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***NEW VISTAS IN ELT:
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Role of Humour in Language Teaching

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Abstract

Humor is the most genuine and universal speech act which distinguishes man from animal. The employment of humor in second language teaching provides significant advantages

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to both the language teacher and the learner. It reduces the affective barriers in the way of language acquisition. Humor as a special pedagogical tool illustrates and teaches cultural and pragmatic components of language which is necessary for communicative competence. Humor is an important element in teaching and it has been an effective tool in creating second language classroom. In this affective environment, learners are emboldened to take risks and use their second language. Students must be encouraged and praised for their efforts to use their second language in the class room as well as outside. Humor instills confidence in each student and they become bold enough to face ridicule or negative criticism coming their way. Humor provides positive environment for learning. Dickinson states his opinion regarding the use of humor in the classroom: “Classroom in which laughter is welcome helps bring learning to life.”

Keywords: Humor, Second Language Teaching, Communicative Competence, Language Acquisition

Definition of Humor

Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines humor as ‘the mental faculty of discovering, expressing or appreciating something that is comical, amusing or absurdly incongruous’. Humor, to a large extent, depends on the parties involved in a discourse. In a multicultural country like India, the complexity of cultures brings one to learn much only with a sense of humor. Deducing meaning from humor should be based on the cultural interpretation of the environment. Cultural orientation is germane to the success of humor in the teaching of ESL. For instance, students have to be taught some idioms of the English language that humorously say some ordinary things. For example, if a student cannot understand that ‘I’m sick of lectures’ means ‘to be tired of lectures’, then a language culture which involves such expressions could be difficult to understand and/or learn.

Use of Humor in the Classroom

Humor is a human trait and it is a self-effacing behavior. It invites the shy or timid student in our classes to participate with the group. Properly used humorous expressions allow

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students to feel a part of the class and they can then participate without losing face, feeling exposed or vulnerable. It is of prior importance in the communicative classroom. Humor has a way of reaching out to students who are too afraid or nervous to attempt expressing themselves in their second language. Humor is as human and as authentic as the need to communicate. It plays a vital role in our everyday social interaction. Hence, one should make it a regular part of our everyday classroom learning. And humor, or laughing at oneself easily, is not natural for us Indians, and has to be learned.

Using Humor in your classroom, proper preparation is the key in language teaching. Proper preparation leads to a proper delivery. Let humor arise naturally, encourage it and it may be the most amusing part in the teaching. Humor is to be delivered considering the fact that each individual has come with different tastes towards learning. Humor should never be used in demeaning or in a sarcastic way against the language learners. Teachers must make healthy humor as an integral part of their class. Humor works best as a natural on-going part of classroom learning. With practice, one may develop a style of humor, and get to a comfort zone with the usage of humorous expressions, in their speaking style, interaction, and learning.

The use of humor depends on the content the teacher is teaching and the availability of appropriate humorous material. When humor is planned as a part of the teaching, a friendly environment is established. There is an attitude of flexibility, of *camaraderie*. The communication between student and teacher is that of freedom and openness. It reduces the authoritarian position of the teacher. It allows the teacher to be a facilitator of the learning process. Fear, and anxiety are natural emotions growing out of the new and unknown situation which becomes less of a threat, as it develops a partnership between the student and the instructor. Humor is used to solicit dialogues, create conversations and improve vocabulary. Humor can relax and re-energize the students for class. It can also prepare them to converse in their second language. To help the students shift from their first language to their second language, they should be encouraged to enjoy discussion and debate. The humor must be comprehensible, with themes that students can relate to their subject or content.

Views of Provine, Loomax and Moosavi

Laughter helps us forget about ourselves, our problems, our fears and allows us to use ourselves momentarily. Humor in the communicative classroom must be well prepared and must have a specific objective in the process of learning and teaching. Provine in “The Science of Laughter” *Psychology Today*, states that both sexes laugh a lot, females laugh more. Therefore, the women in the class seem to enjoy more the humor used in the classroom. Males appear to be the initiators of humor. He also states that using humor as human trait is a self-effacing behavior. Properly used humor allows the students to feel a part of the class and it erases the nervousness of students who attempt to express themselves in their second language. Loomax and Moosavi point out the use of humor in an article, saying that humor is an extremely effective tool in education. They suggest that the use of humor in the classroom reduces tension, improves classroom climate, increases enjoyment, increases student-teacher support and facilitates learning.

Humor as a Positive Environment in Learning

In the environment of second language teaching, the students are not willing to participate and take risks in using their second language in a classroom. Students have to overcome their inhibitions and tension in using the second language for communication. Humor allows such students to face the situation without fear and ridicule. Humor prepares the possible ways for the students to step up to the front. It changes the formal, prosaic environment into an informal, casual and an amiable environment for the learners. Hence, it is important for the teacher to create such a positive atmosphere for learning. As humor decreases anxiety and stress, it contributes to the positive classroom, to class unity and learning.

Learning a second language requires positive classroom atmosphere. Students reported that jokes help them pay more attention during class time; they pointed out that humor helps learning difficult material. Humor has a positive effect on language teaching and it increases

motivation and success. It is the teachers' responsibility to make their classrooms more inviting and conducive to learning.

Teacher's Role

Teacher's role is to create a relaxed positive attitude in the teaching environment and students learn more and have more fun if they are in a safe atmosphere. Humor discussed here does not require any humoristic skill of a teacher, but it refers to simple humoristic remarks that enhance the communicative teaching of a second language. Humor improves the classroom messages. Learning induced through humor strengthens the learning and memory power. Students appreciate and enjoy learning with the teacher who uses humor. Lectures with more concept related humor helps students do significantly better on recalling texts of learnt concepts. In order to motivate and have more receptive students, humor is essential to teaching as well as learning.

The Benefits of Humor to Learners and Teachers

Humor has noted beneficial effects on the second language classroom. Using humor helps shy students to participate with the group. It aids students' confidence to grow in expressing personal opinions in English. Jokes create enjoyment in the language situation. Humor not only enables teachers to create an affective positive environment, but it is also a source of enjoyment for students and teachers alike, regardless of culture and educational setting. Humor is uniquely and ideally suited to serve as a vehicle for classroom illustration and instruction of specific linguistic and cultural phenomenon in the second language. Humor helps the teacher making the learning process easier, understandable, vivid and memorable for the learners. It disallows the usual way of memorization of concepts for the learners.

Provine (2005, p.24) argues that humor is closely related to memory as it is easier to recall an experience that occurred within a humorous context. There are many benefits to using humor in the classroom; it creates a cooperative atmosphere helping students to better relate to

one another and it makes them focus more effectively. It adds a cultural frame to language by presenting a tone, expression and context to the materials, thus increasing cultural knowledge.

Humor facilitates the acquisition of vocabulary and helps distinguish figurative from literal meaning. It helps develop visual memory and improves the capacity to solve linguistic problems. The devices that one can use to add humor to a language class range from idiomatic expressions, riddles, proverbs, pronunciation, games, comics, the use of jokes and typical grammatical errors.

Conclusion

The role of humor in the language classroom offers the greatest potential for pedagogical impact. Humor contributes a great deal in the second language classroom and it creates an effective and positive atmosphere both for the learners and the teachers. It becomes a source of enjoyment for the teachers and the students. Humor strengthens the mind of the learners, develops the confidence of the students, directs them towards developing a positive attitude and reduces stress, anxiety and nervousness. Humor energizes the mind of the learners as the rain revitalizes parched ground.

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