

A STUDY ON THE USE OF HUMOUR IN MOTIVATING STUDENTS TO LEARN ENGLISH

Sufi Amin Salmee

Faculty of Education, Universiti Teknologi MARA

aminsalmee@ymail.com

UiTM Shah Alam Campus, 40450 Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia

Marina Mohd Arif

Faculty of Education, Universiti Teknologi MARA

marina363@salam.uitm.edu.my

UiTM Puncak Alam Campus, 42300 Puncak Alam, Selangor, Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Throughout the years, a lot of research has been looking at the significance of effective atmosphere in second language classroom. We often overlook the fact that humour is a vital element in attaining a supportive learning environment that can benefit students. There is limited research conducted on the effectiveness of the use of humour in ESL classroom, especially in the context of motivating the students to learn, in which the students are used as the indicator and method in gaining insights as they are the ones who experienced the learning process. Thus, this study was conducted to look at students' views towards the effects of humour on their intrinsic motivation to learn English. A survey was conducted using questionnaires adapted from Deci & Ryan's (2003) Intrinsic Motivation Inventory Test (IMI) on 70 students of various programmes from the Faculty of Education, UiTM. The acquired data were then compared based on each of the programmes in the Faculty of Education, UiTM. The findings from this study revealed that majority of the respondents strongly agree that humour has positive effects on students' intrinsic motivation in learning English. The positive responses received from the respondents indicate that humour is indeed an effective teaching tool in promoting intrinsic motivation in learning second language.

KEYWORDS: *ESL learners, Humour, Learning English, Motivation*

INTRODUCTION

English is broadly used in the world as it is the global language for business, technology and science. It is primordial for people to be able to communicate and also write in English. Even though the importance of the language in the world is evident, Malaysian learners are not able to recognize the necessity to use the language (Pandian, 2002). The sophistication of

education system in Malaysia is growing in tandem with the development of this country; therefore, students ought to be able to master the English language in achieving the needs of the society.

In recent years, a lot of research has been conducted to look at the significance of effective atmosphere in second language classroom. This type of classroom is where the learners feel comfortable using the second language without having the fear of facing judgement or negative criticism from others, especially peers. In order to attain this supportive environment that can benefit student learning, researchers have suggested several strategies such as language play, communicative activities and language games (Harmer, 2008).

Nevertheless, we often overlook the fact that humour is as vital as other elements in teaching. The term humour in the context of this study referred to teacher-initiated attempts to stimulate laughter or amusement, in which the attempts implemented may come from materials, lesson content or even classroom interactions which may result in students to laugh and feel amused (Petraki & Nguyen, 2016). In the context of English as a second language, research specifies that proficient use of humour by teachers assist both teaching and learning processes. It can be useful in teaching a second language as it can be communicated through language and can be unified in instructions of all four main language skills. Mostly, verbal humour such as wordplays, funny stories, puns, and content related jokes play a significant role in second language learners' development of sociolinguistic and sociocultural competence (Ziyaeemehr & Kumar, 2014). For example, in the context of communication, using humour to establish rules in classroom such as "*Certainly you may miss class for family emergencies, but if your grandmother dies three times during the semester, I may begin to suspect something amiss*", can give a lighter approach to rule enforcement while not taking away the importance of the rule. Humour in educational setting serves several functions other than simply making people laugh. Previous studies have indicated that teachers' use of humour has been mostly linked with issues of teaching effectiveness, student learning, classroom atmosphere, student motivation and the evaluation of teachers by students (Wagner and Urios-Aparisi, 2011). Studies on humour with second language students often talk about its ability to promote a better classroom environment. In general, the application of humour can make the classroom become more conducive and can help reduce nervousness among students (Chiasson, 2002).

Research also suggests that general comprehension of classroom messages was meaningfully enhanced by the use of humour. Casper (1999) stated that learning that involves humour helps to reinforce the learning memory. Similarly, Kaplan and Pascoe (1977) reported that lectures that use concept related humour helped students do considerably better in the recollection of learnt concepts. Hence, it is clear that in developing motivated and receptive students, humour is important in the context of teaching and learning.

Majority of the previous studies that have been conducted on the application of humour in second language learning had foreign language learners as their subjects. Apart from that, in terms of identifying the views or perceptions of humour application in English learning, most studies use teachers as their sample. This study is going to address the research gap by looking at students' views on the usage of humour in motivating students to learn English.

