

HUMOUR AS USED AND PERCEIVED BY INSTRUCTORS IN EFL TEACHING AT THE UNIVERSITY OF BAHRAIN

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempted to investigate the instructor's perception of humor and its use in the teaching of English as a foreign language at the University of Bahrain (UoB). To that end, a survey was given to 30 native and non-native English speaking instructors in the English Language Centre as well as in the English Department at UoB. The findings revealed that there was an agreement among the instructors in that humour has an undeniable role to play in lowering the affective filter by creating an enjoyable and convenient atmosphere and also in contributing positively to making language learning easier and more effective. This finding clearly supports earlier research in other studies such as Deneire (1995) and Tuncay (2007), among others, which provided evidence about the benefits of the employment of pedagogical humour. However, the participating instructors seemed to be unsure about how humour is to be implemented in English language teaching. Based on the results of the present study and those of other studies make it necessary for course book and material designers acknowledge this benefit of humor, not only for lowering the affective filter but also as a useful language teaching tool of targeted linguistic features. In view of this positive result, which represents only part of the overall picture, there is a need to complete it by further research that examines humour in actual teaching and evaluates its impact on learning of specific language features and on English language learning as a whole.

KEYWORDS: *Humour, Ambiguity, Teaching, Learning, Motivation*

Article History

Received: 17 Feb 2018 | Revised: 03 Mar 2018 | Accepted: 06 Mar 2018

INTRODUCTION

Since the introduction of the grammar translation method in the 19th century and the subsequent methods, the development of approaches and techniques for improving the teaching and learning languages have never ceased to find and implement the most effective ways that learners, teachers and curriculum designers can adopt in order to give the best results, not only in terms of lowering the affective filter, language anxiety and providing a relaxed atmosphere but also achieving easier and more effective learning and teaching. Yet, compared with the research work conducted on the use of strategies for improving teaching and learning in general, the subject of humour is still understudied (Pham 2014). Thus one wonders what humour is and what role it plays pedagogically as regards language learning and teaching. Humour is defined as "the ability to be funny or to be amused by things that are funny" (www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary). Another definition of humour is provided by Wikipedia as "the tendency of particular cognitive experiences to provoke laughter and provide amusement".

The language of humour stems from the fact that it is consciously and deliberately planned and designed, relying, to a great extent, on puns, and ambiguity whether it is spoken or written to create a dramatic effect on the reader or hearer. Humour is also described by Farghal (2006:1) as a social, collaborative act in which the teller/writer, the listener/ reader and the humorous utterance simultaneously engage in a socio-cultural function.

As a result of humour being discussed by psychologists, sociologists, and educationalists among others, various theories have evolved, explaining why utterances come to be humorous. The superiority theory maintains that we find a person, a situation or an act humorous when we feel superior. We laugh at other persons because we feel more intelligent than they are and we laugh at their misfortune, because we are luckier. Even when we laugh at ourselves, it is the past, inferior self we are laughing at (Billig, 2005). In this sense, humour becomes a malicious act and this may explain "the traditional opposition to laughter and humour" (Morreall, 1997). The incongruity theory states that it is the incongruous juxtaposition of two or more people, objects, ideas, or expectations that makes something humorous (Morreall, 1983). The relief theory views, humor as a release of tension and restraints of society and the environment around us (Billig, 2005; Morreall,1983). The linguistic theory considers humour as a cognitive activity and views it from the semantic and pragmatic perspective and deals with the relations between the linguistic form and the content and where the semantic incongruity makes the scripts humorous. (Raskin, 1985; Attardo, 1994).

Hammer refers to "a variety of texts, but often with subtle differences: jokes, jests, witticisms, quips, sallies, cracks, gags, puns, retorts, riddles, one-liners and conundrums" (Schmitz, 2002). Meaning in humor is not made clear, but it has to be worked out through cooperation between by the listener/ reader and humour producer (the cooperative principle).

Humour based on language can occur at different levels: phonological, morphological and semantic and pragmatic. In phonological humour ambiguity is created by playing on language sounds, stress, intonation and pronunciation. Humour can sometimes be created by playing on morphemes where the manipulation of the morphological rule is done on purpose to create this special effect. Humour can also be created semantically in polysemous phrasal verbs or syntactically in word order. Pragmatic humour occurs when people concentrate on the sense of the utterance rather than its force. The speaker deliberately intending to create humour gives less information than is required and becomes ambiguous (flouting the Gricean maxim quality of the cooperative principle) thereby leading the hearer, in his/her interpretation of the utterance, into drawing certain conclusions, i.e. implicature and replying accordingly (See Grice H. P. 1975, the cooperative principle, pp. 45-6).

