**Humor & Props: Laugh Your Way to Better Engagement & Acquisition**

By Christine So

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**Why use humor and props in foreign language teaching?**

- Your students’ emotions are their conditions for learning
- Focusing on visible objects reduces anxiety, taking the focus off self-conscious students
- Putting new words in obvious context means less time reaching for their dictionary
- Engaging multiple senses → more ways something is learned, more neural connections in brain
- Task-based learning creates genuine need to speak in ways discussion questions cannot
- Prevents mental burnout and disengagement in long classes
- Classmates bond being playful, creating a sense of community in a classroom of strangers
- Laughter releases dopamine, which enhances memory of events

**The Order of Today’s Activities**

*WARNING: Underlined parts = You will be asked to participate*

1. Watch video of ESL students in a combined low-high beginning classroom engaging in unscripted conversation when they were assigned a role and task (but not lines) and are sent to stations full of props resembling a bookstore, grocery store & flea market

2. Watch video of ESL students “selling a product” in a pretend tv advertisement in class

3. **Two audience members act as students in “Eye Doctor” Role-Play.** *(See chart on p. 7)*
   Optometrist repeats: “Can you see this?” to practice correct emphasis and deemphasis of modal *can* vs. *can’t* → “I CAN’T see” in the negative and unstressed “I can SEE” in affirmative

4. Read list of *Absurd Role-plays* (p. 3), *vote on one favorite absurd situation* about which 2 lucky participants will create a skit in a few minutes...

5. Meanwhile, pass around and see 40 different props while our actors plan their absurd skit.

   **Got ideas how a prop could be used in teaching a certain function, grammar concept or skill?**

6. **Two audience members do an impromptu demo** of an *absurd role-play* from list. (p.3)

7. Funny cartoons, photos, 30-second youtube videos as discussion starters.
   Pair up with person near you, at your seat discuss the cartoon or video projected.
   *(See p. 5 Discussion questions on bottom)*

8. See a funny dialog-free short film that can be used as fluency practice in simultaneous narration, retelling actions taking turns alone up front. *(p.6 has more shorts on Youtube)*

9. **An audience member stands & narrates the second time we watch same short film.**
Worksheet for pretend TV ads students plan & film same day in class

Example of a TV ad for a small store:

Do you like bananas?
We’ve got bananas!
Do you like strawberries?
We’ve got strawberries!
You don’t like strawberries?
No problem...
We’ve got oranges!
You don’t eat *fruit?
No problem.
We’ve got vegetables!
Come on down to ___________________! (name of your store)
We’ve got the best prices!

Now you write what you and your partner want to say:

Do you like ___________________s?
We’ve got ___________________s!!
Do you like ___________________s?
We’ve got ___________________s!
You don’t like ___________________s?
No problem....
We’ve got ___________________s!!
You don’t want ___________________s?
No problem...
We’ve got ___________________s!
Come on down to _____________________________(name of your store)!
We’ve got the best prices!

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List of Absurd Role-plays: Pick Your Favorite

1. Store where everything is outrageously expensive
2. Ice cream shop where they have only one flavor left
3. The waiter who always brings what you didn’t order
4. A customer in a restaurant who is never satisfied with the food
5. The doctor who is never worried and thinks “It’s nothing.”
6. A babysitter who lets the kids do very unsafe things
7. Little kids lie to their new babysitter about things their parents let them do
8. Totally unqualified applicants at job interviews with wrong personality for a job

Skits Enlivened by Household Props

1. Haggle at the Flea Market (bring CDs, DVDs, Books, Magazines from home)
2. Sorry, we’re out of that. (clean cereal boxes, egg cartons, milk jugs, bottles in recycling bin)
3. Shop then try to return an item (anything!)
4. Storm Newscast (plastic microphone, paper plates make great fans to create wind, shaking poster board can make “thunder”)
5. Pretend TV Commercials selling items. (office supplies or food props from recycling bin)
6. Crazy Infomercial in which students make up 5 unusual, unexpected uses for an object (example: a giant “water noodle” swim toy for kids or an unfamiliar object)
7. Working in a preschool & two little kids start to fight over a toy (toys from yard sales, your kids)
8. Babysitting 2-year-olds who do unsafe things (mardi gras beads, coins, scissors, coffee cup)
9. Optometrist (pages of random letters /numbers printed in huge font, then smaller font sizes that doctor uses to ask, “Can you see this?” to practice correct emphasis and deemphasis of the modal can “I CAN’T see” in the negative and unstressed “I can SEE” in affirmative)
10. Soap opera with scenes begun in one dramatic starting line-- but students must write the rest of their scene’s lines. (ex props: $1 reading glasses from Dollar Store for “parents”, plastic ring from supermarket 25-cent machine for fiancée, fake flowers that can be thrown in anger…)

