Overcoming the Challenges of Using Humor in Non-Native Instructional Discourse

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This article describes a narrative study exploring the challenges that international teaching assistants (ITAs) encounter when using humor in North American university classrooms. Twenty participants were recruited from twelve teaching fields. Each ITA participated in two interviews and a videotaped teaching observation. The participants talked about their use of humor in the classroom and the reasons they were reluctant to engage in humor. These autobiographical narratives were then subjected to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Findings from this study revealed that the ITAs specified linguistic, cultural, social, and authoritative challenges to using humor, but then explore the ITAs' personal strategies to overcome these obstacles. The article concludes with a discussion of how humor can benefit ITA training programs and provide a way to explore the connections between language, culture, and pedagogy.

Incorporating international instructors into the faculties of U.S. colleges and universities adds to the academic quality of the professorate, as well as promotes internationalism on university campuses. The demographics of U.S. higher education continue to shift toward increasing numbers of internationals and non-native speakers of English in the teaching force. According to the Institute of International Education (IIE), the number of international scholars in the United States has increased from 115,098 in the 2009-10 academic year to 177,453 in the 2015/16 academic year (IIE, 2016). Seventy-six percent are in the science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) fields, with China, India, South Korea, and Germany providing the greatest numbers (IIE, 2016). Of the near 180,000 noncitizen scholars, 34.6 percent receive funding from U.S. colleges and universities in the form of grants, scholarships, loans, and work-study (IIE, 2016). Presumably, those graduate students eligible for work study and with adequate proficiency scores on either the TOEFL or TSE exams can apply for ITA positions in their respective colleges or universities. Given the prevalence of international teaching assistants, it is imperative that we understand the challenges ITAs face while researching solutions to provide the needed supports as they adjust to the teaching norms at U.S. universities.

Research into the instructional practices of ITAs has revealed numerous challenges that stem from a mismatch between the ITAs' first language (L1) and home culture and that of the target community (i.e., North American undergraduate classrooms). Linguistic, sociocultural, and pedagogical competencies or inadequacies comprise the bulk of the research into ITAs and their teaching contexts (See Gorsuch, 2016 for a full review). Whether exploring the connections between teaching practices and student/teacher expectations (e.g., Chiang, 2009; McCalman, 2007; Moeller & Faltin Osborn, 2014) or language proficiency and cultural differences (e.g., Dawson, Dimitrov, Meadows & Olsen, 2014; Gorsuch, 2003a,

2003b, 2012; Kang & Rubin, 2009), researchers have attempted to define the difficulties that ITAs face when taking on the responsibility of undergraduate instruction.

Currently no standard exists for the assessment and preparation of ITAs. While some of the ITA research indicates that ITA training should include language, pedagogy, and culture (Hoekje & Williams, 1992), the degree to how training is implemented is determined by the institution. Some program models focus on the socialization of ITAs to help ITAs adjust to American higher education (Jia & Bergerson, 2008), while others focus on teaching pedagogical skill sets that the ITA would be expected to have in the university classroom (Boman, 2013). Many universities do not have the resources for an extensive ITA training program, so training could be limited to a workshop or a one-semester class that is taken in addition to the regular content area coursework (Boman, 2013; Hoekje & Williams, 1992). In some cases, ITAs receive teaching assignments based on an adequate combination of TOEFL and TSE scores (Xi, 2007). Concerning the use of language proficiency exams as a final assessment measure, Hoekje and Williams (1992) admonished,

> Oral proficiency tests have thus been challenged as valid evaluation measures, both in terms of the construct they have proposed to measure (language proficiency) and in terms of applying the test score to other contexts, such as the classroom (p. 262).

Those institutions that have the monetary and personnel resources place ITAs in a course specifically designed for international teacher preparation (Gorsuch, 2013). Often this is a three-hour-a-week class for a single semester, in which the ITA practices the academic language that is discipline specific while learning cultural expectations for teaching styles. Many ITAs have some additional departmental support to offer the ITA supervision and feedback on department

procedures and policies for teaching. In this case, specific language instruction is not part of the curriculum; consequently, many ITAs struggle in their teaching assignments.

