

## Humor As an Important Tool in the Classroom

In this article in *Foreign Language Annals*, Peter Swanson (Georgia State University) explores whether teachers' sense of humor affects student learning. Swanson says a teacher's sense of humor has the following elements:

- Seeing oneself as a humorous person;
- Recognizing humor in others;
- Appreciating humor;
- Laughing;
- Keeping humor in perspective;
- Using humor to cope.

These elements are interrelated, says Swanson, and aren't just innate; they can, to varying degrees, be developed.

Swanson recruited 127 public and private school Spanish teachers, had them take the Multidimensional Sense of Humor Scale, and correlated the results to how their students did on the National Spanish Exam. What did he find? That the better teachers' sense of humor, the better their students did. How big was the difference? From an A- with the more-humorous teacher to a B with the least humorous, or from a B+ to a B-.

Citing previous research on humor, Swanson theorizes about the mechanism: a teacher's use of humor reduces tension (performance anxiety is a common element in foreign-language classrooms), helps students relax and be better listeners and more diligent workers, improves rapport and classroom climate, increases motivation, enhances self-esteem, promotes higher-level thinking, and facilitates retention. From the teacher's point of view, Swanson believes humor helps them cope professionally, deal with stress, maintain a positive outlook on teaching, and persevere in the face of setbacks.

Swanson lists a variety of different ways teachers made use of humor in their Spanish classes:

- Using top 10 lists, jokes, riddles, puns, oxymorons, and malapropisms (the mistaken use of a word that sounds like the correct one);
- Using cartoons and funny graphics and visuals;
- Using comical modifications of a cliché, adage, or maxim;
- Using the obvious humorously – for example, “*Los ricos tienen toda la plata*” (The rich have all the money);
- Using Tom Swifties with adverbs – “I just love the cheese,” she said sharply;
- Telling amusing personal stories and showing photos of the teacher as an adolescent;
- Using exaggerated gestures and facial expressions and imitating famous people;
- Helping students relax in testing situations – for example, “The test is easy; it's not rocket surgery” or “It's as easy as one, two, tea.”

“Spanish Teachers' Sense of Humor and Student Performance on the National Spanish Exams” by Peter Swanson in *Foreign Language Annals*, Summer 2013 (Vol. 46, #2, p. 146-156), <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/flan.12031/abstract>