Statement of the Research Problem

One of the most commonly observed problems in second language learning in the context of Malaysian school is the perception of the students towards the language. Even though English is taught as a second language in Malaysia, it is mostly perceived as a foreign

language by the students. They study the language because they have to and not because they have any interest in it (Choy & Troudi, 2006). This has seemingly contributed to the decreasing standard of the English language in the country.

Motivation is considered as a major part in students' second language learning. Although the majority of second language learners in the country are familiar with the position of English language as a core medium of communication, some students are lacking of the appropriate level of motivation to do so. Earlier studies have shown that students who took courses whereby lecturers or teachers implemented humour in their lessons became more motivated in the class (Chee 2006; Golchi & Jamali, 2011). It is thus believed that inserting humour in language learning can improve the process of learning, namely the emotional and cognitive processes as well as establishing a constructive classroom environment.

However, there is a lack of studies on humour in motivating students to learn second language. Previous studies (Krause et al., 2015; Pham, 2014) have looked at the use of humour in English as foreign language (EFL) rather than English as second language (ESL) and most of these studies use secondary school students as their respondents rather than university students. Therefore, there is a need to investigate the use of humour among tertiary students. Apart from that, in terms of identifying the views or perceptions of humour application in English learning, most studies use teachers as their samples. This study is going to focus on students' views on the usage of humour in motivating students to learn English.

Essentially, this particular study is expected to assist lecturers as well as the students in having a positive perspective towards the implementation of humour in second language classroom. By exploring the need and benefit of applying humour in second language learning, they can identify the pattern and trend on how the students view the subject matter. With this understanding, various teaching strategies and tools may be added to the lecturer's teaching repertoire in order to promote and enhance second language learning atmosphere. Therefore, this study intends to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the students' views towards the effect of humour on students' intrinsic motivation?
2. What are the students' views towards the effects of humour on students' intrinsic motivation according to the different programmes in the Faculty of Education, UiTM?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employs a quantitative approach where a set of questionnaires which was adapted from Deci & Ryan's (2003) Intrinsic Motivation Inventory (IMI) on the use of humour in the teaching and learning of English was used as the main instrument to gather data for this study. The adapted questionnaire was also reviewed by content expert in the area of second language learning to ensure its content validity. The questionnaires were administered to 70 tertiary students who have experienced humour in their second language learning process to identify the trend and pattern of how they view the usage of humour in motivating students to learn English. The questionnaire consists of two parts, Part A is intended to obtain the demographic profile of the respondents and Part B, the respondents were asked to evaluate themselves on the effect of humour on their intrinsic motivation in learning English as second language by using a 5-point Likert scales.

The data were analysed using a statistical software to reveal the accurate pattern of distribution of responses from the students for each of the items in the questionnaire. This was made possible by comparing the mean average of the items to get the overall representation of the students' views. The average mean scores that are above 3.00 were considered as positive and high agreement level. The acquired data were then determined based on the 7 programmes in the Faculty of Education, UiTM. The mean average for each of the items were compared for each of the programmes: Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) programme, Visual Arts Education programme, Physical and Health Education programme, Science Education (Biology) programme, Science Education (Physics) programme, Mathematics Education programme and also Science Education (Chemistry) programme.

Population and Sampling

The population comprises the tertiary education students from all of the universities in Malaysia who have learned English as second language. As the study looks into the students' views on the use of humour in second language learning, the population has to be tertiary students who have experienced humour in their second language learning process. In this case, they are able to give their views regarding the matter thus increasing the reliability of this study. The samples for the present study involved 70 tertiary students who were doing their degree programme in the Faculty of Education, UiTM.

This study employed purposive sampling method whereby the researcher selected the samples based on the purpose of the study. For this study, the respondents were chosen from those who have taken the Integrated Language Skills (ELC) subject as well as those who have experienced humour in their second language learning classroom. A total number of 70 respondents were randomly selected, with 10 respondents from each of the programme.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Demographic Data of the Respondents

The first part of the questionnaire looked at the demographic data of the respondents. There were 6 items in the section. Majority of the respondents were female (64.3%), in the group of age between 23-24 years old (62.9%), are in the 8th semester (48.6%). Majority of them have been learning English for more than 15 years (87.1%) and have experienced humour in the learning English (100%). All of the demographic data of the respondents are summarized in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1 Demographic data of the respondents

