

Humor – An Invaluable Teaching Aid

Dr. M. Ravichand, Tirupati

*Associate Professor of English, Sree Vidyanikethan Engineering College.
"Classrooms in which laughter is welcome help bring learning to life."*

I. Introduction

Humor is the characteristic that makes something laughable or amusing but humor in the English classroom has more than just the 'effect to induce laughter'; it brings together a chain-reaction by increasing the learner's motivation and self-confidence which creates a positive classroom atmosphere for the smooth acquisition of the language.

Joseph Gatt (2000) explains it best:

"It is the 'breathing-out of the soul'. During the lesson the pupils only listen to the teacher, who may be teaching in the same tone, then it is as if they only breathe in and have no opportunity to breathe out. They need humor, which the teacher can find in very different places. Therefore the teacher must bring in humor during his lessons and this humor should result from the vitality and momentum of the lesson."

Such is the wondrous effect of humor in the classroom.

II. Benefits of humor

There is little or no doubt that humor is an invaluable teaching aid in the English classroom and that almost all English teachers use humor at one point of time or another in their lesson. As a matter of fact, students have listed humor as an essential quality of a good teacher (Sylwester 2001) and the best teachers are known for their ability to release tension in class with humor (Kenner). But what exactly is so special about the use of humor in the ESL classroom that helps get the language to flow so freely? It has been observed by Marklin (Walker 2002) that "students enjoys humor in forms of funny anecdotes" and it is this very 'enjoyment' that makes humor a popular content for teaching English because positive humor helps,

1. Increases Motivation and Self-confidence

"Humor can help the shy and/or timid students to feel that they are a part of the class and to allow them to contribute or participate without feeling humiliated or vulnerable" (Chiasson 2002). This can act as a means of enhancing student motivation to learn English as well as stimulating recall to the materials taught. (Vadillo 1998)

2. Creates a Positive Classroom Atmosphere

The nature of positive humor helps create a "positive atmosphere" which encourages the learners' desire to take part in class conversations by decreasing anxiety and stress. (Chiasson 2002) A positive classroom environment coupled with increased motivation encourages the young learner to take risks and participate in the use of English because there is no fear of criticism or being ridiculed in a joyful and non-threatening environment. This effectively reduces anxiety and increases motivation in the English classroom.

Types of Humor in Teaching

We have seen the benefits of humor in teaching English, but how do we go about using it in our lessons? How are we going to make the students laugh?

A common misconception is that humor must result in laughter. Although a sense of humor in teaching involves much more than just telling jokes, one need not be a comedian in order to utilize humor in the classroom and humor itself may or may not be expressed by laughter.

The trick here is to understand that humor is basically an attitude that is communicative (Chiasson 2002); therefore, humor in the classroom shouldn't be random, it should instead be used with a clear objective and adequate preparation in order to effectively help bring life to a lesson.

Humor in the language classroom can be classified into four major categories:

1. Textual Examples: Stories, Jokes

"Humor in the form of a joke should be the spice of a lesson but it should not over-stretch the attention of the class." (Gatt 2000)

"As for stories, young children tend to enjoy humor books that were easier to read and they are more interested in humor based in characters' actions than humor of language and wordplay." (Shannon 1993)

2. Pictorial Examples: Cartoons, Comics

"Pictures used either on their own or with text help creates valuable stimulus in the classroom as it can help liven the story. When both text and picture are used together, it can help the young learner in the memorization of language structures." (Wieggers, Grooters & Tormo 1996)

3. Action/Games Examples: Theatre, Video, Role play, Simulation, Contests

"Young children learn without being aware of it when they are learning through games because it is spontaneous and natural. They have to think and react quickly in a game without tension or fear and for ESL games, they would have to concentrate on the vocabulary and grammar." (Vadillo 1998)

4. Verbal Examples: Puns, Word games, Acronyms

"Young children often have difficulty interpreting kidding; they are dead-serious when they take the meaning of words literally because that is the only meaning they are capable of understanding;

They tend to enjoy the humor of broad discrepancies such as slapstick humor as they cannot process subtle categorical discrepancies such as in acoustic puns and idiomatic expression (two different strands of thought tied together by a sound, which belongs to both words. E.g. alcoholiday).

