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メタデータ	言語: eng 出版者: 関西外国語大学・関西外国語大学短期大学部 公開日: 2021-03-26 キーワード (Ja): キーワード (En): Humor, ESL, benefits, classroom, education 作成者: Knowles, Lawrence メールアドレス: 所属: 関西外国語大学
URL	https://doi.org/10.18956/00007952

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Abstract

This paper discusses the advantages of humor in the ESL classroom. Research indicates that humor eases the stress of being a second language learner, brings attention to grammatical structure, aids in memory of materials, enhances communicative competence, and provides both instructor and student with a tool for social coping.

Keywords: Humor, ESL, benefits, classroom, education

1. Introduction

Humor has long been misunderstood and underappreciated. In *The Republic*, Plato argued, for instance, that citizens “must not be too fond of laughter. For usually when one indulges violent laughter, such a thing is apt to bring in oneself a violent upset of feeling” (as cited in Gordon, 2012, p. 9). Then came the ecclesiastics in the Middle Ages, who felt that humor was incompatible with Christianity. How devout could one be, they argued, when one’s laughing all the time? Later, in a young America, Puritans looked down on laughter and humor as things that were incompatible with “the good Christian life based on moderation of speech and action” (Gordon, 2012, p. 11). It is no surprise, then, that early American educators, taking their moral cues from all of the above, held humor in low regard.

Humor had its proponents, however. In Erasmus’ *Praise of Folly*, the philosopher noted that completely rational beings would probably kill themselves if they could not engage one another with some degree of humor (Vlieghe, Simons & Masschelein, 2010). In the last century, philosophers and intellectuals have similarly touted the benefits of humor. Educator John Dewey, for instance, argued for a sensible balance between play and education, as both fostered mental and moral growth. Freud, meanwhile, noted that humor helped resolve conflict between the ego and superego, and contemporary humor theorist John Morreal considers laughter as an expression of a “positive and vigorous view of the world” (Vlieghe

et al., 2010, p. 725).

Over the past several decades, academicians have taken a more sanguine view of humor in the classroom than their predecessors, and modern linguists have particularly noted its efficacy at lowering the affective filter, bringing attention to form, enhancing memory, building humor competence, and being a coping mechanism.

2. Lowering Affective Filter

Lowering “affective filter” is one of the most prevalent benefits associated with humor in the ESL classroom. Krashen (1985), who coined the term “affective filter,” defined it as “a mental block that prevents acquirers from fully using the comprehensible input they receive for language acquisition” (p. 3). This mental block is often the result of stress and anxiety that English language learners (ELLs) experience in the classroom. The use of humor, however, has been shown to attenuate these feelings, with the result being enhanced attention span, motivation, and enjoyment in the classroom. Schmitz (2002) discussed the amount of work that goes into learning a second language and pointed out, “Humorous material can add variety to the class, providing a change of pace, and can contribute to reducing tension that many learners feel during the learning process” (p. 95).

Studies also show that *teacher* humor is fairly effective at reducing student anxiety and increasing enjoyment of class. Ketabi and Simin (2009) found, for instance, that 70 percent of students felt “noticeably to considerably” more relaxed as a result of teacher humor, and that “80% of learners and 94% of instructors reported that humor led to an overall more pleasant learning environment” (p. 442). Meanwhile, Garner (2006) reported that students in a humor experiment group perceived lessons containing humor more positively than students in the control group, which experienced the same lesson but without humor.

In particular, teacher humor on tests has been shown to reduce student anxiety (Berk, 2000; Hackathorn, Garczynski, Blankmeyer, Tennial & Solomon, 2011). For instance, a six-year study by Berk (2000) found that test humor significantly lowered graduate and undergraduate student anxiety and enabled them to perform better. In fact, nearly all undergraduate students reported that humor was “extremely effective” at reducing anxiety and “very effective” at helping them perform well, and the author concluded that “[M]ost students feel that humor makes a difference in their test performance” (p. 153).

