

A Study on Humour as a Pedagogical Tool for Language Teaching

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Abstract

The paper *A Study on Humour as a Pedagogical Tool for Language Teaching* discusses the importance of humour as an effective tool for teachers in language classes. Language anxiety or academic anxiety is a serious issue among English as a second and foreign language learners. So, the paper is a study on the significant theories of humour, how humour can effectively impact an individual's physical and psychological well-being and the effect of humour in classrooms. In the light of the theories, the paper discusses how humour should and should not be used in a classroom. The paper also suggests a set of guidelines, in the end, to be followed while handling humour in language classes.

Keywords: English Language Teaching, Humour, Pedagogical tool, ESL learners

Introduction

Humour is an experience to produce laughter and amusement in the reader or the listener. Humour is derived from the Latin word for "liquid" or "fluid." As Thomas P. Kasulis (1989) says, "Humour is no joke." It has its place in physiology and psychology, in social interactions, and in building and maintaining relationships. Studies say laughter can bring people together and can be used as a tool "to protect attack, connect and distract" (Izzy, 2015).

Stress and anxiety are common in all age groups. Academic anxiety, fear, and tension while asked to perform in front of teachers or classmates or expected better performance, common among school and college students, are all being discussed seriously. Language anxiety, the worry when asked to use a language other than their mother tongue in class, is common among English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as Foreign Language (EFL) students. Appleby (2018) says that for teaching to be effective, teachers do not have to be serious in the class. Most teachers prefer to be serious because they believe in making students laugh or using humor while teaching will tamper with the seriousness and discipline of the class. Many researchers have stated the correlation between humour and learning, where humour stands as an area of research. Wortley (2016, para. 1) says, "Just as successful comedians must connect with and engage an audience, a successful instructor must strive to

engage his/her audience: the students." In light of what humour is and the theories of humour, the paper is a study on how humour can be a part of the teaching and learning process in a language classroom.

Theories on Humour

There are many theories on humor and laughter in contemporary academic literature. These humor theories evaluate the meaning of humor, its functions, and what can be called humorous. Some prominent theories of humor are the Superiority theory of humor, Relief theory of humor, and Incongruity and Incongruity-resolution theory of humor.

Superiority Theory of Humour is one of Plato's earliest theories of laughter. This theory says humor is when we laugh at someone else's mistakes, weaknesses, misfortunes, and stupidity (Superiority Theory, n.d.). Relief theory and Incongruity theory were the two theories that emerged in the 18th century by weakening the dominance of Superiority theory. Relief Theory of Humour is more on the psychological aspects of humor. According to this theory, humor helps to reduce psychological tensions. This theory was sketched in Lord Shaftesbury's 1709 essay "An Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humor." Sigmund Freud stated in his relief theory that "all laugh-producing situations are pleasurable because they save psychic energy. It brings to the person pleasure because it spares expenditure of feeling, a comedy because it spares expenditure of ideas and joking because it spares expenditure of inhibition." (Relief Theory, n.d.). Incongruity Theory of Humour is the perception of something incongruous. The audience expects a particular climax, but the actual finale violates the mental patterns and expectations (Philosophy of Humor (Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy), 2020). Example: "Teacher: Billy, if you had two dollars in one pocket and five dollars in another, what would you have?

Billy: Someone else's pants, ma'am" (Deneire, 1995, p. 292).

This approach was taken by James Beattie, Immanuel Kant, Arthur Schopenhauer, and Søren Kierkegaard and is considered the prominent theory of humour in psychology and philosophy. Incongruity-resolution theory is another aspect of congruity theory. This aspect makes clear that the subject won't be able to understand the humour if they cannot connect the two incongruous elements. Thus, the incongruity should be resolved. For example, calling or naming a tall person "Tiny" will be a joke to only those who know him. Otherwise, those who don't know the reference will fail to find humour in it (Bilokcuoglu, 2018, p. 349).

There are several humour theories in education, and the two major linguistic theories of humour are The General Theory of Verbal Humour (GTVH) and Instructional Humour Processing Theory (IHPT). Atterdo and Raskin suggested the General Theory of Verbal Humour(GTVH) in the article titled Script Theory Revis(it)ed: Joke Similarity and Joke Representation Model, published in 1991. This was developed from Raskin's Script-based Semantic Theory of Humour (SSTH). This is similar to incongruous resolution theory, where a

combination of two opposite scripts will be presented, normal v/s abnormal, actual v/s non-actual, and possible v/s impossible.

Example:

"Lecturer: do you know what Ph.D. stands for? Student: no

Lecturer: Permanent Head Damage (laughs)" (Ziyaemehr, Kumar, & Faiz, 2011)

In this example, 'Ph.D.,' which stands for Doctor of Philosophy, is given a wrong and opposite expansion. The actual meaning stands for a person knowledgeable in a particular discipline, but the given definition stands for a person who is mentally disabled. This creates humour through the actual and the non-actual (Bilokcuoglu, 2018, p. 349). According to Instructional Humour Processing Theory (IHPT), proposed by Wanzer, Frymier, and Irwin (2009), the message conveyed by the teacher or speaker through humour should motivate students, increase attention and impact positively.

