
Appropriate Use of Humor in English Language Teaching: A Case Study of KUST (Kohat University of Science and Technology), Kohat.

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Abstract

The multiplicity of needs and interactions among the diversity of people of the world make it imperative, especially for the Developing World, to learn other language(s). In order to make learning of English as foreign language a success, in a Pakistani scenario, ways and means are required to make it enjoyable, easy, and fast. This research is intended to explore the views and observations of students and teachers regarding the use of humour in language institutes so that informed decisions may be taken regarding the appropriate use of humour in the context of teaching English in Pakistani setting. Humour is one such strong factor, which can help us in learning it efficiently, without much conscious effort in an imperceptible manner. But the use of humour involves some risks. Sometimes because of inappropriate use, humour proves counter-effective and instead of facilitating the teaching-learning process hampers it. At times it becomes offensive or degenerates into careless fun and leads to a circus-like environment. In order to get an idea about the mode of using humour in terms of appropriacy in English language institutes of Pakistan, the researcher conducted a study of 45 students and 11 teachers of the English department of Kohat University of Science and Technology, Kohat, by using a questionnaire employing Likert-scale. Results obtained from the data help us identify the loopholes in its use; they alert us to its improper usage so that humour can be utilized to enhance the language teaching-learning process manifold, instead of disrupting it.

Keywords: Humor, English Language Teaching, Likert-scale

English is the official language of Pakistan. It serves as a means for getting higher education and jobs in Pakistan. A Pakistani can hardly do without learning it. Therefore, it is taught as a foreign language in both private and government learning institutions. The approach adopted for teaching it, in majority of cases, is the classical approach. The method employed is the usual Grammar-Translation method where the class is teacher-centered, complete silence is preferred and no degree of deviation or humour is tolerated. Such an

environment is never conducive to learning. Uninteresting and dry information is crammed into the students' heads and the needs and motivation of students are not taken care of. Humour which can work as a strong motivation for learning a foreign language is absent. Humour can have direct effect on learning and information retention and indirect effect on the general classroom environment in terms of the affective nature of humour on the learning process. "Surveys rank humour as one of the top five traits of an effective teacher" (James, 2004). "It helps learners relax, alleviates stress, and often makes it easier for students and teachers to connect personally. (Wanzer et al 2006).

In case of learning something, the environment needs to be encouraging. "If teachers want students to learn, then they should consider making learning more palatable, even enjoyable" (Torok, *et al.*, 2004, p. 14). This is particularly true for 'dread courses' that students "avoid because of perceived difficulty, a previous negative experience, or the students' lack of confidence" (White, 2001, p. 338). Because of certain factors, English is the subject which the students fear most and high failure percentage in any exam at any level in Pakistan can bear it out.

After casting a look at the status of teaching English in Pakistan, we realize that humour, although a very strong and important factor, is very rarely used in it and if it is used in some degree at all, then most of the times, it is used inappropriately, which hampers learning. "Humour can also be destructive in the classroom from the vantage point of both the teacher and the student. Embarrassment, sarcasm, and ridicule are forms of humour that should be absent from the classroom. Laughing with and not at students is important. From a discipline point of view, inappropriate humour can destroy the mood of a class or distract attention. If allowed to careen out of control, humour can turn a classroom into a circus" (Cornett, 1986). The result is that after spending years at language learning, students fail to communicate in English language.

This research is intended to explore the views and observations of students and teachers regarding the use of humour in language institutes so that informed decisions may be taken

regarding the appropriate use of humour in the context of teaching English in Pakistani setting. The research has been delimited to and conducted in the English department of Kohat University of Science and Technology, Kohat. The results of the study are expected to be applied and implemented in other areas of Pakistan after they have been checked and verified by further research in other areas of Pakistan.

The research objectives are as follow:

1. To identify the pitfalls involved in using humour.
2. To recommend the appropriate use of humour in a language class.
3. To make English teaching and learning easy, quick and effective through the use of humour.
4. To promote the use of English language in Pakistan.