ITAs that have either recently entered the U.S. or been studying here for several years still experience high levels of anxiety when having to converse spontaneously with students (Brown, 2008; Li, Mazer, & Ju, 2011). Low communicative skills and the demands of adjusting to a new educational culture pose significant hurdles in testing ITA linguistic and communicative competence (Chiang, 2011; Dawson, Dimitrov, Meadows & Olson, 2015; Gorsuch, 2012). Studies that track student affective learning to teacher communication behavior positively correlate better teachers as having a teaching style perceived to be dramatic, open, relaxed and friendly (Li et al., 2011; Zhang, 2014).

Language, instructional context, and culture combine to make the use of humor a complicated concept for any second language (L2) speaker to master (Bell, 2006, 2007b). As a result, many L2 speakers avoid humor altogether. Harder (1980) refers to this phenomenon as the "reduced personality" of the L2 learner because the student is unable to enact the same level of humor that he or she would in a native language. This lack of confidence is expressly manifest in the instructional setting where ITAs are forced to communicate cohesively and coherently, producing few lexical, syntactic, or prosodic miscues (Hoekje & Williams, 1992). To further the research on ITAs, this paper begins with an exploration of the research on ITAs and humor, culminating with a narrative study describing the self-reported challenges ITAs face while attempting to use humor in their university classrooms. Such data provides researchers with insight on how to help language learners identify and develop skills needed to incorporate humor into their teaching repertoire, thereby increasing the linguistic options in the classroom.

Background Research

International Teaching Assistants

Following Gorsuch (2012), ITA researchers have focused on the relationships across the areas of language proficiency, teaching practices and expectations, and cultural differences. Within the area of language proficiency, Gorsuch (2016) documents highly detailed descriptive measures of sentence level stress (Hahn, 2004; Levis, Levis & Slater, 2012), tone choice and intonation (Pickering, 2001; Gorsuch, 2013), and interventions with pronunciation (Hahn, 2004; Levis et al., 2012). Other areas of research by Gorsuch (2011, 2013) have focused efforts on pedagogical interventions addressing remediating pausing patterns in speech. A long-standing issue for

researchers is the native speaker norms for speech behaviors and pronunciation practices, along with reliance on subjective ratings by students to judge the effectiveness of the various interventions (see Kang, Rubin, & Lindeman, 2015 for a review). Acknowledging the narrow focus of such studies, Gorsuch (2016) calls for future research that considers the influence of an ITA's professional history on L2 growth. She also advocates that ITA research needs to examine the length of time needed to develop more native-like prosodic patterns of speech.

From a cultural perspective, researchers have explored how teaching practices and expectations emerge from both the professional experiences and cultural backgrounds that ITAs bring to the classroom (e.g., Ates & Eslami, 2012; Brown, 2008; Gorsuch, 2003b, 2012; McCalman, 2007). Many of the ITAs originate in countries where there is a clear division of power between the teacher and the student, and classrooms are exclusively teacher-centered (Dawson, et al., 2014). As a result, ITAs struggle with transitioning into U.S. classrooms where the predominant student-centered teaching style allows for disagreement with the instructor (Dimitrov et al, 2014), interruption of the teacher (Ashavskaya, 2015; Chiang, 2011), or challenge of a grade (Gorsuch, 2003b).

In two separate studies, Gorsuch (2003a, 2012) developed questionnaires seeking the intersections between the educational cultures of ITAs and U.S. universities. The purpose of the investigations was to determine how past educational experiences influenced beliefs about "good teaching," and the impact those beliefs had on how ITAs adjust to their new educational environment. Findings indicate the more developed their procedural knowledge, the more definitive their agreement or disagreement about what constitutes good teaching. Cultural and educational backgrounds, therefore, play a critical role in how ITAs approach teaching and influence their interactions with American undergraduates. Gorsuch (2012) concluded that adjustments in cultural and procedural knowledge must be understood in terms of L2 usage by stating, "ITAs need second language communication ability to learn new communicative genres relevant to teaching in U.S. higher education, and expand and redefine the ones they already have" (p. 15).

