

Laughing Out Loud: Taking a Stand on Standup for the ESL Student

Kathy Zimbaldi
Westside High School

INTRODUCTION

I am a secondary ESL teacher at Westside High School in HISD. I teach 10th, 11th, and 12th grade classes of Advanced and Transitional students, and my class populations are extremely diverse both culturally and linguistically. While many students are native Spanish speakers, most are from South America rather than Mexico. And while some of my Asian students are Chinese or Vietnamese, others are from Thailand, Bangladesh, or India. The native Arab speakers are from Iran, Lebanon, and Palestine, while the African ESL students are from Angola, Cameroon, or Nigeria. Unlike my previous ESL teaching experiences with 100% Mexican populations, my Westside High classroom is a mini-United Nations!

While my own learning curve is steep as I seek to meet the needs of this very diverse group, I still try hard to maintain an atmosphere that keeps the affective filter low as my students struggle to learn in a second language. My goal is to promote a stress-free zone that encourages risk-taking; if we are to make steady progress toward language proficiency, then students must be comfortable manipulating that language. I choose to teach with a generous level of flexibility in the ESL curriculum, and I am fortunate to have the full support of my principal in this regard. Like Robin Williams' students in *Good Morning Vietnam* or Bill Murray's in *Stripes*, my students seem to appreciate any efforts I make to engage and entertain them as we tackle the more daunting lessons in English language learning. Operating from a teaching philosophy that works to create a common bond while celebrating our differences, I find that humor has a unifying affect among my students. This is why I am especially excited about the language learning possibilities of my topic. Like Driver Education, English grammar and usage lessons have the potential to be terribly dry. And if the standup comedy approach works in the deadly dull defensive driving seminars, think what it could do for lessons in syntax and vocabulary!

OBJECTIVES: TEKS Chapter 128.42

(6) Reading/word identification/vocabulary development. The student acquires an extensive vocabulary through reading and systematic word study. The following expectations apply to the second language learner at his/her level of proficiency in English. The student is expected to: (B) rely on context to determine meanings of words and phrases such as figurative language, idioms, multiple meaning words, and technical vocabulary; and (F) discriminate between connotative and denotative meanings and interpret the connotative power of words.

(22) Second language acquisition/learning strategies. The ESOL student uses language learning strategies to develop an awareness of his/her own learning processes in language arts and all content areas. The following expectations apply to the second language learner at his/her level of proficiency in English. The student is expected to: (A) develop and expand repertoire of learning strategies such as to reason inductively or deductively and to look for patterns in language (ESL); and (G) use accessible language and learn new and essential language in the process (ESL).

(16) Listening/speaking/purposes. The student speaks clearly and effectively for a variety of purposes and audiences. The following expectations apply to the second language learner at his/her level of proficiency in English. The student is expected to: (A) use the conventions of oral language effectively, including intonation, syntax, and grammar (ESL); and (D) use effective verbal and nonverbal strategies in presenting oral message.

RATIONALE

I have always subscribed to the belief that humor in the classroom engages the learner in ways no other teaching strategy can. As long as the humor is not ill-intentioned or results in victimizing the learner (i.e., creates a winner/loser situation), I find that most students respond eagerly when subject matter is presented in a humorous way. I find that I best serve my students when I attempt to envision myself in their position as listeners/learners. Without a doubt, my very best lessons occur when I imagine myself as part of my audience. I have suffered through my share of boring lectures, PowerPoints and group activities over the years that were delivered by very dedicated and well-intentioned teachers and have kept a mental “don’t do” list as I watched the minutes slowly tick by in a class I could not wait to leave! And, while some subject matter does not lend itself well to a humorous delivery, I always appreciated the teacher who tried to make me laugh. It says something to a student I think, when a teacher makes this kind of effort; it creates an “us” where once was just a “me” and “them”. This is, according to Dr. Cunningham, “because the ability to laugh together makes a group, creates a unit of, at least for the moment, agreement illustrated by laughter.”

English is a subject with plenty of material for humorous lessons. Indeed, as I teach ESL students I am often reminded that it is the very nuances of our language that cause the most difficulty in language comprehension. Figures of speech, double meanings, puns, and idiomatic expressions are concepts that come easily to native speakers who have manipulated the language all of their lives. The meanings of the “in” jokes we so frequently use and the playful banter we so readily exchange are lost on the students who do not share our culture or our dialects. I see in the bits of the standup comic all of the material I need to make my grammar lessons interesting, relevant, and memorable. If I can manage all three of these criteria as I present this unit, I think my students will learn the kind of English that will serve them a lifetime!

Why Stand Up?

