

Critical Review:
Does the use of humour in language instruction foster second language development in English as a second language (ESL) learners?

Marina Bishay
M.Cl.Sc (SLP) Candidate
University of Western Ontario: School of Communication Sciences and Disorders

The implementation of humour in language instruction settings is known to result in significant benefits. This critical review examines evidence regarding the effect of humour employment on language acquisition and individual perceptions. A literature search using computerized databases resulted in seven articles meeting the inclusion criteria. Study designs include: a systematic review, a qualitative study, a case study, a survey research study, and three randomized control trials. The articles were evaluated using a critical appraisal template assessing the level of evidence and clinical importance. Overall, the results support the implementation of humour as it can contribute to language acquisition and create environments conducive to learning.

Introduction

Humour is one of the most authentic and universal speech acts in human communication (Askildson, 2005). It has been documented that use of humour in second language classrooms can facilitate language teaching and learning (Bell, 2009). Humour in the classroom may be categorized into three classes: verbal humour (consisting of jokes, anecdotes or puns), nonverbal humour (cartoons, written passages) and mixed humour consisting of both verbal and nonverbal humour (Hativa et al., 2001). In addition to promoting an environment that fosters students' interest and comfort, it can be used as a tool that primes students to the phonological, lexical, and syntactic differences between a student's native language (L1) and second language (L2) (Askildson, 2005).

Humour has the ability to cause amusement due to its comical, absurd, or incongruous qualities (Matthews, 2001). This feeling of amusement derived from an unexpected surprise can contribute to students' overall learning enjoyment. Based on the Incongruity Theory, one needs to solve the incongruity of the joke in order to understand. This task gives readers a cognitive task, recruiting one's motivation and attention, influencing memory performance (Zabidin, 2015). Humour can reduce tension that is often prevalent in language learning classrooms as well as assist in creating bonds among classmates (Ziyaemehr & Kumar, 2014; Bell, 2009). In addition, implementing humour in language classrooms can reinforce class attendance and increase teaching effectiveness (Deiter, 2000).

In addition to creating an appealing environment conducive to language learning, humour can also introduce and reinforce phonological, morphological, lexical, and syntactic differences between a student's first language or target language (Askildson, 2005). This is thought to be attributed to the fact that humour can increase learners' motivation, thus facilitating the consolidation of language concepts and structures. (Ketabi & Simm, 2009; Salehi & Hesabi, 2014). Studies that were critically evaluated in this review explored the effects of humour on vocabulary retention, reading comprehension, and personal attitudes.

Results gathered from the studies in this critical review may be used by curriculum designers to create relevant material that can promote students' motivation and enhance language acquisition.

Objectives

The primary objective of this paper is to critically evaluate existing literature regarding the effects of humour implementation on language acquisition of English as a Second Language (ESL) learners. The secondary objective is to determine the implications of this body of evidence for clinical practice, curriculum development, and future research.

Methods

Search Strategy

The following online databases were used to locate relevant articles: Google Scholar, Scholars Portal Journals, and Academic One File, and the Directory of Open Access Scholarly Resources. Search terms included:

(humor) OR (humour) AND (second language) OR (SLL) OR (second language learners) OR (L2) OR (English as a Foreign Language/EFL learners) OR (ESL learners) AND (language development)

Selection Criteria

Studies selected for this critical review focused on the use of humour to support second language learning and provided analyses at the individual, interactional, and class level. In order to focus on recent research, the search was limited to articles written in English between 2000 and 2018.

Data Collection

Results of the literature search yielded seven articles that met the aforementioned selection criteria: systematic review (1), case study (1), qualitative study (1), survey research study (1), and randomized control trials (3).

Results

Systematic Review:

A systematic review is a type of study that attempts to answer a particular research question by integrating available literature (Kitchenham, 2004). Since they are nonexperimental, they result in level four evidence according to the experimental design decision tree (Archibald, 2009)

Bell (2009) derived data from three research projects (interviews, participant observations, and discourse analysis of audio/video recorded interactions) that involved the use and understanding of humour by L2 speakers in classroom and non-classroom settings. In this article, Bell (2009) addresses the importance of implementing humour into the language classroom by providing recommendations for pedagogical applications of humour.

