Humour and Laughter in the EFL Classroom

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In this paper I will report research about the function of humour and laughter in the EFL classroom and the possibility of humour and laughter in ELT as a potential source of increased interpersonal tolerence and understanding among L_2 interactants.

1. Data collection and evaluation

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

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

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

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

2. On humour and laughter

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

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

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

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

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

3. Analysis of Data

It was found that there are two major sources of humour and laughter in the EFL classroom. Teaching humorous materials or presenting and pracising materials in a humorous way constitute one source for humour and laughter; natural and spontaneous humour amongst learners and teachers constitutes another. The former is designated with the term prefabricated humour; the later is designated with the term spontaneous humour for the purposes of this research.

3.1. Prefabricated humour: source and content

In accord with McGee's defintion, I take prefabricated humour to be relatively serious in nature which basically aims at expanding existing knowledge.

Prefabricated humour and laughter enliven the classroom atmosphere, they add to a playful relationship between teachers and learners and open up the way to spontaneous humour and laughter. Material and teachers seem to be sources for prefabricated humour and laughter. Prefabricated humour and laughter encountered in the data were analysed in terms of content and who initiates who acts.

A. Material initiated humour-learner and teacher acted upon

Material initiated prefabricated humour is based on humorous aspects of the foreign language culture. As such they constitute the right input to develop learners humorous competence in L_2 (cf. Alexander, 1982) and their knowledge of certain cultural aspects of the foreign language-in-use.

There can be innumerable prefabricated sources for humour and laughter available to teachers and learners. They can be part of the teaching materials incorporated in the syllabus or a suplementary source of materials supplied occasionally by the teacher.

Prefabricated sources for humour and laughter are funny songs, games, tricks, cartoons, riddles, anecdotes, jokes, limericks, word play based on double meanings and so on. Jokes and cartoons that are challenging to intellect are the funniest. In a sense, we can think of jokes and cartoons as a kind of problem solving tasks based on a word play where a characters confuse the literal meaning with the metaphorical one or where characters can say stupid things that are true. Puns, limericks and absurdity riddles, tongue twisters etc are particularly funny to children. Often, however, they can be too simple for adults.

Material oriented prefabricated humour, in general, is based on language processes that can be found on various linguistic levels from the graphological, through the phonological and the syntactic to the lexico - semantic level. It is also based on the incogruity of sociolinguistic and pragmatic constraints opearating in a particular context of situation.

It will greatly aid the learner in his/her understanding, interpreting and enjoying L_2 discourse, oral or written, if s/he has some idea of the linguistic mechanisms and the sociolinguistic and pragmatic variables involved in the various modes of humour, which constitute the essence of verbal and situational humour.

B. <u>Teacher initiated humour - learners acted upon</u>

Teachers may also present, practice or explain new material in a humorous way. To achieve this end they may use mime, blackboard drawing, facial expressions, funny stories, code switching and so on. Code switching seems to be an important source for humour and laughter. Here are two examples.

1. A teacher drew a funny figure on the board and asked: "Let's see where we can put this lovely καρούμπαλο"."On the head, on the head" cried the learners laughing.

2. When a learner asked the teacher what the lexical item 'murder' meant, the teacher said: "If I kill you it will be a murder" The incogruity and absurdity of the situation had a humorous effect in the class.

3.2. <u>Spontaneous humour: source and content</u>

Spontaneous humour and laughter, however, spring up unexpectantly as a result of some incongruous or absurd situation revealing itself in the classroom. Following McGee's definition of humour, I take spontaneous humour to lack serious intent. It is mainly based on a playful consideration of the incogruities of the events and relationships encountered in the EFL classroom. Spontaneous humour seems to me even more important than prefabricated humour because it allows learners to develop an awareness of their limitations in the use of the language. This awareness enables them to look at errors and misunderstandings in a playful way. They can exploit their inadequacies for humour purposes, thus developing rapport with the other L_2 users rooted on tolerance, affection and mutual understanding.

Source and content of spontaneous humour and laughter are regulated by the pragmatics of the foreign language classroom.

Learners and teachers alike seem to be sources for spontaneous humour and laughter. Instances of spontaneous humour and laughter encountered in the data were analysed in terms of content and who initiates, who acts; examples are also provided.

A. Teacher initiated humour - learner acted upon

1. Teachers very often make humorous comments about learners' misbehaviour, absent-mindedness or poor performance. These comments are, to a great extent, well meant and aim at restoring discipline and instruct learners in a humorous way. The teacher may refer to the class as a whole or s/he may address his/her humorous comments to one learner only. Here are some examples of teacher talk:

3. Who is brave enough to come and write on the board?

4. You are very quiet today. Is there anything wrong with you?

5. I knew that everyone here is clever but I did not expect such proof.

6. Why are you looking out of the window, Petros? There aren't any girls walking outside, you know.

2. Sometimes teachers themselves become a source for humour and laughter in the classroom because of absent-mindedness, confusion and/or weariness. In the data there are even instances of mild self-ridicule. Here are some examples from the data examined.

