

Humour in the teaching of English and German equivocal words

Alfonso Corbacho Sanchez*, School of Arts and Humanities, University of Extremadura, Avda. de la Universidad s/n, Caceres 10071, Spain

Luis Javier Conejero Magro, School of Arts and Humanities, University of Extremadura, Avda. de la Universidad s/n, Caceres 10071, Espana

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Abstract

This article proves statistically the effectiveness of humour in the teaching of English and German to Spanish students of foreign languages. The referred lexicon is particularly troublemaking because of the difficulties that such vocabulary poses for Spanish learners of not-Latin-originated languages. The approach followed is a quantitative and contrastive analysis and was carried out with four groups of Spanish learners. The experimental groups (one for each language) were presented with the input they were supposed to learn in sentences and contexts in which the use of the English/German term, with the meaning of its Spanish 'false friend', resulted in nonsensical and highly humorous utterances. The presentation of the same lexical items to the control groups was more neutral and deliberately bereft of humour. After that, the participants were set a test to find out whether or not they remembered the proper sense of the lexicon taught and could also use it correctly. The results are conclusive and the outcome strongly supports the beneficial effects of pedagogical humour in the language classroom.

Keywords: Humour, English as a foreign language, German as a foreign language, L2 resources, motivation, vocabulary development.

* ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE: Prof. Dr. **Alfonso Corbacho Sanchez**, Dpto. de Lenguas Modernas y Literaturas Comparadas, Facultad de Filosofia y Letras, Universidad de Extremadura, Campus Universitario, Avenida de la Universidad, s/n, 10071 Caceres, Espana. E-mail address: alcorsan@unex.es / Tel.: 34 927-257400.

1. Introduction

Spanish students often enter language classrooms lacking motivation and feeling stressed. Anxiety, boredom and the pressure or importance that learning a foreign language has nowadays are only some examples of the students' emotions when they are attending one of these lessons. Gardner and Lambert (1972) point out the importance of such feelings on motivation and success. Indeed, many language teachers in Spain face the difficult task of teaching English and German while making students participate in the classroom. Teachers and educators agree on the fact that learning a second language requires the creation of a 'positive' atmosphere in the classroom. Kristmanson (2000) pays attention to the need to facilitate a 'welcoming classroom for language learning' (p. 5) in order to avoid the intimidating role of the teacher or the threatening environment in the classroom.

It seems logical, if not obvious, to consider humour as one of the first and most efficient barriers against the negative emotions mentioned above. The use of humour in the second language classroom can be directly connected to positive class management. Walter (1990) highlights that the pupils who laugh show less disturbing outbursts in class. Although this is widely shared both by educators and students alike, humour has not been deeply discussed among language researchers and perhaps barely employed in the classroom on a conscious level.

In the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), and from a general perspective in education and psychology, humour has been investigated for its pedagogical effects (Berwald, 1992; Gruner, 1967; Loschmann, 2015; Zillman & Bryant, 1983). Until the mid-twentieth century, innovative educational models did not begin to adopt different and more flexible approaches. According to Zillman and Bryant's (1983) terminology, '[the] new humanistic and dynamic approaches are based on contemporary methods' (p. 185). Evidence extracted from these and other studies suggests that the use of humour in SLA classrooms improves the teaching climate, increases pupil-teacher rapport and enjoyment, reduces tension and facilitates learning because of the real-life experience, that is, the classroom (Lomax & Moosavi, 2002; Provine, 2002). On the one hand, an example of one of these studies is the one carried out by Sudol (1981). He states that humour helps maintain student interest and comfort (1981: 27). Terry and Woods agree with Sudol when they define humour as an 'attention-getter and tension-reducer' (1975: 185). The theories of Cornett (1986) and Fisher (1997) support the idea that humour can be beneficial to classroom learning, promoting understanding and holding the students' attention. And, Ueda (2013) highlights the importance that joke-telling has for children learning other languages.

