

**THE ROLE OF HUMOUR IN TEACHING FOR ESP STUDENTS /  
LE RÔLE DE L'HUMOUR DANS L'ENSEIGNEMENT DE  
L'ANGLAIS SUR OBJECTIFS SPÉCIFIQUES<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract:** *In the course of history, humour has been more explored in literature, but little emphasis has been laid on it in teaching for higher education students. Intended or spontaneous, humour can play an important role in teaching and can facilitate teacher-student communication. It is a good pedagogical method whose main aim is to enhance students' learning. The teaching-learning process can acquire special valences through humour. Humour enlivens the atmosphere in the classroom, helps students overcome learning difficulties and creates social bonds between participants in the act of communication. The present work aims to highlight humour complexity in the educational process. It also focuses on approaching humour from such perspectives as: definition, semantic richness, and pedagogical implications.*

**Key words:** *humour, social bonds, semantic richness*

### **Introduction**

Humour is a universal aspect of human experience (Apte, 1985 and Lefcourt, 2001), occurring in all cultures and virtually all individuals throughout the world. Humour universality is clearly highlighted by Chiaro (2010): It has a human-specific dimension found throughout the recorded world; no cultural group has ever been discovered that was devoid of a sense of humour. Humour *per se* is a universal: "humour like communicating and instructing, is one of a small number of pervasive and universal language functions" (Bergen & Binsted, 2004, p.79).

Contrary to popular belief, humour is more than fun or amusement for one's enjoyment or to entertain others. It is a tool that can be used in totally opposing ways: to propagate tolerance or intolerance, to stabilize or criticize a system, to encourage or ridicule students' attitude, to solve a situation or give rise to a conflict etc. Irrespective of its usage, humour gets a multi-dimensional perspective and finds its application in a wide variety of fields and subjects. It enhances human communication, it develops learners' adaptability to new educational environment, it has a powerful social connection and it has deep roots in psychology, anthropology, biology, sociology etc.

### **What we mean by humour**

In spite of its complex application, the definition of humour in contemporary dictionaries is as simple as that. The *Oxford Learner's Dictionary* defines humour as "the quality in something that makes it funny; the ability to laugh at things that are funny." Its etymology comes from Latin *humor* – moisture, liquid, fluid, and makes reference to the four fluids flowing through our bodies: *yellow bile*, *black bile*, *blood* and *phlegm*. Ancient philosophers associated these substances with our personality traits and considered that they influence our mood and contributed to improving health. Later on, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, humour was defined as "comply with someone's fancy or disposition." Today humour is referred to as something amusing, entertaining, although in some contexts it goes beyond these semantic meanings.

At the same time, humour is context and culturally-dependent, meaning that each activity is done differently depending on temporal and spatial coordination. It also conveys various connotations such as pleasure and amusement or ridicule and bad taste.

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In some respects, "it is only a matter of semantics, but with important consequences" (Prensky, 2001, p.05-3).

### ***Ancient philosophy and humour***

The existence of humour in the past is unarguable. It is identified in various cultural practices, either in writing or in verbal form. Visuals such as theatre masks, depicting characters or situations were widely used to provide a bounty of humorous potential. They were signs of social recognition and symbolized the less pleasant characteristics of society (corruption, vices, infirmities, ugliness etc.). Similar to today's interpretations, humour of the past helped to boost a group's morale or to give rise to hostilities.

Antiquity abounds in humorous scenes taking places in taverns, carnivals, circuses or fighting rings while showing elites and non-elites, slaves and kings in embarrassing and ridiculous situations with a view to highlighting the society of those times. Visuals had the role to stir laughter and to empower the viewer. The humorous representation of various social classes required intelligence and creativity to be decoded. Whole communities consisting of ordinary and wise people were closely scrutinized, harshly criticized and exposed to productive ridicule. The valuable insights of humour permitted scholars to enter and analyze life in the ancient world with all its richness of practices, thoughts and emotions.

Plato interpreted humour as *malevolent behaviour*, while Aristotle, Cicero and Quintilian agreed that it is "a form of behaviour from which civilized man should shrink" (1995:1). Ancient philosophers associate humour with *incongruity theory* which is something that violates our mental patterns and expectations. Cicero states that "the most common kind of joke is that in which we expect one thing and another is said; here our own disappointed expectation makes us laugh" (*On the orator*, ch. 63). Scholars also agree that humour is a mixture of feelings: "when we laugh at what is ridiculous in our friends, we are mixing pleasure this time with malice, mixing that is our pleasure with pain." (Plato's *Philebus*, 49e-50a). However, the philosophers generally concluded that humour is situational, character, cause and purpose-related and denied its efficiency as a rhetorical strategy. Humour certainly introduces elements of superiority and maliciousness, and even the so-called "innocent" jokes may have a harmful effect on the audience. The context and content, as well as the engagement of the audience are recommended ways to decipher and interpret humour properly.

