2020

Autoethnography of Laughter: Transforming Identity by Teaching Composition and Linguistics through Humor

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AUTOETHNOGRAPHY OF LAUGHTER: TRANSFORMING IDENTITY BY TEACHING COMPOSITION AND LINGUISTICS THROUGH HUMOR

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172 Pages

The following dissertation is a story composed of humorous and humor-related experiences, lived by me as an immigrant student and instructor. I reflect on how those experiences influenced the transformation and performance of my teaching identity and shaped my humor-based pedagogy for Composition and Introductory Linguistics courses. The work is considering the effects of humor on my linguistic and cultural competences as well as my teaching practice. Along with that, the work provides an overview of scholarship on humor in education and the ways practicing academics utilize humor in their teaching and teaching identities. To reflect on how and why I utilize humor in my teaching and identify areas of improvement, I use the method of interpretive autoethnography, which combines autobiographic and autoethnographic narratives. The narratives are relevant to the matters of performance and negotiation of identity via humorous discourse and humor as pedagogy, which incorporates my teaching style, course materials, syllabi, assignments, and assessment.

KEYWORDS: autoethnography, female immigrants in academia, humor, transformative pedagogy, reflective teaching and learning, stand-up comedy, genre-based writing, composition, linguistics

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A Dissertation Submitted in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of English

ILLINOIS STATE UNIVERSITY

2020

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

When Dr. Janice Neuleib took up the role of my dissertation chair, I could not be happier because she told me, “I will fight for your dissertation”, which was exactly what I needed to hear back then because I started having some serious doubts about the validity of my work. I cannot thank Janice enough for her kindness, patience, guidance, constant encouragement, and zucchini muffins we shared in the Coffee House during our advisement sessions.

Pot Belly sandwiches with Dr. Claire Lamonica were also delicious, and just like one of her daughters still hears Claire’s motherly advice in her head, I kept hearing “Your work does not have to be perfect, it is not your final destination, it is a stepping stone. Get it done and move on with your life!” Thank you so much Claire for these words of wisdom, they kept me safe from my own extreme criticism so I could make it to the final period of my very last sentence.

Coffee Hound Americanos were good too, especially in the company of a handsome and witty Americano Dr. K. Aaron Smith. Special thanks to him for rejuvenating faith in myself and helping me with linguistics related questions, as well as teaching me that in *Soviet Russia vodka drinks me*! However I have discovered that in America I should drink it myself and better with tomato juice and celery.

Special *gracias* to my multilingual and multicultural Communication professor Dr. John Baldwin, who, by his humor-injected teaching style and comments on the margins, inspired me to become obsessed with American humor and humor in education. In other words, he is the one to blame for my dissertation topic, and he is the one to praise for being the *puniest* professor who willingly shared his humorous strategies with me so I can mention them in my little project called dissertation.

I would like to express my deepest respect and appreciation to the academics who, either with their advice or their teaching experience and scholarship, made a significant contribution to my writing process and overall success of my project. Dr. Wendy Woith, Dr. Jina Hunter, Dr. Eliss Hurd, Dr. Laura Ellingson, Dr. Catherine Davies, and Dr. Susan Burt.

My endless gratitude goes to my partner and an outstanding chef Jeff Ridenoure. Not only he was generously feeding me during my dissertation writing but he was pushing me forward and supporting me every step of the way, listening to my crazy ideas, and proofreading my work. Without his love and faith in me this work would not be possible.

Even though she was my major distraction, my daughter Leah, deserves a paragraph here. She was one of my moving forces throughout the whole PhD program, she was my best buddy and the source of joy when I was frustrated with myself and felt stuck with my writing. Leah was the best source of humor and examples for my linguistics and composition classes. One night, sitting in the bathtub, she started acting out my nagging, by saying to one of her toys, “Hey, what are you doing, go to bed! I need to work and study! Do you hear me, I need to work and study!” But all work and no play would have made Olya a dull girl. So, thank you, Leah, for being an unexhaustive source of fun and funny stories one can find on the pages of this product of my work and studies!

O.C.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Much research has been carried out on immigrants and their experiences (Kolapo, 2009, p.xi) but currently, due to societal changes and changes in immigration policies, there is an increasing interest in the research of immigrant scholars and students in American academia (Vieira, 2019, p.ix). Multiple self and collaborative qualitative studies (Kolapo, 2009; Griffin, 2012; Hernandez et al., 2014; Lawless, 2015; Ashlee et al., 2017; Chen & Lawless, 2017; Guglielmo & Figueiredo, 2019) talk about the challenges of academics based on the factors such as race, gender, immigration status, accent, and cultural adaptation. Special attention is being drawn to the experiences of immigrant and America-born women of color because women of color are under-represented in faculty and administrative ranks within the Academy (Hernandez et. al., 2014, p. 1) and as both immigrants and women of color represent cultural, racial, and gender minority groups, they frequently "find themselves at odds with the dominant culture and struggle with tokenism, micro-aggression, subtle discrimination, and associated stress" (Hernandez et al., p. 1). The experiences shared in the interviews, memoirs, and self-reflections demonstrate the ways immigrant academics learn to adapt to the host culture, "to which immigrant scholars are often admitted as total or near-total strangers" (Kolapo, p.xi).

In order to adapt, immigrant academics have to re-negotiate their identities, have to adjust their personalities, teaching styles, and expertise to the local requirements (Kolapo, p. xii). From the perspective of a striving-to-adapt immigrant graduate student, I would like to add that immigrant academics need to put significant effort into the improvement of their linguistic, communicative, and cultural competencies. Regardless of the tendency to criticize academic language policies for questioning the English language proficiency of non-native speakers and

considering adaptation as a form of marginalization and alienation from self-identification (Chen & Lawless, 2017), I advocate for academic initiatives for immigrant scholars and students, which can assist to improve their English. Practice shows that effective interactions with professors, colleagues, and students, which incorporate a number of communicative and cultural competencies besides language, are critical for navigating graduate school, especially when the majority of native speakers have very little exposure to foreign accents, languages, and cultures.

One immigrant English professor writes that language use is entangled with power that determines which languages and literacies, and in turn which bodies count, which is a form of power and control (Guglielmo, 2019, p. 104). When I came to the US to study, I quickly came to the realization that to make my body *count*, mastering American English would be one of the most important steps in the process. By the same token, linguist William Labov (2012), in his book *Dialect Diversity in America: The Politics and Language Change* says that we are all constrained by the social consensus (standardized speech), even presidents. He notes that even president Obama did not use *-in'* instead of *-ing* in his public speeches because of the inflicted norm. However, when the linguist was able to listen to Obama talking during a picnic and recorded his casual speech, he discovered that the president would say *-in'* (like in *preparin'*) 72% of the time (Labov, 2012, pp. 13-14). Labov states that Obama's efforts to follow the norm were perceived much better than Sarah Palin's idiosyncratic use of *-in'* (p. 14). The linguist highlights that regardless our backgrounds there are socially accepted norms of speaking, which we adhere to, depending on the communicative context (Labov, 2012). I stand with Obama and prefer to know the rules, especially when I am in the verbal and non-verbal habit of breaking them with humor.

Linguists, like Rosina Lippi-Green, the author of "English with an Accent" (2012), who promote non-discriminatory and non-prejudiced attitudes towards native and foreign accents in English; and the proponents of *translingualism* in English teaching practices, such as Canagarajah, Kumaravadivelu, Pennycook, will most likely frown upon my perspective because it appears too colonial. However, not denying that accents, dialects, sociolects, idiolects, and even my uniquely established *idiotlect* should be welcome as representations of linguistic creativity and expressions of identity, I believe that immigrant academics should demonstrate outstanding linguistic expertise since they should position themselves as competitive with native speakers.

As much as I would want to support the flexibility in the attitudes towards the English language proficiency, my experience with professional communication and academic writing in my Master's and Doctoral programs taught me that standardized grammar, pronunciation, punctuation, extensive vocabulary, knowledge of idioms and slang are very important for proving myself as a worthy, intelligent student and potential academic. Therefore, in my work I am going to emphasize the importance of near-native fluency in English, while developing as a teacher and a scholar in the American academic world. I consider my contribution to the immigrant scholarship based on self-reflection and observation as valuable because in my work I am going to explore how the challenges of American academia and the need to re-negotiate my identity can be faced with and through humorous discourse.

The works of Bell and Pomerantz (2014; 2016) highlight the importance of humor in the English language classroom, saying that non-serious discourse will help to move away from some of the classroom fictions based on the transactional approach to language learning, and

transition to the vast array of social meanings that are constructed within and trough every act of language use (p.32). The scholars argue that humor and language play can be used to increase learners' metalinguistic awareness and expand their communicative/interpretive repertoires (p.33). As a never-ending language learner and a huge fan of comedy, jokes, stand-up acts, puns, comic strips, and spontaneously generated humor, I cannot agree more with the aforementioned statement of the ESL classroom researchers. Their scholarship inspired me to move forward with my humorous endeavors and investigate the benefits of my exposure to American humor for my linguistic and professional development as an immigrant educator, and the ways it shaped my teaching identity. In the following section of this introduction you will hear my more playful voice and will learn more about why I chose humor and what else to expect from this work past the introduction.

The importance of being funny

Just like pumpkin spice is the most popular flavor of the fall, humor is one of the most popular flavors for *the moveable feast* of human interaction. Grains and pinches of humor slip off people's tongues to either be savored or be the cause of massive indigestion, depending on the intellectual diet the connoisseurs of humor adhere to. Humor-flavored meals people cook in the kitchen of their craniums can be served in various verbal forms and under a great variety of non-verbal sauces on multiple occasions. One of the occasions humor-chefs rise to is college education. Both teachers and students constantly treat each other to witty desserts in the classroom space.

The ways those cupcakes of wit affect the teaching-and-learning process have been of interest to hungry academic minds for over fifty years now. The classical philosophical thought

was rejecting humor as a form of discourse or academic inquiry, consequently, teaching was considered to be a very serious enterprise, where jokes and such were simply a distraction. Collectively, teachers perceived humor in the classroom as unprofessional, uncontrolled, and undignified (Korobkin, 1988, p. 154). However, slowly but surely, the attitude towards the role of humor started to shift and nowadays, we have quite a few empirical investigations conducted in different college disciplines, which advocate for the humor-flavored teaching (Bell, Berk, Banas, Garner, Deiter, Bell and Pomerantz, etc). Some studies, but not all of them, show that humor increases interest in learning, alleviates stress and anxiety, helps to establish positive emotional bond between an instructor and the students (Appleby, 2018). Contemporary investigators and practitioners of classroom humor, such as Laura Ellingson, Kristen McDermott, Don Nilsen, and Peter M. Jonas, encourage college professors to use it as one of the ingredients that would enhance students' appetite for learning and improve retention, making the educational process more enjoyable. Interdisciplinary studies of the perks of interactional humor laid the foundation for researchers in education so the latter could prove those who said, "humor does not belong in the classroom" terribly wrong.

The humble apprentice of humor gurus aka the author if this dissertation shares the enthusiasm of those who advertise humor as "an instructional defibrillator" (Berk, 2007) and consequently adds humor to her recipes for self-education and for fun teaching Linguistics and Composition, an effort which was often, but not always, effective. You will learn all about it in my Chapter IV. As for now, my dissertation, borrowing one of my colleague's metaphors for his syllabus, is *an invitation to a feast*, a phrase which, in his turn, he borrowed from Ken Bain's "*What the Best College Teachers Do*"(2004). I cordially invite you to my intellectual feast that

would make your minds crave more humor-flavored food for thought and experiment with the recipes for teaching.

What prompted my research interest?

Just like many graduate students at the American English Departments, I had a pleasure of working as a Teaching Assistant, which gave me a priceless opportunity to teach first year writing courses, a course in Introductory Linguistics, and a Gender in the Humanities course. In addition to my university experience, I had a chance to work as a Conversational Russian instructor and ESL writing tutor at a local community college, and as an instructor of First Year Writing, ESL Academic Writing, and First Year Communication at another community college in Midwest. Along with that, I have always been tutoring Russian or English, which is also an honorable experience since I had a chance to unpack cultural and linguistic intricacies with and through humor. In my pursuits to familiarize myself with up-to-date college teaching theories and practices and apply them in my own teaching I participated in a few professional development functions offered by the University's teaching center, which were Future Faculty Roundtable, The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, and Course Development workshops. Thus I have earned some teaching experience and been forwarding myself as an educator for quite a while, and should say that classroom and one-on-one teaching experiences made me reflect on my teaching a lot, sparking my interest in contemporary pedagogical thought and its trajectories.

Another topic I was always very interested in was humor and its role in education. While working on my master's degree in communication I studied the nature of humor and its pragmatics from the communicative perspective and within the frameworks of communicative

theories. Moreover, I have discovered that a communicative analysis of humor overlaps with other fields of study such as Rhetoric and Composition, Linguistics, Psychology, Philosophy, and Education. Such versatile presence of humor studies in a variety of fields prompted me to explore the scholarship on the role of humor in education and I have discovered a wide variety of research both qualitative and quantitative, which would support my claims about the efficacy and risks of humor in teaching. However, one of the biggest criticisms of humor was the inconsistency of research and lack of longitudinal studies (Banas. et all, 2011). Such inconsistency can be explained by the fact that it is hard to replicate humorous teaching and not every professor would choose to teach with humor. Apart from that, humor as a cultural phenomenon undergoes changes, and what might be funny for a professor might not be funny for the younger student population.

Another interesting observation I made, while investigating scholarship on humor in education is that it either provides insights into the perceptions of classroom humor by faculty and students or considers humor as a teaching tool. The scholars present their systematized experience as a set of strategies, they identified as effective, for using humor in teaching. In addition, humor is considered from a cultural perspective, which means it is situated in and emerges from a specific culture, which makes its translation across cultures problematic. As an immigrant graduate student and instructor, striving to assimilate into American teaching culture, I am attempting to offer a holistic perspective on humor and its role in my development as an immigrant teacher in American academia as well as its role and function in shaping the pedagogy I have utilized for teaching genre-based composition and introductory linguistics.

It is important to notice that teaching, learning, and humor are prone to subjectivity, and therefore I choose a postmodern approach to telling you the story of the role humor played in the process of developing and expressing my teaching identity and my pedagogy. I have chosen a postmodern approach which appreciates subjectivity; celebrates and values an individual, who shares their unique experience, providing insights which would not be visible through the lens of positivistic empirical study. The study conducted for this dissertation is represented by my lived experiences and is methodologically framed as an autoethnography, a self-reflection on teaching practices and identity performance within the socio-cultural environment of the Department of English in a mid-size midwestern university. Epistemologically, my study is evolving from my lived experiences related to humor and my learning and teaching experiences. In my reflective autobiographical narratives, I am utilizing Linguistics, ESL, and Composition theories which help to explain and support my claims about the value of humor in the processes of acculturation, language learning and teaching which promotes critical thinking and creativity.

Teach at your own risk

There is no uniform way of teaching for obvious reasons. Teachers are different: they have different personalities, points of view, levels of professionalism, different ways to communicate with students and have different approaches to teaching. Since this dissertation is going to cover my experience in teaching with and through humor, I should certainly mention that not all teachers choose humor as part of their pedagogy and communication. From the articles written by educators who regularly use humor in their classrooms and from my observations as a student, I have concluded that some professors incorporate humor into their professional practice to a certain degree; some think that humor is a distraction for students and it

impedes learning, some are firm believers of the opposite, that humor is a valuable teaching strategy, partially facilitating students' engagement, emotional comfort in the classroom, motivation, and learning.

Currently, there is no universal recipe for a perfect learning environment; the conditions for learning are continuously co-created by professors and students since they start interaction within the time frame of the course. As I have previously mentioned, humor is one of the pillars of my pedagogy and I would like to tell you why I chose this rocky road of humorous teaching. There are many reasons which include both personal and professional interests and overall appreciation of both stand-up comedy and teaching.

Teaching is a lot like stand-up comedy: you are standing up, telling stories, hoping your audience is going to like you and remember something of what you are saying, allegedly, the most important stuff (McCarron, 2009). Of course, you are operating observing the rules of engagement, preventing people in the room from falling asleep. The more you make them laugh, the better they will remember you and what you are saying, they will even quote you in their exam answers. But before I dive into the ocean of the memories and self-reflections about my language learning and teaching, let me introduce you to my work and its generic outline.

On a serious note…

The dissertation you are about to read is a big joke, which I have been living, observing, and reflecting on to make your time worthwhile. I know you could have found much better things to do. But since you committed yourself to dealing with the biggest misfit of the department, please, make yourself comfortable in your favorite yoga pose, pour yourself a cup of

green tea, coffee, or something stronger than that, and share a few good laughs and some pedagogical thoughts with me.

Modern healthcare professionals recommend humor, just like an apple a day, because it is good for our psychosomatic balance (Robinson, 1983; Saper, 1988, Mary K. Morrison, 2012). Humor researchers in education advocate for the use of humor in the classrooms for students of all ages (Mary K. Morrison, 2012; Don Nilsen, 2019; Peter M. Jonas, 2019). However, humor has not always been recognized as a good fit for educational practice. Over 50 years ago, when dinosaurs were still here, humor was considered a distraction which did not belong in the classroom (Korobkin, 1988). Nowadays, when life is getting more and more intense, stressful, and scary, dinosaurs, just like mermaids and unicorns, seem to be the cutest creatures ever existed, and you want to snuggle with them while watching the news about current politics, gun control or immigration issues, humor is recognized as one of the classroom spices that intensifies and enhances the flavors of learning, so they are not always sour or bitter-sweet (Berk, 2003; Bell, 2016).

Not every instructor chooses to teach with humor, but students almost always prefer a humorous professor to a super serious one (Harris, 2007). If humor is appreciated by students and helps to cope with the stressors of teaching and studenting, yes please! I am taking up the responsibility of being a funny instructor, who tames the forces of humor and uses them for educational purposes.

If you are now wondering *how and what comes out of it?* – you are asking all the right questions, which I am going to answer, while reflecting on my language learning and teaching experiences and students' responses to my teaching approach. My work is autoethnographic in

nature because it explores the connections between me as an individual and my teaching practice in the academic and cultural environment I immigrated to.

I situate my work on the intersection of higher education, humor, linguistics, and immigration studies. The most influential works on the use of humor in the classroom I am going to engage with during my reflective process are by Nancy Bell, Anne Pomerantz, Ronald A. Berk, Stanley Dubinsky and Chris Holcomb, Victor Raskin and Salvatore Attardo, as well as the linguistic scholarship of Aaron Smith and Susan Kim. The scholarship of immigrants on academic literacy development, adaptation, and language policies, such as the collection of essays *Immigrant Scholars in Rhetoric, Composition, and Communication: Memoirs of a First Generation* (2019), is of great importance for my self-exploratory work as well.

The Structure of my Joke

Chapter II of my voluminous joke talks about some serious academic sources which discuss the importance of linguistic and cultural competence for immigrant academics, and the efficacy of humor as a pedagogical tool in higher education. Since my work is situated on the intersection of education and humor studies, I would also like to familiarize you with the humor theories I am applying in my work as a researcher and an educator. Along with that, it provides an overview of literature on the use of stand-up comedy in higher education because stand-up comedy as a genre and an approach to teaching is the focal point of my humorous adventure.

Chapter III introduces autoethnography as a method for my self-study and discusses the advantages of the method within the conceptual paradigm of post-modernity. It also discusses the importance of the concept of *sociological imagination* for the form of *interpretive*

autoethnography I am writing my work in. The theoretical rationale and its methodological application are outlined in the chapter as well.

Chapter IV is the *funniest* because it will tell you about my experience of teaching with humor and stand-up comedy, reflecting on how my exposure to humor helped me become a better teacher, and how my students' exposure to humor helped them become successful students, better writers and ESL teachers. You are going to be the invisible guests in my Linguistics and Composition classrooms, learning about my student audience, me as an instructor, and those multiple situations I used humor and stand-up comedy in during the class sessions and for the students' assignments.

Chapter IV is a labyrinth of consciousness filled in with my and my students' voices. We are telling you stories about our experiences with humor in our lives, in our writing, and our experiences with language. The chapter also considers the ways of integration of popular culture in the college classrooms and the benefits of stand-up comedy as resourceful educational material which embraces a wide variety of aspects pertaining to social, cultural, and language phenomena.

Chapter V discusses the strengths and limitations of my self-study, as well as its research potential. Enjoy!

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

The following chapter provides a review of the literature that helps establish the connection between the process of shaping an immigrant teaching identity and linguistic competency which, as I argue in my work, can be improved by exposure to and use of American humor inside the college classroom and outside of it.

The first section of the chapter takes a look at immigrant studies to outline the language-related challenges foreign scholars have to face in the American academic world.

The second section introduces humor as a socio-cultural phenomenon in conjunction with the notions of linguistic competence and performance to discuss the importance humorous discourse in the process of language learning.

The third part overviews the scholarship on humor in the college classroom, both traditional and online, to make the connection between the existing body of research on instructional humor and classroom practice.

The final part initiates a conversation about humor as a way of performing identity based on the autoethnographic study of an American female professor. Her study is the evidence of academic interest to the issues of humor and identity within the context of American culture. It informs my study on how an American woman exercises her sense of humor and the ways it constructs her identity through social interaction. Her self-exploration is relevant to my study because she uses the methodological approach of autoethnography to analyze her sense of humor in conjunction with her identity.

Immigrant educators and linguistic challenges

The scholarship on "academic immigration" (Lawless & Chen, 2015) informs us that apart from gender, race, and socio-economic background, immigrants' command of American English is key to their acceptance into American academia (Ayala-Lopez, 2018). Lawless and Chen (2015), female scholars from the field of Intercultural Communication, note that some studies of immigrants in academia are presented as "problems, especially with respect to language and teaching skills" (p. 40). According to the autoethnographic research of immigrant females, professional expertise is something they have to prove to the American academic world. If their accents or language use stand out as foreign then it negatively affects their teaching evaluations (Hernandez, et. al, 2014). Lawless and Chen (2015) write that "the issue of accent frequently came up in teaching. It marked immigrant women as different and foreign and could function to render immigrant women as incomprehensible, unintelligible, or unable to be heard" (p. 43) The scholars also note that European accents are perceived more positively because the instructors are white; however, students can still make remarks about an accent in conjunction with the intelligence of an immigrant professor. For example, "she has German accent but she's really smart" (p. 43). Additionally, in one of the studies of the effects of humor in the college classroom (Appleby, 2018), a student reported, 'I couldn't understand an instructor's humor because English was not his first language' (p. 1). This particular comment reiterates the claim that humor is culturally situated and what is humorous in one language does not necessarily translate into another language as humorous, especially if the joke involves a word play or contains an item of reality which does not pertain to American culture. I know this from my own experience of attempting to translate a Russian joke into English.

Immigrant women of color in academia express their discontent about being marginalized and underestimated because of the color skin and their accents. (Hernandez, et al., 2014). They recognize that in comparison with females of European descent it is much harder for them to be accepted because of "how people read their bodies" (Lawless & Chen, 2015). One of the immigrants from Africa says, "I can't walk around with my passport on my forehead. I will always be an immigrant. I will always be African. I will always be a black woman, or a woman with an accent. My body will never be read as American" (Lawless & Chen, 2015, p. 43).

Obviously, the issue of race is closely tied to the issue of the perception of the accent. As an immigrant from a big multinational country, I can relate to the problematic perception of immigrant females in the US academia. However, it is not the focal point of the current study, so allow me to reiterate the major argument that linguistic competence is critical for immigrant educators if they strive to acclimate and be accepted as valuable contributors to the American academia, and humor is one of the means that can strengthen their knowledge of English and improve their teaching.

The memoirs of first generation immigrant scholars in Rhetoric, Composition, and Communication reveal that all of the scholars were working hard on their mastery of American English, adjusting their identities to the American academic culture, and choosing English as their primary mode of communication in academic fields in which the demands of language proficiency are especially high (Guglielmo & Figueiredo, 2019). Their efforts are very familiar to me since both of my degree programs in the US, Communication and English, required excellent command of the language. For that reason I have been tirelessly working on the improvement of my English, trying to eliminate my foreign accent in both speaking and writing.

Even though I might still write like Tolstoy at times, as duly noted by one of my most scrupulous dissertation readers, I am consciously training myself to chop my long and winding sentences into shorter ones, to meet the criteria of American academic writing to be more direct. Along with that I am constantly learning how to sound more American on the idiomatic level.

Once, in a conversation with a native-speaker I used an expression "to bring bacon home." My interlocutor asked me if that was what we say in Russia, to which I responded: " In Russia we bring bread home, or a loaf of bread with butter, but since we are in America, bacon is the valid currency. I had not even tried bacon until I first came to America on a professional exchange trip about 20 years ago." Another question followed, "But how did you learn this phrase?" My answer was, "From social interaction and from watching American movies."

This example illustrates how idiomatic expressions are representative of the culture they were coined in. And just like idioms humor is a product of culturally specific social interactions. Consequently, its comprehension and production by non-native speakers of English (NNSE) depends on the levels of their linguistic competence and performance (Bell, 2015)

The following section defines the concepts of linguistic competence and performance and explains their significance for NNSEs, in conjunction with humorous discourse as a unique, resourceful, and creative form of human interaction.

Humor and Linguistic Competence and Performance

In her book *We Are Not Amused: Failed Humor in Interaction* (2015), Nancy Bell, Associate Professor of TESOL and Linguistics at Washington State University, writes that "language is both cognitive and social, a system as well as a process"(p.7). Bell (2015) argues that meaning is co-created in the process of interaction and, despite the presence of

conventionalized ways of verbal interactions, such as greetings, apologies, and expressions of gratitude, there is always room for creativity, for some unexpected turn in the context of interactions (p.7). The author distinguishes humor production as one of those creative interactional moments, which break the rules of formulaic language (p.11). Bell's conceptualization of humor as a linguistic phenomenon is valuable for the current study because it presents humor as a phenomenon which requires the knowledge of both rules and the ways the language is used by native speakers in various social contexts (p.11). Thus the NNES's ability to produce and appreciate humor stems from their ability to understand conventional language as well as the ways it is used. This ability can be explained by the concepts of linguistic competence and performance (Bell, 2015, 13).

According to Bell (2015) linguistic competence refers to a speaker's knowledge of language, while performance describes the actual use of language (p.13). It is necessary to note that the knowledge of language includes not only the grammatical structure and vocabulary, but the rules of use (p. 27). Humor researchers distinguish competence related to humor, its production and understanding, as a particular kind of competence, which a non-native speaker may or may not develop apart from the general communicative competence (Raskin, 1985; Vega, 1990; Carrell, 1997; Bell 2015). Competence related to humor has two classifications: joke competence and humor competence. The former is more static, and it requires the speaker to recognize a joke as a form. The latter refers to humor recognition and appreciation when the hearer is able to identify and acknowledge the humorous intent (Bell, 2015).

The concepts of linguistic and humor competencies as well as linguistic performance are instrumental for my self-exploratory work. They facilitate my understanding of what it means to

know another language in conjunction with the multitude of socio-cultural contexts it is being used in. Knowing that humor competence is a separate instance within the scope of communicative competencies, provides additional support to my claim that immigrant academics should consider humor seriously because humor is a source of linguistic creativity and socio-cultural knowledge, which would help them to adapt. It has most definitely been and is helping me to become more language and culture savvy. I have been observing my own progress and improvement since I started watching more stand-up comedy and purposefully utilize humor in my teaching and everyday life.

