

PUN WORK HELPS ENGLISH LEARNERS GET THE JOKE

Kristin Lems

Italian comedian Giacinto Palmieri, who performs in English, said, “The same things that make English difficult to learn are what make it good for comedy” (Logan, 2010, p. 4). Indeed, English, which has elements from two large language families, naturally affords many opportunities for word play. Its rich collection of homophones, words with multiple meanings, and methods for creating and adapting words and phrases makes English exceptionally fertile ground for verbal humor (Cook, 2000; Lems, Miller, & Soro, 2010).

Word play is part of first language acquisition in any language, but children who are learning a new language often do not have the chance to develop the useful and enjoyable habit of understanding and making verbal jokes in their new language. Understanding jokes, both obvious and nuanced, gives children opportunities to make new connections to meaning in both oracy and literacy. Humor also helps bring people together through shared frames of reference, which are often framed through the jokes told. When English learners learn humorous English words and phrases as part of their language study, it can help their *metalinguistic awareness*, or conscious awareness of the forms of language; this, in turn, is positively associated with literacy development

(Ely & McCabe, 1994; Zipke, 2008). Joke telling is even included in the English language proficiency standards designed by the World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA) Consortium (Grades 6–8 Speaking domain, Social and Instructional standard, Level 5): “express or respond to humor or sarcasm in conversation” (WIDA, 2004).

Lowering the affective filter is one of the cornerstones of teaching English learners (Krashen, 1982). Humor raises motivation, lengthens attention span, and helps create a fun and relaxed classroom community. There are also, however, special benefits to using word play humor in particular because of the skills that are involved in learning to “get” a joke.

One kind of word play is English language puns, which we might humorously dub “pun play.” The pun is a widely used vehicle for English language humor. Puns hinge on a double meaning of some kind. They arise from the multiple spellings, pronunciations, and meanings that can occur within and across English words (Lems et al., 2010). Pun humor is language-specific, unlike more visual humor based on actions,

Kristin Lems is a professor in the ESL/Bilingual Education Program at National-Louis University, Chicago, Illinois, USA; e-mail klems@nl.edu.

such as sight gags or pratfalls found on TV or in the movies.

English is not the only language with puns and word play; Mandarin Chinese, for example, has many puns based on the sounds and appearance of the Chinese characters. The Mandarin word for *fish* is a pun based on a close pronunciation with the word *abundance*, and for that reason, the fish occurs in many Chinese illustrations as a symbol of wealth.

Because word play does not transfer between languages, it needs to be learned in each new language, and this is difficult; however, the rewards are great.

The three major categories of English puns are soundalike, lookalike, and close-sounding puns.

Soundalike Puns

A common kind of pun is based on *homophones*, two or more words that sound the same but have different spellings and meanings. Homophones

are a key feature of English, and understanding how they work helps learners with both phonological awareness and, later, reading and spelling. Homophones abound in English. Here is an example of two jokes based on homophones.

Teacher: Tell me something that conducts electricity.

Student: Why—er—

Teacher: Very good—wire! Now, name a unit of electrical power.

Student: The what?

Teacher: Very good job—the watt is correct!

The humor is based on the fact that the teacher heard the student's confused responses, "Why—er" and "the what?" as correct answers because the correct answers have exactly the same sounds. Many puns based on homophones can be understood by English learners at the

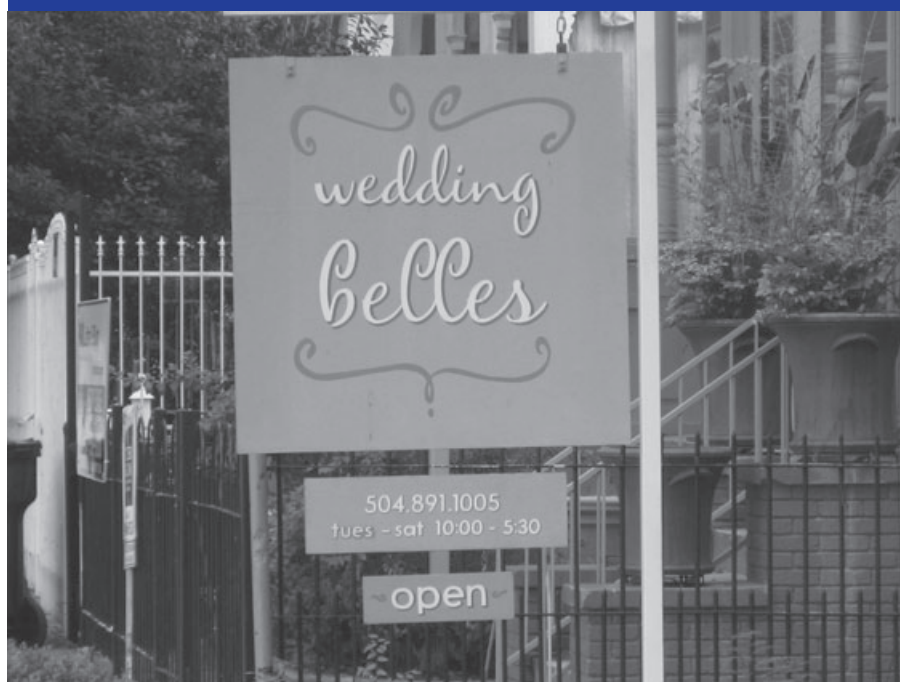
intermediate level of proficiency because so many high-frequency English words are homophones (Lems et al., 2010).

