

Book review

Bell, Nancy & Pomerantz, Anne (2016). *Humour in the Classroom. A Guide for Language Teachers and Educational Researchers*. New York: Routledge.

Have you ever, as a language teacher, as an educational researcher, or just as a language learner, considered humour, language play, or generally funny and playful language use as an integral part of language teaching and learning? Have you ever considered that humour and language play are not just for entertainment and laughter, but could guide language learners to an overall understanding of language use in interaction? If you have these questions on your mind, if you already think that humour and language play belong in educational spaces, or if you search for some reasons to incorporate them into the language classroom, you should read Bell & Pomerantz's book to find your answers, to rethink your ideas and—why not—to change your views as regards to humour and language play in classroom discourse.

Both the title of the book and the preface inform prospective readers, specifically including language teachers and educational researchers, about its basic focus and interest. In the preface, the authors mention that this is “a book about the role of humour and language play in classroom discourse and additional language learning” (p. vi). In order not only to prevent but also to undermine the dominant conceptualisation of the role of humour in the classroom, the authors clarify that this is not an amusing book. Instead, it is a study that intends to negotiate and overturn some misconceptions about humour, language play, and other non-serious language uses in the classroom, especially in L2 teaching. Apart from the language uses and forms that the “serious” language education traditionally promotes and prefers, “Humour in the classroom” suggests a different approach to language, communication, the language learner and L2 courses. One might think that this is quite an ambitious aim. However, both authors are experienced in the field and have at their disposal valuable work from other researchers in support of their claims and proposals. All that remains is to search for answers in this book concerning the role and position of humour and language play in educational spaces.

Before we continue, it is important to highlight here the reasons why we think that this study differs from others. The authors highlight that their approach “offers a springboard for asking how talk, as a whole, works in classrooms that are increasingly linguistically diverse” (p. xi). Thus the book has two major aims. The first one is to provide “a discussion of theoretical concerns related to language, humour, and classroom discourse” (p. xiii), while the second one is to provide “practical guidance regarding teaching and research” (p. xiii). In other words, the book aims to give answers to questions that teachers and researchers might have, and to suggest that the use of humour and language play into classroom discourse might facilitate language development and enhance learners' communicative repertoires.

In the introduction, the authors provide useful clarifications and information on basic concepts, such as “What is humour?”, “What is language play?”, “Is language play necessarily humorous?”. Providing answers to such questions is significant for every language teacher, educational researcher, and learner who may consider teaching or learning

about humour in class. So, from the beginning, the authors help us distinguish humour from language play, that is, two terms that frequently coincide in the literature or in the minds of teachers, researchers and learners. Thus, the discussion in the beginning of the book is very useful for the development of authors' argumentation later on.

The first chapter titled "Language, communication, and education" offers us a particularly interesting framework for understanding language, communication, the learner, and the language classroom. As the authors mention in the preface of the book, language education is going through a crisis. This crisis involves the fact that language education, teachers, and researchers have to deal with a "rapidly globalising and technologically mediated world" (p. xiii), that is, a world, and, by extension, an educational environment that are extremely diverse from a linguistic point of view. Via highlighting the fact that learning an additional language is a very complex and demanding process, the authors encourage us to approach language and communication as variable, dynamic and situated. This is a quite different perspective on language as it promotes or requires different methods of language teaching. Therefore, the authors focus on the basic goal of second language learning, that is, the development of learners' communicative competence and the avoidance of their marginalisation.

In their discussion of second language learning and its goals, the authors comment on current relevant scholarship and "professional associations dedicated to language education within United States"¹ (p. 1), which view language and communication as "practical" and "utilitarian". In particular, the authors point out that "a structural view of language tends to predominate, suggesting that the L2 consists of a generally agreed-on, internally coherent, and fairly stable set of features to be acquired" (p. 3). Within this context, humour and language play are not considered useful in second language acquisition and learning. However, the Council of Europe (2001) presents a shift of interest in humour and language play, so the authors motivate us to bring humour and play into classrooms "to help learners and teachers understand what language is and how it works in a postmodern, globalised world" (p. 6). And if we still have questions and doubts as regards to what language is and in which ways humour and language play can help to understand how language works, the authors encourage us to make a "playful turn" (p. 7) in language education and to face language as a complex and dynamic system (p. 7), communication as an act of interpretation (p. 13), and language learners as meaning makers (p. 14).