Based on her observations, Bell (2009) argues that the classroom is an appropriate place to implement humour for several reasons: learners desire it, humour is more restricted outside of educational contexts for L2 speakers, and playful use of language may facilitate second language learning (SLL). Bell (2009) recommends using discourse analytic techniques to analyze samples of humour in class to help incorporate humour into the classroom. Teachers may also provide video or tape recordings involving humour as a means to increase discussion. The use of drama in the classroom may also allow students to learn through imitation and memorization.

Since this study is based on the author's own previous research, systematic bias must be considered when interpreting the results. Nonetheless, the author invites further quantitative research to evaluate different pedagogical approaches to humour. Overall, the article provides somewhat suggestive evidence that humour may be incorporated into the L2 classroom to contribute to linguistic and cultural development.

Qualitative Study:

A qualitative study is designed to answer a question through nonexperimental methods such as naturalistic observations (Pathak, 2013). This type of research delves deeper into underlying reasons or functions of human experiences. Since these studies do not result in objective quantitative data, they are considered level four evidence according to the experimental design decision tree (Archibald, 2009).

Ziyaemehr & Kumar (2014) performed an inductive analysis through audio-recordings and classroom observations to determine the instructional functions of humour in the L2 environment. The participants in this study were university professors and students who were involved in ESL studies at a Malaysian university. Participants had varying first language and cultural backgrounds. Researchers analyzed the recordings by first identifying all verbal humour units and then assigning those utterances with codes to represent the strategy used to convey the humour. Researchers then identified the different functions of humour use that can affect aspects of classroom discourse. The result is three instructional functions of implementing humour in the classroom drawn from 124 spontaneous humour instances.

One instructional function of humour is "foregrounding form". This means that verbal humour can bring attention to form-based information. For example, the use of puns, word plays, or tongue twisters can draw students' attention to a formal aspect of the target language. The researchers observed the instructor reminding his class to use the singular form of "leg" when saying the expression "pulling someone's leg". The excerpts of the observation demonstrate the role of form-related humorous verbalizations.

Humour is also intrinsic in figurative and idiomatic expressions can be used to "reinforce meaning". The incongruity between the literal and figurative meaning of an expression can expand meaning and reinforce differences between the target and native language. In the audio-recordings, the instructor tried

to define what a “metaphor” was through the metaphorical expression “your jaw dropped”.

Another instructional function of humour is that it highlights “cultural dissimilarities”. The cultural differences between target and native language can be used to share cultural knowledge. Based on one observation in the study, cultural knowledge may be shared when instructors give anecdotes of misunderstandings that have happened in their interactions with newcomers to the culture.

Despite the fact that this study claims that linguistic and cultural knowledge can be made accessible to students through the implementation of language-based humour, it does not specify the type of qualitative methods used to reach this conclusion. Therefore, it is difficult to appraise whether their study aligned well with stringent qualitative criteria. Overall, the article provides somewhat suggestive evidence that verbalizations of humorous ideas in an L2 learning environment may help to develop L2 learners’ understanding of language form and meaning as well as cultural understanding in the target language.

Case Study:

Case studies are studies that are nonexperimental and result in comprehensive investigations of a single subject or a small group of subjects (Gerring, 2017). Subsequently, they result in level four evidence according to the experimental design decision tree due to limitations in their generalizability (Archibald, 2009).

Bell (2005) completed a case study that aimed to determine the ways in which verbal humour was initiated by three non-native English speakers (NNSs) as they interacted with native speakers (NSs) of English.

