

“Next time, if you don’t bring your book, you’ll die slowly and painfully! ...”

These words, of course, were no more than a jest, and thus wittily uttered by a colleague of mine. Nevertheless, behind this sentence lays the key to an excessively interesting way of teaching: that is, teaching with humour. If ever you enter a colleague’s classroom and occasionally hear pupils laugh, do not feel revolted nor dismayed. The eagerness with which these same pupils would participate and learn should convert you instantly. Since I myself have been converted, I feel that I should spread the word. Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears...

Active students...

Humour is an armour as well as a weapon, and thus is all the more efficient as it may hit target without hurting it. “I’m not hearing French, am I?” asks the teacher in a rhetorical question, staring at the guilty pupil. The pause following this question as well as the stern gaze both individualise the transgressor and convey the seriousness of his fault. Thankfully for the class’s atmosphere, the teacher humorously exaggerates her tone and body-language, lightening her face with a smile. She is obviously faking anger and consequently shows that she did not take the pupil’s transgression to heart. And yet, the fact of “performing” her professional status reminds the pupil of his own responsibilities and is simultaneously invited to stick to the rules “actively”, as in “acting”. As a result, the teacher remains in command. “That’s one of the good things about being a dictator.” In other words, humour in class can be channelled through drama.

De-dramatizing mistakes...

This does not mean that every teacher should turn into clowns. “Humour” and “dignity” are not antonymic. Besides, teachers are not supposed to occupy the stage as they used to. Through self-derision and exaggerations, the teacher de-sacralises her status while allowing the pupils to join her onto the stage as performers themselves. This technique enables the pupils to take risks, since each mistake becomes the mistake of the performer and not of the individual. As a result, these pupils become more active while remaining controllable: “Because we are gentlemen, silence for the ladies.” Humour thus gives us the opportunity to avoid conflict by conveying orders indirectly. A few other examples to illustrate my point: (irony) “No, no violence, please!” if a debate fails to start. (Faked misunderstandings) “A cough doesn’t count.” when pupils are reluctant to participate. (Comical mental images) “Can you read with your eyes on the table?” when a pupil does not look at the board. De-dramatizing a mistake or inaction erases the pupils’ uneasiness which would inevitably result in a prolonged silence. Besides, it also enables the teachers themselves to take some distance and remain cool in all circumstances.

Memories of laughter...

Finally, humour also drives away boredom and keeps pupils awake, both mentally and physically, as the latter wait for the teacher’s next joke. Their bodies, tensed with fatigue, are relieved with laughter. Both their curiosity and memory are stimulated, leading them to associate pleasure with the fact of learning English. However, humour must be counterbalanced with authority and clear-cut boundaries.

All in all, humour in a classroom stands as one of the best ways of impacting our pupils’ brains and lives. By minimising the pupils’ unease and establishing a pleasurable atmosphere to work in, humour shall soon become essential in our pedagogical work.