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The Role of Humour in the English Language Classroom

S. Kumaran, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.

This paper examines how humour in the English classroom can improve learning and teaching English. Instead of analysing theories on humour, this paper tries to bring out the necessity of humour in the classroom through “humorous” exercises.

Humour is not something that induces laughter, rather it acts as a wonderful means to enhance the learning skills of the students. “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 together a chain-reaction by increasing the learner's motivation and self-confidence which creates a positive classroom atmosphere for the smooth acquisition of the language” (Chee 2006). Humour helps students to develop their analytical thinking skills and to achieve command over the language in question.

Humour through Definition

Defining a popular term or concept in a manner that is unexpected brings out humour. There is potential for this humour in the features that constitute a concept. However, this

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potential is not used in day to day language. Even to identify this potential you need some analytical skills. More often than not, we notice this potential in a familiar term only after this potential is revealed through the humorous twist given to the particular word or term.

The following list of humorous definitions demonstrates how analytical skills could be achieved through humour:

1. **Cigarette:** A pinch of tobacco rolled in paper with fire at one end and a fool at the other.
2. **Love affair:** Something like cricket where one-day internationals are more popular than a five day test.
3. **Marriage:** It's an agreement in which a man loses his bachelor degree and a woman gains her Master.
4. **Divorce:** Future tense of marriage.
5. **Lecture:** An art of transferring information from the notes of the lecturer to the notes of the students without passing through "the minds of either."
6. **Conference:** The confusion of one man multiplied by the numbers present.
7. **Compromise:** The art of dividing a cake in such a way that everybody believes he/she got the largest piece.
8. **Tears:** The hydraulic force by which masculine will-power is defeated by feminine water-power.
9. **Dictionary:** A place where divorce comes before marriage.
10. **Conference Room:** A place where everybody talks, nobody listens and everybody disagrees. later on.
11. **Ecstasy:** A feeling when you feel you are going to feel a feeling you have never felt before.
12. **Classic:** Books which people praise, but do not read.
13. **Smile:** A curve that can set a lot of things straight.
14. **Office:** A place where you can relax after your strenuous home life.

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15. **Yawn:** The only time some married men ever get to open their mouth.
16. **Etc.:** A sign to make others believe that you know more than you actually do.
17. **Committee:** Individuals who can do nothing individually and sit to decide that nothing can be done together.
18. **Experience:** The name men give to their mistakes.
19. **Atom Bomb:** An invention to end all inventions.
20. **Philosopher:** A fool who torments himself during life, to be spoken of when dead.
21. **Diplomat:** A person who tells you to go to hell in such a way that you actually look forward to the trip.
22. **Opportunist:** A person who starts taking bath if he accidentally falls into a river.
23. **Optimist:** A person, who while falling from Eiffel Tower, says in midway "See I am not injured yet."
24. **Pessimist:** A person who says that O is the last letter in ZERO, instead of the first letter in word OPPORTUNITY.
25. **Miser:** A person who lives poor so that he can die rich.
26. **Father:** A banker provided by Nature.
27. **Criminal:** A guy no different from the rest... except that he got caught.
28. **Boss:** Someone who is early when you are late and late when you are early.
29. **Politician:** One who shakes your hand before elections, and your confidence after.
30. **Doctor:** A person who kills your ills by pills, and kills you with his bills.
31. **School:** A place where Papa pays and Son plays.
32. **Life Insurance:** A contract that keeps you poor all your life so that you can die rich.

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33. **Nurse:** A person who wakes you up to give you sleeping pills.

(<http://www.slideshare.net/omar466/funny-definition>)

In Aid of Creativity

Humour can be used to enhance the writing skills and to nurture the creativity of students. When students are asked to write about something, they may take the process as a burden, boring and laborious. On the other hand, if they are assigned tasks that are humorous in nature, they may feel self-motivated to explore their hidden potential.

The following activity throws light on this possibility:

A boy, who is being disliked by his girlfriend's father, writes a letter to his girlfriend fully well knowing that his girlfriend's father, who tries to stop their relationship, will definitely read the letter:

"The great love that I have for you
is gone, and I find my dislike for you
grows every day. When I see you,
I do not even like your face;
the one thing that I want to do is to
look at other girls. I never wanted to
marry you. Our last conversation
was very boring and has not
made me look forward to seeing you again.
You think only of yourself.

If we were married, I know that I would find
life very difficult, and I would have no
pleasure in living with you. I have a heart
to give, but it is not something that
I want to give to you. No one is more
foolish and selfish than you, and you are not
able to care for me and help me.

I sincerely want you to understand that
I speak the truth. You will do me a favor
if you think this is the end. Do not try
to answer this. Your letters are full of

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things that do not interest me. You have no true love for me. Good-bye! Believe me, I do not care for you. Please do not think that I am still your boyfriend."

So bad!! However, before handing over the letter to the girl, the boy told the girl to "*Read Between Lines*"...