McCalman (2007) addressed the differences in language and culture between ITAs and their new teaching contexts through the concept of interculturally competent instructors or ICC. Using a traveling metaphor, McCalman saw the ITA as a sojourner: one who moves through multiple languages and cultures acquiring the skills and knowledge to communicate effectively. Conceptualizing an ITA as an ICC has gained strong support (e.g., Dimitrov & Haque, 2016; Moeller & Faltin Osborn, 2014). The ITA as ICC

makes explicit the connections between language and culture. McCalman wrote, "In the intercultural classroom, communication competence is the process by which the instructor continually strives to achieve the ability to work effectively and appropriately within the cultural context of his or her students" (p. 70).

Understanding the educational culture of U.S. undergraduate instruction necessitates knowing what makes for a good teacher and how to make the proper adjustments to compensate for inadequacies in language and perceived cultural differences (Li et al., 2011). Given that an interactive style not only appeals to students but supports student learning (Ashavskaya, 2015), more recent research has focused on the behaviors that contribute to immediacy in the ITA classroom (Jarvis & Creasey, 2012). As part of this rapport, humor as a communicator style deserves some recognition as a method to improve ITA classroom efficacy and increase interpersonal relations and group cohesion (Li et al., 2011). Although numerous studies confirm that using humor in the classroom or in social interactions requires a high level of proficiency (Bell, 2006, 2007a, 2009; Davies, 2015; Wulf, 2010) and a strong understanding of cultural practices (Bell, 2007b, 2011; Davies, 2003), humor remains a topic of research that draws a connection between language, culture, and the classroom.

Humor

Humor requires social competence because much of humor relies on comprehending conversational inferences in real time and processing language nuances to inject humor into the conversation (Davies, 2003; Kotthoff, 2007). Although humor can be casually woven into everyday conversations, it is not so effortless for speakers in an additional language. To start with, joking is often spontaneous as people play with conversational language (Bell, 2007b; Bell & Attardo, 2010). Spontaneous humor is more prevalent since scripted humor is often thought to be juvenile and less valued (Bell, 2013). With conversational humor, humor is a co-constructed effort as multiple parties work together for its creation (Bell, 2009; Matsumoto, 2014). In such a situation the listeners often have no warning that an utterance is supposed to be humorous, and the rapid pace of a conversation often prevents the non-native speaker from evaluating whether something is funny or not, let alone inserting a suitable rejoinder (Bell, 2007a; Carrell, 1997). While jokes can be repeated, often the reiteration dilutes the wit of the original repartee. Such repetition might be face-threatening to the language learner, but failure to understand humor is usually of less consequence than being unable to comprehend a serious conversation (Bell, 2013). In humor, non-native speakers are often positioned as outsiders (Bell, 2006; Kayi-Aydar,

2014). However, research indicates that non-native speakers could shift from the role of outsider to insider as they used more humor and developed more friendships (Kayi-Aydar, 2014).

Comprehension of humor often requires cultural knowledge of the schema or context that is being parodied (Bell, 2007b, 2011; Davies, 2003). Specifically, the cultural knowledge on which jokes are based may not be known by the non-native speaker because it may be based on insider information (Bell, 2005, 2011). Cultural knowledge provides the foundation of a lot of humor because individuals must decode the cultural denotations and connotations of the words in a joke to fully comprehend the meaning (Bell & Attardo, 2010). In addition to understanding the meaning of individual words or phrases, comprehending humor often requires knowledge of pop culture which may be unfamiliar to non-native speakers (Bell, 2006; Kayi-Aydar, 2014). Since humor varies across cultures (Bell, 2007a; Bell & Attardo, 2010; Moalla, 2015), topics that may be funny to joke about in one culture may be viewed as offensive or inappropriate for humor in another culture or setting (Carey, 2014). While humor can function as an exclusionary device to internationals who are not familiar with the culture (Bell, 2005; Kayi-Aydar, 2014), non-native speakers can exploit their status as being "the other" to use linguistic and cultural differences for humorous purposes (Bell, 2011; Moody, 2014).

