

Aspects of English: The Potential for English Wordplay in the Japanese Classroom

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Abstract

This paper looks at the important role of wordplay in the English language. It explains various types of wordplay that are in common use, and examines ways in which these wordplay forms can be introduced in the Japanese classroom. The paper suggests practical ideas for classroom exercises, determines the suitability for different levels of learners, and comments on the social relevance of wordplay. The paper concludes that the teaching of English wordplay, although often overlooked, is worthwhile for a variety of reasons.

Keywords: Teaching English, Wordplay, Classroom activities, Language and culture

“Everybody plays with language or enjoys language play. Everybody.”
(Crystal 2007, p. 172)

1. Introduction

The purpose of language is usually connected with the need for communication, and quite rightly so. The formal study of a foreign language has often had the same goal, particularly since the advent of communicative language teaching in the 1970s. However, there are other aspects of language, apart from the sole aim of face-to-face communication, that are worthy of focus in the English language classroom. One of these aspects, often neglected, is the pure joy of language use; the malleability of a language; the potential fun and humor that is embedded within it. Wordplay in a language, despite often being overlooked, can be fun to teach and learn, can be highly motivational and can open students’ hearts and minds to the beauty of a language and language study. As Medgyes (2005, p. 5) puts it, “We can use the language to make humour accessible for students and, conversely, use humour to make the language accessible. In my opinion, humour is one of the best vehicles for language teaching and its

motivational value cannot be overestimated.”

Medgyes (2005, p. 5) supplies a list of justifications for using humor in the classroom, all of which can be applied to exercises that fall more within the realm of wordplay than pure humor. His list insists that humor, and by extension wordplay: is a vehicle for providing authentic cultural information; builds bridges between cultures; provides language practice in genuine contexts; brings students together; releases tension; encourages creative thinking; generates a happy classroom; enhances motivation; enriches text-based courses; and is a refreshing change.

The formal study of wordplay is called ludic linguistics. However, wordplay is an everyday part of most English speakers' lives, whether the speaker realizes it or not, and therefore is by no means the preserve of formal linguists. In some cases, connections with wordplay are passive, such as being part of an audience of a humorous television or radio program. The scriptwriter takes the active role, specifically choosing a certain phrase to replace a more mundane or straightforward option.

Whether active or passive in form, wordplay has long played an important role in the language life of a populace. In Shakespeare's day, audiences heard the bard's playfulness with the language. Crystal (2008a, p. 143/144) gives the example of an old pronunciation pun on the name “Ajax”, in *Troilus and Cressida*. Thersites is talking to Achilles about Ajax and says, “But yet you looke not well upon him: for who some euer you take him to be, he is Ajax.” Crystal points out that the pronunciation of Ajax at this time was *a jakes*, and in Elizabethan language *jakes* meant lavatory. Thersites' words suddenly take on a whole new meaning.

There are various methods of teaching the language of wordplay and humor to the native speaker of English. Examples include using the interesting text *The Language of Humour* (Ross, 2005). However, this paper specifically ignores the possibilities for teaching the native speaker of English, and concentrates instead on the potential for teaching English language wordplay in the Japanese classroom. It sets out a method for teaching the rudiments of English wordplay, with practical suggestions for exercises that can be carried out in the classroom.

2. Dealing with the known — Japanese examples of wordplay

It is important to set the scene for the theme of wordplay with examples that the students

can easily comprehend in order to show students that wordplay is part of their lives, whether they realize it or not. One of the simplest and most efficient ways to do this is by introducing them to Japanese wordplay that they are already familiar with. By doing so, they have both the cultural and linguistic background necessary to appreciate the nature of the language play. The thematic scene can be set with a short talk that introduces the ideas of *shiri-tori*, *dajare*, or even *oyaji gyagu*, and includes mention of some of the more popular comedians and television programs that regularly use Japanese language play. The theme is, at this stage, very much within the students' grasp, and can be made active if the teacher feels necessary by creating a few personalized questions for discussion about whether the student watches these programs, has a relative who often tells *oyaji gyagu*, and how funny (or otherwise) the student finds these forms of language play or the comedians/programs that use wordplay. The students will realize that language play is part of their everyday lives, and will get a sense if they are more passive or active users of wordplay in Japanese. There are many source materials on the Internet of Japanese wordplay (for example the Jayhan webpage (n.d.), with *dajare* examples including: *arumikan no ue ni aru mikan*; and *toriniku ga torinikui*).

