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Use of Humor in Multicultural Classroom¹

By Sari Alatalo^{*} | Anne Poutiainen^{}**

Abstract

The primary objective of the present paper is to discuss and analyse the use of humor in the context of multicultural classroom. This primarily theoretical discussion also attempts to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how humor can be employed in teaching and instruction thus contributing to learning. Fundamentally, the intention is to determine dimensions of appropriate and benevolent humor in terms of learning. The questions to be considered in this paper are as follows: 1) what the humor is like in classroom, and 2) why humor used in classroom is regarded appropriate or inappropriate. For this paper, humor in classroom is studied in the light of topic related literature. Humor as a complex form of communication is discussed here by reviewing a number of academic publications on the topic. Furthermore, the two pivotal concepts of humor and culture are discussed briefly. This theoretical overview is also supplemented by a few student interviews from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. The present paper focuses mainly on the theoretical aspects of classroom humor and humor as a pedagogical tool. Through this mainly theoretically oriented study, our aim is to identify some of those features which could potentially contribute to the use of appropriate humor as derived from the Instructional Humor Processing Theory (IHPT) and previous research findings. In conclusion, this study offers some viewpoints on humorous features relevant to promoting an inspiring learning experience.

Keywords

humor, pedagogy, Instructional Humor Processing Theory (IHPT), multicultural classroom

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1 Introduction

Intuitively, we expect to encounter humor in various contexts. It can, as Schmitz (2002) argues, be considered to intimately relate to human nature. According to a survey (Karvinen, 2003), children and young people laugh more than adults: a six-year-old child may laugh as much as 400 times a day whereas adults only 15 times. Humor as well as laughter is universal and the best proof of the ‘psychic unity of mankind’; a person who has never had an experience of mirth and joy is practically nonexistent (Apte, 1985).

Humor is universal but still, it comprises a complex dimension of human experience. As regards to creating different forms of humor, it is the complex synthesis of language and imagination that provides the framework for this (Martin, 2007). Nonetheless, there is a great amount of spontaneous interpersonal humor and laughter involved in our everyday lives; the idea is just to have a laugh with no particular goal in mind. In fact, most humor experiences and laughter incidents arise spontaneously in interaction with others (Martin and Kuiper, 1999).

Although humor comes in many forms and shapes in diverse contexts, several theories presume certain universal mechanisms in the understanding and creation of humor. Regardless of the cultural background, those with high humor competence seem to be highly valued and respected, and they can even become ‘professional humor producers’ (Apte, 1985; Martin, 2007; Wagner & Urios-Aparisi, 2011). Humor has developed into a universal mode of communication with a variety of functions such as promoting social inclusion and exclusion; reducing and reinforcing status differences as well as strengthening the feeling of connectedness (Banas, Dunbar, Liu, & Rodriguez, 2011; Martin, *ibid.*). We are truly an affinity-seeking species with a desire to spread humorous messages around us.

The ever-intriguing topic of humor has fascinated a wide range of academic disciplines thus making it a truly interdisciplinary area of study. Humor studies draw from research conducted in anthropology, semiotics, philology, psychology, linguistics, mathematics, sociology, literature, philosophy and education (Schmitz, 2002; Wagner, & Urios-Aparisi, 2011; Attardo, 2009). As for the discipline of psychology, little notice has been taken of humor as a subject of research. However, Martin (2007) suggests that psychology might considerably contribute to for example the education and workplace related branches of psychology.

2 Use of humor in classroom

Several scholarly studies indicate that employing strategies of humorous communication in instruction has proved beneficial (for review, see Wanzer, M. B., Frymier, A. B., Wojtaszczyk, A. M., & Smith, T., 2006). It has even been claimed that humor serves as an educator’s “most powerful resource” to achieve optimal learning results (Cornett, 1986). Further, Kher, Molstad, and Donahue (1999) and Check (1997) share the understanding that pleasant classroom atmosphere and positive teaching approach advance learning and learning outcomes. In addition to humor being an integral part of educational setting, humor also has important roles with targeted purposes in social interaction (Wagner & Urios-Aparasi, 2011). Drawing from our personal experience as teachers, boredom might be the most challenging pedagogical obstacle to teaching.

