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Specialist Diploma in English Language Teaching
SC6111: Exploring the English Language

Using Sarcasm as a Tool
for Language Acquisition

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USING SARCASM AS A TOOL FOR LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

This paper explores the feasibility of incorporating sarcasm into teaching through a limited research into teacher-perceptions. Firstly, by using the findings of research in neuroscience and language studies in relation to sarcasm, inferences are drawn to support the use of sarcasm-based lessons. Consequently, utilising the quantitative opinion of 46 education practitioners of English Language out of 62 respondents who participated in an anonymous online survey, this paper arrives at the conclusion that there is indeed strong support and good potential for such an approach. This paper recommends further research into this issue and advocates the use of sarcasm-based lessons (an example of which is annexed) in teaching.

“The word sarcasm is traceable to the Greek word *sarazein*, meaning to speak bitterly, to tear flesh like dogs; the word irony is traceable to the Greek term *eironeia*, a term used to describe unscrupulous trickery.”

Albert N Katz (2000)

*Introduction to the Special Issue:
The Uses and Processing of Irony and Sarcasm*

Sarcasm and Irony have intrigued philosophers, scholars and psychologists alike for millennia. More recently, the interest in the production and processing of these has transcended from the abstract to the physiological. Studies done by medical researchers such as McDonald (2000), Giora (2000), Channon (2004), and more recently, Shamay-Tsoory (2005) are just some examples of how much the neuropsychological investigation has delved into this phenomenon. Today, not only can we arrive at the irrefutable conclusion that interpreting sarcasm and irony is a physical process of brain function, we can even isolate and identify the left hemisphere as the part of the brain that interprets the literal meaning, the frontal lobes and right hemisphere as the parts that process the intention and context, and the right ventromedial prefrontal cortex as the part that integrates these elements to determine the true meaning (Shamay-Tsoory et al, 2005).

Many inroads have also been made in terms of understanding how the intangible complexity of sarcasm is interwoven in communication, regardless of language. For example, research into other languages such as those done by Pengpanich (1998) and Day (1998) demonstrate that the characteristics of sarcasm are consistent across various languages, and, by studying the technical aspects of the English Language, Kruez and Caucci (2007) suggest that cues can be drawn from the syntactic structure of the sarcastic text.

This finding is corroborated by Livnat (2003 & 2004), whose preceding studies investigated the role syntactic structure in relative detail, and recognises that it does play at least a nominal role in understanding sarcastic utterances as well as in identifying the intended victim. Correspondingly, Bryant and Jean (2006) systematically investigated whether there was an 'ironic tone of voice' and arrived at the conclusion that there was no specific identifier in this regard and that tone and intonation were only peripheral clues that aid in understanding the sarcastic utterance.

Whilst adults use sarcasm for different purposes, namely; joking, criticising, teasing and challenging (Harger & Hallet, 2006), Lee and Katz (1998) suggested that ridicule played an important role in determining the presence of sarcasm in communication, and, Pexman and Olineck (2002) found that ironic insults (sarcasm) were largely perceived to be criticism in a polite manner, although more mocking in nature – with the inverse being true of ironic compliments.

Language Acquisition

Looking at communication and language learning, Kruez, Long and Church (1991) were, in fact, able to demonstrate that irony-based communication achieves its goals better and results in better retention and recall than communication that was literal.

This study lends considerable weight to the idea that sarcasm can be used for language acquisition with other studies, such as those done by Capelli, Nakagawa and Madden (1991), Pexman et al (2006) and Ackerman (1982), clearly narrowing down the age range at which children are able to identify and recognise sarcasm competently. Typically, there is a stark contrast in how children respond to sarcasm above the ages of 11 (as compared to below this age) and verbal cues seem to be more important at the

earlier stages of development before a comprehensive ability incorporating other cues such as syntactic structure, context and the violation of maxims, is attained.