3. English wordplay in the classroom

A good introduction to the concept of wordplay in the English language is by using a visual stimulus such as an ambigram. An ambigram is a specially drawn word that can be read not only from one angle, but can be read equally well when the paper is rotated 180 degrees. Ambigrams feature prominently in *Angels and Demons* (2001) by Dan Brown and also in the movie of that name. A fine example, using the word "wordplay", appears on the front cover of Langdon's (2005) *Wordplay: The Philosophy, Art and Science of Ambigrams*, and this would make an excellent visual introduction to the theme, as students can realize the need to be flexible in their outlook towards language if they are to understand the various forms of language play. At this stage, it is probably unnecessary to make the students active in language play, but if the teacher feels it necessary, the students can access the FlipScript Ambigram Designs and Products webpage (2007) and use the ambigram generator to create their own ambigrams.

Once the visual introduction is over, students can be introduced to, and try out a variety of wordplay types in the classroom. Below are a select few of the many possibilities for wordplay. For each case, there is a classroom framework that includes: an explanatory

introduction; possibilities for introducing the content; suggestions for classroom activities and for which level of student they are suitable; and a comment on social relevance.

(a) Crosswords

Crosswords have been an important part of many people's daily lives for nearly a century. The first one appeared in 1913 in the publication *New York World*. They became more prevalent in the 1930s when serious newspapers such as *The Times* started using them. (Bryson, 1990, p. 223) Some crosswords are simple, some very complicated. Some use a general knowledge style, whereas others use cryptic clues.

Introduction:

It is a good idea to give a very brief history of the crossword before introducing students to the crossword format.

Content:

Examples from English language learning websites such as Activities for ESL Students (n.d.) can be used to explain how simple general knowledge crosswords work. The concept is simple. However, cryptic crosswords are much more complicated. In spite of this, students often appreciate the puzzle-like nature of cryptic clues if they are explained well. One example that can be used to explain this type of crossword is as follows: clue: HIJKLMNO (5 letters). The answer is *water*. The chemical notation for water is H₂O, and the string of letters is from H to O, thus H₂O (and the answer *water*). Another example is: clue: an important city in Czechoslovakia (4 letters). The answer is *Oslo*. Even though Oslo is a city in Norway, in this case the string of four letters O-S-L-O can be found embedded *in* the country name of Czechoslovakia, thus the cryptic answer *Oslo*, with the key word in the clue being *in*. (Bryson, 1990, p. 222)

Activity:

There are many crossword puzzles designed for a variety of levels of English learners. Cryptic crosswords are not suitable for anyone bar the highest level learner, but publications such as Crowther's *Elementary Crosswords For Learner's of English as a Foreign Language* (1980) and *Intermediate Crosswords For Learner's of English as a Foreign Language* (1980) can be used effectively. For students with access to the Internet, English language learning websites such as the aforementioned Activities for ESL Students (n.d.) can be used to allow students to try English crosswords of differing levels online.

Social relevance:

Social relevance is high, with most English newspapers in the UK publishing crosswords. The cultural importance and ubiquity of the crossword cannot be underestimated. A crossword is part of the daily life of many English speakers.

(b) Puns

As Crystal states, “some languages go in for puns more than others” (2007b, p. 173). In English, they are part and parcel of daily life. Crystal goes on to say that, “... nobody has yet found a language or a dialect that doesn’t play with words some of the time” (2007b, p. 173), and so puns are, of course, known, understood and used in the Japanese language.

Introduction:

One way to introduce the concept of English puns is actually by giving one or two examples in the Japanese language. Once the concept has been grasped, then students can concentrate on the English language versions.

Content:

One of the best ways to introduce the students to English puns is using some of the many examples in Toyoda’s *Eigo Share Jiten: Punctionary* (2003). One example is a pun on the word analyze:

Teacher: Give me a sentence with ‘analyze’ in it.

Peter: Anna says she never eats candy, but Anna lies.

(Toyoda, p. 3~4)

After each pun comes a succinct explanation in Japanese. In the example above, the homophonic similarities between *analyze* and *Anna lies* are explained.

Activity:

After a few examples, the concept in English becomes clear to students, and examples without Japanese explanations can be given, with students having to determine where the play on words occurs. For more advanced students, a list of homophones (or near-homophones) can be provided and students can take on the challenge of creating their own English puns.

Another activity that could be introduced for more advanced students is a reading exercise in which students have to identify puns. This can be done with any reading passage that

includes puns, but perhaps one of the most effective ways is to introduce students to an example of so-called “ping-pong punning”. This is where one person in a group uses a pun, and then the other members of the group see this as an opportunity to use their own puns on the same theme. People take it in turns to create puns. One of the most famous themes for ping-pong punning concerns fish and the aquatic world. A simple example of an aquatic pun dialogue would be as follows (with the pun words in italics):

A: What a nice *plaice*. Did you choose it on *porpoise*?