Despite possible negative functions, the socially positive functions of humor are undisputable ranging from enhancing social cohesion to facilitating cooperation and undermining power. As

concisely summarized by Berk (1998), multiple studies have proposed a number of beneficial, both physiological and psychological, effects of humor on an individual. In the case of classroom setting, the results are scientifically less unequivocal as there are a number of factors co-affecting the process (see e.g. Wanzer, Frymier, & Irwin, 2010; Bolkan & Goodboy, 2015).

According to Martin (2007), humor has had many social functions during the course of human evolution. Attardo (2009), in particular, has focused on these social functions performed by humor. He classifies humor acts into four major classes: social management, decommitment, mediation, and defunctionalization. The first one refers to cases in which humor is employed as a method to facilitate and strengthen interaction and bonding in a group. Wagner and Urios-Aparasi (2011) sum up this as all the effects concerning group-pertinence and social control. It is, however, worth noting that there is a more sinister side to social control - exclusion of certain individuals from the group. The second class, decommitment, deals with humorous remarks intended to save the speaker's face in case the remark is too threatening to the receiver. Mediation, in turn, is about devices used to introduce potentially embarrassing or aggressive interactions. Lastly, defunctionalized language is not for transmission of information, but for playful and lucid purposes.

Martin (2007) has adopted a psychological approach by introducing a classification system of humor based on three major functions, viz. cognitive and social benefits of mirth, uses of humor for social communication and influence as well as tension relief and coping. Research indicate that positive affect has an impact on problem solving, cognitive organization and creativity (Isen, 1987). Cognitive benefits of this kind are of great significance since they may improve learning abilities. Martin's second function of social communication appears to be similar to that of social management introduced by Attardo (2009) since the purpose of humor is to achieve social goals, both negative and positive. The third category of tension relief and coping seems, again, to bear some similarity with Attardo's concept of mediation; thus, stressful and even life-threatening situations can be overcome by employing strategies of humor. Research results by Booth-Butterfield, M., Booth-Butterfield, S. and Wanzer (2007) also support the view that humor orientation and coping seem to be closely interrelated with one another.

As for the measurable physiological effects, laughter and humor have been found to benefit an individual in a comprehensive manner. They are helpful in relaxing muscles, exercising the lungs and chest muscles, improving respiration, stimulating circulation as well lowering pulse rate and blood pressure. In addition, their beneficial for endocrine, immune and central nervous systems. (Berk, 1998.)

As is evident based on the list of physiological effects, humor and laughter have a healing effect on the human body. The potential psychological benefits are just as numerous including reduction of anxiety, decrease of stress levels, enhancement of self-esteem and increase in self-motivation (Berk, 1998). Furthermore, in a pedagogical setting this could entail a host of positive factors in a form of a more laid back classroom resulting in lower student anxiety together with increased student motivation as reviewed by e.g. Banas et al. (2011). Thus, humor has a potential of creating both emotionally and socially positive environment with the element of humor serving, as stated by Martin (2007), as a bridge between educators and students. This would constitute to a learning environment in which students are more inclined to concentrate on learning.

Quite a few scholars are in support of teachers incorporating humor into the classroom setting (for review, see Banas et al., 2011). The rationale behind this is that humor has the potential to promote supportive social climate in classroom. Kher, et al. (1999) argue that with such a climate created by an instructor, students are more prone to be open to instruction and learning. This applies to all

classrooms, even to foreign language classrooms in which the use of humor makes the learning context more relaxed. In fact, Schmitz (2002) has suggested that it should be a component of foreign language classrooms as it can make classes more enjoyable and contribute to learning. According to some studies, the playful use of language may actually be a contributory factor to facilitating foreign language learning (Bell, 2009). On the other hand, Davies (2003) claims that it is possible for a foreign language learner to collaborate with a native speaker in a humorous situation only under certain circumstances. This implies that it is very challenging to learn the sociolinguistics of L2 (second language) humor in language classroom. Still, Bell (*ibid.*) defends her notion by stating that humor is not essentially different from other types of linguistic behavior which are expected to be learned in classroom conditions.