On the other hand, too much humour or self-disclosure may be inappropriate and lead to 'non-formal and poor-in-content lessons' (Downs, Javidi & Nussbaum, 1988, p. 135). Likewise, Zillman and Bryant (1983) propose that humour should be employed in its corresponding dose and sarcasm in the second language classroom may confuse students who are not listening carefully. Ziv (1988) investigates the effects on student learning of teaching with humour and reports that students enjoy learning with a teacher who teaches in a funny way. Similarly, Kaplan and Pascoe (1972) add that lessons with concepts, which can be related to something funny, help students to learn concepts easily. This is one of the reasons why this article aims to analyse the function of humour in the teaching of the lexicon.

Previous analyses have been carried out relating the concepts of semantics and humour. Joke telling in a foreign-language context is not novel at all in SLA research. Trachtenberg (1979) explores the opportunities that humour provides for mini-grammar and semantic lessons. In a similar way, Deneire (1995) investigates the relevance of humour in the teaching of culture alongside language. So, Ludszuweit and Seyfried (2012) maintain the use of jokes and puns in the German classroom. Martinez Fernandez and Fernandez Fontecha (2008) study the importance of puns, jokes and 'false friends' in SLA. Upchurch (2012) goes one step further by linking the use of jokes in the classroom and children's jokes in English at an early age. Probably, a more practical example is that of Guy Cook (2000) and his study on the importance of linguistic games as teaching/learning tools.

As suggested above, the evidence in previous studies encouraged the use of 'humour' in the second language classroom. This work examines whether humour is an effective tool in teaching a particular aspect of the foreign language taught—that is, equivocal words (such as false friends)—within the second language classroom.

2. Methods

The selected experimental items consisted of a list of English and German terms that may lead Spanish learners to confusion because each of them, as Wotjak (1996: 125-126) states,

... son unidades lexicas (UL) que se caracterizan por coincidencias totales o parciales en lo formal, o sea, en el plano de la expresion y en lo semantico comunicativo, o sea, en el plano del contenido, y que se destacan al mismo tiempo por divergencias mas o menos considerables en uno de estos dos planos constitutivos para cualquier UL como signo linguistico bilateral.

In the context of the German linguistics, the concept of 'false friends' or equivocal terms is not that different, as Gluck (1993: 182) formulates it,

... morphologische und idiomatische Entsprechungen zwischen zwei Sprachen, wenn sich zwei Worter oder Wendungen scheinbar entsprechen, aber unterschiedliche Referenzbereiche haben.

The list consists of the following 10 pairs of English equivocal words: 'diversion' and 'enjoyment', 'bigot(ed)' and 'moustache', 'celery' and 'quickly', 'sensitive' and 'sensible', 'relaxing' and 'laxative', 'discussing' and 'argue', 'embarrassed' and 'pregnant', 'rape' and 'monkfish', 'remove' and 'move', and 'constipated' and 'cold'; and 10 pairs of German terms: 'Grundstufe' and 'Heizofen', 'Mappe' and 'Straßenkarte', 'alt' and 'groß', 'Eintrittskarte' and 'Brief', 'Mantel' and 'Tischdecke', 'Griff' and 'Wasserhahn', 'Regal' and 'Geschenk', 'Ferien' and 'Kirmes', 'Gymnasium' and 'Fitness-Studio', and 'Gatte' and 'Katze'.

Two groups of pre-intermediate Spanish learners of English (B1) and two of the same level, studying German (B1), were selected and both groups were taught two different lessons including the mentioned list of confusing terms in their input. In each of these two lessons, a different teaching strategy was used.

2.1. Participants

As stated above, two groups of participants were chosen. A total of 36 students of English and 36 of German agreed to participate in the project—they had to sign a consent form. Half of these participants were enrolled at an English course and the other half at a German one. From now on, the two different groups will be referred to as Control Group (CG) and Experimental Group (EG).

