Humour in Peer Interaction
in the L2 Classroom

Carolyn LESLIE
| New University of Lisbon (FCSH-UNL)

Abstract | Research in the study of affect in L2 learning acknowledges that attention to the social dimension can 'improve language teaching and learning' and that negative emotions such as anxiety, fear, stress, anger or depression may compromise our learning potential, whereas positive emotions such as self-esteem and empathy can ease the language learning process (Arnold and Brown 1). For the majority of learners, the classroom environment should be a place which encourages interaction and minimises negative emotions such as anxiety, which could interfere with such interaction. This study seeks to describe episodes of humour during peer oral interaction which may help generate a positive social dimension amongst learners.

Key words | humour, peer interaction, social setting, affective states, Conversation analysis, Task Based Learning

Second Language Acquisition research suggests that second languages are acquired when the language learner processes language input in interactional situations, and it is through this interaction, which Allwright (156) considers to be '*the* fundamental fact of classroom pedagogy,' that the learner's interlanguage system[1] gradually develops. Task Based Learning (TBL) can be thought of as a recent version of a communicative methodology based on current theories of second language acquisition which has drawn extensively on the work of SLA researchers such as Crookes and Gass; Ellis; Garcia Mayo; and Samuda and Bygate. In the TBL classroom peers interact in pairs and small groups to complete oral tasks, the primary focus of which is meaning rather than language. Peer interaction has been described as having a 'collaborative, multiparty, symmetrical participation structure' (Blum-Kulka and Snow), collaborative, as participants work together towards a common goal, multiparty, as two or more participants are involved, and symmetrical in contrast to the hierarchical relationship between learners and teachers. Traditionally peer interaction was not considered a context for learning but a belief that learner talking time could be greatly increased if learners talked to each other, and the notion that this interaction would allow peers to adopt new conversational roles has led to a greater reliance on peer interaction as a context for language practice and use (Philip, Adams, and Iwashita 2).

Although most would agree that oral interaction in the language classroom is necessary for language learning to take place, it is also true that it can be a threatening environment for some learners. If we consider the potential face threatening nature of the language classroom, where individuals who may be highly eloquent in their first language can struggle to express themselves in the target language, it is unsurprising that classroom language learning can provoke negative emotions in some learners. However, our emotional state is important for our capacity to learn. When we consider the effect of emotions on L1, it has been shown that negative emotions such as anxiety, due to the sustained cognitive workload it involves, can adversely affect 'speech planning and execution' whereas more positive emotions such as contentment may 'improve

speech fluency through the minimizing of extraneous, distracting thoughts' (Johnstone and Scherer 222). Krashen (qtd. in Richards and Rodgers 183) recognised the importance of the learner's emotional state in L2 language learning in his 'Affective Filter Hypothesis'. Here, he proposed that a high affective filter (e.g. fear or embarrassment) would hinder or block the necessary input for acquisition, whereas learners with a low affective filter would interact more confidently and would seek out and be more receptive to this input, leading to more exposure to input. Research in the study of affect in L2 learning acknowledges that attention to affect can 'improve language teaching and learning' and that negative emotions such as anxiety, fear, stress, anger or depression may compromise our learning potential, whereas positive emotions such as self-esteem and empathy can ease the language learning process (Arnold and Brown 1).

One way to create a positive social dimension amongst peers is through the use of humour. Oxford (76) suggests using laughter to relax students and reduce anxiety and Ziv suggests that one of the social functions of laughter is that of oiling the wheels of interpersonal communication and relationships, lessening group tension, making the group more attractive to its members and strengthening ties between them. Duff (120) suggests that humour can be used in the language classroom to increase students' enjoyment of the activities, undermine the seriousness of classroom interaction and create greater rapport between learners. In addition, Martineau (qtd. in Senior 179) suggests that:

> The function of humor is to initiate and facilitate communication and development of social relationships. Through humor, consensus is achieved and social distance is reduced. As an aspect of the socio-emotional role in informal groups, humor serves as a symbol of social approval promoting group solidarity.

