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THE USAGE OF AMBIGUITY-BASED HUMOUR IN EFL CLASSROOMS

The effectiveness of English language lessons and means of achieving it have always occupied the researchers, the educators and the experts of this field. It was not long ago that the idea of humour and humorous texts being incorporated into EFL classrooms became popular because of their psychological, pedagogical, social and linguistic contributions into teaching and learning process. Despite the fact that humorous texts have long been neglected by educators because of their ludic language, this paper analyzes how humorous texts increase the quality of teacher- student rapport, boost and enhance students' participation and engagement and make the presentation of various linguistic structures fun and memorable. To explore this, we focused on ambiguity as a common means of verbal humour and analyzed the concept of humour in general and its relationship with ambiguity. Certain notional parts of speech, namely the verb, the noun and the pronoun have been selected as enablers of syntactic ambiguity and the texts in which they appeared causing ambiguity and triggering laughter have been looked at. Examining the ambiguity-based humorous texts revealed that they should be utilized in language classes, especially with advanced students, because of their multifunctional nature. That is to say, humorous texts not only create a positive atmosphere in the classroom but also introduce cultural values and present linguistic items and patterns as an authentic material focusing on their ambiguous meanings. Considering these factors, the paper emphasizes the need of humorous texts in EFL classrooms and advocates the idea of their constant use. To find someone who has not laughed in his lifetime seems to be next to impossible as it is one of the specific aspects of human behaviour.

Key words: humor, verbal humor, ambiguity-based humorous texts, cultural values, language learning and teaching, ambiguity of notional parts of speech.

With so many teaching resources at hand, using humorous texts, such as jokes, anecdotes, puns, riddles does not seem to be very popular in EFL classrooms, thus in many cases they are neglected. As the mentioned texts use ludic language, teachers can find them not completely relevant in the academic context. It is believed, after all, that students should learn in the first place more than have fun. This article looks into the possibilities of using humorous texts as teaching material in EFL classrooms and argues that if and when utilized appropriately, humour has only a positive contribution to teaching and learning process.

There is no doubt that being able to use humour and make people laugh are highly valued in interpersonal interactions. Humour is quite a useful tool for creating a more relaxed atmosphere, being friendly, settling the conflicts, seeming quick-witted and last but not least manipulating the language turning it into ludic. Despite its being universal, humour is also culturally and linguistically sensitive. Not sharing the language and the culture, also with no proper background information, humour may not yield the desirable result. G.Ritchie referring to Morreall and Raskin quotes 3 main theories of humour: relief or release theories, superiority or aggression theories, and incongruity theories [18, 7]. This can be interpreted as

the functions of humor. Firstly, people turn to humour for releasing the negative energy. Also, it is a device for making fun of people over whom you try to gain control. Turning the conversation from the expected meaning to the less plausible one by manipulating it and causing surprise and incongruity seems another way how humour works.

When a humorous effect is achieved through body movements and facial expressions, humour is described as visual. A world-wide British actor Rowan Atkinson uses visual humour for most of his shows. Very little is said, yet people find him funny. In contrast to this, verbal humour relies on what is said. All linguistic features at all linguistic levels can serve as means of verbal humour. However, ambiguity is a central device in verbally expressed humour [18, 39]. A similar idea is expressed by V. Raskin: ... "deliberate ambiguity will be shown to underlie much, if not all, of verbal humour [17, XIII]. Generally speaking, linguistic ambiguity occurs when a linguistic item can be understood in two or more different ways. When an ambiguous linguistic element is not used on purpose and understood as intended, it goes unnoticed and no humour appears. On the contrary, the intention to create a comic effect leads to deliberate ambiguity. Both deliberate and unintentional ambiguity types are

one of the main sources of humorous texts, jokes and anecdotes in English.

Some researchers have attempted to classify the humor used in the classroom and here is the classification put forward:

(a) Figural humour (caricatures, cartoons, comic strips)

(b) Verbal humour (puns, jokes, satire, irony, wit, riddles, etc.)

