

**Treasures in Jokes and Cartoons:  
YOU REALLY MUST BE JOKING!**

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## **TREASURES IN JOKES AND CARTOONS: YOU REALLY MUST BE JOKING!**

### **ABSTRACT**

Humour has been practically neglected in the teaching of English in Malaysia and Asia as well, perhaps due to the conservative nature of its people. Yet, we go through cartoons in the dailies, enjoy jokes over the radio and try by all means not to miss humorous sitcoms like *Friends* or *Seinfeld*. *Mr Bean* is a hit though he hardly speaks a word. Humour, undeniably is a health provider. It is also a relationship builder. However, much more can be gleaned from jokes and cartoons, especially for educational purposes. Jokes and cartoons are not simply written. A review of many cartoons and jokes in the dailies and books has shown that there are hardly any flaws in the words and phrases used in them. However, some are culturally biased, thus making comprehension difficult. In this paper I have highlighted some of the rich treasures or resources found in cartoons and jokes, especially that of the words, sounds, colours and have suggested ways they can help the English language teachers in the classroom.

### **INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND**

Walter Nash has this to say

*In short, as wise men often remind us-with a wink of paradox-humour is a serious business, a land for which the explorer must equip himself thoughtfully. Here we find wit and word-play and banter and bumfun; slogans and captions and catch words; allusion and parody; ironies; satires; here are graffiti; and limericks; here is pert rhyme, and here the twisted pun; here are scrambled spellings and skewed pronunciations; here is filth for the filthy (you and me) and here are the delicacies for the delicate (me and you). How extraordinary that such multiplicity should be denoted by a single word?*

The greatest complaint among teachers of ESL is, “My students just won’t open their mouths and say something.” This I believe is prevalent everywhere where English is not the mother tongue of the students. The students on the other hand complain of shyness or being afraid of saying something that may be wrong. Perhaps there is nothing for them to say.

This paper likes to work on these two complains; of there is nothing to say and of being afraid or shy of saying something. My sympathies are with the students. Lesson in

English are an end by themselves.. There is nothing else to talk about. Seldom is there a take-away or there is nothing to look forward to. Some students even feel this way.

*Aminah was back from school, unusually earlier.  
“Why are back so early, Aminah?” Her mother asked.  
“My teacher punished me for something I didn’t do,” Aminah replied.  
“That is bad. I must have a word with your teacher,”  
Aminah’s mother said, “what is that you didn’t do?”  
“My homework,” replied Aminah.*

*Chong Peng was taking his time preparing for school.  
“You will be late, hurry up.” His mother said.  
“What’s the hurry?” Chong Peng replied. “Afterall school is open till 2.00 o’clock.”*

*A teacher was showing her students the picture they had just taken.  
“Just imagine what you will all be in a few years time.”  
“Daniel, you will be a lawyer.” “Sabrina, you will be a scientist.”  
“Zack you will be a doctor and so will you, Jamiah!”  
Just then, there was an intrusion from the back.  
“And here is the teacher, she is dead.”*

Though the above are meant to be funny, these very words could be the very words uttered by bored students. The often said excuse among most teachers is that I have been supplied with this book, these materials. What can I do with them? If I don’t use the book and the materials, action will be taken against me”. Yes there is no denying. We have to use the materials, supplied to us. These materials at times can be so serious that students prefer to *bury them* at school and refuse to talk about them at all. And we say our students seem to have *lost their tongues*.

Just what is preventing us from using humour in our classes? Perhaps it is conservatism. Laughter is not something that is condoned even at home, so what more in schools. The old ism of ‘*Children should be seen and not heard*’ still persists and as such a noisy class spells disorder, chaos and disaster and that is just what humour is capable of. Humour causes laughter. Yet laughter is no laughing matter. Doctors recommend it. Why? Because laughter has many benefits. These are some of them

- (i) Laughs are natural stress busters. Laugh and stress will disappear.
- (ii) A laugh can keep depression and anxiety outside the door.
- (iii) Laughing is good for your body, mind and spirit.
- (iv) Telling jokes can build up your ego and self confidence.
- (v) Telling and hearing jokes can relief pain.
- (vi) A good laugh can make you look younger.
- (vii) Laughing or even smiling can bring people closer to one another.
- (viii) Humour add sounds, words and colour to a world of black and white and

can make Aminah, Chong Peng, Daniel, Sabrina, Zack, Jamiah, Ali, and Samy talk and talk for hours. They might even imitate their teacher And the teacher in the picture will still be *living and kicking*.

