

Laugh and Learn: Humor and Learning a Second Language

Rima Aboudan, United Arab Emirates University, United Arab Emirates

Abstract: Learning a second language requires a “*positive*” classroom atmosphere. This research presents “*humor*” as an effective tool in creating the affective second language classroom, and in learning a second language. Students’ views reveal favoritism towards using humor in learning a second language - (80%) reported that jokes help them pay more attention during class time, and (71%) pointed out that humor helps learning difficult material. Evidence in this research confirms, consistently with past studies, that the use of “*humor*” in ESL classrooms reduces tension, improves classroom climate, increases student-teacher rapport, and even facilitates learning. More specifically, students reported greater enjoyment of the learning process when humor is used. This research argues that “*humor*” has a positive effect on the language teaching setting in increasing motivation and success thereafter. Along with encouragement and praise, “*humor*” ought to be used by language teachers to make their classrooms more inviting and conducive to learning.

Keywords: humor, ESL Learning

1. Introduction

Many United Arab Emirates University (UAEU) female students often enter language classrooms lacking motivation and feeling stressed. Emotions such as stress, anxiety, and feeling boredom in a language learning setting often affect motivation, and success thereafter (Gardner & Lambert, 1972). Indeed, most, if not all Emirati students are too nervous or even afraid to attempt expressing themselves in a second language.

Concurrently, it is well recognized that students are more willing to participate in classrooms that allow them to feel supported. As with all learning, learning a second language requires a particular “*positive*” atmosphere in the classroom. (Kristmanson, 2000) emphasizes the need to create a “*welcoming*” classroom for language learning, so that the learning environment does not feel threatening or intimidating.

Humor has also been connected to positive class management. Walter (1990) reported that students who laugh have less disturbing outbursts in class. Powell (1985) and Proctor (1994) reported that humor communicates issues related to classroom management without either lessening teacher’s authority or embarrassing the class.

Regardless of what evidence there may be, we all have personal views on what constitutes a “*positive affective*” environment for learning a second language. For many ESL teachers, a positive environment in the classroom is the most important: we all encourage our students not to be afraid to use their second language, and we praise their efforts constantly.

Along with encouragement and praise, language teaching should use tools that enhance day-to-day motivation, and make classrooms more inviting and conducive to learning. Moreover, although error correction is regarded appropriate, constructive, and a good tool to instill confidence in students, one always tries to avoid linguistic ridicule and negative criticism. One way to encourage students' learning in a language environment is to bring learning to life.

Language is best dealt with when seen in real life situations. Evidence in past studies consistently suggests that the use of "humor" in classrooms improves classroom climate, increases student-teacher rapport, increases enjoyment, reduces tension, and even facilitates learning and makes it a real-life experience (Loomax and Moosavi, 1998; Provine, 2002).

This research examines whether humor is an effective tool in teaching English as a second language in the United Arab Emirates University (UAEU). Does humor create the affective second language classroom for UAE students? Do humorous remarks/situations allow UAEU students to express themselves without fear? Is linguistic humor an effective tool in teaching UAE nationals? Does humor affect the UAE learning environment? Can humor create the affective ESL classroom in the UAE? Is humor beneficial to ESL acquisition in the UAEU setting? Is humor a componential medium for transmission of difficult linguistic data?

2. Why HUMOR?

Student motivation can be affected by a number of factors. The level of difficulty of material presented, the kinds of activities used, support of classmates, and encouragement of the teacher are only some of the factors that are often mentioned as having an effect on the language learning experience. Even more importantly, the mood of the classroom can contribute a great deal to the learning process in the second language classroom. Previous research showed that humor can be beneficial to classroom learning (Cornett, 1986; Fisher, 1997). Humor can promote understanding, and hold the attention of the students

On the other hand, too much humor or self-disclosure is inappropriate (Downs, Javidi, and Nussbaum, 1988). Bryant and Zillmann (1988) reported that teaching with humor depends largely on using the right type and amount of humor. Likewise, Kher, Molstad, and Donahue (1999) wrote that appropriate and timely humor in the college classroom can foster mutual openness and respect, and contribute to overall teaching effectiveness.