Humor is a difficult topic to master in a non-native language due to the linguistic skills that are needed to convey humor (Bell, 2006, 2007a, 2009; Davies, 2015; Wulf, 2010). To produce humor, a person must be able to manipulate language by playing with the language's forms or meanings (Bell, 2006, 2012). Such a skill is easier for language learners of advanced language proficiency (Tarone, 2000). Another linguistic skill needed to produce humor is the ability to use language for symbolic references rather than to refer to physically present objects (Belz & Reinhart, 2004; Cook, 1997, 2000). Forman (2011) found that symbolic references in humor add another dimension to humor which often juxtaposes incompatible items to produce an underlying meaning other than the literal words of the discourse. Additionally, L2 speakers appropriate other voices to project humor into a conversation (Bell, 2005), such as parodying a teacher or a friend. Hall (1995) indicated that language competence involves learning to use a variety of voices for one's own benefit. Understanding how and why to use various voices for humorous purposes would also tie back to the cultural norms of humor as discussed previously (Tarone, 2000). Given the many different functions of humor, a variety of linguistic skills is needed to use humor effectively.

Humor is often a learned behavior that is not explicitly taught as part of a teacher education program. Specifically, Song and Gonzalez DelCastillo (2015)

found that international students did not receive cultural information as part of their teacher education program to implement humor into their instruction. However, Bell (2011) argued that humor is not a specific skill that can be taught as a formula; instead humor is one of the linguistic choices that a speaker has available and that can be used if desired. Nguyen (2007) observed that incorporating humor into a teaching repertoire enabled instructors to make connections with students. Although research indicates that humor in the classroom can increase instructional effectiveness and increase student engagement (Bell, 2009, 2010; Forman, 2011; Sidelinger, 2014), international instructors may be uncomfortable with this because using humor in the classroom may be inappropriate in different cultures (Bell & Attardo, 2010; Carey, 2014).

Beyond the cultural disinclination for humor in the classroom, this study seeks to explore what challenges that international instructors cite when using humor in the classroom. Specifically, the research question asks, "What barriers do international instructors self-report as serving as obstacles to their use of humor in English speaking university classrooms, and how do the ITAs respond to these challenges?"

Method

Participants

The participants in this study were twenty ITAs (ten males and ten females from thirteen different teaching content areas and fourteen different nationalities. This study occurred at a large research university in the Southeast United States. Recruitment of participants focused on students who had gone through the university's formal ITA training classes. Calls for participation were also sent to departments that employed a high number of ITAs. The ITAs who participated in this study had taught for an average of three years at an American university and had resided in the United States for an average of five years. Participants who were teaching courses in the humanities were responsible for teaching two sections of the same course. On the other hand, ITAs from the sciences generally taught a lecture course or a lab where they supervised students' experiments.

Data Collection

The study was part of a larger study on teacher identity development of international teaching assistants. As such, the research design involved an initial interview: each participant was interviewed individually to discuss their cultural backgrounds as students in their native cultures. The initial interview script was standard for all participants with questions

such as, "Tell me about your previous educational experiences," or, "Describe what qualities make a good teacher in the United States." As part of the first interview, spontaneous sub-questions were used to get the participant to elaborate on their initial responses when there was not much detail provided (Braun, Clarke, & Rance, 2014).

This interview was followed by a teaching observation in which a researcher watched and videotaped the participants teaching in a university classroom. Then the videotape was used as a basis for a follow-up interview during which the participant watched the video with the researcher who had videotaped the lesson so that the two could view and discuss critical incidents from the tape (Sherin & van Es, 2005). The second interview, which occurred while viewing the taped observation, focused on clarification questions from the first interview and on discussing incidents that occurred on the videotaped classroom. During this second interview, humor was a frequent topic because many of the participants tried to incorporate humor into their lessons, but humor was not targeted in the first interview, so that there was no pressure for the ITAs to showcase humor in their videotaped lesson. Each of the interviews was transcribed to aid in the data analysis, making a complete data set of forty interviews and twenty videotaped classroom observations.

Data Analysis

The data set was analyzed through thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Patterns and themes were developed through keyword searches and multiple readings (Braun et al., 2014). Consistent patterns across data sets were focused on identifying the participants' portrayals of their future identities in relation to their current practices. Member checks were performed to clarify unclear portions of the transcripts. The transcripts were analyzed through narrative inquiry (Pavlenko, 2007) to provide a contextualized analysis of the ITAs' experiences with humor. After identifying major themes, the data was grouped by themes for cross data set comparisons. The themes from the study revealed that the participants voiced four areas that presented obstacles to using humor in the classroom.

