

Humour in English Foreign Language Teaching
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Abstract

In this paper, we will see the presentation of humour as a genuine communication means and as an interesting teaching means; how we can use it as an important component in foreign language teaching. How the use of humour in foreign language courses in different levels makes classes more enjoyable and reduces the student's stress. It can also contribute to improving students' proficiency.

ملخص

نتناول في هذه الورقة البحثية دور لغة الفكاهة في التواصل والتعليم، ونوضح كيف يمكن استعمالها واستثمارها في تعليم اللغات الأجنبية لكل المستويات، ذلك أنها تمنح المتعلمين راحة وحيوية في التعلم و تحفزهم على العمل المستمر. وتوصلنا إلى أن لهذا الأسلوب نتائج جيدة في مجال تعليم اللغات وتعلمها.

1-Introduction and statement of the problem**1-1 introduction**

Humour is "... any communication which is perceived by any of the interacting parties as humorous and leads to laughing, smiling, or a feeling of amusement"⁽¹⁾. In this paper, we will see how we can use humour in the classroom in the best way to help the learning process take place in a relaxed atmosphere; in this respect, we will see the benefits of humour from both the teacher's and the student's point of view.

Let us start by the definition of humour. The Oxford English Dictionary defines humour as that quality of action, speech, or writing, which excites amusement; oddity; jocularly, facetiousness, comicality.

Also, humour is a performative pragmatic accomplishment involving a wide range of communication skills including, but not exclusively involving, language, gesture, the presentation of visual imagery, and situation management. Humour aims at creating a concrete feeling of enjoyment for an audience, most commonly manifested in a physical display consisting of displays of pleasure including smiles and laughter.

1-2 Statement of the problem

The aim of this research is show the importance of humour in teaching/ learning process and to try to answer to the following questions:

- Does the use of humour in the foreign language classroom facilitate the students' learning of the foreign language?

- How and where can we use humour and does it influence the students' general socio-pragmatic skills?
- What recommendations can be made for the use of humour in the foreign language classroom?

1-3 Research methodology

The present study falls onto the educational research. To fulfil this research, we will describe humour in several domains, several learning levels and how humour can be a very good teaching/ learning means because it offers a relaxed atmosphere and we learn better being relaxed.

2- Humorous discourse

From the time of Aristotle, thinkers concerned the art of communication have considered the element of humour that can be employed to create an environment conducive to effective learning. We can all recall funny and information teachers from our school days.

“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 that you will be heard that what you are 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. Issue of motivation and language anxiety are keys to this topic of affect in the second language classroom”⁽²⁾.

Humour represents perhaps one of the most genuine and universal speech acts within human discourse. As a natural consequence then, the use of humour within the context of second language pedagogy offers significant advantage to both the language teacher and learner. Indeed, humour serves as an effective means of reducing affective barriers to language acquisition. This effectiveness is particularly relevant to the communicative classroom, as humour has been shown to lower the affective filter and stimulate the prosocial behaviours that are so necessary for success within a communicative context. In addition to the use of such humour for the creation of a conducive learning environment, great value lies in the use of humour as a specific pedagogical tool to illustrate and teach both formal linguistic features as well as the cultural and pragmatic components of language so necessary for communicative competence.

Humour is a very important concept in today's society. Politicians and their speech writers regularly include instances of humour in their speeches; this shows the place of humour in the speech. Research on humour and its functioning in language has recently developed into a multidisciplinary field of study, especially since the advent of theories on language and context such as pragmatics and applied linguistics. These new disciplines have given proper attention to aspects of language such as humorous communication which, until recently, were considered minor or secondary. The cognitive processes and communicative strategies involved in humorous communication are relevant to our research since it is necessary to understand all the factors involved in human interaction. The existence of “The International Society for Humor Studies” with a yearly conference and the international journal *Humor* indicate the importance of this topic and the fact that it has developed into its own field of study.

3- How can we use humour?

First, humour is recognized as a therapeutic tool by the medical professions: helps reduce anxiety and stress in the classroom setting and can break down the barriers between students and teachers. It can also help to make potentially dry subjects appear more appealing.

Second, studies in foreign language acquisition and teaching have acknowledged the use of humour to raise students' motivation in the world language classroom and to teach humour as an important tool in a foreign culture in order to reach higher social competence. Furthermore, humour has been shown to facilitate the development of listening comprehension and reading.

