

## **GLOBALLY COMPATIBLE CLASS ROOMS COMPETENCIES: USE OF HUMOR IN CLASS ROOMS**

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### **Abstract**

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*A substantial body of research emphasizes the importance of humor in teaching processes however, research on the reasons for non-use of humor in academic contexts has enjoyed scant attention. Addressing this gap, this study examines the reasons for instructors' humor avoidance taking into account student perceived benefits of using humor in academics. Data were collected through an open-response questionnaire. Participants were asked to provide their views on: (a) the reasons some instructors avoid using humor, and (b) the benefits of using humor in classes. "Humor is not in their personality," "they lack competence to create humor," and "they are more syllabus-oriented" were the most frequently cited reasons for the non-use of instructor humor. Particularly, verbal humor such as wordplays, funny stories, puns, and content related jokes play an important role in learners' development of (socio) linguistic and sociocultural competence. Perceived benefits of instructor humor were placed into three major categories: Psychological, Social and Instructional. Implications of these findings are explored within the content of second language education.*



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### **Introduction**

This study aims to examine the reasons for instructors' the benefits of using humor in academic classrooms. Humor is a (socio)linguistic and sociocultural phenomenon which has a wide range of instructional values. Despite the skepticism among some practitioners in academia that humor may undermine the instructors' attempts to develop instructional understanding, there is now a substantial body of research indicating the facilitative role of humor in general education as well as second language teaching. The use of humor in the classroom has been suggested to increase instructional effectiveness increase message persuasiveness to create an enjoyable and more relaxed classroom environment increase student motivation, student learning and can be used as a means of clarifying course material.

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In second language education, research indicates that competent use of humor by teachers makes contributions to both teaching and learning processes. Even though humor can be used as an aid in teaching almost any academic discipline, it can be particularly useful in teaching a second language since it is communicated through language and can be incorporated in instruction of all four main language skills. Particularly, verbal humor such as wordplays, funny stories, puns, and content related jokes play an important role in learners' development of (socio) linguistic and sociocultural competence. It has been suggested that humor can serve as a formidable tool that can be used for sensitizing students to phonological, morphological, lexical, and syntactic differences within a single language or between a student's L1 and the target language . In the same vein, Medgyes (2002) explains that funny games, stories, jokes, puzzles, pictures, sketches, and dialogues can be fruitfully used for all levels of learners. He also suggests activities for this purpose like recording different types of laughs and providing students with a list of adjectives (bitter, nervous, polite, hearty, hysterical) to match with each laugh.

Such type of activities suggests to the learners that humor is not always an indicator of a feeling of mirth, it also can be a useful tool for instruction. Using, discussing, and analyzing humorous interaction in a variety of ways and through different types of activities can also contribute a great deal learners' linguistic and sociolinguistic development.

Sometimes the teacher seems so much like the wise, distant person. A little laughter shows your students that you have the same feelings they do, and this makes you more trustworthy. The ability to laugh at your own mistakes, in particular, you have to show that you are humble, real and person too .Teachers too make mistakes, whether it's misspelling a word on the board or getting the dates wrong in a discussion about history. Modeling the ability to laugh at yourself teaches many good lessons at once. Give it a try!

out what is it that makes something funny at language level. The first linguistics-based theory of humor is Raskin's

(1979, 1985) semantic-script theory of humor (SSTH), which was subsequently revised and revisited as the General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) by Attardo and Raskin (1991) and Raskin and Attardo (1994). GTVH employs semantic scripts (also called frames or schemas) to model the recipient's use of linguistic and real-world knowledge to interpret joke [or humorous] texts. Similar to incongruity-resolution theory, GTVH explains why students find instructor humor as funny at lexical level. Based on this theory, students find instructors' use of verbal humor such as wordplays, puns, and irony as funny because they are compatible with two scripts opposed to each other such as actual vs. non-actual, normal vs. abnormal, possible vs. impossible. In example (1) below, the lecturer's (L) use of the abbreviation "PHD" in line 1, evokes a normal script, which is a person holding a doctor of philosophy degree and is normally associated with being knowledgeable. L stands for lecturer and Ss for students.

(1)

L: Do you know what PHD stands for?

