).
3. My three-year-old daughter is resisting a rest (arrest)!
4. I practice my handwriting because it's the write (right) thing to do.
Lookalike Puns
1. Teacher: Selma, what's the highest form of animal life? Selma: A giraffe?
2. Barry: What travels faster, hot or cold? Mary: Hot. You can always catch cold.
3. Question: How do you stop a charging bull? Answer: Take away its credit card.
4. Question: What did the road say to the bridge? Answer: You make me cross.
Close-sounding Puns
1. The barber went to the bank and opened a shaving account.
2. Question: How did you keep your dog out of the street? Answer: I took her to the Barking Lot.
3. A skunk fell in a river and stank to the bottom.
4. Sign on a bake shop: "We bake to differ."
Texting Puns (See the translations at the end of the article.)
1. GINVU!
2. R U L8?
3. Hotel sign: Gr8 r8s
4. Why is 10 scared? Because 7 8 9.

Table 1. Examples of four pun categories

to "really enjoy something." This pun also alludes to the fact that we know Ben Franklin once received an electric shock when a key suspended from his kite was hit by lightning.

- Knock knock/ *Who's there?* — Brighton/ *Brighton who?* — Up Brighton early just to see you today.

This is a soundalike pun with the same pronunciation of "Brighton" (a name) and part of the idiomatic expression "bright and early."

How English language learners process puns

To understand any of these puns, students learning English must go through several steps. First, they must recognize the meaning of the original word or phrase. In many cases, there is a common idiom or current phrase that needs to be explained. Then, they must recognize and be able to access a second meaning for one of the words. If it is a close-sounding pun, students must be able to figure out what the other word sounds like, which is a challenging task in one's second language. Then, they need to pull together the two possible meanings of the word and compare them in the context of the phrase or sentence. When all of those steps are complete, there is a moment where the two meanings come together, and it's time to laugh.

Once we "unpack" all these steps, we gain a new appreciation of the complexity required to understand an English pun. To add to the challenge, most puns are expected to be understood within about a half second. As I have studied puns, I have come to the conclusion that the hardest of the four categories is close-sounding puns because they are spoken quickly and require making an association between two words that have nothing in common but similar sounds. This often requires an advanced English language proficiency level.

Teaching puns

If you want to incorporate puns into your lessons, you can start by building a pun collection. The following five references contain numerous examples of puns and other jokes that can be used in the classroom:

1. Adler, D. A. 1988. *Remember Betsy Floss! And other colonial American riddles*. New York: Bantam Skylark.
2. Elliott, R. 2010. *Laugh out loud jokes for kids*. Grand Rapids, MI: Revell.
3. Hills, T. 2000. *My first book of knock-knock jokes*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
4. Lewman, D. 2000. *Joke book*. New York: Simon Spotlight/Nickelodeon. (This is based on SpongeBob SquarePants characters.)
5. Rosenbloom, J. 1986. *Nutty knock knocks!* New York: Sterling.

Before building your own repertoire of puns, however, you might want to practice classifying the four categories of puns. To begin, try to classify each of the ten puns in Table 2 into one of the four categories. (Answers are at the end of the article.)

Puns are a natural outgrowth of language and word study (Lems, Miller, and Soro 2010). For example, when teachers introduce homophones, it makes sense to illustrate the idea through examples of puns based on homophones. Similarly, when teachers introduce the concept that words can have multiple related meanings that are sometimes very divergent, it only makes sense to show how these multiple meanings can lead to misunderstandings and point out that some of the misunderstandings can be quite funny. As mentioned earlier, close-sounding puns are hard to process, and any examples teachers give to introduce them should be at the easiest level possible.

Texting puns are a different case. They are probably part of your students' lives already, and simple acronyms such as "BFF" (best friends forever) or "LOL" (laugh out loud) are familiar to students all around the world. However, not all texting puns may be in English, as nearly every language has shortened forms of words for texting, and these can be used to create a lot of clever innovations. It is possible that your students will be able to locate some of them for you, and student input can help create a good language learning activity. (Of course, we need to keep a sharp eye out for any inappropriate puns with double entendres.)