The research described here analyses episodes when peers engage in humour during peer to peer oral interaction in the TBL classroom. The learners involved were adult learners at B1 level (Council for Cultural Co-operation European Committee 2001) who attended three hour weekly classes in groups of up to eighteen learners, all of whom were eighteen years of age or over. Recordings of students taking part in oral tasks were carried out in normal class time after the

class teacher had explained the activity and distributed task sheets. Groups of between 2 and 4 students were chosen randomly and recorded simultaneously and in the same room for the duration of the task, which on average lasted approximately 15 minutes, using two voice recorders which were placed on the table in front of the students. All names have been changed. During the task itself the class teacher circulated helping students when necessary and answering learners' questions, as usual. These interactions were then transcribed and certain sections re-transcribed and analysed using conventions from Conversation Analysis (CA). CA is a methodology which tries to explain the details of interaction and to 'uncover the communicative and social competences that structure and render meaningful talk-in-interaction' (Firth and Wagner 813). It is a multi-disciplinary methodology and has been applied to a wide range of academic areas, including language learning and teaching. The transcription conventions used can be seen in Appendix 1.

Qualitative Analysis of Peer Interaction

In Excerpt 1, Filomena, Bernardo and Lourenço are completing a dictogloss activity (Appendix 2). Line numbers shown are those from the original transcription and arrows indicate lines under discussion. This excerpt shows that when the group finishes the activity before their classmates, they continue to speak in English and exchange real world information about the Aztecs and football. On line 52 the triad finish the activity and this is followed by a 7 second pause. On line 53 Filomena extends the task by asking about a doubt she has and a short exchange between Filomena and Bernardo then ensues. On line 61 however this exchange finishes, as the interactants have completed the task. Then on line 62 Lourenço takes on the role as information giver and extends the task by initiating a conversation about the Aztecs.

(1)

49   L   tv was invented

50   B   (2) in 1925

51   F   by a scotch? (3) in 1925

→

52	B	(1) °°in 1925°°
53	F	(7) i'm i'm [doubtful] about what here. (3) i was astonished to
54		learn
55	B	i think it's that
56	F	that
57	B	that football
58	F	yes (.) I guess (.) also (.) that football?
59	B	was [pla:yed]
60	F	°was played by aztecs (.) yeah°
→ 61	B	°yes °
62	L	°with an iron ball° (2) it was an iron ball or a rock ball (1) [and
63		they crack]
64	B	[an iron?]
65	L	°yeah (1) they crack the the skulls. (.) many of the bodies of the
66		aztecs that were found they have (.) big cracks in the (.) cranium.
67		°
68	B	hm:
69	L	°it was because of that°
70	F	°because of this? °
71	B	[where]?
72	L	°[the skulls] °(2) [[go]]
73	B	[[where they]] they get the the the iron (.) you
74		don't know? ((laughs))
→ 75	L	( )
76	F	(3) <very go:od . (2) but Mary didn't say that.>
→ 77	B	no ((laughs))
78	F	did she. ((Bernardo laughs)). no. ok because i didn't hear ((very
79		serious voice))
80	B	yes ((smiley voice))
→ 81	L	it's a
82	F	((laughs)) ok

The above sequence exhibits an example of playful behaviour on Filomena's part as she does 'being the teacher' on lines 76 and 78. Here Filomena can be seen to shift to the teacher's identity by giving a teacher's positive assessment of Lourenço's utterance on line 76. The fact she does this dramatically by lengthening the word 'good', and speaking in a paused, measured rhythm shows how she is 'hamming up' this role, thereby injecting a certain amount of humour into the situation. This can also be seen on line 78 where she answers the question she asks on line 76 and uses a lack of intonation and 'no' to 'reprimand' Lourenço for 'straying' from the task at hand, although she orients to the playful nature of these exchanges by laughing on line 82. Kotthoff (qtd. in Reddington and Waring 3) mention role reversal as a humour typology in the classroom and here we can see an example of this. Filomena overtly embodies the role of the teacher rather than that of a student by shifting her style of delivery to that of the disapproving teacher, thereby invoking laughter in the others.

