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Humor in the Foreign Language Classroom

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Abstract

Humor is a notoriously vague construct, often identified not by formal definition but by individual intuition (Bell, 2009). This makes it rather difficult to study or categorize concisely – indeed, analyzing humor or explaining a joke is often thought to remove the fundamental enjoyment from the experience. Despite the inherent hazards, this research seeks to provide further insight into the effects and potential applications of humor in the foreign language (FL) classroom, guided by the following research question: *How does L1 humor, specifically when used as a pedagogical tool, influence students' affective filters in a college-level elementary foreign language classroom?* Toward this end, I collected observation and interview data from students in a college-level elementary French class regarding their response to various types of humor at play in their classroom. Through qualitative data analysis, I then categorized my findings into three key themes related to the effects of humor. This study's results lend insight that could shape language instructors' attitudes toward humor in the classroom, and consequently their methods of teaching and interacting with students. Additionally, I hope that the gaps in this research will elucidate avenues for future study in this rich field.

Introduction

Foreign language (FL) pedagogy has seen much evolution as language instruction research progresses, from the grammar-translation methods to the audio-lingual, to the current emphasis on communicative competence. The diverse facets that combine to make an effective FL classroom could be studied in a myriad of different manners as researchers strive to formulate a concept of "best practice." Toward this end, this paper will examine the effects of humor on a particular college-level FL classroom, through qualitative data collection and synthesis of the themes that present themselves during the course of the study.

Literature Review

Preliminary Key Constructs

One factor that must be addressed in the context of this study is the affective filter. As presented by Krashen (1981) and explained by Du (2009), the affective filter hypothesis posits a mental block that prevents comprehensible input from being used for language acquisition. Factors affecting the affective filter include student motivation, attitude, anxiety, and self-confidence (Du, 2009). Additionally, for the purposes of this research, I've restricted the discussion of pedagogical tools to resources which support and enhance teaching. In referring to foreign language (FL) classrooms, I wish to demarcate mainly classrooms in which students learn a language that is not a commonly used language in the country in which they live.

Secondary Key Constructs

In accordance with the findings to be presented later in this paper, it will be necessary to address in this section the constructs of power distance and willingness to communicate (WTC). As introduced by Hofstede (2011) in his seminal categorization of selected constructs in intercultural communication, power distance is the "the extent to which the less powerful members of organizations and institutions (like the family) accept and expect that power is distributed unequally" (p. 9). Specifically, power distance is the perceived legitimacy of hierarchy within a social organization, as defined not only by those at the upper levels, but as upheld by those in the lower ranks of the pyramid. For this study, I will focus on the level of informality in the classroom, and the approachability of the professor as key elements of power distance. Willingness to communicate, on the other hand, is characterized by the intersection of students' perceived communicative competence and their level of anxiety in the FL classroom (Yashima, 2002). Students who believe themselves to have a greater ability to communicate and lower anxiety in the FL classroom will typically be more willing to speak up in class and practice using the L2. These two constructs will be used to frame much of the Findings and Discussion section.

Approach to Humor

In order to engage with the discussion of humor in the foreign language classroom and its effect on students' affective filters, we must first broach the construct of humor itself. Because humor is a broad concept and rather difficult to define, many previous studies have relied on readers' intuitive understanding of what humor is (Bell, 2009). A few trends can be identified in what we recognize as humor: subverting expectations, such as violating Gricean maxims, politeness conventions, social taboos, etc.; joking (not canned jokes, but interactional humor and joking *with* students); exaggeration and sarcasm; and self-deprecation (Azizifard & Jalali, 2012; Dynel, 2009). Nevertheless, Bell warns that while these typologies might be a good starting point for understanding varieties of humor, humor is complex and these categorizations "cannot be taken as accurately representing conversational joking" (2009, p. 244).

If meticulous typologies of humor are thus deemed inadequate, and intuition remains a major categorizing factor, how do we see that previous researchers have gone about studying it in classrooms? Beginning with a framework common in educational research, Askildson (2005) categorized his discussion according to direct and indirect effects of humor – the former affecting the saliency of input and information retention, and the latter influencing the general class environment and affective factors. While the direct effects have been analyzed well through experimental testing and detailed qualitative research, as in Zabidin (2015), the indirect effects have only recently begun to receive attention in the literature, perhaps due to their less defined nature.

