Humour: A pedagogical Tool for Language Learners

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Abstract

“Laughter is the shortest distance between two people.” Victor Borge

Researchers have shown that laughter is crucial to our health and that the use of humour in class can do something of a miracle. Teaching experience has shown that humour helps keeping students interested and motivated. Humour and laughter can also help less sociable students in language classes to participate with the group, to feel a part of the peer group, join class activities and group work without feeling exposed or vulnerable. This is of particular importance in a communicative classroom where the emphasis is on veritable oral communication, pair works and interaction. It’s a way of getting those students involved in class activities who are worried or nervous to try and talk their minds in a foreign language (Provine, 2000). Kristmanson (2000) emphasizes the necessity of creating a hospitable atmosphere for language learning. The present paper shows the impact/s of using humour and laughter in creating a relaxed and open atmosphere for language learning, to get and hold students’ attention, increase retention of what is learned, foster a constructive attitude towards mistakes, and stimulate both creative and critical thinking during a language classroom. Humour in language classes reduces tension, improves classroom atmosphere, increases enjoyment and has a positive impact on the student-teacher interactions.

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1. Introduction

Teacher: Maria please point to America on the map.
Maria: This is it.
Teacher: Well done. Now class, who found America?
Class: Maria did.

“Through humour, you can soften some of the worst blows that life delivers. And once you find laughter, no matter how painful your situation might be, you can survive it” (Cosby). Laughter is, above all, a social signal. Recent investigations by Provine (2001) suggest that laughter is a form of communication, probably the first one in the human race, which later evolved, with the liberation of voice from walking and breathing, into human language. He argues that laughter is an audible expression or appearance of excitement, an inward feeling of joy or humour. It may arise from jokes, tickling, and other stimuli. Researchers have shown infants as early as 17 days old have vocal
laughing sounds or laughter. It conflicts with earlier studies indicating that infants usually start to laugh at about four months of age. Laughter researcher Provine also states that laughter is a mechanism every human being has; laughter is part of universal human language. There are a variety of languages and dialects, but everyone speaks laughter in pretty much the same way. We all can laugh. Babies have the ability to laugh before they ever speak. Mother born blind and deaf children still have the ability to laugh.

1.1 The educational-psychological impact/s of Humour

T.S. Elliot once said, “Humour is also a way of saying something serious”. How can teachers take advantage of laughter in academic settings? Unfortunately many teachers fear humour, since they think of it as equal to losing their authority and therefore something to be avoided. “I'm not going to tell jokes; it will mean erring on the side of complete loss of control, and poor class conduct”. Actually teachers do not know how wisely they can use it in the classroom. “I enjoy humour, but I don’t know how to use it, so I don't. I don't want to look foolish”. Yet humour is as authentic and as communicative a human reaction and social skill as is greeting and conversing with friends. Using humour and allowing laughter in class, does not mean that teachers need to be comedians. Teachers main responsibility is to make the learning process easier, so if humour can make the learning process more enjoyable and can arouse students’ interest and attention, why not use it in the class?

Watson and Emerson (1988) said: When humour is planned as part of the teaching strategy, a caring environment is established, there is an attitude of flexibility, and communication between student and teacher is that of freedom and openness. The tone is set allowing for human error with freedom to explore alternatives in the learning situation. This reduces the authoritarian position of the teacher, allowing the teacher to be a facilitator of the learning process. Fear and anxiety, only natural in a new and unknown situation, becomes less of a threat, as a partnership between student and instructor develops. (Watson & Emerson, 1988, p.89)

Kristmanson (2000) says: In order to take risks, you need a learning environment in which you do not feel threatened or intimidated. In order to speak, you need to feel you will be heard and that what you're saying is worth hearing. In order to continue your language learning, you need to feel motivated. In order to succeed, you need an atmosphere in which anxiety levels are low and comfort levels are high. Issues of motivation and language anxiety are key to this topic of affect in the second language classroom.