Comedy in American culture has been an important form of social commentary, as it endorsed and challenged dominant social cultural norms (Mintz, 1985). American stand-up comedy as a genre has a long and interesting history. For the purposes of education and entertainment, I have watched documentaries about Lenny Bruce, George Carlin, Joan Rivers, Lewis Black, Jerry Seinfeld, and some others. From Richard Pryor's influence on white American views of race to Jon Stewart's and Trevor Noah's more recent success at engaging a younger generation in political commentary, comedians continue to play important role as voices of dissent, change, and conscience in American society (Bingham & Hernandez, 2009, p. 337) American comedians taught me a lot about language policies and politics, gender roles, life in New York, social issues, and diversity of cultures and accents across the country. They motivated me to watch more and more comedy to better understand the culture, cultural stereotypes, slang and idioms, American ways of saying things body language, politics, social issues, you name it.

My experience working with international students showed that language competency is highly necessary for the development of humor competency in another language. Even though English language learners with lower levels of language proficiency are still capable of humor production (Bell, Pomerantz, 2016), they are not be able to understand more complex and culturally situated humor without that additional understanding of what is funny and why in American culture. For instance, when I was showing Margaret Cho's stand-up *Fresh off the Boat* to a group of ESL students, mainly from Europe, and they did not find it funny because they could not get cultural references and as well as it was hard for them to simply understand certain things she was saying. My example is a good illustration of how linguistic and cultural competences are critical for understanding of humor.

Apart from language learning, humor has been studied in a variety of fields and the overview of some of the studies will provide for better understanding as a linguistic phenomenon, as a genre, as a form of socio-cultural critique, and also as a mode of teaching. So let us take a closer look at how humor has been studied and theorized by various authors through time.

Overview of humor theories, types, and genres

Studies of humor embrace concepts that cannot be tied to one discipline. There are theories which explain humor from cognitive, social, and psychoanalytical perspectives (Popesku, 2010). The cognitive theories are based on the notion of incongruity; the social involve hostility and disparagement; the psychoanalytical deal with release. Victor Raskin (1985), the founding father of Linguistic theories humor, in his overview of humor theories mentions theories of incongruity, superiority, disparagement, and disposition as well theories of

release/relief or arousal-safety theory (pp. 36-40). Communication scholars Welter and Miczo (2006) in their article on aggressive and affiliative humor propose security theory, which entails that humor serves to ease tension, as a lens to look at the process of humor production.

Professor of broadcast communication arts at San Francisco State University Arthur Berger (1993) considers humor as paired or bipolar oppositions and argues that all of humor is based on the principle of incongruity, which he defines as involving shifts of one kind to another (p.57). He suggests that the humorous effect is created by the violation of codes that jokes maintain. By codes, he understands some socially accepted norms of behavior or manner of expressing one's thoughts. Berger argues that every joke implies some element of unexpectedness that creates opposition which can be interpreted differently, depending on the frame of reference a critic or every other person brings into a joke (p.59).

Superiority Theory

This theory is standardly attributed to Plato, Aristotle, and Hobbes (Lintott, 2016), and implies that humor is generated at the expense of someone else. John Morreall, the prolific philosopher of laughter and humor, construes superiority theory the following way: "The oldest, and probably still the most widespread theory of laughter is that laughter is an expression of a person's feelings of superiority over other people" (as cited in Lintott, 2016, p. 348).

The concept of superiority supports Plato's perspective that malice and envy are the roots of comic enjoyment as well as Aristotle's expression that humor is a well-disguised condescension (Lintott, 2016). According to superiority theory, humor is based on hostility and trifling faults of other people. One of the theory's derivations is disparagement or dispositional

theory. It is based on the idea that people laugh at infirmities of others, particularly at those who are their enemies (Raskin, 1985, p. 37).

Dispositional humor primarily focuses on the style of communication when one party is disparaged or aggressed against by another party. Appreciation of this kind of humor depends on who is ridiculed: If friends humiliate our enemies then the appreciation should be maximal, and it should be minimal when our enemies humiliate our friends. The effectiveness of this type of humor is estimated by enhancement of a "positive reference group" and disparagement of the one that is referred as a negative one (Raskin, 1993, p.38).

Release theory

Release theory was first introduced by Freud, and its basic principle lies within the concept that laughter provides relief for mental, nervous and/or psychic energy and thus ensures homeostasis after a struggle, tension, strain, etc. (Raskin, 1993, 38). The theory advocates the fact that a human being is surrounded by quite a few constraints, created by norms, and that the easiest way to avoid them or at least lessen their influence is to deviate from commonly accepted logic. Release theory proponents concur in the statement that sense of humor is liberating; it frees people from different kinds of conventional systems and brings them pleasure and relaxation from the rules of reasoning (p. 38). Berger (1993) makes an interesting statement that is very representative of the liberating nature of humor; he says that for humorists, nothing is sacred, humor is a force that respects nobody; nothing is too revered, too holy to be ridiculed, and nothing is out of boundaries as far as humorists are concerned (p.156).

Security theory

Miczo and Welter (2006) write that the basic proposition of security theory is that a sense of security underlies the ability to produce humor (p.65). This theory includes both aggressive and affiliative humor that is produced to bolster the threatened sense of security. As opposed to disparaging humor, security restoration humor is aimed at easing the tension in difficult situations. It should be noted that the aggressiveness of such kind of humor might increase the feeling of superiority of one part over another. However, the theory proposes that affiliative humor centers on themes of inclusion and equality (Miczo & Welter, 2006, p.66). Miczo and Welter apply security theory to intercultural communication, and they point out ethnocentric nature of aggressive humor as one of the mechanisms to restore or maintain a sense of security in communication.

Dimensions of humor

The following section elaborates on the aforementioned affiliative and aggressive features of humor, which along with playfulness and seriousness are defined as dimensions of humor in general. The introduction of these dimensions is necessary for consideration of the functions of humor and the purpose of its usage from a communicative perspective since humor is not just a phenomenon that makes people laugh; it is a form of verbal and non-verbal communication. Miczo and Welter (2006) distinguish four dimensions of humor, which are: playfulness, seriousness, affiliation, and aggression. Playfulness has to do with the nature of humor being viewed as a result of play with meanings, words, objects, concepts, situations, and people for the sake of being funny. Playfulness is recognized as one of the properties of human nature when an individual “feels safe and sated with respect of basic needs” (p. 63). The notion

of play as one of the forms of humor production prompts the idea that what is considered funny can be expressed not only by linguistic means. Generated by playing, then comicality can be derived from the context of a play and, depending on its form, may have verbal and non-verbal expression. The relation of context and humor production is an important stance for humor interpretation and appreciation.

Seriousness is also distinguished as one of the dimensions and has to do with the intentionality of humor as an action which has it specific purpose that is not necessarily should be funny in itself. This dimension is tied to the functions of humor in peoples' interactions that are essentially not humorous, but humor as a form of communication provides a safer way to get a message across. The use of humor in a difficult situation in order to avoid arguments makes humor a very powerful tool not only for entertainment but also for conflict management in various spheres of human life.

Affiliation as a dimension of humor is more common for individuals who interact with one another regularly within the framework of some institution; for example, co-workers in the office, or students in the classroom. Affiliation facilitates the sense of unity and friendliness during communication process. Affiliative humor serves the purpose of reduction of tension and conflict among interactants (p. 63). Aggressiveness in humor serves the purpose of suppression, control, division, and establishment of hierarchy among interactants. Humor has a wide scope of application: from fun for fun's sake to conflict resolution, from developing friendships to expressing hostility. Humor is fluid and ubiquitous, and once it entered classroom interaction, it drew a lot of attention as a pedagogical tool.

Types of Humor and its Forms

Besides being multifunctional, humor is represented by numerous types and forms of expression. Classification of humor often lacks homogeneity. The most organized classification is provided by Berger. The author distinguishes four basic categories under which fall the specific techniques of humor, the tools for creative process of humor production. The four categories are language, logic, identity, and action. These categories have to do with the nature of humor. The first category implies that humor is verbal; the second means that humor is ideational; the category of identity employs existential aspects of humor; and the last category refers to physical and non-verbal humor production (Berger, 1993, p.17).

Some of the techniques Berger (1993) included into his categories in the studies of written humor are considered as genres; for example, parody, grotesque, and burlesque are the identity techniques; satire is the technique of language. Berger refers "verbal caricature" to the identity technique as well. Allusion is the first in Berger's list of techniques under the language category. The author calls them "the bread and butter of everyday humor" and adds that "they are very much tied to social and political matters as well as situations which have sexual dimensions" (p. 21). The essence of allusion is a reference made to a specific person/character, situation, verbal expression that produces a comic effect because of its relevance to an interaction. The source of an allusion does not necessarily need to be funny, but it creates a humorous effect in a particular context because it reveals a character trait that is worth being mocked or ridiculed.

It is worth mentioning that this particular kind of humor is never recommended for the classroom. I got myself in trouble once for mocking an absent student because he stopped

coming to class. Then it turned out that other students were offended my comment because I gave them room to think that I could say sarcastic things about them behind their back as well. However, it was ok for the students to mock other professors or people in my presence. I usually chose not to comment on any kind of ridiculing of another faculty member; I would just remind them to be respectful and save their jokes for after class.

Forms of humor

Humor studies distinguish quite a few forms of humor. Esar (1952), for instance, proposed a classification, which includes wisecracks, epigrams, riddles, conundrums, gags, jokes, and anecdotes. Wisecracks are clever remarks made in regard with a particular person. Epigrams are similar to wisecracks only they ridicule not a single person but rather of a category of people with similar characteristics, such as traits of character, vices, or occupation. Raskin (1993) calls the riddle a duel-of -wit (26) because a riddle consists of a question and an answer. Conundrums are punning riddles that also have a question-answer structure, only the answer is always based on a play of words and their meanings. Gags are defined as a form of a comic conversation, in which the second line usually sounds like a witty remark to the first line.

Jokes and anecdotes are short funny stories, which, according to Raskin (1993), differ in terms of form and subject matter. He writes that jokes are based on the principle of situation comedy, and anecdotes usually illustrate "a moral point or a celebrity's character" (p. 29). Puns or word play belong to the language category. However, some authors consider puns as a low form of humor (Sedivi & Carlson, 2011) and some, to the contrary, consider puns as excellent examples of wit (Berger, 1992).

Jokes, another common form of humor, can be of different types, which are canned jokes, situational jokes, and practical jokes. Canned jokes are slightly relevant to the context of a situation, but interactants understand them because they have some tacit knowledge of the origin of a joke. The situational joke evolves from the communicative situation and the wit of one of its participants. Situational joke production is rooted in a participant's perception of a situation and also the ability of other participants to decode and appreciate the joke. Practical jokes always have a victim who is participating in the process of humor production but is not aware of the fact he/she is the object of the joke. This type of a joke is an example of the superiority model, according to which, humor is always produced at somebody's expense.

Further down in the review you will read that Bell (2015) considers the use of canned jokes in language learning as problematic because they get dated, however, there is nothing wrong in learning some old humor for the sake of learning about some cultural allusions of the past which made those jokes funny. I learned about the existence of Yakov Smirnoff, a comedian who left a legacy of jokes about Soviet Russia, only after I started my doctoral program. I have learned a lot of new things, which I was trying to avoid growing up in Soviet Russia.

The knowledge of the types and forms of humor, and the mechanisms behind humor production is important for further consideration of the practical application of humor as teaching strategy, as course material, parts of syllabus and course assignments, which will be described in chapter IV. So far, I have discussed how humor have been theorized as a phenomenon, now it is time for us to consider the place and role of humor in the college classroom.

Humor in Higher Education

In 1988 Debra Korobkin, a Kellogg fellow of doctoral studies in adult education at the University of Georgian in Athens, in the Volume 4 of the Issue 36 of College Teaching published an article "Humor in the Classroom: Considerations and Strategies." This article has become the most cited in the articles about humor in higher education because Korobkin drew the attention of the college teaching world to the importance of humor in the college classroom and outlined its benefits for learning and student-teacher rapport. Besides Korobkin's experience with humor in the college classroom, the article references previous research done by Anver Ziv, an educational humor researcher at Tel Aviv University, in 1976. Korobkin's article was the first, in the multitude of articles, to describe the college students' perception of the educational efficacy of humor. The author names classroom humor "a twentieth century phenomenon, which had been used and advocated for even in the college classroom" (p. 154). She notes that humor in academic teaching was previously perceived as something "unprofessional, uncontrolled, and undignified"; professors would avoid using humor in speeches, social interactions and presentations for fear of being thought of as trivial, foolish, or ignorant (Korobkin, p. 154). Torok, et al (2004) reiterated that "humor historically was perceived as having no place in the classroom or on test material. The dynamic between and instructor and a pupil has been a serious one" (p. 14). Educators of the past deemed humor as a form of distraction and waste of time. They believed it reduced classroom morale and efficiency. (Torok et al., 2004).

A lot of research related to the use of humor in higher education has been done since then. Nowadays, the interest to humor in higher education just keeps increasing. According to contemporary scholars (R. Berk, A & D Nilsen, M.K. Morrison, N. Bell, K. McDermott, L.

Ellingson, etc) humor in higher education is being considered as a tool of learning enhancement, as pedagogy, as teaching material, as a mode of classroom interaction. Along with that, a sense of humor is perceived as a desirable quality of a college professor (Appleby, 2018) and of a humor researcher (Kmita & Mawhinney, 2015).

Modern college students dread sitting in a lecture hall if there is no "spice" in the lecturer's narrative; they require some kind of light-hearted interjections, especially if the topic of a class is difficult or, like students say, "not very relatable." "Students seem to crave entertainment, not just in their technology, pop-culture, and social media, but in their education as well. The days of the Ivory Tower as the source of knowledge, generously meted out to motivated learners in ninety-minute lectures, may have bid a fond farewell to its era of effectiveness" (Wortley and Dotson, 2016, p. 14).

Contemporary research in psychology (Busler, Kirk, Keeley & Buskist, 2017), for example, provides evidence that students enjoy their learning much more if a teacher tells jokes or funny stories, laughs along with students, and uses relevant interesting and lighthearted personal examples to highlight important points. The most recent study showed that lacking a sense of humor is a quality that students perceive to be "reflective of poor teaching" (p. 2), and that examples of this quality are "never or seldom telling a funny story or joke, being serious all the time, and not smiling or acting jovially around students" (Appleby, 2018, p. 2).

As we can see humor is an attractive subject matter for contemporary educational research and practice. It is also important to note that research of the phenomenon of humor is not limited by research in education; over time humor has become a subject of a multidisciplinary scholarly discourse. Humor has become a VIP guest in Psychology, Education,

Communication, Linguistics, TESOL, Literature, Philosophy, Medicine, Rhetoric and Composition, Gender Studies. The voices of different disciplines complement each other, making our understanding and appreciation of the nature, forms, and function of humor in different spheres of life more robust. The scholarship I will be tapping into is from the fields of higher education, communication, educational psychology, gender, and culture studies.

The purpose of the following part of the overview is to familiarize you with the most important scholars and practitioners who contributed to the field by their research of the application of humor in their classrooms.

To achieve the objective of this study, it is necessary to explore three different sets of literature, which will help me paint a more detailed picture of humor in the college classroom, in Composition and Linguistics, and about the humorous genre of stand-up comedy, which in this work is considered not just as a popular genre of American culture, but as teaching material and a form of its delivery.

The first on the list is the literature covering research and practice on humor in higher education.

When I just started my long and winding road as a humor in education researcher in graduate school, my first question was "who uses humor in college teaching and writes about it?" The three big names I came across, while I was still working on my internship proposal, were Roland Berk, Nancy Bell, and Stanley Dubinsky. Once I learned more about humor in educational research, I became familiar with the names of Alleen Pace Nilsen and Don L.F. Nilsen. Both are professors emeriti at Arizona State University, authors of the book The Language of Humor, An Introduction (2019), and founders of the International Society of Humor

Studies, which I am currently a member of. Mary Kay Harris is another educational scholar who is interested in the role of humor in learning enhancement; she is the author of the book Using Humor to Maximize Learning: The Links Between Positive Emotions and Education (2007). Her book is a fundamental work which provides a series of practical recommendations on how to effectively incorporate humor into teaching. It suggests strategies, but it is the burden of educators to collect and produce humor for the teaching purposes because humor is a socio-cultural phenomenon contingent on current events, language use, popular culture, and technology. For that matter, my study can be considered as another contribution to the discussion of the pedagogical value of humor in the classroom from the perspective of an immigrant teacher.

Ronald Berk, a professor emeritus of Biostatistics and Measurement at John Hopkins University, who is now operating as a Humor Professor http://www.ronberk.com/education.shtml, is my next academic VIP. He helped me realize that if I choose to teach with humor, I should use it and use it wisely.

Roland Berk was the first to describe his experiences in the application of humor in teaching statistics. In 2001-2002 he published two books Humor as Instructional *Defibrillator and Professors are from Mars and Students are from Snickers*. In his 2014 article "Last Professor Standing!": Power Point Enables All Faculty to Use Humor in teaching" he writes:

> Humor is NOT about telling jokes to your class, comedy, or "Last Professor Standing." Wow! Bummer. None of us is trained to perform, although some of you may be gifted with that comic gene or have theater in your bone marrow or spleen. Ouch! Humor is not a random act of entertainment in the classroom.

> When hu-mor is intended for teaching, it is a teaching tool that is systematically planned and has a specific learning outcome (p. 81).

In 1996 Ronald A. Berk published a study that was concerned with students' rating of 10 strategies of humor integration into research statistics classroom. To evaluate the effectiveness of those 10 specific humorous techniques Berk developed a questionnaire. The results revealed that for both graduate and undergraduate students the use of humor in their statistics class reduced anxiety, improved the ability to learn, and increased students' overall performance. Berk is now a recognized professor with the expertise in using systematic humor in teaching. In one of his most recent articles, "Last Professor Standing" (2014) he outlines the following benefits of the integration if humor into teaching. Humor 1) improves overall mental functioning, 2) reduces the negative emotional consequence of stress, anxiety, and tension, 3) reduces test anxiety and improves performance, 4) enhances creativity, 5) facilitates communication, 6) arouses attention and engagement, 7) improves understanding, retention, and memory, 8) improves problem-solving, 9) relaxes students, 10) encourages open-mindedness, 11) increases instructor-student rapport, 12) facilitates a positive mood and cooperative classroom atmosphere. (81)

To complement the findings from Berk's article, I would like to provide a description of a study by Torok, et al (2004), which was intended to identify the relation between students' and professor's humor. The researchers hypothesized that professors and students support the use of humor and that the amount of humor employed, and students' perceptions of their professors will have a positive correlation. Additionally, the research ambition was to identify positive and constructive types of humor as part of a teaching style. Based on the types of humor the study hoped to identify the whether the "judgments about professors' competence and effectiveness

would be positively related to the judgments of professors' teaching style' (p. 15). The study made a prediction that both students' and professors' perceptions of the professor's use of humor would be similar. The study engaged three instructors from three disciplines: biology, educational psychology, theatre; and 124 students; they were selected from the 2 sections of each course. The participants were offered surveys, which included Likert scales, rating scales, modifies checklists and open-ended questions. After the students filled out the surveys they were debriefed. On average over 50 percent of students agreed that the use of humor helps to create a sense of community, and that the forms of humor most commonly used were jokes, funny stories, funny comments, cartoons, professional humor, and sarcasm. The results of the debriefing showed 73 percent of students of students feel positive about a professor who uses humor constructively. When analyzing the influence of humor on students' learning, 40 percent reported that with humor used they learn better often, and 40 percent reported that humor always helps them to retain new information. Students were highly supportive of the use of funny comments, funny stories, professional humor, and jokes in class, but they were not really supportive of the inclusion of humor into tests. Ninety six percent of students reported that they would use humor in instructional discourse; however, along with that, students pointed out that the instructional benefits of humor have their limitations. For instance, 32 percent of students marked humor as potentially offensive. The study showed that the most common outcomes of the use of humor as pedagogical tool, reported by the students, were "facilitating attentiveness in the classroom", lowering tension, boosting morale, and facilitating "understanding of concepts presented in the classroom" (pp.16-17). Ninety seven percent of students reported that they would use humor in their own teaching discourse. Both students and instructors recognized

"stories and/or professional experience; content related professional humor, and sarcasm" (p.17) as the most effective forms of positive and negative humor combined. In the context of the study, sarcasm is perceived as a negative form of humor; however, when students were answering open-ended questions, they did include sarcasm as an appropriate form of humor to use in the classroom. In their discussion section sarcasm was considered as positive and even constructive form of classroom humor under the circumstance of established rapport between students and an instructor. However, the authors of the study recognize that there is still research potential for the role of sarcasm in the classroom. The study reports that one of the major limitations of humor in the classroom is that it can be offensive, especially if it is misused or misinterpreted within one of the social contexts, such as gender or sexuality.

Garner (2010) describes a study which was conducted to identify the connection between the use of humor and retaining information. The study included undergraduate students who were asked to watch lectures on research methods and statistics, with and without use of humor. The research participants had to evaluate their learning experience from the videos on the Likert-like scale form 1-7. The findings showed that the students' learning experience was enjoyable. This is not the only study which reports that students find humor-injected teaching enjoyable, which demonstrates the repetition in students' opinions and lets us use them as a guideline to our teaching practice. However, it is important to keep in mind that not all kinds of humor are suitable for using in the college classroom.

Humor in Language Learning Classroom

The most rigorous research of the role of classroom humor has been conducted in the field of Teaching English as a Second Language (TESOL). A lot of findings and ideas can be

transferred into Linguistics pedagogy because they are related to the motivation of learning and the increase of linguistic and cultural competencies. The most important contributor to the field is Nancy Bell, who is a full professor at Washington State University, where she teaches courses in TESL (Teaching English as a Second Language) and linguistics, as well as courses in academic literacy for students who use English as a second language.

Bell argues that conversational humor is beneficial for language learners. She also problematizes the notion of language proficiency in relation to humor production, pointing out some instances where seemingly low language proficiency did not impede the process of humor production. She discusses the binary of universal and culture-based humor. Bell expresses her strong belief in the connection between humor and culture and that teaching culture through humor in L2 classes can be a very effective enterprise. She provides a satirical political TV show as an example of humorous genre which facilitates for both language learning and digging deeper into the culture it was produced in. Therefore, culture and genre specific humor has great potential to trigger serious conversations about social and political issues. In her discussion about culture, humor, and students' L2 proficiency, Bell supports her claims with students' opinions she pulled out from the interviews she conducted. Bell concludes that humor is a tremendously complex and multilayered phenomenon and when considered to be application within the scope of L2 classrooms, it should be selected wisely and in accordance with the students' learning goals. This statement holds its merit not only for L2 pedagogy but for teaching at large.

Bell provides some useful recommendations on the ways humor can be incorporated into the classroom. For instance, a form-focused task can employ the analysis of some samples of humor, and then it can be expanded to the collection of some humor samples from different

people, including those people whose humor seems to be hard to understand. Such challenges will increase both language competence and cultural awareness. Bell claims that humor is a complex topic with inexhaustible potential for language creativity and the investigation of intercultural and cross-cultural communication. This quality of humor reflects the overall creative nature of any language. Humor in the classroom can be initiated by both instructors and students. The common perception of student-initiated humor is that it is disruptive and off-task. Bell and Pomerantz suggest reconsidering this perspective, claiming that humor can actually be perceived as a creative process indicative of students' psychological comfort in the classroom (2011). Drawing upon Pratt's concept of the Safe House, which implies that classroom communication is a space to create a community where teachers' and students' identities can be comfortably negotiated because the relationships within the community are based on trust and understanding and are free from oppression, the authors make an attempt to identify the ways humor provides for the that kind of psychological security in the classroom. The scholars argue that frequently script-based language classes turn out to be less effective than the ones that deviate from the official scripts, allowing students to engage in playful interactions. They insist that off-script lessons can better facilitate motivated L2 learning.

The authors support their claims with the results of the study they conducted. They recorded Spanish classes at one of the American universities and further registered all the instances of humorous interactions in the L2 classrooms. The instances of spontaneous humor stimulated students to be more engaged into the learning process since the teacher was not acting and was not perceived as a dominating power in the classroom.

The discussion section of the article presents interesting findings about the cohesion between the process of L2 humor production and students' identities. The level of students' language fluency was not very high, but they were still willing to initiate humorous interactions, celebrating their multilingual selves. It turns out that when students are exposed to leaning a foreign language, they become more tolerant to other people who are non-native speaker of English and they can make humor their own inability to learn another language and speak it fluently. The authors explain students' enthusiasm about humor production and their absence of fear of losing face in the classroom with the fact that their efforts to be humorous were encouraged and their L2 learners' identities were negotiated through interactions with each other and with their teacher. In conclusion Bell and Pomerantz warn us that the role of humor in FL classroom should not be romanticized and that not all the representations of humor production should be treated as classroom appropriate. At the same time, they encourage FL educators not to underestimate the role of humor as a stimulus for language production and therefore language learning.

To sum it up, humor enhances learning opportunities because it provides for amicable student-teacher rapport through humor production and appreciation. In Educational Communication studies, the ability to establish rapport and provide for more effective learning is described as teacher immediacy behaviors, which include verbal and non-verbal expressions (Christophel, 1990). The study that showed a positive correlation between teacher immediacy and student learning, presented the use of humor as one of the behaviors which motivated students to learn better and like the instructor more (Christophel, 1990, p. 328). Consequently,

the concept of Humor as the Safe House can be applied not only to language learning but to other subject areas.

Classroom humor across borders

Not only American but also international scholars are concerned with the efficacy of humor in the language classroom. Among them are researchers from India, Romania, and Germany. Their contribution to the body of knowledge about classroom humor is of great value because it brings in perspectives from other cultures. For example, a Romanian scholar, Carmen Popescu (2010), in her article "The Contribution of humor in language education to the construction of classroom culture" explores the influence of humor on classroom culture. She studied the influence through the students' perceptions of the use of humor in Romanian English classrooms. Popescu analyzes her students' reflections on the English course planned around the use of humor, which they wrote 10 years after they took it. Popescu's theoretical background for her study comes from the sociology of classroom humor and the 3 major types of teachers' humor it distinguishes. They are self-deprecatory, joking relationships, and aggressive jokes, and they make a difference in the language classroom environment.

Just like Bell and Pomerantz, Popesku considers teacher-initiated and student-initiated types of humor as the key concepts which support her hypothesis about humor as one of the important factors which positively change teacher-student relationships. Popesku talks about the importance of activities in the language learning process. She argues that humor can engage students into activities and humor production can be a form of activity in itself. The author talks about laughter as a signal of students' understanding within the context of humor-based activity. She also mentions that laughter can create the "glee effect" that promotes positive environment

in the classroom. Popesku recognizes joking around the humorous text in order to reinforce understanding and encourage learning as another strategy of language teaching.

Analyzing the reflections of her students, the author gathers that students had a sense of "humor community" in the classroom. As a teacher experimenting with humor she notices that through the course each class established its own humor identity as a group, plus, there were students who, due to their inherent sense of humor, helped to establish stronger bonds between the students and the teacher. Her study shows that humor-based methodology of teaching English helps to shape a "community of practice". This notion entails that all the members of the community are familiar with the rules and procedures within the community and have a specific code of conduct and communication. According to Popescu's students' responses, they did have that sense of community of practice and actually were willing to apply some if those practices "off task"; for instance, during the breaks and in their student lives outside of the classroom. Such an expansion of humor and language activities promotes autonomous learning and stimulates learning. It is necessary to emphasize that currently a lot of its attention is drawn to the ways of stimulating language practice and autonomous learning.