Both groups shared a number of characteristics—same mother tongue, almost an equal number of women as men and the level of the foreign language studied. The average age, however, was different, and, for this reason, the factor age is going to be studied as one of the variables of the experiment. Regarding the English-taught group, in the CG (18 men and 18 women), there were 21 participants who were in their late 20s, and 15 in their 30s, whereas in the EG (22 men and 14 women), 30 participants were in their early 20s and only six in their late 20s. As for the German one, in the CG (26 men and 10 women), there were 28 participants who were in their teens, and eight in their 30s, whereas in the EG (20 men and 16 women), 25 participants were in their early 20s and only 11 in their late 20s. It is true that the participants' reasons for doing the English and the German courses were different, but since their level of English and German and motivation were similar, this aspect is not taken into consideration. The similarities and the difference referred before will help to gauge more pondered and, therefore, more reliable results.

2.2. Data collection procedures

The choice and use of humorous stories or simple jokes—or even word-play with advanced learners—needs no justification. As has been seen, it is a communicative tenet that teachers are supposed to provide and foster a relaxed positive attitude in the teaching environment in order to gain a good atmosphere where students may learn, talk and have fun in English and in German. This was the purpose of the strategy used in EG, once the teacher had made sure that the group responded to the kind of humour generated by the linguistic items of the experiment. The verification of this response had been previously tested in a pilot study conducted with four colleagues with English and German as their mother tongues, for each study conducted. The assumption from which the experiment starts is that this kind of exercise is anything but trivial since it delves into the meaning, often polysemic, of frequently (mis)used words.

As seen earlier, two groups of Spanish learners of English and two groups of Spanish learners of German were taught two lessons which include a list of equivocal words. Each of these two lessons is differentiated by the different teaching strategy employed. The first one was based on joke-telling, that is, each of these terms was introduced in the context of a humorous story. Conversely, the second strategy followed the conventional or traditional teaching pattern. It consisted of the direct presentation and explanation of the same terms, and was, therefore, less amusing. The jokes in English included the following situations:

1. 'A: While driving along a road in England, with the rather boring landscape, I came across the word *'diversion'*; and I thought that from then onwards I would find a theme park or probably an area full of parks. Yet, what I actually found were endless roadworks and an inconvenient alternative route'.
2. 'Maria (a Spanish girl): My boyfriend is a strong *bigoted* man./She only realised why her English friends were laughing when she found out that bigoted was intolerant'.
3. 'Waiter: Would you like the beef with *celery*?/Customer: Oh, no, thank you. I'm not in a rush'.
4. 'John and his Spanish friend arrive at the beach and John asks: 'Maria, what do you think of my swimming shorts? Sarah told me I look ridiculous'./Maria: Who cares what other people think? Stop being so *sensible*. Taking Maria's advice on board, John stands up, whips off his shorts and runs into the sea like a mad man'.
5. 'Antonio (a Spanish boy): Every morning, I wake up and I have a *laxative* cup of coffee'.
6. 'A: Hey, did you hear that Putin and John Kerry, the American secretary of state, are going to *discuss* what to do about Ukraine./B: What?! Omg!! It could be the beginning of the Third World War./A: Oh, no! They are just talking!'
7. 'Maria: Molly, do you want to stay for dinner?/Molly: Oh, Maria. I am embarrassed after last night. It was your son's fault. / What? Am I going to be a grandmother? / No, no. He said something that made me blush'.
8. 'A lady (a tourist) goes into a Spanish restaurant and on the menu reads that she can order 'rape in the sailor's way'. She is a bit surprised but she thinks 'it's always a good time for a bit of adventure' and she orders the exotic dish. However, she becomes quite upset when she is just given a plate of fish'.
9. 'Mother: Johnny, can you please remove that marmalade with a spoon. (10 minutes later). Johnny: Mom, what shall I do after 'removing' it? (The child is stirring the marmalade on his trousers with a spoon)'
10. 'A: I'm so constipated!/B: Eew! Why are you talking about that?/A: What's the problem?/B: Well, I'm not interested in whether you've gone to the toilet or not'.