Findings

Cultural Challenges

First, many participants explained that in their U.S. classrooms they felt there were cultural expectations for humor which may not have been present in the classrooms of their native countries (Bell, 2009). To conform to this cultural expectation, participants

described their struggles to produce humor. One participant from Tanzania remarked the following:

> Humor is important in the classroom because that's how you make the students feel comfortable or authoritative. Students can create the fun which they're looking for. I'm not good at it, but I would like to be able to use it often. Those who can, I would encourage them to do it because that's what students are looking for.

This ITA recognized the desires of the student audience and attempted to adapt his teaching to fit these expectations. Sentiments like this were echoed by several the ITAs in the study. Most described wanting to use humor in the classroom, yet often remarked that their unfamiliarity with the U.S. pop culture prevented an effective incorporation of humor. One participant offered the following:

> I also observed some an American TA, and he can tell jokes, there in class or give some, um, um, yeah, give some or mention some name, or some actor or something like that. It makes the presentation very, very attractive, very, uh, spiring, inspiring. Uh, but for me, uh, it's hard to do that, yeah. Sometime, I do tell jokes or humor, but that's something we all understood.

This example illustrates why certain ITAs avoided cultural references and used a type of humor that appeals to a variety of cultures.

Other participants commented that humor was not a normal part of their native classroom context, hence they were uncomfortable with the whole concept of humor as part of teaching. Davies (2003) found that some authoritarian cultures do not encourage humor in the classroom because it interferes with the power distance that should be maintained between teacher and student. A Tanzanian participant described humor in his home country, 'It [humor] is rare, they don't usually tend to laugh.' Similarly, a participant from China noted the following:

> Of course, you are allowed to use humor in China, but you know the professor tend[s] not to do it, they would more rather stay serious. Some of them, actually younger teachers, would like to do more joking things now in days.

While some participants acknowledged that humor was allowed in the classrooms of their native culture, it was not commonly practiced. To adopt a persona that used classroom humor required the participants to stretch beyond their comfort zones. For many of the ITAs,

humor was not part of their socialization norms of being a teacher.

Other participants described the challenges of having jokes that did not translate across cultures. For some of the ITAs, using topics that might be perceived as inappropriate in U.S. culture caused fear and trepidation (Carey, 2014). One woman from Spain remarked, "I feel here in America I can't joke the same way that [sic] in Poland, because here is not possible to joke with drinking alcohol for example, or some physical defect, religion." She later expressed fear of being labeled an alcoholic if she joked about drinking. Therefore, she was aware that certain topics are inappropriate to joke about in the United States, although she had been able to use those topics in other countries. Knowing what topics are appropriate in a U.S. classroom setting presented a challenge because it required a level of cultural familiarity. This insider knowledge is something that has to be learned over time and is not explicitly taught as part of an ITA program.

As a result, ITAs have to learn U.S. cultural information from their students through the form of incidental interactions. For instance, during one of the classroom observations, students were reading a textbook in a foreign language class and began teasing the ITA about the character named Fabio. This particular ITA had no idea who Fabio was and what the students found so humorous. Later, one of the researchers explained who Fabio is in the U.S. context, and the participant was able to understand the teasing of the students. While the students found the Fabio reference humorous, lack of cultural knowledge prevented the teacher from fully understanding the moment. As a result, the teacher initially felt like an outsider until the joke was explained.

Linguistic Challenges

Many of the participants acknowledged that while they lacked the the proficiency in English to use humor in the classroom, they found ways in which to compensate. For instance, one participant from Cameroon explained, "You require a lot of experience and a good mastery of the English language." He recognized that linguistic knowledge was needed to manipulate words to produce humor. Similarly, an ITA from South Korea offered the following:

> English is not my native language. So, when I want to tell a joke to my students, to make them feel better, I still have a hard time. Oh, in Korea, you know, I can tell them anything, when class gets boring I try to oooh, kind of change the mood, or I do this instant activity. Something pops up, so I want to do that, in English, I don't think I'll be able to.

For many of the participants, their own perceived lack of English proficiency prevented them from attempting to insert humor into their instruction. Conversely, this same lack of proficiency can be used as a source of humor. A Peruvian ITA made this comment:

> They love even when I cannot pronounce a proper name. Because I need to, 'Could you please repeat your name for me,' and I was trying to memorize, but the conversation is in English, so some sounds even are harder for me. If they would be in Spanish, it would be easier.

