

AN ANALYSIS OF COMMUNICATIVE INTERACTIONS IN SCHOOL: LEARNING FROM LAYERED MESSAGES IN HUMOR

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ABSTRACT

The ability to communicate through oral language is an innate human characteristic (Chomsky, 1968; Pinker, 2007) and is a product of the social process (Vygotsky, 1978). Though the language “... in people’s heads does not always translate automatically into appropriate words and phrases ...” uttered through the mouth (Chafe & Danielwisc, 1987, p. 4), effective oral communication requires the producer to choose carefully from his or her lexicon and syntax knowledge to express specific intentions to listeners. As interactions among diverse peoples are becoming more frequent, so too are the mismatches in communication. This is especially true within the constraints of the education system where students are in contact with a diverse group of other students. Educators are always seeking effective ways to eliminate the disparities in communication present in the classroom. Researchers have long touted humor as a beneficial communication tool for classroom learning (Crossman, 1964). However, the effects of certain types of humor on students have largely gone unexamined. Through an analysis of humor used in classrooms in three different countries, this paper will highlight the prominent types of humor used and argue that some of the most widely used humor is counterproductive for student success. An analysis of the layered messages in specific humor reveals the impact of language use that might be helpful for educators and others to consider. Implications that positively influence instructional practices for educators are also discussed.

Keywords: education, humor

INTRODUCTION

Language is necessary for many types of humor, and laughter is one manifestation of the appreciation of humor. Both language (Chomsky, 1968; Pinker, 2007) and laughter (Martin, 2007) are innate human characteristics of communication. We are born with a neural commitment for two important aspects of communication, (a) the ability for vocal signaling, and (b) the ability to use a gestural system (Kuhl et al., 2008; Provine, 2004; Wilcox, 2004). Additionally, humor is not the same without language and laughter; that is, physical humor is different than verbal humor. These two

innate human characteristics of communication arise out of a social situation that gives context to determining our perception of humor.

Humor is considered predominantly advantageous for many reasons, such as health and learning. According to Bouskill (2012), the fields of psychology and neurology advanced the idea of “humor as a promoter of positive emotions and a buffer against negative effects of stress” (p. 216). Advancing theories that humor promotes health, Morreall (2014) explained that using humor creates emotional engagement, thereby promoting imagination when problem-solving. Humor is also

considered a form of play for some (Bouskill, 2012) that uses a paradoxical linguistic code that reflects serious issues and simultaneously pokes fun at them. Moreover, educators have long touted humor as a beneficial tool in classroom learning (Crossman, 1964). Humor studies in education indicate a range of learning benefits, including increased motivation, attention, and retention; positive learning environments; clarifying content learning; peer bonding; and so on (Chiassen, 2002; Latiff & Daud, 2013; Medgyes, 2002; Senior, 2001; Ziyaemehr, Kumar, & Faiz Abdullah, 2011).

With diversity in classroom populations on the rise, educators are always seeking effective ways to eliminate disparities in communication and build rapport in the classroom. As an innate human characteristic with universally understood qualities, humor should cross cultural and linguistic boundaries. Furthermore, humor in the classroom is arguably one of the most powerful tools for creating student engagement. However, what if the most prevalent type of humor has a derogatory effect?

The purpose of this article is to describe acts of humor along with the benefits and disadvantages of using these humor acts in the classroom. This article explores the types of humor used in classrooms in three countries—India, Turkey, and the United States—to answer the following questions:

1. How does the teacher use humor in the classroom?
2. How do students perceive humor used in the classroom?
3. To what extent do teacher intentions and student perceptions about humor align?

A study of humor across contexts offers a means to understand how humor functions similarly or differently in classrooms. This understanding has the potential to strengthen learning within diverse populations.

