



## HUMOUR IN THE ENGLISH CLASSROOM- LEARN WITH LAUGHTER!!

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**ABSTRACT:** English language has acquired the status of the global level. English is learnt all over the world and demand for English is on the rise. The English teachers are constantly confronted with questions like 'How do I reach out to them?' or 'How to teach language in an interesting manner?' As a teacher catering to the UG students I have relied on my teaching experiences. One sided lectures becomes tedious and should give way to interactive and enjoyable class room experience. The following paper endeavors to show the relevance of humor in the present English classroom. I would like to use this opportunity to emphasize the role of teacher in sustaining the interests of the students and consequently how humor is an invaluable teaching aid in the English classroom. There is no doubt that humor is an invaluable teaching aid in the English classroom and that almost all English teachers use humor at one point of time or another in their lesson. Total absence of humor renders life impossible; as teachers we are aware that, teaching grammar at times can become quite monotonous; thus, the present paper intends to showcase that using humor increases student-teacher rapport and even facilitates learning resulting in a positive classroom environment.

**KEY WORDS:** humor, English, teacher, student

### INTRODUCTION

A Proof of which Gender is Intelligent

An English professor wrote the words:

*"A woman without her man is nothing" on the chalkboard and asked his students to punctuate it correctly. All of the males in the class wrote:*

*"A woman, without her man, is nothing."*

While all the females in the class wrote:

*"A woman: without her, man is nothing."*

**Punctuation is powerful!!**

Every time I use this funny anecdote in my grammar class, I am successful in breaking the ice as students have a worried look when they see **"RULES OF PUNCTUATION"**

**THE CONCEPT:** What is **Humor**? **Humor** can be broadly defined as the inclination of particular cognitive experiences to provoke laughter and provide amusement. The term derives from the humoral medicine of the ancient Greeks, which taught that the balance of fluids in the human body, known as humors

(Latin: *umor*, "body fluid"), control human health and emotion. As a Literature student I always liked Ben Jonson's classical theory of humors. The comedy of humors refers to a genre of dramatic comedy that focuses on a character or range of characters, each of whom has one overriding trait or 'humor' that dominates their personality and conduct. Jonson describes the humors in his Induction to one of the most important works of humors comedy, *Every Man out of His Humour* (1599):

Someone peculiar quality  
Doth so possess a man, that it doth draw  
All his affects, his spirits, and his powers,  
In their confluents, all to run one way.  
This may truly be said to be a humour."

According to this theory there are four fluids in human body which determine a man's temperament and mental state. These four humors are blood, phlegm, Choler and Melancholy. A normal individual has these in a balanced proportion, but excess of any of these humors makes him behave in an odd manner; Blood makes a person excessively optimistic

or sanguine, phlegm makes one excessively calm and docile, cholera makes one highly ill-tempered and black bile makes one excessively melancholy and morbid. The present classroom comprises of students from various backgrounds; **all the above four symptoms are exhibited by them in the class.** In spite of it we as English teachers take it in our stride and consider them a class and teach them which speaks volumes of our sense of humor. THANK YOU! BEN JONSON!

**ORIGIN:** To take a sneak peek at its origin, Western humor theory begins with Plato, who attributed it to Socrates (as a semi historical dialogue character) in the *Philebus* (p. 49b) the view that the '... essence of the ridiculous is ignorance in the weak, who are thus unable to retaliate when ridiculed. Later, in Greek philosophy, Aristotle, in the *Poetics* (1449a, pp. 34–35), suggested that an ugliness that does not disgust is fundamental to 'humour.'

In the east, specifically the ancient Sanskrit drama, Bharata Muni's *Natyashastra* has defined humour (hāsya) as one of the nine navarasas, or principle rasas (emotional responses), which can be inspired in the audience by *bhavas*, the imitations of emotions that the actors perform. Each rasa was associated with a specific bhavas portrayed on stage. In the case of humour, it was associated with mirth (haasya). Throughout history of literature, certain intelligence can be displayed through the sparkling forms of wit and sarcasm.

## DISCUSSION

**HUMOR AS A TEACHING AID:** In the present classroom teaching,

"Humor is the characteristic that makes something laughable or amusing but humor in the English classroom has more than just the 'effect to induce laughter'; it brings about multiple reactions by stimulating the learner's motivation and self-confidence which creates a positive classroom atmosphere for the smooth acquiring of the language." (Bonjour 2011)

There is no doubt that humor is an invaluable teaching aid in the English classroom and that almost all English teachers use humor at one point of time or another in their lesson. As a matter of fact, students have listed '... humor as an essential quality of a

good teacher.' (Sylwester. 2001) The best teachers are also known for their '... ability to release tension in class with humor.' (Kenner). As there is no fear of criticism or being ridiculed in a lively and non-threatening environment it encourages the young learner to take risks and participate in the use of English.

