



Comedy as resource for learning culture in EFL

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Abstract

This study explores the potential of comedy as a pedagogical tool for teaching culture in the English as Foreign Language (EFL) classroom. Through a qualitative content analysis of sample materials from three popular comedic genres—situational comedy, sketch comedy, and stand-up comedy—this research demonstrates how comedy can engage learners with cultural norms, cultural stereotypes, popular culture, and socio-cultural critique, making cultural learning accessible and engaging in a foreign language context. Pedagogically, the findings suggest that integrating comedic content into EFL instruction can enhance students' cross-cultural awareness by improving their understanding of the humour, shared perspectives, and behavioral norms within the target culture. Comedic material is shown to provide opportunities to learn both contextually appropriate and inappropriate behavior. Additionally, analysis of satire in sample materials shows the potential for enhancing creativity and critical thinking, as learners are required to analyze and interpret underlying messages, rhetorical mechanisms, and irony used to criticize institutions, ideas, and norms. The frequent use of stereotypes in comedy can furthermore serve as a pedagogical tool for developing learners' ability to recognize and critically evaluate biases and misconceptions. The study emphasizes the need for careful selection of comedic material to ensure suitability and effective learning outcomes.

Keywords: comedy, cultural learning, EFL



Introduction

Background

Humour is an essential aspect of communication and presents valuable opportunities for enhancing second language acquisition. Research has identified various benefits of humour in language learning, particularly in affective and cognitive domains. It has been shown to foster a positive and motivating learning environment by reducing anxiety and encouraging participation (Bilokçuoğlu & Debreli, 2018; Neff & Dewaele, 2023). In terms of linguistic acquisition, it was found that humour facilitates retention and recall of new linguistic structures and vocabulary (Schmidt, 1994; Zabidin, 2015). It furthermore provides authentic contexts in which learners can develop pragmatic competence, including the ability to recognize and interpret sarcasm, irony, and cultural references (Cezar, 2021). These elements are crucial for effective intercultural communication and help bridge the gap between textbook knowledge and real-world application.

Because humour comprehension is closely associated with socio-cultural and linguistic competence, requiring learners to interpret subtle meanings, cultural allusions, and pragmatic signals, the pedagogical significance of humour in language education has been increasingly acknowledged (Askildson, 2005; Bell & Pomerantz, 2015; Wagner & Urios-Aparisi, 2011). However, it remains largely overlooked in secondary and tertiary EFL curricula (Baleghizadeh & Ghoreishi, 2014; Bell, 2011). This appears to be primarily due to the difficulties associated with its effective integration into language instruction (Ziyaeemehr et al., 2011). The use of authentic comedic materials offers a promising avenue for addressing this gap.

The intersection of humour, culture, and language in comedy provides a unique space for EFL learners to engage with the target language and culture in an immersive and meaningful way. The insight EFL learners gain into cultural differences and similarities can make them more proficient communicating in multicultural contexts, help them navigate intercultural interactions more easily, and cultivate mutual understanding and respect (Oikonomou & Papadopoulos, 2024; Papadopoulos & Osae, 2024).

This paper explores the potential role of comedy in cultural learning within EFL education, with particular focus on three genres of comedy, namely situational, sketch, and stand-up comedy. It aims to identify the potential and suitability of each genre to aid EFL learners in understanding aspects of the target culture. By examining how various types of humour can elucidate different cultural aspects, it demonstrates the potential of comedy as a meaningful and impactful approach to cultural learning in the EFL context.

Research questions

In accordance with the purpose for this study as outlined in the previous section, the following questions are proposed:

1. What genres of comedic material are suited to contribute to cultural competence in EFL context?
2. How can the use of these comedic materials in language learning contribute to learners' intercultural competence and critical awareness?

Literature Review

Defining Culture and Intercultural Competence

Culture encompasses not only visible aspects such as customs, traditions, and artifacts (big 'C' culture) but also deeply ingrained beliefs, values, and assumptions (small 'c' culture) (Hall, 1976; Tomalin & Stemplesky, 2013). Given the globalized status of English, the idea of teaching a single, standardized target culture has

been challenged (Prodromou, 1992) in favour of an intercultural approach (Byram, 1997). This approach has become a pivotal framework in EFL instruction, emphasizing the need for learners to develop intercultural competence (ICC), which includes attitudes, knowledge, and skills necessary for effective cross-cultural communication (Papadopoulos, 2020). Scholars such as Chen (2005) and Gudykunst (2004) have attempted to conceptualize ICC, often defining it through affective, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions (Chao, 2013). Byram (2011) summarizes a culturally competent language learner as a person with an open mind, with curiosity and courage, and with engagement and responsibilities.