Literature Review

The importance of using humour cannot be neglected in the foreign language context. “Laughter and joke-telling can be channeled in such a way as to enhance second language teaching. In addition, jokes can act as a dynamic in overcoming problems (such as lassitude) that arise in situations involving group work” (Genovezou, *et al* 1984). Deneire (1995) referred to humour as having a very healthy and wholesome influence in a class of English, by virtue of its capacity to reduce tension. He explained that a second language or a foreign language subjects a student to high degree of pressure and anxiety. The student is supposed not just to use a foreign language but rather to use it in the presence of other fellow-learners. If we compare it with general educational settings then this situation presents a tensor learning environment as the student is divested of the capabilities that s/he enjoys in his L1. “Humour can also improve the classroom atmosphere particularly for students who are worried about making mistakes or nervous about their speaking abilities. It is, however, very important that we learn with our students to laugh 'about' mistakes rather than at the people who make them” (Krashen, 1982).

Kristmanson (2000) laid great emphasis over the presence of affective environment in second language teaching. The hypothesis of Affective Filter propounded by Krashen (1982) advocates the

maintenance of low affective filter, and hence an environment of more ease, to ensure better reception and assimilation of the input presented to the students, in a language class. Humour can work as a potential means to reduce affective barriers, encountered in acquiring a foreign language. The element of humour is more effective and suitable to a class that is more communicative in nature because it lowers the affective filter and stimulates more social behavior, which is so essential for getting through in a communicative setting.

Communicative creativity, which according to Vizmuller (1980) is one of the essential features of language as well as humour, was suppressed by previous methodologies that were based on translation and behaviour. When communicative syllabi made appearance on the scene, humour was brought forward afresh with the focus now on learning language creatively. The wholesome effect of humour assumes more importance in the present day language classroom that is communicative in nature and focuses on maximum production of language.

Humour can be seen to have two effects of very different nature. "Humor can act as a social lubricant or a social retardant...it can educate or denigrate...It's a powerful communication tool no matter which side is chosen" (Loomans & Kolbrey: 2002). Humour in teaching can promote a positive and cohesive class atmosphere, but it can also have unintended negative results if the teacher does not develop a supportive relationship with the students beforehand. (Civikly 1986). "One danger in joking lies in setting the proper classroom tone...in order to escape the prison-like and draconian setting- I often tell jokes or funny stories. The danger, however, is that such joking can lead to the other extreme: instead of a prison, the classroom becomes a playroom, a circus, or- at worst- a zoo. The problem, simply, is that kids hear me tell a joke and they immediately think, "Hey, Sudol isn't going to teach today; he is going to tell jokes. We don't have to work. We can tell jokes too." In that too loose, too happy go lucky, too carefree setting no learning takes place, and in a sense the classroom turns into a prison for me. The second danger is that to many kids the telling of a joke midway through a lecture signals the end of learning for the day. When, after

recounting an amusing story, I look up to see thirty smiling faces and thirty closed notebooks and texts, I know I am in trouble”. (David Sudol 1981).

Wanzer (1999) points out that the use of inappropriate or distracting humour by the instructors can come in the way of students’ learning and affect it negatively. Zillman and Bryant (1983) warn us against the use of improper humour, most specifically against the use of sarcastic humour, which has a potential to cause confusion among students who are not attentive to the verbal input or who do not read the non-verbal signs in an appropriate manner. Similarly we are cautioned by Sudol (1981) that when excessive humour is directed towards a particular individual, then it is more likely to be misinterpreted as negative and, depending upon the kind of humour employed, may lead to be perceived as harassment or favoritism.

Some of the situations listed by Rosenberg (1991, 208), in which the use of humour is inappropriate are the following: 1. A situation in which the number of people around, the occasion and the timing are not taken care of, while using of humour. 2. A situation in which humour usage becomes displeasing and exhausting. 3. A situation in which humour encroaches upon the performance required by job. 4. A situation in which humour is made use of exclusively and heavily for relieving tension and stress, to the ouster of all other strategies. Davidhizar and Bowen (1992) also have underscored the requirement of harmony between humour and its context and timing.