While some of us from Universiti Uara Malaysia have focused seven of these portals in an article in *Towering Leadership*, the focus of this paper will be on the eighth portal.

The following one-liners represent two years of patient reading of cartoons and jokes. They represent the intention of this paper that is to look at the language used in jokes and their usefulness in an EL classroom. This is the treasure I am referring to. Jokes and cartoons use contemporary language. It is English as it should be spoken and some of them can only be described in one word *beautiful*. The complete cartoons or the jokes, in these one-liners, are not addressed here due to constraint of space.

No	Language used	Cartoon
1	Can you spare a dollar for some chicken soup?	Wizard of ID
2	I can't get a fair trial here	Wizard of ID
3.	Are you willing to take a shot?	Blondie
4	It's a nice, roomy walk in the closet.	Bound& Gagged
5	You got nothing you could hide.	Bringing up father
6	Your brother is burning the midnight oil.	Bringing up father
7	He's under a deadline squeeze.	On the fast track
8	Well, some of them do.	Peanuts
9	A lot harder than it looks	Baby blues
10	You have a special ability that isn't obvious.	Dilbert
11	Sad to say, you are right.	Momma
12	You have failed to see the forest for the trees.	Big Nate
13	This is my punch line.	On the fast track
14	Let me do a dress rehearsal first.	Pc & pixel
15	I am beside myself, this morning.	Bound and gagged
16	Insults seem to travel farther when the air is thin.	H a g g a r t h e Horrible
17	The enemy has run out of options.	Haggar the Horrible
18	He didn't even bother to stick around.	Blondie

19	I want to keep that from you.	On the fast track
20	This way is better than that way.	Baby blues
21	Haven't they heard of elevator music?	Loose parts
22	You have an overnight mail!	Wizard of ID
23	You have to pay the price of normality.	Baby blues
24	His mood has a lot to with that problem.	Billy & Saltie
25	Why the lost and confused looking face?	Pc & pixel
26	Have I become a deductible item?	Blondie
27	Are you kidding?	Baby blues
28	Never argue with a night whale.	Billy & Saltie
29	Keep up the good work.	Dilbert
30	I should franchise myself.	Big Nate
31	Serious, you want to chaperone me!	Big Nate
32	In the vastness of cyberspace came my inspiration.	On the fast track
33	Wow! That's a good one.	Blondie
34	Working for Ms Trellis naturally develops a thick skin.	On the fast track
35	Interested in out-sourcing some of that?	Pc & Pixel
36	Probably as good as any	Blondie
37	More proof that cats are vain and refuse to wear glasses no matter how obvious it is to everyone that they need them.	Cats with hands
38	Can you be a little more specific?	Baby Blues
39	Not necessarily in that order	The Wizard of ID
40	Talk about being in the right place at the right time.	Blondie
41	It's not camouflage, look closer	On the fast track
42	It's the only caricature I know how to draw.	Big Nate
43	I'm expecting an important phone call, so I don't want to hear any fighting out here.	Baby Blues

