

# **MEDIA HUMOUR IN THE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM**

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## **Abstract**

Humour plays a significant role in the English print media, from simple puns in newspaper headlines to the complex visual and verbal interplay of editorial cartoons. The ability to understand humorous media texts can be a challenge, but also an important goal for advanced students. As language learning materials, these texts possess several distinct advantages: they often deal with contexts and content with which learners can easily be made familiar from L1 media; and they present multiple sources of that content in the target language, easily accessible via the Internet, and which therefore provide multiple interpretations for investigation and comparison. This paper will document the early stages of an ongoing project to introduce media humour to the language classroom, through the use of a series of newspaper cartoons dealing with the Beijing Olympics, in order to provide not only authentic language input for students, but also a medium for creative learner output. As well as linguistic analysis of both input and output texts, data deriving from learner reaction to them will be presented, showing that students were able to manipulate English set phrases, and a number of key thematic elements, to produce their own humorous texts with considerable success.

## **1 Introduction**

Despite considerable variations in institutional policy, style and tone, the use of humour in the language of print, online and other media sources is not restricted to sections explicitly marked as humorous; and when it appears in columns and opinion pieces, advertisements, reviews, quotations and even news articles themselves, it may present a significant challenge for L2 learners seeking to read authentic media texts. A selection of sports headlines from British newspapers published during the 2008 Summer Olympics, for example, reveals extensive use of punning and wordplay:

Peach volleyball [*The Sun*, 14 August]  
Oarsome duo grab victory [*The Sun*, 17 August]  
It's oar-inspiring [*Daily Mirror*, 18 August]  
It's the Bei-bling Olympics [*The Sun*, 18 August]  
Phelps confirms his gr8 status [*The Sun*, 18 August]

While these examples come exclusively from the British tabloid press, some of them have a much wider currency. The phrase 'great haul of China' (Clavane, 2008a), for example, is

widely used by different news media in a number of countries, not only with reference to the Olympics; a Google search for the term returns more than 15,000 results. In addition, several of these headlines and phrases rely on accompanying visuals for their effect. The articles containing the phrase ‘great haul of China’ and the headline ‘the Bei-bling Olympics’, for example, both come with pictures of gold medals, whereas ‘Peach volleyball’ is the headline for an article liberally illustrated with photographs of female beach volleyball players, making the beach/peach pun an explicitly anatomical one. Teachers wanting to make full use of the potential benefits of authentic media materials in language classes, as well as more advanced learners aiming to develop their own L2 media literacy, need to be aware of the challenges that humorous language like this presents, as well as the opportunity that it provides for students to produce idiomatic and creative language themselves. Newspaper cartoons, in which visual and verbal elements are mutually supporting, provide an easily accessible, compact medium by which these challenges and opportunities can be made part of language teaching and learning. This paper describes the first stage in an ongoing project to introduce media humour into the language classroom, and to both develop and document student response to a variety of different types of humour, through their own creative output.

## **2 Background and research objectives**

### ***2.1 Humour in EFL literature***

Recent research on humour has focused not only in its linguistic and psychological aspects (such as, for example, Ritchie (2003) and The British Association for the Advancement of Science (2002) respectively), but also on its pedagogical implications and potential applications. Cook (2000) describes humour as a part of the phenomenon of language play that is fundamental in human thought and culture, and argues that it can and should take its place in language teaching and learning. Medgyes (2002: 5) makes a practical case for the introduction of humour into the language classroom, supplying a list of twelve affective, pedagogical and linguistic justifications for its inclusion. Medgyes argues that although humour itself is essentially unteachable, ‘what we can teach is the language of humour’ and that the attempt initiates, in effect, a virtuous circle by which ‘we can use the language to make humour accessible for the students and, conversely, use humour to make the language accessible’. Gardner (2008: 9-10) reduces Trachtenberg’s (1979) seven reasons in defense of the use of humour in ESL classrooms to three categories: classroom management benefits, linguistic benefits, and cultural benefits.