In the realm of education, the use of metaphors in teaching is not a new concept, having been in practice for decades. The popularity of the classic *Metaphors We Live By* (Lakoff and Johnson's 1980) is a testament to how important metaphors have become in Cognitive Linguistics. In the same vein, at least one recent study has shed light on the distinguishing characteristics of metaphor and sarcasm (Colston & Gibbs 2002). This particular study has gone on to demonstrate that sarcasm requires a higher order of thinking as compared to the processing of metaphors.

This facilitates the suggestion that sarcasm-based lessons could be used subsequent to lessons on metaphor and warrants serious consideration into the possibility of using sarcasm as a language acquisition tool. With research in this area being limited, this paper aims to initiate such a consideration by undertaking a broad and relatively generic survey that assessed teacher-perception with regard to the use of sarcasm-based lessons.

Research Survey

A nine-question online survey (reproduced as *Annexe A*) was prepared with 8 multiple response questions and 1 optional open-ended question being offered. The critical data collected was the age, years of experience, the level of sarcasm in their own behaviour, the level of sarcasm noted from their students and how effective they would expect a sarcasm lesson to be.

Responses were collected over a period of slightly more than one month (from 30th December 2008 to 4th February 2009) through email invitations to the researcher's friends, acquaintances and colleagues.

In addition, unsolicited email invitations were sent out to all the junior colleges and a note was placed on the researcher's blog which received 2651 unique visitors during the period.

A total of 62 anonymous responses were received, however 12 were incomplete and thus rejected outright. Of the remaining 50, a further four were excluded from the survey analysis as the respondents recorded 0 years of experience (which may have been entered in error). The eventual 46 respondents, whose responses were used, were aged between 21 and 64, had varying extents of experience ranging from 1 to 37 years, and were highly likely to be education practitioners based in Singapore. Whilst the group average was 36 years of age with 8 years of experience, there was a 65.3% positive correlation between age and experience among these 46 respondents. This would indicate that there was a fairly reasonable spread of experienced teachers (as opposed to teachers who have switched to teaching from a previous career).

<i>Level</i>	<i>Respondents</i>
Primary & Below	10
Secondary	18
ITE	1
Junior College	12
Polytechnic	2
Tertiary & Above	3
Total	46

Table 1: Breakdown of Respondents by Teaching Level

Response Analysis

63% of the respondents rated themselves ‘3’ or above on a scale of 5 when asked how sarcastic they considered themselves to be and when queried on the frequency with which they encountered sarcasm in the classroom, only 39.1% gave a rating of ‘3’ and above. However, a higher percentage (55.6%) of the 18 Secondary School teachers gave this rating, which suggests that this may be the level where student sarcasm is the most outward in a classroom setting. Similarly, more from this group (72.2%) rated themselves as relatively sarcastic in nature with the Junior College cohort registering the strongest at 83.3%.

Level	Respondents	Sarcasm		Student Sarcasm		Sarcasm Lesson		Lesson Potential	
<i>Primary & Below</i>	10	1-2	60%	1-2	70%	Yes	70%	1-2	30%
		3	20%	3	30%	No	30%	3	50%
		4-5	20%	4-5	0%			4-5	20%
<i>Secondary</i>	18	1-2	28%	1-2	39%	Yes	83%	1-2	6%
		3	22%	3	50%	No	17%	3	67%
		4-5	50%	4-5	11%			4-5	27%
<i>Junior College</i>	12	1-2	17%	1-2	58%	Yes	67%	1-2	25%
		3	42%	3	33%	No	33%	3	58%
		4-5	41%	4-5	9%			4-5	17%
Total	46	1-2	37%	1-2	61%	Yes	70%	1-2	22%
		3	26%	3	35%	No	30%	3	56%
		4-5	37%	4-5	4%			4-5	22%

Table 2: Breakdown of Quantitative Responses Received

Among all the respondents, 5 offered qualitative responses for the open-ended question and these were largely related to the classroom management rather than language acquisition – which was to be expected. However, one respondent did explain that he or she had previously used advertisements employing sarcasm in a classroom lesson.