You’ve got to go out on a limb sometimes, because that’s where the fruit is.

Will Rogers

If readers of this unit are silently wondering how to justify the use of standup comedy as a teaching tool, and more importantly, wondering if it is a teaching strategy worthy of valuable classroom instructional time, I offer the following resource: *Using Humor to Maximize Learning: the Links between Positive Emotions and Education*, by Mary Kay Morrison. I have been waiting a long time for a book like this. Hot off the presses (2008), Morrison’s recent publication gives credence to teachers who love to teach and to laugh. Because I have subscribed to maintaining a classroom with humor, I have been the thorn in the side of fellow teachers who thought kids were having entirely too much fun in my room. It seemed that kids could not be learning unless they were serious. Says Morrison, “The belief that play has no place in the serious business of education has been woven into the very fabric of our system. The very word ‘play’ is repulsive to some people in education, who think of it as the antithesis of learning” (Morrison 27). It is not so difficult to use humor with young children, as it is universally agreed that the very business of childhood is play. Following this logic to its unhappy ending, it would seem that teachers who also love to play and teach play should stay in the early childhood classroom (where I might add I spent many a happy year) and away from the “real teaching” of middle and high school where

Morrison states that conventional wisdom dictates that play is “not appropriate for the higher cognitive processes after fifth or sixth grade” (28). It is there apparently, that Morrison says the disconnect happens; the widespread “belief that students need to buckle down, work harder, play less and quit clowning around as they grow” shapes the curriculum and the atmosphere where students are expected to learn (28).

And yet, as Morrison points out, research proves that humor, when used appropriately in the classroom, creates an optimal environment for teaching and learning, expands concentration, captures and retains students’ attention, and helps to build relationships between students and teachers (44). Although high stakes testing seems to be what now drives classroom business, and thus demands “serious” attention to subject matter, we may be overlooking a powerful teaching and learning strategy. Humorous lesson plans may just provide the results we’ve been “seriously” looking for!

UNIT OVERVIEW

I have created a three part unit taught over a three week time frame. Part 1 begins with a broad overview of comedy theory in literature, beginning with the Greeks and paying special attention to the philosophical discourse of Henri Bergson’s *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*. Within the confines of this overview, students will explore topics such as the purpose of comedy and how it serves the needs of the human family. Some questions to be considered during this section might be: Why do we laugh? What do we think is funny? Why is laughter contagious, and why is a joke best enjoyed in the company of others? As we explore laughter as a cultural phenomenon, we might wonder: Are certain types of comedy universal? (i.e., enjoyed by all cultures and appreciated in the same way?) Are certain types of comedy culture specific—presuming a cultural knowledge base to fully appreciate the comic elements?

Part 2 of the unit explores the history of standup comedy and how it came to be recognized as an art form. We’ll trace its origins from the vaudeville and minstrel days of the late 19th and early 20th centuries to the boundary pushing comics of the ’50s and ’60s who dared to explore political topics such as race relations, politics and sexual humor. From there we will focus on the heyday of standup (’70s – ’90s), when entertainers became stars based on their ability to test their comic skills before live audiences. This latter part of the unit leads nicely into Part 3, in which we study three standup comics of the late 20th century.

Part 3 of the unit showcases the talents of three successful comics, whose work has broad audience appeal and who are considered to be some of the greatest talents in the world of standup: Bill Cosby, Jerry Seinfeld, and Ellen DeGeneres. Apart from the fact that these comedians are my personal favorites, I chose them for several other reasons. First, I needed material that was appropriate for the classroom, and all three have content that can be used with a high school audience. Second, they all share the common bond of “observational humor” – that humor which consists of “observations made about sometimes very minor and superficial aspects of Western culture and which is based on the premise that ‘it’s funny because it’s true’ ” (“Observational Comedy,” *Wikipedia*). Finally, I chose them because they all had both video footage and written works from which to draw; all three have had their own sitcoms, written books, and performed live monologues before taped audiences. Since language learning is measured in the four language arts strands of reading, writing, listening, and speaking, I think my students will benefit from comparing and contrasting these comics and their language use both in their live performances and in their written words. And I can easily imagine the study of literary elements, syntax, vocabulary, idiomatic expressions, and word choice within the bodies of these works. While Cosby is a natural choice for non-linguistic expression, with his gestures, grimaces and eye rolls, Seinfeld is perfect for the study of irony. And DeGeneres is a wonderful study in word placement, pauses and inflection; even if my students are not very familiar with Ellen, they

will certainly recognize her as Dorrie, the forgetful-but-kindhearted fish who won DeGeneres an Oscar nomination for *Finding Nemo*.