Figure 1 shows another example of a soundalike pun. The store sign plays on the soundalike words *bells/belles*. The first word, *bells*, suggests an association with wedding bells that ring at many church weddings; the second word with the same sound, *belles*, is a word borrowed from French and used in English to mean *a beautiful woman*. It is found in phrases such as *the belle of the ball* or *Southern belle*. Belle was also the female protagonist in the fairy tale and subsequent Disney movie *Beauty and the Beast*. When we possess the background knowledge just described, we can read the sign and fold together the two meanings for the homophone. Then we realize that the shop sells to brides. The humor not only plays on our understanding of the two meanings of the sounds and identifies the items sold

Pause and Ponder

- Think about experiences you have had using humor in the classroom. What have you learned from them?
- Have you ever tried to understand a joke in a new language? What did it feel like?
- Puns are especially widely used in English. Do any pun jokes come to your mind among jokes you know? How would you explain them to an English learner?
- Think about ways that understanding jokes using English word play might be more important to English learners than to native English speakers. Do such jokes serve mainly to make learners feel at ease, or could they have academic value as well? If so, how?

Figure 1 Wedding Belles



Note. © 2010 Kristin Lems.

at the store, but also makes a memorable impression.

Lookalike Puns

These puns are based on words that both sound and look the same but have two or more unrelated meanings. Their multiple meanings may be found in different contexts, alone or in phrases or idioms. Here are two examples of lookalike puns that might be found in a joke book for kids:

Teacher: Karen, what is the highest form of animal life?

Karen: A giraffe?

This pun relies on two possible meanings of *highest*: either *tallest* or *most advanced*. The joke hinges on the fact that the teacher is expecting an answer related to the evolution of species, but Karen finds that the question can also be interpreted as asking about height, and she ends up a winner!

Teacher: Which travels faster, hot air or cold?

Malcolm: Hot. You can always catch cold.

This lookalike pun relies on two interpretations of the words *catch* and *cold*. In the idiom *catch cold*, the two words bear the meaning *become sick with a cold*. Another meaning of *catch*, however, is related to running behind someone, and if the person is fast, it's hard to reach them. The key to getting this joke is knowing the idiom, and this pun affords a natural opportunity to teach it. (The joke doesn't make sense in other languages; in Persian, for example, *catch cold* is the idiom *eat a cold*.) As English learners begin to learn multiple meanings of words, at an intermediate level of proficiency, they will also begin to enjoy these kinds of puns.

"Because word play does not transfer between languages, it needs to be learned in each new language, and this is difficult; however, the rewards are great."

Close-Sounding Puns

These puns are based on words that have different meanings and spellings, but sound similar, differing in only one or two sounds. The pun is achieved by substituting a close-sounding word in a word or phrase that contains the other one. "Knock-knock jokes" are based on close-sounding puns and can be very tricky for English learners:

Tim: Knock knock.

Teri: Who's there?

Tim: Eiffel.

Teri: Eiffel who?

Tim: Eiffel down and scraped my knee.

To understand the pun, students must go through several steps: (a) recognize the word *Eiffel* and know that it goes with the word *Tower* in English; (b) hear the word *down* and search for a plausible phrase that sounds similar to *Eiffel* and *down*; (c) recognize that the sound sequence in the answer can represent the phrase *I fell down* if it is pronounced in a certain way. "Unpacking" these steps gives us an appreciation of how difficult it is for English learners to get such jokes, which take place within about a half second in real time!

"Ex-stink" is another word play based on a close pronunciation (see Figure 2).

Figure 2 Ex-Stink



Note. © 2010 Kristin Lems.

Almost everyone knows the word *stink*, and the image of the toilet completes the picture. Not everyone knows the word *extinct*, however, and this van sign gives teachers a chance to teach, or check, student understanding of the word’s meaning. Finally, the class can paraphrase the meaning into something like this: If you hire us to fix your plumbing, the smell, and the problem, will disappear forever—in the same way a species can become extinct.

Close-sounding puns require making an association between the sounds of words that have nothing else in common. These jokes often require an advanced English language proficiency level.

