EFFECTS OF HUMOR IN THE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM: HUMOR AS A PEDAGOGICAL TOOL IN THEORY AND PRACTICE

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Humor represents perhaps one of the most genuine and universal speech acts within human discourse. As a natural consequence then, the employment of humor within the context of second language pedagogy offers significant advantage to both the language teacher and learner. Indeed, humor serves as an effective means of reducing affective barriers to language acquisition. This effectiveness is particularly relevant to the communicative classroom, as humor has been shown to lower the affective filter and stimulate the prosocial behaviors that are so necessary for success within a communicative context. In addition to the employment of such general humor for the creation of a conducive learning environment, great value lies in the use of humor as a specific pedagogical tool to illustrate and teach both formal linguistic features as well as the cultural and pragmatic components of language so necessary for communicative competence. In order to investigate these and other perceived benefits of humor within the language classroom, the researcher of the present study surveyed a diverse collection of language students and teachers and asked them to evaluate the use of humor in their classrooms. Results from this pilot-study strongly confirm a perceived effectiveness for humor as an aid to learning and instruction.

INTRODUCTION

Humor is an inextricable part of the human experience and thus a fundamental aspect of humanity's unique capacity for language. In fact, it stands as one of the few universals applicable to all peoples and all languages throughout the world (Kruger, 1996; Trachtenberg, 1979). Nevertheless, despite such breadth and scope, humor is rarely discussed among language researchers or educators—perhaps even rarely employed in the classroom on a conscious level. Although humor has been given scant attention by SLA researchers and their subsequent literature, researchers in the social sciences, particularly those in the fields of education and psychology, have long investigated humor for its general, conducive pedagogical effects on a variety of levels (Gruner 1967; Bryant, Comisky, and Zillman 1979; Berwald 1992). This paper will argue that such general pedagogical benefits of humor are uniquely suited to the language classroom in general and the dominant contemporary communicative classroom in particular. To that end, results from a recent pilot study investigating student and teacher perception of humor usage in the classroom will be advanced as evidentiary support for the employment of humor as a pedagogical tool of instruction. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, this paper will also contend that humor is uniquely and ideally suited to serve as a vehicle for classroom illustration and instruction of specific linguistic, cultural, and discoursal phenomenon in the Target Language (TL) (Trachtenberg, 1979). Such TL humor is not only an idyllic and engaging manner by

which the language educator can teach specific elements of the language and culture at all levels of proficiency, but it is rather, given its ubiquity, an entirely *authentic* medium for the presentation of the language, and one which the learners may put to real communicative use in a variety of language contexts.

Despite its present pervasiveness within general education, humor has only recently taken its place as a fixture of classroom culture. Indeed, formal education was viewed as a wholly serious matter up until the mid-twentieth century—when *classic* educational models began to give way to the more flexible and humanistic approaches upon which we base our contemporary methods (Byrant, Comisky, & Zillman, 1979; Zillman and Bryant, 1983). The introduction of humor to language teaching has followed a similar though progressively distinct path: While the death of the classical language classroom, based upon the traditional grammar translation approach, occurred at roughly the same time as the demise of most classical educational models in general, its replacement by behavioral approaches based on conformity, repetition and cadence—such as the Audio Lingual Method (ALM)—allowed few new opportunities for use of classroom humor. Indeed, both the dominant translation and behavioral methodologies stifled what Vizmuller (1980) identifies as one of the key characteristics of both language and humor: creativity in communication. Thus, with the dawn of communicative syllabi in the early seventies and eighties, humor was finally implicitly reintroduced alongside a new emphasis on authentic and creative language learning. Nonetheless, SLA researchers, in conjunction with foreign/second language educators, have been slow to investigate, recognize, and/or exploit the significant potential of humor within the language classroom. This paper, therefore, is intended to stimulate interest in the implications of pedagogical humor in the hope that researchers and teachers alike will recognize the multiplicity of benefits inherent in both general classroom humor as well as the employment of humor for the illustration of specific linguistic and cultural elements of the TL.

General Affective Humor

In light of the minimal attention given to the effects of pedagogical humor by language researchers and educators, any discussion concerning the implications of classroom humor usage must begin within the fields of education and other closely related disciplines of the social sciences. Research foci within these fields have primarily approached the study of humor from within two distinct perspectives. The first of these concerns the direct effects of humor on learning and information retention. That is to say, many researchers have investigated whether humor has a *direct* effect on saliency of input with a resulting improvement in both information gain and retention. The second perspective examines the possible effects of humor on the general classroom environment and the subsequent *indirect* correlations such *affective* factors may have on learning. While both perspectives have yielded researchers important insights into the affective nature of humor on the learning process, it is primarily the latter perspective that has proven itself more fruitful in terms of measurable effect. For this reason, research concerning the indirect effects of humor will serve as the focus here.

