

Student Joke-Telling through Modification of Input Materials

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Abstract

As part of an ongoing investigation into the responses of EFL learners to English humour, 38 university students were asked to rewrite two English jokes selected from among a series of humorous input texts linked to functions and topics being studied in class. Learner joke output showed considerable variation in content and was largely successful in maintaining the humorous basis of the input texts, although a significant number of responses to the second joke indicated that writers had not fully understood the grammatical complexity of the original. Students were then asked to rate the output of their peers in terms of difficulty and humorous appeal. 74 student joke-ratings were obtained in each category, with student output, in the case of both jokes, being rated as both less difficult, and funnier than, the original jokes. With the exception of responses that relocated the original setting of the first joke from America to Japan, most major variations did not seem to have a significant impact on ratings. As well as the limitations of the current study, factors that might explain the overall difference in ratings, especially the role of affect and increased familiarity with content schema, are discussed.

Key words: humour, jokes, learner output, peer-rating

1 Introduction and research background

Recent research has begun to make the case for the introduction and use of materials incorporating creative language play in the English language classroom (notably Cook, 2000), to suggest some of their potential benefits, and to provide both practical applications of humorous materials, and broad guidelines for their use in both first language (e.g. Spector, 2009) and EFL/ESL contexts (e.g. Medgyes, 2002; Gardner, 2008). Hodson (2008a) found that the potentially huge range of linguistic, content, cultural and humour-related variables present in authentic humorous texts, specifically English jokes, may make the task of selecting and sequencing specific materials for language learners a crucial but difficult one. Hodson (2008b and forthcoming) investigated learner responses to and creation of humorous texts - specifically, newspaper cartoon captions - in which format and content were controlled, and found that students had considerable success in creating original and entertaining English output. This paper describes part of an ongoing study to investigate further the factors that affect learner response to humorous texts, in accordance with Gardner's suggestion that humour in the language classroom should be 'purposeful and not merely entertaining' (2008: 12-13). The investigation aims to: a)

control input text content and sequencing by linking the choice of materials to language functions and topics already being studied in class; and b) encourage learners to manipulate input texts to create their own humorous output and share it with peers. This paper presents a preliminary analysis of the content and peer-rating of student output, in the form of two English jokes.

2 Participants

The participants in this study were 38 first-year students, in two classes of 20 (C1) and 18 (C2) respectively, majoring in international relations and cross-cultural communication in a public university in Japan. Of the 38 participants, only 16 in each class were present on the day that the first activity described in this paper was carried out, generating 32 valid responses, in the form of modifications of jokes provided as input texts. Of the 32 respondents, 27 were female and five male; 28 students were Japanese, and four Chinese. For the second activity, which was carried out only with C1, responses were obtained from all 20 students (15 female, 5 male; 17 Japanese, 3 Chinese).

3 Input materials

3.1 Selection and rating system

Students were presented with 22 English jokes (21 jokes in the case of C2) over the course of one semester, during their English oral communication class. The jokes were chosen and sequenced to tie in with language forms and functions occurring in the class textbook (Helgesen, Brown & Mandeville, 2004), which itself contains the question ‘Can you tell a joke in English?’ as an option within its final review activity, but which does not provide substantial input texts or structured productive activities explicitly focusing on this area of communicative competence. Joke texts came from a variety of sources and were subjected to minimal modification of language and content, and in 12 cases, no modification at all. Students were asked to rate the text difficulty and funniness/humour of each joke, using a five-point scale modelled on Stock and Strappavara (2002), with difficulty ratings of 1 (very easy), 2 (easy), 3 (so-so), 4 (difficult) and 5 (very difficult), and funniness ratings of 1 (not funny), 2 (not very funny), 3 (mildly funny), 4 (funny) and 5 (very funny). Funniness ratings on each handout were illustrated with small faces showing expressions ranging from a frown to a broad grin.