Teaching Puns

Here are steps teachers can use when they introduce puns for the first time. The puns that are chosen for examples should be carefully designed to match the English proficiency level and age level of the children. Animal puns are good choices because most children have background knowledge about animals as well as keen interest in them. Before the lesson:

- 1. Obtain some joke collections for children (some resources are cited later in this article). Joke collections tend to have a long shelf life, and jokes are often still funny decades after they appear in a book, so it is easy to build up a collection from used book sales and school and public libraries.
- 2. Create a pun collection that you will use with your class. You might keep them on index cards or in a word file. For each pun you have selected, write down the background knowledge necessary to understand the key word(s) in order to ensure that all facets of the joke will be

completely accounted for when you explain it to English learners.

- 3. Choose puns that you will use as exemplars for each kind of pun.
- 4. Choose a few easy, funny “winners” that you will use to begin your pun study.
- 5. Prepare a single sheet that contains 9 to 12 puns that exemplify the 3 kinds of puns, preferably equal in number. The sheet will be used by small groups to classify the puns. Make sure the puns you choose fit easily into the three categories.
- 6. Differentiate the puns you have collected for high beginning, intermediate, or advanced levels of English proficiency. As you divide the puns by level of difficulty, you may discover that there are cultural assumptions that need to be explained explicitly to your English learners. Some puns will need to be discarded because they are too advanced for your learners or have an inappropriate subtext.
- 7. Once you have an ample collection, classify each pun

according to the three kinds of puns explained here: *lookalike*, *soundalike*, and *close-pronunciation*. You should now have nine groups of puns—three kinds of puns at three proficiency levels. Building your collection will take some time; you might start with the puns in this article. Once you have activated your “radar” to notice them, however, you’ll find puns in magazines, newspaper circulars, billboards (keep a camera handy), greeting cards, and in spoken form at social gatherings. You will be surprised to find that newspaper headlines routinely use puns, especially on the sports pages.

- 8. Prepare a colorful, readable, three-column chart, following the template shown in Table 1. Providing visual support for development of academic vocabulary is a key feature for successful teaching of English learners (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2000; Zwiers, 2008). Make smaller copies of the chart that can be used in small groups.

Table 1 Types of Puns

	Soundalike Pun	Lookalike Pun	Close-Sounding Pun
1. “Is it true your boss fired you for lying?” “Yes, I was lying in bed an hour too long every morning.”		X (<i>lying</i> means not telling the truth, or reclining in bed)	
2. “Knock knock” “Who’s there?” “Harvard?” “Harvard who?” “Harvard you like a punch in the nose?”			X (<i>Harvard</i> sounds similar to <i>how would</i>)
3. Two peanuts were walking down the street, and one was a salted.	X (assaulted)		

PUN WORK HELPS ENGLISH LEARNERS GET THE JOKE

During the lesson (may be done over several days):

1. Define *pun* as a humorous word play based on a double meaning. Share several simple examples that you are sure students will understand, using visual supports as needed.
2. Put up the three-column chart with the columns marked *soundalike pun*, *lookalike pun*, and *close-sounding pun*. Read the categories of pun out loud and ask the students to repeat the words.
3. Provide an exemplar of each of the three categories of pun and explain their double meanings.

Possible exemplars at an advanced proficiency level:

- Soundalike pun—My 3-year-old sister is resisting arrest (resisting a rest)!
 - Lookalike pun—Q: How do you stop a charging bull? A: Take away its credit card.
 - Close-sounding pun—The barber opened up a shaving account.
4. Scaffold student understanding by reading some carefully chosen puns to the whole class. Explain each pun and ask students to classify it. Write the pun in the right place on the large chart. Share a couple of easy additional puns and have students explain them and classify them, using thinkalouds.
 5. Provide a smaller copy of the three-column chart and divide students into small groups of mixed proficiency. Provide the page of puns that you have prepared. Ask students to classify each of the puns on the three-column chart. You

can circulate to help students who might need additional hints or are missing background knowledge. After students have had time to classify the puns, each group can report back to the class on some of the puns, in jigsaw style.

6. Come back together to talk about the puns and fill in the pun types on the big chart. Continue to add puns to the chart every week.

Extension activity:

1. Keep a pun wall in the classroom and add puns to it as they are encountered during the school year.
2. Give students a chance to choose a pun and illustrate it. The illustrated puns can be put on the bulletin board outside the classroom or turned into humorous greeting cards for parents and caregivers.
3. Put the students in pairs to perform or record their puns with a “joke of the day.” Each pair chooses a joke, practices reading it expressively, and prepares an explanation of the joke. They then record the pun. The recording should include a first reading of the joke, its explanation, and a second reading, to help others get the joke. The teacher can add a laugh track. Podcasts of these jokes can be posted to a class webpage or comparable website. Matt Granger, a teacher who developed this rich fluency project, reported that it was highly motivating and built many English language skills into his third grade sheltered English class. A podcast of his class project can be accessed on the Internet (Granger, 2011).
4. Invite students to report back to the class when they spot examples

of puns around the community. The words and phrases students find can be analyzed and put on the pun wall.