Programme (%)	Gender (%)	Age (%)	Semester (%)	Years of learning English (%)	Experienced humour in learning English (100%)
TESL = 14.3	Male = 35.7	20 and below = 0	Part 5 = 20.0	More than 15 years = 87.1	Yes = 100
Visual Arts = 14.3	Female = 64.3	21-22 = 22.9	Part 6 = 18.6	10-15 years = 8.6	No = 0
Physical & Health = 14.3		23-24 = 62.9	Part 7 = 11.4	5-10 years = 4.3	

Biology = 14.3	25 and above = 14.3	Part 8 = 48.6	Less than 5 years = 0
Physics = 14.3		Part 8 and above = 1.4	
Maths = 14.3			
Chemistry = 14.3			

The Students' Views Towards the Effect of Humour on Students' Intrinsic Motivation in Learning English

The students' views were determined by respondents' level of agreement on the 10 statements on the use of humour in learning English. The mean scores for each of the items were calculated to see the level of agreement of each item and the mean average of each item was combined to identify the overall representation of the level of agreement towards the effect of humour on students' intrinsic motivation in learning English. The result is presented in Table 3.2.

Table 3.2 Students' views towards the effect of humour on students' intrinsic motivation in learning English

	<i>m</i>	<i>SD</i>
1. While I was learning English with the use of humour, I was thinking about how much I enjoyed the process.	4.07	.906
2. Humour makes me feel more relaxed (i.e. less anxious) in my language classroom.	4.00	.933
3. I think I am pretty good at learning English when the teacher uses humour.	4.10	.871
4. I found learning English as very interesting when teacher uses humour.	4.03	.868
5. Learning English is fun when the teacher uses humour.	4.56	.605
6. I am always anxious when the teacher uses humour in teaching English.*	3.61	1.067
7. Learning English was very boring when the teacher uses humour.*	4.06	.946
8. The use of humour in learning English makes me feel demotivated to learn.	3.99	.909
9. The use of humour in learning English makes me feel demotivated to learn.*	3.94	.814
10. Humour generally improves my ability to learn a second language by creating a more comfortable and conducive learning environment overall.	4.46	.736
Average	4.08	.866

m mean, *SD* standard deviation

1-5 (1= Totally Disagree, 5= Totally Agree)

*: refers to negative statement, therefore the reversed calculation is used to find the mean score. 1-5 (1= Totally Agree, 5 = Totally Disagree)

As shown in Table 3.2, the students' views on the effect of humour on students' intrinsic motivation in learning English on the whole were positive with the overall result (M=4.08; SD=0.866). This indicates that students agree on the positive impact that humour brings in developing students' intrinsic motivation in the learning of English language.

Respondents generally enjoyed the process of learning English with the use of humour with a high mean score of $M=4.07$; $SD=0.906$ recorded. This is parallel to the claim made by Provine (2002) that the use of humour in classroom increases enjoyment in learning. Students also found that humour makes them feel more relaxed and less anxious in the language classroom ($M=4.00$; $SD=0.933$). These results are consistent with those of Kristmanson (2000) and Gatt (2000) who claimed that the students of English language learn better and are willing to participate in a relaxed classroom atmosphere. This can help reduce anxiety in second language learning (Krashen, 1987).

A high number of students agree with the statement “I am pretty good at learning English when the teacher uses humour” in the teaching and learning process ($M=4.10$, $SD=0.871$). Students also agree with the statement “I found learning English as very interesting when teacher uses humour” as they find it as one of the advantages in applying humour in second language learning and it does impact their intrinsic motivation to learn the language ($M=4.03$; $SD=0.868$). The data also show that majority of the students agree on the statement learning English is fun when the teacher/lecturer uses humour ($M=4.56$; $SD=0.605$). The ‘fun’ factor here relates to the intrinsic motivation that the students have in learning English.

The respondents however, slightly disagree with the statement humour makes the students feel anxious in language class ($M=3.61$; $SD=1.067$). This is parallel to the result of its positive statement (item 2), where students feel less anxious and more relaxed whenever teacher/lecturer uses humour in classroom. Students also disagree that learning English becomes boring whenever the teacher/lecturer uses humour ($M=4.06$; $SD=0.946$). These results correspond with the findings of Tosta (2001), who stated that a funny teacher is not a clown figure but a professional who relies on the meaningfulness and effectiveness of having fun while learning.