Humor also has numerous physiological effects on the body. According to Garner (2006),

laughter enhances breathing and blood flow, lowers heart rate and blood pressure, and infuses oxygen and endorphins into the bloodstream. Berk (2000), meanwhile, states that laughter reduces certain stress hormones, “such as serum cortisol, dopac, and epinephrine, as well as hormone levels in the blood” (p. 151). Further, Vlieghe et al. (2010) tied in the physiological elements of laughter with existentialism, noting that as laughter creates involuntary reactions, such as spasms in the gut and face, we temporarily lose control of ourselves – and, by extension, our lives. In quoting the German philosopher Helmuth Plessner, the authors state, “[C]orporeal occurrences emancipate themselves. These shake us and leave us out of breath. Man has lost his relation to his physical existence. The body does with her as it pleases” (p. 727). In other words, in laughing, we briefly absolve ourselves of responsibility to the world around us – a welcomed respite, no doubt, for the burdened ELL.

3. Attention to Form

An additional benefit to the presence of humor in the ESL classroom is that it brings attention to form. That is, it leads – or, in some instances, requires – students to pay attention to elements of grammar, such as morphology and phonology, as well as prosody, such as intonation and stress (Bell, 2009, 2012; Lems, 2011; Lucas, 2005; Ness, 2009; Shepherd, 2014; Schmitz, 2002). Lems (2011) succinctly summarized the value of attending to form related to humor, stating, “When English learners learn humorous English words and phrases as part of their language study, it can help their metalinguistic awareness, or conscious awareness of the forms of language; this, in turn, is positively associated with literacy development” (p. 197).

3.1. Morphology

Generally speaking, ELLs tend to look at morphology, i.e., parts of a word, when grappling with humor in the L2. However, while Lucas (2005) reported that morphology was a significant focus of the students in his study, Bell (2012) noted that it was rarely used by the students in hers. The reason for this discrepancy may lie in the activities that the students were doing. In the first study, the students were performing a teacher-assigned task – analyzing comic strips – that provided rich opportunity to play with morphemes. In the second study, the students were mostly joking around with their teacher. Thus, instructors should be aware that the type of humorous activity likely makes a difference in whether students focus on morphology or not. Even in the second study, however, students fleetingly

focused on morphemes to create a neologism, “airplanesick,” which elicited laughs in the classroom.

3.2. Phonology

Curiously, though attention to phonology, or the sound of words, has been touted as one of the benefits of humor in the ESL classroom, few studies have addressed this benefit. Only Lucas (2005) has dedicated much space to discussing it – and only because he designed his study so that students would have to evaluate phonology if they were to understand the humorous material.

However, when the task does not require students to address phonology, the students rarely do so. Bell (2012), for instance, found that students avoided contemplating phonology as much as they did morphology, and concluded, “Although teachers can develop planned focus-on form activities that draw learners’ attention to any aspect of the L2, ... spontaneous, learner initiated focus-on-form events overwhelmingly involve lexis and, more specifically, meaning” (p. 242).

3.3. Prosody

Regarding prosody, or pronunciation, Attardo et al. (2011), Bell (2007) and Ness (2009) analyzed the intonation, stress, pitch, speech rate and volume of ELLs during canned joke telling and noted variations in production. Attardo et al. (2011) found, for instance, that ESL students generally: (1) delivered punch lines at a lower rate of speech than they did conversational humor; (2) did not pause for punch lines; (3) did not alter pitch or volume for punch lines.

The author refrained from categorizing any of the above variations as “wrong,” but the findings nonetheless provide a starting point for instructors who wish to practice pronunciation via joke telling. After all, when native English speakers tell canned jokes, they often pause and alter their rate of speech for punch lines and deliver the line with a different pitch and volume than the set-up.

Attardo et al. (2011) also emphasized that canned jokes rely on paratones, or speech units comprising one or more words that begin on a high note and finish on a low note. Such units, the author said, function in speech the same way that paragraphs do in writing. They mark distinct ideas. While, in standard joke telling, the punch line comprises a paratone, the punch lines delivered by students in Attardo et al.’s (2011) study varied widely. While one

used a paratone – thus, using the correct prosody – the other student instead completed the punch line with a high note. The implication regarding the study is that prosody plays an important role in the delivery of canned jokes and should be attended to as much as syntax and vocabulary.

