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**Humor and Parodies in the  
Foreign Language Classroom**

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**Humor and Parodies in the  
Foreign Language Classroom**

**by**

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**Report**

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

**Master of Arts**

**The University of Texas at Austin**

**May 2010**

## Dedication

I dedicate this report not only to my grandfather, Bruno Zwietasch, but also to my mentors and advisors, Zsuzsanna Abrams and Per Urlaub, who supported me and my project from the very beginning, as well as to all students and teachers, who eagerly work to fulfill their learning goals and educational philosophies:

Humor shall be an objective and strategy to enrich humanity's stores of knowledge.

*“Two people are laughing together, say at a joke. One of them has used certain somewhat unusual words and now they both break into a sort of bleating. That might appear very extraordinary to a visitor coming from quite a different environment.”*

- Ludwig Wittgenstein

## **Abstract**

### **Humor and Parodies in the Foreign Language Classroom**

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This paper examines the use of humor in the foreign language classroom. Humor is an essential part of culture and a sociolinguistic phenomenon that speaks to the uniqueness of a language and culture. Thus, I argue that an application of humor as an educational objective as well as an educational strategy in the foreign language classroom is valuable in order to lower learners' anxiety and to foster language learning through an increase in culture and humor competences and critical thinking skills.

First, I define humor and explore its linguistic functions as well as psychological features and effects that need to be understood to make humor an integral part of a foreign language learning setting. My theoretical research is primarily based on Raskin's Semantic Script-based Theory of Humor and general theories of incongruity and ambiguity. I further illustrate the effects of using humor in the classroom with psychological research and Krashen's affective filter

theory. I then relate the effects of humor to the *National Standards of Foreign Language Learning* (1996).

Eventually in a case study I demonstrate how parodies, as a specific type of humor, can be implemented in the foreign language environment. This is done through the examination of the German film parody “7 Zwerge – Männer allein im Wald” and it supports my argument that humor deserves an autonomous place in foreign language education as an educational objective and strategy. Finally, I discuss pedagogical recommendations. This paper explores the opportunities and effects of an incorporation of humor in the foreign language classroom.

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## INTRODUCTION

Humor is an important aspect of language, culture, and a distinct part of personal identity. Therefore, any foreign language curriculum that intends to help learners develop real-life language skills and cultural competence must integrate humor as an essential aspect of its pedagogy (Davis & Farina, 1970; Bell, 2007). In order to incorporate humor into this more authentic curriculum, educators have to understand relevant theories of humor, and they need to be aware of cultural scripts that guide the production and interpretation of humor. The *National Standards of foreign language learning* (1996) established five main principles that should guide foreign language teaching in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The “5 Cs” (Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons and Communities) are its main principles, and each help to make a case for the use of humor in the classroom. Even beyond linguistic and cultural benefits, however, humor can also contribute to the affective experience of students in foreign language classrooms as psychological studies demonstrate (Deckers, 1998; Lefcourt & Thomas, 1998). This paper will connect these specific points. It will link theories of humor to the *National Standards*, then discuss affective aspects of humor in second or foreign language pedagogy, and will finally offer a case study using a particular form of humor – parody – in a German language classroom to illustrate these connections.

First I will give theoretical background on what humor is. I will base this on two categories in which I look at humor in language and humor in culture. I explain language-based humor through Raskin’s Semantic Script-based Theory of Humor (SSTH), the role

of background knowledge, ambiguity and incongruity. I examine culture-based humor, which targets the importance of differences and similarities in humor appreciation and perception in cultural contexts (Raskin 1985; Chapman & Foot 1976; Anderson, Joag-Dev & Steffensen, 1979).

Then I illustrate that humor can be used in the language classroom as an educational objective as well as an educational strategy. I will refer to the *National Standards* to explain humor as an educational objective. Here I will especially analyze humor in context with the *Standards*' "5 Cs". Humor as an educational strategy draws on Krashen's affective filter theory (1982) that supports my argument for the application and implementation of humor in the classroom in terms of analyzing learner anxiety.

Finally, I demonstrate in a case study how to implement humor in the classroom environment. I employ humor through a parody, a specific type of humor that will lead to the development of skills for comparing, for example American humor and German humor theories, appreciation or perception, critical thinking and evaluating sources (Hughes, 1986). I use parody in direct connection to audio-visual material, popular culture and literature, which further plays an important role for, what I call, a multi-literacy development (Kuttenberg 2003; Nünning 1999; Trier, 2006). I study the effects of the German film parody "7 Zwerge – Männer allein im Wald"<sup>1</sup> (Eilert, Knorr, Pfarr, Unterwaldt & Waalkes, 2004) directed by Sven Unterwaldt and Otto Waalkes which mocks the original German fairytale by the Grimm Brother's, "Schneewittchen und die

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<sup>1</sup> *Trans.* Seven Dwarfs – Men Alone in the Forrest

Sieben Zwerge”<sup>2</sup>, which further uses elements of popular culture. Finally, I will give pedagogical recommendations that need to be taken into account when using parodies, and when applying humor as an educational objective and strategy.

The origin of this work is rooted in my own experience as a student as well as a foreign language teacher. I am familiar with diverse teaching styles and grew up in a strictly organized secondary education institution, a Catholic private school, which did not allow emotional expression in most cases. I found that I was more successful and less anxious in classes that were not as strictly organized and allowed for emotional expression and creative relations to a topic. I believe humor is a form of creativity and thus should not be excluded from the classroom. Further, from my experience as a language teacher, humor is not only engaging for students, but keeps them interested and enhances their abilities to think critically. They show more interest, start making connections and comparisons, and begin to question more in order to understand a joke or humorous situation (Chapman&Foot, 1976; Bergin, 1999). It is, however, difficult to measure how much they actually benefit from the application of humor in a classroom setting.

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<sup>2</sup> *Trans.* Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs

## **HUMOR IN THE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM**

The theoretical foundation of this paper is based on research that has been conducted in theoretical semantics and linguistics (Raskin 1985; Attardo 2001) as well as psychology and sociology (Chapmann&Foot, 1976; Davis et al., 1970; Deckers 1998). These theories create an understanding of how humor can be created and thus be utilized in foreign language contexts from a language-based as well as from a culture-based perspective.

