Exploring Humor and Cultural Differences Through Intercultural Humor Misunderstanding Case Studies

Intercultural humor misunderstanding case studies are a promising classroom technique for guiding learners from diverse cultural backgrounds to examine cultural differences regarding humor. This paper describes sample classroom case studies about two different forms of humor, verbal irony and satirical news. The recommended steps for introducing such case studies are outlined. Practical expansion activities and student reactions are also shared.

Literature Review

Konrad Lorenz wrote that "Laughter forms a bond, but it simultaneously draws a line" (1963, p. 253). In other words, humor has the power to both help and hinder communication, a double-edged sword that is even more relevant in the context of intercultural communication. While humor may be universal, the frequency of usage of respective forms of humor can greatly vary from culture to culture. Previous research (e.g., Bell, 2006; Holmes & Hay, 1997; Yamada, 1997) suggests that these differences in humor usage can cause difficulties in communication. Additionally, this humor barrier is not necessarily overcome simply with increased language proficiency. Research reveals that even learners with advanced language proficiency often struggle to comprehend, let alone engage in, humor in the target language, leading to embarrassment or even isolation (Bell & Attardo, 2010; Shively, 2018).

A growing body of research in the field of foreign language education recognizes the importance of understanding humor in intercultural communication. Wulf (2010), for example, proposed microskills instruction for helping English language learners engage in humorous interaction in the L2. In addition, Bell and Pomerantz (2016) suggested a backward design approach to better equip learners to detect, comprehend, respond to, and produce L2 humor. Other researchers have focused on helping learners to better understand respective forms of humor that they are likely to encounter in the English-speaking world, including jokes (Hodson, 2014), satirical news (Prichard & Rucynski, 2019), and verbal irony (Kim & Lantolf, 2018).

Exploring Humor Differences in the Multicultural Classroom

Humor is such a complex and multifaceted aspect of culture and communication that perhaps it should not be relegated to a mere unit or one-off lesson. Instead, I designed a full 16-week pilot course entitled “Humor and Intercultural Communication.” This course was open to Japanese and international students at a large national university in western Japan. Twenty-five students signed up for the course, including students from 10 different countries representing all three circles of English.

One consistent component of the course was what I refer to as intercultural communication humor misunderstanding case studies. Using these case studies was a way to examine real-world misunderstandings involving humor from a range of cultural perspectives in an attempt to identify causes of the misunderstandings and, in the end, consider possible solutions. I will share two of these case studies, representing two different forms of humor, including one face-to-face communication example and one online communication example. For each case study, I will explain the steps for introducing the case study, describe expansion activities, and share student reactions.

Case Study 1: Sarcasm Misunderstanding

The use of sarcasm can frequently lead to misunderstandings in intercultural communication, as it employs non-literal language, and the form and functions of sarcasm can vary from culture to culture. A real-world example of this was illustrated in the Japanese sports world with a 2012 incident involving Matt Murton, a star American player for the Hanshin Tigers baseball team. During a game that season, Murton made an errant throw in a game that was being pitched by Atsushi Nohmi, allowing a run to score. After the game, a Japanese reporter asked Murton if he was trying his hardest when he made the throw. Assumedly taking umbrage with this questioning of his effort, Murton retorted that he let the runner score on purpose because he dislikes Nohmi. Unfortunately, Murton’s words were taken literally, and they were splashed across the cover of Kansai sports newspapers the following day (Coskrey, 2012). Despite his popularity and strong performance in Japanese baseball, Murton faced backlash from fans and team management, who were bewildered by his comments.

Warm-up Activities: Overview of Sarcasm in Respective Cultures

Before introducing the case study, students were tasked with examining the use of sarcasm in their own cultures. Sample warm-up questions included:

1. How common is sarcasm in your culture? If it is common, in what situations is it frequently used? What are the different possible functions (e.g., criticize a person or situation, make light of a situation, bond with others) of sarcasm?

2. Do you personally frequently use sarcasm? If yes, in what situations and with what kinds of people (e.g., friends only, family members) do you use it?

3. Are there any warnings or limits about sarcasm in your culture? For example, are there any situations (e.g., business meetings) when sarcasm should not be used?

The second question was included to stress that despite the focus on humor in different cultures, individual preferences for humor use must also always be considered.

Introducing the Case Study

Explaining the case study involves more than just summarizing what happened. As almost no students in the class were familiar with the incident (except for one or two Hanshin Tigers fans), the context needed to be explained in detail. For example, only American and Japanese students represented countries where baseball is a major sport, so a basic overview of baseball terminology (e.g., starting pitcher, score a run) was necessary. Additionally, important details about baseball in Japan (e.g., limits on foreign players, the fanatical passion of Hanshin Tigers fans) were also explained.