(c) Visual humour (sight gags, impersonation, practical jokes, impressions) (d) Auditory humour (noises and sounds)

In another classification, there are 4 main subgroups of humour :

(a) Textual: jokes, stories

(b) Pictorial: comics, cartoons

(c) Action/Games: video, contests, theatre, simulation, role play

(d) Verbal: acronym, puns, word games [5, 350].

Humorous texts based on ambiguity contain two important concepts: language and laughter. Using language appropriately and having a good sense of humour are always sought after, especially for creating bonds in interpersonal relationships. The same idea can be applied to EFL classrooms as well.

Humorous texts are a great teaching tool for reducing stress in the learning process, building more secure and sincere relationships with students, making the teacher more approachable, enhancing their attention and helping them learn in a more engaging way. Also, through this process, students are equipped with cultural information of the nation whose language they are learning and feel closer to the cultural values.

Being one of the teaching tools, jokes are also the consequence of language proficiency, as to acquire a language means understanding jokes as well [13, 1]. Jokes based on ambiguity have additional benefits in comparison with non-verbal humour, as the former builds metalinguistic awareness, that is to say, being aware of the forms of language which in turn facilitates language learning [13, 1]. Recent work in second language acquisition suggests that playful use of language may facilitate second language learning [3, 242].

As cited by Bilokcuoglu and Debreli, Bell states that effective humour is supposed to reflect the personality of the teacher and be appropriate to the context and situation. On the other hand, inappropriate use of humour can produce an unfriendly learning atmosphere that promptly destroys self-esteem and communication (5, 353). Some teachers avoid humour purposefully not to risk their authority and not to seem foolish [2, 2094]. All in all, ineffective use of humour can lead to loss of valuable lesson time and make the class unmanageable.

There are certain difficulties of the use of ambiguity-based jokes in classrooms, so for a successful

learning process teachers should consider them before bringing a humorous text into the classroom. The first challenge is language related which means the centre of ambiguity which is supposed to be funny should not have any vocabulary, grammar or any other linguistic feature unfamiliar to students. Not knowing them will result in students' failure to understand the meaning. If so, ambiguity will not be resolved thus causing no laughter.

Sharing the same culture always brings people together, while the opposite case is when people feel alienated and fail to understand why this or that joke is funny. So, cultural background of both the teacher and the students matter, as what is funny for one of the parts may cause no reaction on the other. Using humour in classrooms enables students to be exposed to the culture of the nation whose language they are learning. So, gaining more insights into culture increases students' overall linguistic competence, as language and culture are closely bonded.

One of the challenges associated with using humour in EFL classrooms is that it must be processed quickly and further resolved to cause laughter. Otherwise, the task of the teacher to present language patterns in a humorous way will not be achieved. As for the real social setting where people are chatting around making jokes, not understanding them can make one feel isolated and awkward. An important part of language learning, therefore, should be learning its jokes and specifications.

In addition to all these, there is a case when the language teacher is not the native speaker of the language he/she teaches. Accordingly, teachers, feeling hesitant about how this or that joke works, may not want to bring it to the classroom and cause confusion. In one of the recent surveys conducted to explore the factors behind EFL teachers' avoidance, students mentioned the following:

1. Humour is not in their personality/nature
2. They lack competence/ability in L2 to create humour
3. They are more content/syllabus oriented
4. They want to gain respect and maintain professionalism
5. They are afraid of negative consequences of using humour
6. They cannot connect to the students
7. They do not believe humour is necessary in the classroom
8. They have different cultural backgrounds
9. They have job-related/ professional problems

These reasons cited by students with reference to teachers' avoiding humour have been ranked in the given order according to their percentage [26, 119].

Another challenging aspect of humorous texts as an EFL material is that they are best reserved for advanced students which mean they will not serve their purpose at lower levels. Humorous texts based

on ambiguity and manipulating the meaning rely on language play which cannot be recognized by elementary or intermediate students. In these cases, such texts do not only fail to cause laughter, but also bring about awkwardness and waste of teacher's efforts.