Norrick (2010) discusses indirect effects in his article on interactional humor, noting that humor "contributes to the creation of identity and fosters group rapport" (p. 240). He also notes that joking works as "positive politeness" that builds camaraderie by lessening the distance between speakers and reducing the threat of any impositions on the listener (Norrick, 2010). An important construct that he addresses is how the framing of actions in a sociolinguistic context determines the reactions they will elicit. Linguistic and paralinguistic features can signal a "play" context rather than a serious one, setting the stage for the entire interaction. Within a play frame, even insulting, mocking, or otherwise impolite speech acts can be received good-naturedly (Norrick, 2010). Face work also becomes relevant here, as joking can be used to reduce the threat of impositions on the listener and save face for either interlocutor (Norrick, 2010).

Further in Askildson's research, he discusses humor as he sees it: "a pedagogical instrument like any other, and one which serves as a double-edged sword–capable of improving or harming the classroom environment depending on its employment by the teacher" (Askildson, 2005, p. 48-49). He notes the possible negative effects of offense and confusion if humor is employed improperly or in a poor context. In his own study, Askildson utilized a Likert-scaled questionnaire targeting students in various language classes, aiming for a representative sample of perspectives. The majority of participants reported that they felt either noticeably or considerably more relaxed in class when humor was employed, and students perceived teachers as more approachable when they used humor. Participants also seemed to view target language (TL) humor as an important tool in language and cultural learning.

Classroom language in general presents an interesting setting for humor research. In their 2014 publication, Bell and Pomerantz argue that much of formal language instruction is a fiction, or more accurately a *fabrication*, as teachers and learners are aware that most classroom language varies significantly from authentic communication among native speakers. Humor seeps into this crack, as it is readily acknowledged that stylistic variation and non-serious talk are ubiquitous in real-world interactions. Although Bell and Pomerantz are not the first to criticize the constraints of language education, their paper begins to fill the gap in applying alternative conceptions of language to L2 pedagogy, increasing the focus on interaction and communicative competency. Notably, they indicate that “humor and language play allow for and even require learners to adopt a view of communication that is predicated on joint negotiation, emergence of meaning, and mediation” (Bell & Pomerantz, 2014, p. 40). Using humor to emphasize these factors in a language classroom encourages learners to creatively utilize both communicative and interpretive resources as they interact in the classroom.

Narrowing in to the use of L1 humor in FL classrooms, Askildson (2005) notes, “The overwhelming majority of those surveyed indicated that even general (non-target language) humor was an important element of creating an overall environment conducive to learning. Specifically, participants indicated reduced anxiety/tension, improved approachability of teachers, and increased levels of interest as a result of humor usage by the teacher" (p. 55). Notably, these factors of reduced anxiety and motivation are associated with the lowering of the affective filter. Askildson goes on to state that humor's perceived importance in learning should guide our consideration of the concept in research on pedagogy (2005, p. 56). Finally, Askildson notes that "humor's evident ability to lower the affective filter makes a strong argument in and of itself for explicit inclusion of humor in a language educational context" (2005, p. 49). Given the results of his own research and of others' in the field, Askildson significantly advocates further research on the pedagogical effects of humor in language-specific classrooms.

Researchers Ziyaeemehr and Kumar (2014) also address a few aspects of humor's role in the foreign language classroom, particularly its role in "foregrounding form," "highlighting cultural dissimilarities," and the notion of a "play frame," similar to Norrick's construct (2010, p. 3). A major role they elucidate is highlighting content and drawing students' attention through the use of humor. It also brings cultural and linguistic dissimilarities into relief, thanks to contrasting expectations. Additionally, putting recasts of errors and more difficult language distinctions into a play frame both more politely corrects students' errors and also serves to draw students' attention to the particular structure in question (Ziyaeemehr & Kumar, 2014, p. 7). These features form a useful framework to analyze both the direct and indirect effects of humor in a foreign language classroom.

Lastly, Bilokcuoglu and Debreli (2018) tout the potential of humor in "creating an affirmative environment and for establishing a less authoritarian way of teaching, leading to the reduction of affective filter among learners" (p. 356). Their article points out that given the prevalence of humor in everyday interactions, and the potential of humor in classroom settings, it is surprising that more research has not been done on how to best utilize it as a motivational and tension-reducing tool. Especially in communicative classrooms, humor allows teachers to assume the role of facilitators instead of high-authority lecturers. Often, teachers view humor as a distraction, or something causing a lack of control, rather than as a tool for effective learning. Used correctly, humor can foster a sense of belonging for students, and allow them to participate without losing face. These ideas must be balanced with the potential negative effects of overusing humor; sarcastic humor especially can lead to confusion in the L2, and humor directed too frequently at a single person might be misinterpreted and produce negative effects, depending on the type of humor used. Bilokcuoglu and Debreli (2018) conclude by stressing the need for more research on humor in actual language classrooms.

