The pedagogy of humour: Inhabiting the Third Space in a tertiary French class

Abstract

Humour is a tool that has long been used at all levels in the classroom setting to engage students and facilitate the learning process. When it comes to foreign language learning, however, humour is often seen as problematic due to its inherent link to cultural specificities. The pilot study described in this contribution aimed to exploit the connection between humour and culture in order to encourage the questioning of French cultural stereotypes. A series of popular comedy clips were delivered to a cohort of students via YouTube in a third year ab initio French unit at The University of Western Australia. The theoretical framework for the study was provided by Homi Bhabha’s notion of the ‘third space’, which offers a particularly effective way of phrasing a conception of culture that emphasises the important role of difference in identity formation both in intra- and inter-cultural contexts. The overarching aim of the study was to determine the extent to which participants identified with the comedic situations they saw on screen and thereby explore whether humour served as an effective means of facilitating a negotiation of the third space. Data was gathered through guided teacher-student discussion after the viewing of each clip and an end-of-semester survey. Results indicate that the use of popular French comedy is an effective way of engaging students by exposing them to everyday language and culture in an entertaining medium. However, although the project revealed some key facets of students’ negotiation of the third space, the videos demonstrated a limited capacity to promote an awareness of cultural difference and the complexities of identity formation. Further research into appropriate techniques for facilitating such awareness is therefore required.

1. Introduction and background

Although it always poses challenges, the teaching of culture in the French language classroom brings great rewards for students who are willing to set aside the stereotypical image of the French man with beret and baguette in hand and venture deeper into unfamiliar cultural terrain. Culture has often been treated as an isolated aspect of the curriculum that should be considered as separate from language, but recent trends in scholarship lean towards the view that language is a social practice and that therefore culture is in fact inseparable from language content (see contributions in Lange and Paige 2003; Hinkel 1999). Despite this shift in scholarly perspective, many teachers will attest to regularly encountering students who come into the
university system envisaging the study of French as a set of linguistic competencies to be mastered which can then, if one chooses, provide access to the culture. Cultural competency is thus often seen as secondary to the acquisition of knowledge of the language which will permit ‘real’ engagement with ‘real’ French people (Pauk 2007). Even when students are open to the idea of treating cultural content as an integral part of the language syllabus, incorporating a cultural component while still providing the desired linguistic outcomes can pose a significant challenge. To this end, numerous techniques and approaches are available to the language teacher, and among them possibly the most attractive and simultaneously daunting method is the use of humour. It would be uncommon to come across a student who does not enjoy a joke or humorous text in class. Humour is one of the most universal of all human phenomena, making it a beneficial tool in classrooms at all levels of learning (Morrison 2010). Studies have shown that humour is a valuable tool in promoting skills related to critical thinking and creativity (Von Oech 1990; Scriven and Hefferin 1998), as well as increasing memory performance and attentiveness (Thompson 2000; Torok, McMorris and Lin 2004). Given these positive benefits, humour has been proposed as a viable pedagogical method in diverse learning contexts, from medical education (Lingard 2013; Watson and Emerson 1988) to engineering (Greig, Missingham and Kestell 2009). It is clear that the effect of humour in education is unequivocally positive, but at the same time its cultural intricacies have been recognized as a complicating factor (Berwald 1992). When the already alienating experience of not understanding a joke and feeling excluded from the social group occurs in a foreign cultural context, the sensation of displacement is heightened even further (Morain 1991). Given this cultural barrier, many teachers may suggest that another culture’s humour can only be safely negotiated at the advanced level of language learning (Schmitz 2002). While these difficulties are real, can the cultural facet of humour in fact be exploited in order to challenge conventional stereotypes surrounding French culture in an engaging and entertaining way? The following pilot study outlines an attempt to investigate this question through a program implemented in a third year ab initio French unit at The University of Western Australia.