Excerpts 2 and 3 show João and Carlos taking part in a correction and discussion task (Appendix 3) and show how João in particular uses humour to create a positive social dimension.

(2)

27	C	you could give your friend an <u>advice</u>, (.) yes and you would
28		tell him (2) a:h (.) i think the food (2)
29	J	°wasn't, isn't?°
30	C	is , (.) or you can be polite and tell him that the food is e:h (2)
→ 31	J	horrible ((laughter))

Reddington and Waring (6) identify three ways in which learners in the L2 classroom initiate humour through what they term disaligning extensions, by 'using a syntactically fitted extension to accomplish pragmatic subversion' through sequence pivots by 'producing talk that pivots to a new course of action' and sequence misfits, by 'producing a turn not projected by prior talk' (17). Excerpt 2 line 31 shows João taking part in a disaligning extension by completing

Carlos's expression on the previous line. The preferred completion would have been *Tell him that the food is good.* By extending Carlos's expression using 'Horrible', João is being playful and this is treated by both as such.

(3)

	137	C	if your friend eh
	138	J	has. (2) had. (1) had.
	139	C	had,
	140	J	had a horrible (1)
	141	C	a horrible haircut, would you tell him
→	142	J	of <u>course</u>!
	143	C	really! ((laughs))
	144	J	yes! ((smiley voice)) oh about the the the look, the the
→	145		style, that I'm honest.(.) oh you are <u>ugly</u> (1) or oh °you are
	146		hot° ((laughter)) >yes! it's true. no. no. < <if i'm <u>really</u>
	147		close with that person> but a strange oh (.) you are so hot
	148		((laughs)) no. (laughs) no. <I can't can't use this kind of
	149		expressions and socialising, socialising>
	150	C	and if it was a girl. would you <u>tell</u> her.
	151	J	yes!
	152	C	really?
	153	J	yes! yes!
	154	C	and if she was a beautiful <u>woman</u>, with a horrible <u>hair</u>.
	155		would yo<u>u tell</u> her
	156	J	<u>yes</u> I I [askid] to a::h (2) to go to my home
	157	C	and if she was a beautiful woman?
	158	J	and I cut his, he, her hair. (.) I'mself ((laughter)) (2) > well
	159		if I cut <u>my</u>, I could<
	160	C	>you cut your hair<?
	161	J	yes !
	162	C	>with a machine<?
	163	J	yes! and the the the (1)

	164	C	scissors.
	165	J	scissors. yes ( )
	166	C	well in my case i think i would (.) tell her only(.) if it would
	167		be ((laughs)) only if it would be a:: close person
	168	J	like your mother, your father, your brothers?
	169	C	my mother my sister, my brother my
→	170	J	>you have a sister<?
	171	C	°no°
	172	J	ah! ((laughter))
	173	C	eh [my cousin

Bell (134) reports that little empirical research has been carried out on the use and comprehension of L2 humour, but notes that theories of verbal humour have traditionally been based on the notion of incongruity. She adds that types of humour include 'jokes, narratives or anecdotes, one-liners, puns, riddles, irony, banter, hyperbole, teases, pranks, wordplay, mockery and parody'. Excerpt 3 shows how João and Carlos together construct a humorous imaginary scenario. From lines 144-149, João initially discusses how he would tell someone if they were hot or ugly, then, from lines 150-159 they discuss how João would invite a beautiful woman to his house to cut her hair, as he cuts his hair himself. Lastly, on line 170, João is involved in a sequence misfit (Reddington and Waring 13) by attending to Carlos's comment on his sister rather than attending to the topic under discussion – if someone had a horrible haircut would they tell him/her. As noted by Reddington and Waring this type of extension often has a subversive overtone, in this case unmasking Carlos as telling lies for the purpose of the task. Again both treat these sequences as humorous as can be seen through their mutual laughter.