An Indian Second-Language Acquisition (SLA) scholar, Mhan Raj reiterates the benefits of humor in his study. He says that creating an amicable in-class environment is vital for successful language learning. He stresses the importance of cultural and linguistic competence that humor provides for "Role of Humor in Second Language Teaching and Acquisition" (2016). Bell and Pomerantz also mentioned that in their work, which strengthens the argument about the role of humor in the development of cultural and communicative competencies.

Along with classroom professors, pedagogical value of humor has become of interest to those who teach online courses. Donna Gayle Anderson in her article "Taking the "Distance" out of Education: A Humorous Approach to Online Learning" (2011) describes a study that was conducted to identify the effects of humor in online teaching. The study compares 2 groups taking the same on-line course. The first group was presented with the standard set of materials and assignments for the course with no humor involved. The second group was taught with humor incorporated into teaching materials, syllabus, assignment sheets, and online communication. Based on the students reports and researchers' observations, the results of the research favor the use of humor in on-line teaching. When exposed to humor, students demonstrate a higher level of engagement in on-line conversation. Students reported that the use of humor provided for a comfortable and safe on-line classroom environment and stimulated their learning. They also reported that the teacher who used humor made a difficult class fun and bearable. The use of humor also affected students' perception of the instructor. They said that the professor was approachable and supportive, which made learning more enjoyable and fun (2011). The study expanded the body of knowledge about the efficacy of humor and strengthened arguments for its pedagogical value in both physical and virtual classrooms. However, just like the Bell, Pomerantz, and Berk, Anderson (2011) emphasizes the necessity of being selective when using humor. She writes that offensive humor might demotivate student and distract them from course content. The following section will discuss the risks of humor in more detail.

The risks of using humor in the classroom

Recognizing that humor as a teaching tool is unique, scholars conclude that humor serves as a double-edged sword – capable of improving or harming the classroom learning environment depending on its employment by the teacher. Academicians indicate that while too much tension often results in negative effects on learning, too little tension can have similar negative results. They warn of the danger humor presents to an ideal level of tension necessary for learning. In addition, it is noted that humor in the classroom should be age appropriate to be beneficially effective. The researchers caution that humor, particularly sarcastic humor, can confuse students who are not listening carefully or reading non-verbal cues appropriately. They also warn that too much humor aimed at a specific individual can be negatively misinterpreted and result in either perceived favoritism or perceived harassment depending on the type of humor employed.

Humor can be perceived by students as aggressive or offensive. Norrick (1993) writes that humor has traditionally been associated with aggression in three ways: it targets a person or a group of people, it submits the audience to an understanding test, and it disrupts traditional turn-by-turn talk and holds the floor to perform for an extended period of time (Norrick, 1993, p. 132). In the previously mentioned study, Torock, et al (2004) mention that 32 percent of students marked humor as potentially offensive. The study reports that one of the major limitations of humor in the classroom is that it can be offensive, especially if it is misused or misinterpreted within one of the social contexts, such as gender or sexuality.

Another fact brought into the discussion by the existing body of research was the fact that the use of humor is more prevalent among male than female professors. However, I found it fascinating that that in 1877, George Meredith in his essay "The Idea of Comedy and of the Uses

of the Comic Spirit" wrote "women are blind in their own interests, when they gravitate towards sentimentalism, rather than comedy; because comedy is indicative of the (potential) social equality of the sexes" (Merrill, 1988, p. 271). In 1990, Katherine Van Giffen published a study about professors' perceived humor and gender, which found that in naturalistic settings, despite the general tendency to favor male professor' humor, females professors with high teaching evaluations also had significantly higher humor perceived ratings (p. 65) .

Gender studies of humor report that sarcasm and negative humor is better perceived coming from a male than a female because that type of humor is not expected from female instructors (Gorham and Christophel, 1990). Berk (2010) notes that the use of profane language is less expected from a female professor. Also, statistically, female professors are less likely to use profanities to produce comedic effect in the classroom. However, currently researchers observe shifts in ways women use humor.

Bell (2016), in her discussion of universal and culture-based humor, argues that humor is always either context or culture specific and that makes L2 learning through "canned jokes" not as effective as advertised because they are still contextually situated and become outdated rather quickly. Bell's claim is applicable not only to L2 learning. If humor is dated or culture-irrelevant then it does not produce the desired effect. To avoid situations of failed humor instructors should keep their jokes up-to date so the students can relate to the humor. Along with that, according to Bell and Pomerantz (2015), humor can be considered as failed if it perceived as an expression of superiority and hostility, or if it does not meet appreciation of an interlocutor due to linguistic or cultural constraints. Projected onto the classroom environment this implies that professors should be careful with jokes that are directly targeting one student and are produced at the expense of

that student. Self-deprecatory humor usually works better when a classroom management issue arises.

In her chapter "Pedagogy of Laughter: How to make learning more fun and effective", Laura Ellingson (2018) overviews positive effects of humor and laughter on teaching and learning and how humor can be used to make students more motivated to learn and be more engaged into the classroom discussions. Ellingson points out that her long-term experience of teaching such intimidating courses as public speaking and research methods prompted her to integrate humor into her teaching. The decision was also supported by scholarly research of the effects of humor on teaching and learning, which, despite the criticism of lacking longitudinal studies and consistency (Banas, et al, 2011), shows many examples of positive outcomes, as long as humor is respectful, and not hurtful or denigrating (Ellingson, 2018, p. 123)

Ellingson (2018) makes important claims about the nature and purpose of humor in higher education, stating that "in a context of higher education…humor more specifically refers to a professor's use of amusing or comic words, actions, or reactions while instructing, engaging, and interacting with students, managing her classroom, and/or setting a tone for timely and appropriate mirthful response to content and activities. (p. 125) According to Ellingson, humor is fundamentally about a mood of lightness that facilitates learning as a way to counter stress, anxiety, fear, disengagement (p. 25) The professor believes that humor in the classroom should be used with a high level of caution because if humor is used negatively to disparage students then it can cause embarrassment, anger, and alienation, and contribute to a hostile classroom environment (Banas et al., 2011; Hoad et al., 2013 cited by Ellingson, 2019). Even well-intentioned teasing can fail because of the power differential between instructor and students,

and she cautions instructors to tread very, very carefully in this area. Her experience shows that light teasing is perceived much better after the rapport between an instructor and the students is established and goodwill is flowing in the classroom (p. 126)

Ellingson, revisiting Bana et al's (2011) overview of humor research over the past 40 years, recommends that professors who choose to teach with humor or, as a she names them, Humorous Pedagogies Instructors, should use humor the way they feel comfortable with, avoiding negative and disparaging humor, ensuring the appropriateness of humor for student audience and relatability of humor to a concept being explained and then followed by clarification of the meaning of humor in relation to the subject matter. According to Ellingson, some evidence shows that planned humor could be less effective than spontaneous humor that arises out of a particular time and place (p. 127), and the authors warned that forced-sounding humor will likely not work, but she argues that this does not mean that instructors cannot be deliberate in their incorporation of humor into their teaching. Ellingson writes, "I make certain jokes and witty comments every time I teach certain topics that I teach over again each term, and the joking works well because it is the first time it has been heard by each group of students and because I truly enjoy the humor so it does not sound stale or forced" (p. 127). As a practicing Humorous Pedagogies Instructor myself, I would like to add that if a joke has been tested on a student audience and has been well received, which is always the key, then you can re-use it and add it to your collection of jokes for your next group of students.

In 2017, Caroline M. Stanley, a professor of psychology at Bridgewater State University, wrote an essay "The Importance of Using Humor in the Classroom" published in" Inside Higher Ed" (http://insidehighered.com). Her work is an important contribution to my research because it

is another like-minded voice in the polyglossia of humor-oriented instructors, who I can learn from and argue with.

In her essay she is reflecting on how she discovered and re-discovered the use and efficacy humor in her teaching practice. One of her goals as an educator, apart from the traditional student learning and engagement goals, was to make her students laugh. Stanley wanted to be a funny instructor. Her intention resonated with my pursuits as an educator, however, I was already aware of my predisposition to humor and appreciation of it, consequently, my decision to incorporate humor into my teaching was prompted more by my awareness that I can pull it off and that it can make my classroom more interesting. In addition, my experiences as a student, prior my exposure to scholarly work about the effects of humor on learning, inspired me to model my teaching from the best humorous teaching practices I have encountered since I was in elementary school. Therefore, I would say that "making students laugh" is not a primary objective of my use of humor in the classroom, however, laughter as an a form of humor appreciation and an expression of positive emotions is definitely a great boost to both instructor and students' enjoyment of the classroom interaction. When students are laughing at your humor, which you intend to be funny, it is very encouraging and heartwarming, and that moment of "laughing with" helps to establish a good rapport with students and a more comfortable learning environment. Occasionally, the students would laugh at you or laugh at another student and it is very important to be able to laugh at yourself but refrain from teasing, which is also a form of humor, but frequently it is perceived negatively by the students. Therefore, it is very important to consider what kind of laughter you want to evoke in your classroom and what forms of humor are appropriate for the classroom environment.

Stanley describes her attempts to incorporate humor in her teaching as very deliberate and very necessary for her teaching since her prior intention of being in control of everything that is happening in her classroom reflected in her course evaluations in the terms “serious”, professional”, “strict”. She was determined to put forth effort to improve her reputation of being a “too in control” instructor. She consulted comedians and a clown, she was watching stand-up comedians and was trying to emulate their style of humor. She tried new jokes, intentional and spontaneous, she tried really hard to be funny, but her attempts would receive a few sympathy laughs from her students and nothing yielded to real success she desired (p.1).

The unsuccessful attempts of using humor in the classroom did not discourage Stanley from further exploration of her own potential of being funny. She continued experimenting and reflecting on her teaching experience with humor. Her decision-making process was prompted by her professionalism and personal preferences of communicative styles. The professor reasoned that she should not joke about politics, religion, or sexual matters, and she should not use disparaging, demeaning or disrespectful humor. Stanley also excluded puns because she could not pull them off, and crude language because she is not a fan of it.

Stanley reported that being humorous with her colleagues and at the department meetings was much easier for her because she was in a more comfortable environment and nothing was funnier than her stories about the instances of failed humor in her classroom. Stanley describes her psychological discomfort in the classroom as a hick-up of her past experience as a graduate student. She writes that “translating random thoughts into professional-sounding, well-articulated prose takes time, so I usually lost my chance to contribute something valuable” (p. 2).

Reflecting on her teaching, Professor Stanley concludes that being yourself in teaching is vital and that "humor won't work unless it's genuinely yours." She adds that it is about "having the courage to reveal who you are during unrehearsed moments." Stanley's revelation about the use of humor had evidence which reflected in her department chairs evaluation, which depicted her overall classroom atmosphere *comfortable*, and that "many students asked questions", "were engaged in discussion", and "appeared very comfortable expressing their ideas and opinions." After that classroom observation Stanley continued to notice changes; she writes, "Discussions flourished. Students who were shy or quiet spoke up much more frequently. I fact, some were cracking jokes. Really good jokes. Appropriate ones. Exactly the kind I wanted for my students." (3) I find the outcomes fascinating and realistic to achieve for every instructor as long as you are trying to achieve rapport with your student audience. Of course, if it is a big lecture hall it might be much harder or impossible to achieve rapport with your students but if it is a 20-25 student classroom then the outcomes like that are quite achievable, however the experience of other professors and my own, shows that it is not just the authenticity of humor and its delivery that makes students more engaged and interested in the course material. The experience of other professors and my own will familiarize you with humorous materials, strategies, and techniques one can utilize to make teaching and learning a more enjoyable endeavor.

McDermott (2019), the professor of English Literature at Central Michigan University, describing her teaching experience mentions that she was not surprised by the popularity of her humor-based course for non-English majors because the students of other majors are already overloaded by the seriousness of their major-specific courses that they would gladly take some fun for a credit since that kind of fun is perceived as an easy pass.

The following part of the review looks at specific applications of humor-based teaching and learning needs. As I have mentioned before, when considering the use of humor in one's pedagogy, one should keep in mind that classroom humor is not about telling jokes, and instructors are not trained performers or stand-up comedians (Berk, 2016, p. 81); however, if one chooses to transfer some of the strategies from stand-up comedy into teaching, they can and should because contemporary "students seem to crave entertainment" (Wortley & Dotson, 2016, p. 14) and they need to be challenged in the classroom because they are going to be challenged in life and if they are pampered all the time they would not develop important self-defense and coping mechanisms that would make them more efficient members of society (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018). Humor in the college classroom should be treated as a set of systematic teaching strategies and techniques, which can be adapted by instructors to their own classroom, personality, and students (Berk, p. 102). When humor is intended for teaching then it is a teaching tool which involves planning and a specific learning outcome.

Humor and Stand-up comedy in higher education: reasoning and application

The following section is dedicated to the exploration of the educational potential of stand-up comedy for teaching in college. I am inviting you on an edutaining adventure around standard and online classrooms of the professors from different academic disciplines who incorporate stand-up comedy and humor in general into their teaching practices.

To my greatest excitement I was able to find scholars who are using stand-up comedy in their practices and write about them in scholarly journals on teaching, communications, and pedagogy. I am sure that there are more educators out there who are using comedy, and I wish that someday, when reading my work, they would victoriously exclaim, "Yes, yes, I have been

doing the exact same thing, only I was too busy teaching and did not have time to write about it!" It turns out, that just like humor in its various forms and media, stand-up comedy is being used by educators from a variety of fields. Philosophers, sociologists, literature scholars, and scientists utilize stand-up comedy to make their teaching more engaging, thought-provoking, memorable, and closer to the real world. Stand-up comedy gets its inspiration from the world outside the walls of academia, and it is to our advantage as teachers and researchers that we have access to the work of comedians via YouTube, Netflix, or Amazon, which can be incorporated into our pedagogical practice, even if we are not brave enough to be explicitly humorous in front of our student audience.

While investigating the pedagogical practices of the scholars who described their experience in teaching composition with and through stand-up comedy. I am going to provide a detailed overview of their work, since its subject matter is directly related to my research interest, and the work of other scholars who attempted to incorporate stand-up comedy into their teaching to improve students learning, engagement, psychological comfort, and overall interest in the course material.

Ian Brodie, a stand-up comedy scholar, named it "vulgar art," considering aspects of performativity and literary work incorporated in the genre. Most certainly, performative aspect of stand-up comedy and its effects on the audience cannot be underestimated because it is the performance or the delivery that keeps audience's attention, especially through an hour-long act. Quirk in her book *Stand-up matters*, writes about the ways stand-up comedians manipulate their audiences, by which she implies that comedians engage their audiences and interact with them by means of various strategies and techniques. As educators we know that we manipulate our

students every time we teach, and contemporary teaching does require a set of skills of a performer because just like comedians we are challenged to keep our audiences' attention, but what makes it more challenging is that our audience should also learn from us.

Mike Livera (2015) in his book *From Stand-up Comedian to Stand-up Teacher* emphasizes the importance of stand-up comedy in teaching by saying that keeping the audience's attention for hours, and sometimes that audience could be drunk, is hard work, and it takes years to master it, and there are variables that constantly challenge the performer because no two audiences are ever alike (p. 34). And just like two audiences are never alike for a stand-up comedian, two groups of students are never alike for an instructor.

Kevin McCarron (2009), professor of English literature and a stand-up comedian, wrote that his attitude to students and his teaching approach in the seminar room changed as soon as he began performing stand-up comedy. He reminiscences, "I now saw students not as people who had to be there, but as an audience, as people who could be working, or travelling, instead of attending university, and more specifically, my seminars" (p.122).

McCarron's word made me reconsider my experience with lecturing and rethink the words that we as students frequently hear from professors, "You entered college, not it is your responsibility to figure it out", or another cordial phrase that I had a pleasure to hear from both professors and graduate students, "you do not like it, there is a fucking door!" As a person who really likes to teach and interact with students in a way that would help the discover and realize their potential, I have never thought that pointing to the door or threats in conjunction with one's responsibility are effective in any way because just like McCarron says, if your teaching is not good enough the students could be doing something else, his thought reinforces the responsibility

professors have, they are responsible for the delivery of the material. In his work he further notes that it is not uncommon to hear academics referring to teaching as performance – what is uncommon is to encounter any further analysis of what kind of performance it is. (p. 122)

In his article "Stand-up comedy and Teaching in the Global Age", McCarron distinguishes between the types of teachers who acknowledge the there is a performance element and the ones who visualize images of desperate and misguided teachers dumbing down their subject by quoting Eminem lyrics to embarrassing and pointless effect. (p. 122) He argues that mostly teachers perceive themselves as actors, who are pretending to be more knowledgeable. McCarron disagrees with the young teachers, writing, "But it is a mistake – teachers are not actors, they are knowledgeable."

Not every young teacher though would be willing to wear a hat of a comedian since the first day of teaching, because being intentionally funny is challenging and being spontaneously funny requires talent, and some people are just born with it. Educational researchers like Bell, Berk, McDermott, and Ellingson, note that more experienced teachers, who are confident in their teaching style and their knowledge of the course content, feel more comfortable using humor in their classrooms. Also, they have acquired confidence in working in front of and with a variety of student audiences.

Stand-up comedy in teaching composition

Kevin Casper (2016), a philosophy professor, in his article about the stand-up comedy in teaching composition shared a story:

> While working on my master's degree at California State University, Northridge, I taught writing as a graduate assistant. That was my day job. At night, I moonlighted as an

> amateur stand-up comedian, crisscrossing the freeways of the San Fernando Valley hoping to land a few minutes of stage time at the end of the night to try out my fledgling material. The very first night I went up was at an open mic night at the now defunct Canoga Bowl, a pitiful, run down cocktail bar inside a bowling alley in Canoga Park. The first time I took the stage, I remember being nervous, of course, as I frantically tried to remember the four of five bits that would compromise my meagre three-minute set. Things started off well enough, as adrenaline and Jameson blunted the reality of what was happening around me. But about halfway in, I began to realise that what I was doing was patently absurd. Here I was, just some nobody graduate student, standing before a room full of complete strangers who were staring right at me and expecting me to make them laugh. An odd sensation overtook me that was equal parts panic, exhilaration, terror, and surrender. The strangest part was, there was something eerily familiar about the feeling. It wasn't until the set was over and I slinked back to a dark table in the corner when it hit me: 'Holy shit! That felt exactly like teaching writing.' This was unexpected. (p.425)

After the anecdote he continues in a more serious fashion, saying, "when you think about it, the similarities are striking. Both actions require a similar recursive practice of preparation, performance, and assessment: drafting, writing, and revision" (p.425) He continues:

> When you're prepping a writing class, you might organize it around activities like 'Respond to first drafts; Small group semiotic analysis of reading; Invention free write at end of class'. When prepping a stand-up performance, your 'lesson plans' are arranged around your sequence of bits: 'Job Bingo; Threesome and a lightsaber;

> Crowd work. Clip-on neckties; Threesome and a lightsaber call-back'. When doing comedy, you want to take the stage with as much natural confidence and effortlessness, or a nonchalance that 'conceals all artistry and makes whatever one says or does seem uncontrived and effortless,' as possible' (p. 425).

I and cannot agree more with this approach and am sincerely jealous that the author of the article could have both experiences simultaneously, I could only exercise my wit in the classroom, and therefore, Casper's experience is very insightful for me.

Brice Particelli (2016), a Composition and Philosophy professor at Pace University, writes about his experience with Dave Chapelle, a famous Black American comedian, author, producer, and a winner of 2019 Mark Twain Prize, in the graduate seminar for the discussion of challenges of teaching writing. Kevin Casper (2016), a professor in the English Department at The University of Wet Georgia, tells us about his experience with stand-up comedy while teaching composition to freshmen. Even though the student audiences differ the authors still argue that comedy stimulated student participation and their critical thinking.

In 2016 Particelli published "Teaching with Dave Chapelle: Exploring Cultural Understandings of Culture through Comedy." The author of the article mentions that her comedian of choice was prompted by her personal preference; however, regardless her preference the material of the Iconoclast episode with Dave Chapelle and Maya Angelou, is important from the pedagogical perspective because Chapelle's stand-up is being spliced with his explanations of it. Particelli notes that for the graduate class 'focused on how to teach the craft of writing, this kind of meta-analysis is gold" (p. 551) because it brings in a great conversation in the hope of starting another. The author makes an important statement that "art and the

discussion of it, provokes us to look at the work through multiple experiences" (p. 551) These words were inspirational and significant for the work that I was doing because he talked about something so closely tied to my teaching agenda. Just like Particelli, I analyzed stan-up routines in my composition classrooms, applying genre analysis and Cultural-Historical Activity Theory to the acts

Pop culture in the classroom can be tricky — popularity both fades and has selective audiences, so while some students still seem to quote the Chappelle Show regularly, a quarter of them did not know who Dave Chappelle was. But this clip has two other things going for it: first, the presence of Maya Angelou, offering the gravitas that makes it easier for teachers to use, and second, the way the Iconoclasts episode splices Chappelle's comedy with his own deconstruction of it. In other words, you don't need to know Chappelle to get it. (p. 556)

In his reflection about teaching Particelli notes that Dave Chapelle's comedy he showed to his students was on its own a deep conversation about racism and equality between Chapelle and his audience. It provided space for another conversation between the professor and his student audience. Since stand-up comedy and humor in general involves verbal and contextual incongruity it is not uncommon for the students to not know how to respond to what they see in a stand-up act when they are in the classroom environment. However, once they realize that the purpose of watching a stand-up is not just for giggles and entertainment, when they get motivated to think harder about the content of the act, once they are willing to look behind the façade of a joke, they start thinking critically not only about the content of the routine but about its context, its composition, its cultural value.

The student population that was exposed to the routine were ivy-league college graduate students who had teaching experience with canonical texts. The instructor's goal was to show them the texts they were not familiar with and which were not within the realm of academic standard. To talk about alternative forms of writing, Particelli introduces humor and humorous genres; he focuses on satire, using The Daily Show, Family Guy, and the Simpsons to explain how serious messages about our society are deliver via humor and particularly satire.

"Of course, while this fosters a community of intellectual exploration, it also sets a tone of natural skepticism, and a very conversational tone in the classroom. So when I told them we were going to write some comedy, their laughter and unease filled the room. The plan was to have students come in having read a comedic piece from Nonrequired, but I did not offer any technique talk, history, or definitions beforehand. I find that such frontloading often can ruin great reads and taint fresh ideas. The next step was to have them deconstruct other comedic work through the language of literary device and technique we had come to share and then to write their own comedies" (p. 553).

To lead his students to writing their own comedy, he introduces them the five kinds of comedy most often seen in literature: slapstick, satire, parody, romantic, and dark. He offered examples of each and then examples of how these categorizations could be partitioned differently but noted that the five categories made a solid enough starting point (p. 554). The specific focus was satire because the idea of showcasing humor that challenges authority and tradition —using irony and absurdity to expose vanity, hypocrisy, sentimentality, and more — seemed like a perfect adaptation for their classrooms. It would allow students to think critically about culture and authority at multiple levels.

Particelli chose comedy because he believes that looking at the ways different types and genres of humor are produced in both stand-up and humorous writing will paint a fuller picture of what constitutes humorous forms both linguistically and stylistically.

McDermott (2019), the previously mentioned professor of English Literature at Central Michigan University, describes her experience with teaching an interdisciplinary general education course Laughing Matters: Comedy and Satire. The major argument is that comedy stimulates students' critical thinking. Since her student population is non-English majors and a lot of them are first generation college from rural areas, she finds it necessary to use comedy because reportedly students need comedic relief in life, especially while they are adjusting to the new life in college. McDermott notes that once students are exposed to comedy as course material, whether it is visual or verbal comedy, they are more inclined to express their opinions and apply course-required concepts and theories.

She uses stand-up comedy to open discussions about the issues of race, ethnicity, and gender, or transition students to a higher level of critical analysis. McDermott wisely notes, that the course is not so much research-oriented then it is guided-learning oriented because it is a general education course where students still learn how to think critically and need to build-up knowledge and vocabulary to be able to analyze humorous texts, and problematize their content. The author states that she uses stand-up comedy as part of her course content. She believes that even though offensive humor is part of a routine, it has a great discussion potential she would use it in her teaching. She recognizes that some humor contained in the stand-ups can be potentially offensive to some students. However, she is ready to take the risk because she believes that challenging students, kicking them out of their comfort zone is part of the learning process. As

an instructor, she places a warning about the potentially offensive content of her course in her syllabus.

McDermott continues her article with a very interesting discussion about race and racist comedy and how students of color better respond to comedy they can relate to and how they come to distinguish between comedy about race and overtly racist comedy that comes from the white power and reinforces racial stereotypes. Besides humor related to race, McDermott included political humor in her courses. But in order to make it less stressful and controversial for students she decided to introduce political satire to the classroom using the presidential elections of 2000. At the end of the course McDermott asked the students to write a reflection about what had been funny throughout the course. The majority of students referred to the simple jokes for the sake of laughter as the funniest, but they did refer to the more complex forms of humor as the more educational ones, which helped them to better understand the nature of humor and the differences between irony and satire (p. 342). The students reported the importance of their understand of why they find things funny, especially "when we get offended easily as you probably know". (p. 349) It is also important to mention that the author provided their students with the opportunity to find their own materials which they find funny and analyze them. Working with the material of their choice made them more motivated to acquire critical vocabulary and "embrace critical analysis for its own sake". (p. 350)

McDermott (2019), after teaching an interdisciplinary general education course Laughing Matters: Comedy and Satire for three times, acknowledges that "comedy as a topic is not just helpful but vital in fostering among new college students' analytical skills crucial for their university careers". (p. 339)

Many college-age students are predisposed to treat serious matters as laughing matters, and they approach their daily lives with a keen sense of irony (p.339). My teaching experience shows that for a lot of students, humor provides comic relief for the challenges they are facing, especially during their first year in college.

"I was not surprised that demand for a course that advertises itself as an interdisciplinary exploration of comedy would be high. I was also prepared for students to be surprised, and frankly annoyed, to find that they were not simply going to consume comic material but would also be expected

to analyze the psychological and cultural processes of humor and satire. I was surprised, however, having often struggled to help English majors learn to apply literary theoretical approaches to poems, plays, and novels, at how quickly and enthusiastically students rose to the challenge of applying complex theories of comedy and laughter to their own comic media diet. I have been able to watch throughout each semester a very diverse group of students learn to communicate ideas (as opposed to feelings) about socially and politically charged issues — particularly race, class and gender — and, in the process, enhance their cultural sensitivity and intellectual curiosity" (p. 340).

"Once students are introduced to critical vocabulary and methods, I then allow them to locate their own sketches or short pieces to analyze using a variety of theoretical approaches. I provide them with links to comedy sketches by artists such as Keegan Michael Key and Jordan Peele, Amy Schumer, Monty Python, and the cast of Saturday Night Live, and we watch and discuss several sample sketches in class. Once the students have mastered this type of analysis, we move on to literary examples, such as Aristophanes' Lysistrata and Shakespeare, for which I

ask students to present to the class modern examples of comic material that share thematic or strategic elements with the literary works". (p. 344)

"That our students are self-aware, sophisticated consumers of social media is, of course, no secret. But by presenting material they identify with culturally, by providing them with accessible, focused theoretical essays (thanks to the new anthologies), and by giving them frequent opportunities to seek out examples on their own, students of comedy actively embrace critical analysis for its own sake (p.350).