While using uniform prosody in both the set-up and punch line would generally be considered incorrect, there are times when such uniformity is exactly what it called for, as is the case with deadpan. Interestingly, Bell (2007) found that none of the students in her study used deadpan in humor, so while Attardo et al. (2011) noted deadpan where it should not have been, Bell (2007) observed a lack of it where it should have been! The latter study observed the use of humor among three female non-native speakers over the course of one to two years and found that all of the women accompanied jokes with laughter or smiling. In other words, the subjects had not used flat tone, pitch, or volume in their punchlines during those instances when deadpan was called for. The implication here is that ESL instructors could teach the concept of deadpan and emphasize that it runs counter to how people normally deliver the payoff of a joke.

4. Memory

Another advantage to using humor in the ESL classroom is that humorous material or exchanges are more memorable than non-humorous ones (Bell, 2012; Hackathorn et al., 2011; Reddington & Waring, 2015; Sidelinger, 2014), with researchers positing that because humor bears an element of bizarreness to it, it stands out from other stimuli. Bell (2012), for instance, in studying playful language-related episodes (PLREs), found that students retained more information related to PLREs than non-PLREs. Specifically, students recalled 55 percent of information from PLREs as opposed to 38 percent for non-PLREs. Much of language learning involves rote memorization, and the bizarreness of humor, thus, appears to be a useful tool for this aspect of learning an L2. Bell (2012) stated that “studies with native-speaker participants ... demonstrated that in extended discourse, too, it is the unusual or emotionally laden sentences, rather than the mundane, that are recalled verbatim” (p. 239).

It should be noted, however, that humor only serves as a limited mnemonic aid. Bell (2012) noted, for example, that students displayed no superior ability to recall *unplanned* LREs involving humor due to the heavy cognitive load taken on by the learner. “[E]mbedding new linguistic information within a playful context,” she added, “which itself requires additional

processing, may negate any positive effects that the unusualness or humorousness might have on memory” (p. 261).

Further, Hackathorn et al. (2011) questioned whether the ability the recall information equated to meaningful learning. The authors cited, for example, Bloom’s taxonomy, which presents a hierarchy of cognitive processing. At the top of the hierarchy, representing the most significant cognitive processing, is “application,” where students are able to “connect, practice, or demonstrate learned information,” while, at the bottom, representing simple recall, sits memory. Thus, though humor aids in memory, the value of this type of learning, according to the authors, is quite low.

5. Communicative Competence

A further benefit of humor in the classroom is that it helps students develop humor competence. Often in the ESL classroom, the instructor or other native English speaker may make a joke only to have the humor met with blank stares. Then, only after the native speaker announces, “That was a joke,” do the students laugh. One may wonder why such comprehension would be of importance in the ESL classroom. Consider, however, the purpose of humor: to communicate. Thus, if humor is regarded as a genre of communication, then understanding humor can be classified as part of overall communicative competence (Wulf, 2010).

5.1. Sociocultural Competence

Humor in the classroom also requires, as well as helps students develop, sociocultural competence, i.e., the ability to comprehend and function adeptly in the target culture (Bell, 2007; Schmitz, 2002; Wulf, 2010). This competence, though closely related to communicative competence, is distinct in that it places more of an emphasis on an individual’s understanding of the target culture and less on communicating correctly within it. Bell (2007), for instance, stated, “The construction and comprehension of verbal humor in an L2 constitutes a great challenge even to advanced L2 learners, as it often requires sophisticated linguistic, social and cultural competence” (p. 28).

Schmitz (2002) explained that those students who intend to study at universities in English-speaking countries will likely encounter humor in the curriculum, especially if they study the humanities. As evidence, he cited the many instances of puns in classic literature, including the works of Shakespeare. If ELLs are to fully appreciate the Bard’s works,

Schmitz (2002) concluded, “they must understand this humor and attempt to see humorous discourse, as far as possible, as the playwright’s audiences did” (p. 101).

Further, Schmitz (2002) and Wulf (2010) discussed the value of being able to tell a joke in an L2. Aside from the linguistic challenges – using the correct syntax and prosody – there is the underlying sociocultural context. A “farmer’s daughter,” for instance, may represent naivety and innocence in American culture but something entirely different in another culture. When told properly, however, the L2 joke often elevates the speaker’s status among native speakers. “The ability to tell a joke,” Schmitz (2002) stated, “to be a good storyteller, on the part of the learner permits the bonding of speaker and listener, of joke teller with joke receiver or listener” (p. 104).