2. Rationale

There are of course many ways of defining culture, from anthropological perspectives on the values and practices of different social groups (Hofstede 2001: 9) to what has been called the ‘cultural turn’ which explores culture in terms of “meaning [as opposed to] a set of things” (Hall 1997: 2). Although all of these approaches are valid, as Claire Kramsch (1995) points out, they in many cases fail to provide the imaginative resources that can allow students to empathise and relate to different social groups. Kramsch goes on to say that

[b]reaking down stereotypes is not just realising that people are not the way one thought they were, or that deep down ‘we are all the same’. It is understanding that we are irreducibly unique and different, and that I could have been you, you could have been me, given different circumstances [...] In addition to history
and social science, culture is therefore also literature, for it is literature that opens up ‘reality beyond realism’ and that enables readers to live other lives—by proxy. (Kramsch 1995: 85)

The notion of reality as literature can perhaps provide a way of bringing together culture and language in a more coherent fashion, since “[c]ulture in the final analysis is always linguistically mediated membership into a discourse community, that is both real and imagined” (Kramsch 1995: 85). This approach allows students to question stereotypes without imposing fixed definitions—in short, it can give learners the tools to position themselves as conscious participants in cultural production from the first moment they step into the language classroom. Kramsch puts forward Homi Bhabha’s notion of the ‘social process of enunciation’ as a viable alternative to the ‘Us vs Them’ binary which can so often take place when encouraging interaction with other social groups (Kramsch 1995: 89; Bhabha 1992). According to this model, language and culture teaching is a dialogic process which exposes the assumptions and expectations underlying the cross-cultural encounter, creating what Bhabha (1992: 58) names a hybrid “third space that does not simply revise or invert the dualities, but revalues the ideological bases of division and difference”. By implementing what Kramsch refers to as a “critical cross-cultural literacy” approach to language learning, the “shifting and emerging third place of the language learners themselves” can be exposed (Kramsch 1995: 90). The principal aim of this project was to investigate whether humour can serve as an effective means of putting students of French into the third space—or rather, of highlighting the position they already occupy within it—without actually leaving the classroom.

The humour chosen for the project took the form of several short French popular comedy videos. Although the use of popular comedy is a technique that has been proposed in the context of the French language classroom (Berwald 1992), there has hitherto been little investigation into its usage as a means of cultivating intercultural awareness. Popular comedy was chosen for this project because it both responds to students’ desire to be exposed to real French language in practice, but also because it is an authentic text that plays on notions of difference. The following videos were utilised:

- Florence Foresti, *J’aime pas les garçons!* ['I don’t like boys'] and *J’aime pas les filles!* ['I don’t like girls']—4’22 and 4’23 (excerpts)
- *Bref!, Je me suis préparé pour un rendez-vous* ['I got ready for a date'] and *J’ai dîné avec cette fille* ['I had dinner with this girl']—1’43 and 1’47 (full clips)
- Anthony Kavanagh, *Le shampoing* ['Shampoo']—3’18 (excerpt)
- Gad Elmaleh, *Les Français* ['The French']—4’06 (excerpt)
- Anne Roumanoff, *L’entretien d’embauche* ['The job interview']—4’23 (full clip)
The overarching objective behind our delivery of this comedic material was to measure how humour may facilitate a more conscious negotiation of the third space by assessing the degree to which the participants identified with each video. The videos all incorporate elements of difference that challenge expectations and conventional stereotypes associated with diversity, a nexus famously exposed by Bhabha (1990). According to Bhabha (1994: 75), stereotypes are a “fixed form of representation” which deny the “play of difference”. However, the usage of stereotypes as a deliberate form of resistance humour targeted at exposing the assumptions that underlie racial difference, for example, is a well-noted phenomenon in humour studies (Weaver 2010). Based on this theoretical foundation, the videos utilised in this study present humorous stereotypes that are designed to bring to the fore the students’ own expectations towards the otherness of French culture. For example, the Gad Elmaleh video *Les Français* presents the comedian’s interpretations of several stereotypical French characters, while Florence Foresti’s video *J’aime pas les garcons!* presents gender stereotypes by playing on societal norms. In addition, the humour was chosen on the basis of its ability to provoke a feeling of cultural familiarity in students. Schmitz (2002: 93-94) argues a distinction should be drawn between the reality-based joke, the linguistic joke and the cultural-based joke, with the first type being easiest to comprehend cross-culturally. In contrast, Bell (2009: 247) argues instead that “culture is present not only in the topic, but in connotations of words, manner of telling, and context in which the humor will be deemed appropriate”, a perspective that is also consistent with the approach outlined by Kramsch. With these two perspectives in mind, the clips were chosen because the situations and characters they present are contextualised in such a way as to aid comprehension (through their link to familiar reality-based reference points) while simultaneously delineating an inter-cultural space of mediation. In particular, the topics of the videos often revolve around scenes and situations to which students can easily relate. For example, Anne Roumanoff’s *L’entretien d’embauche* explores a situation that many students can identify with—a job interview—but also contains added layers of meaning centred on notions of class difference foreign to the Australian context. Furthermore, the videos contain numerous gestures and illustrative devices that ground the linguistic aspect of comprehension in the visual and hence form a bridge between the familiar and the different. For example, *Bref!* presents a series of quickly moving scenes that contain fast dialogue coupled with visual depictions of what is occurring in the narrative, while the other comedians all use physical slapstick to add comedic effect.