This article will not address the whole spectrum of humor used in the classroom and excludes, for example, silly humor or positive puns. Rather, it will highlight some potentially threatening humor that is prevalent in classrooms in three countries and increasingly acceptable in these societies. The intention of this paper is to describe some extreme, though common, examples of humor used to highlight the importance of the types of humor

that stand to inhibit learning. The assumption of this researcher is that the readers come with an understanding that no two classrooms are alike in any compositional makeup and that homogeneity does not exist among teachers or students. In addition, successful teachers may use no humor or use many different types of humor in their classroom. Further, teachers that used the examples provided in this paper did so with varying effects. Though conclusions are drawn based on universal characteristics, it is nevertheless important to remember that every act of humor has contextual and individual considerations. The examples here do not represent all classrooms throughout the world but are meant to support the argument that careful consideration of humor use in the classroom is necessary to sustain student learning (Gorham & Christophel, 1990).

LITERATURE REVIEW

It is often argued that most humor acts are benign (Bouskill, 2012; Gibbs, 2016). Moreover, humor literature is ripe with examples that portray humor as a means to create camaraderie among listeners or activate therapeutic qualities (Bergson, 1911; Freud, 1960; Provine, 2004; Solomon, 2002). However, humor is also seen as a way to create a hierarchy among peoples or marginalize and stereotype members of specific groups (Morreall, 1983). Therefore, the ways we choose to use humor and construct communication messages makes a difference.

Neurology of Humor

Many scholars believe that humor has universal characteristics (Raskin, 1985). Additionally, most scholars believe that humor is uniquely human (Bergson, 1911, Raskin, 1985). The humanness of humor sets the stage for sharing knowledge, but, particularly in schools, different developmental levels and cultural characteristics, along with other influences, play a role in student perception of humor. For example, when a teacher tells a joke, a student may immediately laugh with full understanding, might only understand the literal words, or may lack the cultural knowledge to understand any part of the joke.

The field of neuroscience has revealed many new understandings of humor. Three key findings are relevant for discussion in this article. First, recent neuroscience studies suggest that there

are universal regions or pathways in the brain for humor (Vrticka, Black, & Reiss, 2013). Many recently published functional brain imaging studies show significant brain activity involving humor in areas of the brain such as the amygdala, hypothalamus, and temporal and cerebellar regions (Bartolo, Benuzzi, Nocetti, Baraldi, & Nichelli, 2006). Connectivity among these areas seems to promote emotional control and eliminate negative arousal. When areas in these circuits are inhibited, emotional control might be hindered (Riemet al., 2012). In other words, when these areas are activated by positively perceived humor, pleasurable outcomes occur. The research also suggested that culture does not play a significant role in changing the activation areas in the brain (Ramachandran, 1998), meaning that when humor is considered positively, it activates the same areas of the brain and produces the same positive results in a variety of participant demographics. In addition, during good-natured humor, oxytocin is released (Riem et al., 2012; Toronchuk & Ellis, 2012) and activates what is known as the primary humor circuit. Recent findings provide evidence that humor activates areas in the dopaminergic reward system (Bouskill, 2012). Increased oxytocin levels and endorphins decrease activation in the amygdala, thus limiting anxiety and promoting social buffering. Conversely, there is reason to believe that the type of humor does seem to determine the activation areas. For example, humor that pokes fun at certain people or groups that are perceived as negative activates primarily the amygdala, in addition to the humor circuit, thus increasing activation in areas of the brain associated with fear and anxiety. The effects of humor depend on the pathway of activation.

Jokes

Jokes in which three people walk into a bar have long been told for the purpose of entertainment. For example, one famous bar joke is as follows: "A Rabbi, a Priest and an Imam walk into a bar. The bartender says, 'Is this a joke?'" Aside from the value they have as entertainment, these jokes are found to reflect societal sentiment about certain groups within the population. Over the years these jokes have even been analyzed on many levels, such as political and linguistic (Banas, Dunbar, Rodriguez, & Lia, 2011).

Because humor has therapeutic qualities and is

suggested as a part of a healthy life (Morreall, 1983), some jokes might also create a means of bonding or camaraderie. Within this perspective, jokes can diffuse hostility toward a certain group or groups by poking fun at all groups, thus uniting people instead of dividing them. Further, jokes might be viewed as a means to defuse verbally confrontational or aggressive behavior rather than physically. The humor in jokes is also one way of dealing with hostility in an acceptable manner. By telling a joke and creating a jovial environment, a discussion could follow that allows the participants to negotiate their opinions and strengthen their worldviews.