Ss: No response

L: It stands for Permanent Head Damage [laughs]

Laughter

However, finding out about a second interpretation of "PHD" that it stands for permanent head damage (line 3)

evokes the abnormal script, depicting a person with mental disability, which is normally opposed to being

knowledgeable. Thus, based on GTVH the text is found to have two different scripts (PHD /PERMINANT HEAD DAMAGE), which are opposed on the basis of normal/abnormal, and is thereby evaluated as humorous.

Recently, the latest category of humor theories that explains the humorous message/learning link has been advanced

by Wanzer et al. (2009) in their integrative Instructional Humor Processing Theory (IHPT), which draws from

incongruity resolution theory and the elaboration likelihood model (ELM) of persuasion. IHPT predicts that

instructors' use of humorous messages should result in increasing students' motivation to process course content to

the extent that the humorous message gained their attention, created positive affect, made content relevant, and

increased the clarity of the content (Booth-Butterfield, 2010: 224).

In sum, what seems to be apparent is that past studies have provided strong theoretical and practical evidence for the

important role of humor in second language education; however, what seems to be lacking is providing insights into

classroom humor in order to gain better understanding of why humor is avoided in academic contexts. Thus, it is

important to identify the factors that account for non-use of humor by instructors and the possible benefits of verbal

humor in L2 classrooms, an area that has enjoyed scant research attention. Addressing this gap, the following

research questions will lead this study.

RQ1: Why do some instructors avoid using humor in ESL classrooms?

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RQ2: What are the benefits of using humor in ESL classrooms?

It should be noted that the current study is a part of a larger project in progress which looks into the uses and functions of instructor humor in academic language learning environment.

### 3. Method

#### 3.1 Participants

Participants for the present study were 195 undergraduate and graduate ESL students who had been enrolled in courses such as sociolinguistics, genre studies, teaching principles, English for Specific Purposes (ESP), and research methodology in a university in Malaysia. Participants were of different language and cultural backgrounds comprising local Malays, Chinese and Indians, and the international students included Iranian, Indonesian, African, and Arab ethnicities. For both local and international students, English was considered as a second language and was the medium of instruction in the classrooms. The lecturers were all Malaysian and English was the second language. All the lecturers completed their postgraduate studies in English speaking countries.

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#### 3.2 Procedure

Prior to conducting the study, ethical consent was sought from the faculty dean as well as the participants. Data

sources for this study were two-fold: an open-response questionnaire distributed in the classrooms and the main researcher's fieldnotes during classroom observations, which were carried out for the whole project. Preceding the research questions addressed in this study (RQ1 and RQ2), was the following simplified definition of "humor" to

clarify what was meant by the term in this study:

"Humor in this study refers to anything which is said to create a feeling of fun and amusement in the classroom.

Examples of verbal humor are: funny stories, funny comments, jokes, wordplays, sarcasm, etc."

The questionnaires were distributed among the students and collected by the main researcher and his assistant. The return rate was 100%.

### **Humor in the classroom?**

Can taking a light-hearted, humor-linked approach to classroom instruction help create an environment in which the students feel that they can learn more and consequently feel that their teachers are more successful? More specifically, what impact does humor have on learning and retention of information? These questions are addressed both in the literature review and the study data. The purpose of this study was to determine how humor might be useful in making a more student-centric, learning-conducive environment for the student and ultimately making the instructor more effective in the eyes of the student. I found two common concepts in the extant literature; the first was the positive impact that a caring classroom environment is believed to have on learning. The second was how humor can help create such a caring environment. While not specifically connected in the literature, one could syllogistically put these concepts together then, that humor can create a caring, classroom environment which ultimately has a positive impact on student learning. An

