

Humor: A teaching tool to use rather than ignore

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Abstract

A smooth transfer of knowledge from instructor to student is what is desired in any learning context. One of the essential methods in making this happen is the use of humor in teaching. This study sought the influence of humor as a teaching tool on the student's engagement in classroom learning from students' point of view and to find out the availability and extent of humor used as a teaching tool in the classes of Kandahar University from students' perspective. The study employed a quantitative research-based survey design and used a questionnaire to collect data from a sample of 370 participants. The findings revealed that humor as a useful teaching tool positively influences students' classroom learning engagement but it is not utilized by most teachers as a teaching tool.

Keywords: humor, teaching tool, learning, student engagement, classroom, Kandahar University

1. Introduction

Among instructors of any discipline around the world, if there is one common goal for them to achieve, that would be contributing in any possible way in making learning happen in class (Wood, 2007). In classrooms teachings are happening, but the question is whether learning parallel to the teaching is also happening or not. Similarly, studies have found that when students are actively involved in the learning tasks, they learn more than when they are passive recipients of instruction (Brame, 2016). Students' engagement in class significantly increases when humor is evident in class. The humoristic nature of teachers resulted in higher students engagement with teacher compared to the sarcastic and hostile nature of teachers (Nienaber, Abrams, Segrist, 2019). Hence, a positive relationship between the use of humor and students classroom engagement is found (Shahid, Ghazal, 2019).

Humor is considered to be an important element of classroom that would significantly contribute in students motivation towards learning. Studies have shown that humor has the potential to improve learning (Garner, 2016). Students' regardless of their geographical differences of classes love humor embedded as part of their lesson. Basically, students love subjects and classes in which the instructors present everyday

lesson in some sort of humoristic way. It results in easy buildup of rapport between teachers and students which consequently results in trust build-up and anxiety reduction in students. In fact, it is believed that educators who employ humor in their classes are highly favored and nicely rated by both their students and co-teachers in areas of creating motivation in class, reduction in students' anxiety and making of engaging lessons (Makewa et al., 2011; Garner, 2016). Shahid and Ghazal (2019) found that teachers using humor as a teaching tool were highly rated by students compared to those who did not use it. Both in learning and teaching circumstances, humor should be given an important consideration as it is a crucial part of our social life and a way of communication (Shiyab, 2009).

According to Bruner (2002) teaching is all about transformation of students' thinking. He believes that humor can positively influence students' thinking towards problems and challenging situations. Hence, he suggests that humor is an element of teaching and should be used more frequently by teachers. Learning is meant to be fun! In fact, any teacher who incorporates games actually creates humor which is inspiring his/her students to have good time together with the instructor as part of a class gathering (Cross, 1987). They enjoy the lesson, stay engaged and tend to show more classroom interaction and participation which fosters learning overall. Deneire (2009) believes that humor, if introduced in the class at the appropriate time during teaching, would improve students' cultural and linguistic competence, on the other hand, instructors who tend not to use humor or do not possess a good sense of humor are found to be less liked, boring, strict and teacher centered. He also argues that though, the significance of humor as an effective tool of teaching is evident, yet it is found to be very limitedly used by instructors in practice.

A class in which learning is presented to the students with the element of humor, tends to be fun and effective. Often, students love instructors who introduce some sort of humor to their lesson and find their lesson interesting. However, based on the personal experience of the researchers, it is believed that majority of the lecturers at Kandahar University follow more of a non-humoristic approach while teaching their classes. They are perceived more of a serious, structured and rules and regulation bound individuals. These instructors perceivably believe that the addition of humor to their teaching methods will distract students to focus on having fun more in class rather than concentrating on their lesson and learning objectives. In fact, humor is not considered significant enough by instructors for their students and they think that it does not make any difference in classroom learning. The limited or no humor use in class obviously influences students engagement possibly limiting it to happen extensively. In a study it was found that language functions presented in humoristic context were better learned by a group of students since they are more engaged in it compared to the group to which the language functions were presented in ordinary non humoristic contexts (Azizifard & Jalali, 2012). Since, no or very limited studies have been conducted to study the influence of humor as a tool of teaching in Language classes in Kandahar province, or at a national level, the researchers of the current study, therefore, considered this as a gap to study the issue. The findings of the current study would outline the importance of humor as a tool of teaching for teachers and

would present data to justify whether it would make any difference in learning and teaching process for both students and teachers.