Each NNS was initially interviewed to obtain information about their language background, the NSs they usually interacted with, and explore their views on both L1 and L2 humour. Then, the NNSs were encouraged to audio-record their interactions with NSs at their discretions. The NNSs returned with a total of 32 hours of naturally occurring interactions, consisting of 541 examples of conversational humour, of which 204 were initiated by the NNSs and 337 were initiated by the NSs. After the author identified instances of humorous language play, she set up two playback interviews to ascertain the validity of her perceptions and to understand each participant’s view of a particular interaction.

Bell (2005) identified three functions of humour as a result of the interactions between NSs and NNSs. She found that through experimentation with L2 voices, sociolinguistic competence may be achieved. That is, through double-voicing, one may express two different intentions simultaneously. One example of this was seen in the audio-recording when a NNS imitated the voice of the host of *The Weakest Link*. By using a pop culture resource, the NNS achieved double-voicing and displayed sarcasm.

Another function of humour according to Bell (2005) is to draw attention to form and meaning of linguistic elements. Learners’ attention can be drawn to linguistic forms through implicit feedback and “reformulation” by a native speaker. By receiving feedback by an NS, one NNS was able to learn a more colloquial expression for physical attractiveness (“hot”). Through presentation of this new form by the NS, the NNS learns to extend meaning of the word “hot” to a new context.

Humour also acts to destabilize the interlanguage (IL) system, which is defined as the “mapping of L1 meanings onto L2 words”. This was seen during an interaction with an NNS and NS where the NNS was given the opportunity to adjust the scope of a lexical item’s semantic field. In the audio-recordings the NNS understood that the word ‘clone’ may be used to denote physical similarity between things and not just ‘to copy’. The possibilities for using ‘clone’ as a metaphor opened up and by interacting with her NS communication partner in a humorous exchange, she allowed for deeper and memorable processing for future use.

One strength of this article is the quantity of footage that was received from NNSs, providing Bell with many opportunities to observe functions of humour. However, because this article may be difficult to generalize, it provides suggestive evidence that language play may facilitate second language learning. Bell (2005) acknowledges that more controlled conditions in a classroom might allow researchers to determine what specific factors of L2 language play have a function on second language learning.

Survey Research Study:

Survey research studies provide information about a population’s perceptions towards a specific topic (Siedlecki, 2015). Since survey research designs are based on perceptual data rather than empirical data, it results in level four evidence according to the experimental design decision tree (Archibald, 2009).

Askildson (2005) administered a survey to 236 second language learners and 11 second language instructors regarding the importance of employing humour in the classroom. Researchers wanted to determine if students and/or teachers perceive humour to be beneficial in learning language and culture and helpful in reducing affective barriers to learning.

Appropriate descriptive statistical analysis was completed. The results of the questionnaire suggest that there are many beneficial effects of employing humour in the language classroom. Both teachers and students indicated that general humour is an important element of creating an environment conducive to learning, suggesting that it can reduce stress, improve accessibility of teachers, and enhance interest levels. The survey also revealed that students and teachers perceive greater language and cultural learning as a result of employing linguistic humour in the target language.

The article provides preliminary perceptual evidence that teachers and students are receptive to the use of humour in the classroom. However, the authors posit that a controlled study measuring the gain and retention among learners presented with targeted linguistic humour would provide more compelling outcomes. As a result, this article provides suggestive evidence that linguistic humour may serve as a medium to transmit linguistic and cultural information in an engaging and interesting way.

Randomized Control Trials (RCT):

Randomized control trials (RCT) are studies that involve random assignment of participants into two groups: the control group and the experimental group. The experimental group receives the treatment that is in question while the control group does not receive treatment. Researchers ensure homogeneity among participants in both groups to guarantee that there are no other confounding variables that may affect the dependent variables (Kendall, 2003). Utilizing a randomized control trial (RCT) results in level one evidence according to the experimental design decision tree (Archibald, 2009).

