

The Use of Sarcasm in ESP Classes

Mirela COSTELEANU*

Abstract: Sarcasm can be defined as the use of words that mean the opposite of what the speaker actually says, especially to insult the recipient, to show irritation or to amuse the others. Sarcastic remarks are funny and constructive when they are mutually understood within a genuine relationship. Sarcasm has the potential to catalyze creativity for those who produce and receive it. A positive message delivered in a friendly tone - „You did a great job” and a negative message delivered in a patronizing or deprecating tone - “Your answers are far beyond all expectations” - are congruent.

Keywords: sarcasm, positive, negative, strategy

1. What is sarcasm?

Sarcasm is everywhere. We can see it in everyday speech, literature, TV shows and movies. People usually use sarcasm to say the opposite of what is true to make somebody feel or look foolish. The intention behind a sarcastic comment may also be playful and humorous. Some people use sarcastic remarks because they feel insecure, some others resort to them when they want to assert dominance or when they are overwhelmed by a feeling of awkwardness. People who are not used to this passive aggressive mode of communication usually react negatively to it.

The word “sarcasm” is derived from the Greek word “sarkasmos”, which means “to tear flesh”, “to bite the lips” or “sneer”. Sarcasm is defined as “a mode of satirical wit depending for its effect on bitter, caustic, and often ironic language that is usually directed against an individual” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary).

Oscar Wilde describes sarcasm as “the lowest form of wit, but the highest form of intelligence”. When using sarcasm, “speakers typically portray emotions that are contrary to their true feelings. This behaviour may promote confusion in listeners who often fail to recognize the sarcasm and thus, may fail to detect the speaker’s true

* Lecturer, Dept. of Applied Foreign Languages, Faculty of Theology, Letters, History and Art, National University of Science and Technology, Politehnica Bucharest, Pitesti University Center, E-mail: mirelacosteleanu@yahoo.com

intent” (Clark 2005, VIII). According to some researchers, “there are two types of sarcasm - a biting sarcasm typically worded positively, which expresses a negative intent, and playful or bantering sarcasm, typically worded negatively, but which expresses a positive feeling or intent (ibidem). Gibbs (2007) suggests that “people use sarcasm directed at members of social out-groups as a method of affirming solidarity among members of an in-group (Martin, Ford 2018, 15). Besides, “the solidarity or closeness of a relationship acts as a cue for how to interpret irony and sarcasm” (ibidem).

2. The use of sarcasm in everyday life

Communication experts advise us against using this kind of expression, which hurts people and affects relationships. It seems to have no purpose but to seek for laughter at the expense of one’s deficiencies and shortcomings (Dorfman 2017). Yet, the use of sarcasm is often associated with some unexpected benefits. It promotes creativity not only for the people who produce it, but also for those who receive it. If used in moderation, sarcasm can lead to clearer and more creative thinking. Both the producer and the recipient of the sarcastic message benefit from it because both of them need to process the underlying message. The former has to translate the criticism into sarcasm while the latter needs to decode it and understand what the speaker really meant.

Both sarcasm and creativity involve a switch of perspective, in other words, a new way of looking at things. When decoding a sarcastic remark, our brain needs to think abstractly because the intended meaning of the statement is different from its actual one. Some experts argue that exposure to sarcasm helps people become more creative in their thinking. First, the activation of multiple schemas involved in the processing of a sarcastic comment may facilitate the divergent thinking indispensable to creativity. Secondly, the positive feeling associated with positive sarcasm may reduce tension and encourage thinking. People who engage in both positive and negative sarcasm tend to be more creative.

3. The use of sarcasm in the classroom

A historical perspective related to the role played by sarcasm in the educational process is that it is a 20th century phenomenon. Previously, it was considered completely inappropriate to use sarcasm as a teaching strategy. Sarcasm often creates laughter and teachers used to think that laughing and learning could not co-exist in the classroom. The type of sarcasm used in the classroom varies widely depending on factors such as learners’ level of proficiency, cultural context, course goals and teaching style. In considering the role of sarcasm in the language classroom, it is also important to analyse when and how often teachers make use of it. It is not the use of sarcasm, but rather how much sarcasm is used, that determines its effectiveness in the classroom.

Sarcasm is used in the classroom is “to build classroom rapport, lighten the atmosphere of the class, spark interest in the subject matter, or lessen the gap between

teacher and students” (Boxer 2011, 134). Being able to differentiate between a sarcastic comment aimed at boosting student engagement in the classroom and one that has a negative impact on learners is essential for any teacher.

When discussing the issue of sarcasm in the ESP classroom, the first question that arises is whether teachers should use it or not when interacting with students. Most teachers agree that a good sense of humour and a healthy dose of sarcasm can contribute largely to the success of any ESP class. Teachers use sarcasm in the ESP classroom for various reasons. They can use sarcasm to break the ice in high-pressure situations and to encourage creative thinking in students, seen individually or collectively. They may also use it to correct mistakes and inappropriate behaviours.