Some participants used their status as an English learner in humorous ways to highlight their speaking or pronunciation errors. This self-deprecating approach resulted in an increase in the students' level of comfort when risk-taking. An ITA teaching a foreign language class stated, "I always joke with my bad English because with this that is a real problem (laughs) for me, …but they feel more comfortable because they don't . . . they are not afraid to [make] their mistakes, you know?" This ITA used her language struggles to create empathy between her and the students, who were also learning a foreign language as their content area.

Other participants commented that knowing multiple meanings for a word served as a rich basis for humor. One participant explained that students learning Spanish found humor in the double meanings of words, especially when the same word held completely different meanings in two different languages (e.g., cognates, loanwords, doublets).

> There are some word [sic] that is completely different but they, the sound is the same. The other word in Spanish ah so is very with joke ah ah a lot [sic] about this because for example, el pie in Spanish is foot; in Polish it's a dog.

Having the linguistic knowledge of both the students' native and target languages enabled her to capitalize on the inherent humor involved in word meanings, thus make the learning experience more memorable.

Social Challenges

Using humor in the classroom did present the participants with some social challenges, but, as with the linguistic challenges, some found ways to compensate. One of the biggest struggles was voiced by a participant from Spain who admitted having difficulty knowing when her students were joking. In one instance, she explained being confused when a student asked if she was married. Her student stated, "Do you know, madam [laughs], do you know maybe some of us fall in love of you, and we need to know." She spoke introspectively, "You never know if it's a joke or if it's, some real, you know?" This inability to identify a joke or to misconstrue a speaker's intent presented both a challenge and a barrier during social interactions.

Some participants expressed feelings of embarrassment when students were unable to comprehend their attempts at humor. Despite students not comprehending the ITAs' humor, most participants carried on with their teaching plan. They hoped that the students would see their awkward feelings after a joke failed, believing it was part of the overall joke. One participant from China explained that his use of humor sometimes worked, and other times did not. He commented:

> Wasn't that easy, sometimes I think it's quite, you know, funny things I speak, and the students don't get it. And then I'll be embarrassing[sic]. And sometimes, I say something, and I really don't think it's funny, and the students start laughing. And it's, you know, things like that happen, and sometimes they'll get my joke, but anyways [sic].

A participant from South Korea who was successful with using humor in the classroom explained that she often relied on her own experiences as a source of humor:

> Oh, I can tell them a joke, certain things that I remember, but it's always something that I have experienced, I mean I have to draw these ideas from my experience, not something new with my total creativity, you know what I mean?

Therefore, while participants were often unsure of student-initiated humor, they were more comfortable initiating humor themselves by sticking with content with which they were very familiar (Bell, 2007).

Authoritative Challenges

For many of the participants, using humor in the classroom brought about issues that challenged their authority as teachers. The ITAs acknowledged difficulty comprehending the humor initiated by their students, which often led to a loss of face if the joke was not comprehended. The line between having a friendly rapport with students and being too funny was a position where the ITAs had to find an appropriate balance. A male participant from Spain explains, "Sometimes you have to step aside and leave all joking aside, and say (to yourself), 'Hey, time out, it's the time now where everyone says I'm in charge, you are not.' Much to the dislike probably, but you have to." He noted that sometimes humor had to be abandoned in the classroom to reestablish authority.

In another example, a participant from Bulgaria described his philosophy of instructional humor as,

"You have to be very careful to make your humor help you in a point or help your students get involved in the topic." This opinion was repeated by several other participants. An ITA from Spain gave some examples of her humor as she instructed her students to complete activities in Spanish about advice for anti-ecologists and the use of elephant tusks or how to become the fattest man in the world. The purpose of the humorous dialogues was to engage students in language learning activities while maintain authority by keeping students on task. She explained that "the good thing of the jokes, if it is good joke, [is] they relax the tension, the possible tension of the student." Therefore, she affirmed the value of incorporating humor into classroom instruction in spite of the potential pitfalls of unsuccessful humor.

Others recognized the potential loss of face but chose to deal with it by simply stepping out of the role of teacher and into the role of the learner. As an example, a Brazilian ITA explained that she did not lack confidence in using humor; however, if she did not understand the humor in a joke, she would ask for clarification:

> I have no problem asking them (students) something, sometimes I don't know what to say, a word in English and then I ask them.... And, then I say, you know, 'Explain to me what is that in a way that I can understand,' and then he did explain, and I understood, and, ok, I know what you're talking about, so that is this in Portuguese.

