

# TEACHING ENGLISH THROUGH HUMOR AND JOKES

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## ABSTRACT

*The current study is entitled "Teaching English through Humor and jokes". Humor and jokes are an essential part of human life. In teaching English, humor and jokes enhance students' learning capacity. Humor and jokes are also significant elements to reduce the stress in the classroom.*

*The problem of this study lies in the fact that many non-native learners of English language cannot differentiate among the meanings of Wh/question words. The study aims to enable the students to distinguish the meanings of Wh/question words and how they are used in suitable contexts. The study also aims to show how incorporating a sense of humor in Wh/questions can also help students to memorize the meanings of Wh/question words in a better way. So, it is hypothesized that questions which contain a sense of humor can assist in students' understanding the meanings of Wh/question words.*

*The test includes two classes of students (class A and class B), class A has learned Wh/words in a traditional way and class B has learned Wh/question words by including questions that have a sense of humor.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Humor and jokes are becoming important tools that are used widely in the process of teaching students different language skills.

The study consists of three parts. The first part provides theoretical background about the study. It includes an overview of humor, the definition of joke, and advantages of adopting humor and jokes in the classroom. The second part involves the practical procedures that can be used in order to incorporate humor and jokes into teaching process. The last part consists of conclusions, appendix, and references.

## 2. HUMOR AND JOKES: A THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### 2.1 Introduction

Humor in the language of classroom has very significant role in language proficiency. If students learn language skills by using jokes, they will feel more comfortable in their new language, since an important part of learning a language is learning to enjoy its jokes (Cook, 2002, p.25). Martin (2007, p.5) defines humor as: "humor is a broad term that refers to anything that people

say or do that is perceived as funny and tends to make others

laugh, as well as the mental processes that go into both

creating and perceiving such an amusing stimulus, and

also the affective response involved in the enjoyment of it."

It means that humor tends to arise positive feelings inside people and makes them happier. Therefore, when humor is applied to teaching it enhances the students' learning ability (Walter, 1990, pp.43-44). Nevertheless, the mood of the classroom imprints positive effects on English language learning experience because humor can promote understanding and attract the attention of the students until end to make learning process more effective and interesting. It is the teacher's duty to create a relaxed, pleasant, and positive atmosphere in his/her teaching so that the students feel comfortable, learn more, and have a lot of fun.

Garner (2006, p.177) states that "students indicate that humor can increase their interests in learning and research has demonstrated that students who have teachers with strong orientation to humor tend to learn more". Humor brings positive changes in students' attitude toward learning second language.

Kher et al. (1999,p.1) also writes that humor is a catalyst for classroom magic, when all the educational elements converge and teacher and student are positive and excited about learning. According to Prosser (1997, p.2), humor builds unity, relieve stress, and enhance creativity. Humor helps the instructor enjoy teaching and empowers the learner to participate in classroom activities.

Gorham and Christopher (1990, p.354) claim that if the teachers use humor in the classroom they are often doing so to reduce tension, to facilitate self-disclosure, to relieve embarrassment, to save face, to disarm others, to alleviate boredom, to convey good will or to accomplish some other prosocially goal. However, a teacher who uses jokes and humor in his lesson regarding what is he teaching can definitely help the students to learn proficiently. Ziv (1988, p.5) has reported that students appreciate and enjoy learning with a teacher who uses humor and jokes.

## 2.2 Types and Forms of Humor

Since what is humorous varies and different people find different things funny, every teacher has the potential to promote a positive learning environment using humor. A summary of Mark Nichol's (2011) research on the various types and forms of humor include:

1. Anecdotal: Refers to comic personal stories that may be true or partly true but embellished.
2. Blue: A type of broad humor that is unrestrained, unsubtle humor often marked by coarse jokes and sexual situations.
3. Burlesque: Ridicules by imitating with caricature or exaggerated characterization.
4. Dark/Morbid: Grim or depressing humor dealing with misfortune and/or death and with a pessimistic outlook.
5. Deadpan/Dry: Humor delivered with an impassive, expressionless, matter-of-fact presentation.
6. Droll: Utilizes capricious or eccentric humor.
7. Epigrammatic: Humor consisting of a witty saying.
8. Farcical: Comedy based on improbable coincidences and with satirical elements, punctuated at times with overwrought, frantic action.
9. High/Highbrow: Humor pertaining to cultural, sophisticated themes.
10. Hyperbolic Comic presentation marked by extravagant exaggeration and outsized characterization.
11. Ironic: Humor involving incongruity and discordance with norms, in which the intended meaning is opposite, or nearly opposite, to the literal meaning.
12. Juvenile/Sophomoric: Humor involving childish themes such as pranks, name-calling and other immature behavior.
13. Mordant: Caustic or biting humor.
14. Parodic Comic imitation often intended to ridicule an author, an artistic endeavor or a genre.
15. Satirical: Humor that mocks human weaknesses or aspects of society.
16. Screwball: Humor that deals with unlikely situations and responses to those situations.
17. Self-deprecating Humor in which performers target themselves and their foibles or misfortunes for comic effect.