Because these jokes can create a hierarchy (Krichtafovitch, 2006), it is plausible that by using traditional or stereotypical characteristics of members of certain groups boundaries can be placed on these individuals or groups, thereby marginalizing certain members of the group and establishing the superiority or inferiority of a certain member (Aristotle, trans 1994; Plato, trans n.d.). Additionally, Gülen (in Edbaugh, 2010) added that true dialogue cannot occur when people think they are superior within a group and this hierarchy in dialogue limits the possibility of deep understanding and bonding.

Though the premise of jokes about three entities in a bar, as well as other types of humor, is not about the communicative interaction among the entities that are placed together in a situation within the joke's context, the importance of the communicative interaction between the joke teller and the listeners is of pivotal importance. This article focuses on the joke teller and the listener(s), represented in this case by the teacher and the students. The premise of the jokes serves to differentiate one member of the group within the joke while creating a source of bonding for the people telling the joke and those hearing it. This establishes a common ground for conversation and laughter between the teller and the listeners, which underscores the purpose of humor and might lead to building relationships.

To build these relationships, and for the humor to be effective, there must be shared knowledge between the members telling and those listening to the joke. This shared knowledge often leads to some discourse pertaining to the content of the joke. Jokes often contain ambiguous language or have a double

meaning, so higher-level language knowledge is necessary to move beyond the literal meaning. Shared understandings among the participants about the inferences and connotations of a dialogue are important for negotiating interpretations in any communication situation.

Theories

Traditionally, humor is discussed using the common theories of incongruity, superiority, or relief (Graham, Papa, & Brooks, 1992). After a review of the theories of humor, Krichtafovitch (2006) explained that cognitive theories address the role of incongruity and contrast in the induction of laughter, whereas social theories explore the roles of aggression, hostility, superiority, triumph, derision, and disparagement in humor and laughter. Superiority theory highlights the relationship between the speaker and the listener and elevates one over the other (Hobbes, 1650/1840). Shurcliff (1968) posited that relief theory states that humor is dependent on a release of anticipated expectation.

The effect of humor, Krichtafovitch (2006) further asserted, is to elevate the social status of the teller while the listener's social status is raised through the ability to get the joke. Thus, the type of humor plays a meaningful role in creating a relationship between speaker and listener. According to Raskin (1985), there are many similar theories of humor, such as disparagement theory, dispositional theory, and vicarious superiority theory, and "all focus on humor communications in which one party is disparaged or aggressed against by another party" (p. 37). Underpinning all of these theories is the relationship between the speaker and listener. This study focuses on this underpinning of relationships that influences learning.

METHOD

As stated previously, humor use is often touted as advantageous in the classroom (Chiassen, 2002; Crossman, 1964; Latiff & Daud, 2013; Medgyes, 2002; Senior, 2001; Ziyaeemehr, Kumar, & Faiz Abdullah, 2011). Yet the perception of humor is subjective. Before the teacher makes a definitive decision about the use of humor, it is important to understand both its merits and barriers. The purpose of this qualitative study was to describe acts of humor and the benefits and disadvantages of these acts in the classroom.

Qualitative design involves vivid descriptions

of human experiences and opinions (Yin, 2000). Humor is an ephemeral experience best understood by the participants in specific contexts and time periods. Through discourse between the teller and the listener, a better understanding of each group's perspective is understood by discussing the assumptions that influence each person's reactions. According to Finn (1999), one critical aspect of discourse is the ability to understand the underpinnings and to acknowledge individual perspectives. Qualitative design reflects this sensitivity to personal attributes of the use of humor and its perception, and it allows analysis to capture variation across participants. Specifically, this study addressed three questions:

1. How does the teacher use humor in the classroom?
2. How do students perceive humor used in the classroom?
3. To what extent do teacher intentions and student perceptions about humor align?

Therefore, this study explored specific participant experiences.