Sitcoms as Tools for Cultural Learning

Television sitcoms have been increasingly examined as tool for use in the EFL classroom. This genre engages viewers with relatable characters and narratives in various situations, making them effective tools for language and culture learning (Gregori-Signes, 2017). Research has shown that sitcoms allow learners to be immersed in the linguistic and socio-cultural dimensions of the target language. For example, studies have examined the cultural representations in popular sitcoms: *The Big Bang Theory* (Li, 2016), *The Simpsons* (Rucynski, 2011), and *Friends* (Mudawe, 2020). These studies suggest that sitcoms contribute to increased cultural awareness through knowledge of cultural traditions, idiomatic expressions, values, and pragmatic competence. Similarly, Espinar & Rodríguez (2022) examined *Superstore* as a means to teach American values such as self-reliance and equal opportunity, arguing that sitcoms can help learners critically engage with socio-economic issues. Yu (2014), through an analysis of *Friends* transcripts, reveals differences in humour use and politeness strategies between male and female characters, which align with broader cultural gender norms. Such insights can help learners decode implicit cultural messages embedded in humorous exchanges.

The Role of Film and TV in Intercultural Communicative Competence

Stringer & Cassiday (2009) and Guiso, Sapienza, & Zingales (2006) emphasize that culture extends beyond nationality and ethnicity to include behavioral norms and shared perspectives. In EFL settings, learners must be equipped with the knowledge and skills to navigate these cultural nuances (Luk, 2012; Setyono & Widodo, 2019; Papadopoulos & Hathaway, 2024; Osae & Papadopoulos, 2024). Several studies have examined the impact of audiovisual media on intercultural competence. Wardhany (2022) highlights the effectiveness of movies in enhancing cultural competence, supporting Byram's (1997) expansion of communicative competence into ICC. Chaya & Inpin (2020) found that Thai university students improved their ICC through movie-based learning, particularly in attitudes, intercultural knowledge, and interpretive skills. Similarly, Lee (2017) demonstrated that Korean students developed a more nuanced understanding of U.S. holiday culture through film-based discussions and worksheets.

Summary of the Literature

The body of research reviewed suggests that films and TV series, with particular reference to sitcoms, serve as a powerful tool for cultural learning in EFL contexts. As language educators seek to systematically develop learners' intercultural skills (Baker & Fang, 2021), integrating comedy into the curriculum presents a dynamic and effective approach to achieving this goal. So far, the methodology of the majority of studies involves using one particular film or TV series as source material for explicit instruction or focused discussion of specific cultural aspects, often including linguistic aspects such as idiomatic expressions and pragmatic aspects like speech acts. However, the genre of comedy and type of humour have not been associated with the potential for cultural learning, nor has an overview been offered to compare these genres for use in an EFL context. The present study aims to address that gap with reference to situational comedy, sketch comedy, and stand-up comedy.

Research Methods

Using a qualitative, corpus-based approach, the process of data collection and analysis involved reviewing available resources, identifying relevant characteristics and representative samples of these resources, highlighting possible challenges, and analysing the potential of the material as resource for developing cultural competence in EFL learners.

The first step was conducting a comprehensive review of all types of comedy that are available and categorizing them according to genre. Three genres suited for use in an EFL context were selected: situational comedy, sketch comedy, and stand-up comedy.

From each genre, two or three representative samples of differing types and, where possible, with contradistinctive characteristics, were then selected for close analysis and discussion. In the case of television series, such as situational comedies, pilot episodes were used.

Analysis of the material required, firstly, the retrieval of transcripts of the audio-visual material. These were, as a rule, readily available online on fan pages or dedicated websites. To ensure accuracy, I cross-referenced these transcripts with the original comedic materials by viewing the episodes and verifying their fidelity to the spoken dialogue. Notes were added where necessary to reflect relevant paralinguistic elements in the audio-visual material. For the purposes of this study, linguistic elements such as idiomatic language and pragmatic elements like speech acts and implicatures were not included in the discussion. The samples were analysed in terms of the characteristics of the humour and the socio-cultural themes they contain. Certain comedy may depend on a certain social dynamic for creating humour, or humour may be driven by the characters and their personalities, or by a sense of sympathy or superiority on the part of the viewer. Likewise, the socio-cultural themes that comprise the background of the humour, such as race, society, social events, friendship, demographics, or daily life, are not only relevant because of the role they play in the humour, but, in the case of EFL learning, because of the opportunities they offer for culture acquisition and cross-cultural understanding. I deemed it therefore advantageous to include a discussion of these in the analysis, supplemented by examples.