Guegan-Fisher (1975) believed that humour is a very effective tool to make students remember what they should know about the traditions and beliefs, manners and institutions of a culture. Clabby (1979) indicated that humour significantly facilitated intentional learning for the learners. Larson (1982) suggested that humour could be effective in maintaining students attention, providing mnemonic examples, and aiding the relationships between teachers and students. Colwell and Wigle (1984) argued that the value of humour should be understood in a reading/language art program. They showed that the use of humour is supported by many learning theories and that it has probable affective and cognitive benefits. Crvikly (1986) also indicated that humour in teaching could promote a positive and cohesive class atmosphere, but could also have unintended results if the teacher could not first develop a supportive relationship with the students.

1.2 Using humour in language classes

Various researchers have commonly stated some reasons for using humour in classroom atmosphere: its effect as a relaxing, comforting, and tension reducing device, its humanizing effect on teacher image, and its effect of maintaining/increasing student interest and enjoyment. In innovative language methodologies such as Desuggestopedia and Communicative Language Teaching a positive, safe and stress free atmosphere in the class is a must for language learning process to occur. Humour, by decreasing anxiety and stress, can contribute to class unity among the language learners and make learning process more effective and fun. Cr.Ronald Berk says that the psychological and physiological benefits of laughter can have a direct impact on teaching and learning, especially in five significant areas: teacher -learner rapport, classroom atmosphere, student responsiveness, test
short period of time researcher, conveys a great deal of cultural and pragmatic knowledge about a language within a very small space or teaching device‖ (p.189). In a similar fashion, Deneire also advocates the use of authentic examples of advertising in the TL as a way of transmitting cultural clues to students. Advertisement humour, according to the boundarie points to using anecdotal humour of cultural Deneire (1995) strongly emphasizes the importance of humour in the teaching of culture alongside language. He the danger humour presents to an ideal level of tension necessary for learning. Thus, Terry and Woods warn of the indirect though beneficial effects of humour on learning. In addition, however, the researchers also point out the usage in the primary school classroom. Neuliep (1991) investigated the effects of humour by soliciting teacher an ideal means of diffusing embarrassing situations for both students and the instructor Similarly, Sudol (1981) claims that humour helps maintain student interest and comfort, while also allowing the teacher an ideal means of diffusing embarrassing situations for both students and the instructor—again emphasizing the indirect though beneficial effects of humour on learning.

Education and psychology researchers have focused on humour as a componential element of a larger set of affective behaviors impacting learning in the classroom that is generally referred to as immediacy behaviors. The immediacy construct was first developed and introduced by Mehrabian (1969) as a description for those communication behaviors—humour among them—that improve the physical or psychological closeness and interaction of two or more individuals. Such immediacy behaviors have been proved to result in positive affect within classroom contexts (Barr, 1929; Beck, 1967; Beck & Lambert, 1977; Christensen, 1960; Coats & Smidchens, 1966; Cogan, 1958, 1963; et cetera; as cited in Anderson, 1979). Anderson (1979) indicated that student perceptions of teacher immediacy were positively correlated with 1) student affect, 2) student behavioral commitment, and 3) student cognitive learning. Such correlative evidence is also supported by Nussbaum (1984; as cited in Downs, Javidi, & Nussbaum, 1988) wherein teachers who were recognized as effective also displayed more immediacy. Additionally, Gorham (1988) examined the effect of teacher immediacy and student learning within a set of 20 verbal items, including an explicit entry for use of humour. Gorham also indicates the use of humour as an important aspect of teacher immediacy. Gorham and Christophel’s (1990) examination of immediacy and student learning puts humour squarely on top. They believe that using humour can reduce tension, disarm aggression, alleviate boredom, and stimulate interest. Thus, Gorham and Christophel concluded that the effects of humour on learning are best understood and measured within the framework of immediacy behaviors. According to Neuliep humour is not perceived as, “a strategy for increasing student comprehension and learning”. Rather, the indirect and ancillary effects on classroom environment and other affective variables conducive to learning are seen as the result of the employment of humour in the classroom. Similarly, Sudol (1981) claims that humour promotes learners interest and comfort, while also allowing the teacher an ideal means of diffusing embarrassing situations for both students and the instructor—again emphasizing the indirect though beneficial effects of humour on learning.