Students, in their turn, resort to sarcasm for different reasons. Self-deprecating sarcasm may be seen by students as a good method of neutralizing information about themselves. An engineering student who reveals his/her limited technical knowledge in a humorous way (“Of course I’ve heard of engines, but I have no idea what they look like”) is perceived as having more technical inclination than one who discloses the information in a serious manner (“I know what engines are, but I’ve never seen one before”). Students sometimes use sarcasm to distract their teachers’ or their peers’ attention away from certain information. Playful sarcasm can relieve the tension in the classroom and help install an informal atmosphere. Another reason underlying their use of sarcasm is that sarcastic people are usually seen as smarter and more skilled.

3.1. Pros of using sarcasm in ESP classes

1. Sarcasm surrounds students in their everyday lives. When ESP teachers use sarcastic comments in the classroom, their students come into contact with various forms of language that they will inevitably encounter in their personal and professional lives. Repeated exposure to such comments will teach them how to deal with sarcasm when they are faced with it in the future. There are teachers who insist on raising students’ awareness of how sarcasm is used in the target culture. The purpose of bringing learners in contact with this form of expression is not that of creating sarcastic students, but that of familiarizing them with sarcasm and showing them how to deal with it. Some other teachers are against using sarcasm in the classroom arguing that, instead of creating cross-cultural awareness, it may give rise to cultural misunderstandings.

As Frenco points out, “every time one of our learners uses English it is likely to be with someone from a different culture or a culturally different organization” (112). If students know how to cope with sarcasm, they will be able to avoid misunderstandings in the workplace, especially if they are working in a multinational company where people coming from different cultures interpret sarcastic comments in the most varied ways.

2. When it is used affectionately, not patronizingly, sarcasm can help teachers strengthen teacher-student relationship. ESP teachers teaching English to engineering students, for example, are often faced with the challenge of explaining very complex

concepts they themselves are unfamiliar with since most of them are far from being specialists in their students' field of study. Their resort to self-deprecating sarcasm may help them avoid embarrassing situations. Students appreciate when their teachers show themselves as human.

The process of learning technical English is a big challenge not only for those students whose level of general English is low, but also for their peers who master it. When dealing with a complex technical text, students have difficulty in decoding it correctly if they lack the necessary technical knowledge. If students don't have the prior knowledge required, teachers have to go back a few more steps to connect to what they know. When studying a text about material types, for instance, there are students who nonchalantly admit that they have no idea about the difference between metals and non-metals or between elements, compounds and mixtures. Being able to understand a text, to acquire the new specialized vocabulary and to learn how to use it productively largely depends on students' prior technical knowledge. Engineering jobs have been on high demand over the last years all over the world, which has resulted in a big number of engineering undergraduates with little or no technical background. Teaching technical English to such students is an unpleasant scenario for any ESP teacher no matter how experienced he/she may be. Sarcasm is a good way to overcome this impasse. Such a statement as "Technical English is undoubtedly full of emotion and poetry. I'm sure you love it" is meant to help students not feel frustrated at their insufficient technical knowledge.

3. One of the unpleasant parts of a teacher's role is to deal with underperforming students. Depending on what is best for the class, teachers can correct their students' mistakes in various ways. No matter the technique chosen by teachers to correct students, they need to do it tactfully. Correcting students while they are doing their best to use the language can often discourage them. Sarcasm can be used to criticize and correct students, making the comment sound less harsh. ESP students are mature enough to detect the sarcasm in such a message as "Good job" used to refer to their poor performance and not interpret it as a positive message when the teacher wants to convey the opposite.

As Harmer points out, in spite of teachers' efforts to create a successful learning environment, "things sometimes get out of hand and students start behaving in inappropriate ways" (2013, 158). Teachers' reactions may determine how serious the problem becomes, but it may also "influence the attitude of the whole group in terms of their future adherence to the group norms which they have agreed" (*ibidem*). Since ESP teachers often deal with people in their thirties or even forties, misbehaviour in the classroom may become an embarrassing issue. One way in which teachers can attempt to change their behaviour is by means of a sarcastic comment, which often proves to be more effective than a sanction. This method may be successful if teachers make sure that no one student is the target of their sarcastic remarks which should arise spontaneously. On the other hand, there are situations when teachers should avoid using sarcasm. When dealing with a serious behaviour problem, using sarcasm is not a good option because it has the potential to backfire

and to worsen the conflict. Using a caring remark instead of a sarcastic one is clearly more beneficial when correcting a student who is already in a bad mood. Teachers must be careful not to insult their students with overly sarcastic remarks. As Bright points out, “while intimidation can diminish undesirable student behaviours in the short term, because of negative longer-term side effects, doing so results in a win-the-battle-and-lose-the-war Pirhic victory” (2013, 65).

3.2. Cons of using sarcasm in the classroom

Sarcasm and “put-downs” are “insidious for two main reasons. Firstly, they are so commonly accepted among educators as a seemingly harmless weapon in our arsenal of class control and secondly, they can be so satisfying to the perpetrator” (Colin 2003, 150).