3. Participants

The cohort of participants for the study consisted of a class of 21 third year *ab initio* students (two of these participants were mature-age entry students, and the remaining 19 were post-high school entry). The students had already been exposed to French culture enough to have developed both an appreciation of conventional stereotypes but also an ability to question such stereotypes in a more critical fashion. 73% of the students who responded to the end-of-semester survey had visited
France. Of these, one student had spent a total of one year in a French-speaking country, one had spent four months, and the remaining nine students had all spent a period of three weeks or less. The cohort was also chosen because it was beneficial to work with a smaller group of students in order to be in a position to gauge their responses to the videos on a qualitative level throughout the semester.

4. Methods

The popular comedy videos were all less than five minutes in length and were delivered via YouTube. This medium is an effective way of quickly delivering authentic material while also allowing students to retain access to the videos for later use. The length was kept under five minutes in order to effectively integrate the videos into the existing language curriculum and harness their beneficial effect on student engagement with course content (Jonas 2012). The clips were shown on a fortnightly basis across the semester within the 15 minute break period in the middle of a two hour class. The web link was then posted on the Learning Management System (Moodle) to offer students the opportunity of watching the videos again in their own time. It is important to emphasise that the clips were marketed as a ‘recreational activity’ and were shown on a deliberately optional basis—students were free not to attend. Interestingly, based on anecdotal teacher observation, participation rates increased as the semester progressed. Prior to each viewing, students were asked to reflect on the title of the clips. Their context and background were then briefly explained in order to aid students’ understanding, and provide a means of negotiating the gap between “text and context” (Kramsch and Andersen 1999: 39). Difficult keywords used in the clips were written on the board and explained. The clips were shown to students twice, and an opportunity to ask questions and to dialogue about the humour was then provided. The teacher in particular sought to tease out through targeted questioning those aspects that students may have better understood, and to determine some potential reasons for their reaction. Questions ranked from low-order (after first viewing) to high-order (after second viewing), starting with encouraging students to share their first impressions of the clip before prompting a reflection on the reasons why they might have liked or disliked the skits.

Sample questions following the first viewing:

- How much of what you saw did you understand? 50%, 60%, etc.?
- What is it about? Can you summarise what you saw?
- Does it match what you were expecting after discussing the title?
- Do you need any clarification on the vocabulary you heard in the video?

Sample questions following the second viewing:

- Compared to the first viewing, how much did you understand?
- What humorous elements were used (play on words, gestures, etc.)?
- Did they work for you? Did you find the clip funny?
- Why? Why not?
Could you relate to the situations you saw on screen?
How is this different or similar to the humour you are used to?
How are stereotypes used? What is their function?
[As the sessions progressed] Is there such a thing as ‘French humour’ or ‘Australian humour’? If yes, what elements can you identify?

Students’ responses to these questions were recorded by the teacher at the conclusion of each class. At the end of the semester, students were asked to fill out a brief survey to determine whether they had found the exercise useful for their language and culture learning and to find out which clips they found most humorous and why. The survey asked students to give some general (anonymous) information about themselves, and then asked them to identify which videos they found the most and least amusing and to explain why, and to specify which elements they could most easily relate to.