Lastly, data from the study also suggested that the respondents believe in the benefit of humour in improving their ability to learn a second language by creating a more conducive learning environment ($M=4.46$; $SD=0.736$). This is parallel with the study conducted by Wagner and Urios-Aparisi, (2011), who stated that humour create favourable and conducive education environment. In conclusion, students view that the use of humour has a positive effect on their intrinsic motivation in learning English.

The Students’ Views Towards the Effect of Humour on Students’ Intrinsic Motivation in Learning English According to the Programmes in the Faculty of Education

Upon discovering the students’ views on the effects of humour on students’ intrinsic motivation in learning English as a whole unit of respondents from the Faculty of Education, UiTM, the following step is to compare the respondents’ views according to the 7 different programmes in the faculty. By labelling each programme from the Faculty of Education, UiTM as the independent variable and the mean scores for all the 10 items (statements) as dependent variable, the mean score for each of the programme for each item was determined and compared. The result is presented in Table 3.3.

Table 3.3 Students' views towards the effect of humour on students' intrinsic motivation in learning English according to the programmes in the Faculty of Education

Programme	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7	S8	S9	S10
TESL	4.3000	4.6000	4.4000	4.6000	4.7000	4.3000	4.8000	4.4000	4.7000	4.7000
Visual Arts	3.6000	3.6000	4.2000	4.0000	4.6000	4.0000	3.5000	3.4000	4.5000	4.4000
Physical & Health	3.8000	3.3000	4.5000	4.0000	4.6000	3.3000	4.5000	4.7000	3.3000	3.4000
Biology	4.4000	4.6000	3.6000	3.8000	4.6000	2.3000	4.7000	3.2000	4.0000	4.7000
Physics	4.5000	4.8000	4.0000	3.5000	4.6000	4.4000	3.4000	3.9000	3.8000	4.7000
Maths	3.7000	3.3000	4.5000	3.8000	4.3000	4.1000	3.7000	4.1000	3.5000	4.6000
Chemistry	4.2000	3.8000	3.5000	4.5000	4.5000	2.9000	3.8000	4.2000	3.8000	4.7000
Total	4.0714	4.0000	4.1000	4.0286	4.5571	3.6143	4.0571	3.9857	3.9429	4.4571
	.90604	.93250	.87062	.86764	.60519	1.0672	.94617	.90878	.81447	.73594

The analysed data suggest that the respondents from Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) programme scored the highest mean score for 4 out of the 10 statements. This may be due to the fact that the respondents from Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) programme understand humour in the target language better therefore find humour as motivating compared to respondents from other programmes. This can be related to the study by Cook (2000) that learning to understand jokes in a new language depends on the target language proficiency.

Overall, the respondents from all the 7 programmes recorded a mean score above 3.00 for all items meaning they all agree that humour has positive effect on students' intrinsic motivation. Referring to Cook's (2000) study, this may probably be due to the fact that all the respondents from the 7 programmes are good in English language as they have experienced learning the language for approximately 15 years and have taken the Integrated Language Skills (ELC) subject, thus enabling them to comprehend humour (jokes) made by their lecturers. Hence, the students of Faculty of Education, UiTM as a whole view humour as a positive influence on students' intrinsic motivation in learning English.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study has brought to light relevant information regarding the students' views towards the effects of humour on their intrinsic motivation to learn English. The findings revealed that humour is essential in second language learning, especially in motivating students to learn English. The respondents were largely confident of the effectiveness of its use in the second language classroom, regardless of their different learning field. The findings have also provided data which supports some of the characteristics identified by the previous researchers regarding this matter.

From the pedagogical perspective, the findings of this study provide insights for both teachers and students on the students' views on the use of humour in second language learning according to their programme. The results of this study support the idea that the use of humour provides many benefits in the teaching and learning of English. Hence, educators should consider injecting humour in the classroom as this could be the key in producing a conducive classroom atmosphere for second language learning.

Several suggestions for future research can be made based on the present study. Further work required to establish the viability of the research regarding the application of humour into second language teaching and learning is to look at the perceptions and views of teachers or lecturers. As this study only look at the students' views, future research can also compare and contrast the differences between the views of teachers and students on the use of humour in second language learning. The study can also benefit from having a larger sample size in the future. Lastly, to develop an in-depth understanding on the use of humour in second language teaching and learning, future investigations can consider using a different research approach such as a case study method to see how students learn second language with the use of humour to have an in-depth understanding on the influence of humour in second language learning.

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