Finding answers for the following questions is the main goal for the researchers to achieve:

1. How does the use of humor influence the students' engagement in classroom learning from students' point of view?
2. To what extent is humor used in classrooms by lecturers as a pedagogical tool of learning from students' perspective?

Humor has been defined in various ways. Seeing or hearing something which has the ability to engage people in smiling or laughing is perceived humor (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). Things, situations or movie scenes and dramas that have the quality to make us smile or laugh is called humor (Collins, n.d.). Moreover, Humor is defined as a valuable trait given to the humankind, meanwhile, it is an essential tool in the field of education (Banat, 2018).

Humor is a fundamental section in education (Unsal et al., 2018). Before twentieth century you would not use humor in the classrooms and it was unscholarly to bear the trait of humor but twentieth century converted this phenomenon to a powerful learning tool (Korobkin, 2012). With appropriate humor use, we will always have classes full of active students and they will be able to absorb our learning outcomes (Southam, & Schwartz, 2009). Actually, multiple aspects of learning could be achieved through giving students the opportunity to laugh during the classroom activities (Moran, & Hughes, 2006). In fact, students can remember things well while offered in a humorous manner instead of non-humorous method (Sambrani et al., 2014). The audience of every lecture needs to be persuaded and influenced by the use of humor so that they can enjoy and feel good about it (Reece, 2014). Specifically a positive nonverbal behavior such as smiling can easily grab students' attention towards what we plan to teach them (Mustapha, et al., 2010).

O'Neil (2019) claims that both teachers and students realize humor as a pedagogical tool in the classroom, besides, it paves the way for the students in obtaining the degree in institutions. The use of humor enhances better learning by letting students be significantly be relieved of negative thoughts of depression, stress and anxiety (Narula, Chaudhary, Narula, Narayan, 2011). In order to keep the level of anxiety lower while keeping the level of persuasion higher in our classrooms, we have to let our students laugh and have humor (Torok et al., 2004). According to Halula (2013) information could be retained for a long period while obtained in a stress less environment and in a fearless atmosphere. Abu Bakar (2018) writes that keeping the timing for the use of humor and also changing students' perspectives towards using humor effectively in the classroom are both key pedagogically remarkable ways to be used.

With the right amount and type, humor prepares the atmosphere for students to pay more focus on what they have to learn and lets the students to forget about their

worries which contributes in preparing the learning atmosphere in the classroom (Aboudan, 2009; Gorham & Christophel, 2009; Weaver et al., 2009). Since teachers are always challenged by their teaching effectiveness, the problem could be solved with dedicating some of the class time to humor (Ocon, 2015). A study conducted comparatively about high school teachers and college teachers, revealed that college teachers use more humor than high school ones and they realize it as a learning facilitator rather than a learning strategy (Neuliep, 2009). In another relevant study it was found that students liked those teachers who have used humor in the classrooms and in the same time positive relationship is sensed well between teachers and students (Makewa et al., 2011; O'Connor, 2013). Moreover, has even found that mistakes made by teacher during the lecture in the classroom could be coped with humor, on the other hand, through the usage of humor, academic challenges, which are often faced by students, would not be nightmares for them hindering their learning (O'Connor, 2013).

Let's consider humor from another important angle with regard to students' performance in exams and their results. Various studies have found that humor was positively effective enough in increasing students 'performance in exams. Test performance could be denoted remarkably positive and well-done in case humor is used while giving Instructions and clarifications during exams. Therefore, humor is worth to be considered in tests (Berk & Nanda, 2006). Findings by Ziv (2014) reveal that the use of humor during the lessons increases the scores at the final exam denoting that better teaching and learning has taken place during the course.

Besides the valuable positive effects of humor use in class, some of its downsides are also observed. According to Lovorn and Holaway (2015) humor consistently takes place during the lectures, the only matter that should be regarded important is that its use should not go beyond the learning limits. They further added that despite some teachers are willing to use humor in classrooms, it is helpless in classroom management and could be hard to control and re-manage the class with the humor use.

2. Method

Participants

The setting for the current study is Kandahar University. The study deals with a pedagogical issue and a university is considered to be the most appropriate setting to study the relevant issue. The population for the current study is the students of all faculties at Kandahar University. Since the influence of humor on the quality of learning can be best studied from students' perspective, therefore, students of all 10 faculties of Kandahar University are considered to be the right population for the study.

Based on the sample size formula of Krejcie and Morgan, (1970) from a total 9000 students of Kandahar University, a sample size of 370 students was chosen. A random sampling technique was used to collect data from the students disregarding their

demographic characteristics that would influence the outcome of the current study in unimportant ways.