Higher education has committed itself to uphold equality, diversity and cultural respect, in view of which, every type of humour would not do as appropriate. According to Wanzer, “if you can't make jokes about ethnicity, politics, religion, or sex, is there anything left for one-liners?”(Wanzer et al, 2006: p.183). The fact is that most of the times, humour draws upon these very above mentioned factors to be appealing, and without them, humour would find it very difficult to make us laugh. According to her, the use of humour should not be without a limit, as “Students don’t necessarily want Jerry Seinfeld as their instructor”. “They want appropriate

humor that is relevant, lightens the mood and makes the information memorable” (Wanzer, 1999: p. 54).

Berk (2000) cautions us that humour does not consist of games and fun only and suggests that for comedy to be effective, it, instead of distracting from the course material, should complement it. According to Terry and Woods (1975), usage of humour leads to reducing tension in a classroom. But whereas too much tension has an unwholesome effect over learning, too little tension, on the other hand, leads to negative influence on learning. Therefore, according to them, humour poses a threat to the level of tension that is essential for learning. Too much humour or self-disclosure is inappropriate. Too much use of humour is dubbed as “the Uncle Joe Syndrome” by Overholser (1992, 803) which deprives a person of social attractiveness. “But if humour can make the learning process more enjoyable, then I think everybody benefits as a result.” Use of too much humour, according to Mitchell (1988), can be an outward indication of distress. According to McCarroll (1993), reactions of others, to the use of humour, is not the only thing to be considered, as some people might, instead, feel alarmed at their own trespassing of the normal limits of humour. Teachers’ use of humour is also inadvisable at times of anxiety for students e.g. during tests or other situations attended by anxiety. The negative and damaging effect of humour, for students feeling anxious under the pressure of performance, is corroborated by research.

While studying educators on the post-secondary level, Downs et al. (1988) received evidence on the possibility of negative impact resulting from the over-use of humour. A study of teachers who won awards and those who did not, was carried out by them, in terms of their use of humour in their classrooms. It transpired that the teachers that ranked as best and those who won awards, made less frequent use of humour, as compared to teachers that were ordinary. In the view of the researchers, this piece of evidence, “lends support to the contention that too much humour or self-disclosure is inappropriate [producing negative affect] and moderate amounts are preferred”. According to Joseph Janes (1988), humour facilitates learning but it should be used judiciously by the instructor, without using it too often as it stops to be efficacious

when over-used. A teacher, according to him, is after all a teacher and a teacher should behave like a teacher and not like a clown in the class. Besides, some subjects like the Holocaust etc. do not allow space for the use of humour. Humour should be general and should neither be demeaning nor directed towards a specific individual student. (Joseph Janes, *et al*)

If used judiciously, classroom humour has the capability to “humanize, illustrate, defuse, encourage, reduce anxiety, and keep people thinking” (Torok, *et al.*, 2004, p. 19). As explained by Garner (2006), “Well-planned, appropriate, contextual humor can help students ingrain information”. According to James, a great deal of benefits can be accrued through the judicious employment of “content-related, non-hostile humour” (2004, p. 93). Humour is at its safest when teachers poke fun at their own imperfections and errors. For setting the tone, Tomkovick (2004) hints at playing some music prior to a lecture or using humour of self-deprecating nature when the class is taking place. In a study conducted by Ziv (1988), during a 14-week long course of statistics, the effects of humour were analysed by him. He underscored the finding that for humour to be ideally effective, it should be used in small chunks of four to five cartoons or jokes per lecture and should be used with an eye over its relevance to the concerned teaching material. Over the proper use of humour, we are enlightened by other studies, including the one carried out by Berwald (1992), who points out that, for humour to be positively effective, it must be in consonance with the age level of a student. Findings of Bryant and Zillmann (1989) reveal that despite the fact that humour makes the experience of learning more enjoyable, it should also be harmonized to the knowledge of students, for enhancing their attention, for improving the environment of their class or for reducing their test anxiety. According to Bryant (1988) the essential thing, required by a writer, for devising a good joke, is the writer’s competence to view the joke through the eyes of the student or reader (Bryant, *et al*).