The jokes in German included the following:

1. Der Deutschlehrer sagt zu einer spanischen Mutter, dass Kinder der *Grundstufe* auch Deutsch als Fremdsprache lernen können. Die Frau sucht schnell die Kinder hinter einem 'Heizofen'. Der Lehrer erklärt ihr, was das Wort 'Grundstufe' bedeutet.
2. Eine Spanierin spricht mit einer Deutschen und ist irgendwie überrascht, dass das Kind eine *Mappe* zur Schule bringen soll, als ob der Junge den Weg zur Schule nicht kennen würde und sich verlaufen konnte. Die Deutsche, die gut Spanisch sprechen kann, erklärt ihr, dass es sich nicht um eine 'Straßenkarte' handelt, sondern um eine *Mappe*.
3. Ein Spanier steht vor einem Altenwohnheim und der Hausmeister sagt ihm, dass im Gebäude sehr *alte* Menschen wohnen. Der Spanier ist einfach verblüfft, als er viele *alte* Männer sieht, die sehr klein sind. Der Hausmeister macht ihm klar, was 'alt' im Deutschen bedeutet.
4. Eine Spanierin geht auf ein Rockkonzert. Am Eingang darf der Tursteher sie nicht reingehen lassen, weil sie ihm anstatt der *Eintrittskarte* einen Brief der Rockgruppe gibt. Man erklärt ihr den Unterschied zwischen Karte und 'Brief'.
5. Ein Spanier hat Arbeit in einem deutschen Restaurant gefunden. Am ersten Tag sagt die Chefin: 'Ich muss jetzt gehen, finde aber meinen *Mantel* nicht'. Der Spanier kommt schnell mit einer Tischdecke. Die Chefin lacht, weil 'Mantel' auf Spanisch 'Tischdecke' bedeutet, obwohl es genauso klingt wie im Deutschen.

6. Ein spanischer Schreiner, der in Deutschland einen Job bekommen hat, muss den *Griff* einer Schublade reparieren. Er sagt, dass er kein Klempner ist und keine Ahnung über 'Wasserhahne' hat. Der Chef erklärt ihm, was das Wort 'Griff' auf Deutsch bedeutet.
7. Der Schreiner muss später auch ein vollständiges *Regal* zusammenstellen. Als er einen Kasten mit den Teilen bekommt, glaubt er, dass alles ein 'Geschenk' für ihn ist. Einige Mitarbeiter erklären ihm, was ein Regal ist.
8. Ein spanischer Student wohnt bei einer Gastfamilie in Deutschland. Er geht mit den neuen Freunden spazieren und hört, dass er jetzt *Ferien* hat. Er sieht sich um und ist überrascht, dass er nirgendwo ein Riesenrad oder eine 'Kirmes' sieht. Man erklärt ihm, dass die Wörter sehr ähnlich sind, die Bedeutungen sind aber sehr verschieden.
9. Ein Spanier ist zum ersten Mal in Deutschland und soll sich mit einem deutschen Kollegen am Eingang des Schiller-Gymnasiums treffen. Er findet das Gymnasium nicht und ruft den Kollegen an. Er erfährt, dass Gymnasium auf Deutsch kein 'Fitness-Studio' ist, und lacht über das witzige Missverständnis.
10. Eine spanische Ingenieurin reist mit ihrem Ehemann nach München. Am Flughafen wartet der Chauffeur, der wissen möchte, wo ihr *Gatte* ist. Sie sagt, dass sie keine 'Katze' hat. Der Chauffeur ist schockiert und versucht der Frau zu erläutern, was 'Gatte' auf Deutsch bedeutet.

Students, in this study, attended a test three times in order to obtain empirical data to analyse. The test for the students of English is made up of 10 different sentences, which contain one of the words from the above-mentioned list, and the participants have to translate the sentences. This is the list of sentences they had to translate:

1. El circo es una gran diversion para los niños.
2. Ese hombre es un bigotudo.
3. Me encanta el apio en las ensaladas.
4. Es una persona muy sensible, es mejor no hablar con ella.
5. Me apetece un relajante baño al llegar a casa.
6. Han discutido. Ahora están llorando.
7. María está embarazada.
8. El rape es un pescado muy bueno.
9. Hay que remover el arroz cada cinco minutos.
10. Llevo dos días constipado.