Research Design

This study seeks to describe the available trends with regard to the use of Humor as a pedagogical tool of learning at Kandahar University. Hence, a quantitative research based survey design is chosen to guide the study.

Materials

In order to proceed ethically, the researchers had to obtain an official permission to conduct the current study from the chancellor of the university. A questionnaire was adapted from available literature as a tool to collect data for the current study. Several additions and omissions were made in the questionnaire by the researchers in order to best suit the purpose of the study as a tool for data collection. The data was analyzed by SPSS v24 software using descriptive statistics. The mean scores were calculated for all the items in the questionnaire.

Procedure

The purpose of the current study was explained to the students of Kandahar University at the first section of the questionnaire and their agreement as research respondents was obtained prior to the data collection. The questions were prepared very clearly and understandably. Finding the honest answer for every single question is the most important and valuable item in any academic research, therefore, students were encouraged to select the most accurate answers. All 370 students filled out the questionnaire online via google form. The google form was such adjusted that it would have not been submitted without with leaving a question unanswered.

3. Findings

The influence of humor on learning

The first objective of the current study sought to study the influence of humor as a teaching tool on the learning of students at Kandahar University and the relevant findings are presented in table 1 below.

Table 1

The influence of Humor on students' learning

The influence of humor on students' learning	Mean	Std. Deviation
1. encourages students to be actively engaged and pushes them to participate	4.61	.589
2. relieves tension, stress or anxiety	4.55	.606
3. makes subjects matters interesting	4.52	.659
4. increases enthusiasm	4.48	.576
5. makes joy and happier atmosphere	4.45	.569
6. establishes trust between teacher and students	4.34	.777
7. relives hopes and supports optimism	4.33	.674
8. motivates students to be always present in the classroom	4.32	.911

9. increases self-efficacy to learn	4.29	.777
10. increases attention and facilitates understanding of challenging concepts	4.27	.766
11. disarms aggression with others	4.23	.847
12. improves problem solving	4.19	.875
13. increases learning speed and makes learning easier	4.19	.863
14. promotes emotional intelligence	4.16	.798
15. makes learning permanent	4.16	.814
16. attains initiatives	4.11	.809
17. promotes critical thinking	4.04	.826

1 = Strongly Disagree 2 = Disagree 3 = Neutral 4 = Agree 5 = Strongly Agree

The findings in Table 1 show the mean scores for the influence of humor on the students' learning at Kandahar University. All the items in the table 1 have the mean score of four. It can be deduced that all the responses are in the range of agree to all the items of the table. It means that all the respondents agree that humor influences the students' learning on all the different aspects presented in the table above. Items which gained comparatively higher mean scores are 'Humor encourages students to be actively engaged and pushes them to participate' (M=4.61, SD=.589), 'humor relieves tension, stress or anxiety, (M=4.55, SD=.606), 'makes subjects matters interesting' (M=4.52, SD=.659), 'increases enthusiasm (M=4.48, SD=.576) and 'makes joy and happier atmosphere (M=4.45, SD=.569).

Humor as a teaching tool in the classes of Kandahar University

The second objective of the study sought to find out the extent of humor available in the classes of Kandahar University as a teaching tool, table 2 presents the relevant findings below.

Table 2

The Extent of humor available in the classes of Kandahar University

The availability of humor in classes	Mea n	Std. Deviatio n
1. make humorous facial expressions (smile, make lively expressions, laughing ready attitude)	3.25	1.164
2. make jokes and laughs with us	3.24	1.066
3. gives funny examples during the class	3.06	1.001
4. use humor whenever the students feel bored	3.05	1.132
5. tell funny stories related to the lesson	2.70	1.152
6. use irony for the purpose of making humor	2.61	1.119
7. use comfortable body language and relaxed voice	2.51	1.151
8. start the lesson with an amusing moment, joke or small talk	2.49	1.169
9. use games and group activities which results in the emergence of effective humor	2.40	1.231
10. dramatize during the lesson	2.31	1.158

11. foster an informal climate	2.19	1.144
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1 = No lecturers 2 = Few lecturers 3 = Some lecturers 4 = Most lecturers 5 = All lecturers