Using humour in teaching session is not an easy task. The obstacles to the effective employment of humour lie in the teacher, the students and the situation. Humour used correctly and appropriately is a valuable tool for any teacher.

Two types of humour can be used in the classroom depending on how to use it and for what purposes: (i) positive humour, and (ii) negative. A negative humour dominates the class, creates an atmosphere of tension and submission, while a positive humour promotes the harmonious relationship and creates a sense of security based on democratic freedom.

According to Ziv (Cited by Brewerton)⁽³⁾, there are five key functions to humour:

- The aggressive function of humour, verbal attacks, disparaging remarks, sarcasms (to hurt others or establish superiority).
- The sexual function of humour, jokes or remarks about sex or bodily functions.
- The social function of humour: jokes and pleasantries (to create a relaxed atmosphere).
- Humour as a defence mechanism, self-deprecating humour.
- The intellectual function of humour: wit or cerebral jokes (to aid understanding or remembering concepts).

Second, how these types may serve the teacher in the classroom?

If the aggressive, sexual or intellectual humour is used to undermine an individual or a group, this is not to be encouraged in the classroom: it can create an atmosphere that can impede learning; but if it can be used in a positive manner this should be encouraged.

Other types should not be ignored; the teacher who uses intellectual humour is displaying a respect for his audience, wits, and word play and erudite references demands types of flexible thinking. Even some of the more negative humour can be used positively: attacking humour can be positive if used to attack something feared with the right audience, even sexual humour may be used as it is not intended to harm or victimise.

Humor is useful for the development of listening comprehension and reading. An analysis of the vast bibliography on humorology has led to the organization of humorous discourse into three groups: (i) universal or reality-based humor, (ii) culture-based humor, and (iii) linguistic or word-based humor. This grouping serves as a pedagogical framework for teaching humor in both language and translation classrooms. Learners and tyro translators should deal first with the relatively straightforward universal humor, continue with cultural humor, which demands more of learners and translators, and finally deal with linguistic humor that offers serious

challenges to students of foreign languages and translation. The study of humor presents translators with the opportunity to exercise their creativity. Word-based or linguistic humor serves as a test of what can and cannot be translated and may entail a change in script if the "new" humorous discourse is to evoke laughter or at least a smile on the part of the target language audience.

4- Humour in different learning level

Let us start with humour in elementary EFL courses. The teacher who wants to use humour is restricted by the limited competence of the students. The early introduction of humour makes it necessary to provide students as soon as possible with appropriate vocabulary. Bearing in mind that the students at this stage are far from being proficient, only universal humour (this type of humour is obtained mainly from the context and the general functioning of the world) is appropriate. It would in most cases be expected that the linguistic and cultural jokes are beyond the level of competence of the students. In beginning courses, at least towards the end of the semester, the teacher may introduce "quips", that is, "smart" answers or retorts to the questions or statements as presented in the next humoristic situation:

Are you fishing?

No, just drowning worms?

The irony of this situation is that no fish were caught, but the narrator gained experience in dealing with the hard realities of nature. The humorous situation deals with real world situation, human behaviour. For EFL learners there are no language internal or linguistic problem in "getting" the humour of this text, it can be presented as reading, used as dictation or as a brief listening-comprehension activity.

In the intermediate language courses, the possibilities are naturally much wider for the students at this level have a larger vocabulary and more solid control of the syntax of the language. Universal humour should of course be continued throughout the program. Pieces of humorous discourse in the form of short narrative for reading are useful at this stage. In the intermediate stage, most language students are ready to appreciate cultural jokes. Example is shown in the following humorous situation:

The stockbroker's secretary answered his phone one morning: "I am sorry" she said, "Mr Bradford's on another line"

"This is Mr Ingram's office" the caller said "Right now I'd say he's sheepish"

The humorous situation is pedagogically useful because the text is short and provides students with light reading and opportunity for listening comprehension in class or in the language laboratory. The brevity of this text may provide a refreshing change from those longer reading assignments. In order to increase the lexical competence of students as rapidly as possible (the intermediate stage in the time to intensify the presentation of vocabulary), the vocabulary that is part of humorous material could be introduced prior to the presentation of puns of this type. All vocabulary that is presented and eventually learned as part of the course would be included in the evaluation of progress.