It is my hope that with standup comedy as a backdrop, my English lessons will be an enjoyable and memorable experience for my English language learners.

What's in a Word?

A comic says funny things. A comedian says things funny.

Bob Newhart

In the infant days of the fall semester, that nebulous “getting to know you” phase, I share with my students my love affair with words. I explain that I have in them a captive audience and that one of my charges, as dictated by the ESL curriculum, is to immerse them in the amazing world of English words, both written and spoken. Since words and their origins, meanings and powers are my passion, my intent is to share my enthusiasm in the hopes of fueling their own interests in what words can do for them.

For an amateur linguist like me, this fascination with words cannot be separated from the subject matter we study together, whatever form that may take. To illustrate this point, I emphasize the power words can wield. For students in the 21st century, who daily encounter numerous distractions in a fast paced, technology driven world, the study of words and their meanings, derivations, and usage seems irrelevant and even boring. Yet, as I remind my students, every human conflict is ultimately decided by the keepers of the words; those who are most adept at manipulating these words write legislation, communicate decisions, pen political speeches, and draft treaties. Ultimately those in the gangs with the guns are judged by the interpreters of the words.

Words are incredibly powerful, yet they are a uniquely human invention. How words come to have a particular meaning is so simple that it staggers the imagination when one considers how powerful they can be. Why we use particular words and how they come to have a particular meaning is the subject of a delightful children's book entitled *Frindle* by Andrew Clemens. In this story the main character, in an odious task assigned by his prim and matronly English teacher, researches the origin of words. He discovers that the assigning of meaning to a particular arrangement of phonemes (i.e. words) is nothing more than an arbitrary decision made by mutual agreement in any given society or culture. Who decides what words mean? We do. Whether it's Shakespeare's “a rose by any other name would smell as sweet,” or George Carlin's “Seven Words You Can't Say on Television,” the human audience appreciates the arbitrary nature of words.

Now certain words deserve a category all of their own, and these are the ones which are considered socially taboo. We label them generally as “four letter words,” although many contain more or fewer letters. As a child I was fascinated by them; I secretly loved to hear my father's profane litanies when something made him especially angry. As I became a student of linguistics, I researched many a profanity, only to discover that they had insignificant origins and had through the years simply suffered a pejorative decline. Students today are still fascinated by profanity. I admit I chose the novel *Of Mice and Men* to teach my restless 8th graders in May one year because it is rife with profane dialogue. I just knew they would listen, and listen they did! And although words can bite and sting, comfort and calm, they are ultimately just words. One has only to listen to John Travolta's character Vince Vega spew dialogue in *Pulp Fiction* to recognize the fact that the most shocking word, when uttered incessantly, becomes meaningless and has little more affect on the listener than the innocent article “the”!

So what does such a long treatise on word origin and meaning have to do with standup comedy? Simply this: words are the lifeblood of a standup comic. Because standup comics lack what is known as the “fourth wall” (i.e., that invisible boundary between the audience and the performer) in theatrical performances, comedians choose most words carefully as they are at the mercy of a live audience with only a microphone between them. In standup, performers speak directly *to* the audience, unlike actors who perform for spectators invited to watch as voyeurs through the “fourth wall.” With the incorrect placement or choice of words stand-ups bomb; a different arrangement of words can make the same comedian an overnight success. This unit will pay special attention to the power of words, wordplay, and word choice for students who are learning English as a Second Language.

Part 1 – Theory of Comedy

Most theorists agree that a pure abstract definition of comedy is at best elusive, at worst, impossible. Being able to pin down a definition and make it stick has confounded great philosophers from Aristotle to Henri Bergson to George Meredith. While Aristotle offers long treatises on tragedy, “no extended treatment of the subject (comedy) by him survives” (Heath). For Aristotle, tragedy aims to evoke pity and fear, while comedy aims to evoke laughter and “eschews suffering” (Heath 2). While Aristotle allows comedy a place in Greek society (note Aristophanes as the great social commentator), as a genre it was never taken as seriously as tragedy. Says George Meredith in his *Essay on Comedy*, “Comedy, we have to admit, was never one of the most honored of the Muses. She was, in her origin, short of slaughter, the loudest expression of the little civilization of men. The light of Athene over the head of Achilles illuminates the birth of Greek tragedy. But Comedy rolled in shouting, under the divine protection of the Son of the Wine Jar, as Dionysius is made to proclaim himself in Aristophanes”(5). (Perhaps this explains why still today the school curriculum reflects a gaping hole where the comic genre should be!)

