

Lecturers' Perceptions of the Benefits of Using Humour in Classroom

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ABSTRACT

Of all topics concerning classroom instruction, the use of humour has received the least attention. While some lecturers believe that using humour creates a fun and lively classroom, others may experience different situations which hamper them from using it. Hence, this paper aims to look at the lecturers' perception of the benefits of using humour as a teaching strategy and the relationship between socio-psychological and educational benefits which students gain from humour. This study was carried out in a Malaysian public university which regards English as a medium of instruction. 60 respondents participated in this study. The findings showed lecturers considered humour as socio-psychologically and educationally beneficial for students and there was a correlation between socio-psychological and educational benefits of using humour in the classroom.

Keywords: Lecturers' perceptions, humour, learning, lectures

1.0 INTRODUCTION

As the old saying goes, "Laughter is the best medicine". This is used to signify how beneficial laughter or humour is. Its benefits are ranging from health benefits (Whipple & Calvert, 2008) to psychological benefits (Colom, Alcover, Sánchez-Curto, & Zárata-Osuna, 2011) and even educational benefits (Sambrani *et al.*, 2014). In schools, the roles of teachers in classrooms are significant. They play a significant part in delivering lessons to students. At the tertiary level, the roles of lecturers are just similar. Besides delivering lessons, they also make effective learning possible. To achieve this, it is not enough by just having knowledgeable lecturers and technology-enhanced classrooms but also efforts and suitable methods in ensuring comprehensive lessons. Therefore, it is believed that humours can be regarded as a beneficial tool in a classroom to make sure that learning takes place (Deiter, 2000; Aboudan, 2009; Ziyaeemehr, Kumar, & Faiz, 2011).

Humour is a significant component in interaction. Regardless of where humour takes place, it is often considered as a paramount part of daily communication. In addition, humour has also been

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identified to benefit the instruction in classroom (Englert, 2010), reduce anxiety among students (Kher, Molstad, & Donahue, 1999), and increase students' motivation (McCroskey, Richmond, & Bennett, 2006) as well as students' interest in learning (Baringer & McCroskey, 2000).

At a tertiary level, especially, the main way of teaching is through lectures. Through this approach, the delivery of lessons is mostly teacher-centred. This gives students less opportunity to be involved in the learning process. Without much interaction, students will lose interest to participate which will lead to their passivity. Using humours, therefore, is considered as one of the ways to create more meaningful lessons and decrease students' passivity (Omede & Jimba, 2013). However, different lecturers may have different attitudes on the use of humour in delivering their lessons. Therefore, this paper aims to address these questions:

1. What are the lecturers' attitudes on the use of humours in the classroom?
2. To what extent do socio-psychological effects affect educational benefits?

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Numerous studies have supported humour as a useful tool for classroom learning (Fisher, 1997; Cornett, 1986; Kher *et al.*, 1999; Duffy & Jones, 1995; Gorham & Christophel, 1990; Powell, 1985). Humour in the classroom has many educational benefits as well as socio-psychological effects on learners.

One of the educational benefits of using humour in the classroom is being able to maintain students' attention during lessons (Walter, 2007; as cited in Omede & Jimba, 2013). By applying humour in delivering a lesson, students are able to develop a deeper interest in the subject. Humour also has been shown to help increase students' comprehension of complex concepts, making them easier to understand (Downs, Javidi, & Nussbaum, 1988; Wagner, 2007). A study by Kaplan and Pacoe (1997) revealed that the use of humour in the classroom can also help students remember the lessons better. This can be achieved in a positive learning environment. As suggested by Kher *et al.* (1999), humour helps teachers create a positive classroom atmosphere for students. As students are entertained by humour, increased attention span promotes students' understanding of the lesson.

Aboudan (2009) found that humour encourages students to communicate with the teachers, allows students to feel free in the classroom, gives students a sense of inclusion, and provides students assurance and security to participate without feeling exposed or vulnerable. The research was conducted on 160 students of advanced level, where they were asked questions about the effect of humours on their confidence and participation in ESL classes and opinions about humour becoming part of their ESL learning and its effect on classroom atmosphere. Additionally, humour reduces the students' anxiety of the dreaded subjects (Korobkin, 1988). Korobkin (1988) and Schatz (2006) also noted that humour could be used to reduce stress and encourage creativity and critical thinking.

Apart from the educational benefits, studies have also found that humours have socio-psychological benefits on students. Humours have been demonstrated to help reduce the barriers between students and their teachers by creating a closer relationship between them (Proctor, 1994 as cited by Kher *et al.* 1999). According to Walter (2007), humour helps students feel comfortable and

relaxed with the teacher, even though it is the first meeting. By using humour, teachers are able to move away from being perceived as authoritative. This allows shy or timid students to participate actively in the classroom. Humour also has been shown to create a strong liking of students towards the teacher and this leads to the love of learning and anticipation to attend the particular teacher's class.