Comment Text	Response Date
1. I use sarcasm in almost every lesson but I do not plan it as part of the lesson plan.	Wed, 2/4/09 1:00 PM
2. show students adverts which uses sarcasm	Wed, 2/4/09 9:21 AM
3. Sarcasm comes in useful at certain points of the lesson, almost naturally, unplanned, emerging from part of the class dynamics	Tue, 1/13/09 12:17 PM
4. A student claims he is usually smart and handsome. I'll play up on that to energise the class.	Tue, 1/13/09 10:13 AM
5. I have used sarcasm to handle mild classroom disciplinary problems. This seems more effective than scolding the students directly.	Wed, 12/31/08 7:55 PM

Figure 3: List of Qualitative Responses Received

Unsurprisingly, 91.3% of the respondents reported that they had never conducted a lesson incorporating sarcasm with only 4 individuals indicating that they had. Overall, 69.6% were open to using a sarcasm-based lesson plan themselves whilst 78.3% felt that it could be effective (rating of '3' and above). The response from the Secondary School teachers was the most encouraging, with 94.4% rating the potential success of a sarcasm-based lesson as '3' and above and 83.3% of them registering their support to incorporate such a lesson plan into their own teaching.

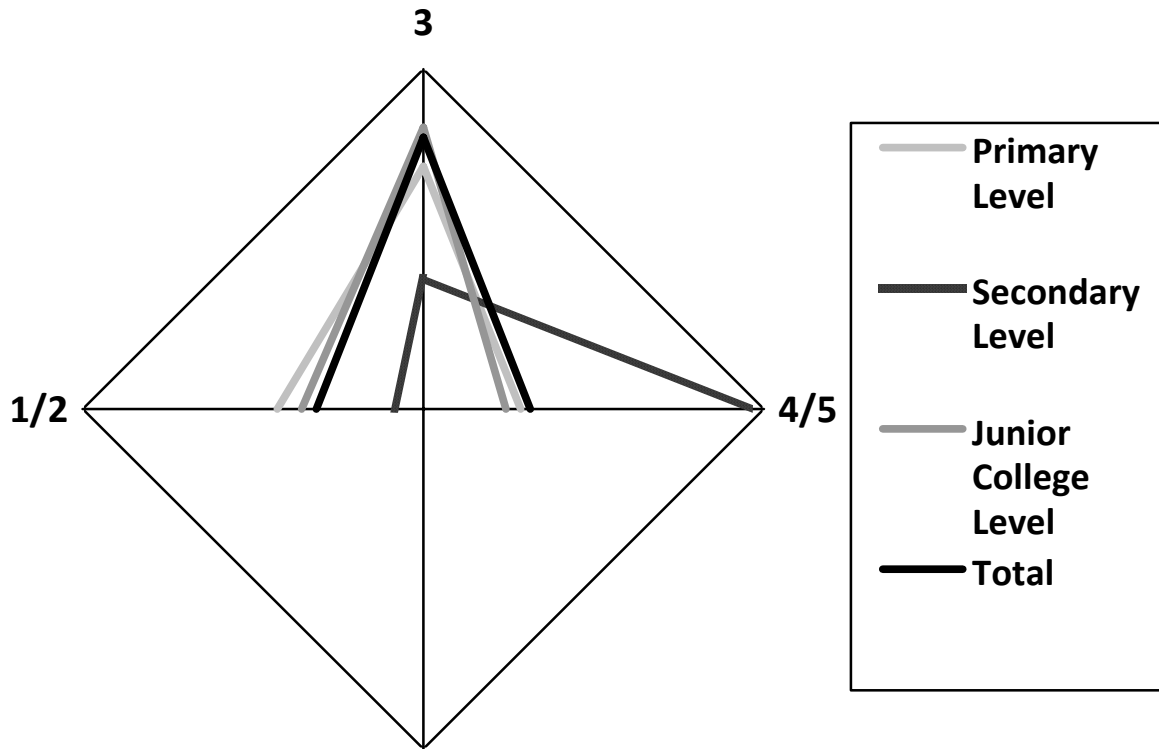


Figure 4: Radar Chart of Respondents' Estimation of Potential for Sarcasm-based Lesson

Interestingly, there was a 16.6% inverse correlation between age and self-assessment of sarcasm, a 24.2% inverse correlation between age and perception of student sarcasm, and a 14% inverse correlation between age and estimation of success of a sarcasm lesson. This translates into the indication that the older the teacher is, the lower they rate their own level of sarcasm, the less sarcasm they experience (or choose to experience) from their students, and, naturally, a higher level of scepticism towards the use of a sarcasm-based lesson.