Wulf (2010), meanwhile, related an instance of when he was first able to successfully tell a joke in German to a group of native German speakers. His joke centered on a double entendre in which he observed that a woman carrying several logs had a lot of “firewood in front of the door.” In German culture, such a euphemism is often used to refer to busty women. Thus, his success not only relied on proper form, but on his knowledge of German culture.

5.2. Divergent Thinking

Humor in the classroom additionally helps students develop divergent thinking, a process that allows them to approach problems from different angles and devise creative solutions (Berk, 2000; Garner, 2006; Reddington & Waring, 2015; Wulf, 2010). Wulf (2010), for instance, noted the abundance of divergent thinking that occurs when children are learning their L1. They play with morphology and phonology, creating seeming nonsense, but all the while they are acquiring language. “Dealing with language in divergent ways might perhaps appear to waste class time,” he stated, “but it is playful, figurative language that often underlies humor, which is used almost everywhere, including the workplace” (p. 157).

Reddington and Waring (2015) echoed this sentiment, positing that language play allowed students to experiment with a variety of registers, and, importantly, use subversive language, i.e., language that is intended to undermine the authority of, say, a classmate, sibling, or teacher. The authors concluded that with this sort of play, “learners stretch their sociolinguistic competence, expand their communicative repertoire, and experience the baseline of meaningful conversation” (p. 18).

Berk (2000), meanwhile, discussed how humor could stimulate divergent thinking in

students who are taking tests. In particular, he advocated the inclusion of verbal or pictorial humor on context-dependent test items in order to measure certain higher-order thinking skills, such as “understanding, critical thinking, reasoning, problem solving, decision making, daydreaming and country line-dancing” (p. 155).

Finally, Washburn (2011), in addressing sitcoms in class, presented an activity that required students to use divergent thinking in a novel way. After the teacher identifies certain sitcom characters’ speech acts, the teacher distributes a transcript of the clip and instructs the students to suggest alternative forms and “how these alternatives might change the relationships or tone of the interaction” (p. 24). By considering the alternatives, the students are contemplating a wide range of registers and meanings, all of which help the student develop sociolinguistic competence.

6. Humor as Coping Mechanism

Humor can also be used as an effective coping mechanism for both ESL teachers and students. The beginning of this paper discussed the role that humor can play in lowering affective filter, that is, in reducing the anxiety that inhibits learners from acquiring a target language. However, anxiety reduction should not be confused with coping. While the former results from the presence of humor in the classroom, the latter uses humor as an instrument to achieve certain self-serving objectives, such as maintaining esteem and persuading others.

6.1. For Teachers

Humor can be a valuable tool for ESL teachers, as it enables the instructor to sustain class harmony, convey certain truths, recover from cultural or interpersonal missteps, and achieve positive student evaluations (Garner, 2006; Gordon, 2012; Sidelinger, 2014). Garner (2006), for instance, in studying 117 students who evaluated a teacher who taught both humorous and non-humorous lessons, found that the humorous lessons were more highly rated than the non-humorous ones. Additionally, the instructor was quite highly rated. Overall, Garner (2006) concluded, “Researchers have identified that educators who use humor in their instruction are more positively rated by their peers and their students” (p. 177).

Sidelinger (2014), meanwhile, used expectancy violation theory (EVT) to explain how those instructors with a history of using humor in the classroom are more able to get away with making offensive comments than those instructors who are more serious. According to the theory, students become accustomed to the humorous teacher’s wide discourse range

and merely view distasteful comments as being at one end of the spectrum rather than out of bounds. “Instructors’ effective use of humor may redirect students’ attention and change their perceptions of instructors’ communication (mis)behaviors,” Sidelinger (2014) stated, adding that “funny instructors get away with norm violations more so than unfunny instructors” (p. 293).

Nonetheless, the results do not give humorous teachers *carte blanche* to say or do whatever they like. Sidelinger (2014) added that students are more willing to overlook transgressions related to course content than irrelevant topics. Also, even if an instructor possesses a wide discourse range, the student may yet choose to be offended by it. The lesson here is that not even the most humorous and highly regarded teachers should consider themselves immune to student dissatisfaction.