The book continues with the second chapter on "Humour and language play". The chapter is dedicated to research on humour and language play discussing their mechanisms and functions. After defining humour², the authors discuss major considerations concerning humour, such as how many different types of humour we have, if they exist in all languages, which are the appropriate contexts for joking, etc. (p. 22). Although such questions are well known, their answers are less clear. Humour, as the authors point out, is a complex linguistic phenomenon and social practice, thus it is difficult to categorise (p. 23). As a result, any question related to humour is difficult to have a definite answer, especially the question of "what it is that makes something funny" (p. 23). Trying to clarify the fuzzy boundaries between humour and play, the authors point out that humour is not so different from other related phenomena (p. 23), so its understanding is easier than we think. To this end, the authors present the dominant linguistic theories of humour, namely Raskin's (1985) *Semantic Script Theory of Humour* and Attardo's (1994) *General Theory of Verbal Humour* (GTVH), approaching humour as based on an incongruity or deviation from prevalent norms and ideologies. It is exactly this ambiguity and polysemy of humour that is the key for learners to understand what language, the negotiation of meaning and the process of communication are all about. In addition, humour has multiple functions emerging in social interaction and some

of them are risky. For those risky functions, the authors provide specific ways to prevent and manage a potential failure of humour in interaction (pp. 37-38; see also Bell, 2015).

The following two Chapters entitled “Understanding classroom talk” and “Playing it safe” focus on the multiple functions of humour in classroom discourse (e.g. building rapport, quelling tensions, critiquing social norms and relations of power). Reconsidering the prevalent, traditional view of the teacher as the exclusive source of classroom talk and of learners as passive recipients of teacher’s talk, the authors suggest a shift of focus towards the “talk and actions of learners” (p. 52) including off task talk and learners’ temporary silence and lack of participation in class. This approach entails “a richer understanding of social interaction” (p. 52) and supports learners engagement with humour and language play, which are usually considered distractive and undesirable behaviours.

Furthermore, the authors present two frameworks through which researchers analyse classroom talk; the positivist one and the interpretive one, the former supporting a “transmission or banking model of learning” (p. 55), while the latter approaching learning as a “process of sensemaking” (p. 57). The authors elaborate on why researchers and policy makers often treat humour as irrelevant to research on classroom discourse (p. 60) and why they highlight other more “serious” and utilitarian uses of language (p. 67).

Although humour is frequently considered undesirable and distracting in class, the authors mention that humour is a normal, “essential and very important aspect of classroom talk” (p. 67). This claim is supported in the fourth chapter (“Playing it safe”) through the notion of *safe houses*. According to Pratt’s (1991: 40) definition, *safe houses* are “social and intellectual spaces where groups can constitute themselves as horizontal, homogeneous, sovereign communities with high degrees of trust, shared understandings, temporary protection from legacies of oppression”. The authors utilise the notion of *safe houses* to “examine how students and teachers draw on humour to manage their identities and relationships in the face of various psychological, social, and institutional pressures” (p. 67). Reviewing specific research findings, they focus on how students might feel safe and secure into classrooms to negotiate their identities, to mitigate any tension and relations of power, and to engage in humour and play without the danger of becoming marginalised or facing problems in interaction. In any case, additional language learners can invoke that they were “just kidding!” (p. 82) or they can adopt a common classroom identity, that is, “playing dumb” (pp. 84-86), in order to engage with humour in a safe manner and simultaneously save their face. Finally, the authors insist on the fact that humour and play are normal, essential, and necessary parts of classroom discourse that give teachers the chance to manage classroom challenges in an enjoyable and effective way.

Vygotsky’s (1978), Lantolf’s (1987, 1989), Cook’s (2000) and Tarone’s (2000) frameworks for learning and language play are significant for the discussion in chapter “Humour, learning, and additional language development”, where the authors try to provide answers to the complex question: “What is the role of humour in classroom language learning?” (p. 100). Recognising teachers’ insecurity when it comes to L2 teaching, the authors propose six principles for “the structuring of activities to facilitate L2 learning” (p. 112). These are the following: (1) teach language as a set of choices, (2) raise language awareness, (3) construct iterative activities, (4) engage with unpredictability, (5) teach meaning as relational and subjective, (6) engage with emotions. Each principle is presented via particularly helpful and interesting activities built around non-serious language and in continuous dialogue with relevant research.