Discussion

The survey response was encouraging and the majority of the respondents felt that they would consider using a sarcasm-based lesson plan. Although the majority had not employed using such a lesson plan, they were nonetheless confident that such a lesson could achieve its objective. From the breakdown of the responses, it can further be noted that, at the very least, the Secondary level may be the most receptive to such an approach.

The data suggests that Junior College teachers, although rating themselves more sarcastic than their peers at other levels, feel that a sarcasm-based approach may not be suitable (or necessary) for their students and were generally less supportive. This unexpected finding could be due to the fact that Junior College students are typically less brash and more timid than their counterparts in Secondary School.

This paper however, concedes that due to the low number of respondents from the ITE, Polytechnic and tertiary institutions involved in the survey, no concrete inferences can be drawn for these teaching levels.

Conclusion

As this study was specifically aimed at a general investigation across all levels, the preliminary findings suggest that a closer look at the teacher responses of each level may be warranted. A larger study comprising increased sample sizes of each teaching level would certainly shed more light on the receptiveness of using a sarcasm-based lesson and establish if the Secondary School level is indeed the most suitable for this purpose as the survey results seem to suggest.

Nevertheless, this report is satisfied that its objectives have been met – namely, an awareness of such an approach was made known to at least hundreds of practitioners, the applicability of sarcasm as a language acquisition tool was demonstrated using existing research literature, and finally, a sample of the willingness of teachers to adopt such an approach was obtained.

It is hoped that the research that was undertaken in this paper can be further developed to make inroads into this area of limited research and be thence consolidated with other parallel research in the fields of neuroscience and psychology such that an instructive direction can be given to education practitioners on the use of sarcasm-based teaching (an example is attached as *Annexe C*).

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Annexe A

Survey Questionnaire Hosted At

http://www.surveymonkey.com/s.aspx?sm=qFacnnFfir_2f9cAocMYSasQ_3d_3d

Using Sarcasm as a Language Acquisition Tool

I am a post-graduate student in an English Language Teaching programme who is exploring how sarcasm can be employed to teach aspects of language to advanced students. The purpose of this survey is to gather feedback from practitioners on whether they think sarcasm can be used for teaching language and if they would use it themselves in their own classroom.

It is hoped that this survey will create awareness on using sarcasm as a language acquisition tool and initiate interest in developing lessons that incorporate sarcasm as well.

Please feel free to email me at gangasudhan@email.com for further enquiries, to provide more details (if you so wish), to request for sample sarcasm-exercises that I will be creating, and/or just to be sarcastic to me.

Q1. How old are you?

Age

Q2. How many years of teaching experience do you have?

Experience

Q3 Which level do you specialise in?

Primary & Below	Secondary	ITE	Junior College	Polytechnic	Tertiary & Above

Q4 How much of a sarcastic person would you consider yourself?

1 = Not Sarcastic

5 = Very Sarcastic

1	2	3	4	5

Q5 To what extent do you encounter sarcasm from your students?

1 = Never

5 = Every Time

1	2	3	4	5

Q6 Have you conducted a lesson that uses sarcasm as part of the lesson design?

Yes	No

Q7 If you have used sarcasm to conduct lessons, I would be grateful if you can briefly describe the lesson.

(If you do not wish to share and/or have not used sarcasm to conduct lessons, please proceed to the next question.)

--

Q8 If provided with a good lesson plan that incorporates sarcasm, would you use it?

Yes	No

Q9 Based on your experience, how effective do you think a good lesson plan that incorporates sarcasm would be?