The test for the students of German was similar, except for the fact that they had to carry out an inverse translation, from German into Spanish. This was their list of sentences:

1. La prueba oral del nivel básico no dura mucho.
2. Todos los ejercicios están en esta carpeta.
3. Yo también lo encuentro un poco viejo.
4. Mi tío ha comprado una entrada muy barata.
5. ¿Te has probado este abrigo?
6. Debe tener cuidado con la manecilla de la puerta.
7. ¿Tienes un diccionario en la estantería?
8. Muchos jóvenes pasan sus vacaciones en la playa.
9. Enséñame dos años alemán como lengua extranjera en un instituto.
10. Mi esposo es traductor de profesión.

Test I is carried out before the explanation for it shows that the participants did not know the words that they are going to learn. Test II is carried out right after the explanation of the ten pairs of equivocal words they listened to in class in order to show that most of them have paid attention and have understood the meaning of the words learnt. Test III would be done two weeks later because it will shed light upon the question whether or not EG and CG retain and remember the lexicon taught.

2.3. Research hypotheses or intuitions

In accordance with the *foci* of this article, one has to address right away three thematic research questions:

1. Is humour an effective way of teaching the meaning of equivocal words?
2. Does the use of humour in the ESL and the German-as-a-foreign-language classroom enhance understanding the meaning of English and German lexicon?
3. Does humour enhance retention of equivocal words?

In order to address these investigative *foci*, it is important to know that this study was, first of all, elucidated via the question ‘whether scholars perceive humour to be beneficial to target English learning?’

3. Results

Results from this pilot study on both languages illustrate that more students (85% of correct answers) from the EG, who had attended the lesson in which jokes were used to teach some words, passed Test III with a higher number of correct answers than CG (only 58% of correct answers).

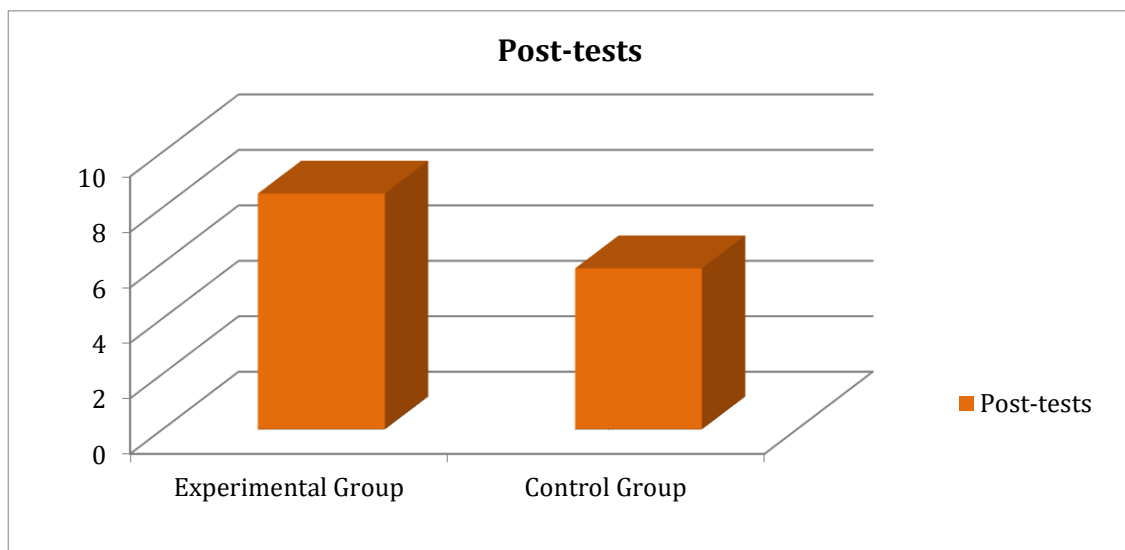


Figure 1: Test III (Post-test) results.