The following three Chapters are dedicated to teaching: the authors move into the “arena of practice” (p. xiv). In Chapter 6, “Teachers and humour: Weighing the risks and benefits”, they do not only discuss the benefits of using humour in classrooms, but also the possible risks. Taking into consideration teachers’ unwillingness to use humour in class, as well as the

risks of using play in “serious” language education, they advise teachers to see humour and play as alternatives included in their teaching repertoires and as effective tools to “manage relationships and to deal with difficult situations” (p. 132). Moreover, Chapters 7 and 8, entitled “Teaching with humour” (p. 153) and “Teaching about humour” (p. 166), provide a very carefully structured context of teaching with and about humour. With an eye on the notion of *backward design* (Wiggins & McTighe 2005), the authors provide specific steps for incorporating humour and play in class. However, they highlight the possible risks of using humour and remind teachers to always bear in mind the desired results and learning outcomes of their courses. Chapter 8 reminds us that humour is not only an alternative instructional tool, but is also a subject of teaching. The authors provide ways humour can be taught, with a focus on its ability to develop learners’ metalinguistic awareness in L2. Moreover, they design and organise a curriculum based on “aspects of humour that are teachable” (p. 181) and define its possible desired results and learning outcomes. The proposed curriculum consists of the following stages: (1) identifying humour, (2) comprehending humour, (3) producing humour, (4) responding to humour (Bell 2009; 2011). This presentation tends to be connected with Chapter 7 and the framework of backward design, thus enhancing the coherence of the book.

The last Chapter, “Researching humour and language play”, is dedicated to proposals for further research. The authors advise and encourage language teachers and educational researchers to delve into under-explored areas of humour and to promote its integration into educational spaces. Moreover, Chapter 9 provides a well-organised and structured research process including specific questions and steps. As a result, any language teacher or educational researcher interested in humour, language play, and their multiple functions in the language classroom, acquires a great starting point to begin with his/her research in the field.

Completing this book review, we would like to point out some aspects that could be further developed in the study. L2 learners’ identities and their ability to critique prevailing norms and to reconfigure relationships of power through humorous interaction in L2 are not adequately discussed. Learners’ multiple identities are significant in classrooms and in interaction in general, as they enable learners to align or reject the prevalent norms, ideologies, and relationships of power in L2 contexts. In other words, the authors could elaborate on the ways through which additional language learners construct their personal and collective identities with respect to the dominant communicative norms in L2 (Norton 2013: 3; see also Norton & Toohey 2011). In addition, the authors could have dedicated more space to the possible risks and consequences of both learners’ alignment with, and the rejection of, such norms and ideologies. However, it is a book mainly oriented towards teaching and classroom discourse, hence some aspects of the pragmatics and sociolinguistics of humour may not be the primary focus of the book.

In conclusion, Bell & Pomerantz’s work is innovative and provides not only answers but also strong motivation for research on humour and its functions in language education. By the end of the book, readers have become familiar with both of the benefits and the risks of the use of humour and language play in additional language learning contexts. Most importantly, in our view, the authors do not advise language teachers and educational researchers to do away with “serious” education and its principles. Instead, they motivate them to adjust language education to the new technologies and increasingly growing globalisation. Consequently, humour, language play and other uses of creative language in L2 classrooms could facilitate L2 development, cultivate students’ communicative competence and, most importantly, prevent additional language learners’ marginalisation in interaction. Although further research is needed, we have at our disposal a monograph critically discussing research findings and including well-planned and innovative proposals for teaching and investigating,

that every language teacher, educational researcher, and policy maker, has to read to design new courses fulfilling the modern requirements of language education.

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Notes

1 These are the National Capital Language Resource Center (NCLRC), the Modern Language Association (MLA), the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), and the University of California (UC) Consortium for Language Learning and Teaching (pp. 1-3).

2 “Humour refers to the key or manner in which elements from one’s communicative repertoire are spoken, written, or otherwise put into use” (p. 22).

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