

HUMOR: WHAT CAN IT DO FOR TERTIARY STUDENTS?*

MİZAH: YÜKSEK ÖĞRENİM ÖĞRENCİLERİNE NE KATKISI OLABİLİR?

Mehmet ÇELİK**

ABSTRACT: Given the important role of the affective variables in the process of learning, this paper examines ways of overcoming negative effects (i.e. anxiety, boredom) of the contextual factors. Exemplifying the uses of humor through context-specific, purpose-driven jokes, it maintains that humor can be utilized to produce a resourceful, encouraging and creative lesson at upper-intermediate and advanced levels at tertiary institutions. Among other benefits noted are smiling, laughter, non-threatening atmosphere, and self-confidence. Attempts of creating a compassionate environment in the classroom find their roots in Humanistic Teaching, Affective Filter hypothesis and Suggestopedia. Using the self-reported views of tertiary students, gathered through a questionnaire, the study reveals the attitudes of learners towards humor, discusses the benefits of humor, and seeks significant differences between and among learners in terms of sex and year level. The paper concludes that humor forms a vital component in lesson planning.

Keywords: Learning at university, negative classroom atmosphere, humor, self-confidence, humanistic teaching.

ÖZET: Öğrenme sürecinde psikolojik etkenlerin önemli rolünü dikkate alan bu çalışma, sınıf ortamından kaynaklanabilen endişe, sıkılma ve benzeri olumsuz etkenlerin nasıl ortadan kaldırılabileceği konusunu irdeler. Ders konusuyula ilgili, amaca yönelik mizah örneklerinden hareketle, sınıftaki öğrenim havasını iyileştirerek ve özgüven sağlayarak, üniversite öğrencilerinin derslerde en üst yararı elde edip edemeyeceği konusu, öğrencilere uygulanan bir anketle saptanmaya çalışılmıştır. Böyle bir düşünceye destek İnsancıl Öğretim, Psikolojik Süzme hipotezi ve Suggestopedia gibi önemli öğrenim yaklaşımlarında bulunmaktadır. Çalışma, öğrencilerin mizaha karşı tutumlarını, mizahı elde edilecek yararları, bu konularda cinsiyetin rolünün olup olmadığını ve son olarak farklı sınıf (yıl) öğrencileri arasında istatistiksel olarak kayda değer bir fark olup olmadığını saptamayı amaçlar. Çalışma, dersle ilgili mizahın, ders planlamasının önemli bir parçası olması gerektiği yargısıyla sona erer.

Anahtar Sözcükler. Üniversitede eğitim, olumsuz sınıf havası, mizah, özgüven, insancıl öğretim.

1. INTRODUCTION

A Pakistani speaker in an international conference delivers a very good paper in English. While he makes his speech, he makes whistle-like sounds in between his utterances. This does not go unheeded by the listeners. After the speech, he is approached by some curious participants and asked "It was all very fine, but the strange noises you have made. What were they?" He responds "Well, I learnt English through BBC Short Wave." (Short Wave signals are usually accompanied by a kind of squeaky noise.)

If lecturers begin their phonology class using this joke in order to illustrate the importance of role models, or inescapable consequence of imitation, this joke will serve very well. The following illustrates another joke for a semantic theory in linguistics classes:

Nasreddin Hodja, a local and historical satirical figure, strolling in the fields in spring season, notices a bird, a strange bird indeed, for the first time in his life. Black and white in color, enormously long legs and a very long beak. He thinks to himself "This is not a proper bird." This is none other than a stork. Somehow, he manages to catch the bird, and takes it home. To his confused wife, he tells he has captured a weird bird. When she asks him what he plans to do with it, he answers: "Wait and see!" Using a pair of scissors, he chops its legs and beak half way. Placing on a table, he steps back and yells: "Now you look like a proper bird!"

* Bu makale Kahire'de (Mısır) Eyp Tesol tarafından 5-7 Aralık tarihlerinde düzenlenen Fourth International Convention'da sunulan çalışmanın geliştirilmiş halidir.

** Y. Doç. Dr., H.Ü. Eğitim Fakültesi, İngiliz Dili Eğitimi-Ankara. mcelik@hacettepe.edu.tr

Using this joke, they can prepare their students for the Prototype Theory in the discussion of theories on linguistics meaning. What else does each of these two jokes do for the learners, for the classroom atmosphere? First, it will serve as an introduction to the lesson. Second, perhaps more importantly, is the strong possibility that almost all students will smile and have laughter about them. Consequently, it will help create a friendly, non-threatening atmosphere. Third, students will realize that the topic to be discussed next is to be relevant to actual world we live in, and that they already have a background in the subject. The latter one, that is, having a background, eventually takes us to the most important element of motivation as conceptualized by Maslow (1968); the subject feels that she can achieve her task, in our case, “understanding”. Then, for better learning to take place, affective variables such as motivation, self-confidence, classroom atmosphere, and anxiety need to be considered as part and parcel of our philosophy of education.