First, I define humor, which is followed by the establishment of a theoretical background. Here I will look at humor from a linguistic angle with a primary focus on Raskin's Semantic Script-based Theory (SSTH). Further, I present the importance of theories that discuss incongruity, ambiguity, and world knowledge. Next I will examine the cultural basis of humor. Finally, I argue that humor should be used as an educational objective, because it ties the studies of the foreign language immediately to the study of a foreign culture. In the final part, I support this argument in evaluating the use of humor as an educational strategy.

### **What is Humor?**

A universal definition of humor has not yet been found, because humor is a complex construct that is evaluated from different perspectives and with different underlying questions. In this paper, humor "refers to laugh-or-smile provoking stimuli of a good-natured sort, that is, likely to be minimally offensive to the object of the laughter

or smile. It is playful poking of fun with the sole aim of amusement” (Gruner cited in Chapman & Foot, 1976, p. 288). According to Guy (2000) humor is closely connected to feelings and the release of emotion, which can serve as a connector and can if appropriately utilized, for example in humorous language play, cause positive effect.

Humor is not only language-based, but also culture-based. Humor offers a way to communicate within and between cultures. Bell (2007) calls it a social construct that is an essential part for intercultural communication as well as a personalized feature of identity, which implies a discussion on humor competence, and humor understanding and appreciation.

In the following two sections I use Raskin’s linguistic approach to explain humor in language and further relate humor to incongruity theories. In addition, I look at humor in culture, which is diverse and dynamic. Eventually I define humor on this basis, as a tool that can be useful for the foreign language classroom. Figure 1 visualizes my claim that humor as an educational objective as well as an educational strategy will enhance language competence (LC), cultural competence (CC), humor competence (HC) and critical thinking (CT).

$$\mathbf{H = \uparrow LC / CC / HC / CT}$$

**Figure 1: The effect of humor in the foreign language classroom**

## Language and Humor

Humor is part of a language and most times expressed in situations of verbal communications. Humor is both intentionally and unintentionally used in communicational situations, which makes it an important part of language and shows the necessity of analyzing humor in terms of language. In the following section I explain humor in language, and therefore humor in language learning environments, through the concepts of scripts and incongruities.

Before outlining the theories, the terms “script”, “frame” and “world knowledge” have to be defined. The terms script and frame are used in psychology as well as linguistics. Linke, Nussbaumer and Portmann (1996) explain that “[m]it den Konzepten ‘frame’ und ‘script’ (...) wird versucht, die Verknüpfung von Weltwissen bzw. Handlungswissen mit den in einem Text sprachlich vermittelten Informationen nachzuvollziehen<sup>3</sup>“ (p. 235).

This connection can only be established if reference can be made to the understanding of world knowledge. Frame refers to the knowledge that links one single word to a more complex whole, because of a given knowledge that *frames* a word. For example the word “castle” automatically attaches the expectations one has about how it has to look like (i.e. big, old building), or who lives in it (i.e. king and queen).

Scripts on the other hand refer to process-related knowledge, for example that a queen and a king, who live in a castle, are powerful and rule a certain region or have

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<sup>3</sup> *Trans.* “with the ‘frame’ and script’ concepts it is attempted to reconstruct the links between world knowledge and process-related knowledge respectively with a text’s negotiated information”

representative functions. A script is non-verbal (Linke et al. 1996). Scripts are also never fully complete. They are viable, can – by revision – become more stable over time and be manipulated.

However, the cognitive structure is eventually internalized by the speaker; it comprises how an entity is structured, what its parts are, how activity is done, or how relationships are organized, for example. These are mainly pieces of prototypical information on an entity that is partly socially and partly culturally determined. The information is more or less equivalent to the lexical meaning and related and evoked by the lexical items.

For example, if someone knows the original German version of the fairytale “Schneewitchen und die sieben Zwerge” by the Grimm Brother’s, he or she creates frames and scripts around this based on what he or she knows about the story, the characters, the setting, among other features. If the same person is being confronted with a different version of the fairytale, he or she will realize that his or her frames and scripts do not match. They can clash and create an emotional response. Raskin (1985) established an understanding of scripts and put it into relation to humor in his Semantic Script-based Theory of Humor (SSTH). His SSTH is based on scripts and represents the complex organization of information about an entity in a given language.

Figure 2 offers an example of a semantic script, based on “Schneewittchen und die sieben Zwerge.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The connection to the fairytale “Schneewittchen und die sieben Zwerge” is systematically established, since it is the topic of the parody I later use for the case study.

<b>"Dwarf"</b>	
Subject:	[+non-human] [+ fairytale figure]
Activity:	= daily search for gold and ore = find Snow White in their bed = let Snow White stay > she cooks for them > she cleans for them > they save Snow White's life twice
Place:	= live in the forrest = small house
Time:	= in the past
Condition:	= seven dwarfs, small, chubby, big noses wear pointy hats

Figure 2: The lexical script for dwarf (referring to the Brothers Grimm original version)

Figure 2 shows the lexical script for “dwarf” in the context of the original German version of the fairytale “Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs”. If considered as a subject, the single word “dwarf” triggers connections to the knowledge cluster one has about the dwarfs in the fairytale. The dwarf’s subject indicators are labeled as [+ non-human] and as [+ fairytale figure], “small”, “cute”, “miner”. Further, the activities we relate to “dwarf” are ordered chronologically; the search for gold and ore, finding Snow White, and allowing her to stay under certain conditions, such as the idea that she cooks for them. The script further references place, time and condition; that they live in the forest, that it has taken place a long time ago, and that there are seven dwarfs in the fairytale.

The understanding of scripts is important in order to examine how humor functions through language. Specifically it is script variability which is often connected



to humor creation. A regular pattern of a script can be interrupted, i.e. if a script path or track is changed intentionally or by accident.

One way humor can come about is when subject indicators and/or other indicators of a lexical script are replaced. For example, this happens if a tall man introduces himself as “Mister Dwarf”. Here the subject indicators are replaced by [+ human] [+ man]. As a result, there is a clash between the world knowledge one connects with “dwarf” and the reality one faces. The clash is further emphasized by the replacement of “small” with “tall.” The change in meaning causes incongruity because “dwarf” and “tall” contradict each other and they do not work together in a logical or familiar sense.

Scripts, world knowledge, and possible incongruity, between what is expected and what really occurs need to be taken into consideration when analyzing and discussing humor. World knowledge is the personalized knowledge an individual has at the time of perception; in my work it relates predominantly to the perception of humor which Raskin (1985) includes in his SSTH. He points out, that humor perception and appreciation are very subjective, therefore a part of personal identity and distinguishes between information affecting linguistic as well as cultural phenomena.