Hayati, Shooshtari, & Shakeri (2011) explored the outcomes of humorous texts on reading comprehension of EFL students. They first questioned whether there is a significant relationship between recall ability and the presentation of English jokes as a pre-reading activity. They also examined whether there would be significant differences in recall ability between males and females. This review will focus on the first question. Researchers

randomly divided forty students into two groups (n=20) and invited them to attend seven reading sessions. The experimental group read a joke followed by the texts, while the control group read the same reading text without a joke. Two days after each reading session, researchers administered a delayed post-test that assessed students' memory performance through free recall and question answering tasks.

Appropriate statistical analysis was completed. According to the t-test that compared recall performances of both groups over seven sessions, there was no significant difference between the recall scores of both groups. However, recall and comprehension scores of the experimental group showed improvement from the first reading.

The results should be interpreted with some caution due to the fact that there were a limited number of reading sessions. There were also no immediate recall testing sessions in order to determine comprehensive differences in consolidation. In addition, the researchers acknowledged that experimenter bias could have occurred since the administration procedures were directed by a teacher. There are some strengths of this article. The researchers administered a proficiency test to ensure homogeneity between the control and experimental participants. The reliability of this test was noted.

Overall, the article provides suggestive evidence that a joke as a pre-reading activity may motivate students and attract their attention towards a reading comprehension task.

Salehi & Hesabi (2014) investigated whether teaching grammar through humour had significant effects on grammar improvement of Iranian English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners in the short-term versus long-term. They also wanted to determine if Iranian EFL learners have positive outlooks toward teaching grammar through humour. Researchers randomly divided sixty students into two groups (n=30), the experimental and control group where they attended six reading sessions. In the control group, students received traditional instruction of grammar while students in the experimental group initiated grammar lessons with some jokes based on the session's target grammatical objective.

Each group underwent pre-testing of a Solutions Placement Test prior to the sessions to ensure homogeneity of the two groups. After the last session was over, an immediate post-test was administered in

the last reading session to determine the efficacy of the treatment in the short-term. A delayed post-test (identical to the immediate post-test) was administered two weeks later to determine long-term effects of teaching grammar. The pretest and post-test were conducted to determine their validity and reliability. Once the treatment was completed, 10 participants from the experimental group were randomly selected to answer eight semi-structure interview questions about humour use in teaching, learners' perception of the course, the development of their learning, and the attributes of the class and teacher.

Appropriate statistical analysis via use of independent t-tests of the data was performed. The results indicated that performance of the experimental group was better than that of the control group in both short- and long-terms. In addition, all participants of the questionnaire believed that humour should be used in foreign language classrooms because it makes learning enjoyable for them by helping them pay more attention to the grammatical structures in class.

There are several strengths of this article. There was rigorous statistical testing to ensure homogeneity between the control and experimental group. The use of the Solutions Placement Test was explored through the consultation of experts to ensure content validity and reliability. One limitation is that the delayed post-test was the same as the immediate post-test thus, there is a risk that practice effects could have affected the results. There were also a limited number of reading sessions (six) which may not be enough time to determine if there was grammar development.

Overall, this article provides highly suggestive evidence suggesting that humour may be used as a stimulus in teaching grammar to increase language comprehension and retention, while also contributing to an enjoyable learning environment.

Zabidin (2015) investigated whether there would be any differences in gain and retention scores between students exposed to humorous text and students exposed to non-humorous text. Researchers randomly divided fifty students to two groups who attended four reading sessions. The experimental group was exposed to short humorous text during each session while the experimental group was exposed to non-humorous text.

Prior to each reading session, a pre-test was administered to observe vocabulary recognition of

target words in the respective texts. After each session, an immediate vocabulary test was administered to each group (post-test 1). After one week, a delayed vocabulary test (post-test 2) was given to assess vocabulary retention. All the tests consisted of multiple-choice questions requiring students to match a definition to its target word. In all reading sessions, the items on the delayed vocabulary test were presented in randomized order to reduce practice effects.

