

Students' Perception on the Use of Humor in the Teaching of English as a Second Language in Nigeria

Akinkurolere Susan Olajoke^{1,2*}

¹ Department of General Studies, Rufus Giwa Polytechnic, Owo, Ondo State, Nigeria

² Department of English, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife., Osun State, Nigeria

*Correspondence: Akinkurolere Susan Olajoke, Department of General Studies, Rufus Giwa Polytechnic, Owo, Ondo State Nigeria. E-mail: olujoke2126@yahoo.com

Abstract: Learners' perceptions about foreign language or second language are becoming issue of attention from various scholars in applied linguistics in recent time (Ayman, 2012; Masoumeh, 2012). The effective teaching of English as Second Language (ESL) is one of the major concerns in Applied Linguistics. Hence, the paper was set out to investigate the perceptions of the use of humor in the teaching of English as L2 on the students of a Tertiary Institution in Nigeria. This approach unraveled the implication of humor both from the positive and negative sides. The paper reflected the relationship between culture and humor as reported by students. It was therefore suggested that the use of humor in the teaching of English as second language (ESL) should be done by teachers with care considering the fact that the linguistic environment is cross cultural, so that the purpose of effective teaching of ESL to learners will be achieved.

Keywords: humor, culture, classroom, second language, teacher

1. Introduction

Language as the best gift to man is as old as man himself. The survival of human being depends to a large extent on language apart from life. Most human activities involve the use of language, this fact has made scholars in Applied Linguistics to place premium on the phenomena of language learning and teaching as vital aspects of research. In fact, we would generally refer to it as the crux of the matter in Applied Linguistics. Language teachers and learners of language perceive the process of teaching and learning as complex especially as regards second language (L2), most teachers of English as second language (L2) in Nigeria are non-native speakers of English language. In essence, the majority of English as second language (ESL) teachers were also, at a time, ESL learners. Although, the fact remains that some teachers of ESL possess near native speaker competence but this does not portray them as native speakers.

In Nigeria, The English Language has become a determining factor for the survival of most people. This is the resultant effect of her linguistic complexity. As Ker (2002, p.117) opines that Nigeria is a multicultural, multiethnic and multilingual country. In any multilingual speech community such as Nigeria, the need to bring diverse ethnic nationalists under one linguistic umbrella becomes paramount. The need for a language common to everyone has given English Language much prominence and by this, the English language in Nigeria Polity has become a necessary and welcomed evil that people have to live with. Ayeomoni (2012, p.13) posits thus:

English has been more noticeable in use in Nigeria. It serves various functions as well as official language as the second language. It remains the language of bureaucracy of government, of education, of commerce, of science and technology, of interethnic cooperation and contacts, etc.

Teaching English as L2 have received attention from scholars via Sociolinguistics, Psycholinguistics and phonology but the focus of this paper is to explore the perceptions of the students on the use of humor in the teaching of English as L2. In the same vein, Ayman (2012, p. 20) opines that:

Nowadays, knowledge of English has become an essential part of everyday life of the global world. Many people are using English in nearly every sector and for international relations....one variable which has received a lot of attention recently in the language learning process is beliefs about language learning which Horwitz (2007) considers as central constructs in every discipline which deals with human behavior.

Hence, the teaching of the English language in Nigerian schools can never be overemphasized as the school serves as the primary avenue for such purposes. Thus, the perceptions or beliefs of students as learners of English as ESL are important to learners' progress and eventual performance in the classroom.

2. Humor in ESL Teaching

According to Merriam-Webster dictionary, humor is 'the mental faculty of discovering, expressing or appreciating something that is comical, amusing, or absurdly incongruous'. The Oxford Advanced Learner Dictionary defines humor as the quality of something that makes it funny or amusing. From these definitions, it is obvious that humor, to large extent, depends on the parties involved in a discourse, the ones lies on the participants to know whether something is humorous or not. Therefore, Humor is anything perceived by parties as humorous in any communication act.