As far as the pedagogy is concerned, most studies acknowledge the direct and positive role played by humour when used in education (Lucas,2005; Berk, 1996; Desberg et al 1981) as it increases the retention of information and promote learning. Humor can be incorporated into instruction in a variety of ways, including in the classroom, on exams, and on syllabi to name but a few (Berk, 2002, 2003; Martin, 2007). The next section sheds some light on the use of humour in English language instruction.

HUMOUR IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

The question of the use of humour in English language teaching has been dealt with by many studies, which can be divided into two categories:

First, the studies that deal with humour as an attention getter and tension reducer in the class: Marklin, quoted in Walker (2002) says that "students enjoy humor in the form of funny anecdotes" Claire (1984:v) claims that humour ensures student involvement in class conversations. Maurice (1988:20) says that "humour can easily be seen as a way of activating motivation and directing attention. Neuliep (1991) in a study on 388 high school teachers found among the stated reasons for employing humour that its effect was relaxing, comforting and tension reducing, it had a humanizing effect on teacher image and it maintained increasing student interest and enjoyment. These studies seem, in fact, to have echoed the affective filter hypothesis which was first introduced by Dulay & Burt (1977) and later by Krashen (1982), quoted in Vadillo (1998) who noted that a low affective filter corresponded to high motivation, self-confidence, and a lack of anxiety. Krashen added that our pedagogical goals should not only include supplying comprehensible input, but also creating a situation that encourages a low filter. In this respect, humor can help lowering that affective filter, reducing anxiety in the class, and encouraging students' desire to take part in what is being said in the class.

Second, the studies that deal with humour as part of the material used for teaching English language features or skills, (Shmitz,2002), (Hatch & Brown, 1995), (Laufer, 1997). The latter studies argue for using humour particularly in vocabulary learning. Laufer (ibid) states that the main problems that face the learner in reading is "the insufficient number of words in the learner's lexicon". Berwald (1992) emphasizes the significance of using humour for the explanation and practice of syntactic, semantic and phonetic and structural components. Trachtenberg (1979) claims that telling jokes in the context of English as a second language offers an ideal opportunities for learning mini grammar or semantic lessons. Poljaveric (1992), quoted in Vadillo (1998), tells us about her experience with jokes when used in teaching materials in her English classes: "The pupils learned without being aware of it. They had to think and react quickly, which is not easy. In a very few minutes they had to select what was important to include and to discard what was not. They had to concentrate on the vocabulary, grammar, etc., and they did it without tension or fear". Rubin (1982) quoted in Shmitz (2002) says that humour is useful for learners at the advanced level as students who plan to deal with literary criticism in their university studies will benefit a great deal from being exposed to humour in the foreign language courses.

THE PRESENT STUDY

The purpose of this paper is to investigate some aspects of humour and its perception and use in English college classroom by instructors in the English language and literature department and in the English language Centre at the University of Bahrain. In order to achieve this task, the author conducted a survey (appendix A) on thirty English language instructors using a Likert scaled survey. The survey is based on that of Tuncay's (2007), however, some modifications were made to the original questionnaire.

Instrument

The study participants were surveyed on their perception and use of humour in English language classes at the University of Bahrain through a voluntary and anonymous questionnaire. The questionnaire comprised 12 questions with five possible Likert scaled responses. Each question required the participants to select one alternative. For instance question one asked the participants to say if humour can be used as a supplementary material in English language classes. They should select one of the following choices: strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, strongly disagree, disagree. The survey seeks to answer the following three thematic questions:

- Can humour be used in the English language college classroom as a teaching tool?
- Does humour play a role in activating students' motivation and interest and reducing anxiety when learning English in college classrooms?
- To what extent instructors use humour in their teaching of English in the college classroom at the University of Bahrain?