TAKE ACTION!

Before the lesson:

1. Prepare a collection of puns and write down background knowledge necessary to understand the multiple meanings of the pun.
2. Choose easy puns to illustrate the three types of puns in your pun study unit.
3. Choose 9 to 12 additional puns at several levels for the class to look at together.
4. Prepare a large chart using the template provided in Table 1.

During the lesson (may be done over several days):

1. Define *puns* and give several simple examples, explaining how they work.
2. Classify puns as *soundalike*, *lookalike*, or *close-sounding* with whole group.
3. Provide 9 to 12 puns and have students classify them in small groups. Bring class back together and put puns in the right place on the large chart.

Extension activity:

1. Keep a pun wall in the classroom and add to it as puns are encountered.
2. Allow students chances to find a pun and illustrate it. Put on bulletin board or turn into greeting cards.
3. Have students choose puns, practice reading them expressively, and record a “joke of the day” as a class project. Upload a podcast of the recordings to the school website.
4. Have students analyze puns they find in the community and put on the pun wall.

MORE TO EXPLORE

IRA Books

- *Literacy Instruction for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students: A Collection of Articles and Commentaries* edited by Michael F. Opitz
- *Supporting the Literacy Development of English Learners: Increasing Success in All Classrooms* edited by Terrell A. Young and Nancy L. Hadaway

IRA Journal Articles

- “Laughing Through Rereadings: Using Joke Books to Build Fluency” by Molly Ness, *The Reading Teacher*, May 2009
- “‘A Squirrel Came and Pushed Earth’: Popular Cultural and Scientific Ways of Thinking for ELLs” by Kathryn M. Ciechanowski, *The Reading Teacher*, April 2009

Creating a Pun Collection

Pun sites on the Internet are highly unreliable. Some contain “gross” or vulgar humor, and others contain tedious lists no one but the author would find funny. Joke books from established children’s publishers are still the safest and most reliable route at this time (see Table 2 for a few humor collections for kids). Bear in mind that a joke collection pitched to native English-speaking children of ages 5 to 7 may still be quite usable for

Table 2 Humor Collections for Kids

Adler, D.A. (1988). *Remember Betsy Floss! And other colonial American riddles*. New York: Skylark.

Elliott, R. (2010). *Laugh out loud jokes for kids*. Grand Rapids, MI: Revell.

Hahn, J. (2006). *777 great clean jokes*. Uhrichsville, OH: Barbour.

Hills, T. (2000). *My first book of knock-knock jokes*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Lewman, D. (2000). *Joke book*. New York: Simon & Schuster/ Nickelodeon. (Based on SpongeBob Squarepants characters)

Parish, H. (1996–2008). *Amelia Bedelia* (series). New York: HarperCollins.

Rosenbloom, J. (1986). *Nutty knock knocks!* New York: Sterling.

English learners at older ages because those students are just reaching the needed proficiency level to understand and enjoy the jokes.

As students catch on to the puns, you will find that the lag time before the explosion of laughter will become shorter, and the groans at clever puns will get louder. Once the basic structure of puns is understood, they can be used to animate and delight a classroom in just a few minutes’ time. When students are enjoyably engaged in solving and sharing puns, the whole class gets the last laugh.

REFERENCES

Cook, G. (2000). *Language play, language learning*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Echevarria, J., Vogt, M., & Short, D.J. (2000). *Making content comprehensible for English language learners: The SIOP model*. Rowley, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

Ely, R., & McCabe, A. (1994). The language play of kindergarten children. *First Language*, 14(40), 19–35. doi:10.1177/014272379401404002

Granger, M. (2010). *Joke of the day podcast: Where you can learn English while you laugh*. Retrieved September 23, 2011, from web.me.com/mgranger114/Joke_of_the_Day_Podcast/Podcast/Podcast.html

Krashen, S. (1982). *Principles and practice in second language acquisition*. New York: Pergamon.

Lems, K., Miller, L.D., & Soro, T.M. (2010). *Teaching reading to English language learners: Insights from linguistics*. New York: Guilford.

Logan, B. (2010, Aug. 17). *Funny foreigners: How overseas comics are storming Edinburgh*. Retrieved September 23, 2011, from www.guardian.co.uk/culture/2010/aug/17/edinburgh-overseas-comics

World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment Consortium. (2004). *English language proficiency standards for English language learners in kindergarten through grade 12*. Retrieved September 17, 2010, from www.wida.us

Zipke, M. (2008). Teaching metalinguistic awareness and reading comprehension with riddles. *The Reading Teacher*, 62(2), 128–137. doi:10.1598/RT.62.2.4