In addition to these potential benefits, writers on humour and language learning have noted several important caveats. Cook (2000: 194) notes that finding materials

exemplifying language play .... which are socially and linguistically suitable for students of various backgrounds and levels of proficiency, and which also ensure active production of playful language as well as its passive reception

would require a major research project. Medgyes’s selection of material is based on the principle that it should be short, meaningful, authentic, useful and varied, as well as humorous (2002: 6). For Gardner, humour in the language classroom should be understandable, with content appropriate for the audience, and it should be ‘purposeful and not merely entertaining’ if its use is to be engaging and motivating, rather than distracting (2008: 12-13). These are useful criteria against which materials can be judged, and to which we shall return.

Hodson (2008, forthcoming) attempts to examine what challenges learners face in understanding humorous texts, in a small-scale pilot study investigating the responses of a group of high-level EFL learners to five English jokes which display a variety of types and levels of humour. Analysis of participant responses shows that shorter jokes, which tend to be more lexically dense, were rated as less funny than longer, narrative jokes. At the same time, the study found that humour involves a huge number of variables – including the presence or absence of a narrative, the extent of cultural knowledge demanded, affective factors related to joke subject-matter, and the different levels and types of humour present in different jokes, and even in the same joke – that make meaningful comparisons of learner responses difficult to achieve.

## **2.2 Objectives of the current study**

The current study is the first stage in an ongoing attempt to introduce humour as both a source of authentic language input, and as a medium for creative learner output in the EFL classroom, whilst investigating learner response to authentic humorous texts in a manner that controls some of the variables involved. In order to do this, it was decided to use a variety of texts with a similar format and length, dealing with a content area with which it was assumed that the majority of learners would already be reasonably familiar. A large number of English-language newspaper cartoons dealing with the 2008 Summer Olympic Games in Beijing were collected, and three content areas were identified: the achievements of particular athletes during the Games; controversies concerning the actual staging of the Games in Beijing; and political events occurring in China and around the world during and leading up to the Games. One worksheet was created for each of these areas, each comprising three ‘input’ cartoons for students to read and rate, and one ‘output’ cartoon for students to respond to creatively. This paper presents data from classroom implementation of the first of these three worksheets.

## **3 Materials**

### **3.1 ‘Input’ cartoons**

Section 1 of the first worksheet consists of three cartoons about the Olympics originally published in British and American newspapers, but widely available on the internet. All three deal with the achievement of the US swimmer Michael Phelps in winning an unprecedented eight gold medals in a single Games, an event which it was thought received sufficient coverage in the Japanese media to ensure student familiarity with the content of the text. The first cartoon (by Mike Luckovich, *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, 13 August 2008) shows Phelps on the podium holding his arms aloft in triumph, having received a gold medal. In the silver and bronze positions stand two dolphins, one of whom is saying to the other, ‘OK, this is getting humiliating’. The second cartoon (by Mike Keefe, *The Denver Post*, 13 August 2008) depicts two swimming dolphins leaping out of the sea, with one commenting, ‘You’re good. But you’re no Michael Phelps’. The third (by Mac, *The Daily Mail*, 15 August 2008) shows the Olympic swimming pool, in which a race is taking place; one of the swimmers is shown only as a pair of legs sticking up vertically out of the water, while two members of the US swimming team look forlornly at the pool. The caption reads, ‘I told you it was a mistake to let Phelps swim wearing all his medals’.

### 3.2 ‘Output’ cartoon

In section 2 of the worksheet, students were presented with a cartoon depicting the Jamaican sprinter and multiple gold medal-winner Usain Bolt sitting in an armchair on the track at the end of a race, medal already around his neck, looking down the track at other athletes yet to finish the race, while the crowd and camera crews look at him and cheer. In the original cartoon (by Chappatte, *International Herald Tribune*, 21 August 2008), Bolt is shown as asking his still-running rivals, ‘Where have you been?’ These words were removed, and students were asked to fill the speech bubble with their own words for Bolt.