Method and Data Analyses

In order to get an idea about the mode of using humour in terms of appropriacy in English language institutes of Pakistan, the researcher conducted a study of 45 students and 11 teachers of the English department of Kohat University of Science and Technology, Kohat, by using a questionnaire employing Likert-scale. The instrument used was a voluntary questionnaire. The questionnaire for the students as well as for the teachers comprised of 20 questions, each of which had five responses of qualitative value. In each of the questions, the participants were supposed to circle a single number from the responses 'a' to 'e'. Each of the responses had its separate qualitative value on a rising scale. The procedure adopted was that both students and teachers were requested to participate in the current study after the researcher had made a brief description and explanation of the process orally. Both of them were asked to respond to the questionnaire, only if they were ready and were willing to attempt it most efficiently, otherwise they should desist from attempting it. Teachers were asked to complete their questionnaires at home when free and return them to the researcher within seven days. After completing the stage of data collection, the researcher then carried out an analysis of the data, according to frequency of individual item response. Percentiles were rounded to the nearest whole number.

Results

In response to question no.1, out of the 89% of students who consider that humour is appropriate for class, 33% of students consider that humour is appropriate to somewhat extent, 23% consider that it is appropriate to a noticeable extent and 34% consider that it is appropriate to a considerable extent. Similarly out of the 91 % teachers who consider humour appropriate for class, 27% consider that it is appropriate to somewhat degree, 36% consider it appropriate to noticeable degree and 34% consider it appropriate to a considerable degree.

In response to question no. 2, out of the 71% students who think the teacher's control over the class is affected, 20% consider that their teacher is not at all in control of class while using humour, 25% consider their teacher very little in control of class, and 27 %

consider their teacher somewhat in control of class. Out of almost the same majority of 72% teachers who consider the use of humour concomitant to the loss of control, 18% consider that while using humour they do not have control at all over the class, 28% consider they have very little control and 36% consider that they have somewhat control.

In response to question no.3, out of the 81% students who believe their teachers use humour negligibly, 15% consider that their teachers do not use humour at all, 33% consider that their teachers use humour very little and 33% consider that their teachers use humour to somewhat degree. Whereas out of the 81% responses from the teachers on the negligible degree of their use of humour, 18% believe they do not use humour at all, 27 % believe that they use it very little, and 36% believe that they use it to somewhat degree.

In response to question no. 4, out of the 67% of students who do not favour every kind of humour, 38% of students think that every type of humour does not have positive effects at all, 29% of students think that every kind of humour has very little positive effect. Among the 90% teachers who consider every kind of humour does not have adequate positive effect, 36% consider that every type of humour does not have positive effects at all, 28% consider it has very little positive effect and 27% consider that it has positive effect to somewhat degree.

In response to question no. 5, among the 71% students who believe the proper limits of humour are not desirably identified to them, 11% consider that their teachers do not succeed at all in identifying to them the desired limits of humour, 31% think they are successful very little and 29% think they are successful to somewhat degree, while on the same issue out of the 63% teachers' responses, 18% think they succeed very little in identifying to the students the desired limits of humour, 45% think they do so to somewhat degree. In response to question no. 6, out of the 68% students who do not believe their teachers made their students laugh at them, 44% consider that their English teachers do not poke fun at all at their (teachers') own imperfections and errors, 24% consider that they poke fun at their (teachers') own imperfections and errors very

little. Similarly out of a majority of 80% teachers, 45% teachers consider that they do not poke fun at their own imperfections and errors at all and 35% teachers consider they do it to a very little degree.