Concept checks were also employed throughout the overview of the case study to ensure that all students understood the incident fully. After all, humor that is obvious in one culture can cause confusion in another culture. Sample concept checks included:

1. Murton's *literal* words were "I don't like Nohmi, so I let the other team score a run." What was his *intended* meaning?

2. Why did Murton answer in such a way?

3. Who was the target of Murton's words?

Discussion and Expansion Activities

Discussion and expansion activities focused on examining why the misunderstanding happened and also considering solutions for avoiding such intercultural incidents involving sarcasm. Although this incident involved an American player on a Japanese baseball team, the case study was used as a springboard for examining how sarcasm is used in students' respective native cultures. Discussion questions included:

1. What is the best solution to this incident? What could be done to avoid such future misunderstandings?

2. Imagine you are asked to explain the use of sarcasm in your own culture. What important information would you give? For example, do speakers give any cues when they are being sarcastic?

3. Do you think that understanding sarcasm and other verbal irony should be a part of English language education? Why or why not?

In addition to discussing the case, students also engaged in a range of collaborative activities to get a deeper understanding of how sarcasm and other forms of verbal irony is used in different cultures. This included sharing common possible cues for verbal irony, such as vocal (e.g., prosody) and nonverbal (e.g., facial expressions, gestures) cues. While many cues were deemed to be fairly universal, students did discover some variance, such as the infrequency of rolling one's eyes or making "air quotes" as a marker of sarcasm in Japan compared to Western countries. For a more detailed overview of instruction on verbal irony markers in language education, see our previous research (Prichard & Rucynski, 2020).

One entertaining collaborative activity for practice identifying sarcasm markers in different cultures is a modification of the "truth or lie" activity. Students are given a range of conversational topics (e.g., movies, music, sports) and need to express a like and dislike about each one, using both literal and nonliteral language. (The sarcastic statement should include at least one verbal or nonverbal cue). Group members try to detect the sarcastic statement and identify the cue(s). An example from musical likes included:

1. I love X Japan. I have all their CDs.

2. I looooove AKB48. I have their posters on my wall.

The respective student used the vocal cue of an elongated vowel to reveal that he prefers hard rock to Japanese idol groups.

The last discussion question was included to expand the situation to focus not only on the case study itself, but also consider possible preemptive measures for avoiding intercultural humor misunderstandings in the first place.

Student Reactions

In addition to in-class discussions, students were tasked with writing a short reaction report to summarize their final opinions about the same questions. As these written reactions contained insightful comments that reflected learners' respective intercultural journeys, I would like to share a couple excerpts here. As all students in the class had either studied English or were studying Japanese at the time, many students chose to especially focus on the language education question (#3).

Overall, the students largely agreed that at least some attention should be given to humorous, non-literal language such as sarcasm in language education. One student who moved with her family from Bulgaria to England as a child credited this early exposure to real-world English ("including plenty of sarcastic remarks") with providing her with the foundation to communicate smoothly in the English-speaking world. She wrote that "having had that experience which helped me understand, detect, and use sarcasm properly I believe greatly elevated my language proficiency as well as helped me get along better with English-speaking people." She further wrote that awareness of sarcasm is an important intercultural communication skill that should be included in English language education.

One bilingual Japanese student stressed that she regularly uses sarcasm in both English and Japanese, but that sarcasm in Japan is done "in a Japanese language way…and only with the right person in the right situation." She noted that language learners should be made more aware of these differences. Similarly to the Bulgarian student, she credited the experience of being an exchange student in the United States in high school with improving her intercultural

communicative competence. Referring to the rigid attention to form in her secondary school English classes in Japan as "like being in prison," she argued for more authentic materials (e.g., movies or TV shows that illustrate real-world English such as sarcasm) in English language education.

Case Study 2: Satirical News Misunderstanding

Satirical news is another form of humor that varies in frequency and popularity from country to country. There is a particular gap in popularity between predominantly English-speaking countries and Japan, as reflected in the current number of Facebook likes for the following respective satirical news websites.

The Onion, USA (6.2 million likes)

The Daily Mash, UK (972,000 likes)

The Betoota Advocate, Australia (826,000 likes)

The Rising Wasabi, English-language site about Japan (42,000 likes)

Kyoko Shimbun (虚構新聞), Japanese-language site about Japan (23,000 likes)

As seen from the last two examples, even *The Rising Wasabi*, with the much smaller target audience of English-speaking foreign residents of Japan, has nearly twice as many likes as the most popular Japanese-language satirical news website, the *Kyoko Shimbun*. Additionally, when my co-researcher and I surveyed our Japanese students about frequency of reading satirical news for a previous study (Prichard & Rucynski, 2018), more than half of the 87 respondents (53.5 percent) responded that they "never" read satirical news, whether in English or Japanese.