Finally, the use of humour at the advanced level can be via linguistic or word-based humour and the cultural jokes.

An example of linguistic-based joke which takes advantage of the polysemy of word *still* would be appropriate at this level of proficiency.

Wife: "Do you love me *still*"

Husband: "I might if you'd stay *still* long enough"

Foreign learners of English who have not developed language awareness or "word sensitivity" will no doubt fail to see the humour the situation in which a wife wishes to be assured that her husband continues to love her and in another situation in which the husband states that he can only make love to his wife provided she remains in one place for a specific period of time. Some students, particularly "false" intermediate students, fail to get "this type of joke owing to lack of awareness that a single word can signal different meanings.

Research in applied linguistics in recent years has shown the need to de-emphasize grammar and grammatical rules, and to give more attention to strengthening the students' vocabulary. As far as second language learning is concerned, the main obstacle to good reading is the "insufficient number of words in the learner's lexicon" According to Laufer (Cited by Schmitz)⁽⁴⁾. Students need massive amounts of vocabulary in order to feel confident that they can understand some or all of the exchange that they hear and also have the opportunity to employ their vocabulary in real situations.

Puns are appropriate at the advanced stages and provide linguistic and cultural information about the target language. Jokes written by children for children (and their parents) are useful and foreign language learners might do well maintain a repertoire of jokes for use in class or when they themselves meet children in the target culture.

In order to help students cope with humorous discourse it is important to present the vocabulary along with the different reading or possible scripts. It would appear that those who fail to understand a specific joke have difficulty in seeing that these exist a misunderstanding due to the introduction of another script on the part of the participants in the joke narrative. Word power is basic to the comprehension of humorous discourse. Learners do not always develop joke and humour competence in foreign language immediately but with sufficient input in the form of humorous texts this competence can be nurtured for steady development during the course of study.

Another type of pun, the conundrum, is also appropriate at advanced level. This type is more difficult for foreign language learners for they involve reference to two different meanings of a word or play on two different word meaning. According to Culler cited by Schmitz⁽⁵⁾ "puns are at work in the central, formative structure of conceptual systems."

The cultural jokes are appropriate for learners who want to be familiar with the cultural practice of a nation, society or community. An example of a cultural-based joke is presented in the following:

- Do you know what I got for Father's Day?
- No, what?
- The bill for Mother's Day

To perceive the humour in this joke, learners have to know that in English speaking countries special days are set aside to remember Mother and Father. In the USA, Father's Day comes after Mother's Day. It involves a stereotype shared by certain members of the society that only men pay the bills and is supposedly the sole providers. It also imputes some irresponsibility to wives and children in their buying habits. The text also points to materialism and the superficiality of giving of presents

in the culture. Cultural jokes serve as mirrors of the socio-cultural practices of the society and can inform the learner how some members of the community view themselves.

The joke is successful for members of the culture for these two special days occur relatively near one another. Father's day is approximately one month after Mother's Day. The humour of this joke would, no doubt, be lost in a culture where these days are not celebrated, for example, in Brazil where Father's Day occurs in August, more than two months after Mother's day.

In the advanced stages of language learning, the teacher, in addition to introducing cultural jokes, can make use of the opportunity to have students reflect critically about the target culture. The advanced level is also the moment when instructors can attempt to tell jokes of their own and attempt also to use humour as teachers did in other subject-matter.

Many foreign learners of English as a foreign language who travel to USA or Great Britain have difficulty in understanding jokes when they hear them in actual conventional exchange, watching television or seeing a film. However, if those students had the opportunity to listen to humorous material in the classroom or in the language laboratory, they would have been better "listener". Those students who are willing listeners make more progress in their foreign language course than who avoid opportunities to hear jokes and puns. Another accomplishment for language learners is to be able to tell a joke to a native speaker. The ability to tell a joke, to be a good storyteller, on the part of the learner permits the bonding of speaker and listener, of joke teller with joke receiver or listener. Understanding a joke is one thing, but telling one is indeed another and this competence may not occur until students have been truly "advanced" students for quite some time.