1 = Not Effective


5 = Very Effective


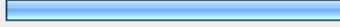

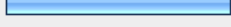


1	2	3	4	5

Annexe B

Overall Survey Results



1. How old are you?					
			Response Average	Response Total	Response Count
	Age		36.13	1,662	46
<i>answered question</i>					46
<i>skipped question</i>					0


2. How many years of teaching experience do you have?					
			Response Average	Response Total	Response Count
	Experience		8.28	381	46
<i>answered question</i>					46
<i>skipped question</i>					0

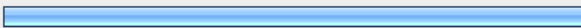
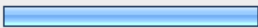
3. Which level do you specialise in? (Please choose the level that you are most comfortable with.)					
			Response Percent	Response Count	
Primary & Below			21.7%	10	
Secondary			39.1%	18	
ITE			2.2%	1	
Junior College			26.1%	12	
Polytechnic			4.3%	2	
Tertiary & Above			6.5%	3	
<i>answered question</i>					46
<i>skipped question</i>					0


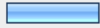



1. How much of a sarcastic person would you consider yourself? 1 = Not Sarcastic 5 = Very Sarcastic			Response Percent	Response Count
1			13.0%	6
2			23.9%	11
3			26.1%	12
4			32.6%	15
5			4.3%	2
			answered question	46
			skipped question	0

2. To what extent do you encounter sarcasm from your students? 1 = Never 5 = Every Time			Response Percent	Response Count
1			19.6%	9
2			41.3%	19
3			34.8%	16
4			2.2%	1
5			2.2%	1
			answered question	46
			skipped question	0

1. Have you conducted a lesson that uses sarcasm as part of the lesson design?			Response Percent	Response Count
Yes			8.7%	4
No			91.3%	42
			<i>answered question</i>	46
			<i>skipped question</i>	0

2. If you have used sarcasm to conduct lessons, I would be grateful if you can briefly describe the lesson. (If you do not wish to share and/or have not used sarcasm to conduct lessons, please proceed to the next question.)			Response Count
			 view
			5
			<i>answered question</i>
			5
			<i>skipped question</i>
			41

3. If provided with a good lesson plan that incorporates sarcasm, would you use it?			Response Percent	Response Count
Yes			69.6%	32
No			30.4%	14
			<i>answered question</i>	46
			<i>skipped question</i>	0

4. Based on your experience, how effective do you think a good lesson plan that incorporates sarcasm would be? 1 = Not Effective 5 = Very Effective			Response Percent	Response Count
1			10.9%	5
2			10.9%	5
3			56.5%	26
4			13.0%	6
5			8.7%	4
			<i>answered question</i>	46
			<i>skipped question</i>	0

Annexe C

Sample Lesson Plan

LESSON PLAN

Aim: Appreciate the Role of Context in English Language Communication Through Sarcasm

Level of Students: Upper Intermediate

Learner Profile: Academically-inclined students at Secondary School who respond well to the Auditory and Kinesthetic learning styles

Lesson Time: 45 minutes

Specific objectives: At the end of the lesson;

- 1) Students should be able to provide at least 2 distinct meanings for each given sarcastic sentence.
- 2) Students should be able to offer logical scenarios that can reasonably explain obviously sarcastic statements.

Materials:

Equipment to facilitate PowerPoint Presentation

Visualiser

Activities:

Activity 1

As a class activity, students are shown a series of sarcastic sentences and, for each, are asked to offer as many different meanings as possible (see **Activity List 1** below).

Activity 2

As a class activity, students are shown a series of common sarcastic remarks (with context) and, for each, are asked to volunteer logical and reasonable scenarios that give an acceptable meaning instead (see **Activity List 2** below).