With all the identified benefits in mind, it needs to be pointed out that there is another aspect to the use of humor since it may have negative effects or functions in social interactions. Garner (2003), for one, advises us to use humor cautiously as it can be a social catalyst but also a social impediment in pedagogical settings. As for Deneire (1995), he urges for prudence and discretion in the use of humor by giving instances of inappropriate humor in the classroom context; jokes related to ethnicity, sexuality and politics. Accordingly, it can be concluded that it is not a homogenous concept to serve positive functions alone but can also serve negative ones such as derision and social isolation (Banas et al., 2011).

One of the reasons the use of humor is complicated is because of its multidimensional and multifunctional nature. For one, it is perceived highly personal, subjective and contextual; all features which make it problematic to predict the way humor will be received by the hearer. Consequently, prudence is offered as the guiding principle when applying humor to classroom environment (Garner, 2003). The question of what effective humor would be like in instruction is not simple to resolve, and the existing recommendations are not necessarily based on empirical studies. In like manner, Bell (2009) criticizes that oversimplified humor typologies are based on written and literary humor, ‘an arsenal of childish riddles and canned jokes’, rather than drawn from authentic interaction, thus ignoring ‘the multifunctional nature of communication’. Moreover, according to her, humor being universal in nature poses a problem since it is, after all, considered a strikingly idiosyncratic quality.

Schmitz (2002) recognizes the need for further research on the use of humor in educational settings in order to be better informed of the appropriate kind of humor to be practiced in classrooms but until then, he says, we need to settle for recommendations based on educators’ practical experiences of humor. Related to this, Garner (2003) states the following: the effective use of humor does not equal telling jokes but for an academic setting, it needs to be specific, targeted and subject related.

Schmitz (*ibid.*) also makes a suggestion that the use of humorous materials in classrooms should be planned in advance. The idea behind this seems to be that premeditation might make a favorable contribution towards a successful effect of humorous material in classroom. Still, it needs to be remembered that a lot of humor and laughter simply arise in a spontaneous manner (Martin & Kuiper, 1999).

3 Conceptual framework

In terms of the topic in this paper, humor in multicultural classrooms, there are two relevant concepts to consider: humor and cultural diversity. These will be briefly discussed here. Firstly, the complexity of humor is addressed. Secondly, some cultural considerations are expressed.

3.1 Multidimensional nature of humor concept

As established already, humor is a universal human phenomenon. Descriptions of what humor is are abundant and, as Carrell (2008) says, diverse definitions of humor can be found but no agreement can be detected as to the precise meaning of it at the moment, nor in the foreseeable future. Yet, there is an ever-increasing interest among the researchers to immerse themselves in the serious study of humor, convinced that they are investigating the phenomenon of humor. This indeed corresponds to what McComas (1923) once said: "He who approaches *laughter* upon science bent will find it no laughing matter."

Despite the fact that the definitions vary among scholars and, in particular, among disciplines from which humor is approached, there is something they all quite agree upon: humor is about communicating multiple, incongruous meanings perceived in some way amusing by those involved (Banas et al., 2011). Apte (1985) goes as far as to state that there is a general agreement on certain stimuli making people laugh with pleasure. From physiological viewpoint, research seems to suggest that there are specialized brain circuits for humor and laughter in humans which could be considered an inherent characteristic of being a human. This is not, however, exclusively a human feature as other apes have been found to have a similar capability to laugh, albeit in a more rudimentary sense of the term. (Martin, 2007.) Given these research findings, the question of what humor is all about remains unanswered.

In their study, Gervais and Wilson (2005) summarized the essence of humor as an unexpected change - immediately spotted in a social context - which they call "nonserious social incongruity". They do not intend to formulate a comprehensive definition of humor, but the intention is rather to come up with a facilitating tool through which their research needs are met. The way Gervais and Wilson apply the definition is a manifestation of what Wagner and Urios-Aparasi (2011) see as a data-dependent approach to defining humor. This tendency, in fact, can also be seen in a lot of related research. In addition, along the same lines, Struthers (2011) aptly remarks that conceptualisations of humor from a restricted viewpoint appear to lead to fragmentation in the field of humor research.