### 3.3 Linguistic analysis of ‘input’ cartoons

All three of the input cartoons rely on situational incongruity – talking dolphins being out-swum by a human in both 1 and 2, dolphins taking part in an Olympic race and winning medals in 2, and a swimmer taking part in a race wearing enough gold medals to cause him to sink in 3 – rather than linguistic ambiguity or word-play for their humorous effect. Table 1 below shows a simple linguistic analysis of the three cartoons, giving basic information as to the number of clauses that they contain, their lexical densities and an rough estimation of the level of their vocabulary, obtained (as in Hodson, 2008) by assigning each word form a value based on its frequency level as indicated in the *Collins COBUILD English Dictionary*. Words in the COBUILD top frequency band were assigned a value of 1, and words in the bottom band a value of 5. Proper nouns were excluded and inflected forms were assigned the value of their base form. The values for each word form in each cartoon were then averaged to give an average vocabulary level for the cartoon as a whole.

	<b>Tokens</b>	<b>Word forms</b>	<b>Lexical density</b>	<b>Vocabulary level</b>	<b>Number of clauses</b>
Cartoon 1	5	5	100%	2.00	1
Cartoon 2	7	6	86%	1.00	2
Cartoon 3	15	15	100%	1.43	2

Table 1: Linguistic analysis of three ‘input’ cartoons

Although comparisons between three such short texts should be treated with considerable caution, the second cartoon seems to be, lexically at least, the ‘easiest’, with both the lowest level of vocabulary, and the lowest lexical density. The first cartoon would appear to be, lexically, the most challenging, due in large part to its use of the relatively low-frequency word ‘humiliating’ (COBUILD value 5). However, the third cartoon is by far the most complex syntactically, consisting of a main and a subordinate clause. The second clause is not only a *that* clause without *that*, but also contains two infinitives, the second with *to* deletion (‘it was a mistake to let Phelps swim’, and an adverbial phrase (‘wearing all his medals’) modifying the latter.

## 4 Findings

### 4.1 Participants and tasks

The participants in this study were 87 mainly first and second-year students in two institutions, one public university and one private junior college in Japan. The public university students were surveyed in three different classes, two comprising students majoring in international relations and cross-cultural communication (U1, 18 respondents; and U2, 20 respondents), and one in information and media studies (U3, 24 respondents); the private college students were members of one class of English majors (C1, 25 respondents). No data was obtained regarding their general English proficiency.

#### **4.2 ‘Input’ cartoons: difficulty and appeal rankings**

Students from the four different classes were given a worksheet containing the three cartoons and asked to rank them in terms first of their difficulty (with the easiest cartoon being ranked 3, and the most difficult ranked 1), and then of funniness or appeal (with the funniest cartoon being ranked 3, and the least appealing ranked 1). 85 valid responses were obtained in total, with two responses being discarded as incomplete or incorrectly completed. Each cartoon was given a total score, and subsequently an average ranking, for difficulty and appeal, obtained by adding the ranking scores, and dividing them by the total number of responses. Higher scores for difficulty and appeal indicate that students found a cartoon easier and funnier, respectively.

There was no universal agreement as to the difficulty of the three cartoons. U1, U2 and U3 all ranked the first cartoon as the easiest, whereas for C1, the second cartoon was the easiest. All classes except U1 ranked the third cartoon as the most difficult. Across the 85 respondents as a whole, the first cartoon was ranked as the easiest, and the third cartoon as the most difficult. There was also no clear consensus on which cartoon was the funniest, with U1 and U2 choosing cartoon one, whereas U3 chose cartoon three, and C1 ranked cartoons one and three as equally appealing. However, all four classes ranked the second cartoon as the least appealing. In general, there seems to be no distinct correlation between the rankings for difficulty and appeal. Table 2 shows the difficulty rankings and Table 3 the appeal rankings of each cartoon, both by class, and by the group of 85 respondents as a whole.