### ***Types of humour (fun)***

Humour is multi-dimensional and comes in many forms. Allen Davenport (2022) proposes types of fun which include *sociability*, *contentment*, *achievement*, *sensory* and *energetic fun*. By *sociability* students create suitable social relationships. The classroom environment is where learners interact with their friends and classmates and are fully involved in the activities. Humour can also be experienced through *contentment*, that state of satisfaction while being, reading or relaxing with the others. *Achievement* is another dimension by which learners show themselves off with what they have done. Use of our senses (*sensory*) in the learning process is an efficient way to decipher sounds, visuals or other gestures and provide them with the best connotations. *Energy* is also essential since educational tasks require and burn energy.

Lazarro, 2004 suggests other types of fun categorized as *easy*, *serious*, *people* or *hard fun*. *Easy fun* is made up of novelty, curiosity, role-play, creativity, etc., which all spark students' imagination. Grammar, vocabulary, reading or writing can be taught in amore pleasant way, even if certain structures involve a higher level of difficulty. Novelty of the topic may stir curiosity, while role-play tasks may become attractive and

stimulate our imagination. One question arises, whether learners relate humour to the content of their lessons.

It is clear evidence that students in more technical fields do not find any humour in the content or teachers' behaviour. Preciseness of information, limitations in analysis, the abundance of accurate figures or standard formulas do not convey space for humour. On the other hand, humour in other fields like humanities, psychology or journalism gets multiple connotations and provides appropriate levels of challenge and meaningful activities.

For example, the human brain, the most complex part of the body can be explained easier while allowing students in Psychology to imagine how it works. The following task may be student-centred, humorous and also challenging: *Imagine the human brain; what it looks like, how it reacts to a good joke, how neural connections are, what you associate the amygdala with, which part of the brain is responsible with emotions* etc.

In *serious fun* learners benefit from personal growth. They find activities exciting, flowing and reflective while staying focused and losing track of time. *People fun* aims to increase positive competition, cooperation, respect for the others and make friendships. The category of *hard fun* is more related to challenge and achieving goals. However, certain contexts may cause frustration among learners, especially when there are unexpected outcomes. Long exhausting activities should be interrupted by brain breaks to distract students and introduce them into a more comfortable and caring atmosphere. This complies with the statement "the way an activity is done will prove, we predict, to be more critical than what the activity is" (Diamond and Ling, 2020, p. 513).

### ***Humour in Psychology***

As a starting point, we should make a clear difference between *laughing with* and *being laughed at*. Although similar in meaning, the two constructions differ slightly. The former is usually related with amusement, well-being and sociability, in contrast with the latter which can be perceived as a form of humiliation or rejection. Real laughter generally involves two or more parties who are somehow emotionally connected and see it as a spontaneous energizing activity, resulting in lower anxiety and higher level of contentment. We laugh at others when we see in them lack of energy, clumsiness, dialect errors, vagueness etc. We also ridicule people's shortcomings and their flaws.

Humour has an early development and expands throughout our lifespan. It helps both children and adults to function cognitively and socially. Although it is biologically rooted in our genes, it may be shaped by cultural norms and practices. Due to the complexity of human imagination, humour provides as many communication styles as our creativity allows. It can be responsible for group cohesion or exclusion. It can express agreement, disagreement, cooperation or separation. Humour is a cognitive process which involves mental information and memory to generate comic ideas or situations. Depending on our cultural environment and personal perception we analyze things as humorous -non-humorous, usual – unusual, suprising – ordinary, trivial – important etc.

The emotional dimension of humour has not been ignored by specialists either. Exposure to humorous situations seems to have improved learners' inner mood which means it is highly rooted in the biochemistry of our brains. Laughter as a component of humour has a strong psychological connotation. It activates certain specialized brain circuits and motivates others to behave in particular ways (Shiota et.al, 2004). Emotions allow students to enhance positive interactions and diffuse tension and conflict. The classroom environment is extremely heterogeneous both in terms of human typology,

attitudes, and reactions to various contexts. Efficient management of emotions and active involvement of teachers in mediating potential conflicts convey optimal conditions for the evolution of the educational act. On the other hand, a faulty management of emotions generates a tense atmosphere both to the detriment of the relationships between classmates and their performance. This may give rise to students' reluctance to novelty, their lack of engagement and low self-confidence.

### ***Cognitive functions of humour***

If the psychology of the past was more focused on negative emotions like fear, hostility, discontent, modern psychologists tend to direct their attention to positive emotions which from their perspective provide us with more cognitive flexibility and allow us to expand critical thinking, planning or judgement. In a classroom environment, enhancement of confident attitude is key to students' adapting to challenging learning styles while creating and maintaining better group relations. Teamwork or pair work is more valued in a positive emotion-based atmosphere. Group cohesion, rewarding cooperative efforts and selecting the most suitable partners to carry out the required activities are essential for personal development and self-content.