A Particular Need

Because this is still a growing niche in linguistics, it is evident that much research remains to be done on specific classroom situations in which humor is used (Askildson, 2005; Bell & Pomerantz, 2014; Bilokcuoglu & Debreli, 2018). As it stands now, there is a disconnect between theory and studies. Much of the existing research is either larger questionnaire-based studies like Askildson’s, which provide more quantitative findings, or simply theoretical discussions on humor’s potential in language classrooms. As these researchers make clear, case study research in actual classroom situations is necessary to invigorate the academic conversation concerning the effects of humor usage. I hope that my study can contribute to bridging this gap. Therefore, within this context, I present my research question as follows: *How does L1 humor, specifically when used as a pedagogical tool, influence students’ affective filters in a college-level elementary foreign language classroom?*

Methods

This research, framed as a case study of a college-level elementary French classroom, was comprised of a mixture of classroom observations and interviews of students in that class for the purposes of triangulation (Harbon & Shen, 2010). The beginning French class, offered at a small liberal arts college in the midwestern United States, consisted of eight college-aged students and one professor. Due to the school's COVID-19 protocol in the fall 2020 semester, full class attendance was occasionally disrupted by student quarantines or absences. Despite this, students were usually able to participate in class over Zoom, and I was able to collect sufficient data from the remaining in-person students.

In order to formulate a rough observation scheme (Harbon & Shen, 2010), I began by conducting a preliminary observation of the French class to provide a framework for the later observations. Harbon and Shen (2010) also suggest that researchers may wish to seek a balance between an observation scheme and field notes to include additional aspects that a structured protocol might not capture. For this reason, I collected both field notes (loosely guided by my preliminary observation) and video recordings of four fifty-minute class sessions, over the course of several weeks in the middle of the fall semester. To uphold an unobtrusive, non-judgmental yet emic observation style, I recorded these class meetings from a back corner of the classroom. I did not participate in class activities, but I introduced myself before the first observation and made friendly conversation with the students before and after class so they would be more comfortable with my presence in the classroom. This posture was indubitably aided by my own membership as a student at the school. Additionally, my repeated presence in the class contributed to a reduction in observer effect (Labov, 1972).

Of the eight students in the class, four consented to be interviewed. The duration of each interview was approximately forty minutes. An emphasis on co-construction and reflexivity (Mann, 2011) guided the development of interview questions, as well as the reflection on the collected data. The interview protocol for this study (see Appendix A) consisted of questions designed to both assemble an interviewee profile and to elicit their perspectives on classroom humor (Wagner, 2010). In each of the interviews, I first explained the concept and goals of this study and their role as an interviewee, and then initiated simple conversation to set them at ease. I then transitioned to more intentional questions concerning their language experience, humor preferences, and general attitudes. We continued with a discussion of the participant's perspectives on class humor in general, as well as of specific instances from the class periods (Harbon & Shen, 2010; Wagner, 2010).

Throughout the interviews, I intentionally paraphrased interviewee's words back to them and directly invited validation or correction of the stated concepts to ensure accuracy, as a form of member checking (Mann, 2011). Due to this emphasis on co-construction and natural elicitation of data (Mann, 2011), each interview naturally followed a slightly different train of conversation. The questions listed in the interview protocol were mere starting points, as the goal of the interviews was to begin a conversation around the context to elicit a more holistic understanding of the situation (Harbon & Shen, 2010). Finally, as suggested by Mann (2011), I embraced my own interactional influence and potential bias as a peer researcher, student, and fellow language learner, using these as an opportunity to elicit student responses in a manner that researchers of other backgrounds might not be able to employ. I obtained approval from the university's Institutional Review Board to conduct this study.

The process of data analysis was greatly shaped by the acknowledgment of my underlying assumptions as a student researcher, and involved an additional level of reflexivity to mitigate unwanted skew because of this (Mann, 2011; Wagner, 2010). My method of data collection was informed by Holiday (2010); based on his suggestions, I began with broad observations, then moved to personalized thick descriptions, and landed on focused inquiry. My approach was shaped by transparency in method, submission to data, and dedication to making appropriate claims in order to maintain reliability (Holliday, 2010). According to the suggestions of Wagner (2010), I also considered the effects of self-deception bias and acquiescence bias on participants' responses to interview questions. In analysis, I strove to let the research be driven by the themes elucidated by the data. To draw proper conclusions from subjective data, I coded my transcribed interviews and portions of the video recordings from observations, then grouped them according to themes. These themes were then coalesced into a tentative argument and revised according to the continual refining of my data analyses, gradually approaching a formal set of findings (Holliday, 2010).