In response to question no. 7, from out of 75% students, 24% consider that half of their teachers' humour is based on gender, ethnicity, sex and religion, 31% think that most of their teachers' humour is based on it and 20% of them consider that all of their humour is based on gender, ethnicity, sex and religion. Similarly out of a majority of 81% teachers, 45% teachers think that half of their humour is based on religion, gender, sex and ethnicity and 36% of them consider that most of it is based on religion, gender, sex and ethnicity.

In response to question no. 8 out of 60% students, 36% think that humour in their class is based on lack of intelligence, opinions, appearance, behavior, or get up of students to a noticeable extent and 24% consider that it is based on them to a considerable extent. On the other hand, the view of the teachers is comparatively a defensive one out of whose 64% majority, 27% teachers consider that their humour is based on students' lack of intelligence, opinions, appearance, and behaviour or get up and 37% consider that the same is true to a noticeable extent.

In response to question no. 9, out of 70% students, 44% say that humour in their language classroom is to a noticeable degree according to the timing and context and according to 26% it is so to a considerable degree. Out of almost the same majority of 73% of teachers, 36% of the teachers agree that their humour is suited to the timing and context to a noticeable degree and according to 37% of them it is so to a considerable extent.

In response to question no. 10, out of 72 % students, 7% students believe that their teachers do not bring any change at all in their humour in accordance with the age of the students, 22% of them consider they do so to a very little degree and 33% consider they do so to somewhat degree. As opposed to it, from among the teachers about 54% of teachers believe they bring change in their humour to somewhat extent to fit the age of the student, 27%

consider they do so to a noticeable extent and 19% think they do so to a considerable extent.

In response to question no. 11, out of 69 % students, 22% of students consider that none of their teachers' use of humour is relevant to the subject matter of the classroom and 47% of students consider it is so to a very little degree. Out of 91% teachers, 18% consider none of their humour in class is relevant to the subject matter at hand, 45% of them consider it so to very little degree and 28% of them consider it so, to about half degree.

In response to question no. 12, out of 58 % students, 27% believe that their teachers' use of humour is never for once for illustrating pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, or language peculiarity of some other kind in a class of typical nature and 31% of them consider their use of humour for so to the extent of 1 to 2 times. Regarding this point, out of 55% teachers, 18% believe they never use it so and 37% believe they use it so from one to two times.

In response to question no. 13, out of a majority of 81% students, 34% of them consider that half of their English language teachers' humour is directed towards a specific individual, 36% of them consider most of it as directed towards a specific individual and 11% of them consider all of it as directed towards a specific individual. Similarly out of 72% responses from teachers, 36% teachers think that half of their humour is directed towards a specific individual and 36% of them consider that most of their humour is directed towards a specific individual.

In response to question no. 14, out of 62% responses from students, 27% students consider that their teachers over-rely noticeably on humour for stress relief to the exclusion of other strategies and 35% of them consider their teachers over-reliance on it for the same purpose to a considerable extent. Out of almost the same majority of 63% teachers, 27% teachers consider that they do it for the same purpose to a noticeable extent and 37% of them consider their doing it so to a considerable extent.

In response to question no.15, out of the 62% of responses from students, 29% of them consider that humour is not at all effective for dealing with every kind of topic and 33% of them consider that humour is effective for dealing with every kind of topic

to a very little extent. Out of a majority of 64% responses from teachers, 37% of them consider humour not at all effective for dealing with every kind of topic and 27% consider it effective for dealing with every kind of topic to a very little degree.

In response to question no. 16, out of the 78 % of responses from students, 38% think that half of their teachers' humour in their English classroom is based on embarrassment, sarcasm, ridicule and other forms of degrading attitudes, 27% of them consider that most of it is so and 13% consider that all of it is so. Out of the 54% responses from teachers, 36% of teachers think that half of their humour in their English classroom is based on embarrassment, sarcasm, ridicule and other forms of degrading attitudes and 18% of them believe that most of it is so.

In response to question no. 17, out of about half of the students i.e. 49%, 34% students consider that about half of humour of their classroom contains too personal or vulgar verbal / nonverbal expressions, 11% consider that most of their humour is so and 4% consider that all of their humour is so. However, out of a significant majority of 81% teachers who hold a diametrically opposed view, 60% consider that none of such expressions exist and 28% consider that such expressions exist only to a very little degree in their classrooms.