Between lines? Try yourself...

Read the Alternate Lines.. [1,3,5 etc...]

It's so smart & sweet.... (http://www.anvari.org/fun/Truth/Love_Letter.html)

By reading between the lines one gets the following message:

"The great love that I have for you grows every day. When I see you, the one thing that I want to do is to marry you. Our last conversation made me look forward to seeing you again.

If we were married, I know that I would find pleasure in living with you. I have a heart I want to give to you. No one is more able to care for me and help me.

I speak the truth. You will do me a favor to answer this. Your letters are full of true love for me. Good-bye! Believe me, I am still your boyfriend."

Humorous Episodes for Learning English

Students can very well be assigned challenging humorous tasks, as shown above, to enhance their writing skills and creativity. It does not mean that only an exercise on love letter writing to be given, rather, the teacher and the students may identify their own contexts such as an informer sending message to police, examiner sending a note to the squad members, the class leader writing a note his teacher, etc.

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Common Errors in English can also be pointed out through humour. Today, the method is widely used to make students understand correct usage. It is important to recognize that students should develop their skill in identifying common errors that they and others commit in English. This should be linked with the effort in eliminating such errors through conscious effort. Humour can be used in all these processes.

Some Examples

Look at the following collection of “leave letters” or request for leave of absence, or letters of request for vacation, etc.

1. An employee applied for leave of absence as follows:
Since I have to go to my village to sell my land along with my wife, please sanction me one-week leave.
2. From an employee who was performing the "mundan" ceremony of his 10 year old son: "As I want to shave my son's head, please leave me for two days... "
3. From the Administration department:
"As my mother-in-law has expired and I am only one responsible for it, please grant me 10 days leave."
4. Another employee applied for half a day leave of absence as follows:
"Since I've to go to the cremation ground at 10 o'clock and I may not return, please grant me half day casual leave"
5. Another leave of absence letter:
"I am suffering from fever, please declare one day holiday."
6. A request for the leave of absence to the headmaster:
"As I am studying in this school I am suffering from headache. I request you to leave me today"
7. Another request for leave of absence letter written to the headmaster:
"As my headache is paining, please grant me leave for the day."
8. Covering note:
"I am enclosed herewith..."

9. Another one:

"Dear Sir: with reference to the above, please refer to my below..."

10. Actual letter written for leave of absence:

"My wife is suffering from sickness and as I am her only husband at home I may be granted leave".

11. Letter writing:

"I am in well here and hope you are also in the same well."

12. A candidate's job application:

"This has reference to your advertisement calling for a Typist and an Accountant - Male or Female'... As I am both for the past several years and I can handle both with good experience, I am applying for the post.

<http://www.funonthenet.in/forums/index.php?topic=34913.0:wap2>

Teacher Preparation is Needed

One cannot deny the suitability of the above mentioned sentences in teaching Common Errors in English committed in India. Such examples enliven the class atmosphere even as these provide actual examples of our errors. What is needed is a devoted exercise in identifying and correcting the errors. Both teachers and students need some training and preparation here.

Use of Jokes

Learning can also be achieved through the use jokes. It is well said that "Humor in the form of a joke should be the spice of a lesson but it should not over-stretch the attention of the class" (Gatt 2000). Through Jokes, it is possible to improve our skill in using sentence structures, other grammar aspects, vocabulary, and critical thinking skills of the students.

Here below are some examples:

Short Jokes

1. Two boys were arguing when the teacher entered the room.

The teacher says, "Why are you arguing?"

One boy answers, "We found a ten dollar bill and decided to give it to whoever tells the biggest lie."

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"You should be ashamed of yourselves," said the teacher, "When I was your age I didn't even know what a lie was."

The boys gave the ten dollars to the teacher.

2. A nervous old lady on a bus was made even more nervous by the fact that the driver periodically took his arm out of the window. When she couldn't stand it any longer, she tapped him on the shoulder and whispered on his ear: "Young man...you keep both hands on the wheel... I'll tell you when it's raining." (<http://iteslj.org/c/jokes.html>)

Skills are Developed Using Humour

Through an analysis it is found that a teacher can make the class more interesting and can transform even the duller topics into impressive ones through humour. Humour enhances the listening skills of the learners as the humour presented attracts their attention. Students recognize the points being taught and they also remember all the time the purpose and context of such learning, which may result in considerable reduction in errors.

To Conclude

What is needed is to develop a master list of humorous items for each class. The master list can receive episodes from well-known movies, biographies, school plays, novels and poetry pieces, in addition to other sources. In reality, once the students are introduced to this sort of fun activities they are bound to identify suitable humorous items and even to create such items on their own. However, there is also the danger that such activities can easily lead students into take advantage of hurtful expressions, biases and prejudices. They may also tend to draw from sexual metaphors. There are several things against which the teachers should take precautionary steps while introducing humor as an important part of error recognition as well as learning correct English usage.

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