B: No, just for the *halibut*. Oh, *cod* forgive me. That was a bad pun.

A: I knew you would say it *tuna* or later.

Many examples more authentic than the short dialogue above can be found on Internet forums.

If the teacher has access to a computer in the classroom, the Internet has a wealth of audio-visual examples of puns. Choosing accessible material for students is the key here. A good example, with language that is not too difficult, is provided by a 1976 episode of the British TV show *The Two Ronnies*. The show regularly used puns, and one of the most famous and much-loved sketches involved a scene in a D.I.Y. store with a customer asking for *fork handles*, but being served with *four candles*. It is an ideal example for wordplay language learners. (See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cz2-ukrd2VQ>)

Social relevance:

Social relevance is relatively high seeing that puns play a role in the everyday conversations of many people in the English-speaking world.

(c) Palindromes

The palindrome is a form of word play that can range from the easy to the extremely difficult. A palindrome is a word that reads the same, no matter whether you read it from front to back or back to front. A simple example is the word *dad*.

Introduction:

Perhaps the best way to introduce the palindrome is as a puzzle. One of the most famous palindromes is: *A man, a plan, a canal — Panama!* This wonderfully inventive English expression reads the same front to back, and back to front. Writing this sentence on the board and asking the students if they notice anything unusual is a good way to pique students’

interest. It usually takes students a minute or two to notice. If necessary, hints can be provided by the teacher.

Content:

The teacher can then introduce further content in the form of other examples of palindromes available on the Internet at Palindrome List (n.d.). Well-known examples include: *Dennis and Edna sinned; Live not on evil; Do geese see God?; Stressed? No tips? Spit on deserts!; Was it Eliot's toilet I saw?*

Activity:

Students can become active by creating their own palindromes. This is a difficult skill, even for a native speaker of English, so it is perhaps best to split the activity into various stages. The first stage would be to ask students to create palindromes in the Japanese language — a far easier proposition due to the Japanese syllabary. Students will easily be able to come up with examples such as *Masako-sama*, in which the five syllables can be reversed to read exactly the same. The next stage is to get students to try to think of simple English palindromes such as *dad*, and *mum*, before challenging them to find four letter examples. If students are at a lower level, a list of palindromes with certain letters missing can be set as a fill-in-the-blanks exercise.

Social relevance:

The social relevance is rather low, and creating examples is difficult for students without a great deal of help, but the interest generated by this form of word play is usually worth the effort.

(d) Anagrams

An anagram is created when a word has all its letters rearranged (in any order) to form a new word. An anagram of the word *rose* could be *sore*, or even *Eros*.

Introduction:

Once again, showing the puzzle-like nature of the anagram is a good way to introduce students to this particular form of word play. The teacher could ask what the connection is between the three English words *rose*, *Eros* and *sore*?

Content:

Further examples of simple, or more elaborate, anagrams can be introduced. Examples of the more elaborate kind are shown in the table below:

Table 1 Examples of elaborate anagrams (From Anagram Hall of Fame, n.d.)

Word/Expression	Anagram
mother-in-law	woman Hitler
William Shakespeare	I am a weakish speller
dormitory	dirty room
eleven plus two	twelve plus one

The content can be extended to show even more elaborate examples from the Anagram Hall of Fame (n.d.). One of the most well-known is an anagram from Shakespeare's Hamlet, in which the lines:

To be or not to be: that is the question, whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune

can be reassembled as the impressive anagram:

In one of The Bard's best-thought-out of tragedies, our insistent hero, hamlet, queries on two fronts about how life turns rotten.

Another from the same source that impresses students is the rendering of Neil Armstrong's famous:

That's one small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind

to the anagram:

A thin man ran; makes a large stride, left planet, pins flag on moon! On to Mars!

Activity:

There are a variety of activities that students could work on concerning anagrams. The most simple to construct from the teacher's point of view is simply to tell students to create their own anagrams, starting with three or four letter words, and to see the longest possible

anagram groups of students can create. The teacher could supply the students with suitable anagram-friendly words with which to work.

Alternatively, a gap-fill exercise could be used. From the table above a simple gap-fill exercise would allow students to fully understand the structure of anagrams. Examples of a simple gap-fill exercise, using the examples from table 1, are shown in table 2 below.

Table 2 A gap-fill exercise for anagrams

Word/Expression	Anagram
_____ -in-law	woman Hitler
William Shakespeare	I am a weakish _____
dormitory	dirty _____
eleven plus two	_____ plus one

Another possibility for exercises with anagrams involves the Internet Anagram Server (2010) website <http://wordsmith.org/anagram/>. If students have computer access, then they can enjoy generating their own anagrams from words, expressions, or sentences. They could then work with other students to see if students can guess the original word or expression that generated the anagram.