McDermott's work is a really good example in support of my claim that stand-up comedy is a good course content source which provokes interesting discussions and make students feel more comfortable discussing certain topics with their peers and think critically about the world around them. It was really interesting and important to learn how professor McDermott incorporates the comedy about race into her course, pursuing both educational and psychological objectives: she intended to start a conversation about the difference between race and racist humor, and at the same time she wanted to make the minority students comfortable in the classroom so they can participate in the classroom discussions and openly express their opinions. My own experience supports the outcomes of McDermott's practice. I noticed that once I introduce a stand-up by a black comedian, especially every one's favorite, Kevin Hart, or a Hispanic comedian, the participation of both students of color and white student population becomes equally active.

Race Comics and "Pedagogy of discomfort"

In support of McDermott's and my own claims about the efficacy of using stand-up comedy for the discussions about racism, Particelli and Laura Mae Lindo talk about the work of

Dave Chapelle and Chris Rock as “race comics” who help to understand the issues of racism in teacher education classrooms.

Lindo (2015) states comedy does much more than just create spaces in public forums for discussions of race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and a large number of other controversial issues; comedy is a starting point for self-reflection on social justice issues for those who chose to devote their professional careers to acting as “change agents”. She believes that comedy helps us to uncover our normalized beliefs as educators, which, according to the pressure of social justice norms should be bias free and socially just and advocate for equity (p. 55). Lindo’s ‘academic tale’ (p.55) is unique because it is told by a “Black Teacher” and comedians like Chris Rock and Dave Chapelle added complexity to her pre-service classrooms. As a black female educator, she was stereotypically considered the best candidate for addressing racism in the classroom, which Lindo never found true and always struggled with the selection of the materials for the courses she taught. She writes:

> And so for many years I struggled with this daunting task. The texts selected for students attempted to initiate “serious” discussions about how race structured our lived realities. While students tried to avoid talking about race in the classroom, I re-focused their attention by pointing out how race shaped the characters and stories we explored. The harder I pushed to have students reflect seriously on the role race played in their lives, the harder they pushed back. Nobody wanted to admit that they were racist, and students were enraged at having to re-live the guilt and shame of participating, even inadvertently, in racist acts. As the tension

> in the classroom grew, a sense of desperation began to set in — I needed to find another way to do this anti-racist work, and I needed it fast (p.55).

Lindo makes an excellent point about the challenge of teaching sensitive topics like racism. She writes that racial discourse is very traumatic and anti-race educators must be prepared for the overt emotional responses that the discussion might lead to. However, she was questioning the mode of teaching about racism by saying,

> "Must we be expected to undergo a traumatic process of re-living feelings of guilt and shame when discussing consequences of racial designations and continued structural racism? I wanted to believe that there was another way, and as I compared and contrasted my own teaching practices to those examined in the literature, I became aware of a source for ARE that I felt had been left un-tapped. That source was laughter." (p.56)

Lindo's delving into the body of research about black comedians uncovered a paradox: many comedians who achieve success, such as Richard Pryor or Dave Chapelle, have either claimed at some point on their career that their comedy is not to be considered political or have had their work de-politicized by critics and reporters. However, Pryor, for instance, in 1995, described his comedic work through the mouthpiece of his infamous alter-ego Mudbone, as follows, "I told him comedy – real comedy – wasn't only telling jokes. It was about telling the truth. Talking about life. Makin' light of the hard times. […] The truth is gotta be funny, but it's gotta scare the shit outta folks." (p. 57)

Based on the premise that conscious race-based comedy is highly educational and could be considered as a strategic anti-racist pedagogy, Lindo uses the analysis of black comedians

done by Bambi Haggins (2007), saying that comedians like Eddie Murphy, Chris Rock, Whoopi Goldberg, and Dave Chapelle within the socio-political reality, to which Haggins refers as "post-soul America", she emphasizes how Black comedians make their audiences laugh while providing significant critiques of continued racial inequalities in North America. Higgins' work provided Lindo with the solid foundation for considering race comedy as anti-racist pedagogy (p. 58)

Looking at the existing body of scholarship about Race Comics and her own analysis of what she was considering pedagogically significant in the comedy of Chris Rock and Dave Chapelle, Lindo came to realization that comedy provided her with incredible pedagogical tools that reconfigured the "safe space" of her classroom by encouraging some very "unsafe" conversations; Lindo discovered a new pedagogical method for her anti-racist work, which she defined as the interrogation of self via race comedy, which implies that one should recognized their complicity with the hegemonic inequities by taking the time to question normalized assumptions. Lindo writes that Race Comics used their comedy to make visible the hegemonic racial ideologies in society had normalized brining tensions and paradoxical social conventions to the attention of the audiences. Based on this premise the scholar defined her pedagogy as a "pedagogy of discomfort" for pre-service teachers, the pedagogy, which "aims to open possibilities for a more incomplete and ambiguous teacher identity that embraces difference as a source of creativity." The "pedagogy of discomfort", according to its author, not only helped to support a political interpretation of a comedic performance that challenged a racist social system, but also made explicit the connection between comedy of Chris Rock and Dave Chapelle and the ongoing anti-racist work within the field of education (p. 59).

Previously, I overviewed Bell's perspective on humor as a Safe House, which can be considered as pedagogy of comfort. However, humor, as it becomes more ideologically loaded in the forms of stand-up comedy and political satire, from the pedagogical perspective, serves the purpose of making students think critically of the world around them and looking for the possible solutions. Either way, from the instructor's perspective, I accept the duality of humor because and utilize both affiliative and disparaging functions of humor to make my teaching more appealing to the students and at the same time thought provoking.

Humor and career

When presenting my poster at 2019 International Society of Humor Research Conference, I was approached by a professor of psychology, who asked me a psychologically intriguing question, "What if you are not going to be perceived seriously as a future professor? Don't you afraid that it would make it more difficult to find a job?" I was thankful to receive such a question, because it gave me an opportunity to show him that I am already knowledgeable enough to say that many fields, including psychology are big proponents of the power and significance of humor in human interaction.

According to Bell and Pomerantz (2016), humor could be potentially dangerous to one's teaching career because of the way it can be perceived by the colleagues or students. However, they are only trying to caution us and not to diverge us from using humor at all. On the other hand, McDermott (2019), who advocates for the use of stand-up comedy in the classroom in the form of videos, not a live performance, says, that learning space, in order to provoke critical thinking should be offensive and hurtful intentionally, because she believes that learning

materials should be able to shake us up and show us something that we have not seen or thought about before, or were not brave enough to say it out loud.

Humor is considered as beneficial, if wisely used, in leadership, management, therapy, and, of course, in education. Educational researchers, such as Berk and Bell, would argue that humor, when used not as an entertainment sidebar but as a meticulously developed part of the course curriculum, relevant to the topic discussed in class, then most definitely, would produce positive effects on students' learning, on their realization of the importance of comedy as a socio-cultural mediator in the modern world.

There are plenty of comedians who are not just trying to be funny but are actually very serious about a lot of things happening in society. Among the most recognized comedians is George Carlin, who was one of those people who would make you laugh and at the same time make you think about the idiosyncrasies and absurdities of the world we live in. Also, he would be one of the greatest examples of how seriously he was taking the craft of writing for his stand-ups. While teaching composition, I used the videos in which Carlin was talking about his meticulous approach to phrasing and note-taking, to show the students that comedy writing is a serious enterprise.

The main takeaway from this overview of scholarly sources is that instructional humor is not about telling jokes since instructors are not trained performers or stand-up comedians. Humor in the classroom should be used as a tool intended for teaching and learning. Consequently, humor in the college classroom should be treated as a set of systematic teaching strategies and techniques, which can be adapted by instructors to their own classroom, personality, and students (Berk, p. 102). However, there is some evidence which warns that planned humor is less

effective than spontaneous humor that arises out of a particular time and place, and the authors warned that forced-sounding humor will likely not work (Hovelynck & Peeters, 2003; Ellingson, 2018). My experience in teaching with humor shows that both spontaneous and prepared humor can work equally well or can fail depending on when and why one chooses to use it. Also, some educators are naturally funny, and humor is always an integral part of their pedagogy. Thus it can be construed that sense of humor is an integral part of some people's identity.

Humor and identity

Catherine Davies, a Linguistics professor emerita at the University of Alabama (2019), in her article "An autoethnographic approach to understanding identity construction through the enactment of sense of humor as embodied practice" writes that a sense of humor is something that is very important to Americans and is understood as part of a desirable personality and thus a key aspect of identity (p. 200). She also notes that sense of humor varies across cultures and that individual senses of humor are constructed within the nested frameworks of linguistic differentiations, gender, and ethnicity (p. 2001). I would add that sense of humor also functions on the level of personal culture and on the level of class.

Davies notes that even though she has been teaching for an extended period of time, she does not qualify herself as a funny professor. However as a linguist and as an individual, she was interested in the humorous representations through which she performs her identity as an American white woman. Despite the fact that her autoethnographic study was not focused on her teaching identity, it still serves as a representation of how data can be collected and analyzed based on the conventions of the approach. Since I have never conducted an autoethnographic study before, Davies's work serves as an example of how humor can be documented an analyzed

in conjunction with one's identity. To document her instances of the use of humor, she kept a dairy where she registered her performances of humor in various social interactions. Just like her, I kept a journal where I recorded and analyzed my classroom experiences with humor.

I found it interesting that Davies wrote about her private expressions of humor when she was simply noticing things in her solitary experience, finding them amusing (Davies, 2019, p. 213). I frequently engage in private expressions myself and it made me think about how the internalization of humor in another language can be representative of the fact that language and cultural competences are becoming part of my identity because I am no longer translating or interpreting humor from the perspective of my home culture.

Davie's findings showed that her sense of humor is highly tuned to situational ironies and absurdities of life; that humor serves a defense mechanism; that humor serves as a tool for demonstrating empathy and creating solidarity; the humor helps her to adapt to the interlocutors and every aspect of the context; and that her humor is never intended to denigrate or hurt an interlocutor(p. 214). She also mentions that in her interactions at work or with strangers, her humor is adaptive and affiliative. However, she notes that she practices cleverly aggressive political humor in private conversations with friends (p. 214). Davie's self-exploration, in which she fully contextualized her humorous interactions, helped her offer the reader the sense of "having been there", a dimension that is missing from humor research that relies of the laboratory settings (p. 214). The author claims that her study is a compelling example of the ways autoethnography can contribute to the understanding of humor and identity (p.214).

Davie's work gave me a sense of direction and made me realize that my work will extend the body of knowledge about humor and identity researched with autoethnographic framework.

What makes my work unique is that I am looking at my humorous practices from the perspective of an immigrant instructor; therefore it will provide new insights of the ways humor is instrumental for re-negotiation of an immigrant identity, adapting to American culture. Also, the interactional instances of spontaneous classroom humor and the descriptions of intended practical application of humor in the classroom will represent the levels of my language and cultural competences, and the level of adaptation of my teaching style to American teaching culture. Thus the study would be of interest for autoethnographic researchers from sociolinguistic, cultural, and pedagogical perspectives.

Now, without further ado, let us learn more about autoethnography, the two-faced Janus of self-exploration, since it can be both a method and methodology.

CHAPTER III: AUTOETHNOGRAPHY AS A FORM OF ACADEMIC INQUIRY

We write to taste life twice, in the moment and in retrospect.

Anaïs Nin

From the following chapter you will learn about autoethnography as a qualitative research method and the reasons why it is a valid method for the exploration of identities and pedagogies within the realm of educational research. The chapter provides an overview of several autoethnographic studies which informed my work and helped me develop my methodology, my approach to data collection, its coding and interpretation. The chapter also discusses a specific type of autoethnography, which is *interpretive autoethnography*, and explains this particular method fits my critical analysis. You will also learn about what counts as data in my study along with the ways it will be presented and analyzed. Also, this section describes a rationale which includes concepts and theories to explain the significance and novelty of my study.

What is autoethnography?

Autoethnography is a qualitative method of research based on the postmodern paradigm of subjectivity which implies that a person's lived experiences make a unique contribution to scholarly exploration and advances understanding of how an individual interacts and performs within a specific socio-cultural environment. Essentially, it is self-exploration and interrogation which aids individuals in locating themselves within their own history and culture, allowing them to broaden their understanding of their own values in relation to others (Starr, 2010, p.1).

Autoethnographic inquiry subscribes to a non-monolithic worldview, which juxtaposes the value of an individual perspective and its critique of the self and the world with the positivist paradigm of the objectification of reality (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

As a form of writing, autoethnography claims itself as a narrative that adheres to literary conventions, meaning that the authors can work in a variety of genres which would reflect the author's thoughts, emotions, and feelings. In other words, autoethnographic writing is evocative, and its purpose is to engage the reader both intellectually and emotionally (Ellis, 2011).

In autoethnography the author writes the narratives in the first person and becomes the object of the research, breaching the conventional separation of researcher and the subject. An autoethnographical narrative is usually focused on a particular case or it incorporates the stories which pertain to one theme, and that moves the nature of research from the traditional generalization across cases to generalization within one case (Belbase, Luitel & Taylor, 2008).

Autoethnography in Academic Research

Researching literature on autoethnography as an academic inquiry, I have discovered that autoethnography is a rather popular method and genre among contemporary scholars in different fields, including educational research (Austin & Hickey, 2007; Belbase, Luitel, Taylor, 2008; Starr, 2010; de Souza Vasconselos, 2011; Canagarajah, 2012). Academics use an autoethnographic approach to reflect on their interactions and practices for a variety of reasons.

For example, women of color in communication studies approach autoethnographies as a way of resistance to the mainstream academic culture, which marginalizes female minorities (Griffin, 2012; Hernandez, Ngunjin, Chang, 2014; Ashlee, Zamora, Karikari, 2017). The work of Rachel Alicia Griffin, an Associate Professor of Communication at the University of Utah, "I

AM an Angry Black Woman: Black Feminist Autoethnography, Voice and Resistance" (2012) advocates for Black Female Autoethnography (BFA) as a theoretical and methodological means. Along with that she utilizes autoethnography to critically narrate the pain and struggle of black womanhood and resist oppression, as black women experience sexism and racism, feeling as "outsiders within" (Griffin, 2012, p. 138).

Suresh Canagarajah, a professor of Applied Linguistics at Pennsylvania State University, utilizes his work "Teacher Development in a Global Profession: An Autoethnography*"* (2012) to reflect on the ways he proved himself as an immigrant TESOL scholar, advocating for translingual and transcultural approaches to teaching English. Canagarajah's autoethnography "represents the ways in which he negotiates the differing teaching practices and professional cultures of the periphery and the center in an effort to develop a strategic professional identity" (p. 258).

Jon Austin and Andrew Hickey, professors of sociology at University of Southern Queensland, Australia, in their article "Autoethnography and Teacher Development" (2007), state that autoethnography as radical democratic politics is committed to creating space for dialogue and debate that instigates and shapes social change (p. 4). They consider autoethnography in education "as a point of interrogation for critical, reflexive practice" (p.4).

Overall, scholars treat autoethnography as a form of critique and resistance, as well as critical self-reflexive discourse which articulates interactions between people and culture through the eyes of non-static, always migratory identity (Spry, 2001, p.706).

The critical aspect of autoethnographic research is that it allows educators to engage with their personal experiences not only as a form of resistance but also as an opportunity for

professional self-improvement. Educators, both immigrant and native, find that autoethnographies help them take a closer look at their pedagogies and re-evaluate their teaching, making it more meaningful, effective, and relevant to the demands of present-day student populations and institutions. For example, Sherrie Steiner of Purdue University, in her article "*How Using Autoethnography Made Me a Better Teacher*" (2018) published in the online journal the *Scholarly Teacher* *https://www.scholarlyteacher.com/post/autoethnography-to-improve-teaching,* discusses the struggles she had while she was trying to diversify her pedagogy, striving for a less teacher-controlled environment. Through the method of autoethnography she was able to better understand her own struggles and insecurities as a young professional. Steiner (2018) writes that at first, she preferred a more controlled form of teaching to conquer own anxiety (p. 1). But as she moved forward, introspection and observation of her students, helped her find balance between teacher control and the strategies which create a collaborative learning environment. Steiner's autoethnography is a good representation of how an educator approaches her teaching critically, documents her strengths and insecurities, and strives for improvement based on her self-exploration (Steiner, 2018, p. 1).

Immigrant voices in American Academia

Immigrant scholars in American academia are writing autoethnographic research because it allows them to reflect on their acculturated identities, their multiple literacies, their responses to the challenges of the host-culture and language policies, as well as on their process of language learning. They tell us what it was like to be othered on the basis of an accent, or a name, or skin color. Immigrant academics are using autoethnographic writing as an opportunity for their voices to be heard and their stories told so other academics and community members

can learn to respect the cultures and the effort immigrants put into becoming better communicators, better teachers, better scholars, and better citizens (Gugliemo & Firgueiredo, 2019).

As an emerging first-generation immigrant scholar, I am fascinated with autoethnography as a research method and methodology because I can present my readers with a unique compilation the lived experiences, I have not had an opportunity to share otherwise. They tell a story about my identity and how it began to change, and is changing, as I started learning English and was exposed to American culture. What makes my story special is the constant presence of humor in my life and its role in the development and re-negotiation of my identity, my pedagogy, and my teaching style.

The following part of this chapter discusses the method of *Interpretive Autoethnography* as a particular way of telling my story and analyzing it.

Interpretive autoethnography and its application to my work

According to Denzin (2014), the author of *"Interpretive Autoethnography"* and a sociology professor at University of Illinois, interpretive autoethnography is a critical performative practice, a practice that starts with the biography of the writer and movers outward to culture, discourse, history, and ideology (p.x). One of the important concepts that Denzin operates with, while crafting his own autoethnographic narratives, is *sociological imagination*. This term was coined by Wright Mills in 1959, and it interprets a life of an individual as connected with and affected by their social, cultural, and political environment, allowing the individual to make sense of their life and their actions based on their connection with society. The concept of *sociological imagination* is widely used by educators in different fields

(Mathews, Eddington, et al., 2018). As a self-reflecting educator, I find this concept useful for my work because it helps me interpret my narratives and better conceptualize my pedagogical findings.

Laura Ellingson (2018), a professor of Communication at Santa Clara University, writes that humor is a very good asset for those instructors who teach with *sociological imagination* because it helps them encourage students to think critically, for example, by using stand-up comedy in the discussion of socio-cultural issues, or issues of race or inequality (p. 125). Ellingson's perspective resonates with my approach to teaching as I encourage students to take a critical stance on the world we live in through their writing and language.

As briefly mentioned above, my self-study is intended not only as a pedagogical self-narrative but also as an analysis of my immigrant identity and its transformation during my years in graduate school. Therefore, it is necessary to provide you with some autobiographical information. The stories about my early years of life in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia will situate my identity within the socio-cultural and political contexts of the two frequently conflicting countries. Also, my English learning process and my work experiences will help you better understand my appreciation for American culture and American English. Finally, my teaching narratives will tell you more about my identity, my expertise, my teaching style, and how humor was always the source of inspiration and a coping mechanism.

Autoethnographies and humor

As a form of academic inquiry traditional autoethnography is known to mainly address some sad, gravely serious, tragic, and traumatic topics (Jones, 2007). Michael Hemmingson (2008), a researcher at the University of San Diego, California, in his article *Make Them Giggle:*

Autoethnography as Stand-up Comedy, notes that it would seem that the majority of published autoethnographies deals with the death of loved one, family member, or friend; physical and mental illness and drug dependency, sexual abuse and traumatic memories.

Denzin (2014) takes a stance that autoethnographic writing should be performative because it describes and analyzes one's lived experience. In response to Denzin's performativity, which he understands as explanation and explication of life itself through co-formativity of meaning with others (p. viii), Hemmingson (2008) argues that performativity could be achieved not only by writing about life from a serious perspective, it can also be achieved through humor. He writes, "autoethnography does not always have to be about serious, tragic, and painful personal subject matter; the subject matter does not always have to be delivered in a 'serious tone' (Hemmingson, 2008, p. 12). He notes that the work of a lot of stand-up comedians is autoethnographic: comedians talk about themselves in conjunction with the world around them, they take a critical perspective on both themselves and society. He also mentions that the tradition of turning a lecture into a humorous performance dates back to Mark Twain (Hemmingson, 2008). Therefore, a stand-up comedy as an autoethnographic performance either in oral or written form should be practiced in academic writing for the reason that "the stand-up comedian can be seen as a shaman for breaching civil decorum, the one who has to suffer and heal publicly so his society can collectively heal" (p.20).

The author encourages us to look at serious socio-political and personal issues from a humorous perspective, and even proposes humorous discourse as a form response to critical attacks. "Do not be defensive, young qualitative inquirer – respond with humor!", he writes (p. 12).

Hemmingson's stance on the tone and form of autoethnography is inspirational for my own writing. Stand-up comedy has been of interest to me not only as a genre of entertainment, but also as a cultural mediator, a form of self-expression, and a source of my teaching materials. Therefore, I am gladly accepting Hemmingson's recommendations on writing my autoethnography humorously.

In addition to the tone and the humorous gaze, the literature also talks about the importance of the researcher's humorous predisposition during interviews or other activities for data collection. Conducting interviews and observations in a stiff manner is impossible because the element of performance is required on the behalf of the researcher. Laughing with participants can provide sense of mutual understanding and may support a quicker acceptance of an outside researcher (Kmita and Mawhinney, 2015, pp.102-103).

What counts as data in my study and how I collected it

As mention in the section above, *interpretive autoethnography* presupposes the presence of biographical information and narratives about lived experiences which connect the identity of the author with the culture, history, and society. My data is a chronologically organized collection of narratives, some of which are the recollections of my childhood, school and college years; some are the stories about my work experience and my teaching; some are about my ways of acculturation and language learning. All of the narratives are selected based on their relevance to the major theme of my work; the ways humor was and is instrumental in transforming my identity, helping me to develop my own pedagogy and making me a better educator. Some of the stories include the expert opinions of two of my own professors who consistently, persistently, and effectively utilize humor in their teaching.

Theoretical rationale, key concepts, and their methodological application

The central figure of an autoethnographic study is the researcher and therefore the researcher's *identity* and the way one is performing and undergoing transformation while engaging with reality is critical for the analysis of the study. In my self-study I treat *identity* as a fluid phenomenon because our perception of self is not static, especially when transitioning from one culture to another and developing new *cultural* and *linguistic competencies*. These competencies provide that fluid identity with the opportunity to participate in a variety of discourses. In my particular case, various discourses, which were part of academic culture, represented by the minority groups: LGBTQ, international students, Black, Hispanic and Latino Americans; as well as by the discourse of mainstream white culture.

The variety of social discourses in academia and in stand-up comedy prompted me to apply Bakhtin's concepts of *polyglossia* and *carnival* to my discussion of the use of stand-up comedy in for teaching purposes. The concepts imply that there can be many voices expressing similar opinions, which in the context of comedy are taking a critical stance on mainstream politics and culture expresses by general public not by authorities or power holders (Scott, 2014).

For my pedagogical theory I am incorporating the concepts of critical and public pedagogies introduced by Paulo Freire and Henry Giroux, as well as the projection of Giroux's concept of *public educator* onto the role of a stand-up comedian in the modern American world. Such conceptualization of a comic was introduced by Catherine Davies, a Linguistics professor emerita at the University of Alabama, in her presentation about *Liberal Redneck* Trae Crowder at an International Humor Conference, which I attended in 2019.

Wright Mill's concept of sociological imagination, which he defined as "interplay of man and society, of biography and history, of self and world" (as cited in Stalker and Pridmore, 2009, p. 27: Mills,1959:4), will be used within the context of reflexive pedagogy, which implies that within our own pedagogical practice, there is an intention to bring to our students a pedagogy that challenges them to recognize where they are socially located and question the knowledge they are trying to gain. We have to be reflectively mindful of our role as instructors in this practice, using popular culture and focusing on the everyday lived experiences of ourselves and our students amid course lectures. Such pedagogy allows us to tap into the students' knowledge of the social world and create an environment in which students themselves are able to be more reflexive (Stalker and Pridmore, 2009, 28).

Reflexivity is important not only for sociological inquiry but also for teaching at large. George Hillock (2005), for example, in his essay about his teaching practice says that it is critical for instructors to reflect on their teaching to identify what can be improved, and for that "there should be consistent willingness to depart from the tired and trite to explore better ways of teaching so that the subject matter becomes the vehicle that lead to the personal, moral, and academic development of young people."(p. xx)

In conclusion, it is important to note that all the previously mentioned autoethnographies helped me to situate my study within the scope of the works of immigrant educators describing their pursuits of professional development and renegotiation of their identities. The publications of these scholars informed my work in relation to the form, structure, content, ideological and theoretical underpinnings. They helped me identify a gap in the research and situate my study as a new contribution to autoethnographic inquiry in the humanities. The novelty of my work is in

the consideration of humor and humorous teaching as means of professional and linguistic improvement, along with the humorous delivery of my narratives. My self-exploratory narratives are not meant to express aggressive resistance or anger towards American academic culture or the dominance of American English. To the contrary, my objective is to show how one can learn from American humorous discourse in the process of adaptation to the new culture. At the end of the day, I dare say, *angry* immigrant scholars are still working at American universities because there is a place for multiple opinions and approaches in this country, and that is the beauty of it.

Mathew McConaughey, Hollywood's ALRIGHT-est actor, and since Fall 2019, the ALRIGHT-est professor of practice at the Moody College of Communication at the University of Texas (https://news.utexas.edu/2019/08/28/matthew-mcconaughey-joins-moody-college-faculty/), in his newly published book "Greenlights" says, " If we are not sure how to respond to a certain situation, our default emotion should be sense of humor. Think about it, we would all get along so much better with more laughter".

So let us get along and move forward to the new chapter with more laughter.

CHAPTER IV: TEACH, LAUGH, LEARN

Finally, after the polyphony of academic voices talking about the efficacy and risks of humor in the college classroom, along with the conversations about the vigor and rigor stand-up comedy brings into teaching, it is my turn take the stage. So please give a round of applause to a classroom comedian with an unusual name, which sometimes is pronounced like a Spanish greeting and sometimes like the name of a facial cream. Ladies and Gentlemen! Meet Olya Cochran, with her four-act performance about humor, laugher, and stand-up comedy in the Composition and Linguistics classrooms!

In the first act you will find out how in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia English chose me, how I got "corrupted" with American culture, and how in the year of 2009 my passion for American English took me to Sheremetyevo International Airport and got me on the plane to a place in America that is "Far from Normal".

The second act of the show is about teaching composition with and through humor, and how by trial and error I integrated stand-up comedy into my pedagogy.

The third act will give you "Linguistics goosebumps" unless you are not allergic to IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet, not the beer) and syntactic ambiguities. You will learn about my humorous approach to teaching the scariest Introductory Linguistics course and will hear some of my daughter's jokes, they definitely made the course worth-while.

The great finale will be celebrated by the fire-works of conclusions about my edutaining experience in the attempt of answering the following questions, "Where I've been? Where I'm going? And where the hell are my keys?" (No wait, that is Billy Crystal's agenda on the cover of his book "Still Foolin''Em"). So despite my very frequent amnesia about the location of my

keys, I will not be fooling you, saying that my questions are, “Who I am? What is my pedagogy? And where the heck am I going to work?”

Please stay in your seats till the end of the show, we are about to begin, get your rotten tomatoes ready.