In order to represent the results from Test III for both groups, bearing in mind that not all of the students have the same correct answers, the percentiles have been rounded to the nearest whole number, counting the correct answers for each of the groups in both languages.

Generally speaking, the results show that jokes help them pay more attention during class and increase their level of concentration. However, it is also true that a higher number of female participants—as they also made it explicit in their consent forms by saying that they liked comedies—laugh easier than men.

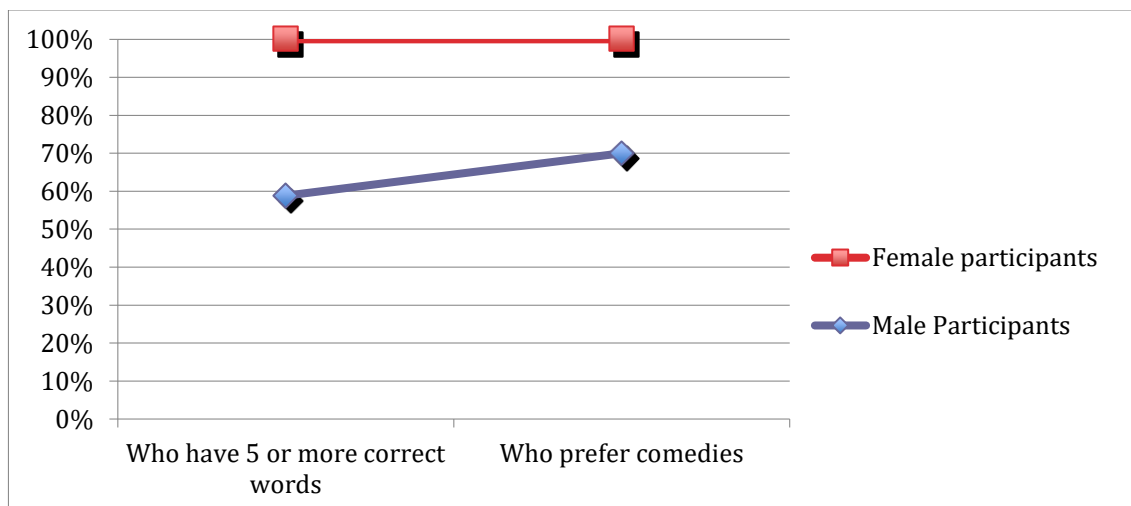


Figure 2: Students' attitudes towards humoristic activities and their results.

This is concomitant with the fact that the sector of women who laughed more were in their thirties. In comparison, only 2% of the men over 30 obtained good results in the post-test.