Research Sites and Participants

This article explores the types of humor used in classrooms in three countries: India, Turkey, and the United States. The study occurred in three classrooms in Maduri, India; two classrooms in Ankara, Turkey; and five classrooms in the state of Oregon, United States. The three countries provided culturally diverse environments based on student population, instructional practices, and perceived teacher authority. The schools in this study were all considered public or free schools and were not affiliated with any specific religion or organization or fee based. Additionally, the participating schools ranged in socioeconomic status (SES) (see Table 1). Further, literacy rates

Table 1. School Information

Country	School	SES	Number of Students
India	And Prad	Affluent	567
	Prak Java	Middle	492
	Tam Para	Poor	389
Turkey	Egitim	Affluent	289
	Mevki	Poor	375
United States	Alem	Affluent	586
	Glenhay	Middle class	497
	Wilken	Poor	678

of the populations and pupil–teacher ratios varied (Nation Master, 2019).

Table 2. Country Statistics

Country	India	Turkey	United States
Literacy Rate	59.5%	87.4%	99%
Pupil-teacher Ratio	35:1	28:1	14:1

The schools visited in India followed a model of lecture-style instruction with rote memorization tasks, thus teacher talk was dominant. The schools visited in Turkey were similar to schools in India, but they also provided guided student talk and some opportunities for students to respond to questions. The schools in both India and Turkey used some project-based learning. The schools visited in the United States provided multiple styles of instruction and student investigation. Oral language was used by teachers and students for learning tasks. However, in no school visited was the language use equal between teacher and student. Teacher talk was dominant and provided the framework for language use in classrooms.

The participants were teachers and students in the equivalent of fourth- to ninth-grade classrooms. Each country identified grade levels differently, thus, the students all were ages 9 to 15. Teachers were selected for this study by administrative staff because of their years in the school and good standing with administrators and parents. Observations took place in ten classrooms. A total of six classroom teachers, all female, volunteered to discuss classroom conversations in interviews. All students were invited to participate, though only students with mid to high English proficiency chose to participate. This could be considered a limitation, but the diversity in age and academic achievement provided some diversity within the student group. The student group also exhibited a range of economic statuses and genders. Interviews were conducted with 15 students representing the three countries.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected through observation, recordings of discussions, and interviews. Audio was recorded in these situations with a LiveScribe pen in field note journals and discussed with colleagues. These colleagues traveled to schools with the researcher and collaborated on observations.

Open-ended interview questions focused on understanding humor use from the perspective of the teacher and the student participants. Individual interviews were conducted separately, and teachers and students were interviewed on different days. Marshall and Rossman (2011) argued that flexibility in open-ended interviews aligned with the fundamental assumptions of a qualitative paradigm. Interviews were transcribed and member checking occurred a week after interviews. Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009) explained that when interview data, qualitatively analyzed, are integrated and member checking is confirmed, threats to inference quality decrease. Merriam (1998) asserted that member checking supports the researcher's attempts to derive appropriate themes and interpretations from the data collected. Because of the researcher's outsider status in India and Turkey, a volunteer from each school checked the researcher's interpretation of the data. There was no need for translators because the classes and interviews were conducted in English. This fact may have changed the observation and interview data. This study attends to personal participant experiences while recognizing the influential role that the researcher plays.

Due to the emergent and inductive nature of qualitative research, the process of open coding was used on each data set for initial themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Additionally, qualitative data software was used for further coding to capture frequencies in responses and analyze emergent themes within and across categories of data. Specifically, examination of humor was analyzed using the constant comparative method for (a) teacher intentionality, (b) student perception, and alignment between both (a) and (b). According to Geertz (1983), an analysis that is based on an individual's recognition of patterns of meaning and social action, when combined with a systemic analysis of the data with structured variables, contributes to a thick description of the phenomenon that contributes to contextual and theoretical understandings.

The data support findings not yet articulated in the literature. Although the perception of humor is subjective, the findings reveal that the types of humor most commonly perceived as advantageous by teachers and pejorative by students were bar-

type jokes and sarcasm. Analysis of teacher interviews revealed that teachers intended to use these jokes to create relationships, poke fun in a good-spirited way, and establish their authority/superiority. Student interviews revealed that the jokes influenced their beliefs about relationships, marginalization, and motivation to learn. As previously stated, each participant's perception of humor differed based on which member group they identified with.