RESULTS

Results from the survey of this study (Figures 1 & 2) have shown clearly that the items related to Research question # one have been in general responded to positively. With regard to the use of humour as a supplementary teaching tool (item # 1), all the instructors (100%) have indicated their approval with (43%) selecting the "strongly agree" and a higher percentage of instructors (57%) opting for "agree" slot. In response to item # two, which addressed the question of whether humour was the easiest way of presenting new language features, the highest percentage of responses (47%) was in the "neither agree nor disagree" category, whereas (30%) of the instructors agreed to using it in teaching for presenting new language features. (57%) of the participants agreed that humor should be integrated into the course book design (item # 3) and further (20%) selected "strongly agree", the total of which is (77%). The responses to item # 4 which addressed the question of whether the use of humour in English language classrooms can help students improve their communication skills, (57%) of the participants and a further (27%) indicated their approval making a total of agreeing responses (84%). In response to item # 5 which dealt with whether humour increased students time in class, (20%) of the participants agreed and a further (43%) strongly agreed making the total of positive responses (63%). With regard to translating humour into the target language if students failed to fully understand it (item #6), the majority of participants (53%) disagreed while the second highest percentage (23%) were not sure and, hence, selected "neither agree nor disagree". In response to item #7 concerning humour helping students interact in class, a very high percentage (67%) of the respondents opted for "agree" and additional (20%) chose "strongly agree" making the total of (87%) of favourable responses.

As for the items addressing Research Question # two, the majority of participants in their response to item # 8, which addressed the question of humour helping students overcome their anxiety and shyness in English language classes, (60%) of the participants opted for "agree" and a further (33%) opted for "strongly agree", the total of which was (93%). The majority of respondents (60%) and an additional (20%) believed that students would have difficulty in role playing humour (item # 9). The question whether humor can challenge due to its culture based meanings (item # 11), (77%) of the participants opted for "agree" and a further (17%) chose "strongly agree".

Regarding the items dealing with Research Question # three concerning the use of humour in the classroom, most of the participants, that is, (57%) who strongly agreed and a further (27%) who agreed, believed that teachers should have sense of humour in English language classes (item # 10). For the actual use of humour in the classroom (item # 12), (50%) of the participants said that they employed at least one aspect of it "sometimes" whereas (20%) "always" used it.

Survey Results

Overall Distribution of Items

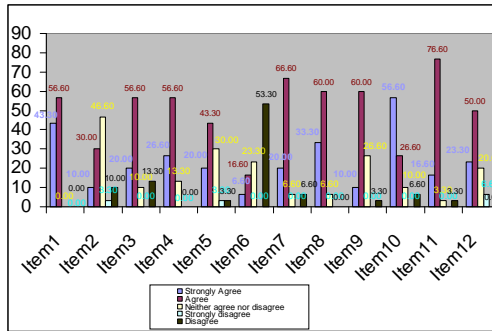


Figure 1: Use of Humour

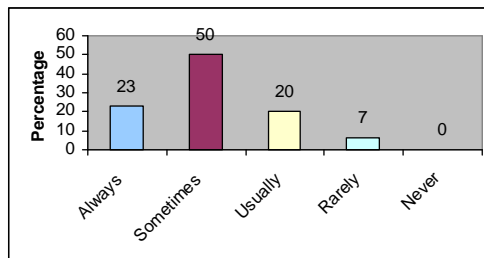


Figure 2: The Total Number of Opinions in all Items

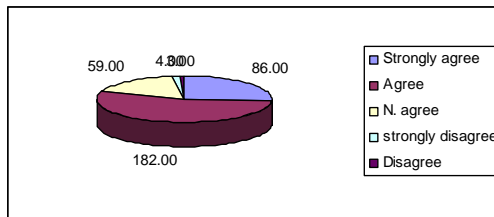


Figure 3

Table 1

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Disagree
Item 1	13	17	-	-	-
Item 2	3	9	14	1	3
Item 3	6	17	3	-	4
Item 4	8	17	4	-	-
Item 5	6	13	9	1	1
Item 6	2	5	7	-	16
Item 7	6	20	2	-	2
Item 8	10	18	2	-	-
Item 9	3	18	8	-	1
Item 10	17	8	3	-	2
Item 11	5	23	1	-	1
	Always	Sometimes	Usually	Rarely	Never
Item 12	7	15	6	2	-

DISCUSSIONS

The results of the survey of this study seem to indicate that there is a tendency to use humour as supplementary tool in teaching English and also as a means of lowering the affective filter by creating a relaxed and comfortable atmosphere, hence leading to better learning in English college classes at the University of Bahrain. Yet, the participating instructors seemed to be unsure about how humour is to be implemented in English language teaching. This, in fact, is not surprising since the literature on humour and as shown in the literature review above have not included any empirical studies that examine the effects of using humour in presenting specific English language items or structures in the classroom.