example would be "Humor, an A study that started me down this path was conducted by Pedde (1996). She discusses the relationship between a caring classroom and how students become more engaged, ultimately improving the learning process. Pedde continues to build a case showing the link between a classroom with humor and a caring and learning environment. While the domain for her study was the middle-school (and I focused on 3 higher education), her research helped nudge me into the potential humor-caring-learning relationship. In looking at this study from 1996 by Kathleen Pedde in more depth, we find that she examined the use of humor in middle school classrooms as the subject of her master's thesis. At various points of her thesis, Pedde does make some far-reaching statements important tool, can be used in any classroom by any teacher of any subject for the benefit of any student, no matter the age level, subject matter or ethnic background." (Pedde, 1996, p. 5) According to Greenberg (2001) the best times to deliver serious points in teaching or a presentation to students is right after they laugh. This is because they need time to relax their minds in the midst of the intense learning and presentations. If this moment is not provided to them, Greenberg (2001) continues to say, they will end up looking like they are listening while they, actually, are not. Humor helps to provide the intensity of the next serious point in the content and is also considered to be one of the most effective tools to judge the quality of any relationship (Moore, 2006). McGhee (2002) stresses the importance of humor using his own words in an interesting way: "...laughter is the shortest distance between two people..." (par 4). However, despite the above facts, emphasis on humor is still missing in teacher training programs, let alone the classrooms where teachers may be encouraged to be more humorous while teaching and providing the learners with the opportunity to acquire such skills in staff development programs (Chi, 1992). This means that humor has not been given its due emphasis yet great forces that are always at play, compelling great attention to the process and products of teaching and learning are the implications to student quality (Chye, 2008). A lot of attention is being given to the curriculum content and the methodology of delivery of the curriculum content in teaching and learning to ensure effectiveness. Just as

Chickering and Gamson (1987) seem to agree, content and pedagogy are connected, in that what is taught is as important as how it is taught. Being an effective teacher requires skills in planning, assessing, motivating, observing and analysing students, managing groups, among other skills. But most importantly, the teacher should be able to create engaging lessons out of the “content” of the curriculum (Flanagan, 2007)

### **Link between Laughing and Learning**

If you were asked which of the following would provide the better metaphor for an efficient learning environment—CIRCUS or FILING CABINET—which would you choose? When one of the informants shared her view of learning with me and asked which I would prefer for a classroom environment, I have to admit he got me thinking. Naturally I rejected the circus environment (often-viewed metaphorically, potentially chaotic and out-of-control) and honed in on the seemingly organized and fact-packed filing cabinet. While seemingly an easy answer, don't reply too quickly on your own for there is more in play than one might consider at first blush.

### **Results and Discussion**

The analysis of research question one called for the testing of the null hypothesis which was stated as follows: There is no significant relationship between secondary school teachers' humor production in the class and students' affective learning and students' rating of their teaching effectiveness in terms of: a) Motivation of students b) Creation of engaging lessons c) Anxiety reduction in students d) Stimulation of thought and interest in students e) Fostering of a positive teacher-student relationship The research question sought to determine the degree of relationship between the use of humor in teaching and students' rating of the teachers' effectiveness in terms of motivation of students, creation of engaging lessons, anxiety reduction in the students, stimulation of thought and interest in students and fostering of a positive teacher-students relationship and the degree of relationship between the use of humor in teaching and the students' affective learning. To determine the relationship between the use of humor in teaching and students' rating of teaching effectiveness, a simple linear



correlation was performed. The correlation coefficient between use of humor in teaching and motivation of students was 0.356 with a p-value of 0.000 which was less than the significance level of 0.05. This implied that there was a significant moderate relationship between teachers' use of humor in teaching and motivation of students. This indicated that each time the teachers used humor in teaching, there was a significant effect on the motivation of the students. When teachers learn to incorporate direct approaches to generating student motivation in their teaching, they will become happier and more successful. Igniting and sustaining a source of positive energy is so vital to ultimate success. Research on motivation has confirmed the fundamental principle of causality: motivation affects effort, effort affects results, and positive results lead to an increase in ability. What this suggests is that by improving students' motivation, teachers are actually amplified to fuel students' ability to learn (Rost, 2005). The correlation coefficient between use of humor in teaching and creation of engaging lessons was 0.231 with a p-value of 0.000 which was less than the significance level of 0.05. This implied that there was a significant moderate relationship between teachers' use of humor in teaching and the students' engagement in the lessons being taught. This showed that when humor is being used in teaching, it has significance in the way the students are engaged in the lesson. This confirms that the way information is presented has more of an impact on the students' performance. Hands-on instruction allows success beyond the classroom, hands-on activities excite students about learning, and that hands-on activities create confidence in the students (Puentes, 2007). The correlation coefficient between use of humor in teaching and anxiety reduction in students was 0.411 with a p-value of 0.000, which was also less than the significance level of 0.05. This indicated a significant moderate relationship between teachers' use of humor in teaching and reduced anxiety in the students that they teach. This, therefore, implied that the use of humor in teaching tended to reduce students' anxiety. The correlation coefficient between use of humor in teaching and stimulation of thought and interest was 0.464 with a p-value of 0.000, which was also less than the significance level of 0.05. This implied that there was a significant moderate