Raskin lists two criteria that have to be met, so that humor can function. A text must be compatible fully or at least in part with two different scripts. Furthermore, those two scripts with which the text is compatible have to be opposites. This also means that two scripts with which a part of the text is compatible overlap in part or as a whole within the text. Thus, if someone is presented with a text, Raskin’s SSTH can be utilized to determine whether it is semantically well-formed, and I argue that the same applies for

the viewing of images or the understanding of a spoken word. Then humor can be identified.

Raskin connects incongruity in scripts further to ambiguity. For him ambiguity is one of the major problems in the analysis of language. He states that a native speaker has “a naïve but amazingly successful natural disambiguation mechanism” (Raskin, 2008). According to Raskin, this highly successful mechanism determines whether a meaning of a word is suitable in a certain situation or not. Usually a speaker chooses a word that seems appropriate and follows its meaning and network. In case of an inappropriate word selection, the speaker’s subconscious becomes aware of the ambiguity and initiates a backtracking process. The speaker goes back to the source of his or her incorrect interpretation of a word’s meaning to correct it. In certain situations, however, ambiguity is oftentimes intentionally applied, to create humor:

[In] the ontological semantics of humor, an ongoing search for intended ambiguity must take place. One advantage over the scripts that ontological semantics has is a built-in opposedness of the handful of properties, such as normal/abnormal, real/unreal, good/bad, etc., on which most jokes are based. (Raskin 2008, p. 11)

When intentionally creating humor, an ongoing search for deliberate ambiguity takes place. In terms of the humor perception psycholinguistic research has found that ambiguity is similar to incongruity and its resolution. Both are main aspects in determining the perception of humor. Therefore

[is] a situation (...) perceived as humorous if (a) the perceiver detects an incongruity in the situation (...) and (b) the person is able to resolve the

incongruity, so that the situation is seen to be sensible when viewed in the appropriate way. (Pepicello&Weisberg, 1983, p. 73)

Incongruities are the heart for many humorous situations or texts with intertextual character not only from a language-based but also from a culture-based perspective of humor.

To reiterate, language enables us to verbally create incongruities or ambiguities. For example, by interrupting or overlapping scripts. However, language and humor further stand in direct connection to the world knowledge, circumstances, and personal development of an individual and the culture in which he or she grows up and lives. The next section deals with the difficulties of humor as a culture-based phenomenon.

### **Culture and Humor**

In this part the relationship between humor and culture is being analyzed with reference to the *National Standards* and the “5 Cs.” Learning a second or foreign language ideally goes hand in hand with the learning and comparing of cultures and, as I argue, humor. A learner of a second or foreign language is usually experienced in how humor is created and how it is used and how it functions in his native language and culture. This may be an advantage if the learner is aware that language learning is tied to the learning of a culture. Language conveys culture and humor first hand and learners not only need to be aware of this in order to communicate but also to understand and be willing to accept differences specifically in humor, culture and language, in the situation

of learning a second or foreign language and when applying it for example in a foreign country where that newly learned language is spoken.

The aim of the *National Standards* is that the “5 Cs” should be equally incorporated in the foreign language classroom so that students will have the “opportunities to explore, develop, and use communication strategies, learning strategies, critical thinking skills, and skills in technology, as well as the appropriate elements of the language system and culture” (p. 32). Adding humor to the “5 Cs” will be beneficial for the students. I explore this by looking at all “5 Cs” separately.

- a) *Communication*. The standards point out the interrelatedness of language and culture through communication. As I have argued before, humor should be an essential part of this as well. The language classroom is the place where humor creates the opportunity for students to play with the language in order to test and strengthen their communication skills. It is the goal that the learner will be able to use the language appropriately in a real-life setting, therefore the learner “must learn comparable cultural constructs and behaviors to communicate effectively in newly acquired languages” (Standards, p. 39). Humor is a cultural construct and behavior and a resulting humor competence in relation to communication skills is the goal.
- b) *Cultures*. Humor is a part of culture, because it can be part of cultural practices, cultural products and cultural perspectives in a society. Through the study of a foreign language, one has a better access to these cultural elements that create a Culture Competence. Referring back to figure 1, I argue, that the use of humor

can increase this competence. As stated above ambiguity and incongruity are basic parts of the construction of humor. If someone does not grasp this in a situation when he or she uses or is confronted with such it can lead to cultural misunderstandings “born of a lack of adequate information, understanding and sensitivity [and] eventually lead to negative reactions to members of different cultures” (p. 48). The aim of the Standards, therefore, is to avoid cultural misunderstandings. Students’ critical thinking is linked to the understanding of differences. For cultures this means that cultural practices and perspectives have to be approached critically.

- c) *Connections*. When learning a foreign language it is common to make connections to the things he or she already knows. This again speaks to world knowledge which further plays an essential role for the understanding and creation of humor. This creates a broader learning experience and if humor is the target within this experience the language competence is enhanced in direct correlation to the enhancement of the humor competence. In fact “concepts presented in one class are the basis for continued learning in the foreign language” (p. 54) and therefore, using humor as an educational objective connects language learning to the expansion of one’s world knowledge which in result is strengthened by connections and leads to an increase in the language competence.
- d) *Comparisons*. This goes hand in hand with connections. When a learner makes connections he or she is sometimes forced to compare first. Humor is one construct that deserves comparison. Language competence increases “by

discovering different patterns among language systems and cultures” (p. 57). Humor is dynamic and different not only on individual levels but especially on cultural levels. Furthermore the *Standards* propose “struggling to express particular meanings in a second language brings awareness of the nature of language itself” (p. 57). In connection with humor, I argue, we also strengthen cultural competence because students become more critical of their own as well as of other cultures, cultural variation and begin a reflected comparison process.

- e) *Communities*. If learners of a foreign language have access to communities in which they can use their newly gained competences, they are likely to see the benefits that result from their study. This way, students will be more self-confident and able to manage situations in real life where they need to use a foreign language. Students strengthen their abilities to understand and apply their humor, language and culture competences as well as their critical thinking. The competence finally enables a person to become a meaningful part of a community in which humor appreciation is an important pre-requisite.