“*Life is too important to be taken seriously*”. Oscar Wilde

“Hello” I am planning to get you at

Can you imagine how lucky Oscar Wilde was to live before the existence of APA or any other citation styles American college students are obligated to use in their research papers? If you are a part of American academic world then you most definitely know that I am talking about what makes academic writing and reading, unlike American clothes, so uncomfortable. The fingers are ready to tie into a knot, typing up all the special symbols and numbers, and looking up pages and publication dates of the sources can make you go cross-eyed. But that is what makes academic writing academic, right? It should be dry, serious, and stitched together by numerous properly cited credible sources…Boring!

I cannot agree more with Ken Robinson, who says, “education teaches us out of creativity”, because higher education, with its abundance of rules, restrictions and other forms of intellectual abuse, has been teaching me out of creativity for the past five years. And until recently Hamlet’s “to be or not to be” a person who finished her dissertation? That was the question I kept asking myself.

Kleenex, wine, scented candles, essential oils, meditation, long walks in the park, positive self-talk, self-help books, I tried it all, but nothing ever cheered me up more than a good-old stand-up comedy act and bag of potato chips, my most favorite comfort foods for body and soul.

Years ago, Woody Allen's "Annie Hall" sarcastically enlightened me that "those who can't do, teach, and those who can't teach, teach gym." There are days when I feel like I cannot do any of those: do, teach, or even teach gym. What is wrong with me? Nothing really, just self-doubt and a shitty political situation for immigrants in the land of immigrants. So, I put a few wishes into my native American dreambox: get a job, finish my dissertation, lose weight. My dreambox works much better than New Year resolutions because the latter are like dating in high school, coming from social pressure and does not last long; but the guilt of white people for what they did to the indigenous population of America will linger forever. Besides, what can be worse than not following your dreams in the land of opportunity? Probably, giving up on them. Consequently, I told my inner-Hamlet to be quiet, and let me release my inner Georgia O'Keefe, who once said "if I cannot be who I want, I can at least paint what I want", which in my case is *I can at least write what I want*.

The most recent encouragement I received from my dissertation chair was, "Have fun writing!" "Well, when was the last time I had fun writing?" I asked myself. When was the last time I did not feel like I am terrible at writing because I did not put the page number in the right corner, or messed up APA citation and the indents in my reference list? And the answer is, a long time ago.

Along with the pressure of academic writing requirements there is an opinion, shared by Amy Poehler and a choir of 100 whiny freshmen, *writing is hard*. And it is! But once you come to an agreement with yourself that your writing is important, at least to you, it becomes therapeutic, liberating and, "wait for it", FUN!

So, let me take you on an adventure that will explain the reasons why I have been so attracted to comedy and why I dedicated a few years of my life to researching it, writing about it, and turning it into my pedagogy.

Terry Pratchett, a renown English humorist, expresses an opinion that humans are essentially storytelling chimpanzees, but dare I add that it is storytelling that makes them so different from chimpanzees, makes them want to look into the past and foresee the future because of the grammatical affordances that allow humans to talk about present, past, and future. With the opportunity provided, let me start my storytelling with a few retrospective narratives, which would shed light on my *wherefroms*, *whys*, and *what-the-hecks*.

An Accidental Gemini[1]

People like to say, "Everything happens for a reason," but I like to think that a lot of things happen accidentally, one of them being my appearance to this world. There is no news in that because a lot of children are accidents, only some parents are nice enough not to disclose the truth to their precious surprises of fate. Also, according to my mother, I am an accidental girl because she wanted a boy, and I am an accidental Gemini because my curiosity to see what is outside that belly-bubble was so strong that I decided to sabotage my mother's final exams at Medical school by popping up a month earlier. And certainly, my life could have been absolutely different "if I were a boy, even just for a day," like in Beyonce's song, but that was not in the cards. So here I am, living in America, raising a daughter with my life-partner, writing a book.

[1] I was born on May 28th, a month before my scheduled date. So if I came to this world as planned my Zodiac sign would have been Cancer, but instead I appeared as an accidental Gemini. Once Aaron Smith, my Linguistics professor noted that "An Accidental Gemini" could be a title for my autobiography. Now I have a perfect opportunity to take his advice.

Little did I know that all of this would have happened to me, while I was a chunky clumsy girl, born in the Soviet Russia during the year of the infamous Olympics, when the brown bear was flying high in the sky and the Soviet troops were laying low in Afghanistan with their communist agenda so disturbing for the Western world. If anyone had told me about my future adventures when I was, say, in Kindergarten, I would have not believed that in 2009 I would hop on the plane, and just like the Olympic Mishka (the Russian for Little Bear), fly high over the Atlantic and land in Normal, Illinois, which, according to a local giftshop T-shirts is far from normal.

Far-from-normal would certainly be a good description of my childhood.

Down Syndrome and Sausage legs[2].

The day I was born my Mom was told that might have Down syndrome. My Mom used to like sharing this story with her friends in my presence, which was always extremely embarrassing, but everyone got really good laughs out of it at my expense. Then my Mother would spice up the story about my appearance to the world with more fun facts, such as "I always wanted a boy" and "She is so much like her father", who she divorced when I was a "sausage legged" toddler who made everyone wonder, "how is she going to walk on those chunks of fat?" Obviously, my only parent present in my life treated me with nothing but admiration and adoration, which made me feel insecure, unwanted, and defective most of time. In my eyes though, she was the embodiment of strength, beauty, and intelligence, until she started yelling at me more and more, using her stressful job as an excuse, exorcizing her

[2] Sorry, Mom…I turned out just fine after all.

parenting demons. Yes, my childhood was pretty messed up, but so was everyone else's (just one happy time period before the periods kick in).

> ***Squirrel!*** *(A distraction word and also a creature that once made me slam the breaks of my dilapidated car so hard that my daughter, who sat in the back, could never forget the f-word afterwards)*
>
> *Me: I hate periods! I think they should be a personal choice.*
>
> *My partner: But without them there will only be run on sentences.*
>
> ***Squirrel hopped away minding her business…***

Now, having a daughter of my own, I am finding that children are so ungrateful that even if they eat off golden platters and poop in golden toilets, they will always find some flaws in their childhood to complain about. Well, at least no-one caused me brain damage and I can still learn and develop, overcoming my personal trauma, embracing the imperfections of the life around me and appreciating 'crazy uncle' jokes on Thanksgiving. Additionally, I am glad that my daughter is a very confident little "babushka" with some good jokes I can use in class for teaching purposes.

Jokes are on them

When I was little, I was a chubby girl and that could not leave our neighborhood bullies indifferent. They came up with all kinds of mean names and pranks to embarrass me. One of the nicknames stuck with me for a while. It was "Baton," which is Russian sour dough white bread, but since I was always curious about word origins, I have discovered that "baton" is the same as "baguette," which is skinny and French, unlike its Russian doughy version. "Well then, I am flattered," I thought.

After a while I came to realization that if I turned their behavior into a joke and started making fun of each and every kid who tried to body-shame me, then I would win. I told myself, "If I am not considered pretty, then I can be considered funny. People like funny." Once I stopped taking the bullies seriously, along with shedding my extra kilos sprouting out, they wanted to be friends with me, proudly using the nicknames I came up with for them. But very soon they found another reason for mocking me again – I studied too much. "Nerd! Nerd! Baton is a nerd!" – they shouted out, while I was walking home from school with a huge backpack filled with textbooks. Going to school for me was a hike, my family decided I should go to a specialized English language school, which was an hour and a half on the trolley bus from where I lived. Luckily, now I am realizing that it was worth of a trip because I received a much better education compared to those children who were not appreciating my nerdiness.

I was speaking English, with a distinct American accent when I graduated high school. I used to have English classes of all kinds 8 times a week, almost like in the Beatles song. I studied grammar, writing, English and American literature, the history of Anglophone countries. There was a Shakespeare theater and an International Friendship Kids Club named after Angela Davis where one could get a pen pal from England or America. If the Russian postal service was not so terrible, I would have been staying in touch with some of the people I used to write letters to.

We watched Channel 1 news on VHS tapes, delivered from America. As English language learners we had to not only listen to the news but to write down the words and phrases we found interesting. Those word were useful for our in-class recaps of the newscast and a

discussion about the events and political issues. Yes, I have been having a long love affair with the English language.

I would have a few hours of technical translation as well. That was my vocational training and upon its completion I received a certificate as an assistant of a technical translator. This skill has been serving me through my entire life. But let me get you back to my little apartment in Vladimir where I first saw the English letters.

English language learning and family culture

My acquaintance with English Language began when I was around five, the time when I started reading words on the spines of the books my grandparents collected through the years. A lot of the words and names were very intriguing to me, I had no idea what they meant but those words excited my imagination. One day a burgundy-red spine with golden letters on it caught my eye, I could not figure out the words because they were in a different alphabet, there were some letters that resembled Cyrillic alphabet ones but why there were reversed letters like N and R, I could not tell. When my mother got back from work, I asked her about the mysterious golden letters and it turned out that the book was not in Russian, it was in English, the language my mom studied in middle school and in high school, but the book was not hers. It turned out that the book belonged to my great grandmother Varvara Vladimirova (1902-1971), who was an exceptionally educated woman. She was a graduate of the Elizabethan Institute for Noble Maidens, knew English, French, German, and played piano well. And the mysterious burgundy red volumes were Lev Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* translated into English.

My great-grandfather Alexey Vladimirov, who was arrested by communists in 1931 and then exiled to Siberia as a political prisoner, the enemy of the communist party, was a very

talented engineer and an educated man. He spoke English and German. Before his arrest, he worked on the construction of Dnieper Hydroelectric Station, which was using turbines manufactured in the USA by General Electric. My great grandfather worked in cooperation with American engineers, whom I can still find on the picture on one of the pages of a book, written by my great aunt Iya Vladimirova during the last decade of her life which she spent on Staten Island in New York City (Vladimirova, pp. 44,57-58). I own a copy of the book and am planning to translate all of it because it tells fascinating stories about love, history, politics, and family values. It is because of Iya's book that I know that speaking foreign languages and pursuing education has a long history in our family, and that knowledge makes these qualities and integral part of my identity.

My great grandmother Varvara became my inspiration for learning foreign languages and playing piano later in my life, but when I started first grade I was only interested in the games our English teacher played with us, the poems and the songs we learned. My mother, Elena Vladimirova, a renowned trauma surgeon and cambustiologist of Vladimir region, the area I had been living in before I came to Illinois, spoke studied English as well. Both Elena and I graduated from the same grammar-school where we studied English since we were in second grade.

In Linguistics and Language Acquisition Studies there is a critical period hypothesis which connects the ability to acquire language to age; in other words it proposes that the earlier in life you start learning another language the better you are going to speak it and if you start learning another language past puberty or later it is significantly harder to acquire it. Even though it does not necessarily mean that one cannot learn and speak a language past the critical

period, I would still agree that the younger you are the easier it is to learn a language. I am speaking from my own experience, because by the age of 9 I was already able to actually speak English in simple sentences. The Englishness of my English was certainly questionable because theoretically English learners in Russia were studying the British variety of English, but the textbooks written were written by the Russian authors and all the teachers were Russian as well. I was acquiring my *rusified* British-English within the realm of expanding circle of World Englishes. According to Smith and Kim (2018) expanding circle is composed of nations which have no great historical ties to English at the societal level but which increasingly use English, particularly in the international domains of commerce and science, e.g. Russia, Spain, Japan (p. 260).

Living the history of changes in Russian politics and economy I could certainly understand how my knowledge of English helped me to get jobs, establish friendships, and forward my educations because I spoke my Russian English, regardless of the omission of the articles because Russian language does not have this grammatical category and with increased mind control over the use of auxiliaries because Russians tend to use inflections where English speakers use auxiliaries. But the *funnest* part is always about the moments when you realize that the English you used in mother Russia is very culturally different from what is spoken in the Anglophone countries and that slang and humor are those layers of the onion of the language (Smith, 2013, in class – *the language is like an onion*) that make your eyes water with laughter when you peel them.

In Soviet Russia English chose me!

My initial interest in humor as a stimulus for learning was evoked during my first trip to England in 1995. In the town of Canterbury at Stafford House School of English I was taking a 20-day summer course in conversational English. Our student group was a mix of students from all over the world: Poland, Greece, France, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Spain, France, and Italy. One day in class we were discussing humor and our teacher asked us to share some jokes most representative of our cultures. What struck us as hard was the process of translation of some of the jokes because they contained some culture-specific word plays and items of reality. Some of the jokes appeared to be universal because they were about human nature and cultural stereotypes that all of us were familiar with. I was fascinated by the fact that some jokes told by students from other countries were identical to the jokes told in Russia. Then I thought that humor can be both culture-specific and universal. Also I recognized that humor was a great way to learn and improve one's language. Now it is a common belief that if one can understand and produce humor in another language then a person's command of that language is pretty good; it is a representation of linguistic creativity. And this fact leads me to another milestone of my academic adventure.

One of my English professors back in Vladimir, Russia had a great sense of humor, which he incorporated into his teaching practice. He would always have a funny story or a pun handy, explaining an intricate spelling instance or a grammatical concept. That professor's teaching style stimulated my interest in English language and in humor as well.

Along with that, the classes I took at the American Home, an English language educational establishment in my hometown, increased my continuous interest in cultural humor,

especially after I was introduced to "The Simpsons" show. The classes were taught by native speakers from the US; therefore our teacher would explain both cultural and linguistic specificity of humor in the show. This exposure prompted me to write a paper on pragmatics of humor in "The Simpsons" episodes for the Psychology of Language course I took earing my master's degree in Communication.

That was the time when I became aware of the existence of the whole field of humor studies and became familiar with Salvatore Attardo's fundamental work "Linguistic Theories of Humor" (1994), with Arthur Berger's "An Anatomy of Humor" (1998), and with Victor Raskin's "Semantic Mechanisms of Humor" (1985). At present, Attardo's and Raskin's works are widely cited by humor scholars in different fields, including TESOL.

During my first year in my master's program, which was also my first year living in America, I was still translating my academic thoughts from my first language into English, which slowed down the process even more. Luckily, I had a professor who appreciated my sense of humor and cultural specificity in writing and would respond to it in the same humorous fashion. Then I became more confident in the relevancy of my own humor and my linguistic competence and started using it in classroom discussions and in my course presentations, and I could tell that it was perceived well. When I started teaching as a graduate assistant, it took me some time to discover my teaching persona and I cannot agree more with what Stanley writes, "Ultimately, the key to better teaching was not to become funnier or more funny. It was to become more *me*" (p. 2).

One of my favorite communication professors had both spontaneous and prepared jokes for each class he taught, and I know because I tool several courses with him, and the efficacy of

those jokes or puns heavily relied on students' perception of the jokes. I liked to sit in the front row because I really enjoyed the content and the delivery of the courses, and several times I would be the only one laughing at his joke because the rest of the group would not catch it. It would be a "nerdy" joke or a joke that an older person would appreciate more. I started my master's program when I was 29, and I do believe that ability to appreciate wit and humor that is less conspicuous and requires more intellectual effort and capacity comes with age because one is more experienced culturally and communicatively. It does not mean that younger generations have no sense of humor or their sense of humor is bad, but it would not be wrong to say that there are so many levels and forms of humor that are contextually situated and the one who understands and knows the context best would get the joke better the ones who do not. The bottom line of my student experience story is that some spontaneous humor was most likely to fail because not everyone was able to perceive it as a joke.

My learning and teaching experiences taught me that on occasion students do not perceive the classroom environment as a place for jokes, so it is an instructor's responsibility to give them green lights for that, especially for freshmen. They are more intimidated by a professor's authority and assume that laughing at an instructor's joke might be perceived as disrespectful or at first, they can be taken aback by the fact that an instructor is humorous. One time on the first day of class my use of humor was perceived as overzealous. When I turned round to the white board to scribble my name on it, I overheard someone's whisper, "What is she on?" However, these speculations are irrelevant for the instructors who advertise their courses as humorous and students are signing up for them for that reason.

When I decided to pursue my doctoral degree in English, I initially was more geared towards TESOL than Linguistics since my undergraduate degree is in teaching English and I have more practical experience in teaching English to non-native speakers. My first intention was to focus on researching humor and its practical role in teaching English. At that time the works of Nancy Bell, a professor from Washington State University, who is interested in humor and laughter in ESL education, was a number one resource for building my knowledge base in that field. Bell's article *Leaning About and Through Humor in the Second Language Classroom* (2009), her article in co-authorship with Salvatore '*Failed humor: Issues in non-native speakers' appreciation and perception of humor'* (2010), her article written with Anne Pomeranz '*Humor as Safe House in the Foreign Language Classroom'* (2011), and some other articles inspired me to develop a project for my TESOL Methods and Methodologies course that was based on "The Simpsons" show. I really enjoyed exploring the ways humor from the show could be integrated into teaching grammar, vocabulary, and culture to non-native speakers. I am hoping to resume developing "The Simpson's"- based pedagogy project sometime in the future. It is worth mentioning, that there is already a book by Karma Waltonen and Denise Du Vernay *The Simpson's in the Classroom* (2014) on how to utilize "The Simpson's" show for teaching writing and grammar, only for native speakers. It is very encouraging to know that the foundation, for what I thought was a crazy but at the same time a pretty awesome idea, has been laid by American academics.

At present my research interests are geared towards stand-up comedy, dialectology, and interactional humor. Needless to say, my interests are inevitably affecting my teaching style and the teaching materials I pick.

While watching various stand-up comedians on Netflix for leisure, I have discovered that they are great resources of accents and regional humor. My discovery instantly made me want to connect comedy with dialects and accents and expand my experience with researching stand-up comedy. So far, I have been able to employ stand-up comedy for my works in the areas of language ideologies, language acquisition, spatial rhetoric, and feminist studies. For example, I wrote a paper, comparing the comedy of Amy Schumer and Louis C.K, who is now a controversial figure due to his deviant sexual behavior. For the matter of language acquisition I wrote an analysis of an act of a Russian immigrant comedian, investigating the influence of his native language on his sentence structure and pronunciation. From the perspective of spatial rhetoric I explored what prevented women from being stand-up comedians throughout the history of the industry and at present time. A feminist lens was instrumental for the analysis of the provocative opinion a famous essayist Christopher Hitches expresses in his article "Why Women Aren't Funny?" published in Vanity Fair Magazine in 2007. Many feminist writers and comedians responded to his article, including a feminist scholar Rebecca Krefting, who called Hitchens's rhetoric "a dick swing". In my humble opinion, gender and humor are connected, not from the of perspective funny or not funny, but in relation to the subject matters different people find laughable. Consequently, Hitchens's article and the debates around it did not discourage me from becoming a female humor practitioner in the American academic world.

The research that I have done about stand-up comedy as an American cultural phenomenon, persuaded me that stand-up comedy envelopes a broad scope of social and political issues, and along with that it is a great representation of American immigrant culture and linguistic heritage.

A Vulgar Art: A New Approach to Stand-Up Comedy (2014) by Ian Brodie informed me about the origins of the genre, how it functions as performative art, and in what way the performative factor influences composition and language of stand-up comedy. Rebecca Krefting's "All Joking Aside: American Humor and Its Discontents" (2014) provided insights on the perceptions of stand-up comedy and problematized the issues of race, accent, gender, and cultural stereotypes, which I find instrumental for my research since I am interested in accented language and stereotypes: the ways they are perceived and the ways they reflected in contemporary comedy.

All joking aside, I started treating stand-up comedy as a seriously useful source for my own acculturation and for my teaching, trying to integrate it into my Composition and Linguistics courses. How? Please, be patient with me, I will get there. I still have some compelling stories to tell.

Not a Spy, Better!

Just like a lady from Virginia Slims commercial, *I've come a long* way from post-Soviet Russia, with the goal to become a scholar and a citizen. I came to America as a master's student when I was 29, leaving my life in Putin's Russia behind. My intention was to acculturate and become an American not just on paper but in my mind and at heart. Just like any other immigrant scholar I have my own story to tell and experiences to share: what prompted me to make the journey of my education, teaching, and reformation of my identity the focal point of my study, which I decided to spice up with humor since it has always been an integral part of my personality and my teaching practice.

I was adjusting to the language and culture of another country trying to do my best to be an effective educator. Efficacy included effective written and spoken communication, non-verbal language, ability to deliver the course material in and interesting, relevant, and engaging way, ability to motivate students to learn, and keep them hooked to the subject matter of the course till the end of the semester.

Stand-up comedy: a mind-set, a genre, a critical lens, a teaching style

Saying that students sign up for first year composition and introductory Linguistics courses with enthusiasm would be a big overstatement. How do I know? I have been teaching first year composition for over 6 years now and the first thing students report or, better say, lament about, is the futility of another English class they are forced into taking by college education system. Both Composition and Linguistics are on the list of what Roland Berk calls "dreaded courses", the ones that are never really interesting, but the school deems them necessary for our educational good. Three of the most popular adjectives students define those courses with are 'boring, redundant, useless', which makes them really challenging to teach.

My very first experience of teaching first year composition was a fiasco because I did not know what I was doing and my teaching persona was in the embryo stage, which meant I had a very vague idea of my own teaching style and pedagogical approach, and the professionalism we had talked so much about during our cohort orientations was not really there. There was a lot of anxiety and fear that I would be perceived as a person who did not qualify to teach composition to American students because of my descent and my accent; however, years of working as an interpreter made me a little more confident in my vocabulary and mannerisms.

When I was working as an interpreter, I learned about the American accents and the stereotypes tied to them, especially about the southerners. Once I accompanied a group from Texas on their tour around the historic route in Russia, and they told me how the way they speak is funny and because of that they are not perceived as very smart. They were very humorous people and they taught me how to speak Texan. They said, "We love to eat and if you want to make sure that we did not skip a mean ask us – Djid jet?" Then they instructed me, "When you need to collect us because it is time to leave, you just shout out, Y'all on the bus!!!!"

A memory of teaching English in a Russian high school provided me with a little bit of faith. One day in class I had a visitor from the US and after my class was over, he said that I teach more like an American teacher rather than a Russian one. His words made me feel proud of myself because I did like a less formal and more engaging style of teaching better than an authoritative, lecture-like style I encountered during my high-school and college years in Russia. Older professors would be especially particular about their teaching authority. Quite a few times, when I would have questions about something, the teacher would not give me an answer but say, "Let me finish speaking, who is the teacher here, me or you?" or "Do not interrupt, you questions give me a headache." Those professors were definitely not my role models, and as funny as it sounds, I was trying to model my teaching style from those teachers I saw in the American movies, such as *Dead Poets Society* and *Freedom Writers*.

But unfortunately, movies are not reality. So, the first semester I taught composition was messy for me on so many levels. It was a 'series of unfortunate events' in all aspects of my life

and I constantly felt that I was not keeping up with anything, not that the latter condition ever changes too much, when you are juggling, family, work, and graduate school.

That was the time when I needed a comic relief in my life, I started watching more comedy every day *The Daily Show*, *Saturday Night Live,* shows on Comedy Central. I watched a lot of George Carlin and other comedians I could find on Netflix. Almost instantly I realized that comedy is not just entertainment, it is a source of learning about culture, language, and social issues. Most definitely I projected my discovery onto my teaching and decided to experiment. But before I start telling you how I did that in class, let me tell you stand-up comedy helped me to make it to class.

Comedy as my coping mechanism

As professional performers and public personae, comedians write not just for their shows but also for the people to get to know them better. Some comedians, such as Ellen DeGeneres, Trevor Noah, Conan O'Brien, Jerry Seinfeld, Joe Rogan, to name a few, host TV shows and they might be more known than the others and consequently there is more information available about them on the Internet and YouTube. Some comedians can be less famous but probably every comedian writes an autobiography at least once in their lives. As public personae comedians are also active on social media as well as in movie making industry, comedians like Dave Chappelle, George Carlin, Amy Schumer, Kevin Hart, they can be seen on the wide screen not just as actors but also the authors of the movie scripts, and quite a few stand-up comedians became movie makers.

As I have mentioned in my literature review, comedians are considered social observers and public educators, therefore they become a platform for expressing opinion about burning

social issues, such as gun control, rights of women, rights of LGBTQ community, they also criticize politicians and mock other public figures. Like Jim Norton said, comedians feed off of societal problems, "if you wake up and nothing weird happened, you're like, damn, nothing to make fun of" (Totally Biased, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=up1qyxHSbCg). For example, just recently, a gay comedian of color Wanda Sykes, who claims that stand-up comedy gives her freedom of self-expression, when talking about the current president, said, "Oh, boy, there is so much to make fun of; but really I can't write anything funnier or more ridiculous than what Trump actually says, it's like doing a parody of a parody". She takes on President Trump in the Emmy Nominated Netflix special 'Not Normal'. Wanda Sykes also stood up for equality and came out, while supporting LGBTQ community during 2008 rally in Las Vegas. She said that she just got up and it just happened, and the next thing she knew she was on TV.

Amy Schumer kept performing till she physically could not, due to the health issues she had during her pregnancy. The fact that she did that and gained her inspiration from her condition of a pregnant woman was very well received by general public because a lot of people could relate to her experience. Also, a working pregnant woman. And let us pretend we do not notice the fact that she is white and rich. She kept working and being successful, and her becoming a mom did not make her less of an individual, to the contrary, her popularity on social media has increased and a lot of attention was drawn to her and her family after the baby was born.

Once I discovered how funny and unapologetic female comedians are, they became my role models in a sense, they empowered me.

As a working woman, as a mother, and as a survivor of domestic violence, I would like to emphasize the importance of empowerment of women as active participants of society, who have patience and courage to juggle between jobs, and families, and other challenges they face in life. Even though Amy Schumer is a celebrity, modern world, modern mentality, needs real-life superheroes, who can be brought closer to home. By that I mean, you can still see them on Netflix, follow them on Facebook, Instagram, see them in the movies, in the news, and memes on the Internet. They write stories for us *muggles*, simple mortals, so we can believe that we can do it. And I think a lot of my students need those kinds of messages as well. They need to be empowered and know that they can do it, and with a little help of humor that usually turns out pretty well. Just like it worked out pretty well for yours truly.

To be honest with you, I had very vague idea of what it would be like to combine single-parenting and a PhD program, until I started my first semester, when my daughter just turned one. It was an avalanche of sleepless nights, falling behind the deadlines because my life schedule was so bound to the needs of a "chubby man" more than to my own. But motherhood had its perks not only when I heard, "I love you, Mommy" for the first time in your life.

Motherhood taught me patience, and at the same time it turned me into a psychic person because I have learned to distinguish truth from bullshit, while raising my kid. This is a priceless skill for working in education because students will try to take advantage of you, butter you up, will try to come up with some lame excuses for why they have skipped so many classes. Along with that, being a mom made me more caring about my students, and sometimes in my attempts to be accommodating, trying to caution students from doing something or explaining the future

consequences of certain behaviors, I would hear, “Oh, you sound like my Mom.” To which I would respond, “Because I am a Mom, and it makes me a better teacher!”

As I mentioned before, Amy Schumer joked a lot about her pregnancy, making fun of the fact that she needed to vomit a lot and that she did not look like a royal princess with a baby bump (body-image jokes were always her strong suit). Her pregnancy jokes could have been perceived differently: one perspective that I came across online was, “who cares”, a lot of women vomit and gain weight during pregnancy, what is so special and funny about that; another group was cheering on and I think that was Amy’s target audience at that time. People who could relate to her condition and could carry on with Schumer’s jokes during the hard times related to cooking another human.

I wish Schumer and I got pregnant at the same time; she would have made my day every day. I did watch a lot of comedy to cope with the stress, fear, and discomfort connected to letting a tiny human inhabiting my body.

