

THE INTEGRATION OF HUMOR IN ELT CLASSROOM INSTRUCTION: SOLUTIONS TO THE BARRIERS

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Abstract

*Beyond digital skills, 21st century teachers also should have humor-use skill. Integrating humor in the classroom instruction is also one of what 21st century teachers should do and develop. Nowadays, using humor in the class becomes worldwide issues among educators and researchers. The use of humor in the classroom has been suggested to increase instructional effectiveness (Chiasson, 2002; Chee, 2006; Askildson, 2005; Lovorn, 2008; Ann, 2013). A previous study conducted by Stroud (2013) entitled *The Laughing EFL Classroom: Potential benefits and Barriers*, reported that learners perceived the use of humor in the classroom has some potential benefits such as reducing anxiety, improving retention, improving participation, increasing enjoyment in learning, and more comfortable classroom atmosphere. However, some problems were also found as barriers of humor use in the classroom, they were: teacher disapproval of humor usage, group dynamics issues whilst humor is present, a lack of seriousness and indiscipline associated with humor usage, and students L2 difficulties in humor usage. Accordingly, the author is interested to explore some problems that previous study perceived as potential barriers of humor usage in EFL classroom, and then offer valuable solutions to overcome those barriers.*

Key words: humor use in ELT, barriers of humor use, solution to the barriers

Introduction

There is no doubt about the fact that the types of students today are completely different from last century's. Teachers definitely need to look at some of the skills to equip themselves with to catch students focus and get them engaged in the learning process. The 21st century teachers need the relevant digital skills that can help them blend in and leverage the power of technology to improve both teaching and learning. However, Kharbach (2012) argues that digital skills are not the only key elements needed for labelling effective teachers. There are also certain practices that teachers should develop to accompany this progress. One of what the 21st century teachers should do is using humor in the classroom. The use of humor in the classroom instruction has been suggested to increase instructional effectiveness. Humor is a sociolinguistic and sociocultural phenomenon which has a wide range of instructional values. Humor is a valuable teaching tool for establishing a classroom climate conducive to learning. A number of studies have been conducted to investigate humor phenomenon in classroom instruction. Stroud (2013), in his study entitled *The Laughing EFL Classroom: Potential benefits and Barriers*, found that using humor in the classroom has some potential benefits and barriers. Based on

Stroud finding, the writer is interested to explore some barriers or challenges of using humor in EFL classroom and then offer valuable solutions to overcome those challenges.

The Impact of Humor Usage in the Classroom

Humor is universal communication among people. It can be brought to our home, workplace, or even classes. Humor will not necessarily cause learning, but there is empirical evidence to support the idea that humor creates conditions conducive to learning. According to Hornby (2010) humor is the quality in something that makes it funny or amusing, the ability to laugh at things that are amusing. The outcome of humor most times is laughter. Laughter is always the outward manifestation of the presence of joy and happiness. It is not exclusive to a race, class of people or a particular nation; rather, it is universal as well as contagious. In the field of English Language Teaching, humor is defined as any physical action or spoken statement intentionally or otherwise that causes students to react by laughing, giggling, smiling, etc (Baleghizadeh & Ghoreishi, 2014). Humor can be represented as jokes, puns, riddles, sarcasm, physical antics, nonverbal behaviors, cartoons, and one-liners (Wanzer et al., 2006).

So far, the reasons for employing humour in the context of foreign language teaching have been showed by many studies. The investigation conducted by Stroud (2013) was examining student opinions of the general benefits of humor usage in the classroom. The study shows that learners perceived the use of humor in the classroom can reduce students' anxiety, improve students' retention, improve students' participation, increase enjoyment in learning, and build more comfortable classroom atmosphere.

In the last two decades or so, scholars have made a number of studies about the effectiveness of humor in second language acquisition. Research has shown that humorous sentences and examples have a positive impact on retention abilities. Garner (2006) conducted an experimental study; both the experimental group and the control group watched the same video recorded lectures with one exception. Three humorous stories or metaphors included in each of the lectures in the experimental group and for the control groups did not. After finishing all three lectures, the subjects were assessed on their retention on the material presented. The results of the study show that humor can be a powerful tool when used in the classroom. The overall opinion of the lessons was significantly higher in the experimental group. Students indicated in the "humor" group that the information was communicated more effectively. Further, the students in the experimental group were significantly more able to recall and retain the knowledge from the lectures.

A number of studies have examined the impact of humor on improving the four language skills. Hayati et al. (2011) found that students who were studying humorous texts during their reading sessions showed a significant improvement in both recall and reading comprehension tests. Rafiee et al. (2010), found the experimental group which practiced the listening skill using humorous songs, outperformed the control group with conventional materials on listening comprehension. Syafiq and Saleh (2012) found that humorous materials and classroom atmosphere increased students' motivation to speak in EFL classes.