18. Situational: Humor arising out of quotidian situations.

19. Slapstick: Comedy in which mock violence and simulated bodily harm are staged for comic effect.

20. Stand-up A form of comedy delivery in which a comic entertains an audience with jokes and humorous stories.

[www.dailywritingtips.com/20-types-and-forms-of-humor](http://www.dailywritingtips.com/20-types-and-forms-of-humor).

### 2.3 Benefits of Using Humor in the Classroom

A great teacher is one whose classroom is inspiring, exciting and imaginative, and stands apart from the crowd. Using humor in the classroom is imaginative and can create excitement, and inspire student interest and learning (Green, 2014, p.6). Ocon (2015, p.4-5) lists the major benefits of using humor in the classroom, humor in the classroom:

- Breaks down communication barriers between professor and students.
- Makes students more relaxed by reducing anxiety.
- Encourages students to listen.
- Indicates that the teacher is human and can share experiences with the class.
- Makes students less intimidated and less inhibited to ask questions or make comments.
- Promotes student creativity by encouraging them to take chances, look at things in an offbeat way and even make mistakes in the process.
- Creates a more positive, fun, interesting environment that promotes class attendance and student performance.
- Increases comprehension and cognitive retention, since students have less stress and anxiety.
- Improves students' attitudes toward the subject and the instructor.
- Makes teaching more fun and enjoyable for the instructor.
- Builds group or class cohesion.
- Results in higher student evaluations.
- Can be used to illustrate course-related concepts.
- Has a positive affect on the level of student attention and interest. It is physically impossible to laugh and snore at the same time.

- Keeps students engaged and involved with the course materials.
- Creates a positive climate for learning and enjoyment.
- Brings a sense of pleasure and appreciation.
- Creates a common, positive emotional experience that students share with each other and the teacher.
- Improves the mental wellbeing of students and the instructor.
- Reduces self-consciousness and boost self-confidence.
- Lowers student defenses and provokes imagination.
- Creates a positive student-instructor relationship.
- Promotes student open-mindedness.

### 2.4 Jokes

Jokes are deemed to be a boon for learners in having them feel more comfortable and stress-free in their new language milieu (Waring, 2013, p.191). Grasping the meaning of jokes is a part and parcel of the process of first language acquisition. Furthermore, jokes can be adopted as tests of comprehension, since not everyone necessarily gets every joke and getting jokes involves background knowledge and rational processing (Norrick, 2009, p.261).

### 2.5 Advantages of Adopting Jokes in the Classroom

Adopting jokes in the classroom has many advantages the most important ones are listed below:

1-Adopting jokes in the classes as "a meaningful task, learner's attention can be focused on the meaning rather than the form"(Nunan, 1989, p.10).

This is related to the top-down process of language learning in which learners try to get the meaning of a text by resort to their background knowledge to interpret lower level information present in the data (Richards and Schmidt, 2002, p.557).

2-Jokes, which are based upon wordplay and assimilation, have the additional benefit of constituting meta-linguistic awareness of the forms and elements of language which eventually results in learning more language (Zipke, 2008, p.128).

3- Another important feature about jokes is their authenticity. Richards and Schmidt (2002, p.42) define authentic material as materials that are not originally developed for pedagogical purposes. Jokes can be deemed authentic material and can be used in the classrooms as a kind of target task with learners. This is so because of the fact that they are an intrinsic part of a first language and their use is not confined to the classroom.

4- Possessing an up-to-date repertoire of linguistic information and background knowledge is a prerequisite factor to understand a joke, even for native speakers of a language (Aarons, 2012, p.35).

Jokes that are based upon wordplay in another language maybe challenging to grasp because they need be processed as quickly as possible. No one wants to be the last to laugh. In a social setting, where people are interacting with each other, comprehending and understanding a joke can seem like a high-stakes test. Being unable to get a joke in this situation can make someone feel like a fish out of water and create a sense of isolation (Lems, 2013, p.26).

### 3. DATA COLLECTION

#### 3.1 Participants

The current study is applied to two classes (class A and class B) of Iraqi first intermediate classes in school for girls. Their ages range between (13-15).

