

LANGUAGE IN INDIA
Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow
V o l u m e 1 1 : 1 2 D e c e m b e r 2 0 1 1
ISSN 1930-2940

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The Essence of Good Teaching – Humor

Rosalia H Bonjour, Ph.D.

Abstract

Psychologists state that the attention span of students is for a mere 20 minutes. Therefore it is a challenge to the teacher to hold the attention of the students for 50 minutes or more!

Humor in the class room is like spice in the food - very necessary and important to add flavor and create interest.

Humor can be created only by those who understand its essence. In this paper, I have highlighted the necessity for teachers to smile and bring humor as welcome breaks into the world of books and study, which students find dreary. I have explained with activities carried out in the class how humor adds colour to teaching and listening.

Introduction: Humor in the Classroom

“Laughter is the best tranquiliser with no side effects.”

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The Essence of Good Teaching – Humour

Humans are distinguished from the rest of the creation by their capacity to think and laugh. The ability to laugh is peculiar to humankind. Humor in the classroom is like spice in the food - very necessary and important to add flavor and create interest.

It is a crucial challenge for a teacher when he enters the class room with enthusiastic, curious and analytical teenagers. He has to satisfy all the students and make them understand what he teaches. It is not an easy task. A teacher should be a guide and a friend and not a taskmaster.

As psychologists state, the attention span of students is for a mere 20 minutes. Thus the teacher has to find creative ways to hold the attention of the students for 50 minutes or more! An arduous task indeed!

Humor can be created only by those who understand its essence. Here in this paper, the necessity of a teacher to smile and bring humor as welcome breaks into the world of books and study, is explained with activities carried out in the class that adds colour to teaching and listening.

Function of Humor in the Classroom

Humor is the characteristic that makes something laughable or amusing but humor in the English classroom has more than just the 'effect to induce laughter'; it brings together a chain-reaction by increasing the learner's motivation and self-confidence which creates a positive classroom atmosphere for the smooth acquisition of the language.

Joseph Gatt (2000: Gatt, Joseph, 2000. "Humor In English Classes," [http://www.waldorfseminar.de/forschung/s-gatt-Humor in English Classes.PDF](http://www.waldorfseminar.de/forschung/s-gatt-Humor%20in%20English%20Classes.pdf) accessed on 15.11.2010) explains it best:

It is the 'breathing-out of the soul'. When during the lesson the pupils only listen to the teacher, who may be teaching in the same tone, then it is as if they only breathe in and have no opportunity to breathe out. They need humor, which the teacher can find in very different places. Therefore the teacher must bring in humor during his lessons and this humor should result from the vitality and momentum of the lesson.

Such is the wondrous effect of humor in the classroom.

Using Humor as a Classroom Tool

The READER'S DIGEST's oft repeated line, "Laughter is the best medicine", holds true as we find today in the world of medicine "Laughter Therapy" is patronised and groups following this idea have formed with the sole aim of relieving stress and improving both mental and physical health. Then why do we keep humor out of our classrooms?

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Recent studies of humor indicate its efficacy as a coping mechanism in situations of extreme stress. The putative effects of humor have long been understood and its increased therapeutic use in healthcare contexts can be viewed as a measure of its perceived importance. In the context of hospitals and other related environments humor functions as an emotional scaffold for both patients and staff . To put simply, it relaxes people in negative circumstances.

There is little or no doubt that humor is an invaluable teaching aid in the English classroom and that almost all English teachers use humor at one point of time or another in their lesson. As a matter of fact, studies show that students list humor as an essential quality of a good teacher and the best teachers are known for their ability to release tension in class with humor.

Humor in ESL Classroom

But what exactly is so special about the use of humor in the ESL classroom that helps get the language to flow so freely? It has been observed by Marklin (Walker 2002) that "students enjoy humor in forms of funny anecdotes" and it is this very 'enjoyment' that makes humor a popular content for teaching English because positive humor :

1) Increases Motivation and Self-confidence

Humor can help the shy and/or timid students to feel that they are a part of the class and to allow them to contribute or participate without feeling humiliated or vulnerable. This can act as a means of enhancing student motivation to learn English as well as stimulating recall to the materials taught.

2) Creates a Positive Classroom Atmosphere

The nature of positive humor helps create a "positive atmosphere" which encourages the learners' desire to take part in class conversations by decreasing anxiety and stress.

Good Effects of Humor in the Classroom

A positive classroom environment coupled with increased motivation encourages the young learner to take risks and participate in the use of English because there is no fear of criticism or being ridiculed in a joyful and non-threatening environment. This effectively reduces anxiety and increases motivation in the English classroom. The learner or student must be free from anxiety or stress and be challenged.

Intensification of workload is a central feature of the educational world and stress is a natural reaction to this intensification. Humor is therefore a necessary coping mechanism for staff; it is also a classroom prerequisite for maximising learning.