Research of indirect humor usage in general pedagogical settings presents a rich and diverse investigative perspective. Exploiting this outlook, many researchers have cast humor within a variety of roles and frameworks that have all resulted in valuable insights for both educators and future researchers. The most significant framework used by education and psychology researchers has focused on humor as a componential element of a larger set of affective behaviors impacting learning in the classroom that are generally referred to as *immediacy behaviors*. The immediacy construct was first developed and introduced by Mehrabian (1969) as a description for those communication behaviors—humor among them—that improve the physical or psychological closeness and interaction of two or more individuals. Although Mehrabian's original articulation of immediacy made no explicit application to pedagogy, the components which constituted his formulation of such immediacy behaviors have been found to result in positive affect within classroom contexts (Barr, 1929; Beck, 1967; Beck & Lambert, 1977; Christensen, 1960; Coats & Smidchens, 1966; Cogan, 1958, 1963; et cetera; as cited in Anderson, 1979).

Attempting to further link immediacy and classroom affect, Anderson (1979) investigated immediacy and teacher efficacy within post-secondary classrooms. His results indicated that student perceptions of teacher immediacy were positively correlated with 1) student affect, 2) student behavioral commitment, and 3) student cognitive learning. Such correlative evidence is also supported by Nussbaum (1984; as cited in Downs, Javidi, & Nussbaum, 1988) wherein teachers who were recognized as effective also displayed more immediacy. Additionally, Gorham (1988) examined the effect of teacher immediacy and student learning within a set of 20 verbal items, including an explicit entry for use of humor (p.44). Results from this study also indicated a correlation between immediacy behaviors and effective learning. Significantly, Gorham indicates that the use of humor is an important aspect of teacher immediacy. While many examinations of immediacy have contented themselves to listing humor in a rather ancillary manner (Norton, 1977; Norton & Nussbaum, 1980), Gorham and Christophel's (1990) examination of immediacy and student learning puts humor squarely on top. Claiming that use of humor can reduce tension, disarm aggression, alleviate boredom, and stimulate interest, Gorham and Christophel examined 206 student observations of teacher employment of humor as well as teacher employment of general immediacy behaviors. The researchers found that though humor was positively correlated with student learning, the teachers' frequency of use of humor also positively correlated with teachers' frequency of employment of other verbal and nonverbal immediacy behaviors. Thus, Gorham and Christophel concluded that the effects of humor on learning are best understood and measured within the framework of immediacy behaviors.

In addition to employment of the immediacy framework for the examination of indirect effect of humor in a general educational context, many researchers have investigated such indirect effect in a more item-specific capacity. In a departure from most previous humor-related research, Neuliep (1991) investigated the effects of humor by soliciting teacher (rather than student) perceptions of their own humor usage and its effects in the classroom. Neuliep's study questioned 388 Wisconsin area high school teachers and asked them to indicate their rationale and subsequent perceived effect for their employment of

humor. Among the most commonly stated reasons for employing humor were: its effect as a relaxing, comforting, and tension reducing device, its humanizing effect on teacher image, and its effect of maintaining/increasing student interest and enjoyment. Thus, as Neuliep himself acknowledges, humor is not perceived as, "a strategy for increasing student comprehension and learning" (p.354). Rather, the indirect and ancillary effects on classroom environment and other affective variables conducive to learning are seen as the result of the employment of humor in the classroom. Similarly, Sudol (1981) claims that humor helps maintain student interest and comfort, while also allowing the teacher an ideal means of diffusing embarrassing situations for both students and the instructor—again emphasizing the indirect though beneficial effects of humor on learning. In an analogous manner, Welker (1977) found that humor serves as an "attention-getter" and tension reducer, as well as a means for dealing with student and teacher errors in a humane and compassionate manner—remarking, "to err is human, but also, to err is humorous" (p.252). Finally, Terry and Woods (1995) also identified reduced tension as an effect of humor usage in the primary school classroom. In addition, however, the researchers also point out the disparate results of such an effect. Specifically, Terry and Woods indicate that while too much tension often results in negative affect on learning, too little tension can have similar negative results. Thus, Terry and Woods warn of the danger humor presents to an ideal level of tension necessary for learning.