Following the comprehensive review of authentic humorous material available for use in EFL, the material was systematically analysed to determine the pedagogical potential it holds for higher intermediary and advanced EFL learners. The significance of these proficiency levels is that such learners would be in a better position to engage with the humour in comedy (Chen & Dewaele, 2018; Shibata, Terasawa & Umeda, 2014) and have attentional resources to spare for learning about cultural issues and evaluating social criticism.

Results and Discussion

Types and Examples of Comedy

Situational Comedy

An analysis of situational comedy shows that sitcoms share certain common traits, such as employing character-based humour, arising from the humorous traits of the characters and the efforts of these characters to negotiate everyday situations. The nature of these situations varies depending on the setting and themes of the series. The short format of episodes, each with a complete story that can easily be further divided along transitions between parallel storylines, makes situational comedy very practical for use in the EFL classroom. The endearing qualities of the characters and general absence of profanity in sitcoms make them a safe choice for instructors to use with a variety of students. However, there is considerable variety within the genre, as different shows often display divergent characteristics, most notably regarding the type and salience of the humour.

The main examples of situational comedy selected for discussion and illustration are *The Big Bang Theory* and *Community*. These shows were chosen because, firstly, they are set in different social envi-

ronments. *The Big Bang Theory* centers around the interaction among friends and family, whereas *Community* is set in a community college and focuses on the mingling and clashing of demographics. They represent the two main varieties of sitcoms—those with and without a laugh track—and feature distinct types of humour, particularly in terms of salience, style, and complexity.

The Big Bang Theory generally features humour markers, such as a laugh track or overt reactions from characters, humour that is universal, conventional, and not derived from culture-specific references, as well as humour based on more obvious exaggeration of behaviour and characteristics, whereas the humour in *Community* is relatively covert in comparison, relying on the audience to uncover it. The humour is often packaged in a dead-pan delivery, with the characters giving few clues in their reactions and expressions that something out of the ordinary has taken place.

As sitcoms consist of interactions set in specific social environments, they are excellent models for the types of issues, behaviour, and considerations that apply to these settings. EFL learners gain exposure to the method and spirit of many types of interactions and speech acts, such as disagreeing, ingratiating, teasing, threatening, defusing tension, and many others, among people in varying relationships with one another.

Sketch Comedy

Sketch comedy consists of a series of short, humorous scenes or vignettes, known as sketches. Sketches are generally much shorter than the other genres of comedy, making them particularly suitable for use in the EFL classroom. The brevity of sketches, together with the fact that they are independent and self-contained narratives, means that instructors are free to select whichever sketch they find appropriate for the lesson, without needing to concern themselves with the chronological order of episodes or plots.

Characters in sketch comedy tend to be stereotypical, albeit often exaggerated, in order to expediently and rapidly evoke a script in the viewer that serves as an element of the script opposition or incongruity, as opposed to the more nuanced and eccentric characters in sitcoms. In sketch comedy, the viewer does not laugh at the characters themselves as much as the type they represent and the message that the sketch conveys.

Sketch comedy represents a wide array of possibilities in terms of themes, situations, characters, language, and humour type. Whereas sitcoms typically follow the same set of characters within a constant social setting, using a certain style of humour and language, sketches are virtually limitless in this regard. This provides the instructor with a range of choices and the possibility to select sketches with themes relevant to a specific topic or goal of a lesson.

One of the distinguishing characteristics of sketch comedy is the tendency to satirize aspects of society or humanity, making it suitable for discussions on sociocultural issues and exercises in critical thinking. Because of the stereotypical nature of the characters, sketch comedy lends itself particularly well to the satirical portrayal of various aspects of society by virtue of what these characters symbolize. This satirical aspect of sketch comedy can foster a critical perspective of the target culture and cultivate critical thinking skills in EFL learners.

Two collections of sketch comedy selected for discussion are *Key and Peele* sketches, available for viewing on the Comedy Central channel on YouTube, and *Monty Python*, which can be found on Monty Python's YouTube Channel. These were chosen because of their popularity, their variety of themes and characters, and as representative of both American and British humour.

Stand-up Comedy

Stand-up comedy differs from most other types of comedy in that it takes the form of a monologue, rather than a dialogue. As the comedian speaks directly to the audience, he/she needs to build a rapport with the listener, which makes for a more authentic type of communication. However, stand-up comedy lacks the interactive nature of real-life communication.

As comedians have their own signature type of humour and preference for certain topics, there is a large selection of themes and a variety of language styles and humour types which the individual comedians bring to the genre. Satire also often features in stand-up comedy, bringing concomitant opportunities for culture acquisition and critical thinking practice.