As teachers, it is our role to create a relaxed positive attitude in our teaching environment – students learn more, talk more, and have more fun if they are in a good atmosphere. But, as with all learning situations, there is a fine tune for when to draw a limit. The kind of humor discussed in this article requires no humoristic skills. "*Humor*" here refers to simple humoristic remarks that naturally occur in the communicative teaching of a second language. Those remarks are linguistically based in that they are related to the linguistic messages taught, and are directly associated to or serving to explain a concept to be learnt and tested for recall later. Though simple, such remarks appear to be very beneficial. When it comes to humor, it is certainly not our role as teachers to be comedians.

Research suggests that general comprehension and retention of classroom messages were significantly improved by the use of humor. Casper (1999) stated that learning induced by humor strengthens the learning memory. Ziv (1988) investigated the effects on student learning

of teaching with humor and reported that students appreciate and enjoy learning with a teacher who uses humor. Similarly, Kaplan and Pascoe (1977) reported that lectures with more concept-related humor helped students do significantly better on recalling tests of learnt concepts. It is clear that in order to motivate and have more receptive students, humor is essential to teaching and learning.

3. The Research

Three studies were carried out on female students studying English as a requirement second language at the UAEU. Study (I) was conducted on a group of 200 students across three levels of English classes - introductory, intermediate and advanced. Questions in this study included specific reference to the effect of humor on learning, attention and concentration. This study also collected students' opinions about the amount of humor that would be considered appropriate in a classroom.

A second study was carried out to see if humor influences the atmosphere of the classroom. To this effect, study (II) was conducted on 160 students of the advanced level. 80 Students were in classes which allowed linguistic humor in the classroom (humor group), and 80 were in classrooms which had no humor, or hardly any (control group).

Students, in this study, answered questions about the effect of humor on their confidence and participation in ESL classes. Students also gave opinions about humor becoming part of their ESL learning; and its effect on classroom atmosphere. Essentially, questions here asked about whether or not:

1. telling jokes means loss of control in the UAE English classroom
2. using humor helps shy students to participate with the group
3. humor gives UAE students confidence in expressing personal opinions in English
4. jokes create enjoyment in the UAE English learning situation
5. jokes should be part of English everyday classroom learning

Study (III) investigated the effects of teaching with humor on student learning. Analyses in this study looked at the effect of humor on understanding, recall, and retention of difficult material comparing immediate and delayed retention tasks.

4. Findings

Generally speaking, results illustrated that more students are in favour of humor in the ESL classroom than against. 71% of UAE students pointed out that humor helps them in learning difficult material. 99% indicated that jokes help them pay more attention during class time and increases their level of concentration. And, 75% were in favour of using humor periodically

In comparison, only 1% of UAE female students believed jokes do not have an effect on increasing concentration levels in the classroom. Similarly, only 5% claimed that humor does not help in learning a second language, and only sometimes boost their attention (19%).

Supporting previous research (Fisher 1997; Cornett 1986), the results of this study show that humor can be beneficial in the UAE second language classroom. Humor promotes the feeling of understanding and helps to hold the attention of UAE students, regardless of the cultural learning situation. Figure 1 shows students' attitudes towards humor in ESL classrooms.