Welker (1977) found that humour serves as an “attention getter” and tension reducer, as well as a means for dealing with student and teacher errors in a humane and compassionate manner—remarking, “to err is human, but also, to err is humourous” (p.252). Terry and Woods (1995) also identified reduced tension as an effect of humour usage in the primary school classroom. Neuliep (1991) investigated the effects of humour by soliciting teacher perceptions of their own humour usage and its effects in the classroom. He questioned 388 Wisconsin area high school teachers and asked them to indicate their rationale and subsequent perceived effect for their employment of humour. The most commonly stated reasons for employing humour were: its effect as a relaxing, comforting, and tension reducing device, its humanizing effect on teacher image, and its effect of maintaining/increasing student interest and enjoyment. Thus, according to Neuliep humour is not perceived as, “a strategy for increasing student comprehension and learning” (p.354). Rather, the indirect and ancillary effects on classroom environment and other affective variables conducive to learning are seen as the result of the employment of humour in the classroom. Similarly, Sudol (1981) claims that humour helps maintain student interest and comfort, while also allowing the teacher an ideal means of diffusing embarrassing situations for both students and the instructor—again emphasizing the indirect though beneficial effects of humour on learning. In addition, however, the researchers also point out the desperate results of such an effect. Specifically, Terry and Woods indicate that while too much tension often results in negative effect on learning, too little tension can have similar negative results. Thus, Terry and Woods warn of the danger humour presents to an ideal level of tension necessary for learning.

Deneire (1995) strongly emphasizes the importance of humour in the teaching of culture alongside language. He points to using anecdotal humour of cultural faux pas’ as one effective means of indicating the unseen cultural boundaries of a new language. Deneire adds, “the humour caused by the clash of cultures serves as an excellent teaching device” (p.189). In a similar fashion, Deneire also advocates the use of authentic examples of humourous advertising in the TL as a way of transmitting cultural clues to students. Advertisement humour, according to the researcher, conveys a great deal of cultural and pragmatic knowledge about a language within a very small space or short period of time—making for an, “interesting way to teach language and culture to students at all levels of
instruction‖ (p.193). Trachtenberg (1979) believes that jokes/humour within an ESL context serve as an ideal vehicle for the conveyance of American cultural patterns. She suggests that many employments of linguistic humour need not particularly be culturally bound—particularly in the case of linguistic humour that is visually coordinated—if it is more likely to confuse than enlighten.

In addition to the linguistic, cultural, and pragmatic applications for humour in language education is the benefit of humour for the illustration and practice of language discourse patterns. Indeed, humour pervades daily discourse and interaction (Schmitz, 2002), and thus, according to socio-constructivist models, has a hand in creating and maintaining identity as well (Brown, 2000). Trachtenberg (1979) emphasizes the importance of developing the comedic elements one utilizes in his/her native language to the same or similar degree in the TL. To ignore the comedic elements of discourse in the TL, according to Trachtenberg (1979), is to lose a part of one’s identity during the language learning process. Schmitz (2002) believes that classroom exposure to humour prepares students to understand and react to this pervasive and authentic element of discourse during real communicative language interactions. Therefore, language teachers may incorporate humourous examples/exercises into student role-plays, oral interviews, or written dialogues to acclimate students to the presence of humour in discourse and to demonstrate its patterns of usage. S/he may also have students create and incorporate their own humour/jokes into discourse contexts while providing appropriate corrective feedback on humourous usage and style (Trachtenberg, 1979).

