Humor in the Classroom: A Guide for Language Teachers and Educational Researchers, Nancy D. Bell & Anne Pomerantz, Routledge, New York (2016). 204 pp., ISBN: 978-0-415-64054-1 (pbk)

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> *"Humor in the classroom is a twentieth century phenomenon. Previously, it was considered unscholarly to use humor as a teaching strategy or even to show a sense of humor as a personality trait"*
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> Korobkin (1988, p. 154)

With the advent of humanistic approach to education, notions like whole person learning, learner-centered education (LCE) and edutainment gained more popularity. The outburst of technology-enhanced methods of learning provided more momentum and impetus for more humanistic trends in education prioritizing learner emotions, needs and desires. Thus, the endeavors made by current practitioners and educationalists to create more playful, fun and engaging ways of learning in humor-laden, stress-free and non-threatening learning environments might be regarded as the offspring of both movements referred to above, i.e. humanistic education and technology-enriched learning. The main mission of the book reviewed here, entitled *Humor in the Classroom: A guide for Language Teachers and Educational Researchers*, is therefore, thought to be two-fold. On the one hand, the book tries to inform teachers of the ways in which humor can be integrated in learning environments, and on the other, it strives to pave the way for more inclusive and fun learning by introducing practical techniques and presenting a research-supported gamut of available options for implementing such learning.

The book comes in nine chapters, all dealing with diverse perspectives of learning with fun. In Chapter 1, titled *Language, Communication and Education*, after giving an account of how language and communication are viewed in the context of classroom, the authors highlight the newly-

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arisen needs of the current globalized and technology-laden world of education and tend to refer to this new trend as the "playful turn" in the modern era which entails the inception of more "ludic or creative" as well as more entertaining styles of learning (p. 5). In so doing, they also present a number of other relevant theories such as Complexity/Dynamic Systems model, Ecological view of language, and Communicative Repertoire Approach. The chapter, then, closes by underscoring the need for more inclusive, culture-sensitive and interculturally-oriented trends in education.

In the second chapter, *Humor and Language Play*, the authors embark on explicating the formal mechanisms of humor and the functions it may assume in social encounters. Meanwhile, the key role played by contextual elements and communicative contexts is brought to light by the writers. In this regard, they are of the view that since "humor is a collaborative or co-constructed communicative endeavor, it is important to consider how people respond to humor" (p. 35). Thus, how to use humor in appropriate ways which eschews misinterpretation or offense is another major concern of the chapter. The authors finally wrap up the discussion of chapter by going about sociocultural perspectives of humor in multilingual contexts and how the construction and perception of humor might look different in monolingual and bilingual communities.

Understanding Classroom Talk, chapter three, delves into the application of humor in the domain of classroom discourse. The authors' main preoccupation in this chapter is dealing with diverse aspects of classroom talk and elaborating on the pros and cons of varied approaches to classroom discourse. In order to reach what they term "'thick descriptions of classroom life" (p. 57), the writers of the book raise the argument that learners are to be "viewed as active constructors of meaning, rather than passive recipients of already-formed knowledge" (ibid.). In the remainder of the chapter, they refer to the partial inattention toward the appropriate inclusion of humor in learning contexts and stress the need for creating more delightful learning environments with the help of language play and fun.

Playing It Safe is the title of the next chapter, in which the authors are after exterminating the long-lasting, orthodox view of humor as a redundant element of classroom interaction. Through the provision of thorough-going examples, they elaborate on how 'student-initiated humor' may take on substantial classroom functions. All in all, the main goal of the chapter is stipulating the efficacious role of humor in learning and eliminating the stereotypical aura of skepticism surrounding the use of language play and humor in learning contexts.

Amid its transition from psychological and social underpinnings of humor in classroom context to more practical issues of L2 development through the application of humor, the fifth chapter of the book entitled *Humor, Learning and Additional Language Development* is after disclosing the phenomenal role of humor in enhanced language learning. Drawing mainly on Vygotsky and Lantolf's theories concerning socioculturally-mediated ways of learning along with interaction and involvement, the authors try to elucidate how games, humor and language play can help further language learning. Mention is also made of educational researchers' emphasis on learning as an emerging process, holding "that L2 development emerges incrementally as the learner participates in similar activities and thus experiences similar language use" (p. 108). This

frequency of exposure, then, is said to be more efficacious when exposure occurs in varied contexts and language play is thought to facilitate this ample meaningful exposure to input, and hence boost learning.