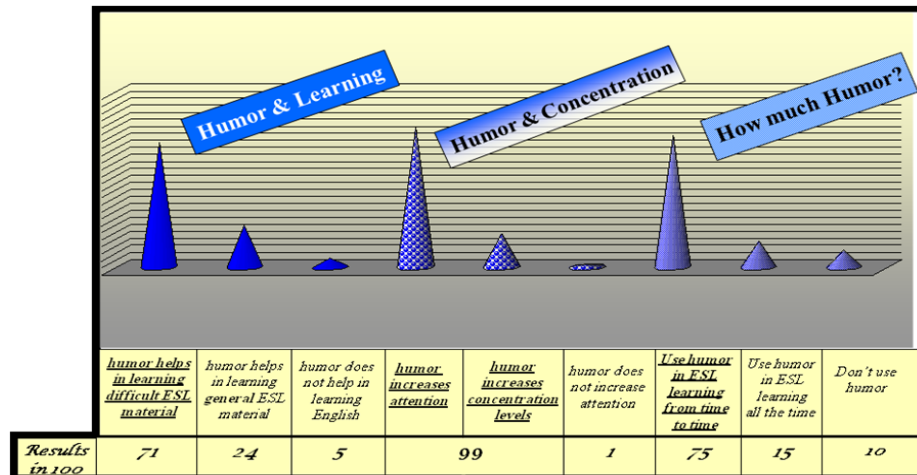


Figure 1: Students' attitudes towards humor

When study II asked about class management, control, and how humor affects the atmosphere of the learning setting, (71%) of all students found humor to be contributing to positive atmosphere in the classroom, rather than losing control. Interestingly, a substantial number of students favoured having humor as part of their everyday English classroom learning (65%), and quite a high proportion of all students - (85%) felt that humor even encourages them to express their opinions freely, using the target language.

Comparisons made between the two groups of the study, the humor and the control groups, showed a high proportion of students desiring humor in the classroom in both groups - 97% and 64% respectively (Figures 2 and 3).

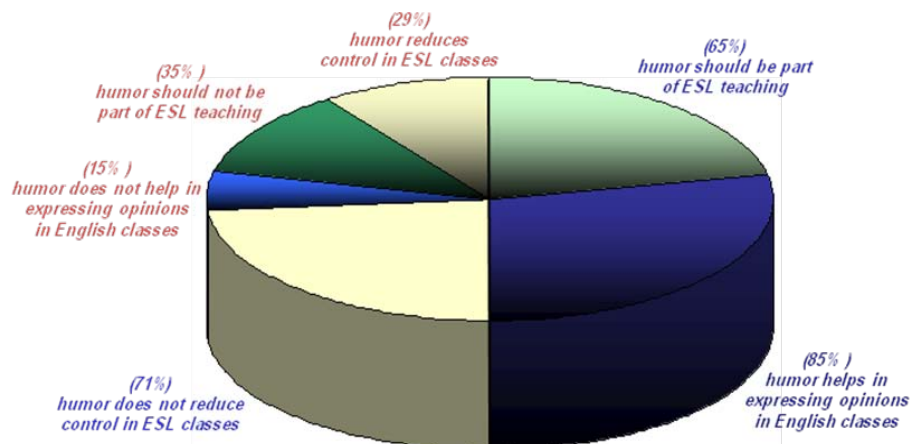


Figure 2: The effect of humor on class management and the ESL learning setting

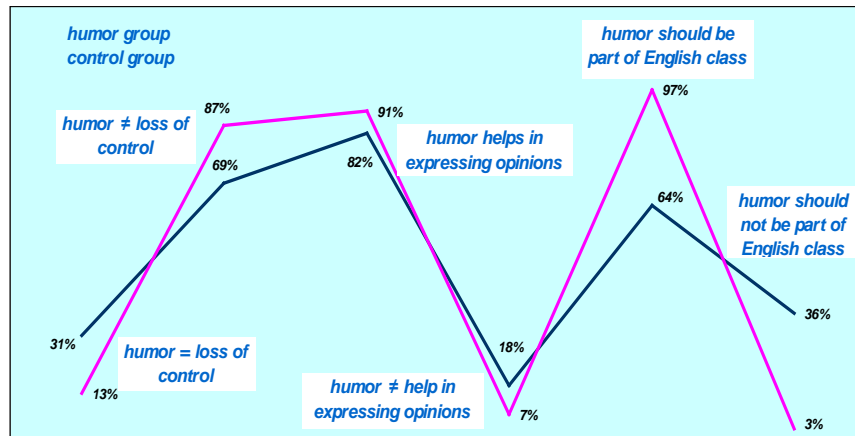


Figure 3: Students’ reactions on the use of humor in ESL classes

When asked about their reasons to desire humor, students reported that humor in the classroom situation affected their learning positively. UAE students expressed specific opinions about humor and the teaching atmosphere. (79%) compared with only (21%) reported that humor reduces barriers between them and their teachers. Also, (71%) felt that humor reduced their “*fear*” of their teachers, and 88% said that humor makes the learning environment more enjoyable. Clearly, students feel the need for the humor factor as part of their learning process. Figure 4 shows the specific opinions that students reported about humor and the learning atmosphere.

| | Yes | No |
|---|-----|-----|
| Humor encourages me to talk to my teacher | 79% | 21% |
| Humor reduces my fear of class/teacher | 71% | 29% |
| Humor makes the learning environment more enjoyable | 88% | 12% |