Teachers have searched for more effective methods of communicating information and assisting students in learning process, especially in the area of communication skills as well as inculcating in them ability to demonstrate values and work efficiently in multicultural environment. It is not debatable that humor and culture are interwoven in any language. The culture of any language is users centered, that is, it encapsulates the people's way of life, art, beliefs, attitudes, and customs to a large extent, the survival of a culture depends on the survival of the language that expresses the culture. Therefore, as long as there is the use of a language there will be a distinct culture associated with the language.

In a multicultural country like Nigeria, the complexity of the cultures brings to bear on humor. Deducing meaning from humor should be based on the cultural interpretation of the environment. ESL teachers are not unaware of this. Therefore, they tend to handle humor with caution in teaching ESL and some ESL teachers might not bother for fear of being misinterpreted. Cultural orientation is germane to the success of humor in the teaching of ESL, for instance, if a student does not understand that 'I'm sick of lectures' means 'to be tired of lectures' then a humor that involves such expression could be difficult to understand .

More so, what is regarded as humorous in one linguistic environment might not be humorous in another i.e. to smile at a funeral in Nigeria is awkward while such is possible elsewhere. Humor associated with a particular linguistic environment forms an integral part of the culture of the environment. Since, the ESL teachers has the major objective of developing proficiency of students, teachers who understand the cultural complexity of the students has a lot to do in order to help the students to appreciate humor.

There are lots of benefits that could be derived from the incorporation of humor in teaching of ESL. Generally speaking, a sense of humor makes the classroom environment lively and reduces anxiety by creating a free and easy atmosphere. On humor Gatt (2000) posits that:

It is the breathing-out of the soul when the pupils only listen to the teacher, who may be teaching in the same tone, then it is as if they only breathe in and have no opportunity to breathe out. They need humor, which the teacher can find in very different places. Therefore, the teacher must bring in humor during his lessons and this should result from vitality and momentum of the lesson.

With this submission, it is crystal clear that one of the ways of creating interest on the part of both the students and teachers is through humor in the teaching of English as L2. It is also observable that the effect of humor is two-way or double sided, that is; it has benefits for both the teachers and the students.

Krashen (1987) wrote extremely on the negative effect of anxiety on the student's ability to learn ESL. For a dreaded course like English especially in an ESL environment, humor can help increase motivation, self confidence and bridge gap between teachers and students. Through this, the students can maximize ESL lessons through easy understanding and long term retention (Glenn, 2002).

Humor could be positive or negative. The basis of judgment is based on the end result in any humorous act. It is negative when it results in distance, repulsion, nervousness while positive humor leads to interest, easiness, calmness etc. Bergen (1992) opines that teachers who use strategies that promote the connection between humor and learning usually provide students with their best school experiences especially when ESL teachers share the same background culture with most of the students.

Munoz (2005, p.24) argues that 'humor is closely related to memory as it is easier to recall an experience that occurred in a humorous context...' as (Tosta, 2001, p.27) regards being funny as humorous by asserting that the funny teacher is not a clown figure, he is a serious conscientious professional who believes in the meaningfulness and effectiveness of having fun while learning. He further makes a clear-cut distinction.

We would like to make a clear cut distinct between a comedian/clown and a humorous teacher. The goal of a comedian even in a formed environment is distinct from that of a humorous teacher. A comedian/clown entertains and gets paid for it without a goal of imparting knowledge, but a humorous teacher is a professional who employs humor for the sole goal of making learning and teaching more interesting and effective. The major benefits of humor in the teaching of ESL can be summed up in Munoz (2005) submission thus:

There are many benefits to complementing humor in the classroom, it creates a cooperative atmosphere helping students to better relate to one another and it focuses them more effectively. It adds a cultural frame to language by presenting a tone, expression and context to the materials, thus increasing cultural knowledge.

Humor facilitates the acquisition of vocabulary and helps distinguish figurative from literal meaning. Similarly, it helps develop visual memory and improves the capacity to solve linguistic problems. The devices that we can use to add humor to a language class range from idiomatic expressions, riddles, or proverbs, pronunciation, games, comics, the use of regalia, jokes or typical grammatical errors.