In chapter six, dubbed *Teachers and Humor: Weighing the Risks and Benefits*, the authors initially refer to Bullough's influential demarcation between light and dark humor. While the former, as they put it, brings about more rapport and affiliation between teachers and students, and makes the classroom atmosphere more tension-free, exhilarating, fun and cooperative, the latter "belies dissatisfaction and seeks to undermine or unsettle others" (p. 133). The chapter, then, provides some useful tips regarding when, where and how to apply humor in a safe and non-offensive way. Another issue dealt with in the chapter is teachers' concern about 'failed humor', cases in which "their attempts at humor will fall flat with or offend students who may lack the linguistic or cultural knowledge needed to appreciate it" (p. 142). Toward the end of the chapter, the authors rightfully underscore the fear of losing class control and management as one of the primary reasons underlying the teachers' reluctance for applying humor in classes. Finally, some evidence is provided based on research in this domain regarding how to get around the issue and tips are also provided throughout the chapter as to how humor is to be practiced in non-offensive ways.

In *Teaching with Humor*, more real-time and hands-on arguments are raised as to the real implementation of language play and humor in classes. Highlighting the need for designing principled and thoughtful ways for dealing with the touchy notion of humor in the classroom, the authors present some stages for bringing about sound application of humor. In order to come up with desirable learning outcomes, they put forth their recommended notion of 'backward design' which according to the authors must unravel in three stages of 'identifying desired results', 'determining acceptable evidence' and 'planning learning experience and instruction'. Tips are provided throughout the chapter concerning how to regard and use humor as a beneficial 'pedagogical tool'.

The authors' attempts in chapter 8, *Teaching about Humor*, center around regarding humor as a pivotal aspect of teaching, and stressing the teachability of humor. Four major aspects of humor instruction discussed in the chapter are: *identifying humor*, *comprehending humor*, *producing humor*, and *responding to humor*. The final part of the chapter offers some useful tips for the inclusion of humor in instruction by way of making a flashback to backward design introduced in chapter 7. The tips thus given are defining the focus, doing research, developing assessment, and planning the instruction.

The final chapter of the book, *Researching Humor and Language Play*, looks more profoundly into the available body of research on humor and its application in instruction. In so doing, the chapter reports on an assortment of research projects conducted on varied aspects of humor in pedagogy, and points to both challenges and gaps in the research on the issue.

Ultimately, though many journal publications have addressed the prominent notions of humor and language play in different contexts (e.g. Maemura, 2014; So-Yeon, 2016; Wang, 2014), *Humor in the Classroom* seems to be the first serious scholarly book providing an in-depth discussion of

functions and applications of humor and language play in pedagogy. The configuration of the book also appears to be appropriate, in that it makes a smooth transition from theoretical foundations in the initial chapters, to the discussion of more practical issues surrounding the real application of humor in language classes. It ultimately comes to an end by exploring what research has to offer regarding the implementation of humor and its varied facets. Overall, the book provides a comprehensive, reader-friendly and idiot-proof elaboration on different perspectives of humor use in pedagogy.

Nonetheless, it occurs to the reviewer of the current book that the authors have failed to pay justice to a well-balanced treatment of humor in terms of contextual factors. For instance, a more vivid elucidation could have been provided if the authors had taken account of learner factors (say their age, language proficiency/background, gender, etc.) as well as contextual factors (class time, structure, etc.) and had elaborated on how such variations in terms of learner and contextual characteristics may necessitate different approaches to humor. Then, more hands-on and practical tips could have been provided for different classes in terms of their unique features. After all, as a fledgling domain of research which seems to be still in its infancy, probe into humor needs to be addressed by more research in the future to come up with more conclusive results as to when, how, and to what degree it can be exercised in different socio-educational contexts.

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