In response to question no. 18, out of 50% of students, 9% students do not support their teachers at all in their use of humour, 14% support them to a very little degree and 27% support them to somewhat degree while out of a significant majority of 73% teachers, 41% teachers believe they get their students' support to a noticeable degree and 32% believe they get their students' support to a considerable degree.

In response to question no. 19, out of the 63% responses in favour of humour use, for creating too little tension from students, 30% support the use of humour for too little tension for academic success to a noticeable degree and 33% students support it for the same purpose to a considerable degree but only 19% of the teachers support its use for the same purpose to a noticeable degree.

In response to question no. 20, out of 80% of students, 18% think that their teachers' use of humour is not at all for education, 35%

consider it is meant for education to a very little degree and 27% consider it is meant for education to a somewhat degree. In this regard, out of 82% of teachers who hold that their humour is meant for education and is not simply humour for the sake of humour, 36% believe it is so to somewhat degree, 28% consider it is so to a noticeable degree and 18% consider it is so to a considerable degree.

Conclusion

Students and teachers prefer to use a great deal of humour while according to research by Ziv (1988) humour shows best results when used in small amounts. Students are little aware of the negative impact of too less tension as a result of humour, subscribe to its over-use for academic success but in this regard the view held by the teachers is a saner one who frown upon over-use of humour for creating too less tension. Although teachers like to use humour in greater degree but their actual use of it is comparatively low which is recommended as helpful for learning. Then the use of humour in English language to illustrate grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, etc is still lesser to an unsatisfactory level. One factor among others for this low use of humour is the loss of control over class during the use of humour. Many of the teachers fail to identify to the students the desired limits of humour although teachers' use of humour is in keeping with timing and context.

One flaw with teachers' use of humour is that they bring only somewhat change in their humour to suit the different ages of the students. Most teachers do not target themselves for humour but rather direct their humour in majority of cases towards a specific individual which can be very dangerous and the worst is that a large chunk of their humour is based on, opinions, appearance, behaviour, get up or lack of intelligence of students. They use very little mild humour of general kind. Most of their humour scathe and demean students and abounds in embarrassment, sarcasm, and ridicule despite the fact that they acknowledge that all types of humour cannot have positive effects. Therefore although the students prefer to have more fun in a language class yet only half of them support their teachers in their use of humour because their use of humour is offensive to them. A lot of their humour unfortunately revolves

round gender, ethnicity, sex, and religion. Although teachers claim that they use expressions of very personal or vulgar nature scarcely yet students refute this claim made by the teachers and consider that such expressions do exist to an objectionable level.

Teachers wrongly consider humor a garment that can fit any topic and employ other methods and strategies very little for stress relief but rather rely too much on humor for stress relief, which according to the literature reviewed above has an unwholesome effect. They consider humor as a cure-all for removing stress and anxiety but the literature reviewed above attests to the fact that use of humor is harmful when pressure to perform makes students anxious. Teachers' use of humor is for the sake of humor and very rarely for education purposes as they use humor just to keep students laugh at one another. Therefore we can see that relevancy of humor to the subject matter is also sadly lacking in the teachers' use of humor.

The researcher expects that if the above-mentioned improper use of humor is rectified for English language classrooms then the pace of learning English will phenomenally increase and humor would instead of retarding the English language learning, expedite it. Less energy and resources would be utilized for learning English and more people would learn it to earn an honest living.

Results of this study can be extended to other institutes of all areas of this country and validated for them but for the sake of caution it is recommended that only after the same questionnaire has been conducted and only after nearly similar results have been found in different institutes of other areas. The researcher would recommend that its application be extended gradually first to other areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and then by degrees to other provinces of Pakistan. The researcher also suggests that further comparative research may be conducted in controlled conditions inside English language classrooms between the prevalent use of humour and the use of humour from which the above-mentioned drawbacks have been removed.

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