Humor can contribute a great deal to the classroom instruction. It enables the teacher not only to create an effective or positive environment, but is a source of enjoyment for the teacher and the students. As Askildson (2005:55) says that “humor was an important element of creating an overall environment conducive to learning”. Humor increases students’ concentration and interest since it combats boredom and helps them cope with learning difficult materials. Based on the pilot study, conducted by Askildson (2005), found that humor can reduced anxiety/tension, improved approachability of teachers, and increased levels of interest as a result of humor usage by the teacher. However, when Stroud investigates students’ perception by splitting humor sources into *teacher-created* and *student-created* during classes, differences in student opinions about using humor in the second language classroom were seen.

Teacher-created humor, the actions and dialogue of the teacher and the teacher materials and visuals were reported to have positive effects on learning in several different areas. Humorous teacher actions and dialogue were reported to be most significantly influential on classroom atmosphere. students generally believed that humor in teacher actions and dialogue improved relaxation, participation and enjoyment in learning. Students also felt that humorous teacher-produced materials and visuals especially influenced their participation and enjoyment in learning. Students perhaps felt that as recipients of humor in the form of visual input from the teacher, humor can help to improve how much they enjoy doing class work Stroud (2013).

Student-created humor is any actions, dialogue, materials and visuals that students produce. Stroud (2013) found that a significantly low number of students believed that humorous actions and dialogues of students own in class made them more relaxed, more willing to participate or classes more enjoyable. Some students may well not see significant benefit in being humorous themselves in the classroom. In this case, teacher should make the students aware that humor is part of human life; everyone can be a humorous person in any way she/he looks, acts and speak. Schmitz (2002) observes: “Humor is part of ... most social encounters; the use of humor and wit is intimately related to human nature”. Thus, language learning is seen in authentic and real life situations.

Solution to the Barriers of Humor Usage

Integrating humor in the classroom instruction is not always smoothly run well. Stroud (2013) notes that students perceive some challenges of using humor in the classroom are: teacher disapproval of humor usage, group dynamics issues whilst humor is present, a lack of seriousness and indiscipline associated with humor usage, and students L2 difficulties in humor usage.

Teacher disapproval of humor usage

Stroud (2013) found several students mentioned a hesitant in whether using humor was appropriate or not at certain times and what they should or should not be joking about. Interviewees made comments such as “my teacher might get mad if I joke around”, “if my teacher doesn’t joke, I shouldn’t”, and “we get loud when we joke and the teacher shouts at us”. A sense of uncertainty about the use of humor seems to stem from the actions of the

teacher and perhaps their reaction to humor usage by students. If students feel comfortable with using humor to aid their learning, then a teacher clearly needs to encourage its use and react in a supportive manner when the addition of humor is not detrimental to the learning taking place.

Not all teachers are humorous and not all teachers prefer to use humor in the classroom. Azizinezhad and Hashemi (2011) argue that many teachers fear humour, since they think of it as equal to losing their authority and therefore something to be avoided. Teachers are 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. Some teachers enjoy humour, but they don't know how to use it and they don't want to look foolish. Omede.et.al, (2013) found that not many teachers use humor and laughter as pedagogical tools for promoting learning because they think it wastes their times and they see it as a digression. However, teachers should know about the benefits of humor in learning activities. They should not force the students to be too serious in learning activity and forbid them to laugh. As Lovorn (2008) notes "Teachers who plan instruction with ... humor strategies reap the benefits of unique connectivity and transform their classrooms into warm and inviting learning environments. Additionally, Chee (2006) stated "When used in the correct manner, humor can help to reduce the 'distance' between teachers and students, who would remember more if they are enjoying themselves".

Group dynamics issues whilst humor is present

A second possible reason for students perhaps not preferring to use humor in class themselves is a lack of confidence to do so in front of their partner, group or class as a whole. Comments made such as "It's embarrassing to try to make others laugh", "I don't think my presentations should be humorous, as I'm not funny" and "my friends will make fun of me" revealed anxiety among some students to perform or create things humorously in class. On the other hand, some students stated "I like making my class mates laugh, as it is fun" and "when I can be funny with my friends, I like the class more". As Stroud (2013) states "willingness to be humorous in class seems to depend on the student at hand and the audience they face, and so teacher consideration of inter-class relationships should always be present".

The writer thought that "lack of confidence with their partner" should not be a reason for student to avoid humor in the class. In fact, humor is a valuable solution to increase students' confidence. The students should know what kind of humor can be use based on their characteristic and how humor works. In fact, humor has social rewards. It boosts self-confidence in conversations, helps us win friends or a mate, disarm enemies with a retort, defuse tension in a delicate negotiation, or persuade others to our point of view (Wulf, 2010:156).

A lack of seriousness and indiscipline associated with humor usage

The third potential barrier to student humor identified from interviews was a lack of seriousness associated with a class with significant humorous elements incorporated into it, potentially resulting in a lack of discipline amongst students. Interviewees made comments such as "funny worksheets are fun to do, but are maybe too playful" and "If I start

laughing, my friends laugh too and the class gets too loud”. General comments from interviewees such as these suggested that activities which involved playful elements might be motivational for students, but perhaps would cause hesitation and uncertainty in their appropriateness.