5. Results

The interaction between the teacher and students during the question-time component of the viewing displays several key trends. Surprisingly, the use of ‘authentic’ language (fast-paced delivery, slang, etc.) was not seen as a hurdle when supported with visual reinforcement, as in the case of Bref! or even L’entretien d’embauche. The findings indicate that students found it difficult to relate to decontextualised situations highlighting general behavioural (e.g. women vs men) or cultural traits. Students appeared quite uncomfortable with clips that played on gender stereotypes, as in the case of both Foresti skits and Anthony Kavanagh’s Le shampoing, and failed to see why they would be humorous. Similarly, Gad Elmaleh’s Les Français did not trigger a positive response as his skit relies on verbal and behavioural traits mainly meaningful to someone with a more extensive in situ exposure to French culture. This skit was introduced to encourage a comparison between exogenous and endogenous views of Frenchness and to trigger a general reflection on the various forms of cultural stereotyping. It became apparent at this stage that students’ perception of the clips were hindered by a strong sense of political correctness and a negative attitude towards the use of stereotypes, as they failed to comprehend the self-derision and the general cultural critique they entailed.

Of the 21 enrolled students, 15 completed the end-of-semester survey, the results of which reflect and reinforce the qualitative data gathered during the semester. In terms of the usefulness for their language learning, 43% found the videos useful, and 20% found them very useful. For their culture learning, 40% found them useful and 47% very useful. 53% of students reported finding Anne Roumanoff’s L’entretien d’embauche the funniest video, and 33% found the Bref! videos the most humorous. 60% of students found Florence Foresti’s J’aime pas les garçons! to be the least funny, followed by 20% who cited Anthony Kavanagh’s Le shampoing as the least humorous. The elements that students found the most humorous only retain their sense when contextually linked to the various videos (hence they are not listed here), but what
becomes clear in both the in-semester and end-of-semester data is that the crucial elements determining the success of the humour were the gestures used and the relevance to real life situations. Finally, there was no significant correlation between understanding the humour and the amount of time spent in France.

6. Discussion

The results generated by both the in-class questions and the end-of-semester survey display some key features that clearly demonstrate how the theoretical model chosen for the study applies to a real classroom situation. Although the majority of students found the exercise useful for their linguistic development, in fact a greater proportion of students reported finding the exercise very useful for their cultural understanding. This supports the perspective on culture as being an integral component of language teaching, and may indicate that humour—at least on a superficial level—is a useful tool for encouraging students to see this link. Beyond these broader student reactions, the study also indicates that helping students to enter the third space of identity formation can be a productive way to frame such a usage of humour in the French classroom, although deeper student engagement within this space was sometimes lacking. What was particularly enlightening was the extent to which students felt able to relate their own prior experience and cultural conditioning to the humour in the videos, and therefore identify with the characters and situations they saw on screen. For example, *L'entretien d'embauche* contained few slapstick and gestural elements, and there was nothing stereotypically ‘French’ about it. Most students reported that they found it funny because they had all experienced a job interview and so they could relate to the main character. In addition, prior to viewing the clip, the students had studied how to write a curriculum vitae in French, and so the video built on familiar unit content which may also go some way to explaining why it was a success. Another example is the students’ reaction to the *Bref!* clips, which allowed them to imaginatively enter the situation they saw on screen and begin to inhabit the character. *Je me suis préparé pour un rendez-vous*, for example, describes the comical antics of a young man preparing for a date with a girl. The results demonstrate that the clip played on the students’ ability to empathetically relate to the character’s situation, and so despite the extremely fast dialogue and slang French, the clip was a success. It is therefore evident that students related best to situational humour in which they could invest themselves and become active agents based on prior experiences in their own cultural context. The other clips, in contrast, like Gad Elmaleh’s *Les Français*, tended to present fictional stereotypes which required the students to occupy an objective stance in order to see them as amusing, that is to say, there was no *mise en situation* allowing students to position the cultural elements they encountered in terms of their own personal experience. It is perhaps for this reason that the elements identified as typically ‘French’ were met with fairly high levels of incomprehension, whether the students had spent time in France or not. The students failed to understand that the Elmaleh clip was deliberately playing on stereotypes surrounding Frenchness in order to subvert...
them. So the students not only needed to be able to identify the stereotypes they saw on screen, they also needed to be able to enter a contextual place of cultural mediation around these stereotypes.