Over centuries, the concept of humor has undergone quite remarkable changes in terms of its inherent nature. The roots can be discovered in classical Greek and Roman theories of rhetoric which included less positive elements such as aggression, superiority and disparagement (Carrell, 2008). Until the late 17th century, the concept had both positive and negative connotations. With the emergence of humanistic tradition in the 18th century, hostile forms of humor gradually lost foothold and philosophers began to conceptualize various forms of laughter and delight into a more socially appropriate direction. (Martin, 2003.) The beginning of the 20th century started to see humor and laughter as a form of release and relief (Carrell, *ibid.*). In his pioneering study on humor and jokes, Freud (1928) argues that there is something liberating about humor; it is a way to reject the claims of reality and, thus, to prevent suffering, i.e. it constitutes a defense mechanism in the face of unpleasanties.

Humor can also be investigated from the viewpoint of what the humor process involves. Here Apte (1985), proposes one suggestion from an anthropological standpoint, whereas Martin (2007) offers another from a psychological perspective. According to Apte (*ibid.*), there are three elements to be considered in relation to humor; (1) source of a possible stimulus, (2) cognitive and intellectual activity with respect to perceiving and evaluating the source, and (3) behavioral response to the stimulus. Apte (*ibid.*) sees these attributes occurring sequentially although he considers the second, mental activity, most crucial.

Working from a psychological angle, Martin (2007) divides a humor process into four components, all of which are considered essential parts of the process. First of all, there is a social context in which humor occurs as humor is essentially a social phenomenon. Secondly, the process involves a cognitive-perceptual process with some some form of incongruous, unexpected and playful elements. An intellectual process is not enough, though, but there needs to be a mirthful emotional response elicited by this intellectual process, and this constitutes to the third component presented by Martin (*ibid.*). The physical manifestation of this emotional aspect has actually been detected in recent brain imaging research (Mobbs, Greicius, Abdel-Azim, Menon & Reiss, 2003), and the essential nature of emotion in the humor process is gradually being recognized also by scholars in the field (Martin *ibid.*). Then, what is still needed, is the behavioral response which Martin (*ibid.*) describes as a vocal behavioral expression of laughter as a way to signal others one's engagement in the humor act. Another possible function of laughter in this context is to affect the emotional state of others (e.g. Owren and Bachorowski, 2003). With regard to Apte (1985), the presented components of a humor process correspond to his three elements quite nicely apart from the emotional component which is the most recent addition to the components and thus, understandably not overtly visible in Apte's representation. As a matter of fact, the emotion in question still remains to be named although Martin (*ibid.*) suggests the word 'mirth' to be used to represent this particular emotion.

When it comes to the components or elements of a humor process, neurological studies actually indicate that they involve different, yet interconnected, regions of the brain (Wild, Rodden, Grodd, & Ruch, 2003). This would imply that each one of them can even be detected as a unique, yet interconnected, physiological reaction. In sum, humor can be seen as "an emotional response of mirth in a social extent that is elicited by a perception of playful incongruity and is expressed through smiling and laughter" (Martin, 2007). Human language and imagination make it possible for us to create humor in numerous ways which can be employed even in classrooms where humor is described by Wagner and Urios-Aparisi (2011) as an act which can be performed either linguistically or non-linguistically by any of the people in the classroom.

3.2 Cultural considerations

Quoting Martin's (2007) wording, cultural norms play a significant role in the ways and forms humor is used in social interactions. In other words, interpretation and appreciation of humor vary depending on the participants' cultural background. As a phenomenon, humor and laughter has turned out to occur in all cultures (Martin, 2007). This aspect of universality is an assumption shared by many theories; accordingly, it is presumed that certain same mechanisms involved in the understanding and production of humor events are discernible in various cultures (Wagner & Urios-Aparisi, 2011).

When contemplating humor from cultural perspective, one needs to address the concept of culture. In regard with the concept of humor, it was noted that there is no unanimous comprehension as to the definition of it. Similarly, no universal conception of this aspect of human life can be found in the literature. Moreover, Piller (2012) points out that the general understandings of the concept usually have one thing in common: they take culture to be a national and/or ethnic phenomenon. This kind of understanding is also reflected in most academic work which Piller (*ibid.*) does not find surprising since culture and cultural categories forming the basis for the academic work stem from existing notions, and the researchers merely reproduce them. For her (*ibid.*), a more becoming understanding of culture incorporates aspects of being constantly evolving, cross-culturally influenced and context-bound.

