

Eleven Ways to use Jokes in your Language Classroom

Jeremy Taylor

Many years ago I had a German girlfriend and I was keen to learn German. I knew a few words but could barely string a sentence together. As a fan of jokes I started trying to translate a few easy jokes into German and then tried telling them to German friends. If I got a laugh (or a groan) then I knew that my German was working.

I think jokes, at least carefully selected jokes, are a great way for students to improve their language skills. Interestingly, children's jokes, which people may think are the easiest, are in fact quite difficult, frequently relying on puns. For example:

What do you give a bird when it's sick?

Tweetment.

Or this classic – my favourite when I was about seven:

What were Batman and Robin called after they were run over by a steam roller?

Flatman and Ribbon.

If a joke needs to be explained then it is probably too difficult – better to select jokes based on situational humour rather than clever wordplay.

From my experience of using jokes in the classroom students enjoy them and are willing to make the effort to understand the joke. If I have convinced you that using jokes is a good idea, then here are some different ways you can use jokes in the classroom.

1. Running Dictation

Divide your students into groups of 4. Allow them to number themselves 1, 2, 3 and 4. Attach a joke to the board – in fairly small letters. On the word go, the number 4s come out, remember as much of the text as they can, go back to their group, dictate it to them. As soon as number 4 is back, number 3 can go up etc. The winning group is the one who has a perfect copy of the

joke. Before playing, remind your students of basic health and safety – and play by standard WWF rules. No biting, kicking, punching, gouging etc.

2. Match the cartoon and the joke

For younger learners, hand out the following cartoons: (they can be accessed at www.sprak-lararna.se format A4)



Cartoons by Ilja Bereznickas

There are a number of ways you can use them.

- a) Students can discuss what they think the joke will be about before they hear it.
 - b) You can show the cartoons one by one, choose a joke at random and the students shout out whether they think the joke you are reading matches the cartoon
 - c) You can give all the jokes to the students and they match them up with the cartoons.
 - d) You can give them other jokes to illustrate and see if their friends can work out what the joke is.
- The jokes which correspond to the cartoons above are:

“Hello doctor, was my operation a success?”

“Sorry, mate. My name’s Saint Peter.”

“I’ve read so many books about smoking and drinking that I’ve decided to give it up.”

“Smoking or drinking?”

“Reading.”

“I’ve lost my dog!”

“You should put an advertisement in the newspaper.”

“That’s crazy! He can’t read.”

A gorilla went into a pub and said to the barman, “I’d like a pint of beer, please.”

“Certainly, sir. That’ll be ten pounds, please.”

The gorilla paid his money and started to drink his beer.

“We don’t get many gorillas in here,” said the barman.

“I’m not surprised,” said the gorilla, “if you charge ten pounds a pint.”

Teacher: What can you tell me about the great musicians of the Eighteenth Century?

Graham: They’re all dead, sir.

Did you hear about the mouse that saw a bat and ran home to tell its mother that it had seen an angel?

“Doctor, doctor, I keep thinking I’m a dog.”

“Mmm, lie on the couch.”

“I’m not allowed on the couch.”

3. Shouting Dictation

Get your students find a partner. They should stand on opposite sides of the classroom so that you have two lines of students facing each other, at least three metres apart. Give each student a short joke. They have to dictate it to their partner and write down the joke dictated to them by their partner. This can be a VERY noisy exercise but also a lot of fun.

4. Find the joke

A variation on the running dictation in which lines of a joke are ‘hidden’ around the classroom. The students have to find the lines, copy them down, then try to arrange them in the correct order to make the joke work.

5. Matching two parts of a joke

Cut up the jokes on the next page into individual sections. (the list can be accessed on www.spraklararna.se, format A4)

A nice idea is to make two copies of the table in different colours so when students come to match them they know that a white piece has to match a blue piece, for example. The students then have to find their partner to complete the joke. This is best done as an oral exercise and the students cannot read the other lines, only listen to them.

6. Who has the punchline?

Hand out 5 punchlines to some jokes to the students in groups of 4-5 (Each group has all five punchlines). Then read out the jokes, stopping just before the punchline. Which group will be fastest in finding the correct punchline?