Social relevance:

The social relevance of anagrams is not particularly high, although all British schoolchildren are aware of anagrams, and therefore this form of word play is part of the cultural and linguistic fabric of most English speakers in the UK.

(e) Text messages

Text messages are typed messages sent from one person to another by mobile phone. Crystal (2008b, p. 4) points out that text messaging has had a rather short history, and that a large increase in the number of messages worldwide occurred between the year 2000 (17 billion message sent) and 2001 (250 billion messages). These days, extremely large numbers of text messages are sent every day, and students at university in Japan are intimately acquainted with this form of communication.

Introduction:

Text message creation is in many ways a form of word manipulation or wordplay. Exam-

ples of English text messages known by students could be a good way to introduce this theme of wordplay to the class.

Content:

To provide a more extensive introduction to English text messaging, it would be necessary to provide examples of the main categories of text messaging: acronyms; vowel-dropping; use of phonetics; and even the use of emoticons. Examples of each of these kinds of text messages are shown in table 3 below.

Table 3 Examples of four styles of text messages (Adapted from Murashige, 2009)

Text message	Style	Standard English
ATM	acronym	at the moment
msg	vowel-dropping	message
B4	phonetics	before
:)	emoticon	happy, smile

Activity:

Perhaps one of the more interesting ways for students to work with the language of text messages is by trying to decipher a notorious piece of written work submitted by a Scottish teenager for a school report. The teacher had expected a formal piece of English written work, but was dismayed to be handed a report written entirely in text message style, including all of the four types of text message styles set out in the table above. The original work was published in a Scottish newspaper, but copies (with a translation in standard English) can be found in the Teacher's Guide of Zemach's *Writing for the Real World* (2009).

Another possibility would be a quiz that involved students guessing the standard English meaning of words and expressions of the four styles of text messaging set out in the table above. This is a simple and effective way to test students' knowledge and creative-thinking ability, as well as getting them to have fun by partaking in a very modern and practical form of word play.

Social relevance:

The social relevance of text messaging is clearly very high. A large number of people now use this form of communication and it is particularly prevalent among the young.

(f) Others

As Crystal (2007b, p. 174) points out, there are many other forms of wordplay in the English language, many of which could be adapted to the classroom. These include riddles, comic alphabets, dialect humour, and fantastic or nonsense word creation. To this list can be added jokes and lipograms. Jokes that rely on wordplay can be very effective for teaching cultural awareness. Lipograms, constructions of text that avoid using certain letters, can help to make students aware of which letters of the alphabet have the greatest importance. Crystal (2007a, p. 196) reports of an instance of a fifty thousand word novel written in 1939 without the use of the letter *e* – an astonishing feat. Two other forms of wordplay that have their place in literary history are spoonerisms, when the initial sounds of two words are transposed with comic effect, and malapropisms. Crystal (2008b, p. 6) points out that malapropisms, the (often amusing) mistaken use of a word in place of the correct one, are used in Shakespeare's *Merry Wives of Windsor*, with one character using the word *allicholy* instead of the intended *melancholy*. Some of these types of wordplay are clearly more adaptable to the classroom situation than others, but what is clear is that the list of wordplay possibilities in the English language is long.

4. Conclusion

Stated simply, wordplay is not essential in teaching a foreign language, and there are more important aspects to studying English as a foreign language. However, for a student to gain a greater appreciation of the English language, and to obtain a greater cultural understanding through English, then the teaching of wordplay is a valid exercise in the language classroom in Japan.

The extent to which wordplay is taught depends on many different factors, including availability of time within the English curriculum and English language ability of students. Which of the forms of wordplay outlined above are most suitable depends on the judgment of the teacher. Some of the wordplay forms are far more easily adapted to classroom exercises that involve the active participation of students. Others are more suited to an information flow from teacher to student. However, wordplay is motivating because it is fun. It can reinvigorate a tired English language learner.

Wordplay appeals to humans. Why? Crystal (2007b, p. 173) believes it is because it

“involves the bending and breaking of the rules of the language, and it appeals to something anarchic in our personalities, which appreciates the incongruous and bizarre.” This may well be true, but his point that it acts not simply as a means for fun, but as a way to gain rapport is surely far more important. Wordplay appeals, it is inclusive, and it is an important part of the repository of culture embedded within a language, and therefore with careful consideration, it can be a wonderful added extra to an English curriculum.

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