In a multicultural classroom, the contemplation over the concept of culture can be taken as not overly relevant. The awareness of the challenges is of importance, i.e. it is necessary to recognize and realize that some ways or forms are acceptable for some people while unacceptable for others. The objective, then, would be to examine whether there are any universally accepted and functional ways or forms, as well as to distinguish those for the benefit of the educators.

4 Instruction-oriented humor theories

As far as theories of humor and taxonomic categories are concerned, there seem to be various principles according to which these categorizations are formulated. These principles might be influenced by the discipline and the data of the research. A few can be introduced as examples of these categorizations. Among these, Attardo (1994) and Carrell (2008) discuss a couple of classifications which partly overlap each other in terms of their categories. Furthermore, Wagner and Urios-Aparasi (2011), with a background in linguistics and pedagogy, mention three categories: semantic-based, text-based and pragmatic theories. The interest in the present paper lies primarily in theories of humor related to pragmatics since these theories deal with social and cognitive processes of humor in human interaction. However, as Attardo (*ibid.*) points out, classifications of theories are only heuristic tools and any individual theory will adopt features from more than one category.

We are concerned with gaining an understanding of how humor functions in learning environment, i.e. the pragmatic aspect of applying humor in education. Principally, the objective in the application would be to enhance learning with the help of humor. For this, Wanzer, et al. (2010) offer a solution through their Instructional Humor Processing Theory, IHPT, which is an integrative theory drawing from earlier theories. The underlying frameworks of incongruity theory (Berlyne, 1960), disposition theory (Zillmann & Cantor, 1976), and elaboration likelihood model of persuasion, ELM, (Cacioppo & Petty, 1984) form a background for an aim to account for how instructional humor can facilitate learning. The IHPT makes use of the theories and aspires to demonstrate that students need to first perceive and then resolve the incongruity of the message in order to benefit from the positive effects of humor on learning (Wanzer et al., *ibid.*).

Incongruity, as argued by Berlyne (1960), requires both a novel and an unexpected combination of stimuli. The humor theories stipulate that humor is about the discrepancy between what is said and what is implied (Wagner & Urios-Aparasi, 2011). Thus, the concept of incongruity present in Berlyne's ideas (*ibid.*) is incorporated into humor theories as the humor is about resolving incongruities. La Fave, Haddad and Maesen (1976) introduce a theory of how this is performed, namely they say that interpreting humorous messages is a two-phase process; first, perceiving the incongruity inherent in humor and then resolving that incongruity, in this particular order. To conclude, the purpose and objective of this incongruity-resolution humor theory is how we fundamentally come to understand humor. The second theory related to the IHPT is the disposition theory which addresses the affective elements in humorous messages. According to this theory, the appreciation of humor is influenced by the emotion toward the targeted person or object, i.e. if the targeted person is liked the humor is not appreciated or accepted by those involved in the situation (Zillmann & Cantor, 1976).

The third theory in the background of the IHPT is the Elaboration Likelihood Model of persuasion, ELM, which suggests that the process of how a message is interpreted has a bearing on the effectiveness of learning. As explained by Cacioppo and Petty (1984), elaboration likelihood is the likelihood a person engages oneself in issue-relevant thinking with the objective of considering the merits of a persuasive message. Their proposition entails two differing routes, or ways, people do the reasoning when confronted by such a message, namely central and peripheral. The central route is

about systematic reasoning involving topic-related thinking, whereas the peripheral route refers to reasoning based on peripheral cues such as the attractiveness of the communicator of the message. They also say that employing the central route is more likely to be connected to a reliable and enduring analysis of messages. This would be highly desirable in educational contexts. The question remains how to accomplish such thinking. Cacioppo and Petty (ibid.) mention that motivation and ability to think carefully are influenced by a variety of factors. In other words, it seems motivation and ability are two aspects to be addressed in instructional settings. Frymier and Shulman's (1995) findings on the interrelation between relevance, i.e. relevant instruction material, and students' motivation seem to be consistent with this thinking.

Based on the previously introduced theories, the IHPT basically proposes that humor enhances retention and learning as a result of students' increased elaboration likelihood (Banas et al., 2011). For humor to enhance learning, there seem to be some prerequisites; students are able to perceive, recognize and resolve the humorous message leading to the message being understood as humorous. Not even this appear to be enough for the message to benefit learning but more is required, namely the message can cause negative affect if it is considered inappropriate. According to the theory, there is still one more phase for the humorous message to pass on its way of becoming a tool to enhance retention and learning; it needs to improve students' ability to process the information. (Wanzer et al., 2010.)