Student pun collecting

If you are in a setting in which English signs, product labels, and advertisements are abundant outside your classroom, you can ask students to look for puns. Puns can be

Ten Puns	Circle the correct pun category: S = Soundalike; L = Lookalike; C = Close-sounding; T = Texting			
1. Knock Knock/ *Who's there?* Wooden Shoe. *Wooden Shoe who?* Wooden Shoe like to hear another joke?	S	L	C	T
2. Q: What kind of bird is found at a construction site? A: A crane.	S	L	C	T
3. Q: How can you spell "cold" with two letters? A: IC.	S	L	C	T
4. Q: What kind of flower grows on your face? A: Tulips!	S	L	C	T
5. Q: How does a tree get on the Internet? A: It logs on.	S	L	C	T
6. Q: Where do sheep go to get a haircut? A: The baa-baa shop.	S	L	C	T
7. Q: What are the strongest days? A: Saturday and Sunday, because the rest are week days.	S	L	C	T
8. Q: What letter is never in the alphabet? A: The one that you mail.	S	L	C	T
9. URAQT!	S	L	C	T
10. Peek a boo — ICU!	S	L	C	T

Table 2. Pun classification exercise

found everywhere, from restaurant menus to advertisements at train and bus stops. Once students are trained to look for the double meanings, they will begin to notice a lot of puns. They can jot them down or sketch or photograph them and bring them into the classroom to share. In fact, the ESL teachers I teach often text me photographs of puns they encounter from all around the world.

When students do not have access to an environment with plentiful English print sources, puns can be created or made available in the classroom. You can keep a collection of silly-joke books in the classroom and allow students to look at them during their spare time. When they start to understand puns, you can ask them to illustrate one. When they get really good at it, they might even be moved to a pun of their own!

Another great way to add pun work to the classroom on a regular basis is through a Joke of the Day project. Matt Granger (personal com-

munication) has his third-grade ESL learners in Illinois choose jokes from a joke book and practice reading them in pairs. When they are ready, the pairs record their jokes. Granger's lesson plan asks students to (1) perform the joke once, (2) tell the source from which the joke came, (3) explain how the joke works, and (4) perform the joke a second time. This kind of fluency practice helps build students' sense of humor, their class spirit, their expressive reading, and their confidence in joke telling. Granger adds a prerecorded "laugh track" to all of the jokes and uploads them to a website where students and their families can enjoy them again and again (Granger 2012).

Puns on the Internet

Puns can be shown through images as well as in written or spoken words. One source of puns based on visual images can be found in the work of American painter Robert Deyber, whose surrealistic paintings are usually based on visual puns. They are thought provoking and funny, and each painting evokes a chuckle. Some of his paintings can be viewed on the Internet (Deyber 2012). When you look at the elements in his paintings and put them together, you will find that they often create a compound word, such as his painting called "The Box Spring," which shows tiny wrapped packages floating down a small stream (a spring).

It should be noted that some humor sites on the Internet—a popular destination for jokes—may include gross or vulgar humor or may try to cull personal information. Joke books or humor pages sponsored by established educational publishers are the safest and most reliable source at this time. Bear in mind that you may be able to use a joke collection intended for younger children even if you teach older learners. That is because native English-speaking children "get" many jokes based on word games by the time they are four or five years old, but English language learners may be quite a bit older before they reach the needed proficiency level to understand and enjoy the same jokes.

Conclusion

Making jokes and puns a component of your language teaching introduces a special challenge that has many rewards. Wordplay and humor create a stimulating and comfortable environment for English language learners, and they will be enriched by the exposure to a wealth of valuable vocabulary, idioms, and other language features. Eventually, as students catch on to the puns, the delay until the laughter breaks out will become shorter, the groans will get louder, and the grins will get wider. Once students understand the basic structure of puns, you can use them to animate and delight a classroom in just a few minutes' time. When students are enjoyably engaged in telling and hearing puns, the whole class gets the last laugh.

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Translation of Table 1 Texting Puns: 1–Gee, I envy you!; 2–Are you late?; 3–Great Rates; 4–Because 7 ate 9.

Answers to Pun Classification Exercise: 1–C; 2–L; 3–T; 4–S; 5–L; 6–C; 7–S; 8–L; 9–T; 10–T

KRISTIN LEMS, EdD, is a Professor in the ESL/Bilingual Education Program at National Louis University, Chicago. She was a Fulbright scholar doing EFL Teacher Education in Algeria for two years and is now an English Language Specialist with the U.S. Department of State. She is also a performing folk singer.

**Possible Answers for
Categorization Task in Figure 3** *(continued from p.11)*

Instructional Enhancements… • Fredricka L. Stoller, Neil J Anderson, William Grabe, and Reiko Komiyama

TRANSITION WORD CATEGORIES			
To add information and reasons	To show cause and effect	To explain, give reasons	To compare
also besides equally further furthermore in addition moreover too	accordingly as a consequence as a result consequently then therefore thus	actually admittedly certainly for example in fact indeed really of course that is	by comparison likewise similarly
To summarize	To contrast	To show sequence	To show chronological order
in all in a word in brief briefly in short in summary	however instead in spite of anyhow nevertheless on the contrary on the other hand otherwise still	first second next then finally last	subsequently later next after afterwards then now nowadays concurrently simultaneously first formerly earlier previously before