7. A teacher could not hear a learner sitting at the back of the room and said absent-mindedly "Let me put on my glasses to hear you".

8. "Oh sorry. I didn't hear what you said; after teaching for so many hours I became deaf" said a teacher.

3. Teachers often imitate words, phrases or utterances wrongly pronounced by learners in an attempt to draw their attention to their wrong accent. Teachers' imitation of learners' English is a source of humour and laughter as well as of instruction for them.

Hatch et al, 1979, refer to this use of humour between interactants as language play. They report research on child discourse where the native speak-

er child imitated the non-native child's pronounciation and varied his non-standard syntactic structures seemingly to correct or tease him. Teacher's imitation of learners' errors plays a similar role in the EFL classroom. It aims at correcting and teasing in an affectionate way.

9. A learner said: How are you, Mary?
   Teacher said humorously: How are you, Mary?
   Other learners in chorus: How are you, Mary?
   All laughed good-heartedly.

B. Learner-initiated humour, learner and teacher acted upon.

1. Learners' code switching is an important source of humour in class. Learners often respond to questions or situations using the L_1 instead of the L_2 either because of absent-mindedness, bewilderment, whimsical predispotion or learners' inability to express themselves in English. The incogruity of the situation where English is expected to be heard not Greek is a source of humour and laughter in the EFL classroom. E.g.

10. T: What is Tom doing, Apostolis?
    L: Κοιμάται, κυρία.

11. T: Do you know the word aspirations?
    A learner responded whimsically: Τί; Ασπιρίνες;
    The whole class burst out in a hilarious laughter.

12. T: What did children do twenty years ago when
       there was no T.V. to watch?
    L: They played πεντόβολα, Miss,
    The class and the teacher laughed with this spontaneous
    joke.

2. Learners' mispronunciations, misunderstandings, grammar errors etc give rise to exhilarating instance of humour and laughter. Some examples are:

13. A learner misprounced the utterance" He was riding a horse". In fact, he said / rɪdɪŋ / instead of /raɪdɪŋ/. The teacher corrected him while the class laughed.

14. In another occasion, learners were practicing questions and answers. The following short dialogue took place between learners while the others were listening.

> L1: Did Paul eat a lot of sandwiches?
> L2: Yes, she did.

The other learners laughed while the teacher commented smiling:
"Paul is a boy, not a girl".

15. Here is a similar example,

> T: Where do raccoons live, George?
> L: Raccoons are living in trees.

16. A learner was describing a picture. The sun appeared in the picture
    but the learner called it the wheel. The teacher commented on that
    by saying "How can a wheel be in the sky? Is it a flying wheel?"
    The incongruity of the situation made everybody laugh.

3.3. Functions of humour and laughter

The functions of humour and laughter in the EFL classroom are similar
to the functions of humour and laughter in the broad society.

Bascom, 1965 argues that the functions of humour in society are as
follows: firstly, humour relieves tensions and anxieties, permits the ex-
pression of ideas and feelings that would otherwise be difficult to ex-
press and facilitates copying with trying circumstances as a result of a
laughter that mainly accompanies it. Humour, in this way facilitates inter-
personal communication and undersdanding. Secondly, humour is used to amuse
audiences. Thirdly, humour is used as a means to educate in a light and play-
ful way and fourthly, humour is a means to validate culture.

In the light of the functions of humour in society defined by Bascom I
would like to argue that the functions of prefabricated humour are to amuse
the learners, and expand knowledge of the foreign language in a pleasurable
way; the functions of spontaneous humour, however, are to increase interper-
sonal tolerance and understanding between communicators and to instruct in
a light and playful way as well.

3.4. Language and humour

Language is an excellent vehicle for creating, relaying and enjoying
humour. Humour is a natural mode of human expression and social communication
and enables ideas to be communicated in a convinient and economical way
which usually goes beyond time, space and objects. As stated linguistic hu-
mour thrives on the violation of linguistic and sociocultural rules.

As in other communicative events language in the EFL classroom is the prime vehicle for humour and laughter, where both the mother tongue and the foreign language are used for humour and laughter. In prefabricated humour, learners rely on the foreign language for understanding, enjoyment and instruction. In spontaneous, humour, however, both languages are exploited for the same reasons. Code switching seems to be a common practice, and an important source of humour. Understanding, enjoying and using linguistic humour depends on language users' metalinguistic and metacommunicative awareness; in other words, on awareness of "language qua language".