	<b>U1</b>	<b>U2</b>	<b>U3</b>	<b>C1</b>	<b>Total</b>
Cartoon 1	2.29	2.37	2.25	2.2	2.27
Cartoon 2	1.76	2.11	2.17	2.36	2.13
Cartoon 3	1.82	1.53	1.58	1.44	1.58

Table 2: Difficulty rankings of three ‘input’ cartoons

	<b>U1</b>	<b>U2</b>	<b>U3</b>	<b>C1</b>	<b>Total</b>
Cartoon 1	2.41	2.21	2.04	2.36	2.25
Cartoon 2	1.35	1.79	1.75	1.28	1.54
Cartoon 3	2.24	2	2.25	2.36	2.22

Table 3: Appeal rankings of three ‘input’ cartoons

Student difficulty rankings, then, do not correspond precisely to the apparent difficulty of the three cartoons. Although, as we might expect, the third cartoon – syntactically complex,

lexically dense and with a relatively high vocabulary level – was found to be the most difficult, the lexically simpler and less dense second cartoon was rated as being slightly more difficult than the first. It is perhaps not unreasonable to suggest, given that cartoons rely as much on imagery as on language to convey their message,<sup>1</sup> that the visual elements of a cartoon must also be a part of their ‘difficulty’, as well as of their ‘appeal’. The first cartoon contains a number of visual elements that support its verbal message: we see Phelps himself, arms raised aloft, two dolphins, both below him and bending over slightly, and also a clear visual representation of the comparison between their swimming abilities, in the form of the medal ceremony podium. In the second cartoon, Phelps himself is not represented visually, only verbally, as is the difference between swimming abilities. In short, the linguistically more difficult first cartoon comes with more visual support for its meaning than the linguistically and visually simpler second cartoon, and this may make the second cartoon more ‘difficult’ for some readers. Visual factors may also account for the relative unpopularity of the second cartoon – which is somewhat harsher in style, and less ‘cartoon-like’ than the other two – in terms of appeal. As the subject-matter of the first and second cartoons are very similar, more insights into this issue might be obtained in future research by switching the text and imagery of these two cartoons around for different groups of readers. The data as it stands here, though, shows no definite correlation (-0.3 for the 85 students as a whole, and ranging from 0.7 to -0.74 for individual classes) between the difficulty and appeal rankings of the three cartoons.

### 4.3 ‘Output’ cartoon: student responses

Analysis of student responses to the ‘output’ section reveals a diversity of approaches to the task, with some common factors. In three classes (U1: 18; U2: 20; U3: 24), all of the students were able to produce an English response, whereas in C1 (where the task was supervised by a different teacher) only 18 of the 25 students were able to compose an English response, with a further six responding in their L1, and one providing no response to this section of the worksheet. It is clear though that, allowing for the fact that very little time was allowed for composition, and none at all for editing, peer or teacher review, or error checking and correction, almost all of the complete L2 responses are both linguistically comprehensible and contextually appropriate.

#### 4.3.1 Coding of responses

Each response was coded for formal and content elements, as follows: 1) Is it written in the form of a **question**, or of a **comment**? 2) Does it contain correct, idiomatic use of a common English **set phrase**? 3) Does it show Bolt focusing on **himself**, his **rivals**, **both**, or the **race** as a whole? 4) Does it refer to any of the following elements: **victory**/medals/ceremony; Bolt **waiting**/resting/being tired; Bolt being **bored**; Bolt’s rivals being **slow** or taking a long time (including possibly ironic references to them being fast); Bolt being **fast**; the **running** style of Bolt or his rivals; Bolt **encouraging** his rivals (including possibly ironic instances); **animal** imagery; or a **pun**. Multiple codings are possible in category 4, with all responses receiving at least one, and a maximum of three codings. Tables 4 and 5 show a breakdown of the various formal and content elements

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<sup>1</sup> Rough estimates of the physical size of each cartoon, as reproduced on the worksheet, show that the main text represents only a very small proportion of the total area: 3% of the first, 4% of the second and 8% of the third cartoon.