For both Meredith and Bergson, comedy is a living thing, not easily defined. While both have essays that have become classical documents on comedy, Bergson’s is an essay of logical finesse, while Meredith’s is of a more cordial, genial nature. Both agree that comedy is a game played in society to discipline the self and “redeem us from our worst stupidity – the original sin of pride or complacency” (Sypher, *Comedy* xiv).

Bergson makes three observations which he claims are fundamental to our understanding that which is comic:

1. It is strictly human. Bergson claims that though the inanimate may become laughable, it is only because of some semblance to man, of the stamp he gives it or the use he puts it to (10).
2. It requires an absence of feeling. Bergson insists that the comic demands a “momentary anesthesia of the heart” (11). This notion is not unlike Thomas Hobbes’ theory of humor which suggests that the audience must at least for the moment, feel “sudden glory” – a moment of superiority in which the humorous subject becomes inferior to those who are watching. Whether one chooses to interpret Bergson’s “anesthesia of the heart” in this respect, or as Dr. Cunningham (Comedy in Literature HTI seminar) chooses – that comedy creates for man an “anesthesia of the heart” – the net effect is the same. For the moment, at least, the audience ceases to feel, so that they may appreciate the comic in the situation.
3. It must have social significance. According to Bergson, “We must put it back into its natural environment, which is society, and above all we must determine the utility of its function, which is a social one” (12).

It will be the purpose of this unit to study the standup comic through the lens of Bergson's comic theory.

Part 2 – History of Standup Comedy

Humor is a rubber sword—it allows you to make a point without drawing blood.

Mary Hirsch, humorist

Standup comedy traces its roots to the early days of vaudeville and minstrel shows of the late 19th century. Originally, the comics were the opening acts, the joke tellers who warmed up the audience before the headliner appeared, or kept the audience entertained during intermissions. With the coming of the golden age of radio broadcasting, comedians such as Jack Benny, Fred Allen, and Bob Hope (sometimes called the “fathers of standup comedy”) acted as masters of ceremony and followed a routine similar to their vaudeville days. Opening monologues, full of one-liners and standard jokes, would be followed by a musical number and finally a skit or story routine. Listeners tuned in weekly to hear their favorites.

It was not until the late '60s and early '70s that the standup comic became an artist in his own right. As the country emerged from the post World War II decade, comedians, playing to nightclub audiences, shifted their monologues from the standard fare of mother-in-law jokes and drunkards to political satire and social commentaries. Humor became bolder and more outspoken, reflecting a country whose youth was testing the rigid social and political boundaries of the post World War II era. The comedy of the '60s and '70s cannot be separated from the historical events of the times: the Vietnam War, Civil Rights, and the hippie counterculture all contributed to a “telling it like it is” mentality that permeated the monologues of the stand-ups.

According to Richard Zoglin, in *Comedy at the Edge: How Standup in the 1970s Changed America*, these standup comics “are the forgotten stars of the cultural revolution,” who at a time when the youth generation was challenging the power structure, “struck an especially responsive chord” (4). While the old style comics emphasized the distance between audience and performer, the stand-ups had a strategy that was “populist and inclusive” (4). Modern standup comedy would never be the same, and these pioneers set a precedent that Lawrence Mintz, in *Standup Comedy as Social and Cultural Mediation*, argues forever cast the standup in a role “as our comic spokesperson, as a mediator, an articulator of our culture, and as our contemporary anthropologist.”(75). And Zoglin agrees:

The news headlines from Washington and Hollywood are filtered through the irreverent and ironic sensibility introduced by the standup comics of the '70s —and today on display everywhere from the monologues of Letterman and Leno to the satiric newscasts of *Saturday Night Live*. (224)

I read the above passage in late February, 2008, as the Democratic primary race between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama was red hot; it was predicted that Clinton would lose the primary race to Obama if she lost Texas (to be held on March 4, 2008), and I have never been as struck by the power of standup as a political force as I was for the next three subsequent weeks. As if I had willed it for purposes of this unit, the Comedy Writer's strike ended and the first *Saturday Night Live* of the new season aired on February 23, 2008. In that episode, a parody of the Clinton/Obama debates showed Clinton sulking in the shadows of Obama's “favored child” media status. While she received the “hard” questions, Obama answered questions like “So what's it like to be Obama?” By Monday, February 25, the Clinton campaign was all over it, and she used the *SNL* skit to her political advantage. Telling the media that they were too soft on Obama, she asked whether they had seen *SNL* two nights before. But she wasn't through. In a stroke of brilliant political strategy that some Americans think turned the Texas election around, Clinton appeared on *SNL* the following Saturday night (March 1) after a sketch in which again

she was the butt of the joke. Because she had been written into the sketch, many interpreted her appearance as a solid endorsement from Tina Fey – giving Clinton the kind of publicity even Clinton money couldn't buy. On March 4, 2008, just three days after the *SNL* skit, she took Texas, destroyed the Obama advantage, and ensured that the race for the nomination would extend all the way to the Democratic convention. On the morning of March 5, 2008, the *Houston Chronicle* ran a *New York Times* editorial that credited the shift in the Democratic contest at least in part to the *SNL* series of Hillary/Obama skits.

