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# The Methodological Challenge of Incorporating Humor Competency Training into the English Language Teaching Curriculum: Case Study of English Satirical News

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## Résumé

### Abstract

Proficiency in a foreign language requires more than just linguistic mastery. One area of language acquisition even advanced learners struggle with is understanding humor, as it "requires a broad base of linguistic, pragmatic, sociolinguistic, and cultural knowledge" (Shively, 2013, p. 931). An increasing number of language educators are calling for a component of humor competency training in the language teaching curriculum, as failing to understand humor can be damaging and embarrassing (Bell & Pomerantz, 2015; Wulf, 2010).

One particularly challenging form of humor is satire. Satire is frequently used in English-speaking countries, and articles from satirical websites, such as The Onion (U.S.A.) or The Daily Mash (U.K.), are often shared on social media. Nevertheless, many people mistake fake news for real news, and detecting satirical media is an increasingly necessary aspect of media and digital literacy for English language learners. Detecting English satire can be especially difficult for learners who come from countries where satire is relatively rare, such as Japan (Johnston, 2015; Wells, 2006).

This presentation will overview two experiments designed to test the efficacy of humor competency training in language education. The first experiment analyzed the difficulty Japanese learners of English ( $N = 120$ ) have in detecting satirical English news. The participants—Japanese university students taking an English reading course—were shown 24 news headlines and a snippet of the beginning of the article, mimicking how links are shared on social media. Twelve of the articles were real but offbeat news stories (e.g., "Driver uses seatbelt for beer, not three children"), and twelve of the articles were from satirical sites. To examine the effect of background knowledge, half of the articles were taken from Japanese English-language sites. The participants rated the articles on a Likert scale, from "satirical news" (1) to "offbeat, but real news" (6). The results were first compared with those of American university students ( $N = 90$ ). Second, in the Japanese data set, variables were examined including the participants' L2 proficiency, previous exposure to satirical news, etc., using regression analyses. Results confirmed that Japanese participants had much more difficulty identifying satirical news, regardless of whether the news came from the U.S. or Japan.

For the second experiment, The Japanese participants were given a posttest in the final

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lesson. However, the experimental group received two interventions of explicit humor training during the course, while the control group received no training. This training included tips on how to identify satirical news and the opportunity to collaborate with peers. The experimental group scored significantly higher on the posttest, while the control group made no significant gains.

The presenters will share the results of the two experiments and discuss implications for language education.

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## **Key Words**

humor competency training; humor and intercultural communication; satirical news