RESULTS

The data sources provided examples that revealed information about intention, perception, and alignment in the two humor categories. There were bar-type jokes used in the high schools that were not set in bars but in various places in the school context. Moreover, the joke format resembled that of traditional bar-type jokes and consisted of a setup, with specific individuals (i.e., a football player, a basketball player, and a cheerleader) walking into familiar areas in the school (i.e., cafeterias, gyms, labs), and a punchline, the twist that makes you laugh and, in this case, separates one of these specific individuals. For example, "A cheerleader once walked into the science lab. The students said, 'Katie, what are you doing here?'" Although stereotypes were different in each country, variants of these jokes were used. The discussion after this joke was about cheerleaders not being smart enough to find the labs to attend class. The teacher joked that the cheer team had not shown up in the labs for years. Classroom jokes also used language groups to create humor. For example, jokes separating Tamil, Telugu, and Hindi speakers, in which Hindi speakers were the prestigious winners in the jokes, were common in several classrooms in India.

Sarcasm was the other type of humor that revealed information about intention and perception. In the middle schools in several countries, sarcastic remarks were a daily occurrence. Often, the use of sarcasm and other pejorative humor is prevalent in middle school classrooms (Frey & Fisher, 2008). For example, because he is cold, a black boy puts up the hood of his jacket in a middle school with predominantly white students, and the teacher says, "Oh, now that you're in a gang, when do you start bullying us to do what you want?" The teacher stated that by using historical stereotypes she was

being sarcastic and relating to the boy. Yet the boy considered the comment racist and hurtful because she thinks he would hurt people. An assessment of the situation between the teacher and student revealed a lack of shared knowledge. Both types of examples (bar-type jokes and sarcasm) were more commonly used than other types of humor at the time of the observations in this study. Moreover, this humor often included some sort of inferential information that was not always fully understood at various developmental levels and at various times. For example, the boy in the hoodie was not fully aware of what the teacher meant until he began talking with others. He merely knew his teacher's tone of voice and the words she used did not feel right to him. Yet some teachers' uses of humor were perceived by students as intended. They understood the humor and perceived it as funny or beneficial to the classroom environment. For instance, Student 3 stated, "I think the jokes in class are funny. I don't know why some of the other kids don't laugh."

Teacher Intent

Teachers reported using humor for three distinct reasons: (1) to build relationships, (2) to poke fun, and (3) to establish authority in classroom. Many teachers revealed that their reason for using humor was motivated by classroom management needs. Humor was used to "decrease social distance" by building positive relationships between teachers and students and thereby managing the classroom behavior (Cosner, 1959, p. 172). Teacher 2 stated:

I use these jokes as a means of bonding with my students. That is the way they related to each other, so it makes me seem like one of them. They laugh, so I know we are bonding. With this joking relationship, they will always do the work I ask and behave in school for me.

Several teachers argued that poking fun at students motivated them to "do better at a task" or to "learn more." Teacher 1 stated, "I use terms like diesel engine to joke and inspire students. You know some people are slow at catching the funny part of a joke." This teacher explained that "a diesel engine is slow to start. Eventually, a diesel engine runs like other engines and some would even say better, but they start slow. My students are sometimes this way—slow to catch

on.” Further, some teachers noted that they were always “teaching” and trying to find ways to engage students. Teachers stated that by building humor into the instruction, they were “earning student respect” and making it “easier to handle classroom problems” (Kavandi & Kavandi, 2016).

While there are studies that establish a relationship between humor and motivation or humor and increased learning (Chaissen, 2002; Larkin & Hein, 2000; Ziyaeemehr, Kumar, & Faiz Abdullah, 2011), there is a dearth of studies revealing that poking fun at students leads to positive motivation in learning. Moreover, studies examining humor that pokes fun at specific groups found that humor is used as a form of bullying that often leads to increased student anxiety.