This paper addresses the question of anxiety in language learning at tertiary institutions, examines the impact of humor in second language learning, and notes the necessity of humor to overcome the affective handicaps. It begins by describing the notion of anxiety, and goes on to examine what Humanistic Teaching has to deal with the eradication of anxiety. Further, Affective Filter hypothesis and Suggestopedia are mentioned in relation to their possible contributions to tackle the negative effects of affective factors.

2. ANXIETY

The concept “anxiety” is charged with negative connotations. It is known that not all anxiety is bad: one type of anxiety called “facilitative” can even contribute to learning. The other type, “debilitative”, is the one that is most associated with the concept of anxiety in that, popularly, anxiety is not regarded as a positive psychological state. What is debilitative anxiety, then? It is that anxiety which stops a learner from achieving a task through one or more of the following depressing factors: feeling of frustration, uneasiness, self-doubt, fear of failing, worry, etc.

Noting several diverse factors that may negatively affect the learning process creating anxiety, Ellis (1994: 479) notes that learners “...need to feel secure and to be free of stress before they can focus on the learning task...” The type of anxiety that is more relevant to learning appears to be the so-called “situation-specific” anxiety, or “anxiety specifically generated by attempts to produce in L2 in the classroom”. Competition among learners, feeling less proficient, inability to follow instructions, serious nature of classroom, not knowing what to do, being afraid of answering questions, fear of making mistakes, being a subject of laughter, feeling of failure, and so forth can cause differing levels of anxiety for different learners. Although, in its first phases of research in the area of anxiety, research results were not consistent in assigning negative, positive or neutral role (Chastain, 1975; Kleinmann, 1978), later research (Clement and Kruidenier, 1985, MacIntyre and Gardner, 1991) has established that anxiety negatively and considerably affects the language learning and that a correlation exists between positive attitudes towards the overall task and successful learning.

3. HUMANISTIC TEACHING

Humanistic approach to teaching tries to secure a positive atmosphere before the actual learning begins in an effort to eliminate the possible negative effects for learning. The response of the learner to the new learning environment, which is detrimental to successful learning, can range from hostility to favorable. Taking this point as one of the central tenets of teaching, Humanistic Approach emphasizes the role of activities in making students feel relaxed, remembering the happy times of their lives, and so forth. For this purpose, for instance, students are asked to make use in activities of the events in their lives (Moscowitz, 1978).

Carl Rogers (1951) in his book *Client-Centered Therapy* made certain observations that have had a great impact on language learning. Considering the full person with his emotional aspects, he argued that affective variables form a crucial part of the learning environment. A non-threatening atmosphere is ideal for successful learning since a learner is accepted a fully functioning person. Almost all practical needs and aspirations of the learner are taken into account in creating the optimum learning conditions. It aims at empowering the learners by having them participate in a stress free atmosphere.

Directly relevant to the principles of humanistic concept of education is the method known as Suggestopedia. This language teaching method, as applied from the practices of Georgi Lozanov, rests on three major tenets: 1) an attractive classroom and a pleasant atmosphere, 2) a motivating teacher with a dynamic personality who can act out the materials, and 3) a state of relaxed alertness in the students (Bancroft, 1978:172). The first and third principles are not only directly relevant to the points raised within the framework of humanistic teaching, but also to Affective Filter hypothesis.

The Affective Filter hypothesis, as advocated by Krashen (1982), is also pertinent to the issue of acquisition. The potential resistance on the part of the learner against the intake of input is defined as Affective Filter, which either eases acquisition or makes it more difficult depending on, primarily, motivation, self-confidence, and anxiety. In this sense, the acquisition pace is correlated with high level of motivation, high level of self-confidence, and low level of anxiety, which collectively decrease the strength of Affective Filter allowing learner to seek more input through low level of resistance. Low filtering of the input allows data to readily reach the acquisition area in the mind (Krashen, 1982:31). Therefore, methods that provide a relaxed atmosphere where the learner is not on the defensive are the ones that encourage low filter. Humor comes in handy at this point. If it can be integrated into methodologies, the problem of anxiety as articulated by the Affective Filter hypothesis can be overcome, facilitating the use of linguistic input by the learners.

