# ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE USE OF HUMOUR: A CASE STUDY OF MOROCCAN SECONDARY SCHOOL TEACHERS

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**Abstract -** This study investigates the possible benefits of using humour in the classroom for teaching and learning purposes. It is intended to prove whether humour facilitates and creates appropriate conditions for teaching and learning or not. In this manner, it explores teachers' perceptions of and attitudes towards classroom humour and the types of humour devices they involve in their day-to-day teaching and instructional practices. The study used a qualitative method that comprised 31 open-ended questionnaires delivered to teachers of various school subjects. The findings revealed that most of the respondents believe that humour facilitates teaching, does not make it difficult, does not contradict with teachers' appropriate behaviour, is not a waste of time and is not associated only with teachers' who have a sense of humour.

**Keywords -** Attitudes, Benefits, Humour, Learning, Perceptions, Teachers.

## I. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 1.1. Introduction

Educational psychologists concur that diversifying instructional techniques and teaching styles can improve the quality of successful learning. Classroom humour is one of the advisable techniques that can, among other things, serve this purpose by increasing students' motivation, developing positive attitudes towards the teacher and the subject and creating an anxiety-free learning setting. Teachers can make a good use of humour to develop students' level of attention, retention and comprehension; to encourage their creativity and imagination; to enhance teachers-students relationship; and to promote students' positive attitudes towards the teacher and the course.

The use of humour is also one of the leading factors in teachers' increased effectiveness in the classroom (Bryant, Crane, Comisky & Zillmann, 1980, as cited in Wanzer, 2002). Teachers who employ it for educational purposes, or who have a high sense of humour are likely to receive more positive evaluation from students, and if compared to other teachers, they may be more approachable and likeable. This is why students in such light-hearted classes may feel encouraged to participate, and are usually motivated to perform in a better manner.

### 1.2. Different uses of classroom humour

Humour has numerous applications. The literature contains a large amount of information about the reasons for using humour as a learning aid and a teaching tool. Humour serves language teaching and learning psychologically, socially and at the level of language acquisition / learning.

#### 1.2.1. The educational psychology role of humour

One of the main humour application areas is found in educational psychology. Learning according to educational psychologists is closely attached to positive emotions and affective factors that will be elaborated on in more details in the section about affective factors. Psychological benefits stand, for instance, for students' increased motivation to participate in classroom activities driven by exposure to humour. In this concern, research exhibits a direct relationship between humour and motivation. For example, Wanzer et al.'s Instructional Humour Processing Theory (2010) "offered an explanation for why some types of instructor-generated humour lead to increased student learning" (p. 10). This explanation involves an increase in students' motivation as a result of the humour generated by the teacher's instructional techniques and their humour-related behaviour in front of the students.

Besides, Stephen Krashen's ubiquitous Input Hypothesis (1982) represents another important reason for using humour. Following Krashen, if there is a feeling of anxiety among students, it will create an affective filter or a mental obstacle, which will in turn hinder the comprehensible language input. In this manner, learners are likely to find themselves unable to upgrade their level of proficiency since they cannot make use of the input they receive for language acquisition. So, humour is highly likely to lower the affective filter by making learning an enjoyable experience.

#### 1.2.2. The social role of humour

Humour expresses spontaneity and pleasure. It has a social role in everyday life that allows people to appreciate an event, a thought, an emotion, and it is this particular element that makes it so necessary. It enables speakers "to establish, maintain, reinforce, renegotiate, or even break social relationships via targeting unacceptable behaviours and views" (Dynel, 2013, p. 31). As a means of communication, humour accounts for a paramount contribution to the teacher-student relationship. Teachers' classroom humour strengthens their social bond with students and usually makes the former more approachable. This is why a socially appropriate understanding is a pre-requisite for a positive learning environment. Also,

humour clears tension and misunderstanding, and assists learners in expressing their mind whilst avoiding the teacher's possible untimely reaction. Therefore, the better the connection they build with students, the easier it is for teachers to transmit plenty of valuable knowledge.

1.2.3.**Instructional role of humour**

As illuminated in the educational psychology section, most students enjoy their teachers' humorous discourse, for it reduces anxiety and motivates them for learning. From an instructional perspective, humorous activities and materials delivered in class result in increased students' attention (as confirmed by Phillips, 1991), which isessential in language leaning. And with a growing level of attention and noticing, students are likely to receive more comprehensible input.

