

Review of Carroll, C. (2024). *Class clown. Fooling them into Learning.*

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Cathal Carroll's book, which is the subject of this review, demonstrates how clowning techniques can be integrated into foreign language teaching. It draws on personal experience and is practical in its approach. The reviewers evaluate the suggested exercises and ideas from the perspective of experienced teachers.

Keywords: book review; foreign language teaching; clowning; game-based learning; theatre pedagogy

This book has been written by a practitioner, and for foreign language teachers who are looking for alternative teaching methods in their daily work. The author is Irish, and the practical experience he draws on is teaching English in Italian state schools. This context is worth bearing in mind: some of the exercises presented specifically address aspects of English grammar, whilst others address problems that Italian native speakers in particular encounter with the English language. The reviewers are lecturers of German as a Foreign Language (DaF) in an academic context; they were familiar with many of the activities presented, but also found some new ones, or existing ones presented in a slightly different way.

The target audience could therefore be foreign language teachers in primary and secondary schools as well as at universities, teaching pupils at all levels (A1 to C1). Carroll distinguishes between E (Elementary), M (Middle School) and H (High School/Adults) – these presumably combine age group and language proficiency level. This is not defined in detail, but in our view can be roughly inferred from the context and is likely to be more familiar to teachers from English-speaking countries.

The author divides his book into eleven chapters. The introduction briefly outlines the framework, aim and content. He then begins with a biographical account of his journey from a rather reluctant schoolboy in the Irish countryside, via a disinterested architecture student in Cork, to an enthusiastic clown student in Belfast, and finally to the clown-turned-foreign-language-teacher in Italy who believes so strongly in his method that he wants to make it available to others. It is an unusual career path, intended, among other things, to encourage

young and searching people to keep finding their way forward, even in seemingly hopeless situations.... There is no 'straight' path to becoming a teacher-clown.

The following four short chapters explore the role of the clown, beginning with his subversive power in the circus as a supposed fool whom everyone laughs at. However, the *theatrical clown* often possesses another power that goes unnoticed. Here, Carroll refers to the French theatre educator and mime artist Jacques Lecoq, whose primary aim is to provide learners with tools for their own personal creativity. The red nose, as the smallest of masks, helps them to discover this – and to create a strong complicity (*complicité*) between the performer and the audience through play ... ideally, the clown responds to cues from the audience and thereby develops his performance further.

Carroll defines *play* as follows: "To enter a state of meaningful exploration and discovery of one's physical and cognitive worlds for the purpose of self-growth and learning." (Carroll, 2024, p. 19)

According to Carroll, the urge to play is innate in humans. In order to learn through play, learning environments must be created that are *joyful, meaningful, actively engaging, iterative* and *socially interactive* (Carroll, 2024, pp. 21–22). Learners must trust the teacher. The teacher is responsible for the learning environment, but also for setting boundaries and upholding rules. The subject matter to be learnt determines the boundaries within which the 'creative journey' of the *teacher-clown* and pupils can unfold ... and it is hardly surprising that the more play is involved, the greater the fun becomes. In an institutional context (school, university), it is important to maintain a balance between learning objectives and play – whilst never letting the thread of play break. However, once rules have been established, according to Carroll, they should not be abandoned; instead, the teacher should support and empower weaker pupils within the framework of the rules, for example by making a mistake themselves. However, they should always play as if 'their life depended on it' (Carroll, 2024, p. 28) – precisely because children play that way too. The reviewers, who have teaching experience, doubt, however, whether this could be sustained.

In the fifth chapter, 'Games', Carroll offers practical ideas for making lessons more playful through his collection of 19 games. Here, didactics deliberately takes a step back. The focus is on the flexibility of the *teacher-clown*, who takes the pupils' energy levels into account, as well as on their attention to mistakes: When they occur, they are celebrated, allowing failure to become first a source of enjoyment and ultimately a positive learning experience.

A recurring element of Carroll's concept of failure is 'punishment'. Punishments are agreed upon together with the pupils and can, for example, take the form of squats in front of the whole class for arriving late or for a mistake in pronunciation or grammar.

The 23 exercises in the sixth chapter, 'Exercises', focus on various aspects of speaking: speaking in front of others, spontaneous speaking, responding to questions, consolidating vocabulary, etc.

The following chapter, 'Use of Theatre', interrupts the list and description of practical games and exercises. Here, Carroll emphasizes the benefits of theatre-based methods in foreign language teaching: among other things, they help students to develop greater self-confidence and emotional maturity and foster certain life skills. Theatre is described as a 'powerful tool for self-expression' (Carroll, 2024, p. 65), offering an alternative to social media and digital devices.

The eighth chapter, 'Theatre Exercises', comprises ten warm-up exercises and ten language games, many of which are performed in a circle, whilst others require greater freedom of movement throughout the room. The instructions are clearly written and easy to follow, meaning they can be used without difficulty in one's own groups. The exercises and games tested by the reviewers so far have gone smoothly and are likely to be used even more frequently in lessons.

The next chapter offers a brief discussion of acting using emotions compared to technical acting (*truthful acting vs. technical acting*) (Carroll, 2024, p. 97). As recalling true emotions does not come easily to everyone (particularly younger children), it is helpful to provide detailed stage directions. Carroll demonstrates this in the chapter 'Theatre Sketches in the Classroom' using six sketches. The pupils are given text-only versions, whilst the teacher's version includes detailed stage directions so that the teacher can instruct the group accordingly.

The eleventh chapter, 'Creating Theatre', outlines the structure of a sample workshop. The reviewers particularly liked the idea of telling a story using just three images and were inspired to try it themselves. The exercise is broken down into small steps and clearly illustrated using an example scenario. The subsequent steps, showing how the images can be developed into a comprehensive story or even a full-length play, are also convincingly presented.

The appendix is available exclusively online and is intended to be accessible via a password-protected link on Carroll's website. At the time of writing, the appendix was not available there. However, upon personal request to the author, it was sent immediately. The appendix includes a list of sources, links to recommended videos on topics such as learning through theatre methods and creativity, as well as worksheets and supporting materials for the exercises described in the book, etc.

Carroll: Class Clown

Class Clown is a very personal book. Throughout, the author draws on his own experiences, such as his professional background or anecdotes from everyday teaching life. This makes the book lively and easy to read (even for non-native English speakers). It is well structured, and the exercise instructions are clear and easy to follow. It is particularly useful for teachers who do not yet have much experience in teaching a foreign language using theatre or clowning methods and are still finding their way, but experienced teachers can also discover new ideas or rethink established routines.

Bibliography

Carroll, C. (2024). *Class Clown. Fooling them into Learning*.