Standup as a political force? It would appear that *Saturday Night Live* wields a power all of its own.

Part 3 – The Comics

Jerry Seinfeld

Jerry Seinfeld was born in Brooklyn, NY in April, 1954, and raised in Massapequa, Long Island. He graduated from Queens College in 1976 and went straight from his college graduation to perform at amateur night at Catch a Rising Star, a Manhattan night club. From 1976-81, Seinfeld perfected his craft; known to his friends as the “professor,” he took his work and his comedy writing seriously. After an appearance on *The Johnny Carson Show* in May 1981, his standup career took off. But it was the long running Seinfeld television sitcom, based on his life as a standup comedian, that made his name a household word.

Seinfeld is best known for his role as “social provocateur,” making great game of “the little guy’s battle for sanity in a crazy world” (Zoglin 220). His style is described as a “lightly sarcastic NY whine,” delivered in the same deadpan monotone, with just a “hint of self-mockery that gives the comedic oomph” (220).

And it is exactly that self-mockery that makes the difference for the audience. If, as Mintz asserts, the audience in standup is what drives the comic and the comedy, and the relationship between the comedian and the audience at the onset is paramount for success, then Mintz’s (and Hobbes’) theory holds true. Seinfeld’s self-mockery allows the audience to feel, if not superior to Seinfeld, then at least his equal. As Mintz explains, “Traditionally, the comic is defective in some way” (74). Indeed, the comic is never handsome or beautiful— what audience would stand for such physical superiority?

Bill Cosby

William H. Cosby, Jr. was born in Philadelphia, PA on July 12, 1937. One of four boys born to his parents, Anna and William H. Cosby, Sr., Cosby was an outstanding athlete and the class clown as early as elementary school. He never graduated from high school, but finished an equivalency diploma and then won a track and field scholarship to Temple University. He left Temple in his sophomore year to pursue his comedy career and appeared at the Gaslight Club in New York in 1962, where he caught the attention of Carl Reiner. That single gig was the beginning of an enormously successful career that continues today. Despite the fact that Cosby dropped out of college in his sophomore year, he knew the importance of education. He returned to finish his degree from Temple and then earn an M.A. ('72) and an Ed.D ('77) from the University of Massachusetts.

Cosby’s brand of humor was a simple observational style based on his childhood and family memories. Through the controversial '60s and the Civil Rights demonstrations, Cosby chose to avoid using race as a topic in his comedy material. After he was asked to defend this choice he declared, “A white person listens to my act and he laughs and he thinks, 'Yeah, that's the way I see it too.' Okay. He's white. I'm Negro. And we both see things the same way. That must mean that we are alike...So I figure I'm doing as much for good race relations as the next guy” (“Bill

Cosby,” *Wikipedia*). To many of us who grew up in those frightening, turbulent times, Cosby was a healing balm who chose to unite the races through comedy, laughter, and the commonality we share as members of the same race – the human race. Though his non-militant approach and refusal to play the race card was fodder for many critics, Cosby’s four decades of comedic success speak volumes. My own children, and my students over the past twenty years, have all roared at Cosby’s standup whenever I treated them to any of his videos. His eye rolls, “rubber face” expressions, and storytelling technique are timeless because his material is universally appealing.

Ellen DeGeneres

Born Ellen Lee DeGeneres on January 26, 1958, in Metairie, LA, this comedienne spent her early years raised as a Christian Scientist. After her parents divorced, she moved with her family to Atlanta, GA, where she completed her high school education. Ellen’s short stint in college (one semester) was spent back in Louisiana at the University of New Orleans as a communications major. She began performing standup comedy at small clubs and coffeehouses and finally worked her way up to the emcee position at Clyde’s Comedy Club in New Orleans by May 1981. Her quirky brand of observational humor earned her the title of “Funniest Person in America” in a competition sponsored by *Showtime*, and after a series of guest appearances on *The Tonight Show*, hosted by Johnny Carson in 1986, her career took off (“Ellen DeGeneres,” *Wikipedia*). In one of these appearances, Ellen achieved an historic “first” as the first female comedienne ever to be invited to share the spotlight with Johnny. Being offered the coveted “hot seat” (the one next to Johnny reserved for only the very talented guests) meant that Ellen had received the stamp of approval from America’s most famous talk show host, and with that was assured high profile, comedic notoriety.