“Mummy, can I wear a bra now that I’m sixteen?”	“Don’t worry sir, there’s a spider on your bread.”
“Mummy, I don’t like this meat. Can I give it to the dog?”	“Why, is it a secret?”
What do you give a man who has every-thing?	“Who put olive oil on my rope?”
“Hello doctor, was my operation a success?”	“Oh shut up and go away!”
“Doctor, doctor, everyone says I tell lies!”	“No, dear, that <i>is</i> the dog.”
Gardener: I always put a lot of horse manure on my rhubarb.	“What, and burn my thumbs?!”
“Waiter, waiter, what’s this fly doing on my ice cream?”	“Wait a minute please.”
“Waiter, this soup is cold. Bring me some hot soup!”	“Who put this violin in my violin case?”
“Doctor, doctor, everyone says bad things to me.”	Penicillin.
“Doctor, doctor, I only have 59 seconds to live!”	“I don’t believe you.”
“Have you been telling people I’m stupid?”	“No, David.”
“Waiter, waiter, there’s a fly in my soup.”	“Learning to ski sir?”
“What were Tarzan’s last words?”	Woman: But, Barry, I am your wife!
Gangster’s famous last words.	“Sorry, mate. My name’s Saint Peter.”
Man: Oh, Helen, you’ve got to help me. My wife doesn’t understand me.	Friend: I prefer custard.

7. Grammar

Once you have a nice collection of jokes, how about using them to illustrate particular grammar structures? George Woolard wrote a nice book called *Grammar with laughter* (published by LTP)

though you could also start building your own collection. For example, conditional sentences:

A man of eighty visited his doctor. “I’m going to be married next week, doctor.”

“Very good,” said the doctor. “How old is your lady friend?”

“Eighteen,” replied the man.

“My goodness!” said the doctor. “I should warn you that any activity in bed could be fatal.”

“Well,” said the man. “If she dies, she dies.”

A gorilla went into a pub and said to the barman, “I’d like a pint of beer, please.”

“Certainly, sir. That’ll be ten pounds, please.”

The gorilla paid his money and started to drink his beer.

“We don’t get many gorillas in here,” said the barman.

“I’m not surprised,” said the gorilla, “if you charge ten pounds a pint.”

A doctor went into a restaurant and noticed that the waitress kept scratching her hands. “Have you got eczema?” asked the doctor.

“If it’s not on the menu, we haven’t got it,” replied the waitress.

Notice in Hospital: If you think the nurses are bad you should see the doctors.

A man was trying to sell a horse to another man.

“This is an excellent horse.”

“Yes, but is it well-bred?”

“Well-bred? If this horse could talk, it wouldn’t talk to either of us.”

“What has got six legs and eats grass?”

“I don’t know.”

“A dog.”

“A dog hasn’t got six legs.”

“It doesn’t eat grass either, but the question would have been too easy if I hadn’t lied.”

8. Reward

Use jokes as a simple reward for your students. Print out some jokes. If a student does a particularly good piece of work, attach a funny joke for them as a reward.

9. Punchline!

Get your students to go to

<http://www.jeremytaylor.eu/books/punchline-a-fun-quiz-for-intermediate-learners-of-english/> and do an audio quiz based on punchlines. Can they get 10/10?

10. Homophones

For older students you could do some work on homophones.

You can’t starve in the desert because of all the sand which is there.

Two scientists went into a bar. “I’d like a glass of H₂O, please,” said the first scientist. “I’d like a glass of H₂O too,” said the second scientist.

The second scientist died.

Get your students to type ‘jokes with homophones’ into a search engine and collect jokes based on homophones. Once they have read 30-40, they should be ready to start creating their own jokes based on homophones. Back to google to find lists of homophones – are they able to create a joke based on a homophone? I’d love to hear it. One comedian who is a genius with homophones is a man called Tim Vine. He is very funny and also very inoffensive with most of his jokes being at his own expense. A search for ‘Tim Vine’ on YouTube should bring up a lot of great material.

11. Best Joke Ever

Ask your students to write out their favourite Swedish joke in English. Then send it to me – jeremytaylorwriter@gmail.com. I’ll put the best ones on my website.

JEREMY TAYLOR is a freelance writer and teacher trainer based in the Czech Republic. In addition to many graded readers he has written a joke book for language learners including the English Swedish Joke Book: ipad version, normal version and the same book in 26 other languages.