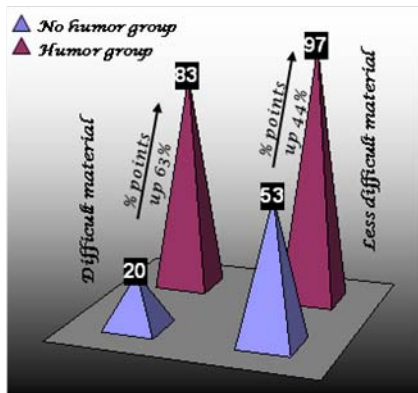
Figure 4: Opinions on humor and ESL class atmosphere

In study three, the effects of using humor on student learning of ESL material were investigated. Learning was tested in terms of (A) information learnt/recalled from the lectures and (B) understanding and retention of difficult material.

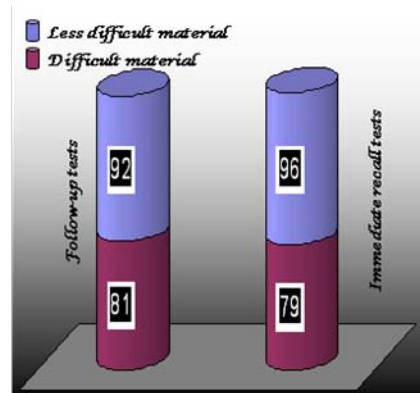
Recall was assessed in terms of immediate recall (same or second day quizzes) and follow-up tests/quizzes (6-9 weeks following instruction). Level of difficulty of material was also accounted for. Content ranged from easy/less challenging material to difficult/more challenging. The level of material difficulty was set by course objectives. The order in which the material was delivered was also controlled – half of the students underwent learning the easier material first and then the more difficult, and the other had the order reversed. This was done to reduce possibility of interference of student increased/reduced motivation levels through the course.

Results showed a significant difference (T test, $p < 0.05$) on test scores measuring learning and recall between classes with humor and classes without humor. Although performance was

poorer in difficult than in easier material, the difference in retention of difficult material comparing the humor group with the control group, was much higher than in less difficult material (63% and 44%). Also, when possible effects of the timing of delivery of material were taken into consideration, analyses showed no difference between groups who had the more challenging material or the less challenging first.



*Information learnt/recalled (%)
(statistically significant at the .05 level)*



*Retention (%) in immediate & delayed tasks
(compared with no-humor: statistically sig. at the .01)*

Figure 5: the effects of using humor on student learning

Furthermore, when immediate recall of difficult material was compared with delayed retention only in humor groups, it was interesting to see that recall of difficult content was better in delayed testing, although no statistical difference was found in the performance of humor groups per se. But, when these results were compared with results in the control non-humor groups, it was found that retention of difficult material in delayed tasks was significantly better in the group which had humor to that which didn't (T test, $p < 0.01$). Clearly humor facilitates retention of information significantly (Figure 5).

Results also showed a statistically significant correlation between understanding of content material and humor. Humor was correlated with less difficult material (Pearson correlation = 2.919, $p < 0.05$) and was highly significantly correlated with more difficult material (Pearson correlation = 4.3026, $p < 0.01$).

When the effect of different types of humor on understanding of difficult ESL material was analyzed, semantic humor was shown to be more effective than grammatical humor but less effective than vocabulary humor. This order shifted in easy material to show that vocabulary humor was the most effective, followed by grammatical humor and by semantic humor as the least effective. More specifically, 86% of difficult semantic concepts were made easier by the use of humor. 90% of difficult vocabulary items became easier; and 74% of difficult vocabulary concepts were became easier with humor (Figure 6).

