

# ELT Lite '1

## What's Funny about ELT?

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Heard any good language jokes lately? This column would be interested in hearing and perhaps sharing those suitable for "mixed company," (The assumption behind that idiom is that MEN, of course, regularly share all sorts of scandalous material, but that gentle and protected women would die of shock if they heard such stuff!) or any of those hilarious true stories that are part of language teaching. We all need a laugh—some of us more than others, and some DAYS far more than others.

Language "jokes" often come about because of mistakes learners make as they try to communicate in the target language. In fact, a major hurdle in EFL is freeing the students from that awful feeling of embarrassment when they make a mistake, and from the even more threatening fear of making mistakes. I have always found that sharing my gaffes and those of others, and demonstrating that these things, though funny and embarrassing, are not life-threatening, or even LANGUAGE-threatening, can be good for students.

Take the word, *embarrassing*. Students of Spanish learn early-on that that little devil is *un cognado falso*," and that if a young American woman announces at a party, "*¡Sí, me gustaría comer. Tengo hombre.*" and then, as the laughter subsides, announces, "*¡Dios mío, estoy embarazada!*" she has just added error to error by seemingly announcing that she is pregnant.

Even beginning students of English laugh when they are told about the *Norte-americana* staying at your city's best downtown hotel who kept calling the bellboy demanding "*sopa*", and then "*en el baño*" at that. When the bellboy finally decided that he had yet another crazy *turista* on his hands and brought the *caldo de pollo* to her room, she was totally perplexed, as was he when she made handwashing motions. Did they sort it out finally, that *jabón*—soap—was what the lady wanted?

My friend Grace tells the story of a humorous letter she received from her grandson, visiting Puerto Rico for the first time, describing how confused he was by the signs in parks that warned "*No pise en el pasto.*" Why, he wondered, would anyone want to relieve himself in the spaghetti—especially in a public park? By the time she

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<sup>1</sup>I know the spelling is l-i-g-h-t, but the "modernization" is now so common in English, used to describe everything from beer to ice cream, that it seems appropriate for this column, which seeks to be informative, but on the lighter—liter—side.

received the letter, Grace was sure her intelligent grandson had already discovered that the Puerto Ricans were not guilty of unsavory public displays, and that the signs were simply warning people not to step on the grass.

My Spanish is still severely flawed, but not as flawed as in the days when I explained to hotel and airport personnel all over the Americas that the wheel chair I travel with was "*una silla de rodillas*," unaware for the longest time what an interesting item that would have been. Chairs with knees, and confusing words in the new language with words in your own language, can be FUNNY when you think about it, but the point is that FUNNY is not FATAL. EVERYBODY makes mistakes when learning a language, and our ability to laugh at ourselves is crucial for improvement. Students must be encouraged to remember that laughing WITH people is a great path to friendship, and that no language mistake EVER did anyone in. So share your mistakes and your triumphs over language learning fear with your students and encourage them to do the same.

Have you heard the one about the Gringo (being one, I can use the word) recently arrived in Mexico who was giving a party for his new friends and neighbors, and was especially anxious to meet the beautiful young woman who lived in the apartment above him? For days he practiced proper greetings, perfecting his Spanish pronunciation and vocabulary as well as his most courtly manner. And when she rang the doorbell, with her elderly mother in tow, he leaned over, kissed her hand, and said in a deep and silky voice, "*Ah, señorita Alejandra. ¡Bienvenidos! ¡Mi cama es su cama!*"

Heard any good ones lately?