Humour and Psychology

Humour and laughter are always associated with positivity because laughter helps to reduce stress, tension, and anxiety. Many of the earlier studies said that humour has a positive effect on the psychological well-being of a person. Studies even say that laughter has the power to increase life expectancy. But later studies brought a division in humour. One is adaptive humour, and the other is maladaptive humour. Adaptive humour consists of facilitative humour and self-enhancing humour. People use facilitative humour as a means to amuse the listener or reader. Hence, it can reduce tension and connect people. Self-enhancing humour is jokes with a humorous perspective of life. This is a mechanism to cope with stress. Maladaptive humour consists of self-defeating humour and aggressive humour. People who fall under self-defeating humour amuse others with self-belittling jokes and laugh along with others when taunted, resulting in an absolute feeling of negativity. Humour acts as a cover for them to hide their inner negative feelings. Aggressive humour includes racist jokes, belittling, and sarcasm. These people pay attention to entertainment rather than the consequences of these jokes. So the study on humour and psychological well-being has proved that adaptive humour has resulted in better self-esteem, positive impact on mood, greater self-competence, anxiety control, and social interactions. On the other hand, maladaptive humour is associated with poor psychological well-being, higher anxiety, and depression.

Humour and Classroom

Learning can happen only in a good atmosphere. The term good atmosphere refers not only to the classroom setting but also to the psychological aspects of the student and teacher and to the student-teacher relationship. As mentioned earlier, for teaching to be effective, teachers do not have to be serious in the class. It is the teacher's responsibility to create a rapport with the students. This will help the students to be relaxed in the class, which will lead to effective learning. Humour can be used as an effective tool to create such an environment in

a classroom. Research has shown that classroom humour benefits students (Banas, Dunbar, Rodriguez & Liu, 2011; Garner, 2006; Huss & Estep, 2016; Pollio, 2002). They say humour increases learning because it creates amusement and curiosity, which is where learning begins (Henderson, 2015). Humour also helps in self-motivation, class attendance, test performance, divergent thinking, and interest in education, positive social and emotional learning, and a common psychological environment.

Humour and Language Teaching

Being proficient in a language's sound, structure, and vocabulary is a slow process that needs time and effort and can be achieved only through memory and practice. Language learning becomes more accessible when the targeted language aspect seems exciting and can recall easily. This is where the humour effect takes charge in language teaching and learning. Humour effect, according to psychology, refers to the physical and psychological impact it has on several variables. Memory is an essential variable among them. Tunku Saraa-Zawyah Tunku Badli and Mariam Adawiah Dzulkifli, 2013, conducted a study titled The Effect of Humour and Mood on Memory Recall. The result of the study shows that the participants could recall the words presented through humorous videos irrespective of their mood. Another survey by Hannah Summerfelt, Louis Lippman, and Ira E. Hyman Jr. on humour and memory through puns says memory can be improved through humour if used according to the context. Likewise, several studies show that recalling is easier when the information is presented along with humour, which is very much necessary in language learning.

According to Dr. M. Ravichand, humour can bring a new way to teach structural linguistic components, which is a flat and dry area for many language learners. In phonology, phonological humour ambiguity is created using pronunciation, stress, intonation, etc.

Example:

"An American asks a Britisher what he does. The Britisher, in his /r/-less vowel dialect, responds, "I'm a clerk." The American assumes on the basis of this answer that the Britisher sits around all day going "tick, tock, tick, tock." The ambiguity creating humour here comes from the British pronunciation of the word "clerk" which is understood by the American as "clock." (Ravichand, 2013)

In this example, the pronunciation ambiguity and the differences in dialects are clearly explained. Another example of teaching syntax:

"Student 1: "The dean announced that he will stop drinking on campus."

Student 2: "No kidding! Next thing you know, he'll want us to stop drinking too."" (Ravichand, 2013)

Here it illustrates the structural ambiguity of the first sentence. So there arises confusion on whether the dean will stop himself from drinking on the campus or the students.

Such humorous examples will help the students relax and focus on the targeted language aspect.

All the studies discussed here encourage readers to consider humour as an effective pedagogical tool, as humour and laughter have the power to make the students feel relaxed and connected with the context. When giving examples, adding humour again helps the students memorize the aspect taught. It also helps to understand the elements more effectively because humour creates curiosity, and this curiosity leads them to the development of interest in learning. But humour becomes an effective tool only when it is used effectively. Through this study, the paper suggests a few guidelines for using humour in the classroom.

1. A teacher should always try to incorporate adaptive humour but avoid maladaptive humour. As per the studies, adaptive humour encourages self-esteem, positive impact on mood, greater self-competency, anxiety control, and social interactions. All these are important to create a student-friendly learning environment.
2. While bringing humour into a particular context, the teacher has to make sure that the students understand what it is all about. According to the Incongruity-resolution theory, comedy happens only if the contradiction is resolved. So the students should be able to recognize the contradiction in the sentence, and this dichotomy should be resolved.
3. The teacher should use humour to help the students feel relaxed. The relief theory proves that humour helps to be relaxed and stress-free. Relief from tension and anxiety helps the students to be attentive. This can be done at the beginning of a session.
4. A teacher should not make fun of the mistakes made by the students. Superiority theory of humour states that this should not be practised in a classroom and is not expected from a teacher.
5. Humour should be selected according to the context and age of the students. It has to fit into the area that is being discussed. This helps to make the points clear. At the same time, the student's age should be considered for them to understand because humour should be processed when it comes to learning, as mentioned in Instructional Humour Processing Theory.
6. The teacher should always be aware of the quantity of humour. Too much humour will not serve the purpose. While handling classroom humour, the teacher should be able to present the content humorously, but it should be done without tampering with the importance of the content. Otherwise, it will result in distraction.

Handling humour and teaching cannot be done without proper training and exposure. So humour should be incorporated into teacher training programs.

Conclusion

Humour is an essential aspect of the teaching-learning process. It helps the students to get rid of stress, anxiety, and tension while aiding the teachers in creating a rapport with the students and making the class interesting. While using humour, teachers should be aware of the dos and don'ts. Instead of considering humour as a less important aspect of learning, it can be studied further and incorporated into the language teaching-learning process.

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