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Humor in the English Classroom

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Introduction

Humor has a role to play in the learning experience. There are evidences about the impact and the challenges of using humor to facilitate group process and learning in problem-based environments for Language learning students. Humour facilitates communication style for students and fosters life-long learning and communication skills. As Chiasson said, "It's important for the teacher to create a "positive atmosphere" for learning. Humour, by decreasing anxiety and stress can, contribute to this positive classroom, to class unity and learning (2003)." Humor, whether in the form of jokes, riddles, puns, funny stories, humorous comments or other humorous items, builds a bond between the instructor and students, bridging the student-teacher gap by allowing students to view the instructor as more approachable. A number of researchers have found that humor is instrumental in creating a rewarding classroom environment, reducing stress, improving attention, enhancing learning, creating a positive emotional

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and social environment, reducing anxiety, enhancing self-esteem, and increasing self-motivation.

Anxiety to Learn English in Classroom

Affective factors such as tiredness, boredom and emotional disorders, anxiety too are an affective factor which can have an adverse effect on second language learning. There are three types of anxiety in language learning. One type of anxiety is trait anxiety as Rod Ellis refers to as *the disposition to be anxious* (1994). This is a general characteristic within a person's general personality. The second type of anxiety is known as *state anxiety*, which is based on a learner's reaction to a specific learning situation like taking an exam or reciting an oral presentation. This anxiety is based on a specific learning situation. The third type is situation - specific anxiety which is based on the general orientation of anxiety resting on certain learning contexts in which a learner does not perceive himself or herself fit or linguistically capable for acquiring proficiency in speaking and/or reading contexts. Anxiety can have either a debilitating effect (increasing anxiety on learning) or a facilitation (easing anxiety on learning). Once the students reduce their anxiety, they can acquire better communicative ability in English. As we all know, anxiety is a negative way to present human feelings. When we are anxious, we feel nervous, worried, and fearful. We struggle, shake, perspire, and our hearts beat quickly.

How to create Low-anxiety Learning Classroom?

The teachers can use humor in the classroom. They rarely laugh, smile, and say jokes in the classroom especially in the junior high school. They even punish students and warn them to pay more attention on their studies. The students are scared to ask questions, and thus failed to communicate with teachers. They feel high anxiety in the classroom. In fact, if teachers can use humor, they can have good relationship with students in the classroom. According to research, teachers' communication style can help students better understand the process and enhance or frustrate students' efforts to learn a language. (Noels, 1999, p23)

Furthermore, humor can also help some students who are shy or embarrassed to talk in the class. Once the students reduce their anxiety, their ability to communication

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enhance better. So, the teacher should consider carefully on how to use sense of humor in the class room. There are some methods which can create positive classroom. (The teachers can use community language learning method to teach students in communication in English.) Students are used to have high anxiety in speaking and in pronouncing. They could reduce students' anxiety by encouraging them to make mistakes in the class. Teachers don't correct students when they are practicing speaking. Students can correct themselves errors so that they can reduce embarrassment.

Using Humor to Enhance Teaching

The role of the teacher in producing student-centered learning has been the subject of considerable discussion. The behavior of the teacher influences the quality of instruction and the learning environment that is created. It is the faculty members who primarily determine the quality of the experience in the classroom. Enthusiasm and laughter are often infectious. Teachers must be creative because of the critical role they play in creating an environment conducive to optimal student learning. Humor is often identified as a teaching technique for developing a positive learning environment. When an instructor establishes a supportive social climate, students are more likely to be receptive to learning. Humor is a catalyst for classroom "magic," when all the educational elements converge and teacher and student are both positive and excited about learning. Instructors can foster classroom "magic" through improved communication with students by possessing a playful attitude and a willingness to use appropriate humor (Duffy & Jones, 1995).

Vocabulary through Jokes

Students of English can learn both basic vocabulary and sentence structures by reading funny jokes. Challenging words are given in bold in the following passages.