Admittedly, something is lost when a joke is explained, but asking for clarification is a simple but effective strategy that can make light of a tense situation. While the act of stepping down from the role of teacher to learner might be daunting to some, as a strategy, it builds rapport with the students while increasing teacher confidence.

Discussion

This study presents an initial foray into the self-reported obstacles that ITAs face using humor in the classroom. The data collected provides insight into the type of humor most accessible to ITAs and how certain communication strategies aided in successful humorous events. Despite the numerous difficulties of using humor by non-native speakers, findings from this research suggest that ITAs can both identify obstacles and discuss ways to compensate. The findings are a relevant and introductory look at humor in the ITA classroom. Consequently, this study contributes broadly to the research on ITAs which explores the intersection between language and culture in the classroom (e.g., Brown, 2008; Gorsuch, 2003; McCalman, 2007; Pomerantz & Bell, 2011), the more general investigations into humor and language (e.g., Bell,

2007a, 2007b; Carrell, 1997; Davies, 2003; Matsumoto, 2014; Reddington & Waring, 2015), and studies on humor and student learning (Sidelinger, 2014).

The ITAs' self-reported results confirm that the greater the distance from one educational environment to the next, the more resistant an ITA is to crossing the barrier. A reluctance to adapt to the new educational culture of the U.S. has resulted in many undergraduate students' negative ratings of ITA performance (Kang et al., 2015). The barriers of language, teaching, and culture are formidable. However, there are ways to mitigate the daunting task of teaching in a second language in a foreign country. Humor stands as one good example of how to strategically create cross-cultural connections in the classroom without compromising teacher authority or renouncing learned classroom ethics and practices. At its best, humor is an area which clearly breaks down teacher/student boundaries and represents a confluence where distinct and distant cultures intermingle. Decoding exactly how to use humor in the classroom is clearly a challenge for any L2 learner/instructor.

This research confirms findings that many ITAs who come from countries where there is a sharp distinction between teacher/student roles struggle with the less authoritarian teaching styles that U.S. classrooms present (Levis et al., 2012). Moreover, matching the uses of humor to procedural knowledge of U.S. undergraduate instruction challenges ITAs in terms of when, how, and where humor can improve student learning, lesson delivery, and teacher/student rapport. ITAs struggle to find ways to make the use of humor cross-culturally relevant. A Brazilian ITA did not understand, for instance, the reference to Fabio, while an ITA from Spain struggled with the question how appropriate certain uses of humor are in the classroom. A second teacher from Spain detailed an excellent account of how "joking around" with the instructor can lead to miscommunication, a perceived inappropriate comment, and "stepping over the line" of acceptable behavior concerning student/teacher verbal interaction (Skalicky, Berger & Bell, 2015). Although humor is an area which clearly redefines a traditional, teacher-centered classroom discourse (Nguyen, 2007), it serves as a marker for intercultural competence (Chiang, 2009; McCalman, 2007; Moeller & Faltin Osborn, 2014) and L2 development (Bell, 2009; Belz, 2002; Cook, 2002; Matsumoto, 2014; Tarone, 2000).

While all the ITAs had surpassed a minimum required score on the TOEFL or TSE exam to enter graduate studies, language proficiency remained a barrier to the use of humor in the classroom. This is not surprising considering the large amount of research into second language proficiency and teaching (e.g., Brown, 2008; Gorsuch, 2003; McCalman, 2007). What was not expected, however, is how the ITAs accommodated for

their limited proficiency in English by temporarily moving out of their role as teacher who is in charge to one in which they are the student learning about American humor (e.g., Moalla, 2015). ITAs accomplished this as they mispronounced words, made jokes about their struggles with English, or drew on cognates from their native languages and English as a source of humor.