4. HUMOR

Although humor is believed to create encouraging attitudes towards a certain goal in any sphere, there has not been sufficient attention on the use of humor for the second/foreign language classroom. Two levels are in question here: research and teaching. One thing that can be said about research is that researchers do not see significant benefit or contribution that humor can play for the acquisition process (see below for exceptions). As for teachers, among the possible causes of the lack of attention, my observations tell me, can be 1) lack of self-confidence, 2) lack of knowledge on where and when to use humor, and finally, 3) the belief that humor is non-productive, chaos-creating, time-wasting. Interestingly, it appears that it is the teachers and educators that need to be motivated to use humor!

Prodromou (1991) indicates in his qualitative study that a good teacher, according to learners, is funny and like a comedian, and plays games, tells jokes, and pretends a lot alongside with other qualities. There is increasing interest in the use of humor in EFL instruction. For instance, *Laughing matters: Humour in the language classroom* by Medgyes (2002) is an important source book dedicated to the various uses of humor in group tasks for beginners and lower-intermediate learners. In it, Medgyes details how funny games, stories, jokes, puzzles, pictures, sketches, dialogues and so on can be fruitfully used for all levels of learners. In one sense, it completes the definitive work done in Moscovitz (1978).

Deneire (1995) complains about the absence of well-designed integrations of humor into existing teaching methodologies or approaches. The concept of humor is associated with positive feelings such as smiling, laughter, excitement, interest, joy, etc. Humor in the second language classroom creates a motivation and atmosphere in which anxiety levels are low and comfort levels are high so that students do not feel intimidated in the use of their foreign/ second language. In tertiary settings with pre-service English teachers, it has been seen that jokes, witty expressions, and so forth can efficiently function to enliven the class atmosphere, sustain interest and motivation, and thus lead to enhanced learning. However, humor should not be used at random without any preparation; it should have a clear objective for the topic.

Deneire (1995) attempts to draw a framework for the use of humor. The important questions for Deneire are: 1) What kinds of humor can be used in the foreign language classroom? 2) When and how should humor be used in the teaching sequence? Of the three broad types of humor identified by Schmitz (2002) using Long and Graeser (1988)'s classifications, universal, linguistic-based and culture-based, the former two appear to be very viable for ESL classroom. Culture-based humor does not appear to be applicable since it requires a cultural background and acculturation for the students to appreciate (Deneire, 1995). According to Long and Graeser (1988), humor involves both jokes and wit. Of the taxonomy they offer for jokes, nonsense, social satire and philosophical ones can be used in the classroom (Schmitz, 2002), and for the wit, the following can be efficient: satire, irony, (mild) teasing, self-appreciation and self-depreciation, over- and under-statement, clever replies to rhetorical and serious statements, double entendres, puns, and finally transformation of frozen expressions.

5. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This research attempts to identify the attitude of students towards humor in class, unearth the possible benefits of humor in retaining important aspects of lectures, determine whether there exists a gender difference in approving certain dimensions of humor, and finally establish significant differences between and among students of 1st, 2nd, and 3rd years..

6. THE STUDY

The participants, pre-service teachers of English, were 310 (77 males; 233 females) students, all enrolled at Hacettepe University. 135 of them were in the 1st year, 79 in the 2nd, and the remaining 96 in the 3rd year. The ages of participants range from 18 to 24, so they can be labelled as young adults. The participants in question can be described as upper-intermediate to advanced level of learners. Although they are taught subjects like Linguistics, English phonology, and so forth, they are still improving their English. In this sense, concerns valid for general English learning conditions are relatively applicable for these learners as well.

In the development of the items, colleague views as well as student views were sought in written form, and the author phrased them in item format. Participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the statements on a 5-point *Likert* type scale. The minimum response score on this scale is 1, meaning 'Strongly Agree' while the maximum score is 5, meaning 'Strongly Disagree'. The lower the mean, the more endorsement an item receives. The questionnaire contained 15 items on the use of humor in the classroom and its consequences on their learning process (see Appendix). 6 items in the questionnaire were purposely worded negatively to check the internal consistency of responses. Therefore, scores for these items were reversed on data entry, and so was the wording of these items in the analysis of results (including the tables).