#### 3.2 Data

The material given to the students is a number of Wh/questions. These questions are found in the appendix.

#### 3.3 procedures

This study is divided into three main procedures:

##### 3.3.1 Pre-evaluation phase

The two classes are given a number of Wh/questions. The researcher teaches class (A) questions that begin with Wh/question words in a traditional way. The researcher writes Wh/questions on the board and explains the meaning of each Wh/question word, and how these words are used in questions to signify

person, place, time, possession, etc. On the other hand, the researcher presents a number of Wh/questions for the students of class (B) on a slide show. These Wh/questions contain a sense of humor. As soon as the researcher begins to explain the meaning of the questions, the students begin to laugh.

##### 3.3.2 Test Phase

The researcher gives each class (class A and class B) a set of questions and asks them to predict which Wh/question word is suitable for each question.

##### 3.3.3 Post-evaluation phase

After the test time finishes, the researcher takes the test papers from the students. The students of class (B) who have learned Wh/question words in questions containing a sense of humor have come up with better results than the students of class (A) who have learned Wh/question words through traditional teaching techniques. The students of class (B) have memorized the meanings of Wh/question words better than students of class (A).

#### 3.4 Data Analysis

The results of the study are analyzed by comparing the results of pre-evaluation with post-evaluation phase.

### 4. RESULTS

The results of the test reveal that students who have learned Wh/question words in questions containing a sense of humor show better memorization of the meanings of Wh/question words than those who learn Wh/question words in traditional way. So, the hypothesis that has been proved is that humor plays an important role in students' comprehension of the meanings of Wh/question words. Jokes and humor do not only help to memorize the stuff easily, but for the things associated with funny incidents imprint on the minds of the students permanently.

### CONCLUSIONS

It seems useful to create a humoristic atmosphere in the classroom to attract students' attention and to make the lesson more amusing and less stressful. In addition, students will be enriched by the exposure to a wealth

of significant vocabulary, idioms, and other language features. Students prefer a learning process that is based on humor because they feel more comfortable. Students' capacity for language learning can be strengthened by using humor properly in the classroom.

## APPENDIX

### Class A questions

1. A: When are you leaving?  
B: On Saturday.
  2. A: Where do you go?  
B: To the bookshop.
  3. A: Who is your favorite actor?  
B: George Clooney for sure.
  4. A: Who has been paying the bills?  
B: Ali has been paying the bills.
  5. A: How was your weekend in Edinburg?  
B: I did not go to Edinburg.
  6. A: Which color do you prefer, red or blue?  
B: Red.
  7. A: Why are you angry?  
B: I am angry because somebody have stolen my wallet.
  8. A: How many apples have you eaten?  
B: I have eaten three apples.
  9. A: Whose book is this?  
B: It is mine.
- These examples are adopted from ([www.dictionary.cambridge.org](http://www.dictionary.cambridge.org))

### Class B questions

1. A: why is 'U' the happiest letter?  
B: Because it is in the middle of fun.
2. A: What relatives are dependent on 'you'?  
B: Aunt, uncle, cousin. They all need 'U'.
3. A: Which is the loudest vowel?  
B: The letter 'I'. It is always in the middle of noise.
4. A: How can we get some clean water?  
B: Bring the water from the river and wash it.
5. A: When does the English alphabet have only 25 letters?

B: By Christmas time, because it is the time of Noel (No L)

6. A: Where do animals go when they lose their tail?  
B: To a retail store.
7. A: How many seconds are in a year?  
B: 12- January 2<sup>nd</sup>, February 2<sup>nd</sup>...
8. A: Who earns money by driving their customers away?  
B: A taxi driver.
9. A: Did you hear that a baby was fed on elephant milk and gained twenty pounds a week?  
B: That's impossible. Whose baby?  
A: An elephant.
10. A: How many legs does an ant has?  
B: Two just like uncle (the hint is aunt)

These examples are adopted from the internet ([www.jokes>iteslj.org](http://www.jokes>iteslj.org))

### Fill in the blanks with the correct Wh/question words:

(What, Where, When, Why, Who, How many, Which, Whose, How)

1. A: ----- is your favorite book?  
B: English is my favorite book.
2. A: ----- did you like to go on vacation?  
B: I like to go to French.
3. A: ----- is your birthday?  
B: On 4 September.
4. A: -----you come late?  
B: I come late because there was traffic jam.
5. A: ----- won the match?  
B: The Iraqi team won the match.
6. A: -----brothers have you got?  
B: I have got four brothers.
7. A: ----- one of these dresses is yours?

B: The red one.

8. A: ----- umbrella is this?

B: It is mine.

9. A: ----- do you go to work?

B: By car.

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