The format of stand-up comedy routines, being on average an hour long, may present a challenge for use in the EFL classroom. However, the tendency for a routine to include several distinct topics with clear transitions makes it relatively easy to divide it into more manageable portions.

The social and cultural themes featuring in stand-up comedy are as varied and numerous as the comedians themselves. The most common themes include family and relationships, cultural differences, sex and dating, pop culture, personal anecdotes, politics, society, and observations of various aspects of daily life. This genre therefore constitutes a potential powerhouse of cultural learning for EFL learners. Specific artists generally prefer certain topics, which could help instructors when searching for specific material. For example, certain comedians are characteristically satirical and have a penchant for social criticism, such as George Carlin, while others tend to draw on racial issues and cultural differences (Russel Peters, Dave Chappelle, Trevor Noah) or find their humour in personal and family anecdotes (Michael McIntyre, Gabriel Iglesias, Kevin Hart).

For the purposes of analysing and comparing the features of standup comedy, excerpts from two relatively distinct styles of stand-up were used: George Carlin's *Back in Town* and Michael McIntyre's *Showman*. These differ in various aspects. Carlin's material is decidedly satirical, including scathing observations and comments on modern society, religion, and right-wing politics, whereas McIntyre's routines usually center around family life, cultural differences, and humorous anecdotes, and is not typically critical in spirit. While Carlin uses profanity and explicit imagery, McIntyre's material is usually clean and suitable for all ages.

Potential for Cultural Learning

The foregoing discussion on the characteristics of various comedy genres—situational comedy, sketch comedy, and stand-up comedy—demonstrates their potential as tools for cultural learning in the EFL classroom. Each genre presents unique opportunities for learners to engage with cultural norms, social values, and critical perspectives on societal issues through humor. The following section will explore this potential in more detail, showing how various aspects of comedy can enhance cross-cultural understanding in EFL learners.

Comedy as Popular Culture

The first and most obvious form of cultural learning offered by authentic comedy is learning about the genre itself. Comedy is a part, and a particularly crucial part, of the popular culture of a community, and as such can serve as a cultural artifact in itself. It is a living example of popular culture, from which EFL learners can gain an understanding of the humour and sensibilities of the culture, including comedic styles, themes, and comedic devices. They can thus become more attuned to cultural humour and gain insights into what is considered funny or amusing in different societies. Comedy permeates various aspects of popular culture, influencing entertainment, media, and social interactions. It further plays a role in shaping cultural identities and collective experiences, as it reflects the shared experiences, perspectives, and humour of a society (Fine & Soucey, 2005; Guenther et al., 2015). As such, comedy is conducive to social integration into new cultures (Tesnohlikova, 2024).

Cultural Stereotypes

Comedy often explores cultural perspectives, stereotypes, and social issues in a lighthearted or satirical manner. Through comedy, EFL learners can therefore gain exposure to different viewpoints and

stereotypes and develop an understanding of various intercultural relations. With some guidance from the instructor, learners can reflect on the ways in which stereotypes shape perceptions and attitudes towards different cultures. This would enable them not only to recognize but also to challenge biases and misconceptions, analyze the origins and implications of stereotypes, and evaluate their accuracy and fairness, thereby developing a more informed and nuanced perspective on cultural diversity.

Cultural stereotypes serve as a source of humour in many types of comedy. In *The Big Bang Theory*, for example, Sheldon's mother, who is from Texas, is stereotypically portrayed as a staunch Christian, while Howard's mom is a stereotypical Jewish mother – loud, nagging, and overbearing, interfering in their children's lives long after they have become adults. Raj's parents, being Indian, are depicted as overly concerned with status, career, and marriage. In the series *Community*, Abed draws attention to the stereotypical view Americans have of Arabic people as threats to national security, as well as to the friction that can result from cultural differences:

I'm only half Arabic, actually. My dad is Palestinian. He's a U.S. citizen, he's not a threat to national security or anything. Lot of people want to know after they meet him because he has angry energy. Not like angry at America, just angry at my mom for leaving. Although she did leave because he was angry, and he was angry because she's American.

Another example of cultural stereotyping in comedy can be found in *Showman*, where McIntyre points out the differences he has observed between American and British people. Here he plays on the well-known stereotype that Americans are more outgoing, assertive, and expressive, in contrast to British people, who are seen to be more reserved and understated, with a penchant for dry humour and sarcasm.