There is an extensive amount of literature focusing on humour and its benefits in education. Many studies support the notion that humour promotes effective classroom learning as mentioned above. However, very few studies have looked into the implementation of humour by educators. The current paper will look into lecturer's perspective of humour in two aspects; educational benefits and socio-psychological effects on students, as these two aspects of benefits are often discussed in isolation (Omede & Jimba, 2013). The current study intends to investigate whether one aspect would affect the other.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study applied a quantitative research method as the interrogative approach. In answering the research questions, descriptive, correlation, and regression analyses were used. Descriptive analysis was used to quantify response to answer the first research question. Correlation analysis was carried out to determine if there is a relationship between the two variables while regression analysis was used to investigate how the independent variable (socio-psychological benefits) affects dependent variables (educational benefits).

3.2 Research Tool

The questionnaire was used as the main research tool in collecting data for this study. The questionnaire was adapted from Omede and Jimba (2013). It comprised 21 questions and two sections; demographic information and lecturers' perception of the benefits of using humour in the classroom. In answering the latter section, 17 questions measured with Likert-scale were given. Analysis of the data was conducted by using SPSS.

3.3 Participants

In this study, 60 lecturers served as the respondents. They were chosen on a random basis, thus random sampling. There were 41 female and 19 male lecturers involved. They share different academic qualifications and age as well as the number of years in service as lecturers. More detailed information of the respondents can be found in the finding section.

4.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 describes the demographic profiles of the respondents. They were 60 lecturers at UiTM Cawangan Pahang. The majority were female (68.3%), with a Master's degree (81.7%) in the range of 31-40 age group (43.3%) and have been teaching for 5-10 years (31.7%).

Table 1 Demographic information of participants (N=60)

		n	%
Sex	Men	19	31.7
	Women	41	68.3
Age	20 - 30	18	30.0
	31 - 40	26	43.3
	41 - 50	10	16.7
	> 50	6	10.0
Education Attainment	Bachelor degree	10	16.7
	Master's degree	49	81.7
	Ph.D.	1	1.7
Years of Service	Below 5 years	18	30.0
	5 - 10 years	19	31.7
	11 - 15 years	13	21.7
	16 - 20 years	7	11.7
	> 20 years	3	5.0

4.1 Lecturers' Attitudes on the Use of Humour in Classroom

In the survey, the respondents were asked to rate their perception of the use of humour while teaching in the classroom. Each question was measured by using a 5-point Likert-scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree".

Table 2 shows the analysis on each of the lecturers' perception of socio-psychological and educational benefits of humour. Regarding the socio-psychological benefits of humour, the results as displayed in the table showed that *using humour to create a closer relationship between lecturers and students* received the highest mean score $M = 4.3167$ ($SD = .59636$) as the most agreeable opinion by the respondents. *Humour could provide students a mental break to make sense of lesson* was next with mean score $M = 4.2167$ ($SD = .52373$), indicating that it was also agreed by the respondents. On the other hand, *humour could allow shy or timid students to participate actively in learning* had the lowest mean score $M = 3.7333$ ($SD = .86095$).

For the perception on the educational benefits of using humour in classrooms, the data revealed that *humour can get and hold students' attention during lectures* received the highest mean score $M = 4.2833$ ($SD = .58488$). *Humour could create a positive classroom atmosphere* followed next with mean score $M = 4.2333$ ($SD = .53256$). However, the element of using *humour could increase retention of what is learned* received the least mean score of 3.7167 ($SD = 0.76117$). This might not be surprising as Wanzer, Frymier, and Irwin (2010) claimed that inappropriate forms of humour would not correlate positively with students' retention. Yet, since the mean scales of 3.5 to 4.5 were in a slightly positive range (Reed, 2006), the mean scores in Table 1 indicate that the respondents had positive perceptions towards the use of humour in the classroom. These benefits appeared to be the most agreeable socio-psychological benefits that can help students' learning in the classroom. Therefore, it can be concluded that majority of these educators believed that using humour brings positive effects in terms of socio-psychological and educational benefits to students.

Table 2 Socio-psychological and educational benefits of using humour in classroom to students' learning

	N	Mean	Std Deviation
A. Socio-Psychological Benefits			
1. Humour can create a closer relationship between lecturers and students.	60	4.3167	.59636
2. Humour could provide students a mental break to make sense of the lesson.	60	4.2167	.52373
3. Humour could allow shy or timid students to participate actively in learning.	60	3.7333	.86095
4. Humour could lift the spirit of students and help them see the topic/subject/lecturer in a more positive light	60	4.0667	.63424
B. Educational Benefits			
5. Humour can get and hold students' attention during lectures.	60	4.2833	.58488
	60	4.1500	.65935
6. Humour could increase students' interest in the subject or topic.	60	3.7667	.81025
7. Humour can facilitate the understanding of students about difficult concepts.	60	3.7167	.76117
8. Humour could increase retention of what is learned.	60	3.7333	.93640
9. Humour could give students another reason to attend class.	60	4.2333	.53256
10. Humour could create a positive classroom atmosphere.	60	3.800	.81926
11. Humour could reduce the authoritarian position of the teacher.	60	4.0833	.67124
12. Humour could reduce students' anxieties about dreaded subjects.			
Valid N (listwise)	60		

4.2 Socio-Psychological Effects on the Students' Educational Benefits

4.2.1 Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Table 3 below depicts the result of descriptive statistics for the variables. From the table, it can be seen that all the variables were normally distributed with the value of skewness less than ± 1 . From the descriptive analysis, the mean for socio-psychological effects is 4.0833, with the standard deviation of 0.45255. Meanwhile, the mean for educational benefits is 3.9708, with the standard deviation of 0.43507. As the mean scales of 3.5 to 4.5 are in a slightly positive range, the mean values for both variables indicate that the participants agreed with the statements that humour brings socio-psychological and educational benefits to students' learning. The small standard deviation values showed that the data were more concentrated around the mean, thus more consistent.