Finally, Gordon (2012) discussed the value of humor to relate certain uncomfortable truths, and, though his article was directed toward “educational philosophers,” the advice could easily be applied in the ESL classroom. “In contrast to a more serious and confrontational style of discourse,” the author stated, “humor can be very helpful in getting people to *listen to and comprehend* the truth. Humor is a very effective way to convey the truth because it permits frankness to be less threatening than a more confrontational style” (p. 14). The implications for the ESL instructor are fairly clear, as, at certain times, the instructor must be honest about the deficiencies in a class or individual. The use of humor to convey such unpleasant information is less direct and will likely be better received by the students.

6.2. For Students

Humor, similarly, can be used by students to manipulate the sociocultural dynamics of the classroom. Consider, for instance, students who laugh at the instructor when he or she does something clumsy or absent-minded. According to Vlieghe et al. (2010), students are not laughing to preserve group harmony or lower affective filter, but to democratize the classroom, to make salient the fact that instructors, like students, are human. Instructors make mistakes, the laughter communicates, and have weaknesses just as the students do. Put simply, this “laughter of resistance” raises the student and lowers the teacher. Vlieghe et al. (2010) summed up the student mindset, stating, “[they] await such moments meticulously, so that the (entire) class might start howling with laughter and thus call into question the superior position of their teacher, and, by extension, of the schooling system as a whole” (p.

719).

Bell (2007), meanwhile, addresses how students may use L2 humor with native speakers to display a smooth integration into the target culture. Their classmates, by contrast, may avoid using humor with native speakers, thereby indicating a more tenuous integration. The inference here is that well-adjusted (or well-accepted) students subconsciously differentiate themselves from the classmates, inadvertently elevating themselves in social status. However, student humor can “cut both ways,” Vlieghe et al. (2010) cautioned. “[O]n the one hand, it acts as an aid to communication, ... but on the other, it seems to be a place where L2 speakers can get positioned as limited conversational participants” (p. 43).

Finally, Bell (2007) stated that students may use humor to mark ethnic or cultural identity. For instance, in citing Zentella (2003), the author mentioned that Latinos construct bilingual humor “as a way of resisting racist discourse by the (monolingual) white community” (p. 44).

Overall, both teachers and students use humor in self-serving ways – teachers to maintain class harmony and preserve student esteem, and students to democratize the classroom or mark themselves as either inside or outside of a referent culture.

7. Conclusion

Humor has long been dismissed in Western thinking as incompatible with education. The notion, rooted in strains of Greek philosophy and Christianity, is that laughter reduces us to a base existence and contaminates the soul, for when we laugh, we are unable to control ourselves or attend to more enriching activities. Because education was, until recently, viewed as a sober undertaking requiring both teacher and student to possess self-discipline, commitment, and a host of other virtues, it is easy to see how humor and education would make for odd bedfellows. However, along came social and cognitive scientists and the view of humor in the classroom began to change. No longer seen as a contaminant, humor was viewed as a legitimate asset for learning. Not only did it provide a respite from classroom routine, but it was shown to significantly reduce stress and anxiety. As Plessner said, maybe laughing – and losing a little control – wasn’t such a bad thing.

Western educators began to rethink their position on humor, too, so that it is now an accepted component of education, found in textbooks, lectures, and assessments. ESL programs, in particular, are well suited to incorporating humor in the classroom for the five

reasons laid out in this paper. First, humor lowers the affective filter, enabling students to better learn the material and enjoy lessons. Second, it brings attention to form, directing students to the morphology, phonology, prosody, and vocabulary necessary to understand jokes and puns. Third, it enhances memory, as humorous content is more easily recalled than non-humorous content. Fourth, it helps ELLs develop their communicative competence, as they cannot be considered fully proficient in English until they are able to comprehend, appreciate, and even produce humor. Finally, humor has also proven to be an effective tool for teachers and students to cope in the classroom. While instructors use it to recover from miscues and maintain class harmony, students apply it to democratize the classroom and mark themselves as members of the in or out group. To wit, humor deserves a place setting at the table of ESL pedagogy. It may drink from the finger bowl, but it holds its own during dinner conversation.

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