Americans are, um... They're an amazing audience, I've got to tell you. They're amazing. As an audience, they're so... Ready, up for a good... They're wild. Wild. Because, with respect to British people, and I want you to know, I am one, so I'm the same as you. When I went to America, they were... wild, whooping, cheering, laughing and everything. I went on social media after the show. Everything was in capitals. "Michael McIntyre was awesome! He blew the roof off. He was incredible!" I don't get that here. I'm going to be honest with you. The best I get from British people is, "He didn't disappoint." Even when we're happy... we have to reference our disappointing lives.

In addition to stereotypical depictions and descriptions of national cultures, many comedies often employ stereotypical portrayals of aspects within the culture, such as role stereotypes and occupational stereotypes. Sketch comedy is a particularly rich source of such stereotypes because of its short format and subsequent lack of character depth, as well as its typically satirical nature. This leads to characters often being symbolical representations of certain aspects of society. In Monty Python's *The Meaning of Life*, for example, such stereotypes can be seen in the portrayal of the huge Catholic family and judgmental Protestant neighbor, the pedantic schoolmaster, the obsequious servers in a restaurant, and the stiff upper-lipped military officers. In Key and Peele's comedy, many stereotypical depictions of African American culture can be found, such as in *Yo Mama*, *Soul Food*, and *Substitute Teacher*. Other stereotypes such as hen-pecked men (*I Said Bitch*), competition show judges (*Gideon's Kitchen*), police (*Popsicle Arrest*), and sports commentators (*If Sports Commentators Had no Filter*) also feature in their sketches.

Cultural stereotypes are ways in which certain tendencies in cultures, occupations, or roles are symbolized, and as such can be an accessible and useful resource for cultural learning. Yet it is essential for instructors to approach the topic of cultural stereotypes with caution and sensitivity. While an understanding of stereotypes can be beneficial for EFL learners, it is also true that stereotypes are often oversimplified and inaccurate representations of a culture. They can perpetuate prejudice, discrimination, and misunderstandings if not critically evaluated. Yet with the right approach, instructors can use stereotypes in the classroom as springboards for discussion, creating opportunities for learners to explore dif-

ferent perspectives, challenge biases, and develop cultural competence. By promoting critical thinking, empathy, and open-mindedness, instructors can thus help EFL learners to constructively engage with cultural stereotypes.

Criticism of Socio-Cultural Phenomena

In many forms of comedy, sketch and stand-up comedy in particular, satire is an important ingredient and source of humour. As satire often targets aspects of society and culture, it has the potential not only to teach EFL learners about these aspects of the target culture but also to evoke critical reflection and discussion of these elements of society. It can thus help learners gain a deeper understanding of English-speaking cultures through engaging with it in an authentic context. As satirical humour often addresses current events and social issues, it is highly relevant to learners' lives and experiences in the real world. Satire furthermore encourages creativity and critical thinking skills, in that learners are required to identify, interpret, and evaluate the messages conveyed and mechanisms employed in satirical humour.

As was mentioned in the discussion of sketch comedy, this genre is often rich in satire, being of limited length and using stereotypical characters to symbolize social and cultural phenomena. In *The Meaning of Life*, for instance, a wide range of both major and minor elements of society are satirized, beginning at birth up until death. In the sketch *The Miracle of Birth* (Part 1), modern medical care is portrayed as driven by money and politics, with medical personnel devoid of empathy and people skills. In Part 2 of the sketch, the Catholic stance on birth control and the pompousness and puritanism of Protestantism are ridiculed.

Throughout this film, issues central to society are held up to derision, such as religion, education, and warfare. In the *Boarding School* sketch, for instance, the biblical language and ecclesiastical tone of the headmaster, reading a passage that are completely irrelevant and meaningless to the young audience, satirizes not only the conventions of Christianity but also the fusion of school and religion.

And spotteth twice they the camels before the third hour. And so the Midianites went forth to Ram Gilead in Kadesh Bilgemath by Shor Ethra Regalion, to the house of Gash-Bil-Betheul-Bazda, he who brought the butter dish to Balshazar and the tent peg to the house of Rashomon, and there slew they the goats, yea, and placed they the bits in little pots. Here endeth the lesson.

The hymn sung by the Chaplain and the children satirizes both the Christian dogma of hell and the fear that forms the basis of many religions, by casting it in culinary terms and taking the form of a supplication not to be punished.

*Oh Lord, please don't burn us,
Don't grill or toast your flock,
Don't put us on the barbecue,
Or simmer us in stock,
Don't braise or bake or boil us,
Or stir-fry us in a wok
Oh please don't lightly poach us,
Or baste us with hot fat,
Don't fricassee or roast us,
Or boil us in a vat,
And please don't stick thy servants Lord,
In a Rotissomat.*

In a subsequent sketch, a sex education class features the headmaster, who, in spite of the subject that is usually fascinating to high school boys, and despite a physical demonstration of coitus with his wife, manages to render the class dull and lifeless with his pedantic style. In these sketches, the comedians lightheartedly ridicule the rituals and conventions accompanying organized religion as well as the heavy-handed pedantism of formal education in British boarding schools.