During the presentation of language patterns in a funny way, students are expected to complete some steps before the time to laugh arrives. The first step they have to go through is to know at least two meanings/ interpretations of the considered linguistic item and to recognize them. Later, comes the stage when those meanings are retrieved and compared. Having completed them, there is a moment when they come together, ambiguity gets resolved and it is time to laugh [13, 30].

Another point to consider is the content of the humorous texts. As known, there are numerous jokes which are sexist, racist or include gross humour. The teachers' task in this case is to be selective to a great extent, not to hurt any feelings and take the material from safe and reliable sources rather than ordinary internet pages. During the selection process, teachers should bear in mind that a joke collection intended for young learners can be effectively used for adult learners as well. This is because native English-speaking children recognize language play by the time they are 6 or 7 years old, while for non-native speakers this period stretches till the point when they reach some certain proficiency in the language.

We believe that there should not be any excuses for non-use of humour especially in advanced classes as English classes are one of the rare opportunities where they can be exposed to authentic linguistic and cultural resources. This way the students gain more access to increase their humour competence which has been accepted as part of L2 learners' "communicative competence" [26, 114].

With reference to the importance of humour as a subject of academic study, R. Alexander states that "... to appreciate and to engage in humour is part of human language behaviour. It is natural for students of language to focus on the texts which realize verbal humour" [1, 3].

Having considered some theoretical issues related to use and avoidance of humor, it is time to analyze some jokes as a tool for teaching various structures and patterns. While doing so, the main emphasis will be placed on grammatical issues. For achieving this purpose, the linguistic items can be categorized according to the traditional classification of parts of speech.

While talking about ambiguity-based humorous texts, verbs are the very first element to consider. Playing a vital role in language, different classes of verbs have substantial differences among themselves. Before looking into the options of verbs creating ambiguity-based humour and how these

features can be taught in an EFL classroom, it is recommended to look at the classification of the verbs depending on its combinability with the object, which is a decisive factor for its ambiguity creating potential.

Different verbs can be followed by different kinds of word structure. This is partly a matter of meaning, also partly a matter of grammar rules that have nothing to do with the meaning. For example, before an object, "wait" is followed by "for", "expect" has no preposition [23, 597]. Unfortunately, there are no simple rules for this kind of problem, it is necessary to learn for each verb what kind of structures can follow it.

Some verbs are usually followed by nouns or pronouns that act as direct objects. These verbs are called transitives. Another group of verbs, not normally followed by direct objects, are intransitives. "To sit", "to die", "to arrive", "to sleep" are examples of this category of verbs. Some transitive verbs can be followed by two objects and they are called ditransitive verbs. They can be a source of ambiguity in many cases, so to teach this feature of ditransitive verbs and to attract student's attention to them, humorous texts can be employed. For an illustration of this, the text below can be looked at:

George: (looking at Gracie, who is arranging a large vase of beautiful flowers) Grace, those are beautiful flowers. Where did they come from?

Gracie: Don't you remember, George? You said that if I went to visit Clara Bagley in the hospital I should be sure to take her flowers. So, when she wasn't looking, I did [15, 163].

"To take her flowers" being the centre of ambiguity is supposed to cause laughter as soon as it becomes possible for the students to notice that this unit can be interpreted as having both *verb + object* and *verb + object + object* structure. The expectation is that during the visit of the patient one takes flowers to the ill person, so the intended grammar structure is "*verb + object + object*". However, understanding the sentence otherwise, with a *verb + object* structure means the person instead of taking some flowers to the ill person, has taken her flowers and this moment should create humour and also teach this verb pattern.