DeGeneres credits the non-plussed, deadpan style of comic Bob Newhart as her greatest comedic influence. Indeed her performances in her early years are described as a “distaff version of Bob Newhart” (“Biography for Ellen DeGeneres”). And if there were ever a comedienne to personify Bergson’s “anesthesia of the heart” it would be Ellen. Chosen to host the Emmy awards just two months after the catastrophic New York City 9/11 attack, she began her opening monologue with the following: “We are told to go on living our lives as usual, because to do otherwise is to let the terrorists win, and really, what would upset the Taliban more than a gay woman wearing a suit in front of a room full of Jews?” (“Ellen DeGeneres,” *Wikipedia*)

Comics and Related Activities

This part of the unit is offered to demonstrate the ways in which I intend to use the three comedians in class language activities. I will begin by explaining that as I was writing this unit, I did several exhaustive searches to try to locate examples of standup comedy used with ESL students. To my dismay, I could find no use of comedians as parts of lesson plans in the United States. I did, however, note that many Asian ESL websites use online comedy clips for virtual, independent learning activities for English as a Second Language Learners. It would appear that foreign language learners have been exposed to this genre by means of the Internet and that many activities are posted that make use of comedy club material. I doubt that my students will find this surprising; in a recent survey I did with my ESL students, most say that they watched television to learn English when they first arrived in the United States, and that they always chose cartoons or situation comedies to watch.

As usual, the most valuable lessons I learn as a teacher are from my students; after this survey I knew I was on the right track with this unit. It would seem that “funny” is easier to pay attention to, no matter what language you speak!

Cosby

I plan to show the video *Bill Cosby Himself* to introduce my kids to “Cos.” In particular, I will focus on a clip that is one of his most famous, “The Dentist.” (I know from past experience that this is funny even to the less able English speakers, because it is full of hilarious body language.) After students view this clip, I will ask them to write a journal entry about the viewing. Questions I would like them to consider would be: What was the funniest part of the clip? Did you understand everything he said? Did Cosby’s body language enhance the viewing experience for you? Was the clip about a situation you could relate to? What about Cosby’s speech? Was it slow enough for you to follow? Or, did you need to rely on his body language to get the funny part?

My hope is that this clip and the journal writing exercise will be beneficial for my students by helping them to track their own language learning needs. This activity requires thoughtful reflection about how much **attending** to what is said plays a vital role in language acquisition.

DeGeneres

Ellen DeGeneres has two very similar pieces I intend to use for this portion of the unit, specifically to have my students compare and contrast written and spoken comedy. After introducing them to Ellen in her video, *Here and Now*, I will use one of her most famous clips, “Peanuts,” (this is an older clip, easy to find on www.youtube.com) in which she comments on airlines and the in-flight peanuts they serve. It is also found on p. 42 of her book, *My Point...and I Do Have One*:

But the rest of them (airline stewardesses), they have this attitude. And they can afford to have this attitude, because they have the power – they have the peanuts. They have these six peanuts that we need. Six peanuts. Somehow they’ve done research. They know that the higher we go, the more we need nuts. And we go crazy if we don’t get them.

I plan to show the clip first and then give my students a written copy of the quote above. I feel sure, that unlike the Cosby video, they will prefer having the written piece in front of them to reread, simply because Ellen speaks very quickly and they may not catch it all the first time. I would like them to analyze the above piece in terms of sentence structure. Ellen uses very short, clipped speech. Her sentences are simple and to the point. The repetition and the simple noun-verb, noun-verb sequences add to the comedic quality of the piece; I will be interested to see if they consider the written piece amusing in its own right, or if her performance enhances the comic element for the audience.

Seinfeld

Of the three comics I have chosen, I expect that my students will be most familiar with Jerry Seinfeld. Seinfeld has a video, *I’m Telling You For the Last Time*, in which he “buries” his old comic bits, as he plans never to tell them again. Many of the bits he uses are also in his book, *Seinlanguage*; I plan to use several of them to illustrate the elements of humor in irony and sarcasm. Like Ellen DeGeneres, Seinfeld tends to speak quickly, so I will also need written copies of his bits for my students. Seinfeld loves to play with words, and nowhere is this more apparent than in *Seinlanguage*:

On standing in the drugstore looking for cold medication: “Did you ever try to pick one of these out? There’s an entire wall of products that you need. You stand there going ‘well, this one is quick-acting, but this one is long-lasting. Which is more important, the present or the future?’” (34)

Or commenting on cars: “My all time favorite mode of motion is the car. I’m one of those people. I love cars. It’s the greatest physical object ever seen. I don’t know why, really.