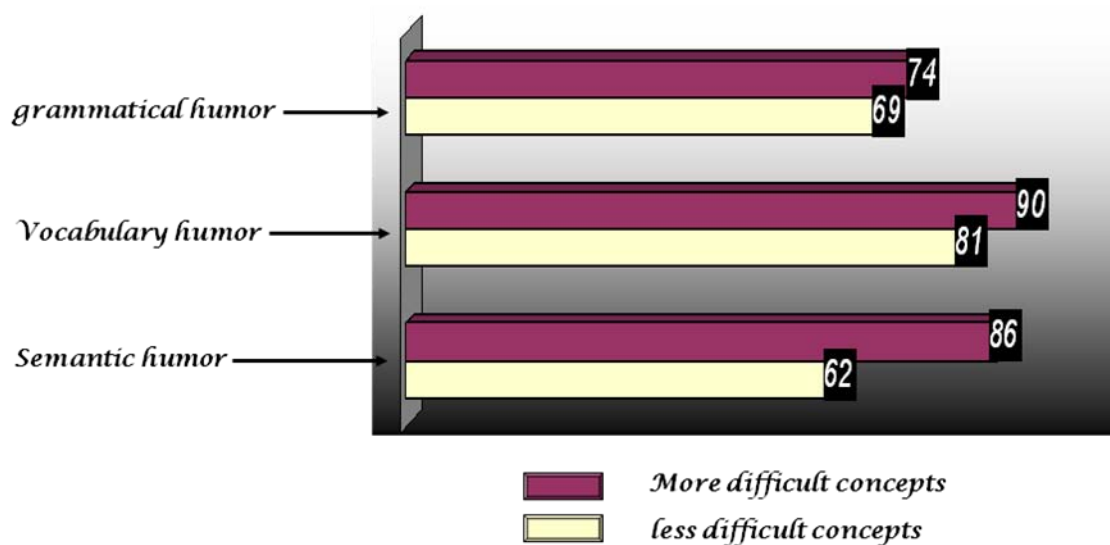


Figure 6: Humor and the understanding of difficult ESL material

More interestingly, when the relation of humor to the material taught was looked at, results showed that humor should be planned, and not randomly used. In other words, humor should be used when the learning process requires humor as a ‘teaching’ strategy. To preserve its value and effect, humor should not be overused. To this point, when students were asked to indicate their preference of the extent of humor in relation to material difficulty, results showed a direct positive relation between the level of difficulty of material delivered and the students’ preferential extent of humor use – the more difficult the material the more humor is preferred: 89% preferred to have humor when the material is very difficult, 7% preferred humor to accompany slightly difficult material, and the rest preferred to have humor with material that is not difficult at all.

When reviewed together, such results reflect on humor as a positive teaching tool that creates a relaxed environment with less authoritarianism on the teachers’ part and less of a stress on the students’. With such a tool well used, teachers in general, and ESL instructors, more specifically could successfully facilitate the learning/teaching setting.

To visualize all the results of this research cognitively, it seems that laughter and learning a second language in the UAEU setting follow steps of realization.

As linguistic ESL stimulus is introduced, students have expectations of what it should mean (from the setting they are in). Therefore, they automatically try to understand what the stimulus says, supposes, doesn't say, or even implies. If they are successful in solving this 'cognitive riddle', and they find out what the thought hidden within the stimulus is, they achieve routine understanding, and they realize that the stimulus wasn't dangerous. When this happens, students get relieved and head to stimuli following.

Otherwise, if students’ expectations are not fulfilled, stimuli appear to be irrelevant, inconsistent or even ambiguous. As inconsistency is not resolved, students feel anxious. This is where humor appears to help. Upon hearing relevant humor, laughter is produced; anxiety gets

reduced; concentration levels get increased. With this, students start to enjoy concentrating on understanding stimuli. When this concentration achieves this level, students freely express views and interact in the learning setting consciously and intelligently. This helps them to deploy humor to help them deal with new, expanded points of view coming from surprising stimuli. Figure 7 shows that the cognitive model of learning a second language using laughter.