The findings in Table 2 show the mean scores for the extent of humor availability in the classes of Kandahar University as a teaching tool. All the items in the table 2 have the mean scores between two to three. It can be deduced that all the responses are in the ranges of few lecturers and some lecturers. It means that some to only a few lecturers use humor as a teaching tool in the classes of Kandahar University. Items in the table that gained higher mean scores are ‘make humorous facial expressions (smile, make lively expressions, laughing ready attitude)’ (M=3.25, SD=1.164), ‘make jokes and laughs with us’ (M=3.24, SD=1.066), ‘gives funny examples during the class’ (M=3.06, SD=1.001). Items in table 2 that gained lower mean scores are ‘foster an informal climate’ (M= 2.19, SD= 1.144), ‘dramatize during the lesson’ (M=2.31, SD=1.158), ‘use games and group activities which results in the emergence of effective humor’ (M=2.40, SD=1.231), ‘start the lesson with an amusing moment, joke or small talk’ (M=2.49, SD=1.169).

Overall, these findings suggest that the use of humor in the classes of Kandahar University as a teaching tool is not used by most or all lecturers. Only a few to some lecturers employ it as a tool of teaching while they are teaching in classes.

Discussion

This research sought to study the availability of humor in the classrooms of Kandahar University. The use of humor was found, but not to the extent needed. However, a study reveals that college teachers use enough amount of humor in the classroom and they recognize it as an affective teaching tool (Neuliep, 2009). Humor is found to be an effective teaching tool of the class, but it is sad to say that it is poorly used at Kandahar University’s classrooms by the lecturers. Few to some lecturers use and recognize humor as a wonderful teaching tool.

The findings of the current study with regard to the influence of humor on learning were similar to the literature reviewed which denotes that humor is valuable learning affecting activity to be focused on during the teaching in the classrooms. Students concentrate and listen more to those lecturers who use humor in the classrooms and they learn better in a humorous atmosphere. Humor makes the subject matter interesting and motivates students to pay more attention in the classroom (Weaver et al., 2009). The findings of this research revealed that humor is stimulus in awaking learners to be actively engaged during the classroom. Sambrani et al., (2014) also found that the exposure of humorous materials is correlated with active engagement which shows positive effects in learning. Adding humor to our lesson plans is an essential tool which should be highly focused in all educational institutions. According to Berk, & Nanda (2006) psychologically, using humor is causing decrease in stress hormones which results in anxiety reduction and the findings of the current study is in concordance with this finding. Making humorous atmosphere in the

classroom paves the way to stress reduction and finally fostering better learning. Additionally, Lovorn & Holaway (2015) also indicated that adding humor to our teaching plan is actually an addition of fun for the students. The current study also arrived to the same conclusion finding that humor lets students to attend classes where lessons learnt are unforgettable.

According to Afghanistan's higher education law, students must attend 75% percent of every course in which they had enrolled in a semester. It means they are mandated to be present in the classrooms. The findings of the current study indicate that students like those classes where lecturers use humor during their lectures which results in their fulfillment of the 75% percent of the attendance without any anxiety and pressure. Moreover, lecturers' instructions could be easily understood while humor is used as a better teaching and learning strategy.

The absence of humor at Kandahar University's classrooms could have some important reasons behind it, such as instructors' fear of losing their dominance over the students in the classroom because students are more eager to laugh instead of paying their attention to lectures.

Study limitations and future research suggestion

Studying humor as a teaching tool from students' perspective was recognized as a limitation for the current study. Studying it from teacher's perspective would provide better understanding of humor as a tool used in class for effective teaching since the main users of the tool are teachers not students. It is therefore recommended as a gap for researchers to study the use of humor as a teaching tool in classes from teachers' perspective.

It is also recommended that trainings be held related to contemporary international accepted teaching methods for the lecturers of universities. Familiarizing lecturers with new teaching methods let them use humor as better-teaching tool in the class. Lecturers have to change their relationships with students towards a friendlier manner.

4. Conclusions

Humor as a teaching tool can be a significant part of every class, all that is needed is the teachers' perspective to perceive it so. If instructors overcome the challenge of using it in an appropriate way and at an appropriate time, both learning and teaching, which is an integral part of the class, would be happening in the desired way. Hence, it is with confidence to say that humor is a teaching tool to use rather than ignore by instructors. If we ignore using humor in the classroom we will only have a boring learning environment as a result, we should encourage Kandahar University's lecturers to enjoy their teaching by adding humor to their classroom activities and recognize it as a powerful and positively affecting teaching tool. Using humor improves students' enthusiasm and encourages them to actively participate in classroom activities. It would not be a factor in losing control over the classroom, in fact, it is a suitable tool to manage it.

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