To sum it up, humor implicitly relates to all “5 Cs” of the *National Standards*, which further state that “Language and Communication are at the heart of human experience” (p. 7). Suls (1983) further argues that producing and understanding one’s native language are equally instantaneous and effortless like the cognitive work to produce effective humor. This further justifies the argument of granting humor a special treatment and appreciation in teaching and the claim for humor as an educational objective.

## **Humor as an Educational Objective**

Humor relates directly to all the “5 Cs” of the *National Standards*. Looking at them separately underlined the importance humor plays for all of them. Humor is a part of communication, but it is a distinct form of it. Humor is highly dynamic within cultures and in comparison of cultures. This can be especially problematic in intercultural environments and for needed communication. Intercultural environments are in fact the reality for most language teachers nowadays in the United States, especially in bigger universities and internationally oriented colleges. This is closely connected to globalization and migration that is taking place world-wide. Incorporating humor into the language classroom enhances the functions and the effects of the “5 Cs”, therefore incorporating humor as an educational objective is a logical consequence.

In that context Kramsch (2002) argues that “there is hardly a term that raises more hope for international understanding and peaceful transaction among people, yet is more difficult to define than ‘intercultural communication’” (p. 275). Intercultural communication is a broad term that comprises and connects to different entities. Raskin already uses the term “humor competence” (Raskin in Ruch, p. 96), which every individual is provided with, but which is diverse and individual. I further argue that the education of such humor competence plays an important role in intercultural settings. This is why it needs to be incorporated in teaching in form of a cultural practice that leads to the forming of an intercultural humor competence.

Humor eventually opens the door to connect and to provide access to inclusive awareness and understanding of a language and a culture ideally in relation to the first

language and culture of a learner. In the introduction of the *National Standards* it is briefly mentioned, that “[i]rony, humor, satire and other rich textures of prose are revealed at their deepest level only to those familiar with both the language and culture” (p. 12). However, it does not mention humor to be a learning objective itself. In fact the Standards are voluntary and foster discussion on rationales for language education while they at the same time aim to target immediate needs of teachers and learners. Thus, I argue for humor as a learning objective.

Another important aspect that I want to tie to my argument is to also implement humor as an educational strategy. In the following section I explain, based on Krashen’s affective filter hypothesis and psychological approaches, why humor must be applied as a learning strategy that creates a language learning environment of lower stress and thus, anxiety and integrates a rather engaging and challenging atmosphere.

### **Humor as an Educational Strategy**

Humor should not only be content of the teaching but should also be an educational strategy. In general humor can help to lower anxiety while it creates a fun atmosphere and helps students to feel more comfortable and to engage in the learning process. Studies have been done that argue for the benefits of humor as an educational strategy (Frymier, Smith, Wanzer & Wojtaszczyk, 2006); Bell 2007, 2009). In fact, humor research shows that “in certain circumstances humor has been found to alter the emotional consequences of stressful events” (Lefcourt & Thomas, p.185). In psychological approaches laughter as an expression of humor appreciation has been



analyzed and results show that humor has effect on anxiety and stress. In applied linguistics Krashen's affective filter hypothesis clearly speaks in favor of the application of humor in the classroom. Lin (2008) has proven in her study in Taiwan that Krashen's theory has a positive influence on students' motivation and their engagement in the language learning process. This speaks to the three main affective variables Krashen relates to

- (1) *Motivation.* Performers with high motivation generally do better in second language acquisition (usually, not always, "integrative")
- (2) *Self-confidence.* Performers with self-confidence and a good self-image tend to do better in second language acquisition
- (3) *Anxiety.* Low anxiety appears to be conducive to second language acquisition, whether measured as personal or classroom anxiety (Krashen, 1982, p. 31).

I propose, that humor lowers the affective filter and helps student to be less anxious. This is because humor creates laughter, and laughter creates community and thus alleviates tensions, which often occur in classroom settings. There are multiple causes, for tensions to build up; they can root in personal or interpersonal difficulties or in discrepancies between the student(s) and the instructor. This needs further examination in concrete studies to prove this claim; however, it has been found that humor can have a negative effect on individuals who suffer from depression, which needs to be considered when implementing humor (Lefcourt & Thomas, 1998).

Humor as an educational strategy will further support students' performance. The classroom setting is enjoyable, while the teacher mediates the humor. We should not forget that the humor comes directly from the fact that it is part of the educational

objective and thus, can be directly connected to its use as an educational strategy. Both go hand in hand and are interrelated and connected. They are in a way codependent, if aiming for the best effect of humor application in the classroom (Bell, 2009).

Finally in connection to the points previously mentioned, anxiety decreases and the affective filter is not as strong so that a student is able to acquire better competences. This is why Krashen (1982) argues that the "filter hypothesis implies that our pedagogical goals should not only include supplying comprehensible input, but also creating a situation that encourages a low filter" (p. 32). The educational objective and strategy have positive influence on the students. They are entertained and eventually develop emotional responses, which will help to relate and reinforce to remember the material better.

The next section will analyze this process from a humor perspective. I will look at parodies as a concrete type of humor that can be utilized in the foreign language classroom; specifically I will offer an example of a parody of "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs". The discussion supports both ideas of humor as an educational objective and strategy, and will further be illustrated in a case study in which I explain parameters through the use of a film parody in the language classroom.

## **CASE STUDY**

In the following case study I analyze the particular effects of using parodies in the foreign language classroom. First, I outline the meaning of parody in its relation to humor and further illustrate the application of humor in the German film parody “7 Zwerge – Männer allein im Wald” (2004). I put it into context with the previously explained aspects of humor in language and culture and exemplify how humor is being created and what benefits result for an application of humor in the foreign language classroom.

### **Particular Effects of Using Parodies in the Foreign Language Classroom**

A Parody is a distinct form of humor and its definition is dynamic. This means, that it is changing like time and in accordance to history. Rose (1993) examined the historical development of parodies which, in my perception, is distinct from culture to culture. Hutcheon (2000) also designated a work on the theory of parody. Hutcheon argues for the nature and function of parody, which is complex and steadily changing. In this context she states that “parody is one of the major forms of modern self-reflexivity; it is a form of inter-art discourse” (p. 2). She talks about parody in relation to the original that is being mocked or ridiculed, which in a result shows differences to the original and puts it in a different frame work. This she calls “trans-contextualization” (p. 15) and according to Hutcheon the main focus of parody lies in irony which “participates in parodic discourse as a strategy” (p. 31) in form of “critical ironic distance” (p. 37).

