

# Using Comics and Political Cartoons in the LCTL Classroom

## Sample Lesson Plan Overview

**Levels:** Beginning-advanced

**Aims:** Become acquainted with target-culture norms that are exploited for humor; provide writing/discussion stimulus; reinforce grammatical forms and vocabulary

**Class Time:** Variable (30 min-several class periods)

**Preparation Time:** Variable (20 min-1 hr.)

**Resources:** Comics from target-culture magazines or newspapers; activity related materials (handouts, poster, overhead, etc.)

Why is that funny? What's going on? Understanding the humor of comics and political cartoons requires in-depth background knowledge and cultural awareness far beyond a simple understanding of grammar and vocabulary. Comics are great ways to introduce students to the subtleties of language, including idioms, double entendres, and the like. They are also an excellent way to sensitize them to the nuances of the target culture as well as to reinforce grammar and vocabulary.

The following three lesson plans exemplify ways in which comics can be used to achieve specific language teaching objectives.

- **He said, she said—Interpreting comics**
- **How's it going?—Greetings**
- **What in the world is going on?—Political cartoons as a discussion/writing stimulus**

## He said, she said—Interpreting comics

**Level:** Intermediate

**Aims:** Practice creating dialogue, become acquainted with target-culture norms of male-female interaction, review expressions of emotion

**Class time:** 60 minutes

**Preparation time:** 30 minutes

**Resources:** 5 comics with men and women interacting in them--a set with the words left out, a set with the words

The meaning and humor of cartoons depends heavily on their visual style—the artist’s depiction of the setting, the characters, etc. It also depends on the captions and dialogue. In this genre, very few words can carry significant impact, especially when reinforced by the visual image the artist has chosen to convey meaning. In this activity, students respond to a wordless version of a popular comic, inferring from the visual cues what may be happening and why it may be funny. They then write their own version and compare their interpretation with the cartoonist’s original intent.

### Procedure:

1. Before class, locate five comics (e.g., from target language newspapers or magazines) in which there are men and women interacting. Photocopy two sets of each comic. With one photocopied set cover over the words or white them out. Make a class set of both the wordless and original comics.
2. In class, review with students already familiar words of emotion (e.g., angry, distressed, anxious, terrified, etc.).
3. As needed, introduce new emotions or actions.
4. Show one wordless comic and solicit responses from students with questions such as:
  - a. Who is in the picture?
  - b. What are the people doing?
  - c. How are they feeling?
5. Have students suggest a caption for the cartoon or write the dialogue between the characters.
6. Divide students into four groups, give each group a different comic asking students to create their own caption(s) or dialogue(s) for the comic.
7. Ask each group to present one of their ideas.
8. Show the example comic in original format. (This may be in the next class period.) Introduce new vocabulary or idioms. Ask students similar questions.
9. Give groups the original version of their comic. Have them read the comic and explain it to the class.

10. Ask students to discuss the differences between their version and the original (which do they like better, think is funnier, etc.).

**Caveats and Options:**

1. Magazine pictures may also work
2. Students may ask what is funny about a particular comic if this isn't immediately apparent. Close monitoring of group work will be necessary.

**Acknowledgments:**

This lesson plan was inspired by Janet Goodwin

## How's it going?—Greetings

**Level:** Beginning-intermediate

**Aims:** Learn greetings used in different situations; heighten awareness of register

**Class time:** 30 minutes

**Preparation time:** 30 minutes

**Resources:** Overhead transparency of 3-4 comics containing dialogues in which people greet each other; handout containing 3-4 similar comics in which the dialogue has been deleted.

In the world of comics, we can often find a microcosm of a given societal system. We see people in their homes or workplaces, displaying a variety of emotions. In this lesson, students' attention is called to the way in which people use forms of greetings to indicate their familiarity (or lack thereof) with the other conversational participant. The lesson combines a grammatical/lexical focus (polite and informal forms used in greetings) with familiarizing students with the target language norms for such situations.

### **Procedure:**

1. Before class, locate 6-8 comics (e.g., from target language newspapers or magazines) in which the characters are greeting each other--preferably in different relational contexts. Make an overhead transparency of 3-4 of these comics with the dialogue intact; make a photocopied class set of 3-4 additional comics in which the dialogue has been deleted.
2. Review greetings by having students provide any greetings with which they are already familiar. Write student contributions on the board and discuss the meanings of any greetings that other students might be unfamiliar with.
3. Discuss the different situations in which the different greetings may be used. (e.g., with family, friends, strangers, teachers, bosses, etc.).
4. Using the overhead transparency, present half the comics one by one, asking students to infer the relationship between the characters.
5. In pairs, distribute the handout containing the "wordless" comics. Ask students to make up their own dialogue, paying special attention to the greetings used.
6. Ask for volunteers to read their dialogue. Discuss.