Another example is a real story happened to Joseph H. Chaote, the US ambassador to the court of St. James in Great Britain, about a century ago. It is told that at one of the social events a gentleman who did not know Mr. Chaote approached and asked to call him a cab. When the ambassador did not comply with the gentleman's request straight away, he, in a state of fury, said: "Won't you call me a cab?" to which Mr. Ambassador said: "OK, you are a cab". Feeling ridiculed and insulted, he took the issue to the host and at the end the misunderstanding was cleared up. The reason for this misunderstanding was the verb "to call" which not only presents polysemy

with the meanings of “giving someone or something a name” and “to use a phone to talk to somebody” but is also used with two objects causing ambiguity. So, while teaching this characteristic feature of the verb “to call”, this story is a perfect material for students learning and feeling amused. The comedic writer Helitzer provides a variation of this kind of ambiguity focusing on the verb “to call”.

“Call me a doctor”.

“Why? Are you sick?”

“No, I just graduated from med school” [12, 89].

Humorous texts used as a teaching resource can also focus on nouns, because this main part of speech offers a wide range of opportunities for ambiguities due to its morphological and grammatical features. Having “common vs. proper nouns”, “countable vs. uncountable”, “singular vs. plural” distinctions, nouns are used in diverse ways. Nouns’ morphologically overlapping with other parts of speech mainly happens when they do not carry any noun-forming suffixes or a determiner before a noun is absent. One specific feature of nouns which is commonly exploited by comedians and advertisers is the combinability of nouns to create compound nouns or noun phrases. To illustrate, let’s look at this example by J. Brown:

“I was the Best man at a wedding; I thought the title was a bit much. If I’m the Best Man, why is she marrying him?” [15, 156].

Here the confusion between compounds and noun phrases has successfully been used to create humour and the teacher using this extract from a stand-up show can teach the structure of noun phrases and compound nouns.

Although many common ideas in English are expressed by noun-noun compounds, this structure in itself is rather ambiguous, so, not surprisingly, it has attracted most comedians’ attention and caused a lot of jokes to appear and also made the meaning easy to manipulate. For example:

“Can I interest you in a nice pocket calculator? said the helpful clerk”.

“No, thanks,” replied the customer. “I know exactly how many pockets I have.” [15, 158].

The ambiguity between the meanings of “a small calculator carried in a pocket” and “a calculator for calculating the pockets” leads to a humorous effect and it becomes obvious that the listener interpreted “pocket calculator” as a noun phrase rather than a compound noun.

Verbs’ and nouns’ contributions to creating ambiguities further followed by laughter are numerous, but there is one more notional part of speech which seems to be a source of endless misunderstandings and humour: pronouns. As known, pronouns are words that can be used instead of a noun or a noun phrase. This is how a pronoun contributes to creating ambiguity-based laughter. That is to say, while replacing, if a noun or a noun phrase is more

than one and the noun and the pronoun belong to the same category of person, gender and number, misunderstandings can lead to a humorous effect. The following joke examples clearly prove the point.

When they brought their first baby home from the hospital, the wife suggested to her husband that he should have a go at changing the baby’s nappy. “I’m busy,” he said. “I’ll change the next one.”

So three hours later, she tried again: “Darling, will you change baby’s nappy?”

«No,» he said. «I meant the next baby» [24, 43].

“The next one” being the ambiguity center, refers to the nappy for the wife, yet to the baby for the husband. There is no linguistic barrier for “the next one” not to be understood in these two different ways. So, this environment for manipulating the meaning brings about laughter. Some more examples are as follows:

Husband: Where is yesterday’s newspaper?

Wife: I wrapped the garbage in it.

Husband: Oh, I wanted to see it.

Wife: There wasn’t much to see .. just some orange peels and coffee grounds [15, 270].

In this little joke, the reference of the pronoun “it” is ambiguous between “the garbage” and “yesterday’s newspaper” because both of the mentioned nouns are singular and can be referred by “it”.

A man calls the hospital and says, “You gotta help! My wife’s going into labor.”

The nurse says, “Is this her first child?”

“No,” he says. “This is her husband.” [15, 275].