Method:

Stage 1	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1) Teacher primes the class by defining the word 'context' and giving some common examples where context subconsciously plays a part. Examples may include simple metaphors such as 'greedy pig', 'couch potato', 'to pull your socks up' and 'apple of my eye', which could then extend to excerpts such as "All the world's a stage; and all the men and women merely players" (Shakespeare).2) Student participation is encouraged by allowing for spontaneous additions of personal examples.3) Teacher directs students to consider the scenario where the context is removed and the metaphor no longer has the intended meaning. For example, in a land where there are no sofas (couches), how would the term 'couch potato' be understood; in a place where there are no socks, how can someone infer 'to pull your socks up'?4) Teacher inserts sarcastic adlibs during the class discussion.5) PowerPoint Presentation is then initiated.	10mins
Stage 2	<ol style="list-style-type: none">6) Activity 1 is introduced with an example sarcastic (but ambiguous) sentence flashed onscreen to the class as a whole.7) Students are asked to offer as many different meanings as they can think of for each sentence that is flashed and the meanings are written on the board for visual anchoring.8) They are intentionally not told that the sentences are sarcastic in nature.9) Total of 5 sentences are flashed one at a time.	10mins

<p>Stage 3</p>	<p>10) Activity 2 is continued with an example of an often-heard sarcastic sentence flashed onscreen to the class as a whole (students are made aware that these are sarcastic remarks).</p> <p>11) Teacher may choose to include a context explanation (verbal or visual) to aid the students' understanding of the sarcastic remark as necessary.</p> <p>12) Students are then asked to offer a plausible scenario that would make each sentence appropriate in a literal sense and negate the sarcasm.</p> <p>13) Total of 5 sentences are flashed one at a time with enough time given for students to think about a suitable scenario before a possible suggestion is 'revealed'.</p> <p>14) Purpose is to facilitate students to think about the scenarios (and thereby the role of context) that can completely alter the intended meaning of the sarcastic comment.</p>	<p>15mins</p>
<p>Stage 6</p>	<p>15) Teacher completes the discussion by identifying the critical factor of context – that can very well 'ruin' the intention of a sarcastic remark. Other examples of sarcasm (other languages etc) can then be offered at the teacher's discretion or other written work on context can be appended to the end of this lesson.</p>	<p>10mins</p>

Activity 1 – List of 5 Sarcastic Sentences

It's a catastrophic success.

Sarcastic Message: The success is so great that it is a catastrophe.

Possible Literal Meaning: The demolition expert was able to bring down the building in an efficient manner.

I feel so miserable without you; it's almost like having you here.

Sarcastic Message: Having you around is worse than not having you around.

Possible Literal Meaning: The person was very ill and their death is equally as painful as seeing them suffer.

I never forget a face, but in your case I'll be glad to make an exception.

Sarcastic Message: I don't want to remember meeting you.

Possible Literal Meaning: As an officer, I should remember a criminal like you, but since you're my friend, I'll pretend that I do not know you.

He has no enemies, but is intensely disliked by his friends.

Sarcastic Message: No one likes him.

Possible Literal Meaning: He is an all-round serious person, so everyone respects him but no one can be close to him.

I didn't attend the funeral, but I sent a nice letter saying I approved of it.

Sarcastic Message: I don't like him and am glad that he is dead.

Possible Literal Meaning: I was unable to travel to the funeral but sent my condolences through an official letter.

Activity 2 – List of 5 Common Sarcastic remarks

You taking steroids? (*eg. when someone does something extremely fast...*)

Sarcastic Message: Why are you being so hurried?

Possible Scenario: Drug Tester asking player or journalists querying suspiciously successful sportsman.

It's okay to feel what you are. (*eg. when someone says, "I feel so stupid"...*)

Sarcastic Message: You are indeed stupid.

Possible Scenario: Someone who is feeling guilty about winning.

It's okay, you're a joke all by yourself. (*eg. when someone says, "Hey, you want to hear a joke?"...*)

Sarcastic Message: Nobody takes you seriously and I am not interested in your jokes.

Possible Scenario: A comedic performer who has lost his props.

Ah, I'm not surprised. (*eg. When someone says, "I don't know how to do this."...*)

Sarcastic Message: You are stupid, no surprises.

Possible Scenario: The person does not have the expertise for an advanced problem.

You look like my grandma's grandmother!

Sarcastic Message: You look ugly/very old.

Possible Scenario: It's a reference to some genuine distinguishing feature of the person.