Table 3 Descriptive statistics for variables

	N	Mean	Std Deviation	Skewness
Socio-Psychological	60	4.0833	0.45255	-0.182
Educational	60	3.9708	0.43507	0.300

Table 4 represents the correlation analysis between the socio-psychological benefits of using humour and educational benefits on students' learning. The r value = 0.720 illustrates that there was a fairly strong positive linear correlation between the two variables. This result depicts that socio-psychological effects had a significant positive relationship with educational benefits at a significance level of 0.01. Since there was a significant positive correlation between socio-psychological and educational benefits, it can be concluded that these educators believed that humour does play an important role in facilitating students in their learning in the classroom.

Table 4 Correlation

		Socio- Psychological	Educational
Socio- Psychological	Pearson Correlation	1	.720**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.00
	N	60	60

4.2.2 Regression Analysis

The results of the regression analysis on the relationship between the independent variable (socio-psychological effects) and the dependent variable (educational benefits) of using humour in students' learning are presented in Table 5.

Table 5 Regression Results

	Estimates	Sig.
(Constant)	1.144	0.002
Socio- Psychological	0.692	0.000

Model fit : R= 0.720; R²= 0.518; F-value= 62.454

**p-value<0.05

From Table 5 above, it can be seen that when socio-psychological effects were regressed against the educational benefits, it produced an F-Statistics value of 62.454. The R² value (.518) indicates how much of the total variation in educational benefits can be explained by the socio-psychological effects. This means that 51.8% of the total variation in educational benefits can be explained. Table 5 also shows that the regression model predicts the dependent variable significantly well. The p-value 0.000, which is lower than the significant level of 0.05, indicates that overall, the socio-psychological effects had a positive significant influence on educational benefits. The coefficients of socio-psychological effects also contribute significant influence to the model (p<0.05). This clearly shows that for every one value increase of socio-psychological will increase educational benefits by 0.692. Therefore, this study successfully proved that using humour in classroom does bring positive effects to the students' learning since both variables (socio-psychological effects and educational benefits) clearly had positive significant influence on each other.

5.0 CONCLUSION

This paper sought to gauge lecturers' perceptions of using humour in the classroom in UiTM Cawangan Pahang. As can be seen in the findings, the study pointed out two significant findings. Firstly, the study showed that the lecturers involved perceived humour as beneficial and helpful to their students. Majority of them agreed that using humour can create a closer relationship between lecturers and students. The respondents also perceived humour as a tool that could provide students a mental break to make sense of the lesson. This is because humour could help lift students' spirit and help them see the topic or subject as well as the lecturer in a more positive light. Another significant finding also showed that the lecturers believed the socio-psychological benefits do affect educational benefits of the students. The lecturers' attitudes on humour in this study confirmed

the findings of previous studies (Ravichand, 2013; Rashidi, Eslami, Rakhshandehroo, & Izadpanah, 2014; Salehi & Hesabi, 2014) that humour brings advantages to the lessons as well as to the students. Besides being a helpful tool in classrooms, humour also helps bridging the gap between lecturers and students thus may lead to meaningful lessons. Most importantly, humours can get and hold students' attention during lectures. However, as Deiter (2000) noted, lecturers should use humour with care and avoid from making offensive humorous statements. This is to ensure that interesting and meaningful lessons can be achieved at the same time.

To sum up, the data analysis and discussion clearly depicted how the lecturers were positive about using humour in the classroom, as well as their perception that there is a strong significant influence between the use of humour in the classroom with the socio-psychological and educational benefits to students.

Nevertheless, there are limitations and weaknesses in this study that should be taken into consideration. Firstly, although previous studies have shown how humour can be beneficial in the classroom (Kaplan & Pascoe, 1997; Korobkin, 1988; Edwards & Gibboney, 1992; Wagner, 2007), studies discussing how socio-psychological benefits affect educational benefits have been very scarce. Thus, there might be some drawbacks in finding previous literature to support this study. Another particular limitation is the small sample size of the respondents ($n = 60$). On the other hand, the respondents' responses could be valid and reliable as the minimum sample size recommended by many researchers (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2006) is 30. Yet it would be ideal to increase the sample size and include the qualitative data such as interviews and classroom observations to further gauge the influence of humour in facilitating students' learning in classroom. Hence, generalisation from the findings in this study should be made with caution.

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