In this truly funny example, the reference of “this” caused a deictic problem. While the intended meaning is “this child”, the listener interprets it as “the person who I am talking to”. These joke examples are not only an authentic teaching resource for explaining various uses of pronouns, their anaphoric and cataphoric meanings, the issue of deixis, but are also an opportunity for teachers, especially those teaching writing classes, urge students to be more sensitive to these cases to avoid any possible misinterpretations.

The texts based on the humour triggered by the ambiguity of the verbs, nouns and pronouns dealt with in this article showed how linguistic items and structures can be presented in EFL classrooms in a humorous way for teaching purposes. Also, while discussing the texts, teachers can highlight their potential for ambiguity and humorous effect. The emergence of the implausible meaning not intended by the speaker/ writer offers a chance for the teacher to emphasise the importance of delivering the message correctly and paying attention to the lexical and grammatical choice.

All in all, humour, not depending on its type, if used appropriately is a powerful pedagogical tool in the hands of a skillful teacher. Being important in reducing the stress, anxiety and nervousness of

students, humour makes the students more receptive to learning and keeps them engaged. Owing to humour, the classroom atmosphere can become more friendly increasing not only student engagement but also overall class attendance. Besides this positive contribution to language learning and teaching, humorous texts as an authentic teaching resource, enable different language items and patterns to be presented and taught in an enjoyable way. In addition to psychological, pedagogical and linguistic benefits, humorous texts can be used for learning more about cultural values and increase the overall communicative competence of students.

Conclusion

This article was an attempt to explore the possibilities of humour use in EFL classrooms. Humour is appreciated highly and expected to be used not only in daily life, but also in classroom settings for the aforementioned positive outcomes. Via effective and appropriate usage in relevant situations, humour arouses students' interest and motivation, facilitates learning process making it more enjoyable and memorable. Increasing the quality of relationship between a teacher and students, humour also helps less outspoken, nervous and shy students to actively participate in language classes and learn effectively. Ambiguity-based humorous texts, in particular, in addition to being an authentic material to introduce certain cultural values can also be utilized to present ambiguous linguistic elements and patterns causing laughter, to discuss their properties in a humorous way and educate students increasing their awareness of unwanted ambiguities proceeding from verbal humour.

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Малікзаде Айдан Тахір. Використання гумору, ґрунованого на двозначності, у класах EFL

Ефективність уроків анґлійської мови та засоби її досягнення завжди цікавили дослідників, педагогів та спеціалістів у цій ґалузі. Нещодавно ідея включення гумору та гумористичних текстів до класів EFL (анґлійська як іноземна) стала популярною через їх психологічний, педагогічний, соціальный та лінґвістичний внесок у процес викладання та навчання. Незважаючи на те, що педагоги довгий час іґнорували гумористичні тексти через їхню ігрову мову, у цій статті аналізується, як гумористичні тексти підвищують якість взаємовідносин між учителем та учнем, стимулюють та посилюють участь та залученість учнів, а також роблять уявлення різних мовних структур захоплюючим та заминаючим. Щоб досліджувати це, ми зосередилися на двозначності як звичайному засобі вербального гумору та проаналізували концепцію гумору загалом та її зв'язок із двозначністю. Деякі значущі частини мови, саме дієслово, іменник і займенник, були обрані як фактори, що сприяють синтаксичній двозначності, і були розглянуті тексти, в яких вони з'являлися, викликаючи двозначність і сміх. Вивчення гумористичних текстів, заснованих на двозначності, показало, що їх слід використовувати під час уроків мови, особливо з просунутими учнями, через їх багатофункціональний характер. Тобто гумористичні тексти не лише створюють позитивну атмосферу в класі, а й знайомлять із культурними цінностями та представляють мовні одиниці та зразки як автентичний матеріал, акцентуючи увагу на їхньому неоднозначному значенні. Враховуючи ці фактори, у статті наголошується на необхідності гумористичних текстів на уроках іноземної мови та відстоюється ідея їх постійного використання.

Ключові слова: гумор, словесний гумор, гумористичні тексти, засновані на двозначності, культурні цінності, вивчення та викладання мови, двозначність знаменних частин мови.