3. Statement of Research Problem

Existing studies on humor have focused on the concept from sociological, psychological and linguistic perspectives. Also various scholars have considered humor as area of research interest in

Applied linguistic. Some of these studies are Pecknik (2001), Downs *et al.* (1988), Schmitz (2002), Munoz (2005), and Tosta (2001). It is observed that none of the existing studies bother on the students' perception as they mostly focus on humor employed by teachers in the teaching of English or other subjects. Hence, the present study bridges the gap by focusing on the students' perceptions on the use of humor in the teaching of English as a second language in Nigeria.

4. Aim and Objectives of the Study

The aim of this research study is to make enquiries about students' perception on humor in classroom environment, with the goal of assessing its effectiveness in pedagogical use. The specific objectives are to:

- a) Investigate the various ways by which English language students perceive the use of humor;
- b) Analyze the various perceptions to show their frequencies;
- c) Examine the implication of such perceptions to the teaching of ESL.

5. Linguistic Approach

This research is approached from the sub-linguistic field known as applied linguistics. Applied linguistics covers language teaching, speech therapy, evaluation, translation, interpretation, planning and other concepts in human domain that centers on language. Researches in applied linguistics open up an avenue to use language to solve societal problem and enhance teaching and learning of language.

Effective teaching of English as second language is one of the major challenges in applied linguistics has become a major concern of scholars interested in the field. It is against this background that this research seeks to employ Social-constructive model to assess the perceptions of students on the use of humor. The choice of the Social-constructive model is based on the fact that, to some extent, the society determines who and what the teacher teaches since learning takes place in environment.

Humor in the teaching of ESL emphasizes culture of the environment. At the same time, the culture cannot be separated from the language of the culture. These have brought the culture of the English language and the culture of student's environment into contact. Since, this research basically deals with use of humor in the classroom environment; applied linguistics becomes the appropriate linguistic approach.

6. Research Methodology

6.1 Research Instrument

The data used in the present research were got from students of Rufus Giwa Polytechnic, Owo, Ondo State. The students were made up of 25 males and 25 females. The randomly selected students were ESL learners and we observed that most of the subjects are NE speakers of Yoruba Language, which happens to be one of the major languages in Nigeria. The students were National Diploma II students.

6.2 Method of Data Collection

Our data were collected using Questionnaire. Our subjects were made to fill the questionnaires during English lessons. The questionnaire contains questions that relate to the implication of humor

in the teaching of English as second Language. The questionnaires were administered (see Appendix) towards the end of the course (Use of English) and on the verge of writing examinations after they have received lectures for twelve weeks. In analyzing our data, we divided the questions into two sections, section A was to elicit information on benefits of humor to students and Section B captures the attitudes of students to the use of humor in ESL teaching. The discussions of result of findings were based on percentage.

7. Findings and Discussion

The questionnaires indicate (see table 1) that the use of humor in the teaching of ESL by teachers is still low as opined by 80% of the students. In our analysis, no distinction was made as regards the sex of the students as equal number of males and females was selected. We realized that a larger percentage of the students speak languages different from English often, hence they are grounded and acquainted with the culture of language(s) different from English. As rightly observed by Ayeomoni (2012) that, 'English is used to perform official and national functions, while the various indigenous languages are used for interaction in their respective domains'. In Nigeria, there abound over 400 indigenous languages with three major languages: Yoruba, Hausa and Igbo. Hence, for most students, there is one language (or more) that they have acquired before learning English language.

Table 1. Gender, usage of English and humor

Research Questions	Response (Percentages)		
	High	Average	Low
Use of English for Communication	20	70	10
Use of Humor in ESL	4	16	80

Note: total 50 students join this survey. Male and female are 50% & 50% respectively

Table 2. Benefits of humor

Research Questions	Response (Percentages)	
	Agree	Disagree
Reduces tension	96	4
Bridges gap between lecturers and students	60	40
Aids retention of taught lectures	90	10
Makes the class interesting	98	2
Encourages students' attendance in classes	70	30
Makes the ESL class participatory	80	20
Makes the lectures flow freely	96	4
Aids understanding of lecture	98	2