My only theory is, when you're driving, you're outside and inside, moving and completely still, all at the same time. I think that's something." (68)

We'll use these two pieces to discuss the literary element of irony; to my mind they are simple, but effective examples to illustrate the meaning of the term. Additionally, students should recognize the same staccato rhythm in Seinfeld that they noticed in Ellen. Short simple sentences in the same noun-verb, noun-verb style serve the comedic purpose in both the written and spoken versions of Seinfeld's work. The practice of making these comparisons and noting the similarities serves two needs of English Language Learners. First, it allows students to recall and reflect on the English language structure as different from their mother tongue. Second, it provides a model for simple, but effective communication in English. Neither comedian belabors an idea or point with long, qualifying phrases in between subject and verb; these are the sentences that confound a language learner. Learning the logic in English discourse is of paramount importance for a student studying English as a Second Language; recent research suggests that failure to do so is what keeps these students from being effective writers (Montano-Harmon, 1988). If the very straightforward, linear American English style is not specifically taught, students attempt to write English using foreign language patterns of logical discourse; the result is a fusion of language rhythms in a poorly organized English composition.

LESSON PLANS

Lesson Plan 1: Lost in Translation

Objectives: TEKS 128.42

16) Listening/speaking/purposes. The student speaks clearly and effectively for a variety of purposes and audiences. The following expectations apply to the second language learner at his/her level of proficiency in English. The student is expected to: (A) use the conventions of oral language effectively, including intonation, syntax, and grammar (ESL); and (B) use informal, standard, and technical language effectively, including academic discourse and social conventions, to meet the needs of purpose, audience, occasion, and task (ESL).

Introduction: Students will be asked to write a joke in their native language. Be prepared for warnings that: "it won't be funny in English!" Nevertheless, coax them to take this leap of faith — you know where you are going with this.

Concept Development: Have students translate the joke into English, using their electronic translators or bilingual dictionaries.

Student Practice: Students will work in pairs to help each other make the joke funny in English. Students must analyze the comic content, determining the universal theme of the joke, and create its comic equivalent in English. This might be political humor, where the character's names need to change to American ones, or actual word play, where situations and settings need to be adjusted to create the comic effect. Note: this is a time when teachers must circulate among the pairs of students, offering suggestions and encouragement.

Assessment: Students will tell their jokes in English to the class, paying special attention to eye contact, timing and delivery.

Closure: Students will be asked to cite the changes they needed to make to their native language in order to make it come out funny in English. They will be reminded that this exercise draws attention to their linguistic abilities to adjust their language registers, and is a highly sophisticated form of language use!

Lesson Plan 2: “Ya Know What I Hate?”

Objectives: TEKS 128.42

(22) Second language acquisition/learning strategies. The ESOL student uses language learning strategies to develop an awareness of his/her own learning processes in language arts and all content areas. The following expectations apply to the second language learner at his/her level of proficiency in English. The student is expected to: (A) develop and expand repertoire of learning strategies such as to reason inductively or deductively and to look for patterns in language (ESL); and (G) use accessible language and learn new and essential language in the process (ESL).

Introduction: In this lesson, students will be asked to imitate the models of comedy that we have studied. Specifically, they will be asked to gather comedy material based on life as a Westside High student. Using the observational style, they will use comedy journals to record examples/situations that might be useful in a 15 second comic bit about Westside.

Concept Development: Students will be asked to use journals to record situations in everyday life at Westside. Some possible topics might include: the cafeteria, scheduling changes, announcements, rules and regulations, life as a LEP student, and standardized testing. We will brainstorm as a group first, suggesting ways in which our routines might lend themselves to comic bits. (Announcements are always about “other” people we don’t know, being scheduled for more than one class at a time, classes that are more than 5 minute passing periods apart, finding your way around Westside, wearing ID badges, being tested on things we have no way of knowing about, cafeteria food, etc.)

Student Practice:

After a one week journaling period, students will bring their comic observations to class. As a group, we will discuss the possible comic elements in each situation. Students will take notes as the group discussion continues, refining their ideas and making possible additions. Once each student has decided on a topic, we will work in pairs to create “bits,” one-liners, and amusing remarks about the subject matter. They will practice in pairs, using some of the techniques we have studied about word choice and word placement in each of the comics we have studied.

Assessment: Will be oral. Students will perform or read aloud the material they have written. Emphasis will be placed on how well they imitate the “observational” comedic style.

Closure: Students will be reminded that they have participated in a very sophisticated form of second language acquisition. Compiling comic material from their school surroundings and refining it into a comic routine requires serious language experimentation, manipulation, and, ultimately, control.