In addition to these issues, central to Western society, *The Meaning of Life* also makes fun of more trivial social phenomena, such as the obsequious but secretly hostile attitude of waiting staff towards restaurant patrons, the difficulty married couples have making conversation, and the excessive deference shown to medical doctors in Western society. Key and Peele's sketches likewise make fun of issues central to American society, such as racism, slavery, popular entertainment, and the workplace, as well as smaller social issues like restaurant etiquette, insincere politicians, romantic episodes, and married life.

Some stand-up comedians, such as George Carlin, have decidedly satirical tendencies in their sets. In *Back in Town*, he ridicules serious issues such as right-wing politics, the death penalty, the prison system, democracy in the U.S., and American consumerism, as well as smaller socio-cultural norms and behaviour like wearing earrings, wearing cowboy hats or reversed baseball caps, constantly recording video of everything, hyphenated surnames, telephone plans, and motivational tapes. In the following excerpt, he uses irony to criticize the death penalty, commercialism, American society, and religion all in the space of a minute:

And- and let me say this to you my interesting Judeo-Christian friends. Not only- not only do I recommend crucifixions, I'd be in favor of bringing back beheadings! Huh? Beheadings on TV, slow-motion, instant replay? And maybe you could let the heads roll down a little hill. And fall into one of five numbered holes. Let the people at home gamble on which hole the head is going to fall into. And you do it in a stadium so the mob can gamble on it too. Raise a little more money. And if you want to expand the violence a little longer to sell a few more commercials, instead of using an axe, you do the beheadings with a hand saw! Hey, don't bail out on me now, God damnit! The blood is already on our hands, all we're talking about is a matter of degree. You want something a little more delicate, we'll do the beheadings with an olive fork. That would be nice. And it would take a good God damn long time. There's a lot of good things we could be doing.

From these examples, it is evident that satirical comedy is a rich source of cultural knowledge for the EFL learner. It can serve to alert EFL learners to non-literal use of language and how irony can be used to criticize institutions, ideas, and norms. Exposure to satire brings a fresh perspective on many socio-cultural aspects of the target culture, and the opportunity to engage with cultural content in an enjoyable way. It makes accessible not only the various elements that constitute a culture and society but also the countercultures and reactions to such elements. As such, satire presents EFL instructors with invaluable material to initiate and fuel discussions on culture in the classroom. Classroom exercises can include an evaluation of the cultural issues themselves, identification and evaluation of the implied criticism in the comedy, and comparisons between the target culture and learners' native culture.

Appropriate and Inappropriate Social Behaviour

Certain forms of comedy typically involve social interactions in various settings, where characters participate in situations that are designed to resemble scenes from daily life. This is especially true of situational and sketch comedy. In such genres, there are often opportunities for EFL learners to observe the behavioral norms and conventions that apply to these situations in the target culture.

Comedy also often relies on inappropriate behaviour as a source of humour, but this very inappropriateness can serve as a valuable cultural learning tool. In many comedic contexts, inappropriate actions

are marked as such through humour cues, such as exaggerated reactions from other characters, laughter, or awkward silences, which signal to the audience that certain actions deviate from social norms. This allows language learners to discern what is considered unacceptable or impolite within a given culture. Moreover, for inappropriate behaviour to be effective as humour, it must be juxtaposed against a clear framework of appropriate conduct. Comedy operates on the principle of incongruity, where the humour emerges from the contrast between expected norms and the unexpected deviation. To heighten this effect, sitcoms and comedic sketches often establish and meticulously follow conventional social rules before introducing a violation, making the inappropriateness—and by extension, the underlying cultural norms—more conspicuous. By engaging with such comedic content, learners not only observe what is deemed inappropriate but also develop an implicit understanding of the cultural expectations that shape acceptable behaviour.

In *The Meaning of Life (Middle Age)*, the norms governing interactions when dining at a restaurant, for instance, are demonstrated in the sketch where the waiter offers conversation topics to the married couple. Despite the deviation from the real-life situation, where food is offered to customers, the formulae and conventions are typical to interactions between guests and servers.

Waiter: Good evening. Would you care for something to talk about? (Hands them a menu)
 Mr Hendy: Oh, that would be wonderful.
 Waiter: Our special tonight is minorities...
 Mr Hendy: Oh, that sounds interesting...
 Mrs Hendy: What's this conversation here...?
 ...
 Mr Hendy: Oh... Waiter... this conversation isn't very good.
 Waiter: Oh, I'm sorry, sir... We do have one today that's not on the menu.
 It's a sort of... er... speciality of the house.