3.2 Jokes for student modification: linguistic features

Jokes 12, 17 and 22 were presented as opportunities for student rewriting and retelling. Joke 22 required only the substitution of any long, hard-to-spell English word for the ‘Constantinople’ of the original, and student output was not collected. Joke 12 (referred to hereafter as the ‘Carnegie Hall joke’) is a traditionally popular joke widely available in a number of variations, and constructed for class use as:

A tourist in New York realises that he’s lost, and asks a passer-by: ‘How do you get to Carnegie Hall?’ The passer-by replies: ‘Practice, practice, practice!’

in order to coincide with class study of the language function of asking for directions. Joke 17

(referred to hereafter as the ‘doctor joke’) is also widely available in a number of variations, and was chosen to accompany textbook focus on the theme of occupations:

Patient: Is it serious, doctor?

Doctor: Well, if I were you I wouldn’t start watching any new TV serials.

Table 1 gives a summary of the main linguistic features of each joke.

Table 1: Linguistic features of two input jokes

	tokens	word forms	lexical density	Flesch Reading Ease score	Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level
Carnegie Hall joke	26	22	85%	50	9
doctor joke	19	17	89%	64	7

Both jokes are shorter than the average of 40 words reported by the Laughlab experiment (The British Association for the Advancement of Science, 2002: 63). With contractions expanded, proper nouns removed and spelling standardized to American English, all of the words in the ‘Carnegie Hall joke’ appear in the Oxford 3000 list of important keywords. The ‘doctor joke’ contains only one word (‘serials’) that does not appear in this list (Oxford 3000 Text Checker, 2008) but it should be noted that this word is crucial to a full understanding of the joke. The ‘doctor joke’ appears to be a slightly more demanding text, particularly with regard to the grammatical structure of its second sentence, but the ‘Carnegie Hall’ joke contains a major cultural reference that required in-class explanation. The average student difficulty rating of the Carnegie Hall joke was 2.84 (between ‘easy’ and ‘so-so’), and of the ‘doctor joke’, 3.27 (between ‘so-so’ and ‘difficult’).

3.3 Jokes for student modification: humour

The ‘Carnegie Hall joke’ derives its humorous effect from the linguistic ambiguity inherent in the question ‘How do you get to...?’ which the tourist intends (we assume) to mean ‘Could you tell me the way to...?’ and which the passer-by answers as if it meant ‘How do you gain entry, via qualification or recognition of your talents, at...?’. In order for the joke to work, the tourist’s destination needs to be both a geographical place and, metonymically, an institution with demanding requirements for admission. There is further pragmatic ambiguity in the passer-by’s (deliberately or otherwise) answering the question as if it carried what is clearly, in the circumstances, the less likely of the two possible interpretations, thereby breaking the Gricean maxim of relation (Grice, 1975). The joke follows the ‘rule of three’ pattern found throughout English humorous writing, with the punch line word ‘practice’ occurring three times.

There is no little or no linguistic ambiguity in the ‘doctor joke’ at word or sentence level. The humorous effect comes rather from the contextual inappropriateness of the doctor’s response to the patient’s question; viewed pragmatically, the doctor is arguably breaking Gricean maxims of quantity and manner by speaking metaphorically. The joke can also be interpreted under the psychic release theory of humour: emotionally charged and potentially taboo topics of short life expectancy, terminal illness and death are hinted at in the metaphor of ‘watching... TV serials’, an activity that requires a prolonged commitment, but not a very long one when seen in the context

of a conversation on life expectancy between doctor and patient.

4 Student joke output

4.1 Instructions and tasks

Students were asked to rewrite each joke, tell it to their classmates, and to get peers to rate their retellings using the same scales as for the original jokes. For the ‘Carnegie Hall joke’, the instruction was ‘Can you rewrite this joke to make it easier for someone in Japan?’ with attention being drawn to the American locations in the original. For the ‘doctor joke’, students were given the original text as far as ‘... I wouldn’t’ and asked to write an original completion.