1. The use of aggressive strategies in the classroom is non-productive. ESP teachers’ sarcasm may be met with reluctance if it is not used appropriately. According to David Sousa, today’s students need emotional support more than ever and sarcasm is one of the factors that may turn them against their peers, their teacher and the school (2005). It may have a negative effect on students’ motivation and self-confidence if the atmosphere in the classroom is tense, if the students do not know one another very well or if they do not feel at ease with one another. As Lewis shows, “where teachers verbally abuse children, humiliate them by the use of sarcasm, frequently and repeatedly exit them from class, or impose arbitrary and harsh punishments, children can experience a range of short-term and long-term negative consequences” (2008, 27). Sarcasm used “against one student puts the others on the alert that they may be next. Sarcasm used by the teacher gives tacit permission to students to use it against that person themselves. Sarcasm undermines trust” (Eyster, Martin 2010, 27) Just like hostile humour, sarcasm may serve a corrective function, but the long-term consequence of diminished esteem in the eyes of students may make the visible gains in terms of behavioural correction not worth the cost (McGhee, 1989).

Whenever teachers use sarcasm in the classroom, they should analyse their students’ reactions to it very carefully to see if it works. If it doesn’t have the expected effect, they should put it away. An ESP class is often made up of students who belong to different age groups. Most of them are between 19 and 22, but there are also students who are in their late twenties or even in their thirties or early forties. Their reactions to sarcasm may vary according to their age. Younger students tend to react positively to it and not feel mocked at whereas those in their thirties or forties may see it as a sign of contempt. Students’ attitude to sarcasm is also closely connected with their personality. Those who are more flexible and playful will appreciate it. Unlike them, rigid students will take it the wrong way and feel offended by it. Male students seem to be better at dealing with sarcasm than female students because men are generally more sarcastic than women. Likewise, male teachers tend to use sarcastic comments more often than female teachers who are more empathetic towards their students.

2. If teacher-student relationship is not based on trust and mutual respect, making a sarcastic comment is a big risk. As Galinsky shows, “unlike sarcasm between parties who distrust each other, sarcasm between individuals who share a trusting relationship does not generate more contempt than sincerity” (Drew 2016). Responding to the constructive criticism of an idea with a sarcastic compliment to the speaker will only instigate conflict, but, when it comes to trusting relationships, there is a playful form of sarcasm that can have quite the opposite effect (Cochrane 2016). Teachers should find a way of harnessing the creative benefits of sarcasm without risking losing their status. Such a sarcastic comment as “I can see you are working very hard” made by a teacher to a class of students who are not actively involved in the lesson is less hurtful if the addresses trust him/her. Teachers’ competence will be questioned and they will be at risk of losing status if the students find the comment inappropriate.

3. If teachers overuse sarcasm, students will find it difficult to distinguish between a sarcastic remark and one they should take literally. If they have got used to being spoken to with sarcasm, such a comment as “You have been working so hard lately that I’ll give you no homework for next week” will be met with some reticence.

4. Conclusion

To sum it up, we can say that sarcasm has a valuable place in communication, but it should be used very cautiously because it can be harmful and destructive. Using sarcasm in the ESP class often turns out to be a double-eyed sword. On the one hand, it may boost creativity and strengthen teacher-student relationship. On the other hand, it may seriously affect students’ level of self-confidence and self-esteem. Although some experts say that sarcasm has no place in the classroom, being able to recognize it, to interpret it correctly and to use it properly is a valuable tool for any student to have. In order to make sure that it is beneficial to students, teachers should use it very cautiously.

References

1. Boxer, Diana. 2011. *The lost art of the good Schmooze: Building rapport and diffusing conflict in everyday and public talk*. Praeger.
2. Bright, Neil. 2013. *Those who can: Why master teachers do what they do*. Rowman&Littlefield Education.
3. Clark, V. Anita. 2005. *Psychology of moods*. New York: Nova Science Publishers.
3. Colin, Weatherley. 2003. *Transforming teaching and learning*. Network Educational Press Ltd.
4. Cochrane, S. 2016. *Your creative mind: how to disrupt your thinking, abandon your comfort zone and develop bold new strategies*, The career press.
5. Dorfman, Lawrence, Naccarato, James Michael. 2017. *The sarcasm handbook*. Skyhorse.

6. Drew, Boyd. 2016. "You're awesome! How sarcasm enhances creativity." Accessed February 21, 2023. [awesome-how-sarcasm-enhances-creativity](#)
7. Eyster, Richard., Martine, Christine. 2010. *Successful Class Management: real-world, time tested techniques for the most important skill set every teacher needs*. Sourcebooks.
8. Frendo, Evan. 2008. *How to teach business English*. Longman.
9. Harmer, Jeremy. 2013. *The practice of English language teaching*. Pearson.
10. Lewis, Ramon. 2008. *The development management approach to classroom behaviour*. Australian Council for Educational Research.
11. Martin, Rod., Ford, Thomas. 2018. *The psychology of humour: an integrative approach*. Academic Press.
12. McGhee, Paul. E. 1989. *Humor and children's development: A guide to practical applications*. The Haworth Press, Inc.
13. Sousa, David. 2005. *How the brain learns*. Sage Publications.