relationship between teachers' use of humor in teaching and the stimulation of thought and interest in the students in terms of the subject taught. This means that the use of humor by the teachers determines the extent or degree of stimulation of thought and interest in the students. It is apparent that the identification, stimulation and development of students' interests and thoughts in a subject are of great importance in teaching (Hasan, 1975). The correlation coefficient between use of humor in teaching and fostering of a positive teacher-student relationship was 0.497 with a p-value of 0.000, which was also less than the significance level of 0.05. This indicated a significant moderate relationship between teachers' use of humor in teaching and fostering of a positive relationship between the students and the teachers. The extent or degree of the use of humor determines the extent or degree of the positive relationship between the teacher and the student. The physical environment in the classroom, the level of emotional comfort experienced by students, and the quality of communication between teacher and students are important factors that may enable or disable learning. Skills such as effective classroom management through a positive relationship between the teacher and the student are vital to teaching and require common sense, consistency, a sense of fairness and courage. The skills also require that teachers understand the psychological and developmental levels of each student because as educators, we are obligated to educate the "whole" child (Jackson & Davis, 2000). To determine the relationship between the use of humor in teaching and students' affective learning, a simple linear correlation was performed. Table 1 below shows a summary of the simple linear correlation. Table 1. Simple linear Correlations Use of humor in teaching Student motivation Use of humor in teaching Pearson Correlation Affective learning Pearson Correlation Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed) The correlation coefficient between the use of humor in teaching and students' affective learning is 0.537 which yielded a p-value of 0.000, which was less than the significance level of 0.01. This indicates the presence of a relationship between the use of humor in teaching by the teachers and students' affective learning. How much or how less the teachers use humor in teaching determines how much or

how less affective learning takes place. The second research question asked the style of humor most commonly used by the teachers. To measure the style of humor that was most common among the secondary school teachers, respondents (the teachers themselves) were required to respond to items on a scale ranging from 1 – 4 (Never – Very Often). The scale of interpretation used was as follows: 1-1.49 Never, 1.5-2.49 Seldom, 2.5-3.49 Often, 3.5-4.00 Very Often.

**3.1 Use of Affiliative Humor** Eight items of the research instrument used by teachers addressed this question with 35 teachers responding to the eight items. Table 2 shows a summary of descriptive International Journal -Mean Ratings of Teachers' Use of Affiliative Humor

Statement	Mean	Std Dev.
I usually laugh or joke around much with other people		
I am willing to and will always make other people laugh by telling humorous stories about myself		
I usually lie to tell jokes or amuse people		
I usually can think of witty things to say when I'm with other people		
I usually make others laugh by telling a variety of odd news and humorous things		
I often play jokes with my friends to make fun		
Usually, when I tell funny things, many people will laugh		
Making people laugh is my natural way of communicating with people		

**Use of Self-Enhancing Humor** Eight items of the research instrument used by teachers addressed this question with 35 teachers responding to the eight items. A summary descriptive statistics of the teachers' use of self-enhancing humor as a style of humor. Mean Ratings of Teachers' Use of Self-enhancing Humor