According to Schmitz⁽⁶⁾, Norrick has examined in connectional exchanges the degree of involvement and joking on the part of speakers and listeners. If foreign language learners are to become proficient in the day-to-day use of the target language, they need to develop strategies to get involved in conventional interactions. Some speakers are very competent joke teller while others are hopeless and cannot remember even a single joke. Humorous material in foreign language should be available for those students who have potential as language learners to tell a joke. But humorous material should also be available for those learners who are reluctant to tell jokes but would like to understand them when they appear in interactions.

According to Powell and Andresen (cited by Smith)⁽⁷⁾ found that: "Humour, provided it is not used to excess, can increase attention and interest and help to illustrate and reinforce what is being taught". More recently, a study of humour in adult learning, conducted by Saltman of Columbia University cited by Smith⁽⁸⁾, he found that positive humour, particularly when relevant to the material, can:

Help establish a climate conducive to adult learning, defuse stress, and provide an affective message delivery system aiding retention of information, break down barriers between facilitators and learning and foster cohesiveness.

However, not all the research into this area provides such positive results. For example, in a series of studies conducted with Harvard student in the seventies, Desberg and colleagues (according to Smith)⁽⁹⁾ found that humour which is irrelevant to the subject matter does not aid learning; only relevant humour does the trick. Also

they found that repeating information in a non-humorous manner may give the same leaning advantages as providing relevant humorous content.

Despite this, according to Smith⁽¹⁰⁾, Desberg is a firm advocate of humour in teaching and training, so long as it is used judiciously. In particular, the use of humorous anecdotes to illustrate difficult ideas can be beneficial. There is really good evidence that people remember stories and jokes better than content. He says that: “Story telling and metaphors helps remember concepts more easily” cited by Smith⁽¹¹⁾.

According to Smith, Hoare stresses the importance of spontaneity for trainers and being you, rather than trying to be funny. “When you get spontaneous lightness and spontaneous interaction, humour is naturally present.”⁽¹²⁾

A similar view is taken by Tamblyn cited by Smith⁽¹³⁾.” Real humour is openness, optimism and a kind of yes-saying to life. Humour is creativity. Humour is a have all, play.” According to these two views, humour well used has a lot of advantages. Also, for Smith there is a whole raft of evidence about the link between humour and wellbeing, so the teacher gains physical and psychological benefit from it. But there is also one study of Desberg and Colleagues according to Smith⁽¹⁴⁾ which mentions that people who use humour are seen as more intelligent, creative and competent than people who do not use it.

For the teachers, the non-use of humour in their teaching is simply a lack of knowledge as how one may use it effectively in class. Others associate humour and its use with non-productivity. Students cannot be leaning while they are laughing. While for others teachers, humour is synonymous with classroom disorder and chaos.

According to Schmitz⁽¹⁵⁾, Deneire said that humour should only be presented when the students have acquired the cultural and linguistics resources necessary to understand it. In this view, the use of humour in the classroom would serve as “an illustration and reinforcement” of what they already know. For this humour should not be used as a technique to introduce linguistic phenomena and cultural knowledge.

According to Schmitz⁽¹⁶⁾ who disagrees with Deneire, humorous material has to be selected to fit the linguistic competence of the students. It is important for the students of foreign language to know what type of discourse native speakers consider being humorous or funny or downright hilarious. It is important also to identify appropriate texts that provoke laughter or at least smile on the part of native speakers. The earlier students are introduced to authentic language point, to different style of speech and to speakers of different ages, sexes, socio-cultural level and from different regions, the less artificial or “classroom-like” their output will be.

We cannot forget that for some people “laughter is the best medicine”, and when used properly, humour allows the shy student to feel apart of the class and possibly contribute without losing face. This is of particular importance in a communication class when the accent is on verbal communication. We should therefore not ignore it but make it part of our everyday classroom learning. Laughter helps us to lose ourselves momentarily. This momentary loss may be interpreted by some teachers as a loss of control, something to be avoided. While humour like all activities in classroom must be well prepared and have a specific objectives, it should give learners the impression of being spontaneous but yet be an integral part of the course instrumental in building language skills, and never an incidental or “by the way” activity. In order to increase the lexical competence of students as rapidly as possible, the vocabulary

that is the vocabulary that is presented and eventually learned as part of the course would include in the evaluation of progress. In this way, humour in the language classroom would be “no laughing or joking matter” and hopefully would be taken seriously. So, the teacher does not try too hard; he must let humour arise naturally, encourage it, do not force it and do not use private humour or humour that leaves people out: it must group not split people into group. But the over use of it loses its values and effects. “Humour is an integral part of culture and that can be a major conceptual and methodological tool for gaining insights into cultural system”⁽¹⁷⁾. In this citation, Apte encourages the use of humour as a teaching means because it is an integral part of the culture, and understanding a part of the cultural side of the population is to integrate the culture and the language of this population.