In *The Meaning of Life (Death)* the conventions of social behaviour at a dinner party are exemplified in the guests' interaction. Here their dialogue is very appropriate to the setting, with the only incongruous element being that the newly arrived guest is the Grim Reaper. The hospitable way of inviting an unexpected guest in, introducing him to the guests already present, offering refreshments, bidding him to sit down, including him in the conversation by showing interest in his occupation and apprising him of the foregoing conversation, and lightening the conversation with witticisms are all aspects of socio-cultural behaviour that constitutes potential for cultural acquisition by EFL learners.

Angela: Who is it, darling?
 Geoffrey: It's a Mr. Death or something... he's come about the reaping... [to Reaper]
 I don't think we need any at the moment.
 Angela: [appearing] Hallo. Well don't leave him hanging around outside darling, ask him in.
 Geoffrey: Darling, I don't think it's quite the moment...
 Angela: Do come in, come along in, come and have a drink, do. Come on...
 [She returns to her guests.] It's one of the little men from the village... Do come in please.
 This is Howard Katzenberg from Philadelphia...
 Katzenberg: Hi.
 Angela: And his wife, Debbie.
 Debbie: Hallo there.
 Angela: And these are the Portland-Smythes, Jeremy and Fiona.
 Fiona: Good evening.
 Angela: This is Mr. Death. Well do get Mr. Death a drink, darling. [To company] Mr. Death is a reaper.
 Reaper: The Grim Reaper.

Angela: *Hardly surprising in this weather, ha ha ha...*
 Katzenberg: *So you reap around here, do you, Mr Death?*
 Reaper: *I am the Grim Reaper.*
 Geoffrey: *[Sotto voce] That's about all he says... [Loudly] There's your drink, Mr. Death.*
 Angela: *Do sit down.*
 Debbie: *We were just talking about some of the awful problems facing the...*

As mentioned earlier, behaving in ways that deviate from social norms, often seen in situational comedy, may provide useful clues to what these norms are, in that (a) the laugh track or other humour markers serve as clues that behaviour is inappropriate in the given situation, and (b) there is often an attempt at normalcy or a reaction against these deviations from other characters.

For example, in the opening scene of *The Big Bang Theory*, Leonard helps the receptionist with her crossword puzzle without having been asked. Instances of humour, marked by the laugh track, are indicated with the # symbol.

Leonard: *One across is Aegean, eight down is Nabokov, twenty-six across is MCM, # fourteen down is... move your finger... # phylum, which makes fourteen across Port-au-Prince. See, Papa Doc's capital idea, that's Port-au-Prince. Haiti. #*

Here, after providing the first answer to the crossword, and even the second, there is no humour marker. This is an indication that helping someone with a piece of a puzzle they are busy solving does not deviate from acceptable behaviour to a great enough degree to elicit laughter. The first instance of laughter marks the point where the receptionist, judged by her expression, and the audience realize that Leonard is planning to solve all the outstanding clues in the crossword. This constitutes a more pronounced social infringement, in that it spoils the enjoyment that the other person hopes to get from solving the puzzle. When the offending party then has the impertinence to tell the other to move her finger for an unobstructed view, there is more laughter, indicating even further deviation from acceptable behaviour. After Leonard has solved all the remaining clues, there is an uncomfortable moment as the peeved receptionist looks at him in silence, and Leonard's own discomfort is apparent when he completes his act with the word "Haiti." This is marked with another instance of laughter, which, together with his discomfort, serves to underscore the inappropriateness of his action.

The interaction between Leonard, Sheldon, and Penny when they meet her for the first time is another example of how cultural knowledge can be acquired from the show. In this situation, meeting a new neighbor, EFL learners can see behaviour both normal and acceptable in such a situation as well as behaviour that is not. Phrases like the following are not marked as humorous, and can serve as examples of what is appropriate to say in such situations:

Leonard: *We don't mean to interrupt; we live across the hall.*
 ...
 Penny: *Oh, okay, well, guess I'm your new neighbor, Penny.*
 Leonard: *Leonard, Sheldon.*
 ...
 Leonard: *Well, uh, oh, welcome to the building.*
 Penny: *Thank you, maybe we can have coffee sometime.*

In contrast, interactions like the one below, resulting from nervous bashfulness, is marked with laughter, indicating that such interactions are not standard. Here the first few turns, seen by the absence of the laugh track, are considered socially acceptable, but when repeated are marked as humorous, indicating the awkwardness of the situation. This is reinforced by the questioning tone of the last turn.