Similarly, humour provides opportunities for a better and longer memorization of content. Therefore, tacit and practical uses of educational humour involves, as proclaimed by a number of researchers (Bryant et al., 1980; Garner, 2006; Wanzer et al., 2010), direct effects on remembering information and language learning in general. In addition, if used appropriately, humour can facilitate class management through holding students' concentration and attention for longer periods of time. It also assists in establishing or dissolving boundaries between the teacher and students, in encouraging creativity and in managing conflicts (Wanzer, 2002).

Besides, humour is quite beneficial in reviewing grammatical structures (Martin, 2007) and revising vocabulary and other linguistic aspects, such as phonology, morphology and semantics (Ross, 1998); however, this remains conditional to the level of students. Using humour to learn phonology, morphology, syntax, or semantics is set for advanced levels, whereas elementary and intermediate students can practise vocabulary retention activities and revise grammar.

### 1.3. Areas to avoid in using humour

It is frequent that some teachers use self-disparaging humour in an attempt to create humour. This may end up breeding negative effects,for if used excessively, teachers may be regarded as incompetent, which may later damage their credibility. Teachers, on the one hand, should refrain from being self-deprecating, and on the other, they need to select the best humour stimuli that suit their teaching behavior. If they think they are not humorous, as Wanzer (2002) said, it will be too challenging to wear a false funny veneer in front of their class.

From another perspective, using humour for teaching and learning purposes may become counter-productive. Teachers should avoid making fun of students because that will probably drive them away from participation and attending classes. Pointing at individual students to tell humorous stories about can be embarrassing and deprecating. Wanzer (2002) warned that "if students feel picked on or belittled, they may be less likely to participate or attend classes." (p. 122). Students usually complain, following a study conducted by Wanzer and Booth-Butterfield (1995) about the relationship between humour and learning, about being constantly targeted by teachers. Unfortunately, some teachers, in their attempt to generate humour, single out some students to be the subject of jokes, sarcasm or satire. Initially, that will create humour, but is surely improper and unfitting.

Teachers are advised to be careful when applying humour. They need to choose the most convenient talk. They should not overuse humour, and it is advisable to combine spontaneity with experience. However, students may misunderstand teachers' humour-oriented actions and see them as unsuitable. This is a reason why it is recommended to include humour-related content in lesson planning and connect it to the subject matter. Wanzer has clarified this by saying that "humorous examples, jokes, and stories can help the students recall the material later" (Wanzer, 2002, p. 122). Consequently, students can remember the material provided to them through being exposed to the funny side of the lesson.

Another thing to mull over in the application of humour is to avoid racial, discriminatory or sexual humour. Before designing a funny activity, teachers should know their students' gender and cultural background, for it will probably humiliate or depress some of the class members or the whole class if the video or the picture illustrated is sexually, racially or ethnically biased. Being stereotypical is likely to distract and de-motivate learners instead of motivating them. Therefore, it is recommended that teachers learn about appropriate / inappropriate humour (see Wanzer et al., 2010) as well as cultural and universal humour (see Schmitz, 2002) so that they may not put themselves or their students in non-humorous, uncomfortable, or even embarrassing contexts.

## II. METHODOLOGY

### 2.1 Qualitative data collection

#### 2.1.1 Questionnaires

A set of 31 questionnaires were distributed to the teacher sampling population. The surveys were designed to gather qualitative data about teachers' background knowledge in relation to humour and classroom humour in particular, as well as their opinions, perceptions and attitudes towards the use and / or non-use of humour. The qualitative data obtained from the open-ended questionnaires were organized, analysed and coded by the NVIVO version 10 program

#### 2.1.2 Sample of the study

The target participants in the study were Moroccan Secondary School teachers. The number of

teachers who took part in the study was 31 teachers of various school subjects in the research site.

**2.1.3 Sampling design**

The researcher selected the sample to be included in the study through a convenient sampling strategy given the existing convenience and availability of teachers-participants in the researcher's school.

## III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Most teachers believe that humour (be it in the form of jokes, funny stories, or other forms) attracts students' attention. It is usually a logicalincentive to draw or regain their attention, and even to keep it active. It is considered, as one teacher declared, as one of the most appealing teaching techniques that inspire students to listen, to engage and to be interested in the lesson. However, some teachers suggested that for humour to be useful, it has to be performed judiciously and properly, whereas few others agree that it does not draw students' attention at all. Most teachers' opinions seem to tally with the research, as mentioned both earlier and in the review of literature, that supports the correlation between humour and students' attention.