Still others showed remarkable skills at using and understanding humor and perhaps represented the exception among the participants. An ITA from Spain commented on the importance of "drawing the line" in the classroom, thus demonstrating the knowledge of when excessive humor detracts from learning and exemplifies poor classroom management. The ITA from Bulgaria explained that humor is most effective when it is used to complement the content in the course (Li et al., 2011). Unlike their peers, these ITAs could step outside of their roles as teaching assistants, transcend the constraints of culture and language, and recognize the functionality of humor and effective classroom management. While they never suggested what they were doing was easy, such findings indicate that limited communicative skills or the cultural constraints of teaching in a new educational environment do not determine an ITA's willingness or ability to make the adjustments that create successful classroom discourse.

Given the promise that this study shows as far as identifying the types of barriers that these ITAs faced in the classroom, this research could be expanded to study the linguistic composition of the barriers that humor presents and how ITAs overcome these linguistically. Additionally, more research could be conducted on how the incorporation of instructional strategies as part of ITA training could help the ITAs be more successful in addressing the barriers that humor presents in non-native instructional discourse.

In the broadest sense, each participant sought ways to transcend the traditional teacher-student dynamic by utilizing strategies that incorporated humor into their teaching. By doing so, the ITA demonstrated an understanding that humor creates cross-cultural connections, improves student interest in course content, and positively affects teacher immediacy and learning (Forman, 2011). To date, current ITA research as it relates to humor has not been forthcoming, and more research is recommended. Studies are needed which catalogue the kinds of speech acts used and understood by non-native speakers when faced with the kinds of cultural barriers the classroom presents.

Clearly a mismatch exists for a great number of ITAs that begin their teaching careers in a new educational culture and language environment (Gorsuch, 2012). The use of humor as a communicator style and teaching strategy remains out of reach for many ITAs beginning the journey. It is also difficult to imagine ITA educators taking the time in an already truncated, intensive training program to incorporate the teaching of humor into the curriculum. However, the interviews conducted in this research indicated that all participants recognized the difficulty, and yet they indicated a desire to weave humor into their instructional practices. Research supports this belief that humor positively affects teacher immediacy and enhances student learning (Forman, 2011). To this end, ITA educators should not dismiss out-of-hand the role and functionality humor plays in U.S. undergraduate classroom discourse, nor how humor increases exposure to the target language and culture, thus aiding ITA language learning and acquisition.

Conclusion

Future research on the study of humor in the classroom within the ITA research is complicated. How does one teach someone to be funny? The adage, "If you have to explain the joke, then it is not funny anymore," is a type of common intervention and would probably not be an appropriate path for future research. Still, the value of humor in the classroom—the ways it intersects with culture, language proficiency and teaching—is undeniable. From a procedural perspective, as described in Gorsuch (2012), it would be valuable to understand more about the decision-making processes experienced teachers, ITAs, and TAs make when using humor in the classroom. Careful analysis of classroom transcripts coupled with observations and discussion of classroom culture could provide a valuable contribution into the research exploring ITAs, language, and culture, as well as inform research into the subtle connections between second language proficiency and teaching behaviors. ITA research would benefit from additional research into humor, as humor plays an established role in building rapport with students and effective teaching.

Given the benefits that humor can contribute to instruction, it should be addressed in an ITA training curriculum. However, while teaching humor as a prescriptive topic would not help ITAs implement humor into their teaching repertoire (Wulf, 2010), and ITA educators should be careful to explain what sorts of humor would be inappropriate in higher education (Bell, 2009), as one department did during this study. Alerting ITAs to the topics that could be considered offensive to university students would set some parameters for humor and potentially save the ITA from an unwittingly awkward or volatile situation (Bell, 2010).

While the ease of using humor in the classroom comes with practice, encouraging ITAs to implement rapport strategies like humor in the classroom would increase the immediacy between the ITAs and their

students (Bell, 2006). The benefits of building rapport between ITAs and students would make positive contributions to higher education. Zhang (2014) argued that rapport is a major factor in international instructors' authority in the university classroom as it serves to foster positive attitudes towards them. Bridging the gap between teacher and student can facilitate student learning as the instructor becomes more approachable for the student to seek help with course content (LeGros & Faez, 2012). While approaches to humor may vary from person to person and even culture to culture (Bell, 2007a), ITAs who are open to using rapport strategies like humor in the classroom will make learning more memorable and engaging for their students. Furthermore, taking the steps to build connections between ITAs and their students can have long reaching effects for higher education as ITAs become more integrated into higher education and students gain experience in cultural competence.

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