Therefore, parody in this work is primarily defined as a trans- or inter-textual work that relates to an earlier form, for example an original text that has been turned into something new. In addition, the recipient is ideally familiar with the original text. He or she understands and relates the new form to the previous form, which is expressed for example in form of ridicule, mockery or satire. This, again, causes a comic effect. For my argument it is important to focus on parody's incongruous elements that are created by intertextuality. These can lie within the actual content as well as within linguistics and thus language itself. Moreover, parodies can be found in cultural and cross-cultural settings. Thus, humor in parodies partly roots in its incongruous elements. An incongruous element in a parody can occur through the change of something familiar into something obscure. I want to illustrate this on an example found in popular culture.

One example that incorporates parodist elements is Walt Disney's adaptation of the German Grimm fairytale "Hänsel und Gretel."<sup>5</sup> Walt Disney in general is an example for current American popular culture, and known for original characters like Mickey Mouse. In the history of Walt Disney cartoons, shorts, films etc. one can observe, that it is a common strategy to refer or use traditional (foreign) fairytales to turn them into something that the present, modern and different culture in a "multicultural USA" can relate to, and that eventually sells on a capitalistic market.

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<sup>5</sup> *trans.* Hansel and Gretel

This is done, for example in the mentioned Disney animated short from 1999<sup>6</sup>. The adaptation of the fairytale shows Minnie Mouse and Mickey Mouse trapped in a witch's house. The story is based on the Grimm fairytale, however, there are changes that aim to entertain and cause humorous effects. For example the framing story of the original is left out and Mickey and Minnie are not brother and sister, who were left in the forest, but a couple looking to have a good time. This is one aspect that classifies the short as a parody, because it mocks an original source through scripts that clash and results in incongruous moments.

Assuming, that one is familiar with the original version of Hansel and Gretel, watching the Disney clip<sup>7</sup> will cause incongruities. First of all, "Hansel and Gretel" are labeled [+ non-human] [+ Minnie Mouse] [+ Mickey Mouse]. The framing story is missing, and details concerning the scenario and the make-up of the witch's house have changed. For example the final of the story is changed entirely. In the original Hansel does not fall into the oven with the witch, Mickey Mouse, however, does. This strengthens the idea of Mickey and Minnie experiencing an adventure, in contrast to Hansel and Gretel who find back into life through the ending of the story.

Further, there is no language in the clip. This implies the importance of non-verbal communication, especially in regard to humor. The only literal information we receive is the name of the witch's cook book that reads "Roasted Mice". This causes

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<sup>6</sup> Walt Disney (1999) animated short: "Hansel and Gretel" on DVD "Mickey's House of Villains"  
<http://www.disneyshorts.org/years/1999/hanselandgretel.html>

<sup>7</sup> The clip can be found on [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com) entering "Hansel y Gretel".

humorous effect on the one hand because we usually do not eat Mice and therefore Roasting Mice is a script clash that is activated by our background knowledge. What we think we know is not compatible with what is presented to us.

Cultural incongruity in this example is shown mainly by visual references. The witch's house is not made out of gingerbread, a traditional German pastry, but rather out of candy canes, cotton candy and other American candy. It is incongruous to what we originally learned from the traditional fairytale, which will lead to a comparison of those two versions. Eventually this will cause critical thinking that brings the viewer to question why Walt Disney made these changes. In this context it is important to keep in mind the fact that times have changed – from Grimm to Disney to today.

The original and the parodied forms are incongruent and cause a humorous effect in the recipient. This kind of incongruity that is created in parodies, targets a clash of the original perception of an existing work and its later parodied counterpart (Farber, 2007). This can be cultural incongruence as well (Hughes in Valdes, 1986). This clip can be interpreted as a cultural adaptation, a humorous parody of the Grimm fairytale, or a critical response to American popular culture. In any case, it causes the informed viewer to relate and evaluate his or her emotional responses which are skills that need to be focused on in language learning environments as well. These cultural differences are illustrated in the script clusters in figure 4, in which I refer back to my main example, “Schneewittchen und die sieben Zwerge” and “Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs”. The cultural differences of the two fairytales have to be made clear first. For example, that in the original the Prince does not awaken Snow White with a kiss.