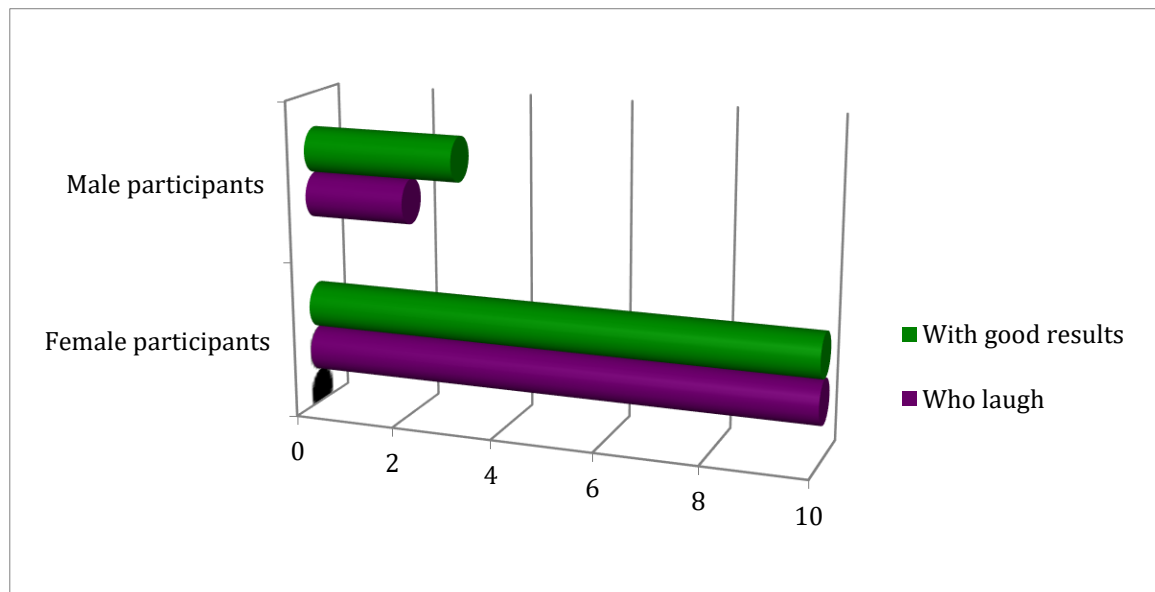


Figure 3: Participants over 30 in the EG.

4. Conclusion

As to be expected, the results of the experiment reflected in the graphs are conclusive. The results seem to strongly support the beneficial effects of pedagogical humour in the language classroom as described in the literature reviewed above. To begin with, the figures reveal that

- humour stimulates learner attention, and in this particular case, it helps students to retain and remember the correct use of equivocal terms;
- the use of this memory improvement strategy, in this experiment, operates more efficiently with the older participants than with the younger;
- within the EG group, female participants responded better to this than male participants.

In conclusion, the evidence provided by the results of the analysis of this case study reinforces the generally accepted assumption that humour increases the degree of motivation of students of any learning levels of proficiency. As can be deduced from the figures and the graphs, in this particular case, joke-telling operates as a factor of retention and memorization of terms whose difficulty resides in their equivocal appearance, such as 'sensitive' and 'sensible', 'bigot(ed)' and 'moustache', 'diversion' and 'fun', 'discuss' and 'argue', or 'pregnant' and 'embarrassed' in English or 'Grundstufe' and 'Heizofen', 'Mappe' and 'Straßenkarte', 'Griff' and 'Wasserhahn', 'Ferien' and 'Kirmes', and 'Gymnasium' and 'Fitness-Studio' in German.

5. Recommendations

Finally, and this is perhaps even more important, this case study contributes to confirm that any utterance, be it a simple word, phrase, or sentence, capable of producing a humorous effect becomes right away a communicative speech-act or event. This power of humour derives from the fact that humour, like laughter or pain, is not only a real-life experience but also an experience, which is the essence of life.

Appendix A: English

4. Diversion = desvío
5. Fun, enjoyment = diversión
6. Bigoted = intolerante
7. a big moustache = bigotudo
8. Celery = apio
9. Quickly = rápidamente, con celeridad
10. Sensitive = sensible
11. Sensible = prudente, sensato
12. Relaxing = relajante
13. Laxative = laxante
14. Discussing = hablar, analizar
15. Argue = discutir
16. Embarrassed = avergonzado/a
17. Pregnant = embarazada
18. Rape = violación
19. Monkfish = rape
20. Remove = quitar
21. Move, mix = remover
22. Constipated = estrenido
23. Cold = constipado

Appendix B: German

1. Grundstufe = nivel básico/elemental
2. Heizofen = estufa
3. Mappe = carpeta
4. Straßenkarte = mapa de la ciudad
5. alt = viejo/mayor
6. groß = alto
7. Eintrittskarte = entrada
8. Brief = carta
9. Mantel = abrigo
10. Tischdecke = mantel
11. Griff = mango/manecilla
12. Wasserhahn = grifo
13. Regal = estantería
14. Geschenk = regalo
15. Ferien = vacaciones
16. Kirmes = feria de atracciones
17. Gymnasium = instituto
18. Fitness-Studio = gimnasio
19. Gatte = esposo
20. Katze = gato

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