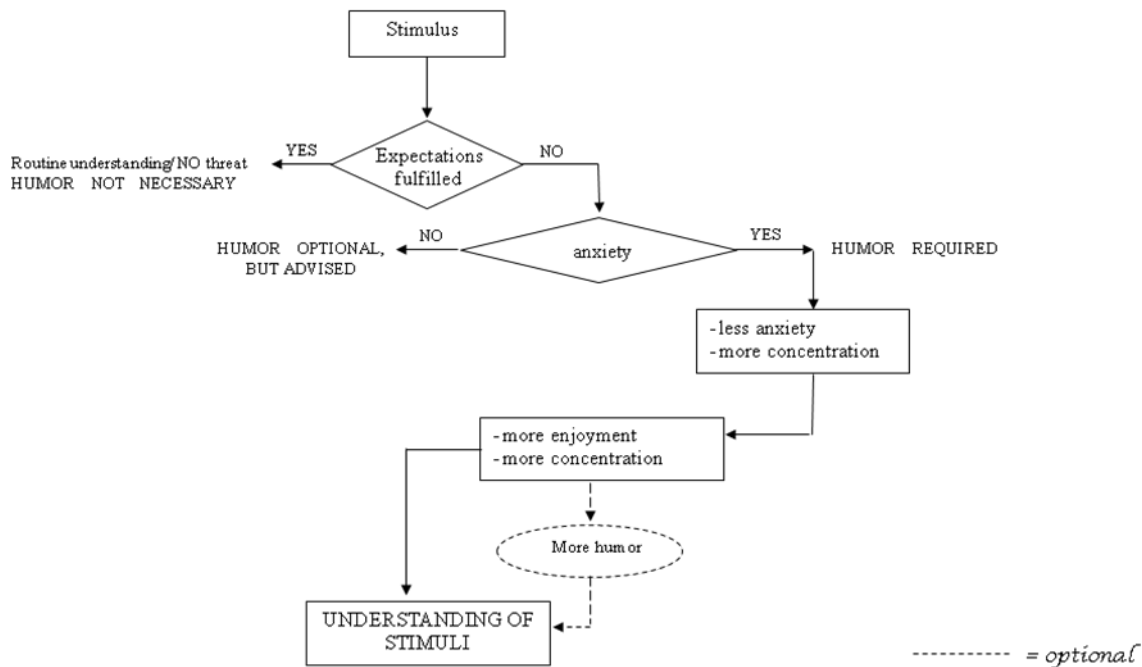


Figure 7: A model of humor and learning ESL

5. Discussion

This research focuses on selected issues of learning, laughing, and humor – mainly, students’ views about the use of linguistic humor, and the impact of humor on the language teaching setting.

UAE participants, in line with previous research, reported that humor should be used as a teaching technique because it makes lectures more interesting and it encourages students to take part and express opinions. Moreover, UAEU students do not only believe that humor does not have a negative effect on class control, but also that it reduces disturbing outbursts in class.

UAE students were encouraged to participate in classes teaching ESL. Telling jokes encouraged students to talk to their teachers and to take part in classroom discussions/debates. Students reported that having humor in the classroom makes the learning experience easier for them and establishes a more positive learning environment.

These findings are consistent with prior research which showed that humor can be beneficial to classroom learning (Fisher, 1997; Cornett, 1986; Kher et al, 1999; Duffy and Jones, 1995;

Gorham and Christophel, 1990; Powell, 1985), promotes confidence, holds the atmosphere of the class, creates a positive attitude toward the subject matter, and reduces anxiety (Powell, 1985).

This research demonstrates that humor has a positive effect on the UAEU learning situation. The present data show that humor not only enables teachers to create an affective positive environment, but is also a source of enjoyment for students and teachers alike, regardless of culture or educational setting. Results of this research point out that using humor encourages communication between students and teachers, and the classroom environment becomes freer and more open. Laughter helps students forget their fears in the communicative language classroom.

It is clear that “humor” is an effective tool in second language education in the Emirates. Humor, clearly, contributes to creating a positive environment for learning in the UAEU setting. The extent to which one uses humor varies with the type of class one has. When used properly, humor ought to allow students to feel as part of the class and possibly contribute without feeling exposed or vulnerable. Teachers do not have to be gifted humorists to attain the benefits of using humor in the classroom. It’s a skillful way of reaching out to those students who are too afraid or nervous to attempt expressing themselves in their second language.

It is therefore suggested that humor should become an integral part of any positive learning classroom environment educationalists in the UAE hope to achieve. Along with encouragement and praise, should be one of the many useful tools used by language teachers to make their classrooms more inviting and conducive to learning. Additionally, rather than making it a special tool, humor should be delivered as a natural part of the classroom learning objective.

Results of this research are convincing that humor is culturally unbound. Just as any other learning setting, humor plays a major role in learning a second language at UAEU. One does not want to keep UAE students laughing for the sake of humor; one rather wants them to learn best when they laugh most.

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