This gap in the popularity and understanding of English satirical news was illustrated by the confusion caused by the October 12th, 2016 headline from *The Rising Wasabi*, "Osaka Launches Foreigner-Only Carriages To Curtail Inconveniences." Several Japanese readers accused this article of being "fake news," with comments such as "This post is not true. I live in Osaka for 23 years. I never see it. it's so bad joke…" and "This is obviously Photoshoped [*sic*]!" These commenters were correct in calling this headline "fake news," but what was missing was an understanding that satirical news websites do generally make it known that their "news" stories are merely jokes. For example, in the "About" section on their website, it is clearly

written, "*The Rising Wasabi* is Japan's premium satirical news publication…."

What was likely also missing was the awareness that *The Rising Wasabi* article was meant to satirize a recent incident in which a Japanese train conductor in Osaka, in response to a complaint from a Japanese passenger, made a regrettable announcement apologizing for the large number of foreign passengers. This incident was picked up by the international media, prompting headlines such as "Japanese train conductor blames foreign tourists for overcrowding" (McCurry, 2016). Many foreign residents of Japan were offended by the conductor's choice of words, prompting the satirical article from *The Rising Wasabi* which, as often happens with humor, apparently got "lost in translation."

Warm-up Activities: Overview of Satirical News in Respective Cultures

As with the previously explained case study about sarcasm, students were again tasked with exploring the use of satirical news in their own culture. Similar sample warm-up questions included:

1. How common and popular is satirical news in your culture? If it is common, what types of satirical news (e.g., satirical news websites such as *The Onion*, TV shows such as *The Daily Show*) are popular? Who or what are frequent targets of this type of humor?

2. Do you personally enjoy satirical news? If yes, what kinds of satirical news do you like?

3. Are there any limits about satirical news in your culture? For example, are there any targets that are avoided or considered taboo?

Introducing the Case Study

As with the Matt Murton incident, very few students were familiar with either the original news story or *The Rising Wasabi* satirical article (although a majority of international students *were* familiar with *The Rising Wasabi*). So, several concept checks were included while explaining the misunderstanding in detail, including:

1. Who or what was the target of *The Rising Wasabi* article? What satirical statement were they making?

2. What is the difference between "fake news" (a term popularized at the time by then President

Trump) and satirical news?

3. Are there any clues in the article from *The Rising Wasabi* that give away that it is satirical news?

The second question was important in order to understand the evolution of the term "fake news." Satirical news could also be called "fake news" or "spoof news," as it is humor and not real news. Trump's tendency to dismiss many media outlets as "fake news," however, was more intended to accuse them of being biased (or simply not supporting his agenda). In the context of Japan, a controversy regarding the accuracy of content in broadcasting erupted in 2007 when NHK (*Nippon Hōsō Kyōkai*, or Japan Broadcasting Corporation) aired a program that included exaggerated claims promoting the weight-loss properties of *natto* (fermented soybeans) (Murakami, 2009). This incident contributed to making the Japanese public weary of fake news, but the distinction here would be that the program aimed to deceive people, whereas writers of satirical news (generally) aim to entertain and (sometimes) criticize.

Discussion and Expansion Activities

As with the previous case study, discussion and expansion activities focused on examining both why the misunderstanding happened and also considering solutions for avoiding such future misunderstandings. Students were also asked their own views on both the potential effectiveness and offensiveness of satirical news. Discussion questions included:

1. If someone is not familiar with satirical news websites, what cues (other than just checking the name of the source) can be used to identify satirical news?

2. What is your opinion about *The Rising Wasabi* website? For example, do you feel that some Japanese people may be offended by foreign writers using humor to criticize their culture? Or do you think that this is an effective way to shed light on social issues in Japan (including those affecting foreign residents)?

3. Do you think that understanding satirical news should be a part of English language education? Why or why not? Are there any benefits of reading satirical news (other than just for entertainment/humor)?

With regards to the first question, students were able to share several possible cues to help identify satirical news. Referring back to the photo used in the satirical story about foreigner-only train carriages, students noticed the use of the word "*gaijin*." This shortened form of *gaikokujin* (foreigner) is often considered derogatory and thus it is unlikely that it would appear in signs made by a railway company or in reputable media sources. Students also noticed differences with regards to style and design between satirical and real news websites. As an example, in *The Rising Wasabi* headline all words were capitalized, whereas sentence case capitalization is generally used for real news headlines. For a deeper analysis of cues to help learners detect satirical news, see our previous research on this topic (Prichard & Rucynski, 2019; Rucynski & Prichard, 2020).