A] Moses, Jesus, and an older bearded man were playing a round of golf. Moses stepped up to **the tee** and hit the ball. It **headed toward** the water. Quickly, Moses raised his **club** and the water **parted**, allowing the ball to roll to the other side onto **the fairway**. Next, Jesus came up and hit his ball toward the same water hole. This time it **hovered** for a few

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seconds over the water. **Casually**, Jesus walked over to it and **chipped** it up onto the green. The older man then teed up and **whacked** the ball which headed over to a nearby **highway**. It bounced off the top of a truck and rolled down **the gutter** of a nearby house, then landed safely on a **lily pad** in a small pond where a large **bullfrog** swallowed it. At that moment a large eagle **swooped down** and grabbed the frog. As they passed over the golf course, the frog **burped** and the ball fell out of his mouth and into the hole for a beautiful **hole in one**. Moses turned to Jesus and said, "I hate playing with your dad."

B] One day, the **chemistry** teacher asked his students, "What is the chemical **formula** for water?" **Silly** Suzie **immediately raised** her hand. "Yes, Suzie, what's the answer?", the teacher asked. Suzie answered **proudly**, "The chemical formula for water is 'HIJKLMNO!'" Her teacher looked **perplexed**. He asked, "What are you talking about?" Suzie replied, "Yesterday you said the formula for water is **H to O!**"

Opportunities to Incorporate Humor

Humor in the classroom can take many forms. In a classic study of humor in the college classroom, Bryant, Comisky, and Zillmann (1979) classified humor in lectures as jokes, riddles, puns, funny stories, humorous comments and other humorous items. Professors have discovered other creative ways to incorporate humor in classes such as cartoons, top ten lists, comic verse, and phony or bogus experiments. Humor can serve a variety of purposes for the college instructor. For example, having students share their "goofiest moment in a classroom" can be used as an ice breaker or to reduce stress, and facilitate excitement, enthusiasm, laughter and high energy. Engaged learning is a reflection of positive psychology at work. It is an indicator of a high level of trust. Trust is almost as difficult to define as humor. Humor builds relationships and nurtures trust. When people feel comfortable and relaxed, spontaneous laughter often emerges, followed by a feeling of human bonding.

Group laughter is contagious. Humour can be used as a powerful tool to put students at ease and make the overall learning process more enjoyable. This is

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accomplished when instructors integrate humor with content and use both planned and spontaneous humor. Humor may also be used to communicate issues related to classroom management. Teachers can display the "instructor's top ten peeves" to correct behavior in a humorous way, without unduly embarrassing any class members. Humor has been used successfully to communicate implicit classroom rules, fostering greater understanding and rapport between the teacher and the students (Proctor, 1994). Walter (1990) noted that students who laugh reduce the need to act out and cause disturbances. Humor in the classroom is not the answer to all classroom management issues, but it is an excellent preventive measure and can often diffuse tense situations (Loomans & Kolberg, 1993).

Guidelines for Appropriate Use of Humor

Humor is most effective when it is appropriate to the situation and reflects the personality of the instructor (Edwards & Gibboney, 1992). The appropriate use of humor is a powerful tool to build a sense of community, promote creativity, and reduce conflict. Judicious use of humor by the instructor sets people at ease and reduces the inherent inequity of the status relationship and the situation with the students (Korobkin, 1988). In contrast, inappropriate use of humor creates a hostile learning environment that quickly stifles communication and self-esteem (Loomans & Kolberg, 1993). When a college student is the target of ridicule, humor has a negative effect on the classroom climate (Edwards & Gibboney, 1992).

The power of humor is such that it must never be directed at an individual or a group; racial slurs or put-downs of a target group must be avoided (Snetsinger & Grabowski, 1993). The targeted students' discomfort is magnified by the fact that leaving the situation is not usually a viable option and thus they become class scapegoats. An instructor must resist the temptation to refer to ethnicity, family, disability, appearance or any other identifier that a student might find offensive when couched in a humorous context (Harris, 1989). A joke that is at the expense of a group or individual may result in a variety of negative consequences in the classroom and can even turn students away from an entire field of study.

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Summing Up

Language teachers have the opportunity and responsibility to create low-anxiety learning environment for students by using humour in classrooms. Teachers should remember one thing that their roles are very important because they control the learning process. It is also important to use different techniques and methods to create interesting and attractive English classroom. Research indicates that the students of Taiwan have high anxiety than other countries in the language classroom. So, how to reduce students' anxiety in the language classroom is really a serious issue for teachers in India. In fact, there are still a lot of techniques and activities such as playing language games, use role-play, positive encouragement, help students practice self-talk, etc. Above all, the teachers should be creative rather than just follow the textbooks.

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