44	Doesn't it concern you that a condiment that people put on burgers, which has nothing to do with us, is called 'catsup'?	Cats with hands
45	They discovered something edible in it.	The Wizard of ID
46	A lone fox wanders on enchanted landscape encountering wonders of astounding variety and surprise!	On the fast track
47	Hey, don't bog me down with details while celebrating.	I'm Baby Blues
48	It's no trouble! It's a pleasure!	Baby Blues
49	Mmmm....Is this meat cured or something.	Billy and Saltie
50	I have 40 witnesses to testify on my client's character.	The wizard of ID
51	Give me something contagious.	Bringing up father
52	Well, I figured that the only way to make them sleepy was to sit down and tell them the longest, most drawn-out exhausting story I could think of.	thBaby Blues
53	And the prince struck at the ogre with his sword but to no avail.	Pc & Pixel
54	I demand that you remove the gender question from this application!	The wizard of ID
55	I have a rush deadline for a low paying client and I don't even know what to do first on the darn project.	Pc & Pixel
56	His portfolio is down to a wallet.	The wizard of ID
57	You getting invited, to a party, is a mystery itself!	Pc & Pixel
58	The yard sales, the flea market and the landfill in that order.	The Wizard of ID
59	Cards for the boss are down this aisle right next to the 'You're fired' cards.	Blondie
60	I can't believe you fall for that every time.	Blondie

61	Don't let it get you down. You probably just need to take a break and relax.	Baby Blues
62	Here's the grim buster contract, boss! Signed, sealed and delivered!	Blondie
63	Really! Dream on!	Blondie
64	You're my inspiration! / You're my perspiration!	Bringing up father
65	It's probably one of the obvious ones.	Blondie
66	Is that to encourage your free lancers to work promptly?	Bringing up father
67	Memories like that are stamped into my brain like a lockbox in a bank's vault.	Blondie
68	Mother nature beat me to it.	Pc & Pixel
69	You can't put a price on an event like this.	Blondie
70	As predicted, Little Fluffy's fascination with bugs turned out to be his undoing.	Cats with hands
71	Are you playing "freak out the little brother" again?	Baby Blues

The above list is just a drop in the ocean and is by no means exhaustive. There are plenty of cartoons in our dailies, just for your plucking.

The following one, two, three-liners or more liners are taken from "The Giant Book of Jokes" by Dave Phillips. Some of them have been modified to ease the cultural bias and to make them clearer and understandable.

Two silkworms had a race and ended up in a tie.
Two fish were in a tank. One turned to the other and said, "Do you know how to drive one of these things"?
One woodworm turned to the other and said, "How's life?" "Boring," said the other.
Two slugs were slithering along the pavement. As they went round a corner, they found themselves stuck behind two snails. "Oh no!" said one, "traffic jam"
Did you hear about the shepherd who drove his flock through town, and got a traffic ticket for making a ewe turn?

ticket for making a ewe turn?
Why do birds fly south in the winter- Because it's too far to walk.
A mother kangaroo jumped in the air with a squeal before glaring down into her pouch. "How many times do I have to tell you? No smoking in bed!"
What do you call a woodpecker that's lost its beak?-A head banger.
If you smuggle cars into the country, are you trafficking?
Woman: My husband drives like lightning. Friend : You mean fast, don't you? Woman : No, he knocks down trees.
Why did the chicken cross the football field? - He heard the referee calling fowls.
Why did the cow cross the road? – It was the chicken's day off.
Why did the dinosaur cross the road? – Because chickens hadn't evolved yet.
Name of a new Second-hand clothing store- 'Whose Sari Now?'
A boy put on a pair of clean socks everyday. By the end of the week, he couldn't wear his shoes.
After a man looked up synonyms for 'death' in a thesaurus and found himself at words for a loss.
When asked for the chemical formula for water, a boy told his teacher that it was HIJKLMNO. After all his teacher had told him, it was H <sub>2</sub> O (H to O).
Two fonts went into a shop only to be told by the shopkeeper, "We don't sell things to your type."
What's smelly, round and cries a lot? A fried onion!

We want our students to talk. We want our students to read. We want our students to learn English.

