

# THE LAUGHING CLASSROOM: HUMOR, TEACHING AND LEARNING

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## Abstract

Diverse strategies are employed nowadays to ascertain effective teaching-learning process. Among these methods chosen to achieve desired result is the making use of humor—a teaching approach which has been discerned as an effective way of creating a more productive teaching and learning, may it be language. This paper discusses the place and importance of humor to teachers, learners, and education as a whole. Barriers and guidelines to using humor are also discussed. The Biblical foundation of humor stresses the benefits humor (laughter) gives.

*Key words:* humor, teaching, learning, benefits.

## Introduction

One of the strategies used for effective teaching and learning is humor. It is considered “as a serious business” (Embalzado & Sajampun, 2020, p. 17) because of the challenges on how it is dealt. However, humor is a significant component specifically in learning. As Tuncay (2007) stresses, “life without humour is too awful a prospect to contemplate, but more fundamentally, because laughter lubricates learning (p. 2). No wonder, Ziyaeemehr and Kumar (2014) comment that humor is a fundamental unit of any language which plays an influence on how language is acquired or learned.

Studies reflected that there was no significant difference between the participants’ gender (Baleghizadeh & Ghoreishi, 2014; Ziyaeemehr & Kumar, 2014), age (Andarab & Mutlu, 2019), ethnicity (Ziyaeemehr & Kumar, 2014), education level (Andarab & Mutlu, 2019; Ziyaeemehr & Kumar, 2014), and their judgment of humor (Baleghizadeh & Ghoreishi, 2014). Also, there was indication that there was no significant difference between male and female instructors considering their embracing of humor styles in the classroom (Andarab & Mutlu, 2019). Furthermore, a study (see Aydemir, 2018) showed that students do not significantly differ in their opinions regarding the use of humor in education with respect to gender, neither the kind of schools they attend.

However, there is a correlation of a high level of instructor’s humor orientation and students’ second language learning perceptions (Ziyaeemehr & Kumar, 2014). Also, there is a strong correlation between how students regard second language learning and the importance and effects of humor (Ziyaeemehr & Kumar, 2014). Studies (Baleghizadeh & Ghoreishi, 2014; Kim & Park, 2017; Ziyaeemehr & Kumar, 2014) show the correlation of humor to learning.

## **Biblical Foundation of Humor**

Humor is a “type of expression and writing representing the humorous aspect of life by adorning with jokes and wit” (Kilic, 2016, p. 945). Humor is “the ability to be amused by something seen, heard, or thought about, sometimes causing you to smile or laugh, or the quality in something that causes such amusement” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2021). It is equated to *laughter*, “the feeling of amusement” (Collins English Dictionary, 2021).

The Holy Bible emphasizes the significance of laughter. King Solomon quotes “a merry heart maketh a cheerful countenance: but by sorrow of the heart the spirit is broken (Prov 15:13). King Solomon further exclaims that “a merry heart doeth good like a medicine: but a broken spirit drieth the bones (Prov 17:22).

King David also encourages laughter. “Then was our mouth filled with laughter, and our tongue with singing: then said they among the heathen, The Lord hath done great things for them (Ps 126:2). Prophet Jeremiah also states,

The voice of joy, and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom, and the voice of the bride, the voice of them that shall say, Praise the Lord of hosts: for the Lord is good; for his mercy endureth for ever: and of them that shall bring the sacrifice of praise into the house of the Lord. For I will cause to return the captivity of the land, as at the first, saith the Lord (Jer 33:11)

## **Place and Importance of Humor**

Studies (Aboudan, 2009; Andarab, 2019; Baleghizadeh & Ghoreishi, 2014; Hackathorn, Garczynski, Blankmeyer, Tennial, & Solomon, 2011; Kilic, 2016; Mahdiloo & Izadpanah, 2017; Nadeem, 2012; Rafiee, Kassaian, & Dastjerdi, 2010; Raghavendra, 2018; Stroud, 2013; Syafiq & Saleh, 2012; Tunnisa, Mahmud, & Salija, 2019) support the positive impact of humor. It enhances different aspects. This includes personality, teaching-learning process, and class environment.

**Personality.** Humor “develops the sensitivity, the empathizing ability and social facts’ multidimensional perception of individuals” (Kilic, 2016, p. 945). Humor enlivens life, entertains people, positively contributes to social relationships, and improves the imagination of individuals (Kilic, 2016, p. 945). In other words, humor has significant roles to one’s personality.