Appropriate statistical analysis was completed. Preliminary analysis indicated that participants in both groups showed an increase in scores from pre-test to post-test 1 (gain scores). This demonstrates that both groups were able to comprehend novel vocabulary when they were simply given texts, irrespective of whether they were humorous or not. The use of either text helped students to increase word comprehension and knowledge. Further statistical analysis indicated that there was no significant difference in gain scores between the experimental and control group, with one exception that occurred in Session 1 where the experimental group reported a mean of 0.8 lower than the control group. Authors suspect that this finding could be due to the fact that some participants in the experimental group already knew the words included in the texts before the experiment (as is evident in their high pre-test scores). As a result, they matched the correct words in pre-test and post-test 1 accurately, leading to more gain scores of '0' for the experimental group.

In addition, there was no significant difference in retention scores (obtained from post-test 2 scores) between experimental and control groups. However, students in the experimental group obtained a marginally higher mean of retention scores compared to those in the control group in two out of the four sessions.

There are some strengths in the article. There was comprehensive statistical testing to ensure homogeneity between the control and experimental group. The humorous and non-humorous texts were comparable and contained identical words that were measured in identical format in the pre-test and post-test to prevent confounding variables. Content validity of the pre-test, post-test 1, and post-test 2 were analyzed through consultation of opinions of two lecturers with more than 10 years of English teaching experience. The authors cite limitations that may have affected the results of the study. The limited number of reading sessions may have not been enough to observe adequate growth of vocabulary knowledge. The fact that the selection of

target words in the tests and readings were not chosen based on progressing levels of difficulty also contributes to that limitation. The participants' topics of interest were not taken into account when choosing the target words, which may have affected students' word comprehension and recall. The fact that individuals in the experimental group exhibited higher pre-test scores demonstrates the lack of homogeneity between the two groups.

Overall, the article provides suggestive evidence that humour may be used to enhance vocabulary comprehension, knowledge, and retention.

Discussion

This review critically evaluated the literature in order to determine if humour may foster language development in second language learners. Overall, the findings from these studies indicate that the interactional instances and pedagogical uses of humour may promote linguistic development and contribute to an inviting language learning environment.

The use of humour in furthering language development has been posited by all seven articles included in this review. Bell (2009) suggested that the use of drama or discourse analysis of video/audio recordings are tools to employ humour. Bell (2005) and Ziyaeemehr & Kumar (2014) found that humorous instances may help emphasize form and meaning to ESL learners. Askildson (2005) administered a survey to teachers and students and found that they perceive greater language and cultural learning as a result of employing linguistic humour in the target language. Controlled studies also help to support the use of humour in classrooms. Zabidin (2015) discovered that exposure to humorous and non-humorous texts may help to increase vocabulary comprehension. Recall scores increased across two reading sessions in the experimental group, suggesting that humorous text may contribute to students' vocabulary retention under the principle of the Incongruity Theory- that resolution of a humorous idea may recruit one's attention and enhance memory performance. Salehi and Hesabi (2014) reported that the use of humour in classrooms resulted in better short- and long-term grammatical outcomes potentially stemming from the positive effect humour has on memory consolidation. Hayati, Shooshtari, & Shakeri (2011) noted that humour resulted in progressive improvement in comprehension scores suggesting that those in the humorous group may have been motivated and

interested, thus making the reader pay closer attention to the information.

Another element of humour use in the classroom involves the ways it can contribute to an environment conducive to second language learning. Students and teachers indicated that general humour is an important element to increasing accessibility of teachers and enhancing interest levels (Askildson, 2005). Students believed that humour should be used in foreign language classrooms because it makes learning enjoyable for them, helping them pay more attention to the grammatical structures in the class (Salehi & Hesabi, 2014).

Future Research

Additional research is recommended to reinforce the current level of evidence. In future studies, the following suggestions may be further explored:

1. Studies over an extensive period of time to accurately assess language acquisition.
2. Comprehensive means of assessing development of language grammar, comprehension, and recall, without risk of practice effects.
3. Differentiation between the types of humour employed in classroom.
4. Clinical involvement of Speech-Language Pathologists (SLPs) in language acquisition of ESL population.