A statistical software package called SPSS.10 for Windows was used to analyze the data. Descriptive Statistics includes Number (N) of participants, Mean (M) for the level of endorsement of the views expressed in the items, and Standard Deviation (SD) to determine the homogeneity of the group. An independent samples T-test was used to see if a significant difference exists between female and male learners. In the same vein, a one-way ANOVA was used to see if significant differences exist between year levels. The following sections try to answer each of the above-mentioned research questions.

7. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

7.1 Attitudes towards and benefits of Humor

Table 1 shows the number of participants (N), Mean, and Standard Deviation. A glance over the mean levels is enough to see that learners are in favor of the use of humor in the classroom: M=1,78. Further, the

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for Mean and Standard Deviation.

Item Statements	N	Mean	Std. D.
01 Humor greatly contributes to language learning process.	310	1,23	,50
12 The use of humor sustains my concentration on the lesson.	310	1,31	,62
08 Humor in class diminishes rivalries, creates group cohesion.	310	1,39	,63
15 Humorous teachers have genuine interest in teaching.	310	1,43	,76
06 Humor can be used to explain a complex subject.	310	1,55	,75
04 I wouldn't like to miss a humorous class.	310	1,63	,92
14 Humorous teachers have good presentation skills.	310	1,68	,91
11 Humor associated with topic is kept in the long-term memory.	310	1,72	,81
05 The use of humor in class boosts my self-confidence.	310	1,74	,81
03 Humor establishes a friendly atmosphere in class.	310	1,88	1,02
10 Humor has effect on shy students' interaction with others.	310	1,98	,85
07 Whenever we get bored, teachers should use humor.	310	2,13	1,08
09 Humor has to be related with the subject matter in the lesson.	310	2,22	1,05
13 Almost all teachers can effectively use humor.	310	2,36	1,15
02 The statement "This theory is developed by N. Chomsky, a close friend of mine" can be humorous.	310	2,50	1,29
Average M/SD		1,78	0,87

average homogeneity level is low: $SD=0,87$, which indicates the views expressed display considerable convergence on the issues among participants.

11 of the items received an endorsement of at least 2 (Agree). The highest endorsement is on the significant contribution of humor to learning process ($M=1,23$), followed by the concentration function of humor on the lesson ($M=1,31$). Another efficacy of humor is its ability to diminish rivalries in the classroom and to create group cohesion ($M=1,39$). Humorous teachers get the fourth highest endorsement, indicating that they are genuinely interested in teaching ($M=1,43$) although learners' experiences with the teachers (Item 14) is that their presentation skills may not be as sufficient as their interest in carrying it out ($M=1,68$).

The proposition that humor can be used to explain a difficult topic receives an endorsement level of 1,55, in between Agree and Strongly Agree. The use of humor can even have considerable influence on the level of attendance to lessons: learners do not wish to miss a humorous class ($M=1,63$). Humor also plays an important role in retention of a topic in the long term memory ($M=1,72$), in boosting self-confidence ($M=1,74$), in the creation of friendly atmosphere ($M=1,88$), and in having timid and shy learners interact with other members of class: $M=1,98$.

The other 4 item statements received endorsement levels between 2 (Agree) and 3 (Undecided). The question whether humor should be used whenever learners get bored or whether humor should be used when there is a topical need has received similar endorsements: $M= 2,13$ and $M= 2,22$ respectively. As far as the learners' experiences are concerned, not all teachers can effectively use humor ($M=2,36$). The least endorsement is given to the item that involves expressions such as those in Item 2: $M=2,50$.

7.2 Gender Differences

Regarding the research question whether there exists any statistically significant difference between boys and girls in their approval of certain dimensions in humor, the following results are obtained through the statistical procedure T-test: only three of all of the items in the test battery showed significant differences between the two sexes at $p<.05$ level (Table 2).

Table 2: Significant differences for males and females.

Items	Level of Sig.
07 Whenever we get bored, teachers should use humor.	.009
11 Humor associated with topic is kept in the long-term memory.	.037
14 Humorous teachers have genuine interest in teaching.	.008

7.3. Differences in Years

The results obtained for the question “Is there any significant difference between 1st, 2nd, and 3rd year students in their approval of certain dimensions in humor?” indicate that statistically significant differences are generally found between the 2nd and 3rd years at $p < .05$ level for 7 items. Table 3 shows the items that showed statistically significant relationships between and among groups. To take the first item (03), for instance, in this particular item a statistically significant relationship is observed between 1st and 2nd year students, and 2nd and 3rd year students. In other words, no significant relationship is noted for other groups.

Table 3: Items exhibiting significant differences between Year Variables.