	<b>question</b>	<b>comment</b>	<b>rivals</b>	<b>self</b>	<b>both</b>	<b>race</b>	<b>set</b>
U1	5	13	8	4	4	2	6
U2	3	17	14	6	0	0	10
U3	4	20	9	10	5	0	6
C1	4	14	12	5	1	0	7
Total	16	64	43	25	10	2	29
	80		80				

Table 4: Student output formal elements

	<b>victory</b>	<b>wait</b>	<b>bored</b>	<b>slow</b>	<b>fast</b>	<b>running</b>	<b>encourage</b>	<b>animal</b>	<b>pun</b>
U1	3	4	0	6	3	3	3	0	0
U2	2	2	0	6	2	4	8	2	1
U3	3	6	4	6	3	4	5	2	0
C1	2	2	0	6	2	3	7	0	1
Total	10	14	4	24	10	14	23	4	2

Table 5: Student output content elements

#### 4.3.2 Formal elements

In terms of formal elements, students tended to use comments to a greater extent than questions (80% for the former and only 20% for the latter). More than half showed Bolt focusing on his rivals, with only two responses taking a wider view of the race as an event, rather than concentrating on its participants. More than one third of the responses (29 out of 80) make use of common English set phrases, such as ‘Welcome home’, ‘Long time no see’, and ‘Take your time!’, and several – such as ‘Oh, you’re still there!’ – come close to duplicating the tone of the original cartoonist’s ‘Where have you been?’

#### 4.3.2 Content elements

The two most common content elements are those in which Bolt comments on his rivals’ slowness (more than double the number in which he remarks on his own speed), and those in which he encourages the other athletes (for example, ‘Do your best!’). The latter, which lends itself to ironic interpretation in a number of cases, may also show some influence from the students’ L1, in which similar terms (such as ‘I appreciate your hard work’) are commonly used in a variety of everyday conversational situations extending beyond the context of this particular cartoon.

The remaining responses show a wide variety of different approaches to the content, some of which have considerable humorous potential. A number of thematic/linguistic groups are of particular interest. Four responses made use of animal imagery, which was a key feature of two of the three ‘input’ cartoons, with all four casting the slower runners as ‘turtles’, and one of these also representing Bolt as a ‘rabbit’, in an explicit reference to the folk tale of ‘The hare and the tortoise’. Another major group has Bolt either questioning – ‘Are you running

yet?', 'Why are you walking?' – or otherwise remarking on the absurdity of the ease of his victory: 'I ran backward!', 'Everyone except me are very very slow. Very strange.' [sic], 'What's happening in this race?' etc. One response takes the form of a fairly sophisticated, if perhaps over-explicated pun: 'My foot is athele's foot, so I can run fast because very itchy!!' [sic], and another makes effective use of the punning potential in the name of the athlete, Usain Bolt: 'I am Bolt, but only I'm not bolting'. Apart from these examples, though, word-play is largely absent. This might be something that we would expect, given that it was not a feature of any of the three 'input' cartoons on the worksheet.

#### 4.4 Output feedback

In a follow-up class, after teacher correction of student output in section 2 of the worksheet, students were given a second copy of the Bolt cartoon, this time with six alternative texts for the speech bubble, one by the original cartoonist, and five taken from the output of, wherever possible, a different class; one text required a minor grammatical correction. Told that all six of the texts had been written by students in a different class, they were then asked to choose three texts that they found funny, and rank them as 'the funniest' (3), 'very funny' (2), and 'funny' (1). Texts were chosen to represent a cross-section of types from the sample as a whole, to include at least one question in addition to the original 'Where have you been?', and a variety of other common formal and content elements, to include 'set', 'wait' or 'bored', 'slow', 'running' and 'encourage'. Tables 6 and 7 show ratings from two classes (U2, with 22 respondents, and U3, with 24 respondents, respectively), with a total rating for each text obtained by adding the scores of 3, 2 and 1 given by each respondent. A higher score therefore indicates that a text was rated as 'funnier' by the class as a whole.