4.2 ‘Carnegie Hall joke’: content elements

Student retellings of the ‘Carnegie Hall joke’ showed variations in seven key elements of the original: the nature and sex of the tourist; the location of the conversation (New York in the original); the description of the passer-by; the tourist’s destination (originally Carnegie Hall); and the punch line (originally, ‘Practice, practice, practice’). Location, destination and punch line are strongly mutually interdependent, and it is on this combination that the success of the joke largely depends.

There were only minor variations in areas other than these three key elements. Two students chose to replace ‘tourist’ with another element. Their choices - ‘child’ and ‘student’ - clearly retain the potential ignorance of location inherent in the original, and that is essential to the joke. Although all but five of the 32 respondents were female, only two chose to make the tourist female, with all five male, and the remaining 25 female respondents retaining the sex of the original. Finally, one respondent expanded ‘passer-by’ to ‘Japanese passer-by’, but this variation was combined with an anomalous location/destination combination (New York/Waseda University). Tables 2-4 show content variation in three key areas of the student ‘Carnegie Hall joke’.

Japanese settings dominated, accounting for 26 locations and 27 destinations. Four locations and four destinations (including one, ‘Sofiya’, for which precise identification has not been possible) were set in China, although only three of each were produced by Chinese students, and the USA

Table 2: Student ‘Carnegie Hall joke’ location variations

location	occurrences
Japan	9
Tokyo	6
China	4
Nagasaki	4
Hyogo	2
Osaka	2
New York, Kyoto, America, Kumamoto, Fukuoka	1 each

Table 3: Student 'Carnegie Hall joke' destination variations

destination	occurrences
Koushien Stadium	6
Budoukan	4
Tokyo University	4
Brick Hall	3
Mount Taishan	2
National Stadium	2
Olympic Stadium, Kabukiza, Yoshimoto, Kiyomizudera, Waseda University, Sofiya, the White House, Tokyo Dome, Shokun-no-ma in Kumamoto Castle, Big N, Marine Messe Fukuoka	1 each

Table 4: Student 'Carnegie Hall joke' punch line variations

punch line		occurrences
triple punch line	practice	17
	study	5
	swing, endure, climb, learn, training	1 each
other		5

featured in two locations (including the anomalous response referred to above) and one destination. The majority of responses (16) featured sports-themed destinations such as Koushien Baseball Stadium, followed by arts-themed destinations (six responses) such as Brick Hall, a popular arts venue in Nagasaki, and two education-themed destinations (four responses), both universities. The remaining six responses consisted of a variety of other types of destination.

The original 'Practice, practice, practice' was the most popular punch line, perhaps reflecting its wide applicability to both sports and arts-related destinations; of its 17 occurrences, one omitted the third 'practice'. All other uses of the triple punch line used a simple present verb except one, but this one - 'Training, training, training' - seems perfectly acceptable if 'training' is interpreted as a noun (as indeed the two most popular choices, 'practice' and 'study' can be). Four out of the five punch lines that did not use a triple, repeating structure were used with destinations characterized as 'other'.

4.3 'Doctor joke': content elements

Potential for student retelling of the 'doctor joke' was restricted to replacement of the verb phrase following 'Well, if I were you I wouldn't', in the original, 'start watching any new TV serials'. All 20 student responses successfully followed the auxiliary 'wouldn't' with a main verb, and six responses (30%) copied the 'start - ing' structure of the original. Table 5 shows the verbs chosen.

All 20 responses followed this verb with a complement, of which there was considerable variety, and a number of orthographical and minor grammatical errors. The most common themes, and the only ones recurring, were planting flowers and plants (four occurrences) and reading the

Table 5: Student 'doctor joke' verb choices

	verb	occurrences
start	reading	3
	planting	2
	watching	1
get		2
go to		2
make, build, eat, check, study for, plant, see, read, enter, sow		1 each

'Harry Potter' novels (three occurrences).

