

Humor in the language classroom: Pedagogical benefits and practical considerations

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Humor in the language classroom seems to be still a nebulous concept surrounded by controversies regarding its pedagogical effects and implementation. While it is frowned upon as off-task, disruptive behavior in some (formal) language classrooms (Bell, 2011), it is treated as a harmless but trivial by-product of class interaction in some other contexts of language education (Davies, 2015; see also Heidari-Shahreza, 2020). Still, an increasing number of language teachers and teacher educators, perhaps relying on their teaching experience and intuition, endorse the use of humor in the language classroom “as a means and [to some extent] an end of language learning” (Cook, 2000, p. 204). As Davies (2015) notes, humor has recently been promoted from an epiphenomenal to a more phenomenal position in some language settings. Nevertheless, “the study of the use and understanding of L2 [second language] humor has been largely neglected” (Bell, 2011, p. 1). This article advocates the serious treatment of nonserious language by highlighting pedagogical benefits as well as practical considerations of language classroom humor.

2 | PEDAGOGICAL BENEFITS

Under the purview of communicative language teaching (CLT), Cook (2000) argues that humor and focus on form can converge in authentic acts of communication. Playful language-related episodes (PLREs), as naturally occurring instances of class discourse where learners’ attention is humorously directed to language form, is a common example of such form-focused humor (Bell, 2012; Heidari-Shahreza, 2018a). These collaborative dialogues also pave the way for the *pushed output* by providing learners with opportunities to notice, experiment with, and reflect on the second language (L2) (forms) (Cekaite & Aronsson, 2005). Furthermore, from a Vygotskian perspective (see Vygotsky, 1978), this light-hearted milieu may also enable the learners to try out L2 forms in a zone of proximal development (ZPD), receive corrective feedback, and enjoy scaffolded instruction from other class members (see also Broner & Tarone, 2001; Bushnell, 2008). In other words, humor (and language

play) can serve as a mediational tool for further language practice and development. Thus, far from being a distracter, humor can trigger informal language lessons by peer teachers (Cekaite & Aronsson, 2005). To clarify, consider the following incidence of natural humor (mainly a teasing instance) where an intermediate group of adolescent Iranian learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) are instructed to talk about their desires using the *I wish* structure:

- 01 Behzad: I wish ... I got 20 (the maximum score) in my math exam.
 02 Reza: (winking at Ali) ☺ Wrong! Say I wish I HAD got 20. ☺ Yesterday Mr. Kamali (their math teacher) said Behzad blew it.
 03 Ali: ☺ Yes! ☺ ... You should use past (i.e., past perfect tense) for regret.
 04 Behzad: (in disbelief) Come on! ... By the way, got is *past*. It's not wrong!
 05 Ali: *Simple* (past tense) is for ... what you want in the present or even future.
 06 Reza: *Perfect* is for past.
 07 Behzad: ☺ English is strange! I wish I got rid of exams forever. ☺
 08 Reza: (laughing) ... It's our dream too.

In this excerpt, Reza (with the help of Ali) instigates humor by teasing Behzad about his score on a math test. During this PLRE, they discuss about different types of an L2 form (i.e., “I wish + simple past/past perfect”), Behzad receives feedback and instruction on them, makes new one(s) (i.e., “I wish I got rid of exams forever”) and reflects on L2 (i.e., “English is strange”). From the perspective of task-based language teaching (TBLT), it is worth noting that they *do humor* while remaining (joyfully) on their pedagogical task (see also Bushnell, 2008; Heidari-Shahreza, 2018a). Furthermore, comparing playful vs. non-playful focus on form, Bell (2012) found significantly higher rates of learning gains when a fun factor was at work too.

Dörnyei (2001) also regards humor as one of the most motivating components of language task content and suggests that teachers “bring in and encourage humor” (p. 42) in the language classroom (see also Heidari-Shahreza, 2020, for a humor-integrated approach in TESOL). Hence, prefabricated types of humor (e.g., jokes, riddles, comic strips, sitcoms) can be an effective attention-raising instrument at various levels of L2 knowledge (e.g. syntax, semantics, morphology). They also enrich the L2 input by underlining the nuances of language use and improve learners’ sociocultural awareness and communicative competence (Bushnell, 2008; Heidari-Shahreza, 2018b). Deneire (1995, p. 295) in this regard asserts “well-developed communicative competence implies humor competence, and vice-versa.”

From a psychological perspective, the relevant literature also suggests that humor in the (language) classroom can (a) lighten the class ambience, (b) increase immediacy behaviors (i.e., higher warmth and involvement among class members), (c) lower learners’ affective filters (e.g., anxiety, inhibition), (d) enhance their motivation, teacher evaluation, and class performance, and (e) encourage more approach and fewer avoidance behaviors (see Banas, Dunbar, Rodriguez, & Liu, 2011). Thus, as Waring (2013) argues, classroom humor may result in a mental state in which a person reaches *optimal experience* through a deep feeling of full engagement and enjoyment. Furthermore, humor can serve as a pedagogical safe house and a safety valve for class members to adopt various identities, and safely communicate potentially face-threatening messages (see Heidari-Shahreza, 2018b, for further elaboration and related examples).