*The funnies look funny but they will look funnier when I know how to read. So said Trixie in Hi and Lois. Cartoons and jokes can do that. In the same manner, Dickeninson D., in 'Humor and the Multiple Intelligences' New Horizons for Learning, Seattle says this of laughter, "Classrooms in which laughter is welcome help bring learning to life."*



Kristmanson, P in “Affect\*: in the Second language Classroom: How to create an emotional climate”. Reflexions states,

*In order to take risks, you need a learning environment in which you do  
Not feel threatened or intimidated. In order to speak, you need to feel  
You will be heard and that what you’re saying is worth hearing. In order  
To continue your language learning, you need to feel motivated. In order  
To succeed, you need an atmosphere in which anxiety levels are low and  
comfort levels are high.*

Four aspects of great concern to teachers are mentioned here. They are the ones that help us in our efforts of giving the best to our students. Basically they are;

- (1 ) the feeling of not being threatened or intimidated
- (2 ) the need to be heard,
- (3) feeling of being motivated
- (4 ) an atmosphere where anxiety levels are low and comfort levels are high.

Humour has the ingredients to bring about all these. Laughter creates the atmosphere of being welcome. One can’t laugh with an angry or sour face. Our muscles have been tuned to accommodate laughter just as they have been seasoned for sadness.

Few people want to hear a sad story. However, a funny story is welcome everywhere, in the home, in class and even at gatherings or functions. A speaker with jokes will be long remembered compared to a speaker who tells long and sad tales. Jokes are short and the punch line usually comes quickly. Perhaps, that is why they manage to catch the attention span of the listener. A sad tale, on the other hand, has to be long to be effective and more often than not will miss the attention span of the listener. And the way the world is now, money problems, killings, murders, bombings, global warming, homework and assignments, humour is a welcome change.

Students who feel that schooling has nothing to offer need to be happy, happy to come to school and hear something pleasant, something they can say aloud to overcome the problems they have or to impress their friends. Jokes are the motivators they need. That is why Charlie Chaplin was a great hit in the days where gloom was all around. Watch him trying to eat his boots in the movie, *The Gold Rush*. Mr Beans antics can help us to momentarily forget our problems. Clowns, too provide that relief. Teachers who make students happy are a popular lot, believe me.

Laughter, can lower your anxiety and create a comfort zone. Students are daunted by teachers who shout at or threaten them but feel comfortable with teachers who smiles or make them laugh. Jokes can help students laugh or even smile and create that comfort zone.

Paul Edman a US scientist said, “If you force yourself to smile, you’ll automatically start feeling happier.”

Laughter drives away worries and as Dale Carnegie has put it, “ If you can’t fight worry, you will die young.”

According to Michael Argyle, a psychologist from Oxford University, Happy people have plans, miserable ones, let hours slip through their fingers with nothing to show for them. (The Star, 4/4/07)

So having accepted humour as a good thing just how can we use them in the class?

Humour and jokes can be used to teach syntax. Words and phrases need to be arranged to form sentences. The grammar used has to be relevant to the sentence and so should the sequence markers and discourse markers. Jokes and cartoons are a good source for teaching sentence structures.

In our ESL classes we teach greetings, introductions, suggestions, recommendations, asking and giving information/opinions, agreeing and disagreeing, justifying points of views, likes and dislike and so forth. Look at any cartoon or browse through a joke. They are full of these communication skills.

Hiram H. Brownell and Howard Gardner in an article found in *Laughing Matters, A Serious Look at Humour* have this to say, “Humour provides an effective means of communicating a range of ideas.”

Jokes are just short stories. They comprise plots, sub plots and characters, all the ingredients of stories but in a condensed form.

The telling of jokes is a means of improving oral skills. It has to be told aloud. People have to hear the joke to laugh. Reading the joke may bring about some effect but one must tell a joke to enjoy it more. That makes one speak. As they say, “Just making our students say something in English is an achievement itself for many a humble souls like me.”

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## Appendix

### Terms used by Walter Nash

Limerick	- humourous short poem with five lines that rhyme
Pert	- amusing but disrespectful
Graffiti	- writings on the wall
Banter	- friendly and good natured jokes
Bumfun	- bad and useless fun
Allusion	- mention of a person or a subject indirectly
Parody	- copy something to make people laugh
Irony	- something opposite happening
Satire	- something at fault shown in a funny way