While all 20 responses were comprehensible, a significant number suggested that the writer had not fully understood the 'if I were you I wouldn't' structure of the original joke, in which use of the second conditional is further complicated by the presence of the gerund 'watching'. In this structure, the doctor advises the patient against beginning a long-term, potentially prolonged activity, such as watching a TV serial, implying that the patient will not be able to see that activity through to its conclusion because - as the context of the patient's question further implies - the patient's medical condition is so serious that he or she will die before completing it. A confident grasp of this structure can be seen in all six of the student responses that used the 'start - ing' pattern, and in six other student jokes, such as 'I wouldn't get ready for Christmas' and 'I wouldn't sow flower seeds in the garden'. These 'I wouldn't' responses make up 60% of the total.

However, the nature of four of the responses (20%) suggests that the writers had interpreted 'if I were you I wouldn't' incorrectly, to mean 'I predict that you won't', producing jokes such as 'I wouldn't see tomorrow sun' [sic] and 'I wouldn't eat the first rice crop of the year', indicating a finite point in the future that it is implied that the patient will not live to see. The final four responses (20%) - including 'I wouldn't enter the university' and 'I wouldn't go to sleep tonight' - can be classified as 'both/unclear' as potentially supporting either interpretation.

5 Student rating of peer output

5.1 Student 'Carnegie Hall joke' ratings

The 32 student 'Carnegie Hall jokes' were rated by peers, giving 35 ratings at an average of 1.09 ratings per student. Three jokes were rated by two students each, with four students rating two jokes, and one student writing, but not rating a joke. Each student gave an average rating for humour of 4.29 (between 'funny' and 'very funny'), with the original 'Carnegie Hall joke' having been rated at 3.84 (between 'mildly funny' and 'funny'), an increase of 12%. The average difficulty rating for student jokes was 2.02, compared to 2.84 for the original joke (both between 'easy' and 'so-so'), a decrease of 29%.

There was less variation in the difficulty ratings of the student joke (sd=0.76) than of the original joke (sd=1.08), but a slightly greater variation in the humour ratings (student joke sd=0.90,

original joke $sd=0.72$). This seems to be counter-intuitive, as we might expect that affective factors would lead students to rate the output of their peers more consistently favourably - in terms of humour - than the original joke. The presence of an outlier may be one explanation of the apparent anomaly: only one student rated a peer's joke as less than 'mildly funny', in fact, giving it the lowest possible rating of 'not funny' (1). Excluding that student's data gives more consistent ratings: student difficulty (2.05) < original difficulty (2.81); student humour (4.40) > original humour (3.87); student difficulty sd (0.75) < original difficulty sd (1.08); and student humour sd (0.67) also < original humour sd (0.72). However, it may not be wise to disregard outliers when dealing with the highly personal judgement of rating humour; and the greater amount of variation in rating student jokes may well be explicable by the simple fact that 32 different student jokes, and only one original text were being rated.

There was a relatively strong negative correlation between the difficulty and humour ratings of the original 'Carnegie Hall joke' (- 0.69, with - 0.79 in C1 and - 0.71 in C2) but this did not seem to be true for the student jokes (- 0.3, with 0.41 in C1 but - 0.75 in C2). Combined results for C1 and C2 showed no notable correlations between the difficulty ratings of the student and the original joke, nor between the humour ratings of the two jokes.