While putting up with the gymnastics of my belly-dweller and sasquatch feet, I was reading a book “Pregnancy sucks: when your miracle makes you miserable”, graciously mailed to me by a friend, who, by then, was a mom of twins. The book was describing some gruesome details of gestation period in a lighthearted and hilarious way. Even though my misery was incomparable with anyone who was pregnant with twins or simply had a very terrible pregnancy, I really enjoyed the book, I felt like I was talking to a girlfriend who lives next door. When my friend was pregnant, she was posting hilarious posts on Facebook, which I always read eagerly because of how funny they were, and also because I was proud of my friend, that she was overcoming her fears and discomfort with humor. I even recommended her to collect her posts

and publish them as a book, will save a lot of lives. A lot of women would feel that they are not alone.

Such, even though virtual, but effective cultural exposure to what it would be like to be a mother taught me a lot of things. It expanded my vocabulary and understanding of what it is going to be like to parent in another country. I knew I would not have two sets of grandparents to help me out, I knew I made a mistake marrying the biological father of my child, and I knew, even when I was still married, that I would be raising my child on my own. I had a lot of learning and adjustments to do.

And just like that book and my friend's Facebook rants, Amy Schumer communicated positivity to her audience, which finds evidence on social media: her fans would say how brave, fun, and smart Amy was and how much they loved her.

She also made some of her post-partum body pictures public to support women who are getting over the trauma of post-pregnancy body. Female bodies do go through a lot of changes throughout life, so we should always give those who gave birth a credit and should refrain from body shaming and celebrate the health and beauty of mothers of all shapes and sizes.

There have been multiple social media photography projects in support of mothers and post-partum bodies, which also reminded me of a great project carried out by comedians: a group of comedians were performing naked, talking about their relationships with their bodies, and in 2017 a female comedian Glory Pearl, performed naked to stand up against body shaming at Bodykind Festival in Totnes, Devon. Acts like this are not just for laughs, they are meant to make the world a better place.

As a female, I belong to the crowd of people who had been shamed for their body for various reasons since they were little, therefore it is a relatable and important subject for me, and I am glad that comedians part-take in body-acceptance campaigns in the attempt to bring empathy into our society surrounded by anorexic and photoshopped Victoria's Secrets models and machos. There should be a good balance between what is beautiful and what is healthy.

Body image is a sensitive subject for a lot of people these days because our society is so obsessed with looks, and there are so many messages which orient us towards ever-lasting youth and skinniness, and I believe it is important to bring this subject matter to the discussions in the college classrooms. The campus counselling and student services are doing a really good job promoting healthy values among students, but if an instructor can re-instate these values that would help a lot of students to feel more accepted.

I am a humanist and do think that if you are skinny there is no reason to be vain because someone else has some extra pounds. In the age of feminism, I notice so many messages about women supporting women on various kinds of social media, so I think that we really should. On a broader scope, humans should support humans, and if someone is struggling, or if someone is different, we should find kindness in our hearts to accept it.

You must be wondering about the connection between motherhood, empowering women, body image, and my teaching? And rightfully so. My home culture was more about indoctrinating women into becoming meek little wives, baby breeders, who need to constantly worry about their weight, because like my Mom used to tell me, " If you are fat, no one will love you!" Therefore, the above-mentioned stand-up comedians serve as an example of liberation from the societal norms I was surrounded by growing up.

And probably not coincidentally I ended up with a man who actually enjoys watching me eat. Just like Amy Schumer married a chef, I am about to marry one too. Subconscious mind works in mysterious ways.

My exposure to female, feminist comedy helped me realize where I stand as an individual, as a female, as a working mother, and an educator. It made me feel more confident about myself. And it is important when you have to stand in front of a student audience and be competent, engaging, empathetic, professional, and humorous.

There were days when I thought I would not be able to get out of bed and look into peoples' eyes because of the emotional and physical pain I experienced because of my divorce, because of my c-section, because of guilt, and feeling of hopelessness. And I needed to always be strong, functioning, taking care of my baby, going to class, teaching every other day. Again, comedy served as a crutch, and as a moving force, it kept me afloat, it made me want to make it through the day.

It helped me not to give up when I was at risk of dropping out of the program after the first semester. I was determined to get what I came for, for a degree and an opportunity to tell the world more about teaching with humor because most definitely I am not the fist and not the last humor nerd who would be looking into the efficacy of humor in higher education because the time is now, more and more educational psychologists, educational researchers, communication specialists, and functioning professors in various fields are interested in the effects and efficacy of humor in the college classrooms.

The interest in humor as pedagogy is increasing because in the age of Google ignorance is personal choice which means self-education and online education has become so accessible

and ubiquitous that college teaching has become impossible without an element of entertainment and the use of technology, which consequently, affects the content of the courses we teach.

Students crave entertainment and do not like sitting in boring classrooms, especially when their inexhaustible sources of entertainment fit in a pocket and they do not even Facebook or Instagram anymore, they Snapchat. The culture of younger generations is becoming more and more visual and, based on my own teaching experience, I am aware that students start giving a professor more credit once they know that 'the pro knows what's up', which means that they are tech-savvy enough to be able to use Snapchat or at least Instagram. Consequently, professors are challenged with keeping up with popular culture and technology, and it is also important to find those intersections on the Venn diagram of generation gaps, which show the existence of cultural overlaps and shared values.

Luckily, computer literacy was never a problem for me, especially after I spend three years working as a Public Relations specialist for a small IT company in my hometown. Due to the specificity of industry English was the language I used on a daily basis. On top of that, our IT guys were using open source operation system which had English interface and I have learned how to navigate the web all in English really well, even learned a little bit of coding. But certainly will never make it to the level of a Russian hacker. However, my computer literacy level helped me learn how to use the University's online tools for teaching and I always felt comfortable using technology to include entertaining elements into my teaching process.

In the following part of the chapter I will be talking about my experiments with humor and stand-up comedy as pedagogy in teaching first year composition and introductory linguistics

courses. My stand-up comedy pedagogy incorporates my teaching style, my use of humor and stand-up comedy as course material and course assignments.

My approach to teaching is theoretically informed by contemporary humor and comedy studies, as well as humor pedagogy practices related to teaching strategies and techniques, students' engagement, and students' academic literacies. The application of humor and comedy studies in my composition classroom was driven by a genre analysis approach to teaching composition.

My approach to the Introductory Linguistics course is based on the Dubinsky's notion of "working backwards," which entails collecting the material which illustrates linguistic phenomena by selecting bits and pieces from various stand-up comedy acts that would later be shown in the classroom in conjunction with a specific material or assignment.

Stand-up, Teaching, Performativity

After my first conference presentation one of my professor told me I was performative. Back then I was not sure whether it was a good or a bad thing because I totally broke the rules and did not read my paper out loud but delivered it as a public speech. And of course it was about comedy.

Ian Brodie, a stand-up comedy scholar, named stand-up a vulgar art, considering aspects of performativity and literary work incorporated in the genre. Most certainly, the performative aspect of stand-up comedy and its effects on the audience cannot be underestimated because it is the performance or the delivery that keeps audience's attention, especially through an hour-long act. Quirck in her book *Stand-up matters*, writes about the ways stand-up comedians manipulate

their audiences, by which she implies that comedians engage their audiences and interact with them by means of various strategies and techniques.

As educators we know that we manipulate our students every time we teach and contemporary teaching does require a set of skills of a performer because just like comedians we are challenged to keep our audiences' attention, but what makes it more challenging is that our audience should also learn from us. Mike Livera (2015) in his book *From Stand-up Comedian to Stand-up Teacher*, emphasizes the importance of stand-up comedy in teaching by saying that keeping the audience's attention for hours, and sometimes that audience could be drunk, is hard work, and it takes years to master it, and there are variables that constantly challenge the performer because no two audiences are ever alike (p. 34).

And just like two audiences are never alike for a stand-up comedian, two groups of students are never alike for an instructor. On several occasions I had to develop 2 different course plans for the same course because of the drastic difference in the group dynamic. One would be very interactive and openly humorous from the first day of class, which guaranteed an instant click with me and my teaching style, what would make studenting and teaching a mutually pleasant endeavor. Another group would be quiet and very reluctant to engage in a discussion; it felt like pulling answers out of them is more painful then pulling their teeth.

There would be times when I would just put on the hat of a serious lecturer and work with them in that dry and demanding mode they had been reportedly more accustomed to in order to make learning happen, or maybe just a performance of learning or what they like to say in our writing program, "civil attention", which included meekly following the instructions and write something that they think that English professor wants from them. The latter, was and is

my least favorite approach, I like seeing students' I genuine interest in what they are doing, I believe that they can learn more than they think they will in that 'annoying redundant English class' and for that reason I would still try to shake them up because those kids need to be *shook*, *woke* and *lit*, in other words, they need to be challenged intellectually, otherwise I would have been at risk of receiving a course review that would say something like, "Did not learn anything."

One of my linguistics professors once shared some words of wisdom with me, saying, that if you do not challenge students enough by keeping the bar of demands and complexity of materials high, they would not feel that they are learning and they would not feel that they need to put forth effort. I took this advice to heart and also project it to myself: I need to challenge myself with new teaching strategies and kick myself out the comfort zone. But certainly, that is to be expected, since just like I have mentioned earlier, standing in front of an audience, trying to entertain and educate them is challenging because their phones are usually more interesting than some human subject in front of them.

But on a serious note, the challenge is not just in keeping their attention but in promoting actual learning because a public-school freshmen population is a motley crew and they come from different economic, cultural, and educational environments. However, one thing they have on common, they all use social media and feel socially awkward, communicating live. Even texting is becoming obsolete for some of them, they would say, "We do not really text anymore, we snapchat."

I did not succeed in my attempt of keeping up with the Joneses and kept using the good old e-mail for communication with my students, showing how quickly the modes of written communication change.

As instructors, we are obligated to teach them how to be polite and mindful of their word choices, punctuation and grammar when crafting an e-mail, but these rules do not apply to younger generations that much. My observations showed that communicative linearity is preferable during a lecture, but humorous deviations are still welcome, and for that reason, I along with a group of like-minded educators, turn to comedy.

Kevin McCarron (2009), professor of English literature and a stand-up comedian, wrote that his attitude to students and his teaching approach in the seminar room changed as soon as he began performing stand-up comedy. He reminiscences, "I now saw students not as people who had to be there, but as an audience, as people who could be working, or travelling, instead of attending university, and more specifically, my seminars" (p. 122).

McCarron's words made me reconsider my experience with lecturing and rethink the words that we as students frequently hear from professors, "You entered college, not it is your responsibility to figure it out", or another cordial phrase that I have heard coming from both professors and graduate students, "You do not like it, there is a fucking door!"

As a person who really likes to teach and interact with students in a way that would help the discover and realize their potential, I have never thought that pointing to the door or threats in conjunction with one's responsibility are effective in any way. Just like McCarron says, if your teaching is not good enough the students could be doing something else. His thought reinforces the responsibility professors have; they are responsible for the delivery of the material. In his

work he further notes that it is not uncommon to hear academics referring to teaching as performance – what is uncommon is to encounter any further analysis of what kind of performance it is (p. 122.)

In his article "Stand-up comedy and Teaching in the Global Age", McCarron distinguishes between the types of teachers who acknowledge that there is a performance element and the ones who visualize images of desperate and misguided teachers dumbing down their subject by quoting Eminem lyrics to embarrassing and pointless effect (p. 122). He argues that mostly teachers perceive themselves as actors, who are pretending to be more knowledgeable. McCarron disagrees with the young teachers, writing, "But it is a mistake – teachers are not actors, they are knowledgeable."

In the defense of young teachers, since I feel like I am still young of them, even though I am turning 41 next year, and all of my female peers are crying that they are getting old, I would like to notice that it is not uncommon for young teachers to self-deprecate and feel like they are not knowledgeable because young teachers are going through baptism by fire during their first years of experience and the certainly do feel like charlatans.

Even yours truly only had two weeks of prepping for the first semester of teaching composition within a new theoretical paradigm. There is an official term for that feeling of being not qualified for what you are doing, it is "imposter syndrome", which a lot of students, especially those who have a tendency to overthink, are very familiar with.

Performativity did help me overcome anxiety caused by teaching something I was picking up on the go. If we think about performativity as a defense mechanism, then it would

not be a mistake to think that one is performing a role of a teacher for the sake of self-preservation as a young student-teacher body in academia.

Not every young teacher though would be willing to wear the hat of a comedian from the first day of teaching, because being intentionally funny is challenging and being spontaneously funny requires talent, and some people are just born with it. Educational researchers like Bell, Berk, McDermott, Ellingson, etc. note that more experienced teachers, who are confident in their teaching style and their knowledge of the course content, feel more comfortable using humor in their classrooms. Also, they have acquired confidence in working in front of and with a variety of student audiences.

I was already aware of my predisposition to humor and appreciation of it, consequently, my decision to incorporate humor into my teaching was prompted more by my awareness that I can pull it off and that it can make my classroom more interesting.

In addition, my experiences as a student, prior my exposure to scholarly work about the effects of humor on learning, inspired me to model my teaching from the best humorous teaching practices I have encountered since I was in elementary school. Therefore, I would say that "making students laugh" is not a primary objective of my use of humor in the classroom, however, laughter as a form of humor appreciation and an expression of positive emotions is definitely a great boost to both instructor and students' enjoyment of the classroom interaction.

When students are laughing at your humor, which you intend to be funny, it is very encouraging and heartwarming, and that moment of "laughing with" helps to establish a good rapport with students and a more comfortable learning environment.

Occasionally, the students would laugh at me or laugh at another student and it is very important to be able to laugh at yourself but refrain from teasing. Teasing is also a form of humor, but frequently students perceive it negatively because they do not like to be a target of a joke

But enough said about the use and benefits of humor in theory, it is time to look at my teaching practices, which involved humor and stand-up comedy. Allow me introduce to you to my syllabi, assignments, and projects I used for teaching first year composition and introductory linguistics courses.

Teaching Composition with humor

Right before I started my doctoral program, I had a brief over-the-phone interview with the writing program director. That was very good news, it mean I got a teaching assistantship. However, I felt excited and at the same time terrified because it meant two things: "I got a job and I had to go teach in a couple of weeks! Wait what, we are teaching genre-based writing? Great! I had experience teaching writing. Yes, sure, plenty of it, in a couple languages!"

I still hear myself saying this with that kind of fake confidence that makes you walk around the room and throw your arms up in the air as if you are persuading a stadium full of people. However, you know that you are doing that because your heart is racing and what you really want to say is, "Are you kidding me, I'd rather die than teach that stuff!"

I needed a plan, I needed something that would help me survive teaching writing to freshmen, especially after you hear phrase like, "Oh, they would not care!" or "The difference between high-school kids and freshmen is June, July, August so be prepared to entertain them

well." Hmmm, entertain you say, I started thinking about all the funny teachers I have ever had and how they kept their students busy.

Reminiscencing my student experience, I came to realization that I really enjoyed the classes which incorporated a good share of humorous moments with some challenging material, which provided food for thought and creativity. Since I have been watching a lot of comedy while walking the non-funny path in my life, I realized that I could use my personal preferences with our Writing Program composition theory. I knew I was taking a risk but I thought it is worth trying because after the first two semesters of teaching writing, by trial and error, and even some crying, I came to the conclusion that teaching and writing is too much fun to not be willing to experiment with humor.

Like Bev Hogue (2010), a professor of English from Marietta College, Ohio, describing her conversation with a skeptical colleague, "Good humor writing is good writing". (p. 199) However, the colleague was skeptical about teaching humorous writing, the presumption was, "But anyone can be funny." But yet again, can everyone write funny and is it an easy task? Those were the questions I still needed to find answers to but meanwhile I was still a rookie in the first semester.

The very first document I need to create and work on with students was the syllabus. As a novice I would just look at the sample syllabi and craft something based on the work of the previous instructors. However, after the first experience of going over the syllabus and trying to apply genre analysis to it, I came to realize that students did not like the activity at all. In informal conversations with me they would say that it was boring for them. Another reason why it was boring was the length and the tone of the document. Once my students shared and opinion

that they do not like to read a long and very dry written syllabi. Knowing that a syllabus is required for every class I teach, I decided to experiment and make my syllabus more student friendly.

Human-centered humorous syllabus

The preparation for the final stand-up comedy act starts on the first day of the semester. I start exercising my wit even before the semester starts because I need to write the most important document of the semester, my syllabus, the holy scripture of the Writing Program requirements. As important as it is to provide the students with all the necessary information it is also very important to understand that no freshmen would read an eight page syllabus and no freshmen will ever re-read it after the first week of class, until you make them to. As I have mentioned during my first couple semesters teaching my students expressed their discontent about the lengthy content of my syllabus and that they find reading syllabi exhausting all together.

One of my colleagues once noted that the tone of my syllabus is too demanding, and I have to soften it down a notch. I take my students' and colleagues' criticism as a call to action, so after every semester I would be tweaking my composition syllabus, cutting it shorter and writing it sweeter. After a few revisions I realized that I want it also to be humorous because this is part of who I am and what the course is about. Once I started providing my new students with a 3-page humorous syllabus the perception of me and the course has become more positive. Students liked the goofy picture of me wearing huge plastic glasses and some pictures of me and my little daughter, the jokes about the course, the assignments, the grade break-down, the tone of the document that was written for them. Revising the syllabus helped me to realize the importance of the structure and the rhetoric one uses to get the message across.

If the syllabus is for the students, then it should be human centered, which mean it takes into consideration the users' preferences in usability, design, and content organization (Jones, 2018). One of the most important factors that sets up expectations from the course is not just the outline of the assignments and the calendar, but it is also the tone, because it sets up the tone for the whole course and reflects a personality of a professor. Jones (2018) mentions that a human-centered syllabus requires effort and revision based on students' feedback. My experience as a student, prompted me to be more student-oriented in my syllabi before I even read the article.

Once upon a time in my master's program I received a syllabus that almost lead me to a nervous breakdown. The demands were so high, and the tone was incredibly formal, which made me tremble with fear and think that the professor would be so strict, so unapproachable, and I will fail the course. So, once I needed to write a syllabus of my own my first consideration was, "The syllabus should not be giving goose bumps and cool sweat to my students, it should make them want to come to my class and be excited about our *intellectual feast*."

There are several ways to approach writing a syllabus, as a contract, as a permanent record, and as a learning tool (2002). As a contract syllabus outlines policies set up for the students and their instructor. One fun policy that I have is to come to class and be present, which means active listening and participation, at no additional points. I was criticized for that policy not once both by colleagues and my students, they would say, "But this is such great motivation to improve attendance and their active learning." But I had my own perspective on motivation, besides external carrots in front of the donkey, there should be intrinsic motivations and that kind of motivation is usually more valuable and effective than extra points that might boost the grade, but they would not boost the quality of learning. When the students asked me once, why am I not

giving them attendance or participation points, my response was, “Welcome to college, you leveled up in your video game called life, now it is your responsibility to come to class and participate, nobody applauds when I show up for work on time and no one gives me a raise for my input at our Writing Program meetings. All of that is my responsibility, I signed up for doing that, but if I fail, I have to own it, and learn from my mistakes” They giggled and then one of them said, “Hmmm, that’s a valid point.”

Yes, thank you, and it is also an unnegotiable point, but I, certainly, provide students with the right to negotiate their grade. However, they can only do so if they can be persuasive and reasonable and show me the evidence of their understanding of the subject matter and learning either during a scheduled appointment or an additional writing response that would justify their choices in the previous paper. I have adopted that strategy from my favorite communications professor who was the most effective and the most motivational, and I am still looking up to his teaching style, because he embodied a perfect combination of funny, knowledgeable, and demanding, and I should certainly mention that his humorous teaching style and his course, inspired me to continue researching humor and its potential in higher education.

I wrote an analysis of verbal humor in the Simpsons episodes as my final paper for the course and was absolutely fascinated by the theories, taxonomies, and functions of humor, and here I am, writing my auto-ethnography about my own teaching with humor.

But let us look at my first day syllabus for my first year writing course, keeping in mind that the course is humor based, the instructor cannot help but teach with humor because of her goofy personality. Usually I would also include a funny picture of myself, a picture of myself with my daughter, and some doodles of my own to better personalize my syllabus. I would

normally e-mail it to my students before the beginning of the semester with a humorous note. Anecdotally, students reported that they sincerely appreciated my gesture because it made them feel more welcome to the class, especially during their very first semester at the university. During the first day of class students would thank me for the syllabus and for the pictures I included into it. They would say something like, "It was so nice to see your picture and know that you are funny" or "Your daughter is so cute, it was nice to know that you are a mom."

I use a picture of me and my daughter I would put a funny phrase my daughter said, something like, *"Mommy, when I grow up, I will be a teacher? When you grow up, you can be a teacher too, and now, you are just a Mommy."* Students would always give me positive feedback on the cute little captions like that and many of them, especially Elementary Education majors. They would ask me to bring my daughter to class so they can meet they cute little funny girl.

I was very glad to receive comments like this because it gave me psychological comfort, which was necessary for me in the high-high stress environment of graduate school. Also, there were times when I actually needed to bring my daughter to class because either there was a day off at daycare or a scheduling conflict with my daughter's baby-sitter.

On the other hand, it was more comforting for my students to learn more about my life outside of teaching. They did not perceive it is as "too much" or "unprofessional," to the contrary, through those bits of information about me and my daughter they would perceive me as more approachable and kinder as an instructor.

My daughter, because she was still little and wanted to spend more time with me, would keep asking me, "Mommy, when am I going to see your '*shtuntzen'* again?"

Now, let us look at the syllabus and they ways I incorporated humor into it[3].

Welcome to my first-year writing class,

aka YOUR NEW and IMPROVED EXPRIENCE WITH ENGLISH

Your professor: Olya Cochran

Classroom: 111

Contact Phone: 111-777

(Ok if you text me when you need to, just introduce yourself)

Class time: 10:00 – 10:50 a.m.

There's never enough coffee☺

And if you are absolutely starving you can bring food to class.

But always pick up the crumbs and wraps before you leave.

Office Hours: M, W – 11 a.m. till noon and by appointment

Office: I prefer holding my office hours at a coffeeshop. I very much dislike my cubicle☹

Email: olyacochran77@gmail.com

Course Description:

This course is a contradiction to your firm conviction that it is just another English class, full of reading, writing, and annotating. My Composition course offers you a unique opportunity to immerse your mind into the ocean of textual

[3] Pictures and other information that would compromise confidentiality have been taken out of the following document.

forms, their meanings, functions, and life cycles in time and space in ***edutaining*** mode.

My course is designed to challenge you with some theoretical material, which will find immediate application in your writing experiments. Your brain muscles will be put through occasional grammar and vocabulary drills, but it's just to keep you in good shape for bigger and more important tasks. It's like routine jogging before running a marathon. In our case, it's a writing marathon, during which we will be learning about different **genres** and **producing them**.

We will consider **genres as fluid textual and multi-modal [text+images+sound+etc] forms which have their features and audiences, serve a variety of practical purposes, can be transformed and repurposed.** (Important stuff☺!)

We will fiercely exercise critical thinking and learning over mastery. Your knowledge of how to tackle the challenge of writing in an unfamiliar genre and how to adjust a familiar genre to a new writing situation is your most important takeaway from this course.

The learning process will entail a lot of research about your writing and for your writing aka Writing Research and Content Research. *Why*? To strengthen your writing skills, to expand your perspectives on writing, to broaden your understanding of what it takes to produce genres in contemporary technologically empowered environment abundant in imagery and translingualism → I'll explain

this fancy word to you when it's time. FYI college LOVES big smart words. Get used to it☺.

To scrutinize the ongoing process of hybridization of genres we will use the framework of *Cultural-Historic Activity Theory (CHAT), the notions of Content and Context, Antecedent Knowledge and Genre, Trajectory, Remediation, Activity System***.**

Still with me? Cool! Please read the rest of the pages, they contain some very important stuff as well!

As you can see my syllabus reveals my personality right from the beginning. I give my students a chance to put a name with a face, that is humorous enough to make students sigh with relief, "No, she is not a monster." Document design scholarship says that a syllabus should be easy to navigate, which means that the important content in the document should be easily accessible visually. I used headings to separate the sections of the syllabus and highlighted the most important term of the course, included a hyperlink that would take them to the webpage with the definition of the terms mentioned in the syllabus. However, based on my students' feedback informal in-class feedback, the tone and the register I used for the delivery of the information, played an important role for them, since they reported, that they really enjoyed the syllabus because it appeared more personable, informal, and less intimidating. My students were telling me that they liked the presence of jokes and emojis.

The concepts of *discourse* and *genre* were very important for understanding the course objectives and learning outcomes, which my teaching approach and material were closely tied to.

One of my biggest requirements and expectations out of my students was and always is active presence and intellectual work in the classroom. The students are warned since day one that they are not coming to my class to bide the time because it is just 'another boring English class' but to come to class and pay attention, listen, think, share thoughts and ideas. I know that nothing scares a freshman more than voicing their opinion in front of the classroom, therefore I am a big fan of small group activities and all-sorts of ice-breakers that help them to feel more comfortable around me and each other, so we can have discussions instead of lectures, so they develop important social skills they cannot develop just by pretending to listen with their heads buried in their phones.

> *One morning I walked into the classroom and spent five minutes into the class session just standing in front of the class without them acknowledging my existence. I already knew what I was going to do because they night before my class I found a video with real life situations about what college professors do to students' cellphones when enough is enough. While the students kept ignoring me, I turned off the lights and started the video. The sudden darkness took them by surprise and then they were shocked by the video, in which professors were violently confiscating and breaking students phones in a variety of ways: by stepping on them, or smashing them against the wall, or even crushing them with a hammer. The students go quiet, watching the video. Then a sigh broke the silence, and a sad comment pierced the tension in the air, "If something like that happened to me, I would be crying." I was victorious, the students' words allowed me to say, "You don't want to see me raging like this, do you?" "No, no, no!"*

was the response. I did not need to nag them or lecture them about the classroom etiquette, the YouTube video was louder than my thousand nagging words.

There are plenty of humorous bits about the millennials and their texting habits just in general, so I usually show my students a routine that would make fun of their generation, for example, *Millennials* by Brad Upton https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j1Zg2S2-heY

When I would notice someone texting or using social media in class, I would come-up of a joke, something like, "I always admired students texting abilities, your guys' thumbs are so developed and you are texting at a phenomenal speed, I wish I could do that" or "If I gave you my digits, would you text your thoughts to me about the question I just asked you?" And it was always amusing to watch all of the smart phone junkies started looking around, hoping that my remark was targeting somebody else.

Usually, my contextually appropriate sarcasm is perceived pretty well because they know that they deserved it. Some of the students seem to be immune to sarcasm and they are brave enough to respond, saying something like, *"Oooh, sarcasm, that's the best form of American humor ever!"* and my response to that would be, *"I graduated from the University of American Sarcasm, so you have a lot to learn from me."*

Besides sarcasm, students still had a lot to learn from me. Even if they had doubts about a Russian teaching them English, I knew that they needed good guidance before they tackle any of the assigned projects.

One morning, after a long weekend, one of my students opened the class with a joke, "So, I told my Mom that our English teacher is Russian!" The class started

giggling. She continued, "My Mom says, your English teacher is WHAT? That is hilarious!" To which I responded, "My Mom says the same thing. And you must be very bad at learning grammar since they started appointing scary Russians to teach you." Everyone started laughing and the class began on a good note.

