

THE VALUE OF LAUGHTER IN THE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

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Abstract

Focusing on humour as a powerful instructional resource, this article examines how laughter can create an open atmosphere for learning, get and hold students' attention, increase retention of what is learned, foster a constructive attitude towards mistakes, and stimulate both creative and critical thinking during a language classroom. Humour materials can be used and transformed into activities that help students develop reading and listening comprehension, improve vocabulary and grammatical acquisition in a meaningful context, and facilitate language practice and communication. Humour in the classroom also reduces tension, improves classroom climate, increases enjoyment and has a direct impact on the student-teacher rapport. We should therefore not ignore it but instead make it part of our everyday classroom learning.

“If you can make people laugh, you can make them think, and make them like and believe you” [1].

We all need humour in our lives. Plato said, “Even the gods love jokes“. Laughter is, first and foremost, a social signal – it disappears when there is no audience, which may be as small as one other person – and it binds people together. It synchronizes the brains of speaker and listener so that they are emotionally attuned. Laughter establishes – or restores – a positive emotional climate and a sense of connection between people, making them take pleasure in the company of each other. “*Laughter is not primarily about humour*”, says Dr. Provine, “*but about social relationships*” [2].

Though most people would argue that academia and laughter are about as compatible as oil and water, research has shown that laughter can have many benefits on our health and that the use of humour in class can yield good results. Even if there is not a direct causal link between humour and learning, researchers believe, and teaching experience has shown that humour serves to arouse student interest and attention.

How does laughter improve our teaching and learning? Teaching and learning are serious business, but T.S. Elliot once said, “*Humour is also a way of saying something serious*”. How should we teachers deal with laughter in our classroom? For many teachers, humour is something to be feared, synonymous with classroom disorder and non-productivity and therefore something to be avoided. “I'm not going to tell jokes, it will mean complete loss of control, and poor classroom management”. Some

do not know how one may use it effectively in class. “I enjoy humour, but I don’t know how to use it, so I don’t. I don’t want to look foolish”. Yet humour is as authentic and as communicative a human reaction and social skill as is greeting and conversing with friends. Using humour and allowing laughter in class, does not mean that teachers need to be comedians. Their job is not to make students laugh, but to help them learn, and if humor can make the learning process more enjoyable, then everybody benefits at the result of it. Ronald Berk in his book *Humour as an Instructional Defibrillator* shows that the psychological and physiological benefits of laughter can have a direct impact on teaching and learning, especially in five significant areas: teacher -student rapport, classroom atmosphere, student responsiveness, test performance, and student attendance.

It is therefore important for the teacher to create a “positive atmosphere” for learning. Humour, by decreasing anxiety and stress can contribute to class unity and learning. It builds rapport between the students and teacher. “*When teachers have a sense of humour and aren't afraid to use it, students relax and become listeners. Having a sense of humour is an indication that the teacher is human and can share with the group*” [3]. Humour and laughter help the shy students in our class to participate with the group, to feel a part of the class and possibly contribute without feeling exposed or vulnerable. This is of particular importance in a communicative classroom where the accent is on verbal authentic communication, participation and interaction. It’s a way of reaching out to those students who are too afraid or nervous to attempt expressing themselves in a foreign language. Kristmanson emphasizes this need to create a welcoming classroom for language learning:

“In order to take risks, you need a learning environment in which you do not feel threatened or intimidated. In order to speak, you need to feel you will be heard and that what you’re saying is worth hearing. In order to continue your language learning, you need to feel motivated. In order to succeed, you need an atmosphere in which anxiety levels are low and comfort levels are high. Issues of motivation and language anxiety are key to this topic of affect in the second language classroom” [4].

However, humour alone cannot save a poorly planned class, and sometimes, too much humour can work against student learning. Humour as with all activities in the communicative language classroom, must be well prepared and have a specific objective. The students also need to be prepared. Humour can help them better retain the subject matter, especially if it reinforces the class material. That is why the use of humour will depend on the content we are teaching and the availability of appropriate

humorous material. Interpretation, discussion and analysis will vary on the proficiency of the class. The humour must be comprehensible, with themes that the students can relate to. *“When humour is planned as part of the teaching strategy, a caring environment is established, there is an attitude of flexibility, and communication between student and teacher is that of freedom and openness. The tone is set allowing for human error with freedom to explore alternatives in the learning situation. This reduces the authoritarian position of the teacher, allowing the teacher to be a facilitator of the learning process. Fear and anxiety, only natural in a new and unknown situation, becomes less of a threat, as a partnership between student and instructor develops”* [5].

Many teachers have developed personal strategies that they regularly use to generate laughter: stock gestures, reactions, humour materials such as jokes, puns, cartoons, and riddles. This serves to give the atmosphere of their class a quick “lift” or “boost”. Any activity that is cause of joy or laughter is most likely to be tackled and completed than one that is tedious and boring.

When teaching literature, for example, there are many approaches in which students can be exposed to this type of class, but, in order to make it more attractive, one of them is to implement a comedy lesson. Reading or studying a comedy may please students more than reading a tragedy, or literature covering other aspects of daily. Charney in his “Comedy High and Low” characterizes and defines comedy as follows: *“Comedy is made of language and rhetoric (which include irony, intentional and unintentional rationality, calculated and spontaneous nonsense, comic aimlessness and stupidity, popular humour, repetition, and joke-telling). Comedy is made of comic characters (which include social stereotypes, characters with conventional identification methods through costume; those with arbitrary values and connotations; those using wit to replace virtue and pretence to replace vice; deflated as well as displayed and celebrated pretenders, and extreme and caricature characters). Comedy is structured (usually beginning with a startling pronouncement or outrageous situation; comic action is developed by repetition, accumulation and snowballing; comedy ends happily, with feasting, dancing, drinking, revelry and the promise of offspring). Comedy is in various forms (a farce has an extravagant plot in which anything can happen, with quirks and eccentrics as characters; in tragic farce, the themes of tragedy have been absorbed and comically transformed; burlesque comedy mocks the moral and stylistic pretensions of tragedy and romance; in comedy of manners, the wits are arbiters of good taste, the butts awkward, stiff, pretentious and social misfits; satiric comedy is intended to show but also control the villain-heroes; festive*

comedy overcomes all obstacles and is full of festive and carnival spirit)" [6].

A comedy, has, according to Marie-Claude Cavano, "*un double but, de plaire et d'instruire*" [7]. In a comedy classroom, the students find the learning process less taxing or demanding. This class is intended to sensitise students to all possible situations that create laughter, or may be considered funny, without yet burdening them with theories about comedy. It is actually an indirect way of making them think why they laugh at certain situations, actions and simple words. It also makes students start to reason and share with one another their ideas about what makes them laugh or what is comical to them. Finally, it is intended to point out the fact that jokes-though always intended to make people laugh-may not be so funny depending on the teller, the audience and the occasion, and may actually be offensive to some people notwithstanding the occasion.

In sum, humour is a powerful factor in any group situation and has the potential to be used in ways that can make a positive contribution to classroom language learning. Specific goals and objectives must be pre-established and clear in the mind of the teacher. The use of humour may give students another reason to attend class. The fact that they are enjoying it is very rewarding for a teacher. More and more studies today show that humour and laughter have a calming effect on humans and serve to break down the barriers that may exist between people.

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