Jokes which emulated the triple punch line of the original attracted a considerably lower difficulty rating (1.83) than those five jokes that did not (3.40), but the humour ratings of both types were much closer (triple punch line=4.26; non-triple punch line: 4.40). Of those jokes that employed the triple punch line, there was little difference in either difficulty or humour ratings between those which employed the 'Practice, practice, practice' formula of the original joke and those which used an original combination (practice: difficulty=1.82, humour=4.41; non-practice: difficulty=1.85, humour=4.00). However, jokes which used a Japanese destination recorded both

Table 6: Student 'Carnegie Hall joke' average difficulty and humour ratings by content group

		responses	difficulty	humour
all responses ¹		32	2.08	4.28
punch line	triple	27	1.83	4.26
	non-triple	5	3.40	4.40
	practice	17	1.82	4.41
	triple non-practice	10	1.85	4.00
destination (country)	Japan	27	1.93	4.37
	non-Japan	5	2.90	3.80
destination (theme)	sports	16	1.88	4.31
	arts	6	2.00	4.33
	education	4	1.50	4.75
	other	6	3.08	3.83

¹ Here and in Table 7, figures for the 'all responses' category are 'per-response' ratings, whereas figures cited in the first paragraphs of 5.1 and 5.2 are 'per-rater' ratings; these are marginally different.

a lower difficulty rating ($1.93 < 2.90$) and a higher humour rating ($4.37 > 3.80$) than the five jokes that used a destination outside Japan. The six jokes whose destination was not clearly sports, arts or education-related received noticeably higher than average ratings for difficulty (3.08) and lower than average ratings for humour (3.83), but it should be noted that there is considerable overlap between this group, the group of jokes using a destination outside Japan, and the group not using the triple punch line, with two jokes appearing in all three groups, and a further four appearing in two of the groups. Table 6 summarizes the average difficulty and humour ratings for each content group.

5.2 Student ‘doctor joke’ ratings

The 20 student ‘doctor jokes’ were peer-rated, giving 39 ratings at an average of 1.95 ratings per student. Five students rated three jokes each, 10 students rated two jokes, four students rated only one joke, and one student wrote but did not rate a joke. Each student gave an average rating for humour of 4.46 (between ‘funny’ and ‘very funny’), with the original ‘doctor joke’ having been rated at 2.80 (between ‘not very funny’ and ‘mildly funny’), an increase of 59%. The average difficulty rating for student jokes was 2.11, compared to 3.27 for the original joke (from between ‘so-so’ and difficult’ to between ‘easy’ and ‘so-so’), a decrease of 35%.

Both in terms of difficulty and humour, student ratings of their peers’ jokes showed less variation than their ratings of the original joke, with student difficulty sd (0.43) < original difficulty sd (0.70); and student humour sd (also 0.43) < original humour sd (0.56). There were no strong correlations between the ratings of the original and the student ‘doctor jokes’, nor between the difficulty and humour ratings of either joke.

There was little discernable difference in ratings between jokes that used a ‘start - ing’ structure (difficulty=2.25, humour=4.33) and those that did not (difficulty=2.04, humour=4.50); nor between those jokes which clearly fit the ‘I wouldn’t’ pattern (difficulty=2.13, humour=4.50), those which suggested a ‘you won’t’ interpretation (difficulty=2.13, humour=4.25), and those which were categorised as ‘both/unclear’ (difficulty=2.00, humour=4.50). Although the small

Table 7: Student ‘doctor joke’ average difficulty and humour ratings by structure and content group

		responses	difficulty	humour
all responses		20	2.10	4.45
verb structure	start -ing	6	2.25	4.33
	non-start -ing	14	2.04	4.50
interpretation	I wouldn’t	12	2.13	4.50
	you won’t	4	2.13	4.25
	both/unclear	4	2.00	4.50
content	plant	4	2.13	4.50
	Harry Potter	3	2.33	4.50
	other	13	2.04	4.42

number of identifiable content groups makes comparison in this area difficult, content also seems to have little discernable effect on ratings. Table 7 summarizes the average difficulty and humour ratings for each structure and content group.

6 Discussion

6.1 Factors affecting difficulty ratings

According to the ratings awarded, students found their peers' modifications of both the 'Carnegie Hall joke' and the 'doctor joke' to be not only less difficult, but also funnier than the original jokes. In the absence of further, qualitative data, it is only possible to speculate as to the reasons for this, but a number of explanations can be suggested.