Examples of soap opera scene starters:

I saw your boyfriend with another girl yesterday.

What? You don’t want to marry me?

My parents don’t want me to marry you.
Project one big funny cartoon, photo or a 30-second video on screen at a time

Fluency Practice, Grammar Practice, Pronunciation Practice
Scroll to a new image every 1 minute or so

Cartoons are great for more advanced grammar too! Ex: Modals of inference in past

- They **must have been** married a long time.
- The husband **must have done** something bad.
- What?
- He might have ____________________.
Use funny video clips of kids from Youtube to teach advanced grammar in context...

- Past tense contrasted with past perfect
- Simple Past vs. Unreal past conditional,
- Modals of inference in past
- Modals of advisability in past,
- Modals of ability in past

Ex. video Baby bites brother’s finger.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fPDYj3IMkRI

Ex. video Toddler is terrified in the car wash.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YscUVkYHSuw

TALK! Now with the person next to you.....

On the board or in a separate handout, you could provide sentence scaffolds like this which they reuse for each new short video clip:

- What happened? ______________. (past tense)
- Why? The little brother **might have** ____________. (possible reason)
- Opinion: The big brother **shouldn't have** ____________. (but he did)
- Late advice: The big brother **could have** ____________ (but he didn’t). It’s too late now.
Some Oscar-Nominated Animated Short Films with Little to No Dialog to Get Your Students Talking or Writing

1.) “Getting Started” (12:14 min)  
From the National Film Board of Canada  
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=scZ8ov0pz_Y  
Procrastination is taken to new heights in this absurd tale of a music student avoiding piano practice.  
*Perfect for discussions about good study habits, distractions, using present tense, negative present tense. Teacher can ask individual students to stand by movie screen and narrate actions as they happen since there are so many silly distractions in one minute.

2.)“Special Delivery” (7:07 min)  
From the National Film Board of Canada.  
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mOsRlp1nKW0  
Ralph’s failure to shovel the front stairs leads to a dead mailman on his doorstep and a vanishing wife.  
*Good drama for practicing intermediate level grammar: past tense verbs, negative past tense verbs, and more advanced vocabulary of regret, modals of obligation, ability and conjecture in past tense should have, could have, would have and drawing connection to moments of regret in their own lives.

3.)“Lavatory-Lovestory” (8:00 min.)  
Russian cartoon with no dialog  
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ajLrFugsdMw  
A bored single woman works a dull job running a men’s public restroom. She doesn’t see who leaves her flowers every day. Perfect for practicing simple past tense, negative past tense, romance vocab.  
*Perfect for very low levels. A simple animation with no words.

4.)“The Cat Came Back” (7:37 min.)  
From the National Film Board of Canada.  
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ck0jwS0CvKk&t=2s  
The hilarious attempts by Mr. Johnson to get rid of a persistent yellow cat that appeared on his doorstep have made this sing-song a beloved classic. No dialog but occasional soundtrack of the song “The Cat Came Back” playing in background.  
*Excellent for beginners to practice third person singular verbs both affirmative and negative.

5.)“The Big Snit” (9:54 min.)  
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p1S5pAF1YYA&t=32s  
This wonderfully wacky animation film is a look at two simultaneous conflicts, the macrocosm of global nuclear war and the microcosm of a domestic quarrel, and how each conflict is resolved. Presented with warmth and unexpectedly off-the-wall humor, the film is open to a multitude of interpretations.  
*Good for more advanced students to have political discussions without naming names of countries.

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