Findings and Discussion

Reflection on the Research Question

How does L1 humor, specifically when used as a pedagogical tool, influence students' affective filters in a college-level elementary foreign language classroom?

During the course of this study, diverse themes emerged from the data beyond what I had originally anticipated in my research question. Originally, I expected to gather information concerning humor as a pedagogical tool and its effect on the affective filter. However, no students reported seeing humor as a tool; on the contrary, Participant 1 noted, "I do think a lot of this is just her personality. I do think she *likes* to make us laugh, but I don't think she goes out of her way to make us laugh." The other three participants expressed similar impressions, commenting that the professor's style of humor seems to be a natural extension of her personality. Additionally, I can report little on the affective filter element, which I had used as a framing device for my research question. The data gathered does not emphasize the affective filter element as expected. Rather, as I questioned my participants, three themes emerged: power distance, self-effacing humor, and willingness to communicate (WTC). These constructs, as a natural outpouring of my data, have consequently become the focus of my findings.

Power Distance

The concept of power distance, though less-cited in language instruction research than in intercultural communication studies, is certainly at play in this French classroom (Hofstede, 2011). Power distance appears to be largely tied to class environment in this situation; the professor's low power distance structure in class was evident in the field observations, and all four participants reported class factors related to lower power distance. Participant 1 introduced the concept of power distance unprompted, noting, "She's… to refer to it in intercultural terms, very low power distance structure. Which works, because I have a very low power distance structure." He further described the professor's teaching style as "easygoing, very informal." Participant 2 affirmed that her lighthearted humor makes her classroom very relaxed, saying, "It's a main contributor to her classroom environment, that it can be so open – she makes jokes about herself." Participants 3 and 4 brought up the professor's graceful response to confrontational questions, tying that response to the fact that she does not see correction as a threat to her authority. Participant 4 also discussed how the professor trusts and respects her students enough to give them freedom in the classroom and with homework.

These findings align with Tananuraksakul's observations that "breaking down the high degree of PD [power distance] can help boost the affective sides to some degrees" (2013, p. 112). In this manner, the findings of lowered power distance in the classroom are still tied to the construct of the affective filter. Many of the same factors are intertwined here, including a relaxed atmosphere and more individual freedom.

Self-Effacing Humor

In many ways, the power distance in this classroom was affected by the professor's particular brand of humor. Labeled "self-effacing" by Students 1 and 4, her humor is characterized by lighthearted exaggeration, usually at her own expense. According to Participants 1 and 2, it often feels spontaneous or situational – "opportunistic," according to Student 1 – and makes constructive use of "teachable moments" built on her own slips in class. Participant 4 mentioned that this communicates a perception of mistakes as ways to learn. Through classroom observations, it was also evident that the professor subtly shapes their perspective of communication in the FL context by lessening the gravity surrounding language errors and presenting them as continuous opportunities instead of fatal failures.

One example of this professor's humor, noted during the observational stage of the research, involves a poorly drawn stick-figure. As part of a vocabulary illustration, the professor attempted to draw a person on the whiteboard, but many of the limbs were obviously disjointed and the head was floating ominously above the body. As the students started to chuckle at the figure, which appeared to need medical attention, the professor quickly looked back at the class and declared, "*Je suis artiste!* [I am an artist!]" with a dramatic wave of her hand.

This sort of arrogance, exaggerated with a grin, is well-tempered by the professor's quick willingness to admit her own mistakes and share embarrassing stories about her language gaffes.

"She sometimes talks about her own *faux paus* and… mistakes she had in French, stories with her husband's family," noted Participant 3. "She's comfortable making fun of herself." This sharing also contributes to the perception of low power distance in the classroom, instituting a sense of relatability and shared experience with the students. These frequent airy asides contribute to what Norrick (2010) would label a "play" context, allowing students to interact with every aspect of the class in a less-threatening manner. When prompted to discuss their perception of the professor's humor, three of the four participants made sure to clarify that humor was not a distraction within the classroom, but rather a beneficial and engaging aspect that increased their level of comfort in class.