Other media, used inside and outside the classroom, that can also convey humour which result in laughter are physical behaviours, posture, drawings, cartoons, facial expressions even thinking aloud to one self. Pragmatic awareness is also important to understand and enjoy humour through other media than language.

3.5. Effect on classroom discourse

The effect of either sources on classroom discourse is obvious. Prefabricated or spontaneous humour and laughter release physical and nervous tension and promote mental alertness by breaking the teach-learn routine of a pre-conceived lesson plan. Humour and laughter create a more relaxed atmosphere of fun and interest and break the ice between teachers and learners and among learners themselves. As a result learners learn to laugh with their own mistakes, and to feel less reserved lest they make mistakes when using the foreign language. Their mistakes are often the result of violation of linguistic and sociolinguistic rules on which humour thrives.

Finally, humour aids the learning process itself and becomes the vehicle for relaxation and rapport amongst teachers and learners, which is reflected on the classroom discourse.

4. Practical implications of research

The existence of two sources for humour and laughter in the foreign language classroom should be fully exploited for the special benefits L_2 learners may derive from them.

Through prefabricated humour learners learn to understand and appreciate humour in the language they are learning. For humour is part of the cultural identity of a language user and, as such, each ethnic group may

smile or laugh at different linguistic and paralinguistic features of their language and society. Comparative impressions between Greek and English humour, for instance, indicate that Greeks and English appreciate different values in humour. Here is a short comparative list of some major characteristics of Greek and English humour.

Greek humour (after Orso,1979)	English humour (after Mikes,1980)
1. Greeks do not laugh at themselves as individuals but as a group, in this sense they are trained in dependency (cf. Pontii jokes)	1. English laugh at their individual failings. They are trained in acknowledging mistakes and shortcomings. They face their responsibilities.
2. Greeks are prone to exageration.	2. English are prone to understatement and underreaction.
3. Greeks prefer exoteric humour that shows Greek superiority.[1]	3. English prefer esoteric humour that is mainly political or dirty.[1]

When introducing prefabricated humour in the classroom it seems advisable that the teacher draws the learners' attention to similarities and disimilarities in humour values between Greek and English humour. See, for instance, Appendix 2 where the shortcomings of civil services and civil servants are presented in a humourous way in Greek and English.

Through spontaneous humour the learners learn to relate to other persons in a positive and playful way while using the foreign language. They learn to express in laughter or smiling the sharing of a pleasurable but also unforunate experience. A learners' shortcomings -- his/her poor knowledge of the language in terms of phonology, syntax, semantics and pragmatics of the foreign language -- may often become a source for misunderstanding and apprehension. At the same time, his/her misunderstandings of the

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1. Basically there are two types of humour: the esoteric and exoteric humour (Jansen,1965) In the esoteric humour individuals reveal what they think of themselves and what they suppose their nationals think of them as representatives of an ethnic group. In the exoteric humour, usually in the form of stereotyping humour, individuals reveal what they think of other nationals.

other's intentions and purpose will also become a source for confusion and intolerance between interactants.

If the learner is trained to develop a humourous attitude towards his/ her shortcomings s/he can increase understanding and tolerence with co-inter- actants. After all, having a good sense of humour is an important trait in one's personality and plays an essential role in interpersonal relationships.

Last but not least, teachers in training and practicing teachers should have their attention drawn to the importance of these two types of sources for humour and laughter in the EFL classroom. Awareness of L_2 humour and its cultural implications as well as using humour to overcome the learners' short- comings in using the foreign language will increase learners' overall commu- nicative competence in the foreign language.

N O T E

This paper, the first to be published, is based on a research project that I have undertaken since 1982. The research aims at evaluating classroom discourse and management, classroom practices, teacher talk and learner talk in Greek foreign language classrooms with particular reference to English as a foreign language.

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Course: Applied Linguistics/ELT Methods

O B S E R V A T I O N   S H E E T   I I I

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Student's Name: ---

I.D. No -------------------

Schools observed ---

Level of classes ---

To the student:

The aim of the questionnaire is to sensitize you to accurate and appropriate teacher & learner practices and language in the foreign language classroom.After yoy have complet- ed your observations, please answer the questions below.Use your own sheet of paper to take any notes which might assist you in filling in the observation sheet.Upon comple- tion please return it to me for evaluation.

Thank you

HUMOUR IN THE CLASSROOM

1. Was it done in L_1, L_2 or both?

2. What was it caused by?
   a. materials (give details)

   b. incongruous situations e.g. learner verbal behaviour was inaccurate or inappro- priate to the situated constraints. (Give details of the situation include actual verbal behaviour of interacting learners and teachers).

   c. Teacher initiated humour done on purpose for relaxation. (Give details-describe the situation - write down actual verbal behaviour)

   d. Other causes not mentioned here: