

# “Applied Humour” in TESOL

*“Who Laughs Last Laughs Best,...If At All”*

MARCUS VANNISSE

Applied humour would have to be the most fickle form of communication, yet when it is understood the way it is intended, it surely is an effective instrument.

When I jokingly alluded to a class of middle-aged clerks, who had been placed in the Elementary English Group of a 50 hour program aimed at raising the ‘linguistic’ image of Indonesia’s National Tourist Organisation, that copycatting was as stupid as jumping off the fifth floor, the only word that they clearly comprehended was “stupid”. Two days later my Director of Studies called me into his office, looked at me a little concerned and asked me : “Mick\*, did you call your students stupid?” While I was trying to figure this one out he added :” There has been an official complaint from the Department of Tourism”. I wondered what would have happened if they’d only understood :” Jump off the fifth floor.” Anyhow, I apologized because

I’d failed to communicate. Sarcasm isn’t always appreciated, if at all understood . Using cartoons didn’t always work either. One day I used a strip called “Ferd’nand”, a sans-parole (no words) cartoon as a tool to check a class of intermediate students on their progress in the use of the present simple, and the present continuous. They had to describe what was going on in the pictures. In this particular sequence, Ferd’nand, a funny man identified by an odd looking little hat, who represents a certain type of undertaking, yet not always successful, character, is seen leaving home for work in a dashing hurry, fully dressed in his office gear...minus his trousers . Next, he stops and remembers something. In the thrid picture he rushes back in, and in the last he re-appears holding his forgotten briefcase, but still without his trousers and looking rather ridiculous in his American style boxer shorts underpants.

## BEETLE BAILEY



## by Mort Walker



To most Non-Americans Beetle Bailey is simply standing there in his sports shorts...in which case they miss the joke completely. The same thing happened with the Ferd’nand cartoon.

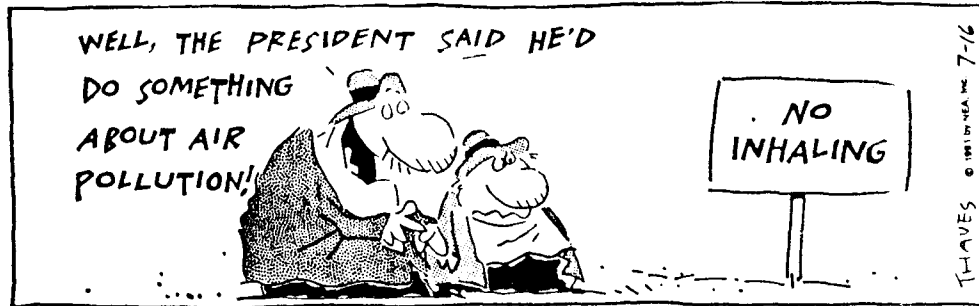
\* The writer’s nickname.

To my disappointment, half of the students, a rather smart class of engineers at a Brewery, took the undies for sports shorts and assumed that Ferd'nand was going for a jog on the way to work. With this missing of the point, the humour was lost and the whole exercise fell flat on its face. I had overlooked the fact that boxer shorts are not known as underwear in many parts of the world

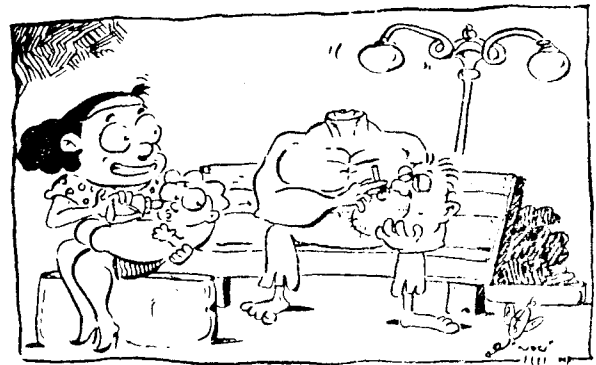
other than the U.S.A. Perhaps Non-Westerners do not appreciate comics the way we do. Apart from the obvious linguistic problems derived from the use of the vernacular, slang and idiomatic expressions, comics often explore new variants of language use, that will only be fully appreciated by that cultural group directly in the know.