For one collaborative activity, learners were tasked with selecting a range of articles from *The Rising Wasabi* and then worked together to identify both the meaning and *target* of the satire. Understanding the target of the humor is essential, as many humor misunderstandings occur because people do not understand the true target of the humor. (An example of this would be the previous case study, where the reporter, and not Nohmi himself, was the target of Murton's sarcastic comment.) *The Rising Wasabi* was chosen because most of the stories are focused on Japan, the one cultural context that all students in the class had in common. In addition, examining such stories together helped Japanese students raise their awareness of the foreign experience in Japan. One example of a misunderstood target included the lighter headline "Tokyo Reaches '*Atsui Ne*' ('It's hot, isn't it?') Yearly Peak." Most Japanese guessed that the target is simply that Japanese summers are hot, but the real target was the tendency in Japan to greet everyone in this season with "*Atsui ne*." To help avoid labeling this as an "Only in Japan" phenomenon, however, British students were quick to add that this would be equivalent to their common (but sarcastic!) greeting, "Lovely weather, isn't it?" Concerning a deeper topic, most Japanese students were baffled by the meaning or target of the headline "Seat Next To Foreigner Used Despite Clear Vacancies Across The Way," a satirical comment on the assumption that the empty seat next to a foreigner on the train is usually the last one occupied. Japanese students were surprised and saddened to hear many international students in the class share that this has happened to them.

Student Reactions

For their written reactions, students largely focused on the second and third discussion questions, with a majority of students arguing that satirical news is an effective form of social commentary that also merits inclusion in English language education. One student from England stressed that an understanding of satirical news is important because headlines from *The Rising Wasabi* such as "Tokyo Disneyland Unveils New Fantasy Area Where Women Have Equal Rights" could initially come across as offensive if the reader does not recognize the headline as satire. The student further explained that "it's also important to realize that satirical sites…often employ hyperbole to not only get an initial reaction, but also to draw attention to wider societal issues that arguably do need addressing."

One student from Japan, who had also lived overseas, considered the issue of satirical news from different perspectives. She explained that she did not find such humor offensive at all because she had been exposed to this type of humor from a young age, but she also warned that "other Japanese people may find it offensive as they have not been fully exposed to that type of humor." In the end, however, she argued that an understanding of satirical news is beneficial in that it challenges readers "to dissect the true meaning of the headline where they are forced to critically think about what is going on in the society."

Another Japanese student who had never read satirical news before the class activities praised the potential of satirical news in making young people more aware of contemporary political and social issues. The student admitted that she rarely reads current political news in Japanese, citing the biased nature of Japanese newspapers as a major reason for her lack of interest in politics. On the other hand, she wrote that she was "amazed that *The Rising Wasabi* generated my interest in reading and knowing more about the current political and social situation in Japan."

Caveats and Conclusion

While students in this course generally had a very favorable reaction to using humor misunderstandings in intercultural communication as class content, there are always warnings when it comes to incorporating humor into language education. First of all, it must be noted that all students in this course had fairly high levels of English language proficiency (and the course

also included a number of students from inner circle English countries). As it was implemented as a content-based course, a minimum score of 600 on the TOEIC was required. This is not to say that humorous content cannot be included in courses with learners with lower proficiency levels. Especially when it comes to controversies or misunderstandings involving humor, however, great care must be taken to ensure that learners have a clear understanding of both the language and content.

Second, this course was greatly enhanced by the fact that there were students from a range of cultural backgrounds. Still, there is potential for using such intercultural humor misunderstanding case studies in English language classes with only Japanese students. Cases such as the Matt Murton sarcasm incident are culturally familiar (and based on a real-life incident) and thus worth exploring for activities examining intercultural communication in traditional English language courses.

Finally, these case studies were included as part of an entire course devoted to the role of humor in intercultural communication. Not all teachers will have the interest (or academic freedom) to design a full course based solely on humor. Still, these case studies could also work well as individual units or activities. It is important, however, to ensure that such activities have a connection with the respective course curriculum. The sarcasm case study, for example, would be most suitable for an English speaking or listening course, especially for students who are interested in studying abroad, or at least actively engaging in English communication outside of the classroom. The satirical news case study would, on the other hand, be more suitable as part of a unit on digital (as satirical news is frequently shared on social media platforms) and media literacy as part of an English reading course.

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