There is a general agreement among the participants that humour in the classroom improves students' communication and encourages them to speak more. This finding would be significant to course and material designers to take into consideration humour in its various forms such as jokes, one liners, anecdotes etc. and implement them in one way or another in the communicative approaches to language teaching.

The respondents seem to agree that cultural humour is challenging for students, however, the presentation of humour can be used in graded material starting with culturally known and culturally globalized humor, which students may be familiar with and then moving into advanced levels of culture-specific humor. The latter may be introduced in advanced courses when students will then have been exposed to higher levels of English language and culture.

The survey has revealed that the participating instructors prefer that a teacher should have a sense of humour for this will make it easier to deal with humour in class. Nevertheless, instructors who believe they lack sense of humour can do well by preparing certain exercises and tasks that contain all types of linguistic humour, thereby generating some humour to which students will react positively.

Another positive finding in this study is that most English language instructors at the University of Bahrain are shown to use humour as a relaxing and also as a pedagogical tool. Therefore, in view of this positive result, which represents only part of the overall picture, there is a need to complete it by further experimental research that examines humour in actual teaching and evaluates its impact on learning of specific language features and on English language learning as a whole.

CONCLUSIONS

The study explored instructors' perceptions and use of humor at the University of Bahrain where English is taught as a foreign language by the Department of English language and literature and also by the English language Centre. As the findings revealed, there seems to be an agreement among the instructors in this study that humour has a significant role to play in lowering the affective filter by creating a an enjoyable and convenient atmosphere and also in contributing positively to making language learning easier and more effective. This finding is similar to the results obtained by other studies such as Deneire (1995) and Tuncay (2007), among others, which provided valuable evidence about the benefits of the employment of pedagogical humour. Hence, the results of the present study and those of other studies make it necessary for course book and material designers to acknowledge this benefit of humour for lowering the affective filter and also employ it as a useful language teaching tool of targeted linguistic features by incorporating certain features of humour into their approaches to language teaching and learning. Pedagogical training materials in the form of exercises with pre-established specific goals and objectives can bring considerable benefits. Jokes, for example, can be used,

among other things, in the following exercises that can be prepared by the instructor as a supplementary material for the class.

- The punch line,
- Choosing an answer from a number of alternatives
- Recognizing the wrong spelling,
- Cloze tests,
- Tense changing,
- Making an end to a joke,
- Scrambled matching

Having said that, teaching becomes interesting and enjoyable and students' attention will be more focused on the content of the exercises and, consequently, teaching becomes more effective and learning easier. In addition, further research is needed to investigate and evaluate the effect of humour when implemented in teaching and learning specific English language features in the classroom.

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APPENDIX A

Survey

Personal Details

Gender:	M	F		
Native speaker		Non-native speaker		
Years of experience	1-3	4-6	7-10	11-over
Affiliation:	ELC	English Department		

For each of the statements and questions below, please indicate the extent of your agreement or disagreement by placing a tick in the appropriate box.

1. Do you think humour can be used as a supplementary teaching tool in English language college classes ?

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Disagree

If you disagree, please say why.

2. Humour is the easiest way to present new language feature such as new vocabulary, structure.. etc.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Disagree

3. Humour should be integrated into course book design.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Disagree

4. Using humour in English language college classes may help students improve their communication skills.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Disagree

5. Using humour increases students speaking time in class.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Disagree

6. Students sometimes may not fully understand humour in English; therefore, it should be translated into their mother tongue

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Disagree

7. Humour may not always be fully understood by the students but it helps them interact in the class.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Disagree

8. Humour helps students to overcome their anxiety and shyness in English language college classes.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Disagree

9. Do you think students have difficulty in role playing while using humour (e.g telling jokes) for communication purposes?

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Disagree

If you disagree, please say why.

10. Do you think you need to have sense of humour to use humour in English language college classes?

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Disagree

If you disagree, please say why.

11. Using humour in English language college classes is considered to be challenging due to its culture based meanings.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Disagree

12. Do you use any type of humour in your English language college classes?

Always	Sometimes	Usually	Rarely	Never

If never, please say why.

If yes, please say whether you use it for explaining a language feature or for getting students attention during the class.