A positive classroom environment merged with increased motivation effectively **reduces** anxiety and **increases** motivation in the English classroom. ([www.teyl.org](http://www.teyl.org))

Total absence of humour renders life impossible; as teachers we are aware that, teaching grammar at times can become quite monotonous; in this context, Humor can be used as an effective teaching aid. An interesting topic which gets the students involved with a smile on their face is '**Homonyms or Homophones.**' While explaining **Homophones**, I always try to give verbal examples of the wrong usage of similar sounding words with different spellings using examples from everyday life. Ex; The sun is **stationary**. If a student spells it as '**stationery**' I remark that sun needs paint, so he has gone to a **stationery shop**. This grabs the attention of most of the students and they become involved in the classroom discussion of Homophones with a smile on their faces. Similarly, in linguistics, a **Homonym** is, in the strict sense, one of a group of words that share the same spelling and the same pronunciation but have different meanings. Here I would like to quote the Bangalore traffic Police who have come up with an original quote;

"IT'S BETTER TO BE A LATE MR. THAN BECOME LATE MR. SO & SO..."

In Saussure's theory of linguistics, a word is simply a jumble of letters; a sign or a word for instance, '**late**'-- gets its meaning only in relation to or in contrast with other signs in a system of signs. In general, the '**signifier**' and the '**signified**' are the components of the sign, the signifier is the sound and the signified is the thought. The signified is the concept, the meaning; the thing indicated by the signifier. The thing signified is created in the perceiver and is internal to them. Even Saussure's serious theory of signs can be made easily comprehensible by using a tinge of humor.

Certain words are contradictory in meaning, but are usually tagged together for emphasis; ex;

1. Clearly misunderstood
2. Exact estimate
3. Small crowd
4. Act naturally
5. Fully empty and the clincher
6. **Found missing!** Such exercises motivate students to be cautious in their usage of superfluous words and also in turn enrich their vocabulary.

Funny anecdotes get the most laughs from students, and they are the most effective form of humor to help teachers establish rapport with students. It has been noted by Marklin (Walker 2002) that ". . . students enjoy humor in forms of funny anecdotes" and it is this very '. . . enjoyment' that makes humor a popular content for teaching English, as positive humor helps create a congenial atmosphere for classroom discussions. I always refer to signboards or hoardings which have wrong usage of words. For an advertisement in front of a store instead of CHILLED BEER AVAILABLE, it was printed on the hoarding as CHILD BEER AVAILABLE! Similarly while dealing with error identification, when I quote the rule that 'definite articles are not inserted in front of proper nouns', the students just nod their heads; but if I illustrate the same with an example; by using articles in front of their names they get the point with a touch of humor, ex; The *Varun* opened the book. On a serious note, word games can be used to promote analytical thinking; for ex, in the words **Ramzan** there is **Ram** and **Ali** is a part of **Diwali**.

#### **BENEFITS FOR TEACHERS:**

Loomax and Moosavi (1998) in an article on the use of humour in a university statistics class point out that . . . anecdotal evidence in past studies consistently suggests that humour is an extremely effective tool in education. These same studies suggest that the use of humour in the classroom reduces tension, improves classroom climate, increases enjoyment, increases student-teacher rapport and even facilitates learning.

Once a student asked me what does "reading between the lines mean. I replied ". . . the double meaning dialogues in the movies" where meaning is implied without resorting to the use of vulgar words. On a similar trajectory some teachers effectively use 'sarcasm' or 'wit' as a disciplinary tool. Poking fun in a light-hearted way sometimes help teachers as it avoids the need for taking other disciplinary action.

**ADVANTAGES FOR STUDENTS:** One reason for using humor is that as a '. . . human trait it is a self-effacing behavior (Provine, 2000). It can allow the shy or timid student in your class to participate with the group. If it is used properly humor allows the student to feel a part of the class and possibly contribute without losing face, feeling exposed or vulnerable. This is of particular importance in a communicative classroom where the accent is on verbal authentic communication, participation and interaction. I would like to quote Professor Ernest Brennecke of Columbia University who is credited with inventing a sentence that can be made to have eight different meanings by placing **ONE WORD** in all possible positions in the sentence: "I hit him in the eye yesterday." The word is "**ONLY**".

The placement of **ONLY** as a modifier is more a matter of style and clarity than of grammatical rule.

The Message:

1. **ONLY** I hit him in the eye yesterday. (No one else did.)
2. I **ONLY** hit him in the eye yesterday. (Did not slap him.)
3. I hit **ONLY** him in the eye yesterday. (I did not hit others.)
4. I hit him **ONLY** in the eye yesterday. (I did not hit outside the eye.)
5. I hit him in **ONLY** the eye yesterday. (Not other organs.)
6. I hit him in the **ONLY** eye yesterday. (He doesn't have another eye.)
7. I hit him in the eye **ONLY** yesterday. (Not today.)
8. I hit him in the eye yesterday **ONLY**. (Did not wait for today.) (Garrison. p85)

By trying out various such combinations an English classroom can be turned into a hub of enthusiastic learners. It's a way of reaching out to those students who are too afraid or nervous to attempt expressing themselves in their second language. Humor is as human and as authentic as the need to communicate. As with other facets of our lives it plays a major role in our every day social interaction. We should therefore not ignore it but instead make it part of our everyday classroom learning.

#### **CONCLUSION**

Laughter helps us forget about our inhibitions, and allows us to lose ourselves momentarily. However,

humor as with all activities in the interactive language classroom, must be well prepared and should have a specific objective. Humorous situations allow students to express themselves without fear of ridicule and criticism. Anxiety and stress is reduced and students are encouraged to take more risks in using their second language. Humor, 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. To conclude, I would like to ask a witty question; what is the longest word in the English language?

**"Smiles"** Because there is a mile between its first and last letters!

**LEARN WITH LAUGHTER!!!!!!)**

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