5- What Makes Some Humorous Material a Learning Tool in Classroom?

Through this part we will show how the culture can be an important point in the learning process.

We must point to three main views of school culture: (i) culture as a piece of information, (ii) culture as a set of symbols and concepts, and (iii) school culture as an arena of different meanings formed as a result of political and social struggle. Schools are complex entities and classrooms are public spaces populated by different students with different values, attitudes and views of the world. What may be in a group may not be in another. What may be felicitous in one context might not work out in another. Many teachers report that each classroom group has its own “personality”.

In order to develop the students’ cultural understanding in this manner, however, teachers are required to have an extensive knowledge about the community and culture of the language they are teaching. The affective environment is important in the language class and with classes where the learners taking risks while they use their second language are afraid. With humour, students are encouraged to use their second language in class and they do not face ridicule, or negative criticism. Error correction is appropriate, timely, constructive and erases confidence in each student.

As the poet John Hegley has said: “Laughter, nice laughter, is nicely therapeutic”⁽¹⁸⁾.

6- Conclusion: Results and recommendations

6-1 Results

Humor provides teachers and students with the opportunity for a respite from the formally assigned text material. Since humor in most societies occurs at specific moments or situations in social interactions, it would be best for teachers to maintain a file of humorous texts for use at specific moments in the language classroom. Learning another language is indeed hard work and requires a great deal of effort on the part of the learners. Humorous material can add variety to the class, providing a change of pace, and can contribute to reducing tension that many learners feel during the learning process. But the use of humorous texts in classes should be planned by the teacher. It should give learners the impression of being spontaneous but yet be an integral part of the course instrumental in building language skills, and never an incidental or “by the way” activity. In order to increase the lexical competence of students as rapidly as possible, the vocabulary that is part of humorous material could be introduced prior to

the presentation of humorous material. All the vocabulary that is presented and eventually learned as part of the course would be included in the evaluation of progress. In this way, humor in the language classroom would be “no laughing or joking matter” and hopefully would be taken seriously.

6-2 Recommendations

According to Morain cited by Struch⁽¹⁹⁾ there are several suggestions for incorporating the study of humour into the foreign language curriculum, for example:

First, providing students with authentic examples of cartoons, jokes, puns and others forms of humour, then, teaching students about the conventions of humour in the target culture and helping students to examine specific instances and genres of humour so that they can analyse the humour better.

Struch⁽²⁰⁾ says also that Morain encourages language teachers to use humour as teaching tool because it will not only be a motivating factor in their study but also benefit them in their sense of integration into the cultural life of the people with whom they are trying to communicate. Language teachers are generally accustomed to teaching a foreign language as a linguistic system. The grammar and the textbooks they use approach language in the first place as verbs, nouns, adjective and propositions, not as discourse and communicative interaction in context. Language is taught as words and sentences, as the neutral conduit for the transmission of information. It is generally not seen as being itself the carrier of values, beliefs and worldviews. According to Schmitz⁽²¹⁾ Deneire said that there is no a need for harmonious integration of humour into existing language teaching approach. The advantage of humour is that it can be used with any language teaching approach or method, be it the Communicative Approach, Total Physical Response (TPR) or Suggestopedia. Also, Powell and Andresen cited by Smith⁽²²⁾ said that humour can:

- promote comprehension and relation
- create a positive atmosphere in the classroom
- encourage student's involvement in the classroom
- hold student's attention
- build self-confidence

According to Chiasson⁽²³⁾; Loomax and Moosani in an article about the use of humour in university statics class point out that the use of humour in the classroom reduces tension, improves classroom climate, increases enjoyment and increases student-teacher rapport and facilitates learning.

In terms of this work, we can say that when it is widely used, humour is a good teaching means in all the teaching level; we have seen that it has a lot of advantages and it can help-in the teaching process but unfortunately, not all the teachers are aware of its values and do not know when and how to use it.

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