

APPROPRIATE AND INAPPROPRIATE USES OF HUMOR BY TEACHERS AND THE EFFECT OF IT IN LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the students' view of the appropriate and inappropriate use of humor in the classroom and the effect of it in students' learning. There were 20 postgraduate students participating in the study, and they were asked to list several examples of suitable and unsuitable use of humor in the classroom and consider the effect of humor in the learning. The result informed that joking about sexual matters, religion, sexist issues, racism, appearance, sarcasm, ethnicity and cultural value was claimed as inappropriate humor, and 83% of students commented that these types of humor had a negative impact on their learning. However, humor related to the topic being taught, cartoons, funny stories, puns, language mistakes was perceived as appropriate, and 94% of them believed that these types of humor affect positively in the learning.

INTRODUCTION

Most people agree that humor plays a role in nearly every situation in which people interact, humor can be used as an essential ingredient in communication to break the boredom or relieve the immense tension from a serious situation. In an educational setting, often, humor is utilized as a strategy to facilitate and enhance the learning process. However, not all teachers are able to present humor, often their personality influences the way they demonstrate humor which can be unfunny or strange. Ziv suggests that humor should be comfortable, unforced and spontaneous, and teachers should maximize the use of humor in at least three instances in a one hour period (1981).

Several studies examine the effect of humor on the classroom (Ziv 1979; Torok, MacMorris and Lin 2004; Garner 2006; Wanzer, Frymier, Wojtaszczyk and Tony 2006), one study considered the value of humor on sentence memory (Schmidt, 1994), another examined the effectiveness of humor for the illustration of structural components of language (Askildson, 2001) and Rareshide studies how teachers use humor in the classroom (1993). Some scholars hold a positive view of the use of humor in teaching; Dziegielewski, Laudadio and Rodriguez reveal that humor creates an atmosphere that allows for openness, spontaneity and a unique perspective on learning and teaching (2003). Another scholar, Hill believes that humor encourages a positive learning environment, retention of the lesson, and also motivates students to learn about a subject and raises curiosity in an entertaining way (1988).

Considering the benefit of humor pointed out by some scholars, it would seem a good idea if teachers integrate humor into the learning objective, particularly in teaching another language which requires hard work and a great deal of effort on the part of the learners. However, not all humorous materials are applicable or appropriate for the classroom. In this study we are going to find out the students' views of the appropriate and inappropriate use of humor in the classroom and the effect of it in learning. It is expected that the findings will provide a description of what types of humor can be used in the classroom and what effect it has in students' learning.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Several studies have explored the use of humor in the classroom and found that it presents a rich and diverse investigative perspective. One study by Torok et al (2004) examined college students' and teachers' perceptions of types of classroom humor. A majority of the types of humor selected for the survey were based on humor classifications designated in Bryant et al (1979). Three instructors and 124 students reported their perceptions of Bryant's types of classroom humor. The researchers began their investigation assuming that seven types of humor (funny stories or comments, jokes, professional humor, puns, cartoons and riddles) would be considered generally positive in the college classroom, and they found support for this assumption. They also speculated that four types of instructor humor, for example, sarcasm, sexual matters, ethnicity and aggressiveness/hostility, would be perceived negatively by students. Although Torok et al did not frame their study within a communication competence perspective, their procedures clearly indicate a focus on the perceived appropriateness of the different humor types. The three humor types (sexual matters, ethnicity and hostility) were found to be less frequent, and not surprisingly, were not recommended for the classroom. Interestingly, sarcasm identified by these researchers as negative humor, was perceived as relatively appropriate and even recommended for use in the classroom.

An investigation of humor as a pedagogical tool and its impact on learning and retention of information in a university setting was conducted by Garner (2006). This study involved 117 undergraduate students divided into two groups, 'the humor group and the control group'. Both groups saw the same digitally video recorded information on the topic of research methods and statistics presented by the same instructor. The humor group, however, saw a version of the lecture in which a humorous story, example or metaphor had been inserted at the beginning of the lecture. The study predicted that those in the humor group would report higher general satisfaction ratings with the course than those in the control group and would retain more information over time. The finding showed that the subjects in the humor group recalled and retained significantly more information regarding the topic.

In a study involving 284 undergraduate students, Wanzer et al (2006) examined the students' view of suitable and unsuitable use of humor in the classroom. The respondents were asked to list some examples of appropriate and inappropriate humor (based on the description of what is appropriate and inappropriate humor). The findings

indicated that pictures, stories, language mistakes, teacher performance and jokes related to the material were the most common responses categorised as appropriate humor for the classroom, and the types of humor which were perceived inappropriate were sexual jokes, intelligence, sexist issues, ethnicity, religion and students' interests. Although the categorisation of humor examples was unclear, the findings provided greater insight of the types of appropriate and inappropriate humor in the classroom.