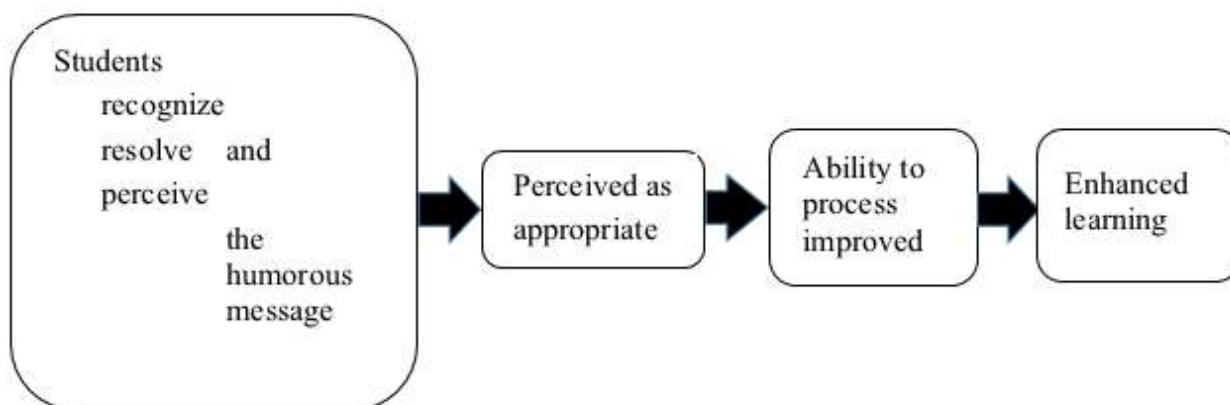


FIGURE 1. IHPT: Enhanced learning process

The figure above illustrates how humor is understood to lead to enhanced learning based on the IHPT theory developed by Wanzer et al. (2010). In sum, the theory is intended to constitute a framework for understanding the cognitive and affective process of understanding a humorous message which may affect learning in the classroom. The theory is relatively new and yet to be further tested and advanced by conducting additional research.

5 Humor and learning in classroom

Some educators may be in the opinion that it is not in place to use humor in their classrooms; they may think that their topic is too serious, or that their role as an educator does not permit such a behavior. As a matter of fact, there are plentiful of research results that speak strongly in favor of humorous instructional events. Not all forms of humor have favorable effects, though, and research have yielded inconsistent results as to the forms of humor that work in classrooms.

5.1 Scientific research: humor is good for learning

To begin with, there are numerous studies about the use of humor in education (for review, see Wanzer et al., 2006). As Wanzer et al. (ibid.) state, it is challenging to draw any definite conclusions based on them since they represent different perspectives. However, as Gorham and Christophel (1990) note, there is usually some reason an educator uses humor in classroom, whether it is to reduce tension, relieve embarrassment, save face, alleviate boredom, or any other. In Neuliep's (1991) study the teachers report that they use humor to put students at ease, to get their attention, to show that they are human and to make learning more fun. A more recent research has been concerned with the possible effects of humor on students, their motivation, and learning outcomes (Garner, 2006; Hackathorn, Garczynski, Blankmeyer, Tennial, and Solomon, 2011; Goodboy, Booth-Butterfield, Bolkan & Griffin, 2015; Suzuki & Heath, 2014). The underlying motive behind the studies appears to be the enhancement of learning outcomes.

Some research have implied that there is a connection between the use of humor and learning. The following studies serve as examples of the kind of results obtained in various studies. Garner (2006), for instance, found that subjects who were shown something humorous during lectures recalled and retained significantly more information about the topic than the control group. Hackathorn et al. (2011) also discovered that using humor increased students' overall exam scores, especially on comprehension level. Other studies report a connection between successful humor and motivation (Goodboy et al., 2015), or between humor and students' recognition of lecture content (Suzuki & Heath, 2014).