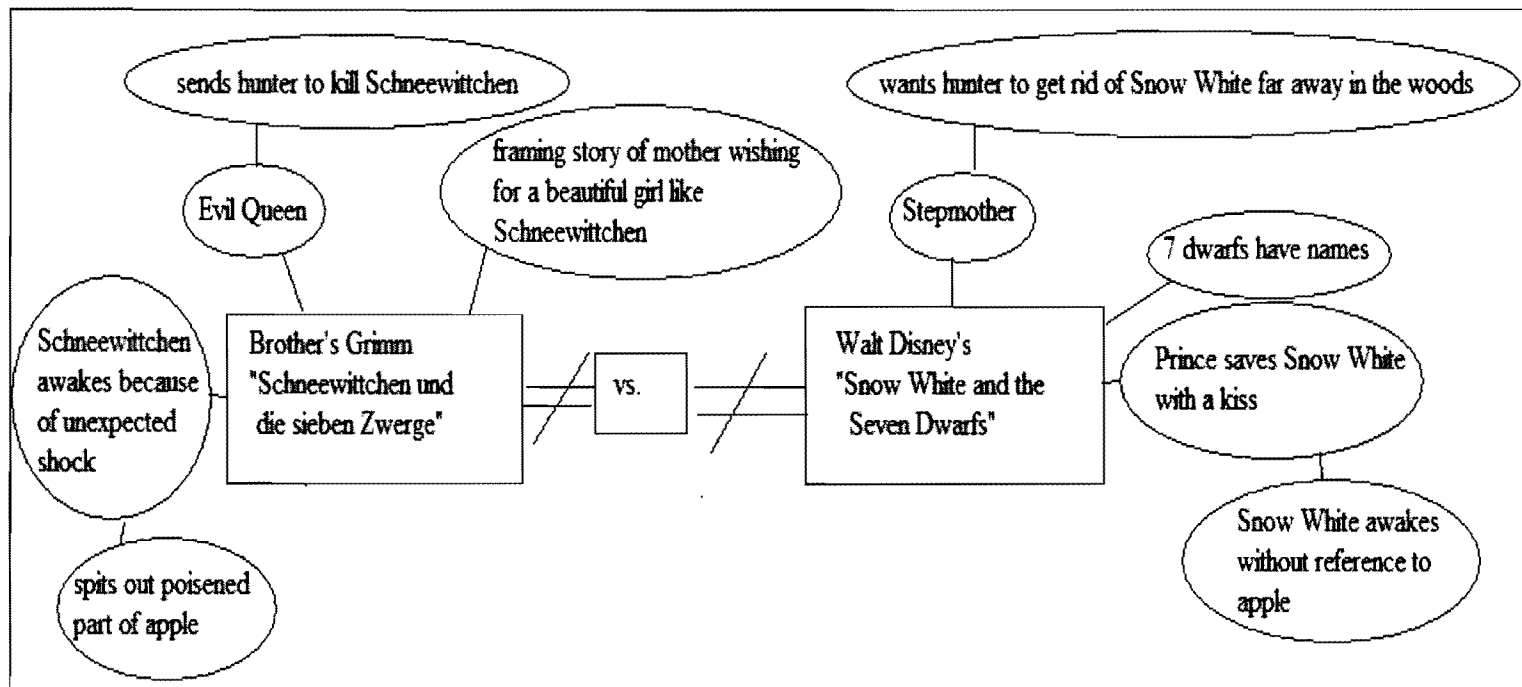


Figure 3: Cultural comparison of the Grimm Brothers' "Schneewittchen und die Sieben Zwerge" and Walt Disney's "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs"

After that, a comparison of the original story with the parody can be achieved that teaches popular culture through the parodied elements of the film. Using parodies as a learning device automatically connects humor as an educational objective to humor as an educational strategy. Students learn about humor and the application and perception of it, while they experience humor first hand. In the following, I want to illustrate the role of humor and parody in foreign language instruction through a didactization of Sven Unterwaldt and Otto Waalkes' film parody "7 Zwerge – Männer allein im Wald" (2004).

One example for using parodies in the language classroom for Undergraduate Students of German is the film parody with Otto Waalkes named "7 Zwerge." It is an adaptation of the traditional Grimm fairytale "Schneewittchen und die sieben Zwerge" and consists of further scenes that mock other Grimm fairytales, like "Rapunzel" or "Rotkäppchen."<sup>8</sup> The mocking is primarily achieved by matching the content with German popular culture and by meeting the demands of popular media. Using this film in the foreign language classroom can do both, serve humor as an educational objective as well as an educational strategy, while implicitly enhancing language, culture and humor competencies as well as critical thinking skills.

Otto Waalkes is one of Germany's best known comedians and popular figures in contemporary German media who has further played a major role in forming the current comedy scene in Germany. He is an exceptional example that shows German humor and German popular culture of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Waalkes has been present in German

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<sup>8</sup> *Trans.* Little Red Riding Hood.



television from the early beginnings of private television and also used the film business to promote his humor and comic talent. His humor often time incorporates parodies or stereotypes to create incongruous elements which cause an emotional response, such as laughter.

Waalkes writes comedy scripts and produces comedy primarily in Germany. He is further known as an actor and stand-up comedian. He not only produced, directed and played one of the main roles in the film “7 Zwerge” but further supported the marketing and promotion of the film which became the most successful film in Germany in the year of its release. In this film one is not only confronted with Otto Waalkes and his comedian talent but further bombarded with multiple popular figures from the German comedy scene. This way the movie not only relates to original German texts, the Grimm fairytales, which are being parodied, but also popular culture and popular figures who are taken right out of present German culture. In fact, these are contents that can be utilized for language and culture learning in the classroom and if sought enhances discussions and useful for content learning approaches.

There are advantages of using Waalkes’ film and the notion of humor. First of all, the trans-/intertextuality that is provided by the film refers to the Grimm fairytales which a) are authentic texts b) are useful for historical, comparative and cultural studies and c) can be utilized as a source for reading skill exercises. Second, watching a movie will support comprehension skills as well as it stimulates transfer and critical thinking if students are being previously prepared for the content. While watching and/or reading, students already make connections, comparisons and eventually relate and evaluate their

sources. Furthermore, writing and speaking activities can be easily developed to fit the content and to provide for the learners' goals. Learners vary so that it depends on the level or target group what type of exercise is going to be useful. These can range from transcribing a scene into a screenplay, and acting it out, or writing an alternative ending and videotape it to writing a love letter from one of the dwarves to Snow White.

Eventually, the students will be able to argue based on the text and the film when they compare the original to the parody. They learn to critically evaluate both, make connections and comparisons and eventually develop an understanding about humor theories and cultural differences in humor.

The fact that an application of humor encourages critical thinking means that the students independently realize that a subject has to be thoroughly looked at. Finally, the juxtaposition of humor differences, its application, perception and appreciation in culture put the issue of cultural stereotypes into discussion. In fact, stereotypes are often times presented in the form of a joke. These jokes can be evaluated and scrutinized, when humor theories are discussed.

Text and film serve as the authentic literary sources that the students are asked to "read." Various courses at American universities discuss the adaptations of Grimm fairytales by Disney. "Schneewitchen und die sieben Zwerge" is one of them. It can be expected that most students are familiar with the Disney adaptation "Snow White and the Seven dwarfs," which is the common American version of the fairytale. Someone from a different culture may know another variation, because the Grimm fairytales have been

translated into almost every language or because there is a similar tale in another original language.

The sources serve as the base for language learning. To take it a step further, comparing it to a parodist version in the target language and target culture will help to encourage the students to think not only in an historical but also in a contemporary context. They will eventually compare the storylines and analyze the intentions and cultural impact of the different version. What has been parodied and why? Is there a parody of “Snow White” in the USA? Are there other parodies that could be used for comparison? These questions are great discussion starters and engage the students immediately with the topic, the language and the culture.

Finally, students can be asked to analyze the humor used in this parody.

- Why and what is funny or comical?
- Where are the comic elements?
- Did script or content incongruities, which are based on pre-knowledge, cause them?
- How does humor work?

Bridging both will help the students to see and evaluate relations between content and culture as well as it will help them to understand concepts of humor and differences within. This enhances critical thinking and leads to positively produced learning success. In figure 4 I chose the dwarf scripts to demonstrate the differences that show the incongruities that cause humor.