Such negative effects of too much and/or inappropriate humor use in the classroom present an additional and significant avenue of inquiry for researchers of pedagogical humor. In a more general capacity than Terry and Woods, Downs et al. (1988) found correlative evidence for possible negative effect of too much humor usage in their own study of post-secondary educators. Their study of humor usage by 'award winning' and 'ordinary' teachers indicated that award winning teachers used humor less frequently than did ordinary teachers. This, according to the researchers, "lends support to the contention that too much humor or self-disclosure is inappropriate [producing negative affect] and moderate amounts are preferred" (p.139). In addition, Berwald (1992) suggests that humor must be age appropriate to be beneficially effective, while Zillman and Bryant (1983) caution that humor, particularly sarcastic humor, can confuse students who are not listening carefully or reading non-verbal cues appropriately. Moreover, Sudol (1981) warns that too much humor aimed at a specific individual can be negatively misinterpreted and result in either perceived favoritism or perceived harassment depending on the *type* of humor employed—an observation that coincides with recent attempts by Neuliep (1991) and others to create typographic sets of facilitative and negative humor. While many researchers indicate the possibility for negative effects of humor on learning, most are also quick to point out the multiple beneficial effects as well. Certainly, this side of pedagogical humor research requires more careful study. What does seem clear, however, is that use of humor in and of itself does not automatically result in positive effect. Humor, it would seem, is a pedagogical instrument like any other, and one which serves as a double edged sword—capable of improving

or harming the classroom learning environment depending on its employment by the teacher.

Despite such possibility of negative effect when improperly employed, humor remains an important instrument for the improvement of educational contexts in general, and language educational contexts in particular. Deneire (1995) points out the well-documented tension-reducing capacity of humor as an especially beneficial effect for the language classroom. Clearly, as Deneire himself discusses at length, the foreign/second language classroom presents uniquely high levels of tension/anxiety for the student. Not only must the learner attempt to communicate in a new and unfamiliar language, but also do so among and in front of his/her peers. This, many would argue, presents a significantly more tense/anxious learning environment—when compared with general educational settings—simply because the student is deprived of his/her L1 language capabilities and thus, in many ways, his/her personal and cultural identity as well. The effect(s) that such anxiety and tension may have on the language learning process is a significant area of inquiry for SLA researchers. Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis addresses the importance of maintaining a low affective filter (a more relaxed learning environment) in the language classroom so that students will be more receptive to the input to which they are being exposed. This, it would seem, is an especially relevant and supportive indicator for the potential beneficial effects that humor can create in the language classroom. Indeed, the vast majority of pedagogical humor research would appear to confirm the tension reducing, anxiety lessening, and relaxation/comfort inducing effects of humor in the classroom. Thus, humor's evident ability to lower the affective filter makes a strong argument in and of itself for explicit inclusion of humor in a language educational context. Such beneficial effect is only further emphasized within the contemporary communicative language classroom—which requires significant amounts of language production/experimentation alongside socioconstructivist-based interactional components that require high levels of student comfort. Thus, the evident tension reducing effects of humor, coupled with the creation of an environment conducive to learning through humor-infused immediacy behaviors, suggests the potential for significant positive effect via humor in a communicative context so reliant on such variables for student production and interaction.

Targeted Linguistic Humor in the L2 Classroom

While the employment of general affective classroom humor offers significant benefits in the form of an improved learning environment within both language and generic educational contexts, humor offers significantly more benefit to the language educator as a specific and *targeted* illustrative tool of the linguistic, discoursal, and cultural elements of the language being taught. Importantly, and in light of the contemporary dominance of structure-based syllabi in language instruction, humor offers an ideal avenue for presentation and practice of linguistic mechanics. Deneire (1995) examines the specific use of humor within just such a linguistic context. He suggests humor as a formidable tool for sensitizing students to phonological, morphological, lexical, and syntactic differences within a single language or between a student's L1 and the TL. The following examples illustrate well the effective application of humor to learning structural linguistic components that are typically presented in a rigid and unengaging manner:

1. **Phonology**
   An American in a British hospital asks the nurse: *"Did I come here to die?" The nurse answers, "No, it was yesterdie."*
2. **Morphology**
   John Kennedy's famous blunder in Berlin: *Ich bin ein Berliner* (I am jelly doughnut), instead of *Ich bin Berliner* [I am a Berliner]
3. **Lexicon**
   A: *"Waiter, do you serve crabs here?" asks a customer.*
   B: *"We serve everybody. Just have a seat at this table, sir."*
4. **Syntax**
   Student 1: *The dean announced that he is going to stop drinking on campus."*
   Student 2: *"No kidding! Next thing you know he'll want us to stop drinking too."*
5. **Syntax + Lexicon**
   Q: *How do you make a horse fast?*
   A: *Don't give him anything for a while.*
   (Deneire, 1995, pp. 290)

All of these jokes may engage and relax students as they simultaneously present and reinforce important elements of the language: The phonology example illustrates the ambiguity of pronunciation and dialectical differences between British and American English. The morphology example shows the importance of the inclusion/exclusion of certain morphemes in order to properly convey meaning. The lexical item demonstrates the dual meanings of crab (i.e. a cranky person or a marine dwelling crustacean). Correspondingly, the syntax example illustrates the structural ambiguity of the initial sentence—whether the dean is going to stop students' or his own drinking. Finally, like the initial lexicon item, the mixed example of syntax and lexicon demonstrates the ambiguity of the two meanings for *fast* as well as the employment of *fast* as a verb or adjective. Significantly, all of these examples show how instruction of discrete linguistic units can be easily and effectively incorporated into classroom humor usage.