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In 1996 Daniel Goleman wrote ‘When people who are prone to anxiety are asked to perform a cognitive task- [anxiety] inhibits performance’. If, as educators, we seek to create an environment which maximises learning, then anxiety reduction and the resultant increase in pupil performance of cognitive tasks should be a goal of all classroom teachers. A positive classroom environment coupled with increased motivation encourages the young learner to take risks and participate in the use of English because there is no fear of criticism or being ridiculed in a joyful and non-threatening environment. This effectively reduces anxiety and increases motivation in the English classroom.

If, as educators, we seek to create an environment which maximises learning, then, anxiety reduction and the resultant increase in pupil performance of cognitive tasks should be a goal of all classroom teachers. Alistair Smith (1996) rightly located anxiety reduction as one of the key conditions in the Pre - stage of the Accelerated Learning Cycle, *‘the learner must be free from anxiety or stress and be challenged’*

Thus, we cannot separate emotional scaffolding and cognitive support; the two are inter-related. When the emotional climate of the classroom is ‘correct’ there will be a resultant rise in pupil performance. Humor , therefore, is an essential element of classroom climate - control!

Types of Humor in Fields besides Teaching

We have seen the benefits of humor in the field of medicine and in teaching English, but how do we go about using it in our lessons? How are we going to make the students laugh?

A common misconception is that humor must result in laughter. Although a sense of humor in teaching involves much more than just telling jokes, one need not be a comedian in order to utilize humor in the classroom and humor itself may or may not be expressed by laughter. What we need is to understand that humor is basically an attitude that is communicative. Therefore, humor in the classroom should be used with a clear objective and adequate preparation in order to effectively help bring life to a lesson.

Humor is one of the most significant and undisputed elements to which everyone is a slave. It can be manifested in the classroom based on the subjects, examples, situation, and specific day and so on. Presence of mind is needed on the part of teacher to enliven the situation.

The humorous act cannot be a pre-mediated act. It should be spontaneous. Through gestures, pronunciation, body language, quotations, proverbs, subjects etc., we can produce humor. Even in films the role of a comedian is inserted as an interlude in the general drama.

Many actors have, crossing the continental barriers, mesmerized people everywhere because of their humor. For example, Hitler himself enjoyed the movie *‘The Great Dictator’* by Charlie Chaplin. Many actors like Jim Carry, Jerry Lewis, Charlie Chaplin, Terence Hill and Bud Spencer, Laurel and Hardy are immortal for their humor.

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In the English Language classroom, perhaps more so than in any other classroom, the personality of the teacher plays a major role in the level of learning a student can achieve. Humor is used in all social contexts, so it is only natural that it be used in the classroom as well. Because of the potentially delicate nature of the teacher-student relationship, however, the type and amount of humor which should be employed in an educational setting has long been a topic of debate. In the ELT classroom, where emphasis is placed upon creativity and personal voice, humor is an obvious technique which can be employed to keep students' attention while also conveying information and provoking the growth of knowledge.

Further Reasons in Support of the Use of Humor in the Classroom

I provide the following reasons in support of humor in the classroom. Humor:

- Facilitates retention of information;
- Increases the speed of learning;
- Improves problem solving abilities;
- Relieves stress;
- Reduces anxiety;
- Increases perceptions of teacher credibility.
- Creates attention in the class.

What about Using Humor in Course Tests?

If humor reduces tension and less tension makes students perform better, then the use of humor could very well work for students. For course tests, Berk (2000) recommends incongruous descriptors under the test title, jocular inserts in the instructions, humorous notes on the last page, or humor in the test items. Of course, the teacher needs to decide how much humor to include in the tests, especially for exams under time pressure.

What Types of Humor Do Students Appreciate?

Most students appreciate funny stories, comments, jokes, professional humor, puns, cartoons and riddles while sarcasm, inappropriate jokes (e.g. sexist or ethnic) and aggressive or hostile humor generally do not work very well in classrooms.

Implementation of Humor in My Classes

- 1. *While teaching the difference between Main Clause and the Subordinate Clause, I usually say that main clause can work independently and subordinate clause can't. At that time in my classes I make a comparison by saying that the main clause is like a wife who can cook independently without her husband's presence. That is, she need not depend on him. But subordinate clause is like husband who has to depend on his wife for food.*

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- When teaching students to write leave applications I give them the following examples of “hilarious blunders”:
- “Since I have to go to my village to sell my land along with my wife, please sanction me one week leave”.
- An incident of a leave letter: “ I am suffering from fever, please declare one-day holiday”.
- A leave letter to the headmaster: “As I am studying in this school I am suffering from headache. I request you to leave me today”.

It is a general fact that concentration on a particular subject for more than half an hour is not possible unless it is supplemented with the application of different methods in teaching.

When we spell certain words we can produce humor. As the background of English dialect is explained how the people in the past behaved, dressed and spoke we can teach it in a hilarious way.

Humor fascinates all universally. By interspersing my teaching with humor I can make the class lively and interesting. When I teach by giving the above examples the tension in the class room is diluted, the students are relaxed and understand the lesson very well. Not only that they like the teacher and will await his /her arrival. They will be obedient and respectful to the teacher. We can teach within the stipulated time without a hassle. Students will interact easily and enjoy the classes, thus ensuring a better result from the exam.