Finally in excerpt 4, further examples of humour can be seen as Bernardo, Carlos and Eva in Class 2 complete a national stereotype discussion task (Appendix 4). The students have been asked to provide a typical name for the stereotypic Englishman today. A number of suggestions are made by all members of the group (lines 109, 112, 117 and 119) culminating in Carlos suggesting Sherlock Holmes on line 126, a fictional character well known to the Portuguese

through television. This is an example of how word play can introduce humour into peer oral interaction. The group then continue the task by describing the typical Portuguese woman today. This leads Carlos to suggest (line 198) that one difference between Portuguese women now and in the past is that in the past they had 'moustaches', i.e. facial hair, but that now women are more concerned about their appearance, and this provokes laughter amongst all three members of the triad.

(4)

107	E	what's [his name] ((laughs))
108	C	º[what's his] nameº
109	B	john, ((laughs))
110	E	john,
111	B	john [is]
112	E	[william], ((laughs))
113	B	william.
114	C	journey pipes.
115	E	journey pipes. ((laughs))
116	B	((laughs)) john or,
117	C	(2) trevor ((laughs))
118	B	trevor ((laughs))
119	C	trevor sinclair ((B and M laugh))
120	B	Sinclair it was the name of the: (.) the computer(.) no? ºthis is the:
121		person who invent the the [first computer]º
122	C	º[somebody make] a moveº
123	B	ºI don't know.º
124	C	º( )º
125	B	do you ?
→ 126	C	ºsherlock holmesº
127	B	ºthink ofº
128	E	ºsherlock º((laughs))
187	C	womens are more beautiful, ((laughs))
188	B	they dress (.) i think they dress better and

189	C	they dress better
190	B	and take care (.) take care of
191	C	take care
192	B	their theirselfs
193	E	yes
194	C	of their <u>appearance</u>,
195	E	yes
196	B	theirselves (.) <u>more</u>, (.) because in the <u>past</u> (2) eh: portuguese
197		womens are known (2)
→ 198	C	º basically they have ((laughs)) (1) a moustacheº ((laughs)) for
199	B	having a mou:stache ((all 3 laugh)) and nowadays ((laughter)) (2)
200		with <u>spas</u> and ((laughter)) (4) and (2) esthetical <u>centres</u>, (.) they can
201		have

Excerpt 4 and the mention of the moustachioed women is an example of hyperbole or an anecdotal reminiscence of life in Portugal in the past. Again use of humour here, as in other contexts, could create a positive social dimension and encourage participation amongst learners.

It would seem that some of the learners in this study are adept at 'being playful' in the language learning classroom, and can bring their real world 'playful' personas to bear in peer interaction. Their humorous talk serves to make the language learning experience more enjoyable and motivating, could lower the affective filter, broadens the range of interactional patterns amongst peers, offers learning opportunities and allows them to explore different identities.

Conclusion

The language learning classroom is different to other classrooms students may experience in that it is social in nature. Within a sociocognitive framework, learning takes place in a social context through interaction with others, and it is this use of the language that promotes learning. In addition, interaction has long been seen as an activity which can promote learning opportunities from a cognitive viewpoint. The interaction hypothesis of SLA was formulated in the early 1980s and

much empirical research has been carried out in the intervening years which supports the link between interaction and L2 learning. These interactions can foster a sense of belonging, or can alienate. They can encourage or discourage positive attributions, especially in the task based learning classroom where oral interaction with a peer forms the basis of classroom activity.

However traditionally these studies have ignored the social setting which is intrinsic to any interaction in the L2 classroom. In the language learning classroom, the social context is a crucial factor for learning, and teachers who disregard its importance do so at their peril. As teachers, it is our responsibility to provide the best learning environment we can and although some may see their role simply as a conveyer of content, this will not lead to successful learning or teaching. Calls have been made over the years for more research which takes social factors into consideration. This study is a response to such calls and it adds to our knowledge of how learner talk can scaffold the affective states of others and create a positive social dimension conducive to learning. It is also important to point out that previous studies on humour in the language classroom mentioned here (Bell; Reddington and Waring) have looked at humour between native speakers and non-native speakers and between learners and the teacher respectively. The present study shows that learners use the same humour mechanisms while working together in pairs or groups as are used in learner/native speaker interaction.