**Teaching-Learning Process.** Humor has significance in education. It enhances language teaching and learning. It is because humor is regarded as “one of the best ways to teach English language to prospective teachers who are taught about the seriousness of teaching as a profession” (Nadeem, 2012, p. 89). Positive humor climate styles are predominant in schools (Şahin, 2018) and that students like to have certain degree of humor (Embalzado & Sajampun, 2020).

Humor “reduced tension, made the students more comfortable in the teaching-learning process, created good interactions, led to more enthusiastic teaching-learning process, encouraged students’ attendance, and reduced the number of students who felt sleepy in the class” (Tunnisa, Mahmud, & Salija, 2019, p. 99). It

helps to “motivate the students for the course, to make the course more interesting, to increase the academic success of the students, and to improve the solution generation skills of the students (Kilic, 2016, p. 945). In other words, humor makes teaching and learning *fun*.

Humor can be in forms of humorous songs. Though humorous songs do not make much difference between immediate and delayed recall test scores, they aided in listening comprehension exercises (Rafiee, Kassaian, & Dastjerdi, 2010). Also, “Learning a construct through the use of humor was most effective for comprehension level quiz items” (p. 116). In other words, humor helps learner’s advancement. Given this, teachers could start friendly relations with learners with the help of humor—a significant factor for language teaching and learning (Nadeem, 2012).

Furthermore, humor enhances learner’s linguistic skills, vocabulary (Kilic, 2016), and writing (Skalicky, Berger, Crossley, & McNamara, 2016). It maximizes learning results in tertiary classrooms (Hackathorn, Garczynski, Blankmeyer, Tennial, & Solomon, 2011). This is because humor improves learners’ “retention, willingness to participation, enjoyment in learning and classroom atmosphere, as well as a lowering of anxiety” (Stroud, 2013, p. 72). Thus, teachers need to employ humor.

Study (see Hackathorn, Garczynski, Blankmeyer, Tennial, & Solomon, 2011) also stresses that “using humor to teach material significantly increased students’ overall performance on exams, particularly on knowledge and comprehension level quiz items” (p. 116). Vocabulary is enhanced by using humorous contexts through pictures (Andarab, 2019), and humorous movie clips (Mahdilo & Izadpanah, 2017). Furthermore, humor enhances receptive skills over productive skills (Baleghizadeh & Ghoreishi, 2014).

Moreover, humor “increases social bonding between teachers and students, salience of information, and ultimately recall and retention” (Al-Duleimi & Aziz, 2016, p. 105). Humor may be “used as an effective form of communication and socialization tool” (Kilic, 2016, p. 945). It creates learner’s confidence to learn and communicate in English (Raghavendra, 2018). Thus, teachers are challenged to make their classrooms more attractive and pleasant through humor (Aboudan, 2009) because humor increases learners' overall performance (Al-Duleimi & Aziz, 2016).

***Class Environment.*** Through humor, the learning environment is more pleasant (Kilic, 2016). Humor, an effective tool, enhances creativity and appropriately set class environment for language learning (Rafiee, Kassaian, & Dastjerdi, 2010). Nadeem (2012) states that,

Dominating language instructors hardly set such an environment that could promote effective English language teaching/learning. Hence, it recommends that humor may be considered as one of the best ways of teaching English as a foreign language to prospective teachers and should also be taken as teaching aid like others (p. 89)

## **Humor and Teacher**

Language teachers need to employ different strategies in teaching to involve students towards a successful learning. A study (see Baleghizadeh & Ghoreishi, 2014) showed that among the school coursebooks, English Language Teaching coursebook “has a statistically more significant position in incorporating humor” (p. 187). Also, a study conducted by Tunnisa, Mahmud, and Salija (2019) in Indonesia gave recommendations that teachers need to come up with effective teacher-students interaction in their teaching. Thus, Huss & Eastep (2016), elaborates,

Instructors overall considered humor to be an integral part of their teaching plan and that humor relaxes students, contributes to a more enjoyable classroom climate, and helps students make content connections, in both traditional and web based classes. Despite general acceptance, the feedback suggested instructors could benefit from targeted training in how to effectively and consistently use humor as a teaching strategy, particularly in their online courses (p. 39)

According to Tunnisa, Mahmud, and Salija (2019), there are several kinds of humor which includes related humor, unrelated humor, self-disparaging humor, and unplanned humor. The kind of humor teacher employ should be hostile and sarcastic but good-natured (Nienaber, Abrams, & Segrist, 2019). Teachers are not only advised to strategically incorporate humor in their teaching because of the positive impact it gives to learners—long-term desire to learn a language (Tong & Tsung, 2020), but also to take into account the flaws of the improper usage of humor (Ali, Ali, & Rahman, n.d.). A study (see Kim & Park, 2017) recommended that teachers are to “provide funny examples using humorous activities or introducing interesting cultural information” (p. 241) and that “humor should be lesson-relevant, appropriate to students’ linguistic level, and used in a careful manner” (Kim & Park, 2017, p. 241).