In terms of linguistic difficulty, and especially given the limited scope allowed for variation, it does not appear that student output was actually significantly easier in the case of either joke. Table 8 shows a comparison of the main linguistic features of the original jokes and student variations.

Table 8: Linguistic features of input jokes and student output

	tokens	word forms	lexical density	Flesch Reading Ease score	Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level	Oxford 3000
Carnegie Hall joke	26	22	85%	50	9	100%
student Carnegie Hall joke average	25	21	84%	46	10	99%
doctor joke	19	17	89%	64	7	95%
student doctor joke average	18	16	88%	58	7	99%

Instead, decreased perception of difficulty may be attributable most obviously to increased familiarity with the material: the action of peer-rating a joke provided at least a third, and in some cases a fourth encounter with the joke pattern, basic linguistic structure and some of the vocabulary involved, after reading the original joke for the first time, and after each student had constructed their own version. Another possible reason may be greater familiarity with content schema, particularly in the case of the more culturally-specific 'Carnegie Hall joke' (although this showed a less dramatic decrease in its difficulty rating, albeit from a higher initial difficulty rating): as noted in 5.1 above, difficulty ratings for Japan-set variations of the joke were lower than variations set outside Japan.

6.2 Factors affecting humour ratings

More familiar content schema may also account for the higher humour ratings of the student productions. The modification required in the 'Carnegie Hall joke' directed students to change the content of certain 'slots' (location, destination, punch line) in the joke 'framework', rather than

the overall framework of the joke itself, retaining the linguistic ambiguity of the original. The higher humour rating of the Japan-set variations would seem to support the possibility that content is an important factor. However, results from the 'doctor joke' are not so easy to interpret. Jokes that successfully emulated the 'I wouldn't' pattern of the original did not score much higher in terms of humour than those that seemed to be based on an incorrect 'you won't' interpretation of the original, which modifies - although it does not fundamentally transform - the humorous potential of the joke somewhat.

Affective factors involved in the process of peer-rating certainly cannot be discounted as an explanation for higher humour ratings. It is intuitively highly plausible that feelings of sympathy, learner-solidarity and perhaps even a certain amount of peer-pressure may have influenced ratings, which were obtained during face-to-face encounters with the teller/writer of each joke, whereas the original jokes were effectively authorless. Out of a total of 74 ratings of student 'Carnegie Hall' and 'doctor' jokes, there was only one rating of 'not funny' and none of 'not very funny', whereas 45 ratings of the original jokes produced five 'not very funny' ratings, although no 'not funny' ratings. It was not possible to control for affective factors during the class activities themselves, although blind-rating of a selection of student texts, either by another group of learners or - in combination with rating of the original jokes texts - by a group of native speakers of English, might shed light on the extent to which humour ratings are a factor of intrinsic, textual and humorous properties of a joke, and to which affective considerations play a part.

7 Conclusion

In addition to the lack of blind-rating and of qualitative data that might shed a clearer light on the reasons behind the rating differences between original and student-modified jokes, this study is limited in size, in terms both of the number of participants and of ratings for each joke, and of the amount of humorous material under investigation, with the two input texts totalling only 45 words, and generating only 1159 words of student output.

As a pedagogical activity, judged by Gardner's 'purposeful and not merely entertaining' criterion, the success of this particular attempt to bring humorous materials into the EFL classroom is difficult to judge. Three students in C1 chose to answer the textbook's 'Can you tell a joke in English?' question, using new material, during the end-of-semester review - an event unprecedented in the writer's eight previous class uses of the same textbook/review activity without the additional provision of humorous texts - but this was not repeated with C2. The presence of a certain amount of misunderstanding of the grammatical complexity of one of the jokes, and the lack of impact that this seems to have had on ratings, may suggest that student assessments of peer output may not be entirely objective or reliable. Nevertheless, learners do seem to have been able to create their own English jokes, through modification of input materials, that their peers said they found both funnier and less difficult than the originals.

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