Similarly, Berwald (1992) indicates the effectiveness of humor for the illustration and practice of such syntactic, semantic, and phonetic structural components of language as well. He offers the example of utilizing humor involving comparative adjectives and oftentimes dry textbook characters as means of effectively introducing and reinforcing such grammatical patterns and semantic notions: "Robert is more attractive than Thomas" (p.195), or perhaps another example might be, "Ozzy Ozborne is more articulate than George W. Bush." Additionally, Berwald offers the following French pun as a way to teach or practice semantic/phonetic similarities and ambiguity:

Question: *Quelle est la différence entre un ascenseur et une cigarette?*
[What's the difference between an elevator and a cigarette?]
Response: *Un ascenseur fait monter et une cigarette fait des cendres.*
[An elevator ascends and a cigarette ashes.]

While the humor may not be immediately clear to someone who has never studied French, that is, in effect, the point. For those who get the joke and those who do not, the

inherent phonetic and semantic lesson it conveys is significant and something with which the instructor can then assist students in uncovering and exploring. In short, the humor and instructional value of this joke results from the verbal phrase *faire monter* (to ascend—the use of *faire* here is superfluous except for the purpose of continuity in the joke) and the verbal phrase *faire des cendres* that literally means *to make ashes*, but phonetically sounds exactly the same as *faire descendre*—meaning to descend. Thus, the joke effectively demonstrates the phonetic particularity of French pronunciation and the resulting possibility of ambiguity, while simultaneously introducing or reinforcing two commonly used verbs and their semantic relationships. Correspondingly, Trachtenberg (1979) claims that joke telling in an ESL context provides ideal opportunities for mini-grammar or semantic lessons. Indeed, presentation of the syntactic structure of interrogative patterns ideally compliments formulaic jokes such as *Knock, knock… Who's there*? Or traditional opening lines for jokes like *Did you ever hear about the guy who… ?* In addition to such formulaic humor, however, original jokes/humor by the instructor can be employed to suit specific classroom circumstances (Trachtenberg, 1979). Moreover, use of puns related to instruction allows for illustration of semantic ambiguity as well as syntax. Take, for example, the following:

→ *One day an English grammar teacher comes to class looking ill.*
→ *A student asks, "What's the matter?"*
→ *"Tense," the teacher replies in reference to her discomfort.*
→ *The student pauses for a moment and then says, "What was the matter? What has been the matter? What will be the matter… ?"*

Here, the humor not only displays the ambiguous lexical/semantic properties of the word *tense*, but also illustrates several grammatical tenses that students would need to identify in order to understand the response. Vizmuller (1979) also points to the benefits of using humor to teach structural components of language. Her own examples of syntactic illustration using transitive and intransitive verb forms, along with additional items of lexical ambiguity, is complimentary to the research conducted by Deneire (1995), Berwald (1992), and Trachtenberg (1979). Nonetheless, Vizmuller (1979) also emphasizes the beneficial cognitive effects of utilizing top-down examples in which students must analyze an authentic piece of language in order to comprehend its parts. Furthermore, Vizmuller also suggests that the creativity of humorous illustrations is important in the language learning process—contending that students must learn to diverge from the norm and the formulaic nature that characterizes much of language instruction.

Although humor provides an ideal mode of instruction for discrete linguistic aspects of language—along with possible cognitive benefits as suggested by Vizmuller—it is also a powerful instrument for the illustration of cultural, pragmatic, and discoursal patterns. Deneire (1995) strongly emphasizes the importance of humor in the teaching of culture alongside language. Specifically, he points to using anecdotal humor of cultural *faux pas'* as one effective means of indicating the unseen cultural boundaries of a new language. As Deneire states, "the humor caused by the clash of cultures serves as an excellent teaching device" (p.189). In a similar fashion, Deneire also advocates the use of authentic examples of humorous advertising in the TL as a

way of transmitting cultural clues to students. Advertisement humor, according to the researcher, conveys a great deal of cultural and pragmatic knowledge about a language within a very small space or short period of time—making for an, "interesting way to teach language and culture to students at all levels of instruction" (p.193). Similarly, Trachtenberg (1979) claims that jokes/humor within an ESL context serve as an ideal vehicle for the conveyance of American cultural patterns. Nonetheless, she suggests that many employments of linguistic humor need not particularly be culturally bound—particularly in the case of linguistic humor that is visually coordinated—if it is more likely to confuse than enlighten.