Items	Sig	Between Groups
03 Humor establishes a friendly atmosphere in class.	.01	1 and 2 / 2 and 3
06 Humor can be used to explain a complex subject.	.03	2 and 3
12 The use of humor sustains my concentration on the lesson.	.03	2 and 3
09 Humor has to be related with the subject matter in the lesson.	.01	1 and 2 / 2 and 3 / 1 and 3
07 Whenever we get bored, teachers should use humor.	.02	1 and 3
13 Almost all teachers can affectively use humor.	.01	2 and 3
15 Humorous teachers have genuine interest in teaching.	.01	2 and 3

8. CONCLUSION

This paper has examined one way of improving the classroom atmosphere in tertiary settings: humor. Through telling of jokes related to the subject matter, in particular, it argues for the inclusion of topic-related jokes to provide background information and thus ease comprehension, to eradicate possible negative affective factors such as lack of motivation, of self-confidence, the existence of anxiety and stressful environment. The argument is supported by views discussed in Humanistic Teaching, Suggestopedia, and Affective Filter hypothesis, all of which note the necessity of the creation of a positive learning atmosphere, taking the learners' feelings, apprehensions, mood, and personal needs. Based on the remarks advocated by the above methodologies and theories, the paper has sought to identify the attitudes and views of learners regarding the efficacy of humor. The self-reported views of learners indicate an endorsement level for humor ranging from what we can label as strong approval to mild approval. They wish to see humor as a favorite component of courses since they think that humor is instrumental on concentration, group cohesion, friendly atmosphere, self-confidence, long-term memory, and interaction of shy learners. Regarding sex differences in endorsement levels, significant differences are observed on only three items. Of the observed statistically significant differences between year levels, the differences between the years 2 and 3 are noteworthy.

REFERENCES

- Bancroft, J. (1978). The Lozanov method and its American adaptations. *Modern Language Journal*, 62, 167-174.
- Chastain, K. (1975). Affective and ability factors in second language acquisition. *Language Learning*, 25, 153-161.

- Clement, R. and Kruidenier, B. (1985). Aptitude, attitude, and motivation in second language learning. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 4, 21-38.
- Deneire, M. (1995). Humor and language learning. *Humor*, 8, 285-298.
- Ellis, R. (1994). *The study of second language acquisition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kleinmann, H. (1978). The strategy of avoidance in adult second language acquisition. In W. Ritchie (ed.) *Second language acquisition research*. New York: Academic Press.
- Krashen, S.D. (1982). *Principles and practice in second language acquisition*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall.
- Long, D.L. & Graesser, A.C. (1988). Wit and humor in discourse processing. *Discourse Processing*, 11, 35-60.
- MacIntyre, P. and Gardner, R. (1991). Methods and results in the study of foreign language anxiety: a review of the literature. *Language Learning*, 41, 25-57.
- Maslow, A. H. (1968). *Toward a psychology of being*. New York: Van Nostrand.
- Medgyes, P. (2002). *Laughing matters: Humour in the language classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Moscowitz, G. (1978). *Caring and sharing in the foreign language classroom*. New York: Newbury House.
- Prodromou, L. (1991). The good language teacher. *English Teaching Forum*, 29, 2-7.
- Ritchie, W. (1978). *Second language acquisition research*. New York: Academic Press.
- Rogers, C. (1951). *Client-centered therapy: its current practice and implications for theory*. London: Constable.
- Schmitz, J. R. (2002). Humor as a pedagogical tool in the second language classroom. *International Journal of Humor Research*, 15, 89-113.

APPENDIX

THE 15 HUMOR VARIABLES ITEMS

Items whose score was reversed before summing the variable scores are indicated with a minus sign (-) in brackets.

1. Humor greatly contributes to language learning process.
2. The statement “This theory is developed by N. Chomsky, *a close friend of mine*” can be humorous.
3. Humor helps establish a friendly atmosphere in class.
4. I wouldn't like to miss a humorous class.
5. The use of humor in class boosts my self-confidence.
6. Teachers can use humor to explain a complex subject.
7. Whenever we get bored, teachers should use humor to give us a mental break.
8. The use of humor may create rivalries and diminishes group cohesion. (-)
9. Humor has to be related with the subject matter in the lesson.
10. Humor has no effect on shy students' interaction with other students in class. (-)
11. Humor associated with a subject helps me keep it in long term memory.
12. The use of humor distracts my concentration on the lesson. (-)
13. Almost all teachers can effectively use humor. (-)
14. Teachers who use humor don't in fact have good presentation skills. (-)
15. Teachers who use humor are not interested in teaching. (-)