All the research results are not consistent, though. An example of this is one conducted by Bieg and Dresel (2013) on teacher humor as perceived by their students. According to their results, some forms of humor are positively while some are negatively connected to for example student perceptions of instruction characteristics, learning behavior and student motivation. Frymier and Shulman (1995) studied motivation, and their findings, even if not concerned with humor, are in line with Bieg and Dresel's (ibid.) as they also discovered that motivation is affected by a certain type of instructional content. It is possible, though, that the type of humorous message has a bearing in the situation which could account for these results. One potential framework which can be employed in research is provided by Wanzer et. al (2010), namely the IHPT, a theory concerned with enhanced learning through appropriate forms of humor.

Even with the inconsistent research result, humor is one instructional tool worthwhile employing in the classroom. For one, it seems that students want this (Bell, 2009; Benjelloun, 2009). Benjelloun (ibid.) even states that almost all the business students included in the study were in favor of some form of humor being used in the classroom even if not all forms were considered acceptable; mainly extreme forms such as an educator acting like a clown or doing some outrageous things were thought unacceptable. Another reason to favor the use of humor in interaction is that analyses have provided support for humor acting as a coping mechanism against difficulties and stress (Booth-Butterfield, M., Booth-Butterfield, S. & Wanzer, 2007). According to the study, the higher one's disposition to employ humorous communication, the better one can handle hardships, and it appears to constitute an effective affect moderator and release mechanism (Booth-Butterfield, M. et al., ibid.). Here the perspective is shifted to the individual using humorous communication and consequently, also the students need to be encouraged to employ humor in educational contexts in order to alleviate the study stress.

5.2 Appropriate and inappropriate humor in classroom

The central objective and aspiration in instructional communication, for any teacher, we dare to argue, is to be as efficient and competent a communicator as possible. Not surprisingly, a considerable degree of research dealing with teacher communication behavior has in fact focused on

the simple, yet complex, question of how to become a better communicator within the educational sector. One feasible way to initially approach the issue of effective instruction is by examining the concept of communication competence, which according to Spitzberg and Cupach (1984, 159) is defined as ‘the extent to which objectives functionally related to communication are fulfilled through cooperative interaction appropriate to the interpersonal context’. This definition clearly encompasses the functions of effectiveness and appropriateness. First, effectiveness can be associated with a competent teacher who acts as an effective and goal-oriented facilitator in the student's cognitive learning process. Secondly, appropriateness equals the affective aspect of learning which in turn generates student approval and positive feelings (Wanzer et al., 2006). Daly and Vangelisti (2003) share the view with Spitzberg and Cupach (ibid.) regarding communication competence; a competent teacher facilitates understanding and retention of students together with advancing a positive attitude towards the subject and the teacher. And since appropriateness is closely associated with social rules and expectations, one might expect that the kind of humor violating those norms would be interpreted as inappropriate by students. To support the argumentation, Levine, Anders, Banas, Baum, Endo, Hu, and Wong's (2000) norm violation model identifies that behaviors violating these pre-existing norms and expectations are regarded socially inappropriate and that people involving themselves in atypical behavior are seen less believable. As a consequence, also the sincerity level of their messages decreases.

Although the use of humor in instruction has extensively been studied, it is the appropriateness of humor that has attracted less attention in the humor studies. The first research specifically centered around the topic of humor appropriateness in the classroom, drawn from Gorham and Christophel's (1990) humor typology, was conducted by Neuliep (1991) who provided some tentative information on the categories of humorous messages related to appropriateness. Neuliep's focus was, however, on the teacher's use of humor in the classroom so the student perspective was missing altogether. This gap in research was filled by Wanzer et al. (2006) who investigated the aspect of appropriate and inappropriate use of humor in the classroom. Based on data consisting of student-generated examples on appropriate and inappropriate humor, Wanzer et al. (ibid.) came up with four appropriate and four inappropriate humor categories. This categorization was later employed in outlining the Instructional Humor Processing Theory (IHPT) which proposed an explanation for why some types of instructor-generated humor result in increased student learning and others do not (Wanzer et al., 2010).