text	from class	rated 3	rated 2	rated 1	rating total (rank)
Where have you been?	-	1	2	8	15 (4)
Don't rush! Take it easy man!	C1	3	4	6	23 (3)
Why is it so hard for them?	U3	0	1	2	4 (6)
Why are you walking?	U3	6	6	2	32 (2)
Hello! Long time no see!	U1	10	8	2	48 (1)
I got tired of waiting for you.	U3	2	1	2	10 (5)

Table 6: U2 output feedback ratings



text	from class	rated 3	rated 2	rated 1	rating total (rank)
Where have you been?	-	2	3	3	15 (5)
*You are like turtles!	U2	5	4	2	25 (3)
Oh, you're still there!	U2	4	3	5	23 (4)
Are you running three times?	U1	12	5	3	49 (1)
Take your time! Good luck!	U2	1	8	8	27 (2)
I'm bored.	U3	0	1	3	5 (6)

Table 7: U3 output feedback ratings  
(\*teacher-corrected for minor grammatical error)

In both classes, the highest rated text was a student production, obtaining a score about three times as high as the original cartoonist's text, which was itself ranked relatively low in both classes (fourth out of six in U2, and fifth out of six in U3). This suggests that, to these particular groups of learners at least, there is no perceptible gap in quality between student output and that of a native-speaker professional; a hypothesis that could perhaps be tested by asking respondents whose L1 is English to rate the texts as well. Texts which contained the potentially ironic element 'encourage', such as 'Don't rush! Take it easy man!' and 'Take your time! Good luck!' were rated highly, as were texts that used an idiomatic set phrase: 'Hello! Long time no see!' and the two 'encourage' texts. 'Wait' and 'bored' texts were not highly related (fifth in U2 and sixth in U3) and do not seem to be intrinsically humorous. Finally, texts which contained more creative combinations of the elements 'running', 'animal' and 'slow' ('Why are you walking?', 'You are like turtles!' and 'Are you running three times?') were rated more highly than the perhaps slightly simpler 'Why is it so hard for them?'

## 5 Limitations and considerations for future research

A number of complications were encountered in the gathering of data for this study. As we have seen, the relative difficulty of material that combines visual and verbal elements is not easy to estimate precisely, and even in short texts a high number of variables is perhaps the inevitable consequence of the use of authentic materials, making the gathering of meaningful data difficult to achieve. In addition, some respondents may have found the 'difficulty' and 'appeal' ratings systems to be confusing: at least two students had obviously not followed the ratings instructions correctly, and while their responses were discarded, the possibility that others had also done so cannot be discounted. While the cartoons used in the first worksheet of this project depicted events which had received widespread media coverage both globally and domestically, students were not as familiar with those events as had been anticipated, suggesting that more pre-teaching, which could have taken the form either of individual research, or of whole-class activities such as brainstorming, may well have been beneficial. Finally, humour is to some extent a personal response. Involvement of a group of native-speaker informants using the same materials might be beneficial in providing a benchmark – unhindered by issues of language proficiency – against which L2 learner's responses can be compared. Steps to minimize these complications will need to be taken, if possible, before the second and third worksheets, which introduce more complex linguistic and humorous elements, are introduced.

## 6 Conclusion

Newspaper cartoons are compact texts that combine both visual and linguistic data not only to entertain, but also to comment on a current event, which may itself often serve as the stimulus for a number of different cartoons. In this respect, they are already short, meaningful, authentic, varied, and humorous (Medgyes, 2002: 6). If input cartoons are carefully chosen to maximize their relevance to students' existing background knowledge, and if materials are devised that promote the development of creativity in learner output – in areas ranging from the use of irony in the deployment of set phrases, to puns and more sophisticated manipulation of linguistic and situational conventions of syntax, discourse and narrative – cartoon humour can also be, as Gardner (2008: 12-13) argues that all classroom humour should be, not only entertaining, but also understandable and purposeful. In this case, students seem to have achieved considerable success in creating output that is certainly entertaining, and ranked by many respondents more highly than that of the original cartoon.

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