Common response of humor is laughter, however laughing too much in the class perhaps sometimes is not appropriate. Chiasson (2002) argues that:

Laughter helps us forget about ourselves, our problems, our fears and allows us to lose ourselves momentarily. This momentary loss may be interpreted by some teachers as a loss of control, poor classroom management and therefore something to be avoided. However, humour as with all activities in the communicative language classroom, must be well prepared and have a specific objective.

So, Specific goals and objectives must be clearly established in the mind of the teacher before he wants to integrate humor in the classroom activity. Humor, along with encouragement and praise should be one of the many useful tools used by language teachers to make their classrooms more inviting and conducive to learning.

Students L2 difficulties in humor usage

The last barrier, found by Stroud (2013), for humor usage identified from interviews was one related to issues with the use of the L2 itself. It is clearly more challenging and complex to create language in the L2 which is expected to create an amused reaction amongst its receivers. Students made comments in the interview section related to their own contributions to a class such as “making my classmates laugh is difficult in English”, “I can’t be funny in English” and “I want to make others laugh, but I don’t know enough words to do it”. Stroud argues that a need for support and guidance from the teacher to give students the ability to use the L2 confidently and successfully with humor is apparent. Perhaps not only with grammatical or lexical items for example, but also with how to deliver humorous material to others as a more confident presenter.

Using humor in second language is not as easy as in students’ first language. As Bell (2007: 28) notes, “the construction and comprehension of verbal humor in an L2 constitutes a great challenge even to advanced L2 learners, as it often requires sophisticated linguistic, social and cultural competence”. However, in another light, Bell (2009) argues that proficiency does not play an important role in interpreting humor since students have adequate potential for making and enjoying different kinds of humor in any category even in early stages of learning a second or a foreign language. Therefore, humorous materials can be used with students in all levels of proficiency.

Not only students, teachers may also face some difficulties when producing humor in the second language. Humor comes more naturally to some teachers and does not come naturally to others. That is why Wanzer and Frymier (1999) suggested that instruction in humor could be added to teacher training to help the teachers become more immediate in developing their humour-use skill in second language. Additionally, Booth-Butterfield and Wanzer (2010) argued that although training is unlikely to change instructors’ humor

orientation from low to high, as with several other communication skills, humorous communication behaviors can be improved with training and practice.

Despite challenges, it is enormously valuable for L2 students to gain some level of L2 humor competence. Wulf (2010) in his article “Humor-Competence Curriculum”, presented taxonomy of L2 humor micro skill.¹ The proposed value of this taxonomy is as a guide to planning lessons incorporating humor micro skills to enhance students’ humor competence.

Tips for Using Humor in the Classroom

It is recommended for foreign/second language teachers to include humor in their materials (Aboudan, 2009). To make teachers easy in incorporating humor in classroom activity, some tips are needed. Ann (2013) offers methods for including humor in the ESL Classroom, they are:

1. *Include humor from the beginning*
Use humor during such tasks. Realize that no one is learning anything without enjoying the process. That is precisely when I start joking around.
2. *Lighten the mood*
Use humor to lighten the mood. On test days, making a small joke can lighten what may be a heavy mood.
3. *Call attention to humor*
Call attention to humor and discuss what makes it uniquely and what seems more universal and easily accessible.
4. *Share a joke from their cultures*
Invite students to share a joke from their cultures. Have them explain it and why it is funny within that culture.
5. *Humor is a tool*
Humor is a tool in the class, not the class content itself. And needless to say humor especially *sarcasm*, should never be directed at students. Sarcasm can be hard to understand, even from someone within one’s own culture. Direct humor at inanimate objects or situations, not people.

Conclusion

Humor is universal communication among people. It can be brought to our home, workplace, or even classes. Beyond digital skills, 21st century teachers also should have humor-use skill. Integrating humor in the classroom instruction is also one of what 21st century teachers should do and develop. Although humor will not necessarily cause learning, but there is empirical evidence to support the idea that humor creates conditions conducive to learning (Chiasson, 2002; Chee, 2006; Askildson, 2005; Lovorn , 2008; Ann, 2013, Garner; 2006). Humor can be one solution to make classroom activity more effective. Many research present humor with several potential benefits. No matter which sources of humor produced, teacher’ humor or students’ humor, it believed as a tool to enhance students’ progress in learning second language. Using humor in EFL classroom is

¹ For detail information see Wulf, D. 2010. A Humor Competence Curriculum. *TESOL QUARTERLY*. Vol. 44 (1): 162.

not without potential barriers. It is a challenge for the teachers to overcome every barrier faced in the classroom. However, if done appropriately, using humor in EFL classroom yields many rewards in language and cultural learning.

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