The situational element became particularly striking when it involved more explicit markers of difference. For example, Anthony Kavanagh’s *Le shampoing* was a clip that one would expect students to be able to relate well to—it describes from a man’s perspective women’s preferences surrounding types of shampoo, and does not rely on cultural specificities. However, 20% of students cited this clip as the one they found least funny, and none reported it as the video they found most humorous. It soon becomes clear from their comments both during and at the end of the semester that the gender difference presented in a humorous manner in the clip revolved around, in their eyes, a negative stereotyping of women which prevented their identification with the video. The same phenomenon can be observed with Foresti’s two videos, both of which attempt to present gender difference in a humorous way through the comedian’s adoption of a childlike persona. After observing the students’ negative reaction to the first Foresti clip at the beginning of the semester, it was decided to wait until the end of semester to show them the second clip in order to verify that their initial reaction was not simply due to the unfamiliarity associated with the former being the first clip that was introduced in the study. Both clips provoked a negative reaction to difference within the more familiar cultural space of personal attitudes, a reaction which prevented their identification with the videos—in other words, the humour began to bring to light the students’ own value systems before the cross-cultural exchange was even able to fully unfold. It is also noteworthy that another reason the students cited for not liking the clips was their inability to relate to the fictional persona Foresti creates. Again, it is realism that students seemed to be able to relate best to, as they lacked the tools to negotiate the third space on an imaginative level. In the case of the *L’entretien d’embauche* video, the themes surrounding French social hierarchy were much less visible on the surface of the narrative, and hence easier to miss. So although the students found the video amusing because they were able to invest themselves in it on a realistic level, from another perspective the clip failed to adequately encourage students to fully inhabit the third space because they were not in fact able to critique their own preconceived notions surrounding social determinism and imaginatively transform them into a tool for examining their stance towards the structure of French society. They simply found the video funny because they could relate to the most superficial aspect, that is, the familiar job interview situation, while remaining incapable of embracing the familiarity within the difference and thereby enter a mediated third space in which values are recast and the hybridity of identity is revealed.

7. Conclusion

The pilot study clearly indicates that popular comedy is an effective way of engaging students and providing an additional source of authentic linguistic material. However, many of the clips failed to adequately encourage participants’ negotiation of the
third space of hybrid identity formation, indicating that its usage as a tool to facilitate intercultural awareness may be more problematic. Although the participants of this study displayed limited self-investment and identification with the situations on screen, perhaps further scaffolding the delivery of the videos—by better preparing students and further integrating the themes discussed into the broader curriculum, for example—is one means of deepening learner engagement with the space of mediation between the familiar and the different. Ironically, it is perhaps by encouraging a deeper reflection on students’ own values and attitudes that it becomes possible to more effectively relate to cultural otherness—in other words, the students’ revaluation of notions of difference closer to home is essential to their ability to successfully negotiate the ‘Us vs Them’ binary. Such a reflection would also entail better equipping students with the skills to negotiate the fictional element involved in learning about another culture. The study demonstrated that students were unable to tell fact from fiction and preferred those clips that were based in realism to those that required them to use their imagination to empathetically relate to the characters they saw on screen. Perhaps providing students with the tools to enter the third space in the imaginative domain and then enabling them to apply those critical skills of self-reflection in real-life situations can allow them to more effectively negotiate difference, whether intra-culturally or inter-culturally. Another finding that warrants further investigation is the lack of correlation between the amount of time spent in France and the ability to understand French humour. Future studies may therefore seek to assess just how much time spent in France is required to exert a statistically significant impact on the capacity to understand humour in the target language. Finally, although the limited success of this pilot study would seem to indicate that humour is an inefficent tool for promoting negotiation of the third space, the small sample sizes mean that it is difficult to make such definitive judgments. What can be concluded is that future studies need to implement other qualitative data collection techniques—particularly focus group interviews—and larger class sizes in order to more reliably test the hypotheses presented in this contribution and propose other possible techniques for exploring the benefits and pitfalls of using humour as a tool for inter-cultural understanding in the French classroom.

References