Willingness to Communicate

Each of the previously-mentioned factors affects students' WTC, an overarching theme highlighted by the interviewed students. The lowered power distance and use of humor both contribute to an affirmative class environment. All four participants stated that the professor's humor contributed to an open environment in which they felt more comfortable practicing the language. As Participant 3 put it, "She puts people at ease with her humor and makes situations easier to be in." Particularly by laughing at her own mistakes easily, the professor shows students that they can make mistakes too. She also tries to break things down when they seem difficult. "She'll just make some lighthearted comments as she's writing things down on the board… she makes the language feel more manageable," Participant 2 explained.

All four participants noted that they felt very comfortable in the class and free to try speaking, despite the risk of making mistakes. Even those who admitted they were not yet incredibly confident in their language skills reported this feeling of comfort in the French classroom. As Student 3 attested, "I'm not a person who would raise my hand or speak out in class, but it's easier to do that in her class." Likewise, Participant 2 noted that humor keeps her engaged in the class, increasing her WTC because of the interaction and sense of personal investment with the professor.

Additional Themes

Another tangential theme elucidated by the interviews was the professor's investment and care for her students. Participant 4 established that making the effort to use humor shows that the professor is more engaged in the class herself, using it as a way to check in on students. "If the teacher seems uninterested or stiff… how are the students supposed to pay attention or be interested?" she asks. Participant 3 affirms this, saying, "When the professor cares, it's easier for you to care." Students also cited this personal attention as a contributing factor to WTC.

Limitations & Further Research

Some of the major limitations of this study were the short span allotted for data collection, the limited number of participants, students' perceptions of me as a researcher, and of course my own biases. The restrictions of this study allowed for only a few observation sessions, collected over a limited period of time, and are not necessarily representative of the class dynamic throughout the semester. Additionally, future researchers should be warned that getting more than half of an observed class to participate in interviews may be difficult. The pressures and busyness of college life often preclude students' willingness to accept interview requests. It should also be noted that while my group membership as a student at the same university shapes my own bias in terms of this research, it also benefited my data elicitation. Students demonstrated greater willingness to answer questions, to provide more of their personal perspectives, and to correct my interpretations of their answers than they likely would have in an interview conducted by an outsider, especially a researcher outside their age demographic.

Conclusion

The three main themes elucidated by my research each speak to a different yet interconnected facet of humor's potential in FL classrooms. Although little data concerning the affective filter or humor as a pedagogical tool was uncovered, the themes of power distance, willingness to communicate, and further description of self-effacing humor were prominent in the interviews. The professor's use of humor contributed to an informal and relaxed class environment with a sense of individual freedom. These elements, consistent with a low power distance, also served to lower the students' affective filters. Additionally, the self-effacing nature of the professor's humor is conducive to the low power distance within the classroom. As the professor readily admitted and humorously recounted her own French mistakes, the students reported decreased anxiety and increased confidence in speaking up during class, particularly in regard to making mistakes of their own. Therefore, from the intersection of these themes, we can also conclude that willingness to communicate is affected by the use of humor in the FL classroom. Overall, this research continues to expand the conversation around humor in FL classrooms, into which further investigation is still much needed. My study presents a sense of direction for future researchers, who can compare the results of their own research with my findings and establish greater credibility for the study of humor and other, less well-defined pragmatic aspects of linguistics in general. Further research along the lines of this study might utilize a different approach to investigate the affective filter element of my research question. Study could also be done into the question of whether humor is solely a personality characteristic, as some of my participants noted, or if it can be planned and harnessed in the classroom.

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Appendix A

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Interviewee Profile

- Tell me about your language learning experience so far – what do you think of the French language?
- Would you describe yourself as a funny person?
- What do you consider funny – what makes you laugh in normal life?
    - Describe your sense of humor (dry humor, sitcom humor, memes?)
- What do you think a good language classroom should look like?

Classroom Experience

- What are your thoughts about this French class?
- On a scale of "I feel like I'm at home" to "I might as well be on the operating table staring up at the surgeon," how comfortable are you in the classroom? (Both on average and when you're asked to use French.)
- How would you describe your professor?
- What is your relationship with your classmates like? How would you describe the class dynamic?
- Could you give me an example of something funny from French class this week? How did you/the class respond?
- How do you feel when the professor uses humor? How do you think the other students feel about it?
    - Does the use of humor make you more or less comfortable? (Both in general and in using French.)
- Do you think the funny elements of class have any effect on how you're learning the language? If so, how?