### **Caveats and Options:**

1. Not every language has an elaborate system of greeting. This lesson may be modified to introduce other everyday phrases.
2. For languages with particularly elaborate systems of greetings, this lesson may help students understand the salient distinctions.

3. An alternative to step 6 above is to have the students role play the characters in the comics using the appropriate greetings.
4. If you don't have that many comics, instead of giving students roles from comics, you may write down roles on index cards and give each student one and have them greet one another.

**Acknowledgments:**

This lesson plan was inspired by Janet Goodwin

## What in the world is going on?—Political cartoons as a discussion/writing stimulus

**Level:** Intermediate-advanced

**Aims:** Provide a stimulus for issues-oriented discussion and/or writing activities

**Class time:** 20-40 minutes

**Preparation time:** 30 minutes

**Resources:** Overhead transparency of one or more issues-oriented political cartoons; questions to write on the blackboard

Political cartoons present amusing viewpoints (and sometimes scathing indictments) of current issues in a country's political arena or social life. As such, they are culturally embedded objects requiring both knowledge of current issues and an understanding of the target culture in order for readers to understand them. In this activity, students arrive at an understanding of issues-oriented political cartoons through guided discussion. They then report back their findings and write an optional reaction journal.

### Procedures:

1. Before class, do the following:
  - a. Locate one or more political cartoons in the target language, preferably on an issue of current interest/debate.
  - b. Prepare an overhead transparency of the cartoon(s) and/or a class set for students.
2. Begin class by asking students to explain the difference between a comic and a political cartoon.
3. Using the overhead transparency, display the political cartoon(s). Begin by asking students to identify the issue depicted and discuss why this issue is of current importance. Write key vocabulary on the board, explaining the meanings of those words that are unfamiliar to other students.
4. Write selected key questions about the cartoon on the board. Some sample generic questions follow: Teachers can also tailor their questions to the specific political cartoons(s) that they choose to use.
  - a. One cartoon only: Discuss these questions and be prepared to explain your answers to the class.
    - i. Who/what is depicted in this political cartoon? What is their relationship to the issue?
    - ii. Is the cartoon funny? Why/why not?
    - iii. Does the cartoon depend on stereotypes for its humor or impact? If so, how?

- iv. Is there a symbolic image in the cartoon? What is it and what does it depict?
  - v. What is the cartoonist's point of view/message? Do you agree or disagree with the point of view being made?
- b. Multiple cartoons: Discuss these questions and be prepared to explain your answers to the class.
- i. Who/what do the cartoons depict? How are they related to the issue?
  - ii. Do all cartoons depict the issue in the same way? If not, what are the similarities/differences?
  - iii. Do the cartoonists share a point of view on this issue? If you think they disagree, group the cartoons into those which take a positive view of the situation and those which take a negative view. Which point of view do you agree with?
  - iv. Are the cartoons funny? Why/why not?
  - v. Are there any stereotypes depicted? If so, what are they? Why do you believe the cartoonist chose to use this stereotype?
  - vi. Do any of the cartoons wrongly or unfairly depict the situation? If so, in what way/why?
  - vii. Are there symbolic images in the cartoons? What are they and what do they depict?
  - viii. Which political cartoon makes the strongest point about this issue? Why?
5. Put students in groups of 3-4 and ask them to answer the questions. Give a time limit (5-10 minutes).
  6. Either in class or as homework, have students write a reaction journal in which they discuss their own point of view on the issue. (Optional)

### **Caveats and Options:**

1. The cartoons should be selected on the basis of visual clarity as well as clarity of meaning. It is also important to keep in mind students' background knowledge as they will not understand the "point" of a cartoon if they are unfamiliar with the world issue it depicts.
2. Selecting cartoons on the same topic from different newspapers around the world can add interest to this activity as differing perspectives are available. (Note: The monthly news magazine World Press Review is an excellent source of thematically-related cartoons as it usually selects an issue of world interest and publishes cartoons on this issue from a variety of newspapers around the world.).
3. In the group activity, it helps to assign each student a role (e.g., discussion leader, note taker, reporter). This ensures that all students are held responsible during the activity.
4. Selecting one or more relevant news articles on the topic of the cartoon provides this activity with a more in-depth reading focus.

5. A possible follow-up activity is to give students a political cartoon on the same subject with the caption/dialogue removed. Ask them to write their own caption/dialogue and share it with the rest of the class.

**Acknowledgments:**

This lesson plan was inspired by James Yamamoto.