In search for so called competent use of humor as a teaching strategy, Wanzer et al. (2006) identify two main categories concerning appropriate use of humor. The first one is the appropriate teacher humor category comprises the four subcategories of (1) related humor (humor strategies or behaviors linked to course material), (2) humor unrelated to course material, (3) self-disparaging humor and (4) unintentional humor. The second main category, inappropriate teacher humor category, also has four subclasses: (1) disparaging humor: targeting students (either students as a group or individual students); (2) disparaging humor: targeting others (disparagement of nonstudent groups based on sex, race, religion or sexual orientation), (3) offensive humor, and finally, (4) self-disparaging humor.

There are some studies that have yielded relevant results related to the IHPT and the appropriateness of humor usage in classroom. Prior to the development of the theory, Wanzer et al. (2006) carried out a research which indicated that both appropriate and inappropriate forms of instructional humor were used, and one of the most interesting findings involve the overlap of two categories; e.g. humor targeted at students was identified as both appropriate and inappropriate. To maintain the appropriateness of humor, the researchers emphasized that disparaging humor targeting students' qualities such as intelligence, gender and appearance should be avoided. On the other hand, course-specific, self-disparaging and spontaneous humor may work in classroom. The rationale behind

favoring appropriate humor over inappropriate is that, as suggested by the IHPT, it might lead to enhanced learning. Indeed, a subsequent research by Wanzer et al. (2010) discovered learning to be positively associated with self-disparaging and related humor. Interestingly, inappropriate humor does not appear to negatively influence learning. Another study, that by Suzuki and Heath (2014), also reports results that relevant humor videos help students recognize lecture content.

Similar discoveries have been made in a couple of other studies as well. For instance, Bieg and Dresel (2013) report that related humor showed positive effects on student perceptions of instruction characteristics, students' learning behavior and motivation, while unrelated humor had a negative connection with interestingness. In addition, self-disparaging humor showed positive connection with students' intrinsic motivation, whereas inappropriate and unrelated humor forms had negative effects. In consequence, at least one form of appropriate humor, namely content-relevant humor, seems to be an important tool to enhanced learning. In accordance with this, the previously reported study by Frymier and Shulman (1995) also supports this notion. Actually, in one of the conducted pilot interviews of this paper, a female student reported an incident where a topic related humor had profound consequences regarding her choice of career as she decided to choose marketing as her major influenced by her marketing lecturer.

6 Discussion

In this predominantly contemporary overview we have, admittedly, been swimming in the deep waters of humor and humor research. In the present paper, our focal point has been the role of humor in instructional environment together with the related theories of humor. We have engaged ourselves in exploring the fundamental principles of the Instructional Humor Processing Theory (IHPT) which incorporates elements of incongruity-resolution theory, disposition theory and the elaboration likelihood model (ELM). For future research purposes, combining the theory (IHPT) as well as the conceptions of humor orientation, humor competence and communication competence are of particular interest to us.

While studying some of the previous research papers, it became apparent that there are gaps in research and, for example, additional support is required for the IHPT. For this, it would be important to 'create conditions where motivation and ability are positively and negatively affected to determine whether humor does or does not lead to increased learning outcomes' (Wanzer et al., 2010). Other research possibilities include setting up experimental designs and exploring more about the specific types of humorous messages likely to facilitate student learning. Yet another interesting topic for future study is self-disparaging humor which might have a harmful impact on the instructor's credibility. Surprisingly, in research literature there seems to be a lack of insight regarding cultural aspects of appropriate humor. Therefore, this is clearly something that needs to be further studied.

During the writing process of this research-in-progress paper, a few of our university students were interviewed in order to acquire information on their impressions, especially on the use of topic-related humor. These open-ended, pilot interviews were found invaluable for further research development and defining of the research focus. Our intention is to conduct a more extensive survey to investigate what the humor like is that may make multicultural student groups "tick" in terms of learning and motivation. There are numerous feasible alternatives to do this: (participatory) observation, analysis of written documents, records and personal diaries on humor events, structured/unstructured/group interviews, and/or oral narratives. With access to latest technology, it would also be possible to create either a physical or virtual platform in which students could give feedback on the humor used in the classroom immediately after the class.

To finish with an anecdote; in the student interviews, there was this one comment on instructional jokes which the students in the classroom did not find humorous at all. Funnily enough, this comment on the unifying effect of these jokes served as a great source of inspiration for us in the preparation of this paper:

“The funny thing was that it wasn’t funny at all!”

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