FRANK AND ERNEST

by Bob Thaves



If you live in a big city you'll 'recognise' this Frank and Ernest cartoon at once, and it will most likely touch your funny bone. However if you don't know the meaning of "inhaling", the joke is lost, because even if it's looked up in a dictionary, that essential element of surprise is gone. I believe that surprise is the trigger mechanism which sets off the laughter and in turn releases our frustrations and traumas : That's Comic Relief ! When students don't get the joke, it becomes counter-productive because too much time is used to explain the humour. Also : the exercise element hasn't even begun yet. Now the class is mentally strained instead of relaxed; the exact opposite of what was intended. Since those debacles took place I've been thinking about giving up on them altogether as an instrument of teaching English. Perhaps comics would be o.k. for a special course in English language humour -- for very advanced students. In my contemplations I've tried to put myself in the shoes of a student of a foreign language and ipso facto another culture. So I had a good look at the comic strips from other countries : Can you get a laugh out of Japanese cartoons? Well, they cause me a lot of stress, trying to understand them. Even if a friend translates them I fail to do get the joke. Bondage of young teenage girls and sado masochism -- are two re-occurring objects in Japanese cartoons. I am sure they are hilarious, but sadly I never get the joke.



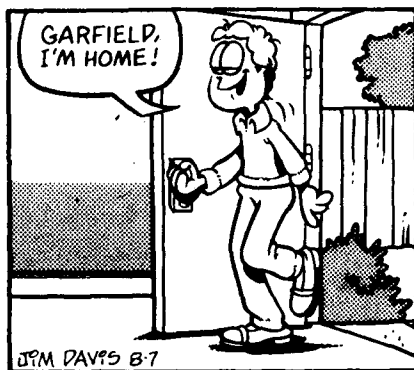
This sans-parole is from a Thai comic book. Although I think I get the pun, I don't think it's funny. Obviously I don't appreciate many forms of Asian humour. I remember a comic strip I used to read in "Poskota", an Indonesian daily. It was called "Doyok". Doyok is the archetypal lazy-bones who keeps wondering why he can't get a job as a factory manager, or as a sales rep for a merchandising company. Some days, I did almost get a laugh from reading the strip, but I found the puns too repetitive and ultimately boring. Obviously Doyok was appealing to an aspect of the Indonesian psyche, which even if I'd understand it, I'd still not find funny because it didn't relate to me in any real meaningful way. From the daily renewed schuckles expressed by my Indonesian friends, I

could see that Doyok portrayed them, or at least a part of them in a way that flawlessly touched their funny bone, time and again. Then I looked at American animal cartoons trying to pretend I was a Third-World peasant. This kind of imagined role play is not necessarily a realism I discovered: I looked at (and later discussed with a Thai colleague) a Garfield cartoon and observed that as a Third-World peasant I didn't appreciate it at all, since I regarded all domestic animals as a source of labour or much needed protein. But the retort was that there was no problem in appreciating the humour of Garfield at all, at least not with my Thai colleague, who'd been exposed to western language and culture for most of her life. And my "role play" as a peasant would not be applicable in the classroom reality where one finds educated citizens, not peasants. This is not to say that peasants have no sense

of humour, albeit most likely quite different from that which appeals to city dwellers. I've come to realise that at the bottom of not appreciating humour are cultural differences, whereas on the other hand, there are areas of universal humour that are most likely appreciated by just about everybody who happens upon them. (See the air pollution cartoon) To find those cartoons must then be part of the art of using humour in teaching English as a foreign language. And like all other techniques in the art of teaching, it takes a bit of talent and a lot of understanding of the target group.

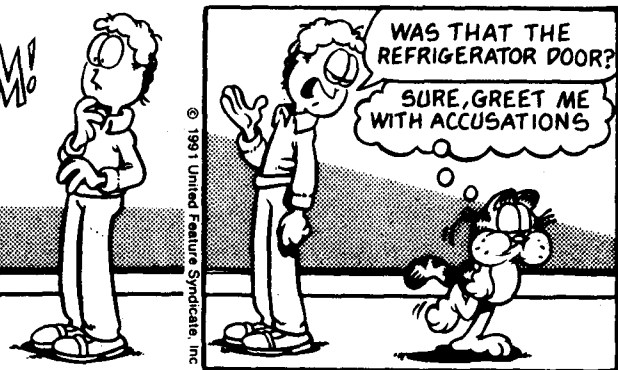
At present I am still persuing the use of cartoons, but before I apply them in exercises or otherwise I check their effectiveness with at least half a dozen locals to make sure that the message is going to get across as intended.

### GARFIELD



SLAM!

by Jim Davis



The writer believes that starving peasants will not appreciate Garfield.