Closely related to such cultural transmission through humor are the social pragmatics of language. Deneire's (1995) example of comedic cultural *faux pas'* represents an effective manner in which such pragmatic issues can be taught in a language classroom. Indeed, as Deneire himself states, jokes (and humor in general) are socially sanctioned violations of cultural norms. In violating the social norms, therefore, one becomes familiar with the norms themselves. Thus, explicit use of anecdotal/narrative humor can implicitly teach the pragmatic norms of a language's associated society and culture through examples of such violations. An illustrative example of such effect in an English context might be a humorous anecdote of a newly arrived immigrant to the United States who is casually asked "How are you?" by an American colleague—out of simple politeness and with the cultural expectation of a short one word response if any at all—but who responds with a ten minute saga of his/her minor problems of the day. Such a rueful piece of anecdotal pragmatic humor allows the students to enjoy, or at least come to enjoy, the comedy of the situation through teacher assisted understanding of the proper and expected pragmatic use of such a greeting. Similarly, Trachtenberg (1979) also indicates the importance of humor in illustrating pragmatic language functions such as greeting someone, introducing oneself, leaving a social encounter, etc. While this type of anecdotal humor (real or created) may be the most obvious form for portrayal of pragmatic missteps, other forms of presentation—such as original narratives, role-plays, and pop-culture items—may offer many additional opportunities. Furthermore, authentic language materials like comic strips or travel memoirs also serve as an ideal means of relating language pragmatics in a humorous manner (Berwald, 1992). Indeed, Theresa Lucas (2004) reported great success in her use of such material to teach pragmatics in her own study of adult ESL learners.

In addition to the linguistic, cultural, and pragmatic applications for humor in language education is the benefit of humor for the illustration and practice of language discourse patterns. In order to properly frame the place of humor within such a perspective, one must first acknowledge the tremendous, though often unnoticed, role of humor in daily discourse. Indeed, humor pervades daily discourse and interaction (Schmitz, 2002), and thus, according to socioconstructivist models, has a hand in creating and maintaining identity as well (Brown, 2000). Trachtenberg (1979) emphasizes the importance of developing the discourse capabilities one utilizes in his/her native language to the same or similar degree in the TL. To ignore the comedic elements of discourse in the TL, according to Trachtenberg (1979), is to lose a part of one's identity during the language learning process. Schmitz (2002) is quick to point out that

classroom exposure to humor prepares students to understand and react to this pervasive and authentic element of discourse during real communicative language interactions. Thus, language teachers might incorporate humorous examples/exercises into student role-plays, oral interviews, or written dialogues to acclimate students to the presence of humor in discourse and to demonstrate its patterns of usage. Alternatively, a language instructor might also have students create and incorporate their own humor/jokes into discourse contexts while providing appropriate corrective feedback on humorous usage and style (Trachtenberg, 1979). Significantly, many examples of discourse humor are provided through entirely natural and authentic exchanges of humor between language students and teachers. This, it must be noted, is rarely if ever employed as an explicit pedagogical tool in the mind of the teacher, nor as an explicit learning tool in the mind of the student. Rather, it represents the natural occurrence of humor as a part of the human condition just as it emphasizes its importance to comprehensive language learning.

PERCEIVED EFFECT OF PEDAGOGICAL HUMOR IN THE L2 CLASSROOM

Participants

In order to investigate the perceived effect of pedagogical humor in the language classroom, the present author conducted a pilot study of 236 foreign/second language learners and 11 foreign/second language instructors using a Likert-scaled questionnaire [Appendices A & B]. All participants were enrolled or teaching at a post-secondary institution in the United States and were intentionally solicited from a variety of language courses (French, Italian, Spanish, Japanese, & ESL) in order to elicit a representative range of perspectives on humor.

Instrument

Study participants were surveyed on their perceptions of humor usage and effect within the foreign/second language classroom using an anonymous and voluntary questionnaire [Appendices A & B]. Both the student and teacher questionnaires included 13 questions with five numbered and qualitatively valued responses accompanying each. Thus, each question required participants to circle a number 1 through 5 with its corresponding qualitative value on an inclining scale. For example then, *Question 1* asked student participants, "How would you rate your instructor in terms of his/her overall effectiveness as a teacher?" Student participants were then offered 5 possible responses below this question as follows: 1 (totally ineffective), 2 (slightly ineffective), 3 (moderately effective), 4 (effective), 5 (extremely effective).

Investigative Foci

In accordance with the foci of this paper's review of relevant literature, the present pilot study questionnaires served to address three thematic research questions: 1) Do students and/or teachers perceive humor to be beneficial in reducing affective barriers to learning in general, 2) Do students and/or teachers

perceive targeted linguistic humor to be beneficial to language learning in particular, and 3) Do students and/or teachers perceive TL humor to be beneficial to target culture learning. In order to address these research questions, the pilot study questionnaires sought to establish a multi-perspective approach to perceptions of humor usage. Research Question #1 was, therefore, elucidated via a number of different items wherein each was intended to indicate perception of one aspect of affective humor. The collection of these related responses was then used to evaluate overall perceptions of affective benefits to humor. Similarly, Research Questions #2 & #3 were addressed via items specific to each question's investigative focus as well as peripheral items establishing related measures of overall importance and effectiveness of humor in the language classroom.