As most work on humour in the L2 classroom to date has focused on episodes between teacher and learners, future research could usefully focus more on humour in peer to peer interactions. A useful additional tool in further research would be the use of video which could give a greater insight into non-verbal communication e.g. gesture, eye gaze and facial expression, and how learners use these to convey meaning and build relationships.

Note

[1] The term interlanguage was introduced by Selinker to refer to learner language and involved two fundamental notions. These were that learner language is a system, obeying its own rules and that this system is dynamic and changes over time (Selinker qtd. in Mitchell and Myles 39).

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APPENDIX 1. Transcription Conventions (adapted from Seedhouse 267-269 and Ohta 27)

:	Elongation of a syllable
(.)	Brief untimed pause
(3.2)	Interval between utterances (in seconds)
word	Speaker emphasis
!	Animated or emphatic tone
CAPITALS	Loud sound relative to surrounding talk
° °	Utterances which are noticeably quieter than surrounding talk
°° °°	Whispered utterances
< >	Talk produced slowly and deliberately
> <	Talk produced more quickly than surrounding talk
( )	Unclear or unintelligible speech or attempt to transcribe such speech
	A feature of special interest
→	Non-English words are written in italics and followed by English translation in
sim	double brackets
((tr.: yes))	Teacher
T:	Unidentified learner
L1:	Several or all learners simultaneously
LL:	Indicates overlap with portion in the next turn that is similarly
[	bracketed
[[	Indicates overlap with portion in the next turn that is similarly bracketed when the single bracket is used in the previous line and or turn so there will be no confusion regarding what brackets correspond to.
	Comments
(( ))	An approximation of the right sound in the case of inaccurate
[finished]	pronunciation
	Rising intonation
?	Slight rise in intonation
,	Falling intonation
.	Accentuated rise in intonation
↑	Accentuated fall in intonation
↓	

APPENDIX 2. Dictogloss Activity

I saw a really **interesting** programme on TV last night. It was a **documentary** about inventions. I didn't know that television **was invented** by a Scot in 1925, and I was **astonished** to learn that football **was first played by the Aztecs**.

Teacher's Notes

Read the text twice at normal speed both times. The first time the students just listen, the second time they make notes about the key information – then given them about 10 minutes to work together and reconstruct the text. They need to write a text that is grammatically correct and contains all the information – they don't need to rewrite exactly what was said.

Go round and then get someone to read theirs – check if it more or less approximates your version. You could then show them the above version in the IWB if you want. You could draw attention to the phrases in bold above – these are the things being recycled and maybe elicit some other names of TV programmes, -ing adjectives, extreme adjectives etc.

APPENDIX 3. "What if?" Correction and Discussion Task

Look at these sentences – some are correct and some have an error – can you correct the ones with an error?

- If you won a lot of money, you would move house?

- What you do if you didn't like the food your friend cooked for you?

- What country would you visit if you could travel anywhere in the world?

- If you needed to borrow some money, who would you ask?

- If your friend have a horrible haircut, would you tell him/her?

Now ask your partner the questions

APPENDIX 4. National Stereotypes Discussion Task

1. The image of a businessman in a bowler hat with a newspaper and umbrella used to be a stereotype of an Englishman. Do you think this is still true? If not, what would you consider a typical Englishman to be today?

- What does he wear?
- What does he eat for dinner?
- What does he do in his free time?
- What's his name?
- Think of 3 adjectives to describe him.

2. Now think about the typical Portuguese man/woman.

- How could you describe him/her?
- What does the typical Portuguese man or woman wear, eat, do in their free time?
- Think of some adjectives to describe them.

Are national stereotypes a good thing or can they be dangerous?