In all three countries, teachers claimed they played an integral role in the shaping of not only the students’ understanding of content and the world but also of their identities. However, the perception of teacher respect and authority was different in each country. In the United States, teachers expressed an understanding of the important role they played in their students’ lives, but many felt that the teaching profession was not well respected throughout society. Some teachers argued that “administrators see us [teachers] as authority figures in the classroom, however, the general public does not respect the work we do.” In addition, several teachers revealed that they struggled to control students in the classroom while also facilitating student independence. Humor was a way to bring students back together and focus their energy on learning. Teachers stated that this type of engagement gave them control and accordingly, students showed these teachers more respect. Conversely, in India, teachers claimed that they felt their position of authority in the classroom was well known by administrators, society, and students. Although most felt empowered by their role as teachers in and out of schools, they used humor in much the same way as the teachers who felt that humor helped to control students and gain their respect. Teacher 5 stated, “I use them [bar-type jokes] with my students to show them my intelligence is more than with the subject material; to let them know they should not talk behind my back. I will always catch them.” Though Chiassen (2002) posited that teachers might interpret laughter

as a loss of control of classroom management and choose not to use humor, teachers in the study felt that humor and laughter were important to their relationships and control of the classroom.

These comments reveal an intentional effort to use humor as a well-intentioned, assistive tool. Teacher interview responses downplayed any hurtful consequences or marginalization of students and stated that the humor in their classrooms reflected students’ peer conversations. Most of the teachers felt that the humor they used relieved “the stress of school responsibilities and made the hard work more fun for everyone.”

When shown negative student responses, many of the teachers blamed the students. Teachers were surprised to find out that students perceived some of the jokes in a negative light. Teachers believed that they were “being fun” and “light-hearted” and that students were misunderstanding the humor or “being too sensitive.” They explained that “maybe it was just a bad day” for that student.

Students’ Perception

In India and Turkey, jokes about religion, typically involving Muslim, Christian, and Hindi faiths, were common. Aligning with tenets of superiority theory, dominant faiths were presented at the top of the hierarchy of the jokes. For example, in one school in India, jokes often involved the Bhagavad Gita. People that respected this text were seen as superior to people from other religions. If students did not know the Gita, they usually did not get the jokes and thus were ridiculed by the teacher. When the jokes used a form involving religious practices, many students took them personally. While some students did poke fun at their own religious traditions with wordplay or by varying intonation, most claimed that they were not sure how to respond when the humor involved religion and came from the teacher.

In addition, some students saw sarcasm as a means of marginalization (Frey & Fischer, 2008). They used sarcasm with their peers to make fun of each other or make the other feel inferior, so when their teacher used it, the students’ perception of it was reflective of their own usage. Thus, to some students, their teacher was targeting them and “being mean.”

Overall, the comments revealed that some students did not think about whether the teacher

liked them. They only remarked about how they did not like their teachers:

- I don't like Mrs. A. She is always making fun of me and calling me a tsetse fly, which meant I have a small brain. (Student 6)
- I hate English because Mrs. S. is so mean to us. She laughs at us all the time. She is always making fun of someone, and it is usually boys. We are trying to learn English, and she makes us not want to. (Student 12)

Interestingly, when asked about how students know what their teachers think of their academic abilities, students commented that their teachers never said much to them about how they were doing in each subject. They thought that based on graded papers and report cards, they would know what their teachers thought, though there was no direct communication about it. However, when asked how their teachers felt about them personally, students said they knew exactly, and many students directly referenced the jokes the teachers made about them as how they knew. If the teacher made them the butt of the sarcasm or put their group in a pejorative joke, they knew the teacher did not truly like them. No matter what else was said, these jokes were remembered most by students in all countries.

The alignment between intention and perception was not always consistent (de Jongste, 2013). Most of the time (62%) there was no alignment between intention and perception. It was not always clear why the mismatch occurred, but it was obvious that what was meant by humor acts was not always understood the same way.

DISCUSSION

Language is fundamentally ambiguous because interpretation is based on the experiences of speakers and listeners (Pinker, 2007) and the varying assumptions held by each based on their membership in different groups. In other words, one's ability to negotiate ambiguities increases when the speaker and the listener share assumptions and knowledge about the world (Scollon & Scollon, 2001). Interpretive understandings (or misunderstandings) are often a source of confusion in classrooms. Effective communication requires that teachers understand that different discourse systems carry different expectations and inferences based on different world views. Furthermore, teachers need to recognize their

own limited understandings of different discourse systems (Scollon & Scollon, 2001).