The findings in table 2 implied that the use of humor in ESL teaching can never be overemphasized as the students expressed this by agreeing that the use of humor reduces tension (96%), bridges gap

(60%), assists retention of taught lectures (90%), makes the class interesting (98%), encourages class attendance (70%), makes ESL class participatory (80%), makes lectures flow freely (96%), and aids understanding of lectures (98%). Table 3 show these culminated to the agreement of the students that humor is essential and relevant in the teaching of ESL (88%). The research has brought to fore practical significance of humor in ESL teaching. From our analysis, it was observed that most of the students perceived being humorous as funny (92%) but they were able to make distinction between a humorous teacher and a clown or a comedian. There is also the possibility that, afore time, the learners might not have the adequate semantic knowledge of such words distinction.

In order not to be silent on the negative humor, the students were made to express their opinions on negative implications of humor but most of the students do not believe that humor could have negative consequences as in the case of distance between lecturers and students (86%), disrespect (70%) and withdrawal of students' (90%) . In essence, the fact remains that the teachers are the major determinant factor when it comes to negative humor. Since, a humor that attacks the personality or ethnic group of the students might bring to fore negative implications such as distance and disrespect. Also, we note that 30% of the students that believed that humor in ESL teaching could lead to disrespect must have based their feelings against the cultural background of their first language (Yoruba language) that provides respect and politeness principles for superiors and elderly (see table 3).

Without mincing words, majority of the students (90%) posited they understand the use of humor in ESL teaching. The reason for this is not far-fetched, the students learn better in a relaxed atmosphere (Gatt, 2000). At the same time, 94% strongly recommend the use of humor in teaching of English language; hence, ESL teachers have a lot to do in inculcating humor into their lectures as long as it is geared towards effective learning of the language. The onus also lies on teachers to equip the students with skills that will make them to understand humor that relates to English culture as the findings revealed that 70% of the students understand humor better in their first language(s). The reason is not farfetched as students are in the first language environment and use their first language in most communicative acts (see table 3).

Table 3. Opinions on humor

Research Questions	Response (Percentages)	
	Yes	No
Relevance of humor	88	12
Understanding humor in ESL teaching	90	10
Humorous teacher as a clown	10	90
Humorous teacher as a comedian	8	92
Humorous teacher as funny	92	8
Distance between teachers and students	14	86
Disrespect	30	70
Withdrawal by students	10	90
Recommendation of the use of humor	94	6
Understanding of humor in L1 than L2	70	30

8. Conclusion

The study has several implications for the use of humor in teaching of English as L2 in Nigeria since it explores the perception of the students. A number of pedagogical implications can be gleaned from this study. Firstly, identifying the views and beliefs of students enhance awareness on adjusting to the various and diverse expectations of the use of humor in teaching. Secondly, it will serve as guidelines for ESL teachers to avoid wrong application of humor in classroom. The cultural environment and the teachers of ESL are the major determinants of students' comprehension of humor. More so, if there is no comprehension, the purpose for use of humor is not achieved.

The teachers of ESL need an improvement program for modification of their language teaching methodology (Babatunde, 2002), this will enable them to equip themselves in handling teaching strategies such as 'the use of humor' in making ESL an interesting experience by creating a positive impact in the classroom.

These recommendations are by no means exhaustive due to the small size of population in the present study and it is not enough to generalize the findings to the entire population of all ESL students since the research covers a particular institution in one of the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria. Finally, a careful investigation of ESL teachers' Perception on the use of humor in English language teaching is recommended in order to allow a comparative analysis of students' and teachers' perceptions.