Genre-based approach to writing was new to the students, and as scary as a Russian in Adidas shorts.

Despite the fact that students are firmly convinced that they know how to write, they are having a hard time realizing that being trained in writing 5 paragraph essays does not make one a good writer. Therefore, my role as a writing instructor was never easy. I had to shift the "I-know-it-all" paradigm and help my students to become more open to the perspective that writing is a complex process, which is situated is social, cultural, historical, and political context. Seeing how disgruntled students were about taking another English class right after high school, I had my AHA moment. I decided to create cognitive dissonance and make them write comedy instead of persuasive essays.

There were times when students loved my teaching style and there were moments when they were very annoyed by the fact that I am not spoon-feeding them everything that they need to accomplish for a project. Instead of just providing them with a thorough description of the project, which would include an exhaustive list of requirements, grading scale, in case they need to ask for extra points for an "awesome grade."

Very frequently I have encountered students' frustration when instead of describing every detail of what I expect from them in their writing and providing them with a sample right away, I

would give them suggestions and link to the recommended readings and videos that would inform their writing.

But my seemingly sloppy and ambiguous approach to teaching was a pedagogically intentional. I did it as an encouragement to own their work, to own their writing, and being able to be critical about themselves, knowing that they are doing a good job, understanding their strengths and weaknesses as writers and students.

The ability to own their writing would imply the knowledge of the literary form they are working in, its features, its function and purpose, its audience, its timeframe, its potential longevity, potential response from the readers. In the modern world of instant communication and social media we cannot ignore the feedback the audiences provide to the writing that we do.

My highest pedagogical ambition here is to see my students transform from stigmatized producers of 5-paragraph essays into student-writers who understand what they are writing, why and are aware of the strategies and techniques to get the message across. Another point of transformation would be a position not of a passive consumer but of an active citizen, who is concerned with the life of the country and the issues it is going through.

I really want to get to know my students better and I want them to like me not because I am an easy grader, or because I do not assign a lot of homework. I want them to enjoy coming to my classroom because we are going to learn something new and, of course, watch some relevant stand-up comedy and have engaging discussions. In our collaboration we can make baby steps towards the transformation I would like to tell you about. As an educator I believe that we teach in a post-method era when it is critical not to just transmit information but to engage students into active learning and critical thinking.

My approach was inspired by the work of Kumaravadivelu, who is an emeritus professor of Applied Linguistics and TESOL at San Jose State University and the author of several works on transformative pedagogy. I became familiar with his work during a course in TESOL methods and materials. I was really impressed by the advancement in L2 pedagogical thought presented in the work of that scholar and his philosophy of identity formation and social transformation became my own. Even though he was writing about language teaching I see that his pedagogy is transferrable to teaching Writing and Linguistics.

Visualizing a three-dimensional system consisting of the parameters of particularity, practicality, and possibility, Kumaravadivelu argues that a postmethod pedagogy must (a) facilitate the advancement of a context-sensitive language education based on a true understanding of local linguistic, sociocultural, and political particularities; (b) rupture the reified role relationship between theorists and practitioners by enabling teachers to construct their own theory of practice; and (c) tap the sociopolitical consciousness that participants bring with them in order to aid their quest for identity formation and social transformation. Treating learners, teachers, and teacher educators as co-explorers (p. 538).

Kumaravadivelu pedagogy includes not only issues pertaining to classroom strategies, instructional material, curricular objectives, and evaluation measures, but also a wide range of historical, political, and socio-cultural experiences that directly or indirectly influences L2 education. (p. 538) He wrote that about teaching English as a second language, but I believe his pedagogy is transferrable to composition and linguistics because we teach writing and consider language within all of those context mentioned above, so definitely besides the production of genre there are factors that influence and shape us as teachers, as individuals, as citizens, and we

cannot ignore our personal histories, our life experience, and I would say, our sense of humor, because it is very much representative of who we are and how we treat ourselves, other people and the world around us.

Linguistic Autobiography

The first big project of the semester was Linguistic Autobiography. The name does not sound funny, but humor was integrated into the task. The following is an assignment sheet for the project.

> **Composition Project 1 – Linguistic autobiography, the search of self.**
>
> **The assignment sheet.**
>
> Unit 2. Multimodal Genres, Language, and Writing Identity.
>
> Linguistic Autobiography
>
> Due on Monday, your favorite day of the week.
>
> **The objective of the project**: To learn more about your linguistic background and the ways you and other people use language, i.e. the way they speak it, the way they write in it, the way they interpret the word through language, the way language affects us and other people.
>
> You will be collecting information about **your exposure to and experience with a language/languages/language variation** and organizing it in accordance with the conventions of the genre of autobiography.
>
> **Your language exposure** may include (and not limited to) the information about the languages spoken at home and the way that affected
>
> - your identity,

- your world views, your way of thinking,
- your dreams and interests,
- your genre (not limited to written genres) preferences,
- your writing style as a form of self-expression.

Your language experience may (and not limited to what I offer) include:

- your first words,
- the first funny phrase you have coined as a child (something that was very memorable to your parents, grandparents, or your teachers)
- the story, a song, a poem you might have written,
- situations in which your knowledge of a language was critical and helped you or another person (it does not have to be just a foreign language, you can write about your native language or another language system you are familiar with)
- any other memorable and meaningful experiences that affected your life and were closely tied with language: it might be something you have read, a song you have heard, something a close person or an absolute stranger said to you, something that had influenced you in a positive or a negative way.

Please include some of your writing related experience in which word choices had very important ideological implications for situations those words were used in and may be a change or actions they led to.

Feel free to structure your work however you like, keeping in mind the features of autobiography.

Length of your work and formatting: 4-5 pages, double-spaced. You should include pictures, screenshots, and other graphic elements. If you are making a video or making a ppt presentation you should submit a supplemental narrative, 2-3 pages.

For the sample linguistic autobiography of the project I chose to use Trevor Noah's Live at Apollo, an autobiographical stand-up piece https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j1Zg2S2-heY

The students were a little bit confused with my choice at first, they were asking questions like, *"Are we writing comedy or and autobiography?"* To which I always respond, *"The initial plan is autobiography, but if you can put the two together that would be great!"* Once, an indignant student snapped at me, "*What am I supposed to write in that stupid autobiography, I am only sixteen!" "Sixteen, and full of sass like my six-year old,"* – I thought to myself.

And here came the best part of teaching, to explain to a more than skeptical but daring student the challenge of the project so she and the rest of the class could realize that despite their young age they would have plenty to say, they just need to start thinking and digging deeper, and do some research about their past. My response contained the following information (which certainly could not make that student happy because she already hated it): *if a Korean kid became a millionaire at the age of six, then I am pretty sure you, ladies and gentlemen, have stories to share*. Let me persuade you that I am absolutely right, you just need to engage into self-reflection and talk to your parents, siblings, close friends and current roommates to collect some data, necessary for your linguistic autobiography or on other words a story of your literacies.

The next very important question my students would ask me is *why we are writing a linguistic autobiography and not a five-paragraph essay*? Well, because you are going to be writing about yourselves, and that is the best way to encourage you work harder, since it is going to be your story you are going to be more invested into telling it well and making it attractive both visually and content-wise. You will be excited to see my reaction to what you will have to say because I am sure you would discover something interesting you possibly never knew about yourselves, while investigating your experiences with language, or maybe languages, or maybe language variations.

"But what if we do not speak any other languages besides English?" Then, you can look into slang and jargon that you use, into different registers of language you use depending on who you are talking to, you can write about your experience of keeping a journal while you travelled to another country and tried using another language, you can write about your own writing that you do on the side, not for school, and it can be absolutely different from what you have been trained to write at school and you thought that no one would ever be interested in reading about it. And, of course, you can re-visit the secret corners of your memory, where you are hiding your sarcasm, irony, parody, funny things that you have ever said to others that would make them either laugh or get angry.

In Denham and Lobek's 'Linguistics for Everyone" (2013), in the Chapter about Human Language and animal communication, when talking about the features of human language mention Productivity, which implies understanding and creating never-before-heard utterances. (p. 5) and when I talk to my students about creativity, I encourage them to play with words and not be afraid to be inventive with their writing, especially if it is humorous.

The outcomes fascinated me. As much as a lot of instructors do not like grading, the project my students submitted made grading immeasurably pleasurable. It was really interesting to see how students would open up and share inside family jokes, funny stories that happened to them when they travelled.

One of the most memorable essays was about black American dialects. The student was an art major and he told a very beautiful story about how he learned to adjust his accent and the vernaculars he speaks to the social situations. He wrote about how he speaks and jokes with his neighborhood friends in one way, and with his mom in another way. The conclusion of his essay brought tears to my eyes. The student was saying that he understands that no matter where he goes his language would always be criticized and that was why he chose photography as a form of self-expression because the language of art makes people equal. I was very moved by his work and it still has a special place in my heart.

Another very interesting project I received was completely humorous. Two students paired up and recorded a video of themselves arguing about whose dialect was better. That was the only time in my whole teaching practice when students agreed to present their project to the whole class. They were blushing, while we were watching their humorous skit in class, but I could tell they were very proud of their work.

Overall, I am also very proud of this assignment. I know that the idea is not very original, I adapted the idea one of my colleagues shared at our writing program workshop. However, I realized that teaching it with humor and encouraging students to write humorously or about some funny situations made the project more challenging and the same time more interesting.

Stand-up routine project

The second and the most important unit in my course plan was a stand-up routine project. Here is the assignment sheet for the project, which I chose not to make funny because I wanted to give students with plenty of guidelines they can follow. I did not want them to feel lost and frustrated because the experience with the Linguistic Autobiography project showed that working in a new genre is difficult even after they would do genre research. And it was hard for the students because for a lot of them the concepts of genre analysis and writing research were new as well. Taking my previous project into account I consciously chose not to be humorous while going over the assignment sheet so the students did not get distracted by my joke, could take notes, and ask me additional questions for clarification.

Stand-up comedy project

- 4-5 pages. Script format (I will talk about it more in class). Grading would be based on your peer reviews, self-assessment, and my scrutiny of your understanding of the genre production☺. Letter grade. Extra points for performing your stand-up or recording a video of your performance.
- Include a bio about yourself as a comedian and a picture that would be representative of your image as a comedian (picture should not be bigger that ¾ of a page). Your bio might include some facts about your place of birth, your interests, some funny facts that characterize you as a person and a performer.

- Provide a description of a venue you are performing at. (Comedy club, Peoria Civic Center, a coffee house, etc.) Geographical location. That way you and I will know who your audience is)
- Structure your routine based on the genre analysis and research we did in class.
- Start with greeting the audience and include your interaction with the audience into your writing. Make fun of some fictional people in your audience (if necessary), provoke your audience to respond and come up with responses.
- Write as if you are talking to your audience all the time. Be interactive, address your audience with some questions related to the topic of your routine, use pronoun you in telling your short stories to make them more relatable to your audience, etc.
- Provoke your audience to applaud or cheer by saying something funny and then make a pause and then let the audience respond to your joke. Include the description of timing and your audience's response into your writing.
- When telling a story, turn it into a dialogue and add descriptions of the ways people were interacting in that situation (gestures, facial expressions)
- If you are saying something that requires a description of your facial expression or your body moves, write that in the parenthesis next to the words you are saying.
- Make some witty transitions from one story to another, or from one topic to another. If you chose not to make transitions to logically connect your stories, then start each story with a catchy statement to get your audience's attention.

- Finish your routine with saying thank you and goodbye to your audience or think of a specific catchy way to end your routine.
- Use conversational language. Use dialogical mode while telling the story, i.e. direct speech of the characters in your stories. Profanities are allowed since they are genre appropriate.

As you can see, the project I put together allows students to work in a variety of genres, which makes the project multimodal. Also, the students have an opportunity to experiment with their writing identities because they could pretend to be somebody else. For example, one of my students decided to develop her routine around the phrase "A girl walked into the bar." And her comedic character was a 21-year old female, apparently older than the author, so she could talk about drinking and flirting in her stand-up. Some students would choose to remain themselves and write about humorous situations they observed in class or on campus.

If the assignment sheet's final point about profanities caused a raise of an eyebrow, then I apologize. And yes, we did watch plenty of stand-up routines with that kind of language.

I fall into the category of females who choose to use profanities. I usually say, "I am a linguist I have no f@#$ing shame!" I teach stand-up comedy as a genre in my Composition class and use stand-ups to illustrate linguistic phenomena in my Linguistics class. The genre of stand-up presupposes the use of profane language, so when I am wearing my stand-up-comedy-educator's hat I am not above strong language. However, I always warn my students about the presence of such language in my teaching to avoid being offensive. I have not encountered any problems yet. It seems that students are more sensitive to sarcasm then to "the words you should not say on TV."

Once in class, a few students asked me if I could teach them some Russian profanities. Knowing that there were religious students in the classroom, I asked if everyone was ok with that and that I might put that on the test. A student fired out, "Go for it! We are going to church on Sunday anyway!" The whole class started laughing. While laughing with my students I thought to myself, that it was a great bonding moment and that I felt comfortable laughing at "going to church on Sunday" joke and noted to myself, "Acculturation is real!" This is a good illustration of the cultural specificity of humor.

In Soviet Russia profanities speak you!

You might be wondering about the students' reaction to my announcement that they were going to work on their own stand-up acts. If you are guessing that a lot of them freaked out, then you are absolutely right.

Once they find out that they are going to investigate humorous genres, focusing on the genre of stand-up comedy, in order to write their own, they freeze, maybe a couple of them would get excited upon the announcement of the course assignment, but at first they are trying to negotiate themselves out of this project, driven by the fear of NOT being funny.

A lot of students think that they are not funny or again, they are afraid that their writing will not be funny. Another big fear all of my freshmen had was performing in front of their peers and for that reason, up to this day, I had not had a student who would perform their routine in class. I tried offering extra-credit for that but the psychological discomfort and anxiety that could have prevented them from successfully performing their acts in front of their peers always took

over. Only once, I had an instance when a student e-mailed me a link to the video, she took of herself performing her act, but I was told not to open it until the semester is over.

Another video reached me because the student had her unique way of composing her stand-up. She recorded herself and then wrote her stand-up, it was easier for her to improvise first because she was doing observational comedy about her family, and she secretly recorded her mom scolded her brother for that matter, which lead us to the conversation about ethical data collection as a meta-cognitive learning moment in her creative process.

My other theory about students "backwards composition" is connected to the fact that she was bilingual, and her language was Spanish. Out of my own experience and scholarly theory about language acquisition and learning, I know that developing writing skills in another language is harder than speaking, and I was excited to see how the student used her knowledge of recording YouTube videos to her benefit and before she submitted her written draft she performed in in front of the camera with all the expressiveness required to reflect the true colors of a big Mexican family, living in America.

Again, I would like to reiterate the point I was making in the very beginning, that unlike seniors described in the article about humorous writing, my freshmen never thought being funny is for everybody. One of my students, and she was the only one throughout all the 5 years of my teaching, who said that she is not funny but most importantly she does not like comedy. I thought she would drop the class because the whole course was comedy based and there would be no way for me to please her non-humorous taste. The student was brilliant and diligent, despite her indifference to comedy, I noticed that she liked me and my teaching style, which made her more motivated to participate in the class discussions. After a couple of comments that young woman

made in the classroom it was hard not to notice that she had a sense of humor: dry, sarcastic, and hilarious. She had the snarkiest perspective on life I have ever encountered from an eighteen-year-old. I could not wait to start reading her stand-up because I knew it would be extraordinarily amusing, and it was, it was witty and satirical, and most definitely reflected a lot of her personality she was willing to reveal during the semester.

A couple semesters later, when I saw her sitting on the floor in the hallway, I approached her and said, "I still remember your snarky sense of humor and I think that your piece was really good!" She smiled and said, "Well, I still don't like comedy". I think this story adds to the conversation about "Everyone can be funny", it turns out that perception of self as a funny or non-funny person has a lot to do with the confidence in the ability of producing humorous texts and students' narrow perception of what comedy is about.

The above-mentioned experiences showed that students are not comfortable presenting their work in front of other students, but as long as they were comfortable submitting their work, I considered it a win. Never have I enjoyed grading so much than while reading my students'' stand-up routines. Without exaggeration I can confidently say that they were very fun to read. I could tell that most of the students put a lot of effort into crafting their virtual performances and really enjoyed the transformation they could undergo while writing as stand-up comedians they imagined to be.

> *Once in class I received a very legitimate question, "How are you going to grade out stand-ups? They are art!" "Yeah!" the whole class cheered to the question. I said, "I have a high striker home. I am going to use if to measure how hard I am going to laugh at your jokes. If a hammer is falling out of my hands because I am*

laughing so hard, then you passed." I was worried that the students would be upset with my answer because I did not give them a rubric (happens all the time). But instead, they started laughing and I heard an approving, "Well, that's a good one!" After the humorous moment I had to get back to a serious explanation about self-assessment, and peer evaluations, and the rubric that we are going to develop based on our genre analysis process. But at the end I added, "The final and the most part of the grade is how low you are going to score on the high striker." And the students laughed again.

The fact that the students appreciated my joke, and we were able to laugh together and then still get the work done, helped us keep a seemingly boring but important explanation in a playful but productive mode. I could tell that the group likes me as their instructor because they were willing to express their emotions, ask questions, and laugh at my jokes. The high striker became an inside joke for that class, which was a sign of cohesion between me and the students.

Humor in my Linguistics Classroom

Now, when we are well-aware of humor enriches pedagogical process, it is time to look at specific applications of humor-based teaching and learning needs in my Linguistics classroom. Berk says that classroom humor is not about telling jokes. Instructors are not trained performers or stand-up comedians (p. 81). Berk writes that humor in the college classroom should be treated as a set of systematic teaching strategies and techniques, which can be adapted by instructors to their own classroom, personality, and students (p. 102). He argues that when humor is intended for teaching then it is a teaching tool which involves planning and a specific learning outcome.

I was excited to learn that more and more attention is being drawn to humor in teaching and that the proponents of humor in the classroom recommend systematized techniques that can be used as didactic even by those instructors who do not perceive themselves as funny. For instance, Berk suggested 10 humorous strategies for teaching a stressful research statistics class. They are: 1) humorous material on syllabi, 2) descriptors, cautions, and warnings on the covers of handouts, 3) opening jokes, 4) skits and dramatizations, 5) spontaneous humor, 6) humorous questions, 7) humorous examples, 8) humorous problem sets, 9) Jeopardy – Type Review for exams, 10) humorous materials on exams. These strategies can be easily borrowed to teach other courses, including a linguistics course.

Just like for my Composition class, my Linguistics course syllabus introduces me as a funny professor. I include a picture of myself and some linguistics-related cartoons into this document.

One of the bullet-points from my Use of Technology Policy on the syllabus says: "If you phone rings in class I am privileged to answer the phone call☺." I have seen students giggling at that warning.

When I advertised my introduction to linguistics course as a comedy-based approach to language the class filled up quickly and then I ended up having 3 extra students who enrolled in my class after the semester started. After the course was over, they came up to me and said, we transferred to your class because we thought that we would never survive the serious class, linguistics is intimidating, and humor made it less scary and even fun.

I tried to begin every class session with an opening joke or with a funny story related to language. I always asked my students if they had anything funny to share. Some of the jokes I

would come up with on the way to the classroom, some of them were borrowed from the stand-ups I watched, some would come out of my daughter's (aka Leah) mouth. Leah's jokes were always a big hit. They were audience appropriate because a lot of my students were elementary or special education majors and were having their own teaching practicum with preschoolers and older children. I could tell that starting a class with humor helped to alleviate students' level of stress and tune them into the subject matter of the classroom. Leah's jokes and code-meshing humorous expression turned out to be very useful when we were talking about language learning and language acquisition.

Dubinsky's and Holcomb's chapter "Kids say the darndest things" was one of my students' favorite for the reason that there were many humorous examples of kids talk. In the reading logs, assigned on weekly basis, the students would always mention their fancy to reading the humorous textbook. Writing about the chapter on kids' talk the students mentioned that they particularly liked the examples and shared quite a few good examples of their own since that was a very relatable topic. Those examples were coming from their parents' memories, their experience with their younger siblings or from their teaching. I collected some of my daughter's jokes for them too:

Me: Who is there?

L: It's me, Leah stooching! (she used the root of a Russian verb 'стучать' ('stoochat'), which means 'to knock', and added the English -ing as in participle I)

One day Leah came home, pulled the couch pillows down on the floor, the climbed the couch and proudly pronounced, "Mommy, I am going to do gymnaskits!"

L: I speak English and Russian. It means I am 50% American and 50% a bear.

Berk (2003) encourages to use content-relevant and content-irrelevant humor in the text of tests and exams. I willingly use his advice because I noticed that it alleviates students' anxiety before taking an exam. *Midterm Exam Study Guide. Ain't that exciting* ☺! Even a simple sentence like that reduces tension in the classroom. I also provide humorous example on the study guide. I have noticed that they appear to be more memorable and students are using them on the exam or in the classroom discussions. Here is an example:

1. *Please review the material about human language and its properties. (D&L p.5) On the exam, you would be asked to describe one of them and provide an example. For example: Productivity means that language users can understand and create never-before-heard utterances.* ***"Mom, I'm going to be the light-offer, and you are going to be the Moon on-er"*** *(my daughter' s creativity☺)*

Berk, when describing the way he prepared for his classes, says that he is obsessed with collecting humorous materials he could use in his teaching. I have developed a habit of writing down jokes, puns, malapropisms, and funny things my little daughter says so I can use them in class as examples or as an opening joke, or as an attention getter for the purpose of classroom management. Spontaneous humor is a great source of examples. For instance, one sunny Friday, having lunch with my Linguistics professor, talking about my specialization exam, she created the following pun, which I later used in my Linguistics class:

S: I am not going to be the only person reading your paper, there's going to be a second grader?

O: Really, a second grader is going to read my doctoral exam?

S: Oh no, it is going to be a faculty member, not a second grader.

When I teach my introductory course to Linguistics, I use humor as a vehicle to promote important linguistic concepts and phenomena. In my Linguistic classroom, I use humorous samples to illustrate this creative potential, especially when my students and I talk about phonology, semantics, and word formation. I introduce them to some Russian jokes, which are culture-specific in order to increase their cultural awareness and show them how languages differ in structure and semantics. Students often perceive grammatical material as dreading but with the use of a joke, or a funny idiom, it becomes more entertaining and retaining. For instance, Russian language does not have grammatical categories of articles and auxiliary verbs and to demonstrate to the students what English would sound if a Russian mafia bandit spoke English, I would use my stRRRRong RRRussian accent and get the articles and the auxiliaries out of my speech. And not once after my Russian performance, students would ask me to say something in real Russian and to teach them some words and phrases.

I assign Dubinsky's and Holcomb's *Understanding Language through Humor* as one of the required texts. Each chapter of the book illustrates various linguistic phenomena with humor of different kinds.

My students reported that they liked the book because it is entertaining and that humorous examples helped them to better understand the information they previously read about

in a non-humorous textbook. I also work backwards for them, looking for stand-up routines that would illustrate linguistic phenomena in a fun and memorable way.

No support of a humorous expression is not always a bad thing. I once told a joke in which punch line was a pun. My students did not understand the joke because they did not know the word, which was supposed to produce the funny effect. That created a learning moment for them because I had to explain the meaning of the word, and some students even googled it while I was explaining. Therefore, failed humor can provide learning experience.

A bear walks into a bar and asks the bartender for a beer. The bartender says, "Sorry, we don't give beer to bears in bars."

The bear replies, "If you don't give me a beer, I'll eat that lady over there."

The bartender says, "Go ahead."

So the bear eats the lady and asks for a beer. The bartender says, "Sorry, we don't give beer to bears on drugs."

"What do mean," asks the bear. "I'm not on drugs."

"Yes, you are, that was the bar bitch you ate."

The last phrase of the joke is a play on words because “the bar bitch you ate” sounds close to “barbiturate” which is a drug. The students did not laugh at the pun because they admitted they did not know the meaning of the word “barbiturate”. This situation taught me that even though the joke was not perceived as funny it could have still been used as a humorous example to illustrate phonetics and semantics related phenomena and can also expand students’ vocabulary if that sometimes becomes a problem. Failed humor can also have pedagogical value and stimulate learning.

One of my personally favorite parts of the course was to teach American accents and dialect and language variation. That was the time when I used a lot of stand-up comedy bits to illustrate and accent and a stereotype tied to it. For example, a part of Elon Gold's "Chosen and Taken" in which he is making fun of the accents you can here in New York City. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gjpApOYziCw

I was extremely and especially excited about the opportunity of teaching the section about the English language varieties and variation.

One of the reasons for that is quite obvious and quite selfish, I am a non-native speaker with a background in Linguistics. I studied Russian, which apart from being my native language is also a language I studied on a deeper level during my first two years of college, I studied English and German, I studied some Italian, I took Latin as an extracurricular in high school and then continued taking it in college when I resumed my studies at the Department of Foreign Languages. The point is that I had been exposed to other foreign languages and understand what it takes to learn another language and what aspects of language are important for language educators to know in order to motivate students learn and develop their language skills. Along with that, I always loved accents and dialects of the Russian language, and that transferred onto my interest in accents and dialects of the English language, especially when I moved to the US. I remember how surprised I was to hear southern drawl in Normal, Illinois, and then it turned out that there are plenty of people who talk like this here and they are not from Texas, they are from the south of Illinois or belong to a certain social group.

Sociolinguistics and perceptual dialectology are the areas that study the connections between the way people speak and their social affiliation and peoples' perception of accented speech or a dialect based respectively of the communicative norms and standards.

As you can see, I am passionate and about this topic and that was my selfish reason why I chose language varieties and variations as a part of the course I developed. Another reason why I turned to stand-up comedy as a source for my course plan was the fact that a great number of comedians use accents and dialects in their acts. They also exploit stereotypes about other languages to create a comedic effect. But my interest in the linguistic and sociolinguistic aspects of stand-up was not just for the sake of laughs, it was also for the sake of learning.

Good comedians are very creative with language and "are elaborate linguists, probably, without even being aware of it themselves; or perhaps, it comes from craft; they have to be aware of language and its peculiarities so they can portray different characters, situations, and emotions." (Falk, p. 3). For that reason I decided to investigate students' perceptions of the American regional dialects and accents by showing them stand-ups, in which comedians speak with an accent.

When stand-ups stand out

The following section is presented as a formal study, which involved IRB, data collection, and analysis. However, I am considering this work as a part of my autoethnographic narrative because the process of data collection and the findings provided me with unique experience from the perspective of an immigrant graduate student. I had to dive into the sea of American accents and dialects and find comedians that would represent them. This preparatory process strengthened my understanding of cultural differences across the US.

While watching various stand-up comedians on Netflix for leisure, I have discovered that they are great resources of accents, regional humor, and envelop a variety of genres to keep audiences' attention and make them laugh. My discovery inspired me to connect comedy with teaching dialects and accents in my Linguistics class. During my internship I conducted a study collecting data on the effects of stand-up in teaching language variations. The study was concerned with perception of regional American dialects. The goal of the study was to identify whether or not the exposure to humor in the classroom affects students' perception of regional dialects and accents in the United States.

The foundation for research lies within the realm of academic work of a linguist Dennis R. Preston, who is extensively researching dialects and accents. Dr. Preston is the founding father of perceptual dialectology in the United States. It is important to mention his name because I was using his tool "Preston's map" (Appendix A) for my data collection.