In sum, the growing body of research on pedagogical humor suggests that “[t]he ‘ha-ha’ of humor in the classroom may indeed contribute to the ‘aha!’ of learning from the student” (Garner, 2006, p. 180). Nevertheless, due to its *double-edged* nature, humor might be counter-effective if not properly employed. The next section of this article addresses the practical side of classroom humor.

3 | PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Some language teachers, especially those involved in (traditionally) formal language education, may consider humor to the detriment of their class authority, dignity, and perceived competence. Notwithstanding, it should be noted that humor or “[language] play ... does not entail a rejection of order or authority, though it does at least imply more voluntary and creative reasons for embracing them” (Cook, 2000, p. 204). Moreover, as mentioned earlier, a sense of humor can, in fact, ameliorate learners’ perception of their teachers.

Similarly, sociocultural differences (e.g., race, religion, ethnicity, social class) are potentially problematic areas which discourage some teachers to welcome humor, particularly in multicultural language settings. Although such variations may affect how agreeably an attempt at humor is realized, recognized, and reacted to, these differences may successfully be incorporated into classroom humor (Bell, 2011; Heidari-Shahreza, 2020). Bell (2006), for instance, noted that her Thai English learner did not find the humor targeted at overweight people funny because in her native culture obesity as a subject of ridicule was not welcomed.

Individual differences should also be considered in characterizing and implementing humor. Gender, for instance, seems to play a role in the amount, types, and functions of classroom humor (Banas et al., 2011). Thus, as an example, gender identity and order (or how men and women are perceived and positioned in a given society) should be heeded especially in settings where hegemonic, gender-biased norms still prevail. Otherwise, humor may be negatively rated as tendentious, if not aggressive (Wanzer, Frymier, Wojtaszczyk, & Smith, 2006). Humor orientation is another individual characteristic, germane to classroom humor. It refers to the personality-based inclination and ability of individuals to be funny in various situations (Booth-Butterfield, Booth-Butterfield, & Wanzer, 2007). Teachers’ and learners’ humor orientation should be considered (and possibly enhanced as discussed later) before doing and encouraging humor in the language classroom.

In addition to sociocultural and individual factors, the cognitive and linguistic demands of (L2) humor should not be ignored. The creativity, spontaneity, and situatedness inherent to humor may multiply its complexity particularly for linguistically less competent learners. This, however, is not to say that classroom humor fails in low proficiency classes and should be postponed to advanced L2 competence. In fact, while underscoring teachers’ facilitating role, the relevant literature suggests that learners at all levels of language proficiency are able to engage in joking or humorous language play (Bell, 2011; Heidari-Shahreza, 2018b). Likewise, the (many) prosocial functions of classroom humor (as mentioned earlier) should not make teachers heedless of its *antisocial* potential. Teasing, for example, is a common form and component of humorous communication which is typically welcomed by the targeted audience (Banas et al., 2011). In the language classroom, however, teasing learners may not yield teachers’ expected outcomes because learners may render it as disparaging or (considering the reciprocal nature of teasing) they may not feel comfortable engaging in such humor with a higher-status person (i.e., the teacher) due to its face-threatening potential (Wanzer et al., 2006). Thus, as Banas et al. (2011, p. 136) recommend, “teachers should utilize humor that laughs *with* students rather than *at* them.” In addition to affiliative (or positive, prosocial) humor, a self-deprecating style of humor may be employed by teachers (see Heidari-Shahreza, 2020; Liao, 2001).

In light of the literature on pedagogical humor, I offer several suggestions regarding humor in the language classroom (see also Bell & Pomerantz, 2016). First, it is recommended that teachers employ authentic instances of L2 humor (e.g., comic strips, cartoons, sitcoms, limericks) both as a topic of class discussion and language learning input. As a discussion topic (i.e., teaching about humor), teachers may address humor contextual cues such as laughter, word order, marked prosody, and so on, as well as failed (unsuccessful) humor and pragmatic strategies used to communicate (intercultural)

humor. As language learning input (i.e., teaching with humor), comic strips, for instance, can conveniently be used in jigsaw (cooperative) learning activities (see Heidari-Shahreza, 2020 for more information and other examples). Likewise, drama and role play involving comic persona may be utilized to raise learners' awareness and appreciation of humor (Banas et al., 2011; see also Prichard & Rucynski, 2018). Furthermore, technology-enhanced education (e.g., online language classes) is also found to facilitate humor use by creating a more secure, anonymous, multimodal context of interaction, especially for L2 users with low humor orientation. Additionally, in-service workshops and microteaching (using successful instances of classroom humor) can be of great help in empowering language teachers to make the best of humor (see also Banas et al., 2011; Heidari-Shahreza, 2020). Finally, to employ *appropriate* (instructional) humor, language teachers should heed the sociocultural and educational norms of their workplaces. Otherwise, humor can notably be ineffective.

4 | CONCLUSION

I hope this article has met the goal of kindling the interest in classroom L2 humor and has been successful in highlighting that “we need to take non-serious language more seriously” (Cekaite & Aronsson, 2005, p. 169). It is also hoped that as L2 (pedagogical) humor gains more prominence in TESOL theory and practice, more guidelines to enhance *humor literacy* can be provided. In this respect, language teachers can adopt humor-integrated language learning (HILL) as a practical approach to teach with and about humor (see Heidari-Shahreza, 2020 for further information and related examples.). This way, *humor as and for language learning* (i.e., humor literacy and language education) can both be aimed for.

5 | THE AUTHOR

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