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***NEW VISTAS IN ELT:
EMPOWERING ENGINEERS FOR EMPLOYMENT***

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**Elements of Humour in Teaching Technical English to
Engineering Students**

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Abstract

The present study throws light on the favourable aspects of using the elements of humour in the English teaching classroom. It also confines and sets boundaries within which a teacher can have effective teaching and make the students enjoy the experience of learning. Within the

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prescribed syllabus of Anna University for the Engineering college students, the present study focuses on the scope of using elements of humour in teaching Technical English. And some sites for language games are also suggested that can be used during the orientation programme. This paper attempts to show the many ways in which elements of humour can help the students of Engineering Colleges to learn English with interest and desire.

Key Words: Elements of Humour, Classroom Management, English Grammar, Technical English

Introduction

Teaching English to professional students is quite a challenging task, as it involves no prose or poetry piece. Functional English, improving vocabulary, basic grammar and usage of idioms and phrases find a major part in the prescribed English Workbook-I&II. Amidst the hectic practical periods, much laborious laboratory hours, problematic core papers and exhaustive theory lectures, the only one hour left for them to stop, study, and learn in a relaxed manner is in the language class room. But, the paper being a technical one, having no literary piece to read and relish, the task of making the classroom interesting and interactive becomes a very challenging one. To make the students skilled in English and make the class simultaneously lively, a teacher necessarily has to be seriously humorous!

Importance of Humour

Humour increases the students' attention and facilitates interaction. It decreases the anxiety level and motivates attention and involvement. Humour sets a comfortable environment to learn and has a positive effect upon the learning retention. Humour in the classroom need not be considered as a diversion or a digression from the lecture. It can be blended into the teaching method. For teaching any particular grammatical item, the teacher can give the rules to be applied in the grammatical pattern first, and while giving examples she can add a touch of humour.

Teaching Conditional Clause

The teacher starts by explaining the three types of ‘if conditional’ sentences with different pairs of tenses and different meanings. The rules to be followed are given as follows:

| Condition | Structure | Meaning |
|--|---|---|
| Type I Open or factual condition | Simple present in the ‘if’ clause → Simple future in the main clause | Shows probability |
| Type 2 Hypothetical or unreal condition | Past tense in the ‘if’ clause → Present conditional in the main clause | Shows improbability |
| Type 3 Impossible condition | Past perfect in the ‘if’ clause’ → perfect conditional in the main clause | Shows impossibility as it talks about things that did not happen in the past. |

Now, the teacher can give her own examples. They can be constructed with some humour in them:

- a) If you get leave tomorrow, you can/will watch the cricket match.
- b) If I dressed up neatly, I would be the centre of attraction.
- c) If you had recharged my number I would have called you.

Some exercises can be given to the students such as:

- A) If I were Mr. Madras, -----
- b) -----, I will get good marks in the semester.
- c) If I had scored good marks in the Higher Secondary Exam, -----

The answers got from the students could be:

- a) I would propose to Miss. India
- b) If my friend helps in the exam hall
- c) I would have joined a good college

A Chain of response from the students that was received while teaching If clause, Type I:

If it rains, I will go out to enjoy myself.

If he goes out, I will complain to the principal.

If he complains to the principal, he will be given the T.C

If the principal gives the T.C, he will leave the college.

If he leaves the college, we all will be happy.

Teaching Cause and Effect Expressions

Tension can be relieved through humour. When a teacher senses tension, a humorous remark or telling a funny story will help a lot.

The teacher explains the casual relation between two actions that can be shown by using connectives **like because, since, as, therefore, as a result, due to, etc.**

Examples can be given by an interesting narration as follows:

As Mr. Hopkins was walking down the street, he noticed a small boy. The boy was standing outside a house **since** the door was closed. He was trying to ring the doorbell but **owing to** his short stature he could not reach up to the bell. He wanted to ring anyway; **therefore** he got a book out of his school bag and stood on it. The bell was still too high up for him to reach **because** the book wasn't thick enough. The man felt sorry for him **as a result** he decided to go and help him. He walked over to the door, **consequently** rang the door bell three times.

Then he turned to the boy and said kindly, 'so now what, little man?' 'Now,' the boy replied, 'we run away as fast as possible'.

Teaching Different Forms and Uses of Words

The teacher explains the words that can be used both as noun and verb. She/he explains how in speech, the difference in usage is brought out by placing the stress on different syllables. While using the word as noun, the stress is usually on the first syllable. On the other hand, when the word is used as verb, the stress is on the second syllable.

Some interesting examples can be given which could stir up the students' minds to think in that way and come out with their own examples.

Examples

- Don't **watch** (v) the **watch** (n) in my class.
- **Change** (n) is the only thing which cannot be **changed**. (v)
- How dare you **park** (v) the vehicle in the **park** (n)?
- **Look** (v) at her. Her **looks** (n) are completely changed.
- **Message** (v) me as soon as you reach the place. I will wait for your **message** (n).