Education research has pointed to the importance of the teacher in classroom learning ameliorating communication misunderstandings (Ashley, 2015-2016; Curby, Grimm, & Pianta, 2010). The influence of a teacher impacts everything from general motivation to specific content understanding (Joseph & Strain, 2004; Lindfors, 1991; Smith, 1988). The teachers in this study were veterans and seemed to care deeply about each student's learning. They knew the importance of a positive teacher-student relationship (Newberry, 2010). After all, this is why they chose to intentionally use humor. This study found that it was sometimes an unfortunate occurrence that the humor was misapplied and misconstrued. Decades of research on humor use in the classroom fail to reveal a specific type of humor deemed effective by all; however, many studies provide useful examples applicable within contextual considerations. Additionally, this study aligned with other studies that demonstrate that humor such as sarcasm is detrimental to learning for some students.

Chiassen (2002) found that using humor in the classroom should be carefully considered based on the students and the environment. Humor design must account for the individual tastes and expectations of students present in the classroom (Vijay, 2014). Furthermore, humor resulting in sadistic pleasure should be avoided, even when control of students is achieved. Kristmanson (2000) reiterated the importance of using humor to create a risk-free classroom, free from ridicule and anxiety. It is important to recognize the growing diversity present in classrooms around the world and to understand that humor is subjective. The perception of jokes within varied populations results in a number of consequences.

This article highlights the importance of several areas of consideration of using humor, such as motivation of use, the relationship between speaker intention and listener perception, and the level of shared knowledge. Though spontaneous humor is often the best method of engagement in the moment of everyday talk (Norrick, 1993), taking time to understand the motivation behind the use of specific forms of humor in the classroom might help determine whether it will enhance the

lesson or environment or marginalize one or more students. This is not to say that all humor must be calculated in advance to be appropriate; however, being more intentional with language use might create a positive atmosphere where everyone gets the joke and laughs (Vijay, 2014). Additionally, in a setting where the audience is a classroom of students, creating a safe environment to use humor involves knowing the students and how they might perceive a specific joke or anecdote. Carefully choosing the way to introduce humor might lead to fewer mismatches in understanding and more moments of laughter. Though the language “in people’s heads does not always translate automatically into appropriate words and phrases . . .” uttered through the mouth (Chafe & Danielwisc, 1987, p. 4), effective oral communication requires the speaker to choose carefully from their lexicon and syntax knowledge to express specific intentions to listeners.

Further, studies in language-learning classrooms also provide ways to build the shared knowledge needed in the two-way interaction of humor use (Crosman, 1964; Latiff & Daud, 2013). For example, Bell (2002, 2005) found that language play helped students form deeper meaning. Playing with language forms (sounds and rhymes), grammar, and vocabulary in a nonthreatening environment allowed students to build shared knowledge and understand specific nuances of humorous exchanges. Medgyes (2002) and Bell (2005) suggested that explicit analysis of humor such as jokes and puns is helpful for linguistic and sociolinguistic development.

CONCLUSION

In sum, the examples provided in this article exemplify the need to carefully consider how humor use might best serve each learning environment. The language teachers use is synthesized by students, and often a teacher’s language is perpetuated by them. Students learn from teachers as they do from parents and repeat what they hear. For example, sarcasm is applied to peer groups perpetuating notions of superiority; that is, I make you the butt of the joke and the group knows how cool I am.

It is widely recognized that humor is a powerful tool in the classroom (Boerman-Cornell, 1999; McMahon, 1999; Minchew, 2001). Its benefits range from adding fun and motivation to learning

to building comprehension and increasing self-esteem (Gilliland & Mauritsen, 1971). However, it is important to consider what type of humor is used and how students are perceiving it. Since humor is a personal experience guided by many influences, is important to be aware that we may not all be processing humor in the same way. Students with different background knowledge will experience humor differently. Additionally, it is through education that our ability to communicate worldwide might shape or be shaped by our awareness of and respect and compassion for others.

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