Psychologically speaking, humour and laughter help the shy language learners to have more participation in the class and to feel a part of the group. It’s a way of dealing with those language learners who are too afraid, shy or nervous to express themselves in a foreign language. Kristmanson(2000) emphasizes this need to create a welcoming classroom for language learning: “In order to take risks, you need a learning environment in which you do not feel threatened or intimidated. In order to speak, you need to feel you will be heard and that what you’re saying is worth hearing. In order to continue your language learning, you need to feel motivated. In order to succeed, you need an atmosphere in which anxiety levels are low and comfort levels are high. Issues of motivation and language anxiety are key to this topic of affect in the second language classroom”.

However, as a word of caution for language teachers: humour alone cannot be effective and sometimes, too much humour can work against learning and even destroys the whole teaching plan. To be effective, humour along with other teaching and learning activities in the communicative language classroom, must be well prepared and have a specific pedagogical objective behind. Language learners need to be prepared too. “When humour is planned as part of the teaching strategy, a caring environment is established, there is an attitude of flexibility, and communication between student and teacher is that of freedom and openness. The tone is set allowing for human error with freedom to explore alternatives in the learning situation. This reduces the authoritarian position of the teacher, allowing the teacher to be a facilitator of the learning process. Fear and anxiety, only natural in a new and unknown situation, becomes less of a threat, as a partnership between student and instructor develops” .Many language teachers develop personal strategies to be used in class to create laughter such as: stock gestures, reactions, humour materials such as jokes,puns, cartoons, and riddles. As Chiasson (2002) sate: “According to Provine (2000) laughter is generally subdued during conversation. Speech will dominate and laughter serves as a phrase break creating a punctuation effect in language. Laughter therefore has a specific role in conversations and is not random. Therefore, as in authentic communication, humour in the classroom shouldn't be random. It shouldn't be used without preparation and a clear objective. It may be simple or complex in nature. It is your decision as to how, when and why you will use it.”

2. Conclusion

Many researchers, and particularly Stephen Krashen, have written about the negative effects of anxiety on student’s ability to learn. "Acquisition requires meaningful interactions in the target language - natural communication - in which speakers are concerned not with the form of their utterances but with the messages they are conveying and understanding….The best methods are therefore those that supply 'comprehensible input' in low
anxiety situations, containing messages that students really want to hear. These methods do not force early production in the second language, but allow students to produce when they are 'ready', recognizing that improvement comes from supplying communicative and comprehensible input, and not from forcing and correcting production.' Krashen’s emphasis is on low stress environment which can be achieved through using humour to ‘break the ice’ of the students and create a more friendly and cozy environment; it’s no wonder that people ‘laugh things away’ when they want to avoid getting nervous or take annoying things with ‘a pinch of salt’ which makes things taste better! And there’s no need to say that students ‘prefer to hear’ messages containing a little bit of humour.

Using humour can play an important role in helping students to overcome stress and nervousness and so make them more receptive to learning. Humour can also help to improve atmosphere particularly for students who are worried about making mistakes or nervous about their speaking abilities. It is however very important that we learn with our students to laugh about mistakes rather than at people who make them. Humour is perhaps one of the most genuine and universal speech acts within human discourse. The employment of humour within the context of Second/foreign language pedagogy offers significant advantage to both the language teacher and learner. Humour is a powerful tool in the hands of a skilful language teacher in positive contribution to classroom language learning. The use of humour may give students another reason to attend class. If we make language learning more enjoyable it is very rewarding for a successful teacher. Many studies show that using humour and laughter can have a calming, positive effect on the mind of the language learners and serve to remove the psychological barriers in the process of better language learning. This effectiveness is particularly relevant to the communicative language teaching classroom, as humour has been shown to lower the affective filter and stimulate the pro-social behaviours that are so necessary for success within a communicative context. Humour not only provides an ideal mode of instruction for discrete linguistic aspects of language it is also a powerful instrument for the illustration of cultural, pragmatic and discoursal patterns. Humour strengthens the relationship between student and teacher, reduces stress, makes a course more interesting, and, if relevant to the subject, may even enhance recall of the material.

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