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; however, inappropriate humor can also increase this distance. Therefore, it is vital that the lesson is well prepared and that only positive humor is adopted in the English classroom and this will help achieve the intended - to help the children learn English!

The Truth about Humor

It is true that humor can have negative connotations; it can be used to ridicule ; it can be a vehicle for prejudice , but also it can be used to facilitate a broad range of beneficial effects:

- Humor leads to increased attentiveness – something television producers have not ignored !
- Humor contributes to making learning ‘fun’ and having ‘fun’. It is an undoubted motivator.
- Humor facilitates a relaxed (stress-free) classroom environment and the brain works better in a state of relaxed alertness. (Humor is a stress moderator)
- Fear blocks ‘working memory’ and, as fear dissipates when we are amused, our memory functions more effectively in an environment in which humor features.

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- Humor (but not sarcasm !) is effective as part of classroom behaviour modification - it aids conflict resolution.
- Humor is a key communication tool - it increases group cohesion.

Advice to the Teacher

It remains for us to consider practical methods of ensuring that we maximise opportunities for humor. The following are the maximising strategies:

When using text try 'Read in the style of - 'as a method of encouraging active reading e.g. 'Read in the style of an angry detective'; 'Read in the style of an overly dramatic person'. The more unusual the choice of character the greater the impact!

- Use terminology which pupils will recognise as signifying 'fun' e.g. 'The comma game' : if pupils perceive an activity as a 'game' then they are more likely to be receptive to it.
- If class (or group) attention wanders 'dip into' a bank of humorous (but educationally valid) 'Time - out games'. It is better to refocus attention in this way than to continue with a lesson which becomes increasingly ineffective.
- A good Key Stage 2 example is 'The Initials Game' in which descriptions of pupils are invented which match the initials of that pupil's name e.g. Henry Weir - Hard worker
Gillian Spencer - Good speller
- Use non - conforming materials whenever possible! Most Y6 pupils can quote 'She whipped a pistol from her knickers' when asked to remember something written by Roald Dahl . (Ensure however that the material is not too risqué!)
- Try to use published materials that have a humorous element; cartoon-like presentation can be particularly effective.
- Read out to the students jokes that will set them off to a mood on a plane that encourages learning.
- When something needs to be remembered, such as a subject specific word, a fact etc., invent a humorous narrative in which the object/date/fact features centrally. Encourage the pupils to do the same.

When a teacher brings humor during his/her lecture, he/she can sustain the attention of the students towards his subjects. But the humor should be appropriate. It should not offend anybody.

- Let humor arise naturally.
- Do what fits your personality.

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- Don't use private humor or humor that leaves people out of the topic.
- Make humor an integral part of your class, rather than something special. Humor works best as a natural on-going part of classroom learning.
- Be careful not to over use it, it could lose its value and effect.
- Using humor, like teaching, has to be well prepared.(Chiasson 2002)

Teacher Training Courses and Humor

Even with such a wealth of positive attributes, humor doesn't feature regularly in teacher training. Perhaps it relates to the erroneous perception that humor is part of a 'dumbing down' of education. When using humor we shift the classroom focus from coverage to acquisition. Recognising that acquisition-centred learning is a pedagogical imperative certainly isn't symptomatic of a 'dumbed - down' curriculum. Effective teachers have long used humor as an educative tool and more formal consideration of it is not a new thing. Humor can be used as a cognitive alternative to stress.

In this sense humor is doubly useful - firstly, as a part of an armoury of effective teaching techniques and secondly as a method of reducing pupil stress and helping them to take a playful perspective on stressful situations, thereby reducing its possible negative emotional responses. Mannell and McMahon (1982) point out how humor can function as a brief 'play - activity' which can be 'snatched' at any point in the day. They indicate that the link between 'humor as a play activity' and mental health and well-being.

Doubly Useful

Humor is doubly useful - firstly, as a part of an armoury of effective teaching techniques (as already discussed) and secondly as a method of reducing pupil stress and helping them to take a playful perspective on stressful situations, thereby reducing its possible negative emotional responses. In other words, humor, in an educational context, serves two key purposes:

1. It is an indispensable teaching tool and aid to learning.
2. It is a life skill which helps pupils to deal with change (and its attendant anxiety).

Conclusion

Having established the benefits of humor in the classroom it remains for us to consider the practical methods of ensuring that we maximise opportunities for humor. If we are to consider methods of making learning more effective, then, we need to take seriously the benefits of applying humor in the classroom. Learning is, paradoxically, too serious to be taken seriously, a comment which would appear to be nonsensical if we didn't acknowledge the critical importance of humor in our classrooms. Perhaps 'edutainment' should cease to be a derisory term ; perhaps it is time for us to take humor seriously.

The willingness to make the atmosphere in the classroom sunny and moderately stress-free is a decision that the teacher makes, but it may take some time and a lot of practice to implement it effectively. If we don't acknowledge the critical importance of humor in our classrooms, we stand to lose an opportunity to make our teaching more effective and learning a lot easier. Perhaps 'edutainment' should cease to be a derisory term; perhaps it is time for us to take humor seriously and see that it spices up our English classroom and enhances the effectiveness of our teaching.

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