There are some risks however, for foreign learners in word play as the double meanings may not be apparent." (Gatt 2000)

Guidelines on using humor

As mentioned above, humor exists in many forms and it is important for one to keep in mind that what adults deem as humorous may not have the same effect for children. Robert Sylwester (2001) sums it up pretty well:

"The term 'kidding' is often positively associated with a teacher's sense of humor. Sarcasm isn't. To be effective, the indirect language and intonation of kidding must imply a genuine love of and respect for the person being kidded, even though the actual words may suggest negative connotations."

However, humor can be a double-edge sword because it often "results in laughter, an ill-understood instinctive contagious emotional outburst that can both bond and humiliate people". (Sylwester 2001)

Let's take a look at the negative aspect of humor to young children. Accordingly to a research conducted by Donna Shannon (1993), what children deem as humorous falls into four general categories;

1. Superiority or Sense of Accomplishment - young learners perceive that they have something, which another child does not have.
2. Physical Events and Appearances - they find the odd pronunciation of a foreigner very funny
3. The Scatological and Gross - they make fun of a deformed person whose deformity is new, strange or unusual to them.
4. Language and Wordplay.

Of the four categories mentioned above, the first three falls under another aspect of children's humor which could somewhat shock adults: the 'primitive' side of humor. (Gatt 2000) 'Primitive' humor should not be encouraged and this can easily be done through proper preparation, some general guidelines for using humor in teaching English to young children are:

1. Don't try too hard. Let humor arise naturally, encourage it.
2. Do what fits your personality.
3. Don't use private humor or humor that leaves people out of the topic.
4. Make humor an integral part of your class, rather than something special. Humor works best as a natural on-going part of classroom learning.
5. Be careful not to over use it, it could loose its value and effect.
6. Using humor, like teaching, has to be well prepared. (Chiasson 2002)

In addition, it is best to avoid jokes and puns related to cultural, religion, customs, or racial issues, also considered taboo are the learner's personality and their family relationships (parents, siblings, etc.,)

III. Conclusion

When used in the correct manner, humor can help to reduce the 'distance' between teachers and students, who would remember more if they are enjoying themselves; however, inappropriate humor can also

increase this distance. Therefore, it is vital that the lesson is well prepared and that only positive humor is adopted in the English classroom and this will help achieve the intended - to help the children learn English!

References

- [1]. Chiasson, Paul-Emile. 2002, Humor in the Second Language Classroom; It's not a Laughing Matter! [Online], Retrieved from, <http://caslt.org/research/humor.htm> [2003, Apr. 17]
- [2]. Donna, Shannon M., 1993, Children's Responses to Humor in Fiction. [Online], Retrieved from, <http://www.ils.unc.edu/phd/shand.html> [2003, Feb. 13]
- [3]. Gatt, Joseph, 2000 Humor In English Classes. [Online], Retrieved from, [http://www.waldorfseminar.de/forschung/s-gatt-Humor in English Classes.PDF](http://www.waldorfseminar.de/forschung/s-gatt-Humor%20in%20English%20Classes.PDF) [2003, Feb. 13]
- [4]. Kenner , Roger, Reasons Why a ESL Humour Site Should Work, Concordia University, Canada [Online], Retrieved from, http://rkenner.concordia.ca/Teslpapers/Raby_Pankovitch/G-Teache.htm [2003, Jun. 30]
- [5]. Sylwester, Dr, Robert (Ed.D), 2001, A Teacher's Sense of Humor, [Online], Retrieved from, http://www.brainconnection.com/content/11_1/printable [2003, Feb. 13]
- [6]. Vadillo , Ricardo S.M., 1998, Using Jokes to Foster The Practice of English [Online], Retrieved from, <http://members.aol.com/Jakajk/ricesl.html> [2003, Feb. 13]
- [7]. Walker, Cheryl (Jeanie Marklin), 2002, How English teachers use humor in the classroom, Wake Forest University [Online], Retrieved from, <http://www.wfu.edu/wfunews/2002/052102humor.html> [2003, May. 19]
- [8]. Wieggers M., Grooters F., Tormo A. 1996, Being Creative [Online], Retrieved from, <http://projects.edte.utwente.nl/ism/online96/project/kiosk/team10/bc10.htm> [2003, Feb. 13]