Procedure

Both student and teacher populations were solicited for participation in the present study after a short oral description and explanation by the researcher. Participants were instructed to complete the questionnaire to the best of their ability if they chose to participate, or to simply leave it blank if they chose not to participate. All questionnaires were labeled with a random Subject ID code that identified only the TL of the course. Teachers were asked to complete their own version of the questionnaire at their leisure and return it to the researcher within approximately one week's time. Following the data collection period, the researcher analyzed the data according to individual item response frequency. Approximately 1-2 participants circled more than one response per question. As a result, these contradictory responses were excluded from analysis.

RESULTS

Results from the pilot study present clear trends of student/teacher perception according to each of the three research questions outlined above (See Fig.1.1 below). In response to items regarding Research Question #1, a significant majority of respondents indicated that humor was a benefit to reducing affective barriers to learning in the classroom. Specifically, 78% (181) of student participants indicated that they felt *noticeably* to *considerably* more relaxed as a result of instructor humor usage (Item #4). Perhaps more compelling, 64% (7) of teacher participants felt that their humor usage made students *considerably* more relaxed in class, while an additional 36% (4) thought humor made students *noticeably* more relaxed (Item #4). Moreover, 72% (169) of student participants indicated that use of humor increased their interest in subject matter (learning a language in this case) from a *noticeable* to *considerable* degree, while 100% (11) of teacher responses indicated an identical perception (Item #5). Additionally, 80% (188) of student respondents and 82% (9) of teacher respondents thought that an instructor's use of humor made him/her *more approachable* to *considerably more approachable* in class (Item #7). Finally, and perhaps most significantly, 82% (194) of student respondents and 100% (11) of teacher respondents indicated that humor usage created a more comfortable and conducive learning environment overall (Item #8).

In response to items addressing Research Question #2, the vast majority of respondents reported that targeted linguistic humor was important to overall language learning. Specifically, 44% (104) of student respondents rated humor as *important* to overall language learning with an additional 34% (80) indicating such humor as *considerably important*. Moreover, 73% (8) of teacher participants also indicated humor as *considerably important* to overall language learning while the remaining 27% (3) of respondents all rated humor as *important*. Furthermore, 74% (173) of students and 73% (8) of teachers perceived targeted linguistic humor as *noticeable* to *considerably* helpful to acquisition of a second/foreign language. Finally, Research Question #3 was answered with a majority of respondents indicating their perceptions of humor as important and beneficial to cultural learning. Indeed, 65% (154) of student participants rated additional learning of TL culture from exposure to TL humor as *noticeably more* to *considerably more*. A further 26% (61) rated such additional cultural learning as *slightly more* as a result of exposure to TL humor. Among teacher respondents, 82% (9) rated the additional learning of culture as *noticeably more* to *considerably more* when humor is employed.

Figure 1. Student (S) & Teacher (T) questionnaire item results according to frequency for each of five Likert scaled responses

Item #	**Response 1** S / T	**Response 2** S / T	**Response 3** S / T	**Response 4** S / T	**Response 5** S / T
1	0% / 0%	1% / 0%	4% / 0%	44% / 91%	51% / 9%
2	0% / 0%	21% / 18%	27% / 36%	32% / 45%	20% / 0%
3	1% / 0%	5% / 0%	19% / 27%	45% / 36%	30% / 36%
4	1% / 0%	4% / 0%	17% / 0%	34% / 36%	44% / 64%
5	0% / 0%	5% / 0%	23% / 0%	29% / 36%	43% / 45%
6	1% / 0%	8% / 0%	26% / 18%	34% / 45%	31% / 36%
7	0% / 0%	5% / 0%	15% / 0%	43% / 18%	37% / 82%
8	0% / 0%	3% / 0%	15% / 0%	43% / 55%	39% / 45%
9	1% / 0%	22% / 36%	28% / 27%	38% / 27%	11% / 9%
10	0% / 0%	2% / 0%	24% / 27%	43% / 36%	31% / 36%
11	0% / 0%	13% / 27%	36% / 45%	33% / 18%	18% / 9%
12	0% / 0%	1% / 0%	21% / 0%	44% / 27%	34% / 73%
13	14% / 0%	42% / 36%	22% / 27%	16% / 36%	6% / 0%

See Appendices A & B for phrasing of actual questions and responses. ***Note:*** Percentiles have been rounded to the nearest whole number.