Teaching Homonyms & Homophones

The teacher explains homonyms as words with same spelling, but having a different pronunciation. And homophones are explained as words which have almost the same pronunciation, but different spelling and meaning.

Homophones-Examples

- **Check** the amount filled in the **cheque**.
- We eat **meat** whenever we **meet**.
- **Write** your name in the **right** corner.
- Where is the **steel** pipe? I didn't **steal** it.

- **Know** God - No worries; **No** God - **know** worries.

Homonyms –Examples

- **Lead** the workers. They work with **lead** pipes.
- The **wind** is blowing heavily. **Wind** up the materials.
- Hit the **bat** with your **bat**.
- He **ground** all the nuts into a powder, but it fell on the **ground**.
- Come fast from the **bank**. I will wait on the river **bank**.

Teaching Types of Sentences

For teaching Direct & Indirect speech the teacher has to explain the types of sentences such as Assertive, Interrogative, Imperative and Exclamatory sentences. The teacher can use the class room atmosphere to give examples and in the voice modulation a false anger can be expressed.

For example:

When the teacher starts with a sentence like,

This is the noisiest class I have ever seen-

The students get shocked for a while.

Then, the teacher explains this is **Assertive**.

The students feel cool.

The teacher raises her voice again and says, **Can't you keep quiet?-**

The students are again confused.

The teacher explains, this is **Interrogative**.

Keep Quiet or Get out - The teacher shouts.

And at once explains, this is **Imperative**

The students feel happy and the teacher says,

How sweet you are! You kept quiet.

And explains, this is **Exclamatory**.

The students enjoy and laugh. When the laugh ends, the teacher asks,

Do you understand the types of sentences now?

The students reply, “This is **Interrogative** sentence Madam”

The teacher laughs now and says “**we shall go to the next grammar item**”

The students reply” Madam, this is **Imperative** sentence.

The teacher enjoys and laughs and says, “**Really you are all good students**”

The whole class cheers, “This is **Assertive** sentence”

Humour as a Starter Tool

Sometimes, to bring the students to our English class lecture could be a difficult task. Their mind and thought might remain in the previous class. Or they might be greatly bored with grammar so much, so as to zone out altogether. Some puns, riddles or jokes can serve as starters. Below are some examples.

A Joke on Ambiguity in Stress and Intonation

- How do you make a cat drink?
- Easy. Put it in the liquidizer.
(Cat ‘drink - drink for a cat
‘Cat drink - drink out of a cat) (Language of Humour, 10)

Joke Using Morphology

What is a small book called?

A booklet.

So what is the baby toy called?

Toylet?

One who drives? Driver

One who cooks? Cooker? (Language of Humour,15)

Joke Using Syntax

Time flies like an arrow

S V A

Fruitflies like a banana

S V O

Police found drunk in shopwindow

S V O

Police found drunk in shopwindow.

S V C

Do you serve frog's legs?

D.O

We serve anyone who is able to pay. (Language of Humour, 23)

I.O

Joke Using Punctuation

Come, let's eat grandma.

Come, let's eat, grandma

Tensionless Tenses Teaching

Once it happened in the Literature class room that, when a girl quoted, "I fall upon the thorns, I bleed", immediately a boy quoted, "If winter comes, can summer be far behind?".

Now such lighter moments can happen while teaching Tenses.

After teaching tenses, boys used to give examples such as:

‘I love you’- **simple present**

Immediately it would be followed by girls’ reply

“I will kill you” - **simple future.**

And when a student gave an example as,

“I shall have married by next year”

It could be followed by a comment, - “wow! **future perfect**”

Remarks Related to Humour Used in the Classroom

There is a substantial body of literature devoted to the use of humour in educational settings. Those who study and write about humour in educational settings are quick to identify the benefits associated with teacher’s humour use. For example, when the teachers use humour the students learn more. (Davies & Apter, 1980) Additionally, teacher humour has been recognized as an effective classroom management tool with the power to establish or dissolve boundaries of a group, encourage creativity, motivate individuals, control conflict and relieve stress (Wallinger, 1997). But, before utilizing humour as an instructional tool, it is important to understand more about how humour operates in the class room.

Suggestions for Using Humour Effectively in the Classroom

The teacher need not undergo any particular workshop or be skilled in humorous talk to be humorous in the class room. Examples from life situations, usage of jokes, puns, riddles, funny stories and humorous comments can help a lot. Teacher must be very careful to avoid sexual, hostile, nonsensical humour. She/he must be careful about the characters involved (student, teacher, other) in the examples cited. It has to be checked whether the humour involved is self-disparaging, student-disparaging, or whether the humour deviates from the content. There are sites in the internet like esljokes.net, vocabulary.co.il, word games and puzzles that can be well utilized during the orientation programme.

Conclusion

The paper presented here provides an overview of way of teaching grammar to the Engineering college students of Anna University, with a touch of humour. Teachers can be more creative in their own way and make the class interesting, effective and interactive. It can be vividly seen that the participation and interaction of students has increased in the class room. They may feel comfortable in clarifying their doubts and try speaking out boldly and open with their answers.

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