Lesson Plan 3: “You Just Had to Be There!”

Objectives: The student will do research, write a report based on this research, and present their information orally. The student is expected to: (A) use the conventions of oral language effectively, including intonation, syntax, and grammar (ESL); and (D) use effective verbal and nonverbal strategies in presenting oral message.

Introduction: In this lesson, students will be asked to research comedians from their own country and develop a written and an oral report about their choices.

Concept Development: I will explain that we have listened to and read several selections from my favorite American comedians, but I am curious about who is famous in different countries and for what type of humor. Reminding students that we must keep it clean, I will ask them to choose someone who is a recognized, comedic celebrity in their countries. Once they have chosen someone, I will ask them to research that comedian and prepare a report for the class that would

include biographical information, venues where this comedy is performed, types of humor that they are known to use, (observational as we have learned about? or another?), and why they think they have such acclaim in their particular country.

Students Practice: Students will be permitted to use class time for research. This will include library visits and Internet use. Most of my students use the International Internet sites with great regularity, so this should not be a difficult assignment for them to research. They will be asked to pay particular attention to the comedian’s use of their language, and note if there is wordplay, certain manipulation of syntax, sentence structures or particular types of vocabulary used. Is this a comedian for the “common man” or is this comedian a favorite of more sophisticated individuals? Does this comedian enjoy broad audience appeal or is he/her more age/gender specific? Does this comedian operate in an “underground” setting (this because some of my students are from Communist countries) or are they available as mainstream entertainment like the American comedians we studied?

Assessment: Will be based on a rubric for their oral report (See Appendix A). Their written report will be graded according to how well they have researched their topic and answered the pertinent questions posed during the concept development part of the lesson.

Closure: Students will be reminded that comedy, and laughter, is part of the human existence. How and what we laugh at or find humor in may or may not be culture specific. The comedians we studied had universal themes that we could all identify with (going to the dentist or the doctor, airplanes, family situations, etc.) but it was important to all of us that we investigate other comedians in other countries to broaden our perspectives on humor.

Lesson Plans Four – Six: Plans for three additional lessons are found in the section entitled “Comics and Related Activities.”

APPENDIX A

Presentation Rubric : Comedian Oral Report

Teacher Name: **Ms.Zimbaldi**

Student Name: _____

CATEGORY	4	3	2	1
preparation	well prepared and rehearsed; speech was clearly very familiar to speaker; had all materials; included visuals to enhance presentation	showed signs of advance preparation; rehearsed but had some rough spots; could have used more practice; had most materials	minimally prepared; some signs of familiarity with speech; lacked some materials	did not rehearse; lacked necessary materials; no visuals
delivery	great delivery; maintained eye contact; clear, confident and in control	good delivery but did not maintain eye contact; body language distracted	acceptable delivery, but unremarkable	weak delivery; speaker was unsure and unclear

content	excellent content; gave ample amount of info	good content; good amount of info	adequate content; adequate amount of info	weak content; little info
follows directions	followed all directions; no parts missing	followed most directions; some small parts missing	followed some directions; had some important parts missing	did not follow directions

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Hilarious and timeless! Students absolutely love "the Cos," no matter the age or ethnicity. Clean and simple humor, Cos is a master at non-verbal expression.
- “Biography of Ellen DeGeneres.” 2008. *International Movie Database*. April 4, 2008
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- I'm Telling You for the Last Time*. Dir. Jerry Seinfeld. Perf. Jerry Seinfeld. DVD. Columbus 81 Productions, Inc, 1998. Great stuff! Seinfeld has a funeral for his old bits, telling them for the last time in a one man, one night Broadway show taped live at NY's Broadhurst Theater.
- Meredith, George. *An Essay on Comedy*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1956.
Easy to read essay that augments any study of comedy; highly recommended to use in conjunction with Bergson.
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Seelye, Kathryn Q. "Media Get Tougher in Covering Obama." *Houston Chronicle*. 5 March 2008, Sec. A: 14. A great article to illustrate the power of standup comedy in the political arena. Printed the day after Clinton took the Texas primary, Mar 4, 2008.

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Supplemental Resources

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Ellen DeGeneres, Here and Now. Dir. Ellen DeGeneres. Perf. Ellen DeGeneres. DVD. Home Box Office, INC., 2003. Ellen is very funny and down to earth in this compilation of insights into the humor of everyday life situations. Appropriate for teenage audiences.

Gruner, Charles S. *The Game of Humor: A Comprehensive Theory of Why We Laugh*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2000. An interesting argument for all of comedy being reduced to a win/lose game. Gruner makes a great case for his theory.