Penny: Oh, hi!
 Leonard: Hi.
 Sheldon: Hi.
 Leonard: Hi.
 Sheldon: Hi. #
 Penny: Hi? #

At other times, the reactions of the characters themselves can indicate the deviation from social norms. Many such examples can be found in comedy, especially situational comedy, but one would suffice as a demonstration. In the following interaction, Sheldon points out Leonard's faux pas in his inept attempt to invite Penny for lunch. Penny's reaction furthermore shows her initial failure to infer Leonard's intention from what he had said. These types of reactions serve as additional clues that a character's behaviour deviates from the socially acceptable norm.

Leonard: Anyway, um. We brought home Indian food. And, um, I know that moving can be stressful, and I find that when I'm undergoing stress, that good food and company can have a comforting effect. Also, curry is a natural laxative, and I don't have to tell you that, uh, a clean colon is just one less thing to worry about. #
 Sheldon: Leonard, I'm no expert here but I believe in the context of a luncheon invitation, you might want to skip the reference to bowel movements. #
 Penny: Oh, you're inviting me over to eat?

The above examples show that many opportunities exist in comedy for EFL speakers to learn appropriate, and inappropriate, behaviour in certain social contexts. Observing characters' behaviour, reactions, and communication styles can help learners understand the social norms and etiquette governing various situations in English-speaking cultures. Comedy also frequently reflects cultural values, taboos, and idiosyncrasies. With the guidance of the instructor, these instances can be made explicit through exercises like identifying the inappropriate elements of behaviour, suggesting substitutes for such behaviour, and role-playing the inappropriate interaction and a corrected version.

It is evident that comedy serves as more than just entertainment; it is a powerful pedagogical tool that can facilitate cultural learning in the EFL classroom. Comedy is an accessible and engaging way to expose learners to cultural references, societal norms, and even critical reflections on social issues. As humor continues to evolve alongside cultural and societal changes, its place in the EFL classroom will remain a valuable and dynamic resource for promoting deeper intercultural understanding.

Conclusion

Summary

This study examined the potential of comedy as a pedagogical tool for teaching cultural aspects in the EFL classroom. It investigated the characteristics and suitability of three popular genres of comedy, namely situational comedy, sketch comedy, and stand-up comedy, with reference to their potential in the EFL context. Through a close analysis of samples of these three genres of comedy, it was observed how their content can aid learners in discovering various aspects of the target culture, such as popular culture, cultural stereotypes, social norms, and criticism of socio-cultural issues. Examining and discussing content of comedic material, learners stand to gain insights into many aspects of English-speaking cultures, such as cultural norms, values, and social dynamics. This would be instrumental in enhancing their cross-cultural skills and understanding and make cultural issues more accessible and engaging.

Pedagogical Implications

From a pedagogical perspective, these findings highlight the benefits of incorporating humour into language instruction, particularly for developing cultural competence. Teachers can use comedy strategically to show cultural differences, facilitate reflection on cross-cultural communication, and provide authentic language input. Supplementary activities, such as guided discussions, journals, and role-playing can further help students navigate cultural nuances.

Limitations of the Study

Although the potential benefits of employing authentic comedy in the EFL classroom have been demonstrated in this study, its application is limited by factors such as the proficiency and the age of the learners. The comedic material discussed in this study requires an existing level of English proficiency among learners for it to be used productively. This is especially the case when wishing to learn more advanced features such as cultural nuances and humour comprehension, which presupposes the ability to understand the language code to a sufficient degree. Similarly, many comedic materials contain profanity and sexual references which would be unsuitable for younger learners.

The genre of comedy being so vast, consisting of numerous subgenres, each of which includes a wide variety of titles with their own styles and idiosyncrasies, the examples employed in this study are a relatively small sample of what is available. As such, generalizations on the characteristics of genres are subject to slight variations from one title to the next, or even depart from them in unusual cases. Yet such generalizations are helpful to distinguish between genres and to make the task of selecting material simpler for the instructor. Also, finding such rich pedagogical potential in a relatively small set of samples attests to the capacity of comedy as resource in EFL instruction.

Suggestions for Future Research

This study has identified a range of potential benefits that future research may appraise by experiment. Of particular interest would be how much EFL speakers can learn implicitly from watching English comedy, considering the array of linguistic, humour, and cultural features they could benefit from and the unfeasibility to make them all the subject of explicit instruction. Long-term studies in this regard may be especially enlightening. Research into the practical implications, challenges, and considerations for teachers will be of considerable value in the progressive and effective integration of comedic material into EFL instruction.

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