## **Barriers and Guidelines to Using Humor**

**Barriers.** There are possible barriers for humor inclusion in learning. These may include “teacher disapproval, student confidence issues and language problems with being humorous in the [second language]” (Stroud, 2013, p. 72). Barriers may also include, “humor is not in their personality,” “they lack competence to create humor in L2,” and “they are more syllabus-oriented” (Ziyaeemehr, Kumar, & Faiz Abdullah, 201, p. 111).

**Guidelines.** Given this, Stroud (2013) suggested ten-step directions (see Table 1) for teachers in their desire to employ humor as a “potential catalyst for learning . . . ” (p. 80).

Table 1 Ten Steps for Teachers to Use Humor Effectively in Learning

Step	
1 Implement humor into your own dialogue and actions.	7 Provide students with the language and knowledge necessary to be humorous in the L2.
2 Implement humor into your classroom materials and visuals.	8 Give positive feedback for humor usage by students.
<i>Using jokes, humorous gestures and noises in the interactions with students.</i>	9 Follow up classes with feedback to ensure that students are still performing adequately in their learning.
<i>Using pictures and videos which induce laughter in the classroom.</i>	10 Be an active and willing participant with humor yourself. A teacher who is enjoying a class themselves is more likely to spread motivation to their students
3 Where possible, ensure students only work with or present to students whom they are comfortable using humor with.	<i>Allowing students to form their own choice of groups once humorous output of the task has been explained.</i>
4 Encourage student humor, but give students the choice of whether to use humor or not.	<i>Allowing groups or individuals a choice between producing output such as a comical news report or a serious one (with no preference in choice from the teacher).</i>
5 Explain potential discipline issues to classes (noise for example) that may occur due to humor usage and express your expectations of students' behavior during class work.	<i>Drawing up of class rules with regards to humor usage prior to undertaking classwork.</i>
6 Identify when students are uncomfortable with using humor and offer them alternatives in their learning.	<i>Offering a switch of activity content (from a comical play to a more dramatic one for</i>

*example) for students throughout class time.*

*Allowing groups a practice period with the teacher and feedback on language use before presenting work to their class.*

*Allocating a score for humor usage in classwork to further demonstrate acceptance*

*and approval of its use.*

*Obtaining feedback from classes in the form of test scores, interviews, observations or surveys to ensure that humor is having a positive effect on learning.*

*Creating your own teacher's version of student classwork during class to further emphasize approval and potential enjoyment of using humor.*

### **Summary**

Humor, a strategy that can be employed for teaching-learning process, has challenges in its usage. However, it has advantages to both teachers and students alike. Humor lubricates learning and is a factor for language acquisition.

Learners do not significantly differ in their opinions regarding humor in education in terms of gender and schools they attend. However, there is a correlation of teacher's humor orientation and learners' comprehension of the second language learning, and how learners take into account the impact of humor and second language learning. These show that humor impacts learning.

The Holy Bible stresses the importance of humor which is equated to the word *laughter*. It is reflected in the books penned by King Solomon and King David. Both King Solomon and King David encourage to keep laughter in one's heart.

Humor has its place and importance in a teacher, learner, and in education as a whole. Humor gives life and positively enhances social relationships. It reduces stress, gives comfort, make good interactions, et cetera. Thus, teachers are encouraged to employ humor.

There are certain barriers to using humor. However, there are guidelines to follow for its positive usage. Humor, when properly employed, brings benefits.

### **Conclusions/Recommendation**

The usage of humor in teaching-learning process may be challenging. However, humor when properly employed, has advantages that outweighs its challenges. Even the Holy Bible mentions about the benefits of humor in one's life.

Therefore, it is recommended for teachers to properly employ humor. A *laughing classroom* is effective. A *laughing classroom* has many advantages.

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