In my study, I investigated the students' view of appropriate and inappropriate use of humor in the classroom and asked them to consider the effect of humor in the learning. To elicit the examples of appropriate and inappropriate humor, I employed the same questions to those of Wanzer et al (2006). However, I did not provide the description of what is it meant by appropriate and inappropriate humor. The data analysis in my study was also different from Wanzer et al (2006), and I did not categorise humor instances based on Gorham's and Christophel's definition (1990). In conjunction with this stated purpose, the following research questions were addressed:

1. What types of teacher humor do students consider appropriate and inappropriate for the classroom?
2. What effect does it have in student's learning?

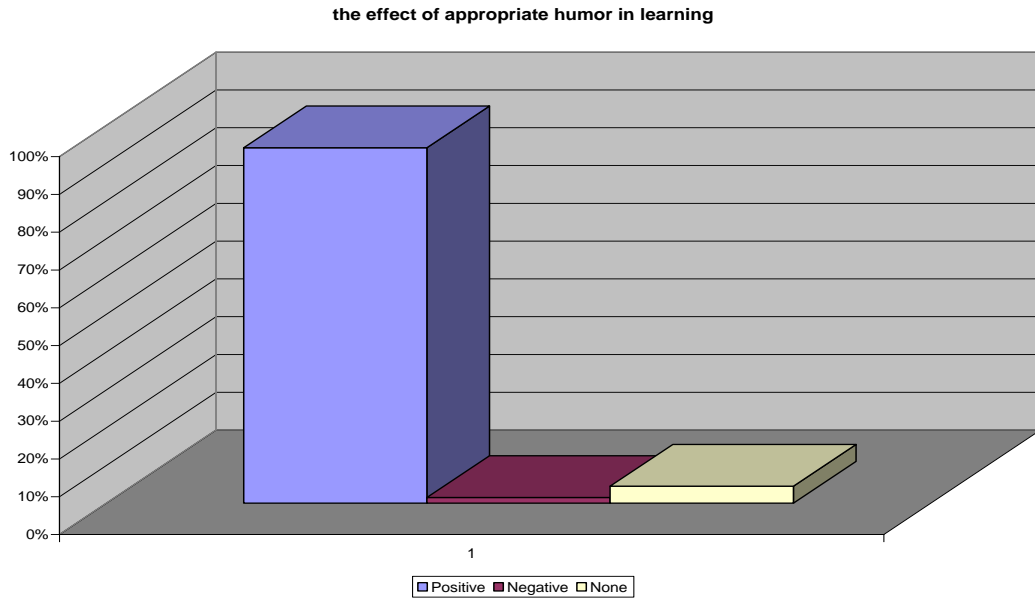
METHODOLOGY

The subjects for this study were twenty postgraduate students, ten male and ten female, who are currently doing various majors at the University of Canberra. The subjects are Indonesian, Chinese, Korean, Iranian, Vietnamese and Australian. They were given a questionnaire consisting of two open-ended questions asking them to mention several examples of teachers' use of humor in the classroom (which were categorized as appropriate and inappropriate humor) and consider the effects of it in learning by ticking the comment 'positive, negative or none'. Analysis of the data began by transcribing the subjects' responses of classification of appropriate and inappropriate of humor. Once the data were transcribed and unitized, humorous instances were categorized (if some examples were similar, they were classified as one category). Then, the data were calculated totally and counted in percentage. However, some students' responses were not included in the data because their examples were too vague and difficult to classify.

RESULTS

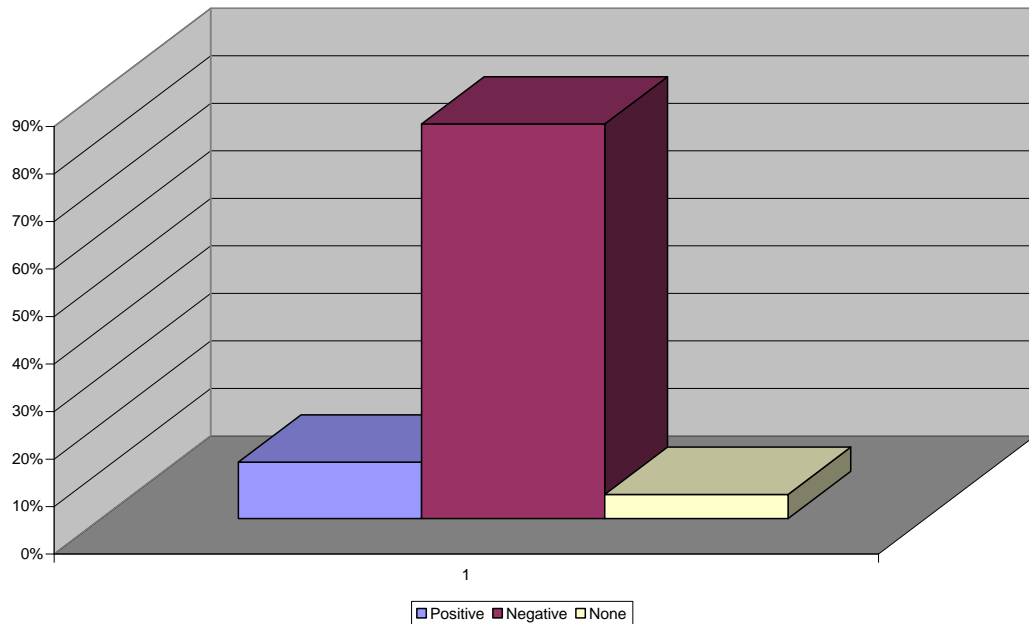
Regarding the first research question 'what types of teacher humor are considered appropriate for the classroom', the students generated 67 examples of teacher humor (as indicated in appendix 1 table 1). The table shows that cartoons or funny pictures relating to the topic (19%), language mistakes (11%), famous people (10%) and funny stories (10%) were the most frequent responses which the students mentioned as appropriate humor in the classroom. However, surprisingly, some respondents (3%) indicated that sexual humor could be appropriate in some circumstances and have a positive effect in their learning.

