

Humour and Laughter in the EFL Classroom

Sophia Papaefthymiou-Lytra, Ph.D.

English Department, University of Athens.

In this paper I will report research about the function of humour and laughter in the EFL classroom and the possibility of humour and laughter in ELT as a potential source of increased interpersonal tolerance and understanding among L₂ interactants.

1. Data collection and evaluation

To collect the data a questionnaire was devised (see Appendix 1). Copies were distributed to fourth year students of the English Dept., University of Athens, who would be observing classes at state and private schools. Students were instructed to fill in the questionnaires after finishing their observations. 100 questionnaires were analysed. Furthermore, taped classroom discourse was also analysed. Six cassettes one hour each (half hour on each side) were used to collect classroom data.

Questionnaires and taped classroom discourse covered all levels of English: beginners to advanced, and all ages: children-adolescents - adults.

Instances of humour and laughter encountered in the EFL classroom were identified and evaluated in terms of a four point taxonomy:

- source and content
- function
- language
- effect on classroom discourse

2. On humour and laughter

Humour has been defined as a form of intellectual play. McGee (1977), for instance, argues that there are two forms of such play, "one is relatively serious in nature and is characterized by a desire to expand existing knowledge, and the other lacks serious intent and is characterized by a playful consideration in fantasy of events or relationships known to be impossible or improbable" (pp. 42-43). As it is pointed out in the research reported here both types of humour are encountered in the foreign language classroom. They serve functions which are different in nature but equally important in ELT. (See section 3, Analysis of data).

Furthermore, humour is conceptualized in the literature as a tool of social influence and interpersonal understanding. The power of this tool lies in the ambiguous nature of humour. Humour in communication can be interpreted in more than one way, thus always allowing for social recovery if it is responded to unfavourably. (of Kane T.R. et al, 1977).

This function of humour is also well documented in the present research. Learners and teachers alike make use of humour to establish interpersonal understanding and mutual tolerance not only as learners and teachers but also as foreign language users. Humour, in other words, is also used by them on purpose in an attempt to overcome problems and difficulties they may face while using the foreign language as a means of communication.

This view is in accord with what several scholars have maintained about the nature of humour. It has been argued that humour is the outcome of a mixture of many ingredients, such as a feeling of irony, a sense of the absurd, a certain contact with reality and, of course, of affection, which at first sight may seem surprising. Priestly, 1976, in particular, argues that "humour at its best has some root in affection and affection brings warmth into humour and insight into character, eventually creating more humour". It seems to me that the playful interpretation of classroom incongruities are rooted deeply in affection and rapport between learners and teachers. In fact, affection constitutes the essence of a great deal of humour and laughter used in the EFL classroom. (See in particular section 3.2.).

Apart from affection, however, there might be aggressiveness and cruelty in humour as well (cf Mikes, 1980). This aspect of humour however was not documented in the present research.