DISCUSSION

The results of the present study, though preliminary in nature, would seem to strongly support many of the beneficial effects of pedagogical humor in the language classroom as described in the previous literature reviewed above. The overwhelming majority of those surveyed indicated that even general (non-target language) humor was an important element of creating an overall environment conducive to learning. Specifically, participants indicated reduced anxiety/tension, improved approachability of teachers, and increased levels of interest as a result of humor usage by the teacher. This was true for both student

and teacher respondents, and thus creates a powerful indicator of perceived effect of humor usage in the classroom. While some of these perceived benefits to humor may be couched within larger frameworks of immediacy behaviors, it seems quite evident that students and teachers view such effects of humor as sufficiently significant in and of themselves. Clearly then, humor is perceived as an important component for the learning process among both students and teachers and must, therefore, be given consideration in evaluation of pedagogical approaches to language teaching.

In addition, student and teacher participants indicated a very strong perception of increased language and cultural learning resulting from employment of targeted linguistic humor in the target language. These results of perceived language acquisition and cultural transmission through the use of TL humor (in the form of jokes, puns, funny anecdotes, etc.) correspond with the findings of Deneire (1995), Trachtenberg (1979), Berwald (1992) and others. The implications for such a gain in linguistic and cultural acquisition through humor usage are significant to pedagogical planners and offer a componential medium for transmission of TL linguistic and cultural patterns in a novel and engaging format. Nonetheless, hard empirical data (en lieu of perceptual evidence) in support of such pedagogical humor is poignantly lacking. Indeed, while major studies of the effects of general affective humor abound in pedagogical and psychological research, no large-scale quantitative research has been carried out to address such *targeted linguistic humor*—that is, linguistic humor employed in the TL with the intention of illustrating specific TL features. Indeed, future research is particularly needed in order to examine language learning gain and retention among learners presented with such targeted linguistic humor. Moreover, this line of inquiry must look beyond perceived effect and incorporate rigorous and controlled study of actual language instruction and acquisition within the classroom. Clearly, therefore, a great deal of additional experimental inquiry into this area is needed in order to elucidate the impact and effectiveness of such humor within pedagogical contexts.

CONCLUSIONS

The role of pedagogical humor in the language classroom is truly multifaceted and thus requires examination and analysis from a variety of perspectives. A great deal of research has been conducted in the area of general pedagogical effects of humor on affective variables in the generic classroom. Macro constructs of behavior frameworks—such as the immediacy behavior patterns discussed above—have been offered as lenses through which the effects of humor can be more easily observed. Despite some uncertainty concerning the degree to which humor benefits the classroom, the vast majority of literature and experimental evidence in this area has generally acknowledged significant benefits to the pedagogical employment of humor. The results of the present pilot study overwhelmingly confirm such perceived benefit. Moreover, given the particular importance of lowering the affective filter in the language classroom, the affective benefits of humor would seem to be ideally applicable to such a

context. In addition, a fledgling body of literature also supports a role for humor as an illustrative tool for targeted linguistic features in a language learning context. It is this as yet undefined role for humor in the language classroom that offers perhaps the greatest potential for pedagogical impact. While many language educators may intuitively employ affective humor as a pedagogical tool already, few are likely to employ such targeted linguistic humor in light of its near-total absence from pedagogical training materials. Thus, given the integral part played by humor within all facets of human language, pedagogical researchers and planners have an obligation to its inclusion as both a pedagogical tool and a natural component of linguistic study. The largely supportive perceptions of student and teacher participants in the present pilot study only serve as further emphasis for such a need—as well as the impetus for further research in order to clarify the scope of such a requisite.

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APPENDIX A

Pedagogical Humor Questionnaire (Student)

Subject ID _____ Language Class _____

Circle the number that corresponds to your response for each question:

1. How would you rate your instructor in terms of his/her overall effectiveness as a teacher?

1	2	3	4	5
(totally ineffective)	(slightly ineffective)	(moderately effective)	(effective)	(extremely effective)

2. How often (on average) does your instructor use humor (i.e. jokes, witticisms, humorous facial expressions, funny stories, etc.) during each class session?

1	2	3	4	5
(uses no humor)	(1-3 times)	(4-7 times)	(8-11 times)	(12 times or more)

3. How much of the humor used by your language instructor is related or relevant to classroom subject matter?

1	2	3	4	5
(none)	(a little)	(about half)	(most)	(all)

4. To what degree does humor make you feel more relaxed (i.e. less anxious) in your language classroom?

1	2	3	4	5
(increases anxiety)	(no effect)	(slightly relaxed)	(noticeably relaxed)	(considerably relaxed)

5. To what degree does humor in the foreign language increase your interest in learning that language?

1	2	3	4	5
(decrease in interest)	(no increase)	(slight increase)	(noticeable increase)	(considerable increase)

6. Do you feel that you learn more about the culture of the foreign language by being exposed to humor native to that language and culture?