References

- [1] Ayeomoni, M. O. (2012). The Languages in Nigerian Socio-political Domains: Features and Functions. *English Language Teaching*, 5(10), 12-19.
- [2] Ayman, S. D. (2012). Beliefs about foreign language learning and their relationship to gender. *English Language Teaching*, 5(10), 20-33.
- [3] Babatunde, S. T. (2002). The state of English language in Nigeria. In Adebayo Lawal, Ifeoma Isiugo-Abanike, & Isaac Nnam Ohia (Eds.), *Perspective on Applied Linguistics in Language and Literature* (pp. 129-142). Ibadan: Sterling Horden Publishers (Nig) Ltd.
- [4] Bergen, D. (1992). Teaching strategies: using humor to facilitate learning. *Childhood Education*, 69(2), 105-106.
- [5] Downs, V. C., Javidi, M. M., & Nussbaun, J. F. (1988). An analysis of teachers' verbal communication within the college classroom: Use of humor, self-disclosure, and narratives. *Communication Education*, 37(2), 127-141.
- [6] Gatt, J. (2000). *Humor in TEYL: reducing classroom anxiety*. Retrieved February 2, 2012, from [http://www.teyl.org/article 2.html](http://www.teyl.org/article2.html).
- [7] Glenn, R. (2002). Brain research: practical applications for the classroom. *Teaching for Excellence*, 21(6), 1-2.
- [8] Ker, D. (2002). The choice of English as a national language for Nigeria: a reevaluation. In Adebayo Lawal, Ifeoma Isiugo-Abanike, & Isaac Nnam Ohia (Eds.), *Perspective on Applied Linguistics in Language and Literature* (pp.177). Ibadan: Sterling Horden Publishers (Nig) Ltd.
- [9] Krashen, S. D. (1987). *Principles and practice in second language acquisition*. Prentice Tall International.
- [10] Masoumeh, N. (2012). An exploration of upper-intermediate Iranian EFL learners' perception of politeness strategies and power relations in disagreement. *English Language Teaching*, 5(10), 180-191.

- [11] Merriam (2001) *Webster Collegiate Dictionary* (10th ed.). Springfield, M.A: Merriam - Webster.
- [12] Munoz, B. J. (2005). Learning through humor: using humorous resources in the teaching of foreign languages. *The A.T.I.S Bulletin*. 42-46pp.
- [13] Oxford Advanced Learner Dictionary (7th ed.) (2005). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [14] Pecnik, G. (2001). Jokes in Teaching English as a Foreign Language. *ELT Newsletter: The Weekly Column* (February 2001, Article 49). Retrieved from <http://ww.officelive.com/default.aspx?cloc=en-us&location>
- [15] Schmitz, J. B. (2002). Humor as a pedagogical tool in foreign language and translation course. *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*, 15(1), 89-113.
- [16] Tosta, A. L. (2001). Laugh and learn: thinking over the 'funny teacher' myth. *English Teaching Forum*, 39(1), 26-29.

Appendix

Questionnaire on Perception of Humor in Teaching of ESL by Students

Instruction: Please, kindly fill the questionnaire completely by ticking the space you select for each number.

1. Sex: Male..... Female.....
2. How would you rate your use of English for communication?
High..... Average..... Low.....
3. How would you rate the use of humor in the teaching of ESL by teachers?
High..... Average..... Low.....
4. Do you agree with the following assertions about humor in the teaching of ESL? Agree or Disagree.
 - (a) Humor reduces tension.
 - (b) Humor bridges gap between lecturers and students.
 - (c) Humor aids retention of taught lectures.
 - (d) Humor makes the class interesting.
 - (e) Humor encourages the students' attendance in classes.
 - (f) Humor makes the ESL class participatory.
 - (g) Humor makes the lectures flow freely.
 - (h) Humor aids understanding of lecture
5. Is humor relevant in the teaching of ESL? Yes..... No.....
6. Do you understand humor used in teaching of ESL? Yes..... No.....
7. When teachers use humor, do you perceive them thus? Yes..... No.....
 - a) A clown
 - b) A comedian

- c) A funny teacher
8. Do you think that humor in ESL classroom can lead to the following? Yes..... No.....
- a) Distance between teachers and students
 - b) Disrespect
 - c) Withdrawal on the part of students.
9. Do you recommend the use of humor in the teaching of ESL? Yes..... No.....
10. Do you understand humor in first language than English Language? Yes..... No.....

Abbreviations

ESL- English as a Second Language

L1 - First Language

L2 – Second Language