Perceptual Dialectology studies perceptions of regional dialects by non-linguists. The knowledge about folk-perceptions of dialects is important to sociolinguistic inquiry because it is strongly tied to a concept of language ideology, which implies that accents and dialects are socially marked, either positively or negatively. My study was exploring students' perceptions of regional dialects and accents and the reasoning behind them.

As I have mentioned, for collecting data about the perceptions of regional dialects I used "Preston's map." "Preston's map" is a blank black-and-white map of the United States with the outlined borders. Underneath the outlined map of the US there are instructions, which research participants follow. The participants were asked to draw boundaries around the areas where

people speak a different variety of English, and then label them with one or more labels the participants use to identify a particular dialect (Appendix A).

Further down there are blank spaces for names, contact information, demographic information, occupation, and languages spoken. The other side of Preston's map is left blank for the participants' comments and additional drawing if they needed to draw a smaller are. The original instructions were expanded with a question: "Why did you mark the map the way you did?"

Students filled out the map three times: the first time – two weeks prior to exposure to comedy in class; the second time – after they watch 6 stand-up routines performed, each with a specific accent; the third time - after their exposure to some theoretical material on the subject matter, followed by an in-class discussion.

After the students filled out the map for the first time, they were asked to write up their thoughts about accents and stereotypes before viewing the comedy. After the research participants watched the stand-up routines, they were assigned to write a reflection about their perceptions of dialects and accents after they listened to those six stand-up comedians who not only speak with an accent but also use that accent or dialect to create a comedic effect. The comedians selected for the study were all white, three of them are male and the other three are female.

Note: Due to the time constraints the study did not include AAV or the blends of languages like Spanglish, or any foreign accents, the study only included the US regional dialects.

Preston's maps (Appendix A), students' essays about accents and stereotype before and after watching the comedians were used as sources of data collection in order to identify most common language stereotypes and the ways and reasons why they might or might not change under the influence of humor.

I have collected the following results:

- 2 students reported that stand-up routines did not affect their perception of regional dialects in any way because they were previously familiar with them. They also mentioned that they were raised in linguistically diverse environments and were never prejudiced against any language variation. The rest of the students revealed a certain degree of stand-up influence on their perspectives on accents and stereotypes associated with them.
- 3 students reported that stand-ups reinforced existing stereotypes.
- 3 other students reported that they have realized that stereotypes about southerners and their lack of intelligence were not true because the comedians were able to make fun of themselves.
- 1 student wrote that watching stand-ups made her think about peoples' identities and how they are represented through accents. She said she did not fall into the trap of stereotyping because her first language is Polish, and she is aware of the fact that she speaks English with a slight accent.
- 4 students reported that stand-ups raised their level of awareness of a variety of accents comedians speak with.

- 1 student reported that she marked her last map based on the material learned in class and watching stand-up but since she does not believe in stereotypes her perception of them had not changed after she watched the routines.

At the end of the semester students were asked to answer the following questions:

1. What kind of the US accents and dialects you are familiar with?
2. What are the most common stereotypes associated with those accents and dialects?
3. What is your perception of those accents and dialects?
4. Did the stand-ups we watched in class affected your perception of those dialects and accents? If yes, why?
5. Did the stand-ups we watched in class reinforced the stereotypes for you?
6. If the stand-ups did not affect your perception of the US regional accents and dialects, explain why they did not.

In the beginning of the semester, once they started taking my course, the students were asked to fill out map task 1, so there is no influence on their tacit knowledge of the US regional accents and dialects. The first set of data was meant to get an idea about students' general knowledge about the regional dialects as well as some markers they associate with a certain regional variation.

The total number of participants who signed the consent forms and participated in all the stages of the research was 41.

- The age-range of the participants varied from 19 to 23.
- 38 students were born and reside in Illinois,
- 1 student was born in Missouri,

- 1 student lived in New Jersey and Texas,
- 1 lived in Pennsylvania,
- 1 born in Mexico and then moved to Illinois.

Ethnicity, as marked in the map tasks:

- 2 African Americans,
- 1 Puerto Rican,
- 1 Mexican,
- 1 Hispanic,
- 1 Filipino,
- 1 Polish,
- 1 Croatian,
- 30 identify as White or Caucasian.

Languages spoken:

- 39 of the participants speak English as their first language,
- 1 speaks Polish as first language,
- 1 speaks Spanish as first language.
- 1 exposed to Tagalog at home,
- 1 exposed to Croatian at home,
- 1 exposed to German at home,
- 2 are exposed to and speak Spanish at home.

Education/occupation: Education majors, English majors, PR; Sales associate, Summer camp counselor, maintenance, waitress, nanny, tutor, cashier. As the numbers show, the student

population I worked with is not very diverse and this is very common for my university classrooms in general. Most students are predominantly Illinois born Caucasian with little exposure to other cultures or languages.

The following is the list of the dialects identified by the students as linguistically marked:

- **Southern**: dumb, uneducated, stupid, hick-like, lack of knowledge, bad grammar, farm, country music, poor, blue collar, red-necks, 'howdy y'all', 'gentlemen but drives a truck', cute, sweet, 'honey accent', southern twang, sweet and comforting, can be also snotty and 'princess-like'.
- **Minnesota, Canadian-like, Northern**: long vowels, 'dontcha knoh', bag is said like 'baeg', same with *leg* and *bagel*
- **Chicago**: Da Bears, harsh on the As, dad – dayd, Chicahwgo.
- **Boston, New York, North-Eastern**: mean, angry, Italian, Italian mafia, mobster-like
- **California**: slow, chill, talk softly, call people 'dude' and 'bro', surfers, 'dude region'.
- **New Jersey**: slickers, speak loudly, seem like they are yelling, 'New Joisey' like in *Jersey Shore.*

Most of the students did not have prior exposure to many accents because they did not travel much and did not think much about the ways people speak. Those who speak other languages or are exposed to other languages at home demonstrate a higher level of familiarity with social and cultural stereotypes based on how people speak.

- 90% of the students wrote that stand-up comedy did not change their perception of the stereotypes about the US accents They report that they do not judge people by the way they speak because accent is not representative of who people really are.

- Forty students responded that stand-up comedy reinforced stereotypes, because this is what comedians do, they take a stereotype and over-exaggerate it, it can be offensive, but they hope that we can laugh at ourselves.
- One student said that comedy did not reinforce stereotypes for her because she does not believe in stereotypes.
- For 99% of the students it was not so easy to identify the accents the comedians spoke with because of their lack of exposure to other accents in the US. (Most of them are familiar with accents in the North and South of Illinois, and Chicago accent). They noted that telling them where the comedians were from would have been more educational and they could have had a better judgement of their perceptions those accents.
- Students found stand-up acts funny and still helpful, especially those where the accents were more identifiable. It was also interesting for them to find out how accents are stereotyped based on the information they learned from the stand-up acts, since comedy exploits stereotypes.
- One student reported that was actually more focused on the comedy itself and not of the way people were speaking. Stand-up acts made them self-reflect on how they perceive people based on the way they speak.
- One student reported that a southern comedian showed her that not all the southerners are hick-like.

Findings:

One of the most important things I have learned from my investigation of the map tasks is that "nobody lives in Wyoming." And if nobody lives there then there are no dialects spoken in that desolate part of the US. (Background laughter, something you hear in *Two and a Half Men*.)

According to the results of the study the most stereotypical perception is attributed to the Southern accent. Students explain that by the fact that they are more familiar with this accent and the markers such as 'hillbillies', 'country', 'uneducated', 'country music', 'southern drawl'. Reviewing the maps, I noticed that they do not reflect a lot of progress or change in the perception or knowledge of regional accents and dialects. I connect this with the fact that the level of students' motivation and attention was low because the last map task was done before Finals week and students had plenty of stressors affecting their productivity.

The result revealed that exposure to stand-up comedy did not have a strong effect on the perception of stereotypes of the dialects, but it strengthened students' understanding of how dialects and accents, based on the stereotypes, are socially marked and how they can be used to produce a humorous effect.

The study is of pedagogical value for me because it prompted me to be more focused on the learning agenda and use non humorous educational materials first. Then use comedy as an illustration instead of the initial source of learning because humorous delivery can be a distraction. Also, in order to motivate students to take a critical stance on perception of the dialects it is important to be selective of the humorous materials I am using for my teaching. It is important to help students see what a comedians message is and maybe it contains more the just making fun of an dialect or an accent, maybe through laughter a comic is trying to tell us more

about some social issues or tell us more about the specificity of group membership and renegotiation of identity.

What have I learned from my humorous adventures?

After all this time living and studying in America and obsessing about the ways humor is being used in this culture, I still have a lot to learn. As I have mentioned previously, humor is not just a form or a genre, humor is a socio-cultural co-created process. My research of stand-up comedy as genre and as a significant phenomenon in American culture taught me a variety of things. It improved my vocabulary, my understanding of slang and jargon, it taught me more about American history and culture.

It helped me realize that if it were not for graduate school, I might have become a stand-up comedian since the vacancies for stand-up grammarians fill up rather quickly. Not once my students would actually think that I am a stand-up comedian who just happened to be their English teacher.

But I do like to teach, and since due to my physical shape, I cannot teach gym, I would love to continue teaching Composition and Linguistics. The outcomes of the projects and the materials I have collected taught me a lot and improved my linguistic and cultural competences. The exposure to stand-up comedy was educational not only for my but also for my daughter.

> *I could only watch George Carlin when my little daughter was asleep because he uses a lot of profanities and I did not want her to bring any of 'the words you can't say on TV' to daycare. Once very early in the morning I was watching his piece about the environment and the moment he dropped another 'F' bomb, I heard a little voice behind my back, "Oh, this guy is going to be in trouble with*

his Momma!" Leah snuck up on me, and this is how I knew that, and 'F' bomb was no longer a secret for her, but she somehow knew that this is something you do not say in front of your mother.

Of course, I shared this story with my students not once, usually in our conversation about words and meaning, and how it is socially co-created and contextualized. And then one of my students used Carlin's routine about "soft language" in his presentation about euphemisms and their usage. I was glad to see that the story I told made the student incorporate comedy into his own presentation, which was a really good illustration of the use euphemisms. Moreover, it made other students pay closer attention to the presentation and we were able to have a fruitful discussion afterwards.

Here is another story, to keep you well entertained towards the end of my clumsy and accented writing:

One of my morning Linguistics groups clicked with me really well. They were responsive, inquisitive, prepared for class. They were my dream team. Students would stay after class and chat with me, sometimes about their projects, sometimes about the comedians they really like. Another class would start in that room shortly after mine and other students would be already waiting in the hallway very close to the door. One time when I was leaving the classroom, I overheard a student who was not in my class, saying to the student from my class, "What are you guys doing there? You are always leaving so happy; we never feel that way after our class." And the student said, "We have a really funny teacher, she's awesome."

Even thought it was just a brief conversation I unintentionally overheard, it made me feel very good about myself and my teaching and made me want to try harder and do better. Of course I have received negative feedback from my students too, and I have always been very anxious about opening my course evaluations at the end of every semester. However, I tried to remind myself that it is a learning process, and if I failed or did not meet someone's expectations, I could always learn from my mistakes and do better in the future.

Teaching in a new academic environment was not easy but I know that as an immigrant educator I have learned a lot. I would have learned even more if I had more time to spend on campus due to my commitments as a parent. But I am incredibly thankful to those people who were willing to support me as a single-parenting mother and would let me bring my daughter with me to a certain meetings or appointments.

As I have mentioned previously, I came from a rather authoritative educational culture, which I never liked as a student living in my home country. When I first I started teaching I wanted to be more engaging, more open to a conversation, and most importantly, I wanted to be able to discuss a variety of controversial and thought-provoking topics. Therefore, having academic freedom and freedom of speech in America allowed me to become an educator I have been striving to be: less formal, open-minded, caring, and humorous.

In its turn, my affinity for humor immersed me into an unembraceable and constantly changing world of American humorous discourse. I constantly watch stand-ups, sitcoms, and humorous shows. I listen to the books written by comedians while I am driving. I am writing down funny things my daughter or my partner say around me.

Last winter, I binged the show *Marvelous Misses Maisel*. While watching, I was constantly thinking how about how and where I could use certain episodes of the show in my teaching. Isn't that marvelous? Have I turned into a humor zombie? I do not think so, I believe that my obsession with American humor in all its shapes and forms, helped me achieve a rather decent level of linguistic and cultural competency and I am thoroughly enjoying my full immersion into American culture, as a person and as a professional.

While I was learning how to teach and teaching to learn with and without humor, I have become more confident about what I can do in the classroom as an instructor. I no longer perceive myself as a foreigner in an unknown environment. I have re-discovered my potential, and I know that I can use my performativity and creativity to my students' and my own advantage.

I came to realize that because of how well students usually perceive my teaching with humor, I am not performing "American" in my classroom anymore, I am being myself. Now, I have a hybrid identity, "50% American, 50% a bear", which only makes me a more interesting and a more engaging teacher.

CHAPTER V: WHAT DID HUMOR TEACH ME, WHAT SHOULD I STILL LEARN?

This chapter is a wave goodbye to you, my dear audience, and it summarizes the major findings about linguistic, cultural, and institutional challenges I had to face as an immigrant graduate student. It sums up the advantages of the integration of humor into my teaching style, my course activities, and materials. In addition, it discusses the research potential of my work and publication opportunities.

What I did well, not so well, and what I can do better!

Overall, teaching Composition and Introductory linguistics to non-majors was challenging and fun. In teaching Introductory Linguistics the main challenge for me as an instructor was to alleviate anxiety the students had regarding the terminology their textbook contained. It is certainly not the flaw of the textbook; it is what an introductory course calls for: covering sub-fields of linguistics. Needless to say, each subfield has its own terminology, which in most cases is fairly new to the students. As the gatekeeper of the course material I felt it was necessary to focus my students only on the most important concepts and asked them to memorize the material that is of practical significance for them as future ESL instructors. I would always try to emphasize the practical application aspect of the information the students were exposed to. I provided them with various real-life examples that would illustrate the ways acquired knowledge in linguistics could be utilized for teaching English to non-native speakers or to students with disabilities.

The students were always freaking out before their Midterm and Final exams. The complexity of the chapters on Phonetics, Grammar, Syntax, and Morphology made the panic.

Almost unanimously, my students were saying that learning language-related concepts and all the terminology was as challenging as learning a foreign language. However, I have noticed, that those students who were previously exposed to learning another language struggled less than those who had little or no experience with a foreign language. One of my students expressed an opinion that every American school should teach a foreign language starting elementary school because that way American children would get a better understanding of their own language and will become more aware of the diversity of language sounds and the multiplicity of layers a language contains. I could not agree more.

I found it very important to keep track of the students' understanding and retention of the course material. For that reason, I would spend more time on a difficult topic, providing clarifications and giving additional practical tasks when necessary. I should admit that not all of my class sessions were filled with spontaneous instructor-generated humor because of the theoretically intense content of a chapter or due to the students' expressed concerns regarding a very specific detail which would catch me off-guard, especially when it got to Syntax and Phonetics. Those situations side-tracked me from my initial plan of being an 'edutainer'; however, those unpredictable learning situations re-enforced the importance of "know-your-stuff" and never stop learning as a practicing teacher.

In the search of effective ways to facilitate students' learning I came to realize that focusing on the textbook content alone puts one at risk of taking creativity out of the learning process.

In a blog post for cup.linguistlist.org, Professor Dubinsky, referring to his teaching experience, wrote:

> In over two decades of teaching the science of language and basic linguistics to undergraduate college students, I have found that their appreciation for, and understanding of, the building blocks and structure of language can be greatly facilitated by using comic strips, panels, and other jokes to open the door for them. This is because most of the important language concepts that we teach (such as parts of speech and sentence structure) are precisely the point where ambiguity can arise, and linguistic ambiguity is the basis of most language-oriented humor. Working backwards, if I can find a comic strip or joke that relies on an ambiguity which is centered on a structure that I am trying to teach, then my teaching of that structure is helped along by students' understanding the joke."

Re-reading Dubinsky's quote about "working backwards" I thought that it would be interesting to try this "working backwards" principle in the classroom, bringing in the elements of research and composition into the linguistics class. Before talking about the linguistic phenomena through various humorous forms and genres, I thought about asking students to investigate and produce some genres that would be topic appropriate. My students and I did not get to writing actual genres due to the time constraints, but we did look at different genres and form of humor such as puns, canned jokes, limericks, stand-up acts. After my experiments I thought that I could even teach the whole course backwards, starting from the macro level of discourse and ending on a micro level of a phoneme. I have not developed a course like this yet, but I would be very interested in putting one together in the future.

In *Understanding Language through Humor* there is a wonderful chapter on Discourse and genres of humor. This chapter could be used to initiate a conversation about humorous

genres which are established through language with the help of a specific linguistic phenomenon, for instance, a malaprop, a category of verbal slipups, which involve the replacement of one word (or more) with a similar sounding word (Dubinsky & Holcomb, 2011, p.37).

I was thinking about asking the students to write two-line jokes and then share those in class. I thought that while sharing the jokes, we could consider a variety of the language means which humorous effects are achieved by. Unfortunately, there was not enough time because, like I said, they were freaking out about Phonetics before the exam and they wanted to get more humor-free explanations from me and do some exercises.

Since I have taught a unit in stand-up routines in my Composition class, I know that humorous writing is doable in the classroom setting. If I were to teach an introductory Linguistics course again, I would assign a stand-up routine with the explanation of types of humor and linguistic means used for humor production as a final project. In other words, along with the actual routine, the students would explain their writing from a linguistic perspective. For instance, a mondegreen exemplifies the meaning-making role of the sounds of human language, or puns deal with semantics and homophony. The plan is to combine production of humorous genres with the study of language.

Speaking of the study of language, as an immigrant bilingual educator I should always keep my English language muscle toned. The more I teach the more I realize that even though it is hard to eliminate an accent, it does not mean that it is impossible to work on it so native speakers can understand you better. After thirty plus years of speaking English and almost twelve years of living in Illinois, I still have slips of the tongue on the vowel length or can

deprive a consonant of aspiration because of the differences in phonological structure of English and Russian.

In the classroom, especially in Linguistics, my slips of the tongue provided learning opportunities. For instance, once we were talking about units of metric and imperial system, as I pronounced the *liter* as *litter*, and one of the students started giggling. I have a rule in my class, if a student laughs and I catch it, or other students start laughing, the student has to share. The young man who giggled was a bit shy at first, but then he explained that I was mispronouncing the word *liter,* and it was funny. I joined him in laughing and then he asked me to explain the difference between the phonemes /t/ and a flap in the word *litter* /lider/ and explained that my mispronunciation even though accidental is not just my ignorance by subconscious tendency to pronounce /t/ as a flap like in the words writer /raider/ and letter /leder/, which is a tendency and American English. But if I wanted to sound British then I would have pronounced all of the above words with a different annunciated /t/. My students always find my imitation of accents amusing.

Another very important take away from my teaching practice is that integration of humor into the linguistics classroom is fruitful soil for development and systematization of humorous techniques. Also, the use of humor in teaching linguistics has a very good research potential, which is the first thing to discuss in the following section.

Future research potential

The research I did in the attempt to find any publications in humor in the linguistics classroom showed that there are no publications which would try to collect empirical data that would support the claim that humor is one the effective tools to learn about language studies.

Therefore, I would be very interested in collecting both qualitative and quantitative data in conjunction with the hypothesis that humor is a great source, tool, and style for teaching Linguistics.

To strengthen my arguments about the role of humor in the process of academic adaptation both as an international student and as an immigrant scholar, I would be interested in cooperating with one or several colleagues with similar cultural backgrounds and write a duo-ethnography or a collaborative autoethnography, exploring our growth as immigrants and professionals and how humor facilitates for better acculturation, communication, cultural and linguistic competencies.

Also, I would develop a questionnaire for the students I will be teaching to explore how humor affects their learning, their attitude to the subject I teach, their relationships with other students in the classroom, their overall class satisfaction. Such qualitative qualifiable data will allow me to paint a more systematized picture of who integrates spontaneous humor and humorous materials into their teaching practices, why they do it, how that might or might not affect the students.

The systematic documentation of our own experiences, as well as interviewing students or other immigrant colleagues will help to elaborate on the conclusions I have drawn in this study and paint a bigger picture of the influence of humor on our teaching identities, pedagogies, and the ways students perceive us.

Additionally, I would like to interview a substantial pool of professors from different fields and universities about their perspectives on teaching with and through humor. I imagine

that the interviews could be easily turned into a book about various teaching practices or even into a documentary about professors teaching with humor.

Motivated by the interest in the role of humor in acculturation process, I would like to conduct a study, hypothesizing a positive correlation between linguistic competency, humor production and appreciation and acculturation. It would also be interesting to explore contemporary immigrant humor that is becoming part of the American language and culture or how immigrants adapt to and adopt American humor once they acclimate to life in America. The population of the study could include immigrant comedians, for example, Russel Peters and Margaret Cho, and groups various immigrant groups could be interviewed to identify who and why they use humor in their lives, and how it is connected to their socio-economic status, their interactions with the host-culture and American English.

The issues of race, gender, and sexuality related to immigrants' assimilation to American academia is another avenue for exploration I am contemplating. It would be very interesting to investigate the correlation between race, gender, and sexuality and the use of humor in the professional lives of immigrant academics. The study would provide important insights into the similarities and differences in the communicative patterns and teaching styles and practices of immigrant academics, and the ways they have to adjust their identities in order to fit into the American academic environment. The project would be even more valuable if the study were longitudinal and reflected the changes in immigrant academics' behaviors, communication, humor, and teaching style over time. That would allow us to make stronger connections between race, gender, sexuality and the processes of acculturation and changes in linguistic competence.

As for my self-exploration, the work that you are about to finish reading, it is just a first step in my scholarly endeavors. It was just a first attempt to reflect on my lived experiences and analyze what humor means to me as a person, as an immigrant, as an educator.

Potential publication venues

Since my work discusses humor as a teaching tool, teaching material, style and pedagogy, "Pedagogy" https://read.dukeupress.edu/pedagogy would be an appropriate journal to get my work published. It would also be great to see some of my writing in one of the issues of "HUMOR: International Journal of Humor Research", which belongs to International Society of Humor Studies http://www.humorstudies.org/JournalCenter.htm. "The Journal of Autoethnography", a very new and accessible publication venue https://online.ucpress.edu/joae, I would like to publish in, while I am plotting a new autoethnographic writing about my "white privilege" and humor.

As Denzin (2010) wrote, a finished autoethnography is not a product but part of the process, and opportunity for the new beginning. I think that the work I have done allowed me to become more aware of how and why I should use humor and respond to it. I have also learned more about how I should use humor to my advantage but not only through self-deprecation but through witticisms I coin or borrow or the quotes I find.

I have learned that in the classroom environment sarcasm or even a tease can make a student feel uncomfortable and that might lead to a conflict. I have realized the importance of being funny and using audience-appropriate humor for shrinking the generation gap, which is growing each year if you are teaching freshmen all the time. But I will not stop critiquing my teaching practice. I will keep re-thinking and re-evaluating my identity and pedagogy, and the

ways I can improve then. I will keep learning and crafting new jokes. I will keep observing life. In 2005, giving a commencement speech at Harvard, Steve Job's final appeal to the graduates was "Stay hungry, stay foolish", and so I will. I will keep learning and crafting new puns and jokes, I will keep observing life, noticing funny in it, taking notes.

Thank you and good night! Mike drop…

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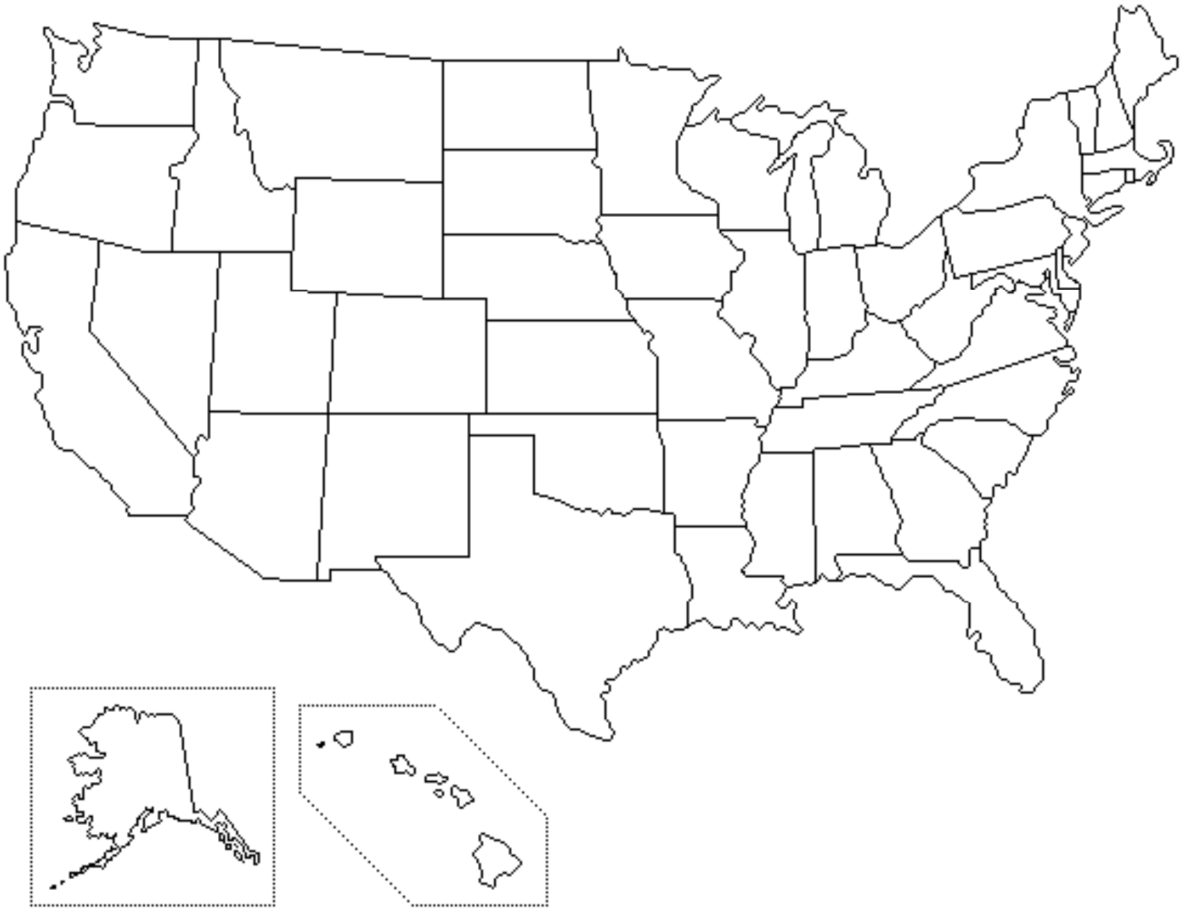
APPENDIX A: PRESTON'S MAP



Instructions: People in different parts of the country speak differently. Please draw boundaries around the speech areas of the US on the above map and write inside the area the label you use to identify that kind of speech, the area, or the speakers. If you use more than one label, give all you use.

Your name (optional) _____ Your address (optional) _____

Your Phone # (optional) _____ Your fax or e-mail address (optional) _____

Your sex _____ Your age _____ Your ethnic background _____

Your residence history: _____

(Where you lived when you went to grade school, high school, and any places since then.)

Your job (or job you are being trained or were trained for) _____

Your first language_____ Your second language_____

Your mother's first language _____ Your father's first language _____