Clinical Implications

Teachers are one of the many professionals who work with an ESL population to facilitate and promote social and academic success. SLPs also work clinically with this population by administering evidence-based assessments and interventions to support speech and language development. SLPs may use this information to inform their therapeutic practices and create a clinical environment conducive to language acquisition. In addition, their comprehensive knowledge of language development and its functional relationship to academic performance is significant to teacher and SLP collaborations. Through the partnership of teachers and SLPs, professionals can bridge the gap between research and practice by implementing humour to help students receive the best access to the curriculum and grow in necessary areas such as reading and writing. Curriculum developers can also use this information to design relevant and applicable school programs that are motivating and engaging to ESL learners.

References

- Archibald, L. (2009). Experimental Design Decision Tree [online resource]. Retrieved from: https://owl.uwo.ca/access/lessonbuilder/item/99315345/group/a239b995-c520-4875-81ab-5605dba1eaf0/Experimental_Design_Decision_Tree09a.pdf
- Askildson, L. (2005). Effects of humor in the language classroom: Humor as a pedagogical tool in theory and practice. *The Arizona Working Papers in Second Language Acquisition and Teaching*, 12, 45-61.
- Bell, N. D. (2005). Exploring L2 language play as an aid to SLL: A case study of humour in NS-NNS interaction. *Applied Linguistics*, 26(2), 192-218. doi:10.1093/applin/amh043
- Bell, N. D. (2009). Learning about and through humor in the second language classroom. *Language Teaching Research*, 13(3), 241-258. doi:10.1177/1362168809104697
- Deiter, R. (2000). The use of humor as a teaching tool in the college classroom. *NACTA journal*, 20-28.
- Gerring, J. (2017). Case study research: Principles and practices (Second ed.). Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.
- Hativa, N., Barak, R., & Simhi, E. (2001). Exemplary university teachers: Knowledge and beliefs regarding effective teaching dimensions and strategies. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 72(6), 699-729. doi:10.1080/00221546.2001.11777122
- Hayati, A., Shoostari, Z., & Shakeri, N. (2011). Using Humorous Texts in Improving Reading Comprehension of EFL Learners. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, Vol.1, No. 6, pp. 652-661. doi: 10.4304/tpls.1.6.652-661
- Kendall, J. M. (2003). Designing a research project: Randomised controlled trials and their principles. *Emergency Medicine Journal: EMJ*, 20(2), 164-168. doi:10.1136/emj.20.2.164
- Ketabi, S., & Simm, I. S. (2009). Investigating Persian EFL teachers and learners' attitudes towards humor in class. *International Journal of Language Studies*, 3(4), (435-452).
- Kitchenham, B. (2004). Procedures for Performing Systematic Reviews. Retrieved from: <http://www.inf.ufsc.br/~aldo.vw/kitchenham.pdf>
- Matthews, M. L. M. (2011). A funny thing happened on the way to the hippocampus: The effects of humor on student achievement and memory retention. Arizona State University.
- Pathak, V., Jena, B., & Kalra, S. (2013). Qualitative research. *Perspectives in clinical research*, 4(3), 192. doi: 10.4103/2229-3485.115389
- Salehi, F., & Hesabi, A. (2014). Impact of teaching grammar through humor on Iranian EFL learners. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 4(8), 1641-1652. doi:10.4304/tpls.4.8.1641-1652
- Siedlecki, S. L., Butler, R. S., & Burchill, C. N. (2015). Survey design research: A tool for answering nursing research questions. *Clinical Nurse Specialist*, 29(4), E1-E8. doi:10.1097/NUR.000000000000134
- Zabidin, N. (2015). The Use of Humour Texts in Improving ESL Learner's Vocabulary Comprehension and Retention. *English Language Teaching*, Vol. 8, No. 9. doi: 10.5539/elt.v8n9p104
- Ziyaeemehr, A., & Kumar, V. (2013). The role of verbal humor in second language education. *International Journal of Research Studies in Education*, 3(2) doi:10.5861/ijrse.2013.474