Humour has an antagonistic nature. On the one hand, it may build cohesiveness, mitigate conflicts or humiliate and manipulate somebody, on the other hand. As regards learning, it is the teacher's main role to shift perspective by giving a stressful lesson a new and less challenging horizon. Therefore, the more manageable a topic becomes, the more likelihood to be acquired properly while maintaining students' morale at a certain level. Being perceived as essentially benevolent, humour gets tremendous value in most areas of life.

### ***Humour in education***

As Oppliger, 2003 states "students are much more likely to be motivated to learn and to retain information if they are happy and amused than if they are anxious and threatened." Apart from reducing anxiety and boredom, humour makes learning enjoyable, creates positive attitudes and stimulates attention. It also promotes critical thinking, improves memory and facilitates learning.

There is a lot of skepticism among teachers who believe that too much focus on humour can be detrimental since students are no longer able to distinguish between the role of education itself and their hilarious manifestations towards serious issues. Moreover, there are also doubts whether learning serves its intentional purpose, or it is liable to derision. This explains why teachers are reluctant to over use humour in the classroom.

There is another psychological aspect regarding male teachers' tendency to use humour more often than female teachers. This can be justified by males' more authoritative styles which enable them to restore control over students, as compared to women who find it more complicated to manage classes and establish communication boundaries. Although teasing and ridicule are more frequently directed by male teachers, they are unlikely to cause anger or activate defense mechanisms. On the other side, women seem to be more reserved in using humour lest they should be misjudged or misunderstood.

Women teachers avoid aggressive or tendentious humour, instead they tell funny jokes or prefer soft teasing without hurting or humiliating but with a view to correcting potential mistakes. Most of the times, educators opt for non-verbal humour in the form of funny gestures or humorous vocal style, to unwind the atmosphere in the classroom. Humour may add vividness and momentousness to allegedly tense lessons while helping teachers to develop solid interactions with their learners.

### ***Teachers' use of humour in the classroom environment***

Irrespective of the difficulty level of the lesson, a good sense of humour increases teachers' popularity and makes the course more attractive to learners. During my teaching experience, I have faced situations when students did not respond positively to various grammar or lexical structures which they found extremely complex and hard to understand. However, comprehension of such topics increased, once instances of humour were introduced in the lesson, or when I gave students brain breaks to recharge their cognitive energy. Indeed, one of the most desirable and highly rated characteristics of an effective teacher is his/her sense of humour. Distance and aloofness deter teachers from promoting a sense of immediacy among students. By this immediacy, special relationships are created, based on encouragement, praise and motivation.

For example, telling jokes or humorous anecdotes and stories and avoiding self-deprecating humour contributed to more positive responses, long engagement and better receptiveness to novel ideas. Positive emotions associated with peals of laughter improved the overall learning experience and facilitated the acquisition of information.

Inclusion of humour in the classroom environment also helps cognitive processes such as storage and retention of information and long-term memory. Each human brain perceives humour in a unique way. What is humorous for a student can be totally ordinary or non-humorous for another. Humour is a play between constancy and change, an open and a close mind, an ordinary and an abnormal situation etc. Getting the flavour of humour is keeping cognitive tension at high levels. Also, in the humour experience students need to be less logic in order to catch all the oddities of the jokes or less sensible to the possibly hostile content of the lesson.

To fully understand humour or to create humorous reactions is not easy task either for the creator, or for the recipient. This process is much more elaborate and requires cognitivity, emotions, cognition, personal drive, relationships etc.

### ***Drawbacks in the use of humour in education***

Humour is generally positive, especially when it serves its purpose. However, the hostile forms of humour (irony, ridicule, teasing, sarcasm etc.) do not bring any benefits for learning. Some teachers' perception that cruel behaviour may correct undesirable behaviour such as lack of focus, failure to complete tasks, boredom etc., is totally erroneous and deviates from the normal course of teaching. This attitude is more often offending or humiliating and totally inconsistent with education or social norms. Aggressive humour encourages aversion to and isolation from the group, inhibition and reluctance to learning. Using malicious humour, the educator manifests his/her superiority over the students and disqualifies them to such an extent that the latter become introvert and suppress all their emotions to the others.

### ***Conclusions***

Humour as a universal language should have a specific ethics and aesthetics, which educators must discover and promote. It must be given a high value so that its recipients should take advantage of all its benefits. Trivialization of important issues and violation of values may lead to abusive attitude and desensitization. Humour is an extraordinary construct with a cathartic effect and numerous advantages on our personal development. It is unanimously accepted when both the producer and receiver have a shared understanding of a specific phenomenon.

Humour inventory is unlimited and it is only up to us what connotations we attach to it or what cognitive processes we associate with it. As long as humour is

positive, constructive and purposeful, it remains a powerful tool of human communication and interconnectedness.

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