Besides, a lot of teachers reveal that humour helps students in a variety of ways: it helps them concentrate more on their lessons; it motivates them more; it reduces their anxiety; and it triggers them to participate more. These opinions correspond with those of students discussed earlier, and they show a promising agreement between the two sides on this matter. Such a finding is fruitful for non-humorous teachers and for those who are still reluctant to try humour, or even for the ones who believe that they have no sense of humour. This is because the more humorous the teacher is, the more friendly and approachable they become in the eyes of their students, and as Garner (2006) affirmed "a strong sense of humor plays a major role in developing a positive learning environment" (p. 178). Therefore, it is recommended that teachers of all school subjects, not only English, use humour to create a welcoming learning environment and to establish closer relationships with students.

Most teachers have positive attitudes towards humour and the use of humour. First, they generally believe that humour does not contradict with teachers' appropriate behaviour in class since it is a teaching style that many use to improve the quality of education. It is also a personal trait that they may be endowed with, and which they can employ to create a suitable context that is conducive to learning as long as it is appropriate. This unveils that there are humorous behaviours that are deemed appropriate and others that are not, namely disparaging humour (see Gorham and Christophel, 1990; Neuliep, 1991; Wanzer et al., 2006).

Besides, many teachers contend that humour is not a waste of time as long as it serves the pedagogical purpose of education, and since the teacher is in control of the situation. This attitude suggests that they like to use humour, but not all of them. In this regard, some teachers reject the notion of classroom humour altogether, claiming that it is just a waste of teachers' and students' time. For them, it does not have anything to do with teaching and learning. This is no more than a point of view that is not validated by research. Neither recent research nor earlier studies (such as Bryant et al., 1980 & Ziv, 1988) about educational humour consider it a waste of time.

In addition to this, most teachers agree that humour does not make teaching and learning difficult. On the contrary, it facilitates communication between them and the students through the verbal and non-verbal forms of interaction embedded in it, and that boosts, in a way or in another, the student-teacher connection. In this vein, Polio and Humphreys (1996) maintained that the existing connection between the teacher and the student "was key to effective teaching" (as cited in Garner, 2006, p. 178). It is also a "communication behavior we recognize from personal experience that can be used competently or incompetently" (Wanzer et al., 2006, p. 179). So, if it is involved properly, it will be used competently, and vice versa. Its proper application involves using prepared, related (to the course content) or spontaneous humour that does not disparage students.

Regarding the question about sense of humour, I found that the majority of teachers possess a sense of humour. This generally denotes that witty teachers are more likely to use humour. However, it does not necessarily have to be the case since humour is not associated only with those who are funny. It should be pointed out that some teachers, who never use humour, are not sure about whether they are witty or not. Having this attribute is not a requisite for a successful use of it. All teachers, humorous or non-humorous, can create fun and laughter in their classrooms by preparing it or by just being spontaneous. There is another category of teachers who are known to be lighthearted, but never use humour with students. They are usually hesitant or more concerned about their self-esteem or image. These teachers should know that here is a paucity of research that shows that involving humour makes them more approachable and effective and help their students learn better.

In responding to the question of whether Moroccan culture considers humour a disruptive behaviour in class, it was detected that Moroccan teachers are divided on this point. While some of them (8 respondents of 31) are bound by the popular cultural beliefs that view education as a strictly serious process, others (13 respondents out of 31) believe that seriousness does not contradict with fun. Here lies the dialectical relationship between culture and education on the one side, and culture and humour on the other. Since there are teachers who are

governed by their own cultural norms, the influence will probably extend to the teaching style they follow, which may be innovative/ conventional, or personalized / impersonalized. Therefore, it is recommended that teachers prioritize students' learning needs over what cultural limitations may dictate vis-a-vis the use of humour. Moreover, as humour is highly cultural, language teachers are advised to involve the types (avoid culturally specific humour found in certain jokes) and examples (use common and international humour; see Lewis, 2006) of humour that students can understand and appreciate easily (see Bennett, 1993) in order to avoid cultural and linguistic confusion and misunderstanding.

It appears that Moroccan teachers do not use a wide variety of humour devices. The most repeated ones, although used only sometimes, are built around gestures, comments and stories, whereas jokes, pictures and body language are rarely used as tools for humour creation. The reason is that culture may be omnipresent here as some teachers fear for their self-esteem and reputation. This is why they exempt from resorting to body language, for instance, to trigger amusement. As for pictures, because of the nature of several school subjects that do not fully rely on pictures (Mathematics and Physics as example), teachers do not employ them as much as they do with others.

## IV. CONCLUSION

This paper studied and exploredteachers' perceptions of and attitudes towards classroom humour, and the types of humour devices they use with their students. The findings revealed that most teachers have positive attitudes towards classroom humour, and even if theyconsider that it can greatly serve education, they do not use it quite often; only a few of them resort to it, albeit at a very limited frequency.

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