Subject: [+non-human] [+ fairytale figure] (1)  
 Activity: = daily search for gold and ore  
           = find Snow White in their bed  
           = let Snow White stay       > she cooks for them  
   > she cleans for them  
   > they save Snow White's life twice  
 Place:    = live in the forrest  
           = small house  
 Time:     = in the past  
 Condition: = seven dwarfs, small, chubby, big noses  
             wear pointy hats

VS.

Subject: [+ human] [+ comedians] (2)  
 Activity: = **avoiding women**  
           = **let Snow White stay**  
           = **let Snow White redesign have half of the house**  
 Place:    = live in the forrest  
           = **normal siced house in the woods**  
 Time:     = **in the present**  
 Condition: = **seven dwarfs , tall, individual appearances**  
             wear pointy hats

Figure 4: Lexical scripts of Dwarf for the Grimm Brother's original version (1) and the film parody "7 Zwerge" (2). Differences are marked in bold in script (2)

The bolded attributes show the differences of the dwarfs in "7 Zwerge" to the original version by the Grimm Brothers. These differences cause humor because they are

unexpected and clash with the original idea one has about dwarfs, especially if one is familiar with the original story. Dwarfs in “7 Zwerge” are now human and not small, but of regular height. They still wear pointy hats, but this is another humor creating element, because humans usually do not wear pointy hats. This is a feature clearly associated with the encyclopedic knowledge (same as world knowledge) one has about dwarfs in its original sense.

## **PEDAGOGICAL RECOMMENDATIONS**

We learned that the use of humor and in specific the use of parodies in the classroom supports my argument that humor should be implemented as an educational objective and strategy, because it influences the development of critical thinking skills, enriches the classroom experience by lowering the affective responses, and catalyses language learning in direct connection to strengthening (inter)cultural and humor competencies.. Direct advantages for learners are not only the ability to understand and apply humor theory and to develop critical understanding for cultural differences in humor, but also the establishment of a relaxed and low-anxiety learning atmosphere. The teacher can step back and function as a mediator, who students turn to when they are in doubt, and whom they do not have to fear. However, this can only be achieved if it is done well.

Therefore, there are underlying factors that result from the use of humor as an educational strategy. If using a film, as described in here, students also need to be introduced to the appropriate content in film analysis, which becomes steadily a greater part in language studies. This is why a teacher needs to learn these skills first (Kuttenberg, 2003). The teacher is also responsible to initiate a positive learning space. If he is able to do so, he can apply humor to establish a fun learning environment that goes along with the topic and leaves the students with a positive experience.

However, the use of humor in the classroom may not be a choice for every instructional purpose, context or instructor. It can be very difficult to fake humor and the

instructor first of all needs to understand how humor works so that he or she can apply it and react to it appropriately. This is especially complicated when we consider the subjectivity of humor in individuals as a factor for personal identity. Further the instructor has to be careful to not fall into a role of a comedian. It is important to keep in mind that the primary role is to teach and to be a resource for the students who are ideally eager to learn and strive to apply newly gained skills in real life.

Thus the instructor's role is extremely important in communicative situations and the teaching style is one of the main points that will lead to learning success in students. If humor can be utilized it is a great tool, but it should not be forced. Nonetheless, using comedic material as presented in a text, film or clip discussed in class, the teacher, if unwilling or unable to apply humor appropriately, can simply rely on these sources to speak for them. Ideally, however, I argue that humor should not only be a part of course material but also of the teaching style of the teacher, if possible in a diverse way.

When talking about language development for beginners, easy language and easy context is important. However, the content should not be too easy, because it could hinder students to engage in the material, because they easily get bored or distracted. Referring to something that is already known in the native culture is always a good strategy to stir interest, especially in connection to cultural differences. Looking at children narratives is thus a good example for this.

In order to use parodies as an effective learning device, it is the teacher's task to make sure that students understand what parodies actually are, how they are created and what effect they can have. To introduce the topic of parodies, the teacher can also look at

its historical development and should provide students with concrete examples that most of the students are familiar with or will be able to understand.

To clarify students' pre-knowledge and humor appreciation the teacher can give a pre-survey asking the students humor-related questions. Doing such a survey serves various purposes; not only can the teacher generate an image of what kind of humor the students are familiar with but also what kinds of humor he should use. He can further get an image of the students' variables which differ from class to class and from student to student. Student bodies are often times very diverse (Valdes, 1986).

At the same time, using parodies and humorous material is not as easy as it may seem. Many articles (Bergin, 1999; Cook, 2000; Davies, 2009; Frymer et al., 2006; Hellmann, 2007; Hopper & Minchew, 2008) give examples and strategies, for example on classroom scenarios in which humor had been used successfully or unsuccessfully; however, it is the teacher's task to prepare well, to examine his/her students well and to create a common ground in order to apply humor, to use humor and to not "just give it a try."

Further, before using a specific parody in class, the teacher should conduct a "pre-parody-brainstorm unit." Students can be asked to define "parody" and give an example from their own experience. This underlines the fact that parody is not easily defined or categorized and dynamic in its use and purposes throughout history and today. "Associograms" serve as a meaningful tool to introduce a new topic and generate necessary vocabulary that the students will need in the foreign language to successfully work on following tasks. The "pre-unit" is coordinated by the instructor according to the



survey he conducted. This coherence further shows the students that they are just as important in the success of the class and that their opinions are respected.