Statement	Mean	Std Dev.
If I am feeling depressed, I can usually cheer myself up		
humor If I am feeling upset or unhappy, I usually try to think of something funny about the situation to make myself feel better		
My humorous attitude towards life keeps me from getting overly upset or losing confidence on things		
If I'm by myself and I'm feeling unhappy, I make an effort to think of something humorous to cheer myself up		
It is my experience that looking for and thinking about some amusing and interesting aspects of the situation is often a very effective way of coping with problems		
When I'm bored or feeling unhappy, I like to recall some humorous and interesting things in the past to amuse myself and make myself laugh		
My sense of humour keeps me from getting overly upset or depressed about things		
If I am feeling		

sad or depressed, I usually will not lose my sense of humor Self-enhancing humor, The items had means ranging from 2.0571-2.8286. The results yielded a mean of 2.5786 and a standard deviation of 0.58086. The items with the highest mean were “my humorous attitude towards life keeps me from getting overly upset or losing confidence about things” and “it is my experience that looking for and thinking about some amusing and, aspects of the situation is often a very effective way of coping with problems.” They both had a mean of 2.8286 which is an indication that the teachers using this style of humor often feel or think this way. The item with the lowest mean was “If I am feeling sad or upset I usually will not lose my sense of humor” which had a mean of 2.0571. This indicates that the teachers in this category of style of humor seldom feel or think this way.

### 3.1.2 Use of Aggressive Humor

Eight items of the research instrument used by teachers addressed this question with 35 teachers responding to the eight items. Table 4 shows a summary descriptive statistics of the teachers’ use of aggressive humour as a style of humour. The items had means ranging from 1.5143 to 2.4000. The results yielded a mean of 1.9393 and a standard deviation of 0.64195. The item with the highest mean was “sometimes I think of something that is so funny that I can’t stop myself from saying it even if it is not appropriate for the situation” with a mean of 2.4000. This means that the teachers that use this style of humor will engage in this, though seldom. The item with the lowest mean of 1.5143 was “I often ridicule and tease those people whose abilities and social status are inferior to me.” This is also engaged in, though seldom. This also means that all the items in this style of humor are done, though seldom in the teachers’ life.

Mean Ratings of Teachers’ Use of Aggressive Humor Statement	Mean	Std Dev.
If someone has a shortcoming I will often tease him/her about it	1.5143	0.64195
I do not like to criticize or put people down with humor	1.5143	0.64195
Sometimes I think of something so funny that I just can’t stop myself from saying it even if it is not appropriate for the situation	2.4000	0.64195
If I don’t like someone, I often tease, ridicule and put him/her down	1.9393	0.64195
If I don’t like a person, I often tease, ridicule and put him/her down behind his/her back	1.9393	0.64195
If someone made a mess about something I will often tease him/her	1.9393	0.64195
I often tease and ridicule those people whose abilities and social status are inferior to me	1.9393	0.64195

inferior to me I often play practical jokes on others to make fun Aggressive humor. Use of Self-Defeating Humor Five items of the research instrument used by teachers addressed this question with 35 teachers responding to the five items. A summary descriptive statistics of the teachers' use of self-defeating humor as a style of humor. Mean Ratings of Teachers' Use of Self-Defeating Humor Statement Mean Std Dev. I let people laugh at me or make fun at my expense more than I should I will often get carried away in putting myself down if it make my family or friends laugh I often try to make people like or accept me more by saying something funny about my own weakness, blunders or faults I often go overboard in putting myself down when I am making jokes or trying to be funny When I am with friends or family, I often seem to be the one that other people make fun of or joke about Self-defeating humor. The results yielded a mean of 2.0614 and a standard deviation of 0.68235. The item with the highest mean was "I often try to make people like or accept me more by saying something funny about my own weaknesses, blunders or faults" which had a mean of 2.2571. This means that this item, ("I often try to make people like or accept me more by saying something funny about my own weaknesses, blunders or faults"), much as it is the most common to feature in this category, it is engaged in seldom. The item with the lowest mean was "I make people laugh at me or make fun at my expense more than I should" which had a mean of 2.000. This puts all the items in this style of humor in the same category of "seldom" used or engaged in. Based on these self-reports from the teachers, the researchers came up with the bar graph representation below, showing the means of teachers' use of humor styles. Means of teachers' use of humor styles It is encouraging to note that the greater number of teachers engaged in positive styles of humour, affiliative and self-enhancing, which have scored the highest means 2.7 and 2.6, the implication to class instruction, therefore, is that the effectiveness of teaching is to a good degree.

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