1	2	3	4	5
(not at all)	(a little more)	(slightly more)	(noticeably more)	(considerably more)

7. Do you feel that your teacher's use of humor makes him/her more approachable in class?

1	2	3	4	5
(less approachable)	(no effect)	(slightly more)	(more approachable)	(considerably more)

8. Do you feel that humor generally improves your ability to learn a language in the classroom by creating a more comfortable and conducive learning environment overall?

1	2	3	4	5
(hampers learning)	(no effect)	(slight improvement)	(improvement)	(considerable improvement)

9. How often does your instructor use actual words and/or other elements of a humorous example in the foreign language (i.e. a joke, pun, comic strip, funny story, etc.) to illustrate grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, or any other particularity of the language during a typical class?

1	2	3	4	5
(never)	(1-2 times)	(3-4 times)	(5-6 times)	(7 times or more)

10. To what degree do you feel that illustrative humor in the foreign language (as characterized in question #9 above) helps you to learn the language you are studying?

1	2	3	4	5
(not at all)	(very little)	(somewhat)	(noticeably)	(considerably)

11. In your opinion, what is the ideal amount of humor (i.e. number of humorous items employed) for a typical class period in order to create the classroom environment most conducive to learning?

1	2	3	4	5
(none)	(1-3 times)	(4-7 times)	(8-11 times)	(12 times or more)

12. In your opinion, how important is humor to language learning in the classroom overall?

1	2	3	4	5
(not at all)	(minimally)	(slightly)	(important)	(considerably important)

13. How often (on average) do you use humor to communicate in the foreign language you are learning during each class?

1	2	3	4	5
(never)	(1-3 times)	(4-7 times)	(8-11 times)	(12 times or more)

Thank you for your time and insight. Your responses will help researchers better understand the nature and effects of humor in the language classroom.

APPENDIX B

Pedagogical Humor Questionnaire (Teacher)

Subject ID _____ Language Class _____

Circle the number that corresponds to your response for each question:

1. How would you rate yourself in terms of your overall effectiveness as a teacher?

1	2	3	4	5
(totally ineffective)	(slightly ineffective)	(moderately effective)	(effective)	(extremely effective)

2. How often (on average) do you use humor (i.e. jokes, witticisms, humorous facial expressions, funny stories, etc.) during each class session?

1	2	3	4	5
(uses no humor)	(1-3 times)	(4-7 times)	(8-11 times)	(12 times or more)

3. How much of the humor that you use is related or relevant to classroom subject matter?

1	2	3	4	5
(none)	(a little)	(about half)	(most)	(all)

4. To what degree does humor make your students feel more relaxed (i.e. less anxious) in the language classroom?

1	2	3	4	5
(increases anxiety)	(no effect)	(slightly relaxed)	(noticeably relaxed)	(considerably relaxed)

5. To what degree does humor in the foreign language increase your interest in learning that language?

1	2	3	4	5
(decrease in interest)	(no increase)	(slight increase)	(noticeable increase)	(considerable increase)

6. Do you feel that your students learn more about the culture of the foreign language by being exposed to humor native to that language and culture?

1	2	3	4	5
(not at all)	(a little more)	(slightly more)	(noticeably more)	(considerably more)

7. Do you feel that your use of humor makes you more approachable to students in class?

1	2	3	4	5
(less approachable)	(no effect)	(slightly more)	(more approachable)	(considerably more)

8. Do you feel that humor improves your students' ability to learn a language in the classroom by creating a more comfortable and conducive learning environment?

1	2	3	4	5
(hampers learning)	(no effect)	(slight improvement)	(improvement)	(considerable improvement)

9. How often do you use actual words and/or other elements of a humorous example in the foreign language (i.e. a joke, pun, comic strip, funny story, etc.) to illustrate grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, or any other particularity of the language during a typical class?

1	2	3	4	5
(never)	(1-2 times)	(3-4 times)	(5-6 times)	(7 times or more)

10. To what degree do you feel that illustrative humor in the foreign language (as characterized in question #9 above) helps your students to learn the language they are studying?

1	2	3	4	5
(not at all)	(very little)	(somewhat)	(noticeably)	(considerably)

11. In your opinion, what is the ideal amount of humor (i.e. number of humorous items employed) for an environment conducive to learning during a typical class period?

1	2	3	4	5
(none)	(1-3 times)	(4-7 times)	(8-11 times)	(12 times or more)

12. In your opinion, how important is humor to language learning in the classroom overall?

1	2	3	4	5
(not at all)	(minimally)	(slightly)	(important)	(considerably important)

13. How often (on average) do your students use humor to communicate in the foreign language during each class?

1	2	3	4	5
(never)	(1-3 times)	(4-7 times)	(8-11 times)	(12 times or more)

Thank you for your time and insight. Your responses will help researchers better understand the nature and effects of humor in the language classroom.