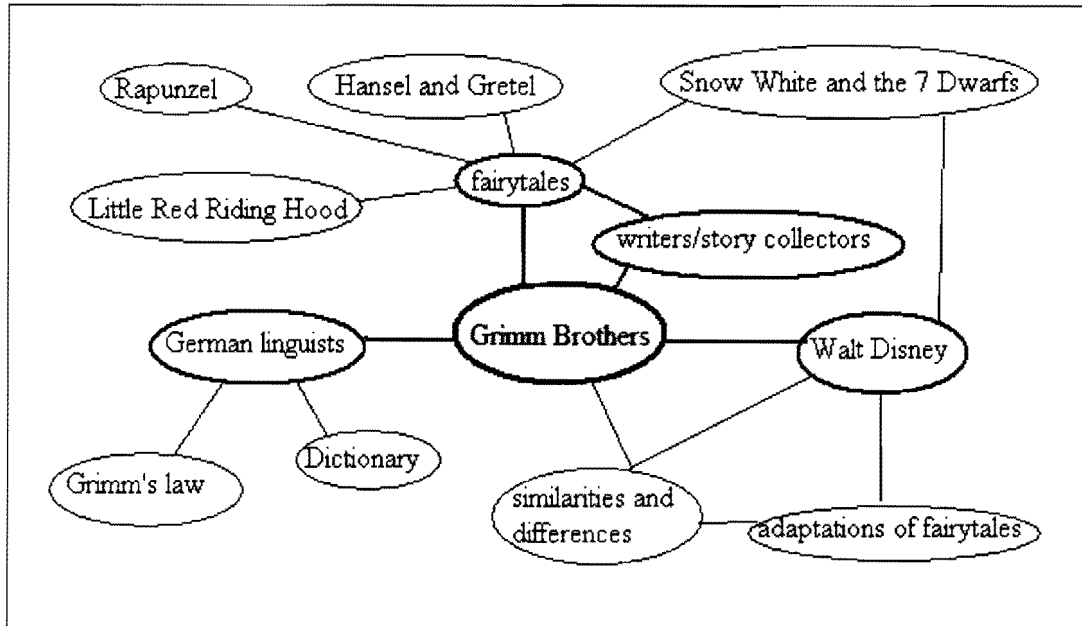


Figure 5: Associogram for "Grimm Brothers"

Figure 5 shows an example of an associogram for "Grimm Brothers." It illustrates the connections made with the name. It leads from fairytales to names of fairytales over to an American context which is established through Walt Disney. It can further point out differences of the fairytales, while some of the students may have knowledge about it and some may not. The goal is that after having taught humor through parodies as described above, the initial associogram (which can be much smaller than in the example if little or no previous knowledge is given) becomes more complex and is still individualized by the students. Associograms are in a way similar to frames and scripts that one has.

Methods to use parodies in a language classroom environment can differ as well. Connecting it to a culturally valuable themes will help to not only foster language and culture learning but furthermore strengthens students' skills in critical thinking and their application of newly gained knowledge.

Nonetheless, it is up to the teacher whether he or she persists on using conventional material, such as printed texts or multimedia material, like film or music. A combination of different types of media will help to keep students engaged and interested. Furthermore, switching from more serious or conventional authentic material or context to humorous or unconventional authentic material, will create a low anxiety environment in which the learning will eventually be more meaningful and the outcome stronger than in a regular language class in which memorizing of grammar tables and vocabulary is emphasized or in which there is a lack of intermediality or intertextuality.

To keep the balance between humor and seriousness as well as between the right amount and selection of material that is important. Material should not necessarily be subjective and only speak to a small group, but rather target a broader group. Further the instructor needs to consider differences in humor perception, appreciation and learner variables.

If we take the example of German studies, the teacher should brainstorm about what kind of media and what topic can be useful for what level or student body. Thinking about a beginning German class, in which few to no German language and culture skills are present, the material and topic chosen should aim to foster both: language

development and building cultural understanding and awareness. This can be achieved best if it is put into relation of a familiar field (Nadar, 1989; McCabe, 1998).

## CONCLUSION

In the field of applied linguistic many teaching models or methodologies and theories have been evaluated, created and transformed etc. In general a teacher's philosophy of teaching can differ for example from laissez-faire to authoritarian. It depends on the schooling received and the experiences a teacher has, which direction he or she will chose. In general it is up to the teacher what strategy he or she uses, but he or she is further required to comply with the curriculum and philosophy of the school he or she teaches at.

In the last few decades, the use of new technology has become more important in the classroom environment. Teachers implement computer-based learning tools, media taken from the Internet or the Internet as a tool itself, as well as multi-media material that have explicitly been made for the foreign language classroom. Part of the intention is to motivate and engage students more than by "just" using a textbook and material that is easily and fast outdated.

Alongside this development one can detect the expectation of students that teachers should take on the role of an entertainer. Entertainment includes the notion of humor. And looking back at the given examination one can see that humor must be an important part of all the "5 Cs" in order to strengthen for example an intercultural competence. Bell (2005) argues that humor, especially in connection with language play, should be addressed more "[p]recisely because humour remains difficult, even for

advanced L2 [Second Language] speakers, it may provide an important resource for L2 instruction (215).”

Nevertheless, it still needs to be evaluated how much or what kind of humor is adequate and suitable in a language class environment, because the discussion on the use of humor in the classroom is getting more interesting the more actual data is being collected (Frymier et al.,2006; Bell, 2005) . This is, however, a recent process that still needs to be strengthened. Garner argues for the trend that an application of humor as an educational strategy is not only positively received by students; faculty web pages and teaching philosophies more frequently target humor directly. Garner refers to Bryant et al (1980) who had already stated that

(...) a strong sense of humor plays a major role in developing a positive learning atmosphere. Kher, Molstad and Donahue (1999) suggest that teaching effectiveness is enhanced by the use of appropriate humor that fosters mutual respect, and humor increases student receptivity to material by reducing anxiety in dealing with difficult material and has a positive effect on test performance (p. 178).

Humor as a teaching style is part of a teacher’s communication competence and can be very different as well. What this means for a language classroom is the following: In a language classroom one already has two kinds of humors to appeal to, the humor of L1 and the Humor of L2. It becomes even more complicated, but not impossible, if the student body is a multicultural space with students of different nationalities or with different backgrounds. As mentioned earlier, this is very likely in a university setting and needs to be taken into consideration.

Furthermore, the teacher needs to be aware of humor perception differences in a more concrete context. This means that the humor of the teacher is usually especially different to the humor of the students, which can be a result of age difference or background and thus needs to be guided by the teacher. The teacher is in charge of selecting materials and he is further in charge of creating meaningful exercises that match the content of the material and will foster language skills in the students through the use of humor.

In the present report we learn that humor must be considered in the foreign language classroom, because it not only supports the instruction and enriches the teaching environment, but first and foremost serves as a source of thematic depth that will engage students in critical thinking, especially through comparison and analysis. As illustrated in figure one the use of humor as an educational objective and strategy increases cultural and humor competencies as well as language learning and critical thinking.

The theoretical background is explained through linguistic and psychological approaches and uses the “5 Cs” of the *National Standards for foreign language learning* to draw parallels to already existing guidelines. In addition, the given case study illustrates these hypotheses with the help of multi-medial material that incorporates humor – parody – and provides useful ideas of why and how humor must be incorporated.

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## VITA

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