In term of the type of inappropriate humor for the classroom, the respondents generated 59 examples of humor (the detail information appears in appendix 1 table 2). Joking about sexual matters (15%), religion (15%), racism (12%), sexist issues (10%) and ethnicity (8%) were the top five most common responses considered unsuitable humor for the classroom.



The chart represents the impact of appropriate humor on students' learning. The majority of respondents (94%) believe that appropriate humor has positive impact, whereas, 5% of them think that the two humor types of teacher's experience and exaggerated miming have no impact on their learning. Another type of humor, namely teasing students, affect negatively, although this types of humor is perceived as appropriate humor.

The effect of inappropriate humor in learning



The chart illustrates 83% of the respondents think that inappropriate humor is considered to be generally negative in their learning. Interestingly, although humor about sexual matters, religion and violence are labeled inappropriate, 12% of the students view these types of humor as sometimes having a positive effect in the learning, and 5% of them believe that cynicism and ethnicity humor bring no effect.

DISCUSSION

A primary aim of this research was to begin to understand the ‘competent’ use of humor as a teaching strategy, by first examining and differentiating appropriate and inappropriate humor use in the classroom. Most of the respondents had no trouble identifying appropriate and inappropriate examples of humor used by teachers. Most of the examples identified as appropriate humor in this study are consistent with the previous research (Torok et al, 2004; Wanzer et al, 2006). For example, funny stories, cartoons, funny pictures and language mistakes are considered appropriate humor. Although in Torok et al’s study, these types of humor were not claimed appropriate, they were nonetheless generally considered positive in the classroom. However, surprisingly, one type of humor (sexual jokes) viewed as appropriate in my study was in conflict with Wanzer et al’s and Torok et al’s results. In their studies sexual jokes was categorised as inappropriate or perceived negatively by the students.

With regard to appropriateness, most of the humor examples recognized inappropriate were sexual jokes, religion, sexist issues, racism and ethnicity. This result is consistent with Wanzer et al’s findings (2006) and Torok et al’s assumption of the examples of humor which are perceived negatively in the classroom (2004).

The majority of the respondents (94%) believed that the use of appropriate humor brings a positive effect in the learning. Hayes pointed out that appropriate use of humor in the classroom would create a positive classroom environment which helps students hold their attention, reduce their anxiety relating to difficult materials and encourage their involvement in the lesson (Hayes, 2006). Perhaps, this was the reason why the majority of the respondents held the view that appropriate humor had an impact on learning. Interestingly, few respondents thought that sexual jokes might bring a positive effect to learning. Possibly, their assumption about sexual jokes here, was because the humor did not really expose vulgar words or pictures, but was only common knowledge. 83% of the respondents believed that inappropriate humor (e. g. sexual jokes, religion, appearance, racism, sexist issues, ethnicity) had a negative impact on learning. Interestingly, although sexual, religious and violent jokes were perceived as inappropriate, 12% of respondents believed these types of humor might have a positive effect in some circumstances. Considering the findings in this study, it can be said that not all appropriate humor might effect positively and not all inappropriate humor might bring a negative impact on students' learning. Askildson (2001) pointed out that the types of humor used in the classroom will be beneficially effective if it is used appropriately to the level of students, their age and situation. He also mentioned that humor is less effective with the students who are already attentive to the material.

The findings would provide a broader understanding of the effect of appropriate and inappropriate humor for the classroom if the study were extended with follow-up interviews to obtain greater information 'why some examples of appropriate and inappropriate humor effect positively and negatively in students' learning. This question is clearly beyond the scope of the current research but should provide the basis for future research on humor in the classroom.

CONCLUSION

This study offers some valuable information for educators who want to utilize humor in their teaching. They may closely examine their humor in relation to the types identified in this research to assess the level of appropriateness. Based on this study, teachers should avoid using humor about sexual matters, appearance, sarcasm, religion, sexist issues, racism, cultural value and ethnicity since these types of humor are classified as inappropriate for the classroom and generally have negative impact on students' learning. However, teachers may employ the types of humor (cartoons, funny stories, famous people, anecdotes, inter-cultural) which are perceived appropriate and generally have positive impact on students' learning since this helps them to relate to the material and recall the information that they are learning in the classroom.

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