

Humour as a Pedagogical Tool in Higher Education Teaching Learning Practices: A Study

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the possibilities of utilising humour as a pedagogical tool to retrieve attention and interest in the teaching-learning environment. It further stresses that a touch of wit and humour, cleverly correlated with the subject being taught kindles a better learning experience and fosters healthy relation between the tutor and the pupil. To analyse and validate the same, a descriptive quantitative study was conducted across teachers belonging to higher education sector in India to find their views on using humour in classroom teaching. A survey was conducted through a self-designed questionnaire using Google forms. The data collected from 147 teacher respondents was used for discussion and analysis. The survey suggests that majority of teachers agree upon the significance of humour as a classroom aid for better engagement of students. Based on the evidences attained, this research argues and establishes that humour is a necessity in the teaching-learning process and teachers must know the art of correlating humour in their academic discussion. Thus, the study undertaken clearly demonstrates that humour can be an effective pedagogy in higher education and related implications.

Keywords: humour, classroom, learner, teaching, higher education

Introduction

No doubt, the rapid technological innovation and easy access to information has made significant positive impact on the education sector but on the other hand, it has become increasingly challenging to capture student's attention in a conventional classroom and online teaching-learning scenario. Whatsoever, classroom becomes a platform for both the teacher and student to engage in a dialogic academic discussion. With recent adaptations to online learning due to the pandemic, the challenge to engage students for a continuous period of time needs serious thought. In this context, humour can aid as one of the pedagogical tools for effective classroom engagement. Humour may be broadly defined as the quality of being amusing or comic; the ability to make other people laugh. And more specifically, it incorporates focused and structured amusing or comic words, actions, or reactions of a teacher in the act of teaching, engaging and interacting with students, managing a classroom, and/or setting a tone for timely and appropriate mirthful response to content or activities (Latta 1999; Berk 2002). Humour in education settings forms a significant strategy in garnering fruitful academic achievements. Although its importance is acknowledged in academia, there are very few practitioners. As Mary Kay Morrison (2008:73) points out to the fact that there exists a kind of "humour paradox" in educational sector, where academicians are reluctant in using humour and even find it uncomfortable to participate in humorous exchanges within the classroom dynamics. However, it is true that mirthful response or light-hearted statements sprinkled during a lecture brings freshness to any academic engagement.

Impact of humour on the dynamics of classroom teaching-learning activities is immense. Humour needs to be conveniently adopted in the teaching process and it is one of the teaching skills which kindles participation, interaction among learners and ensures classroom management. Humour can be utilised as a strategy to arouse interest and recover from boredom of continuous teaching learning hours in academics. With the added physical and psychological stress among student community and considering student's perspective, this article contests that the teacher, apart from solely engaging in technical discourses, must use those 'gaps', 'silent spaces' during lectures to evoke a sense of humour, laughter to uplift and ease the monotonous routine in the classroom environment.

Learning to use these spaces to generate subject interest and involvement for pedagogical transitions can be adopted for the benefit of the student community and better learning outcomes. Humour creates a better learning environment for students, thus encouraging their academic and behavioural performances (Lovorn 2009).

Literature Review

Research indicates use of applicable humour in teaching-learning scenario can yield better academic performance and generate confidence among learners (Harlin 2008: 125). Levine (2006) points that humour elevates classroom environment and increases motivation to learn further, thus making a comfortable situation to learn (Shiyab 2008: 623) and thereby increasing students' cognitive brain functioning. Research indicates that sense of humour in the class enhances learning experiences. To illustrate further, Wanzer et al. (2010) examined how humour, when instilled in classroom sessions, can assist learning capacities. According to Schmitz (2002), jokes that address universal elements of humour (e.g. exaggeration, hyperbole, irony etc.) are the easiest to understand for a language learner. Further, Banas, Dunbar, Rodriguez, and Liu (2011) described humour as something that co-relates verbal and non-verbal aspects to evoke laughter, joy and amusement. With respect to classroom humour, Wagner and Urios-Apari (2011: 400) consider it as "an act performed through linguistic or non-linguistic means by any of the participants (i.e., student(s) or teacher)." Another study by Abraham et al. (2014) pointed that humour enables creating teachers' rapport among students and the rapport allows to foster better relationship and makes learners more participative due to the appealing nature of the class environment. Humour has a stress easing health benefit and increases productivity in education (Cornett, 1986; Davies & Apter, 1980; Kher et al, 1999). Studies reveal that Humour aids as a salient technique to combat monotonous routine learning and to foster better learning situation. Although numerous researches have pointed its significance in the classroom, few studies have also cautioned the negative impact of using such a practice especially with respect to classroom control and management. For example, Grow (1995) and Steele (1998) in their study have found that teachers perceive humour as a distraction and fear loss of classroom control.

Considering these surveys and discussions, this study aims to explore the usage of humour as a pedagogical tool in classroom learning environment in an Indian higher education scenario. It is observed that numerous studies have been carried in this line of thought across the globe; however, less has been attended to considering the Indian perspective. In Indian curriculum and pedagogy, inclusion of humour has always been a neglected component though its positive impact on learners is recognised. This study fills the gap in the existing literature as it explores the factors influencing teachers' decision in using humour. Hence, this is a significant study in the light of innovative and best practices in educational domain.

Research Topic and Objectives of the Study

In the light of theoretical framework, this study focuses on the implication of Humour as a pedagogical tool in higher education teaching learning practices in India. Accordingly, the objectives of the study are:

1. To understand the perception of teachers' on humour as pedagogy
2. To understand teachers' willingness to employ humour
3. To analyse the significance of humour in higher education teaching-learning practices
4. To identify humour as an innovative teaching strategy

Methodology

This study includes a descriptive analysis of data collected through a questionnaire, used as a research tool to find the validity of efficacy of humour in teaching-learning process in higher education. For the said purpose, the researchers developed a self-designed close-ended questionnaire. In order to realise the objectives of the study, normative survey method was employed by the researchers. For quantitative data collection, convenience sampling method was used as it was deemed fit for collecting information from teachers across Indian universities and colleges. The target group for this study consisted of in-service teachers working in various higher educational

institutions across India. The responses to the survey were collected through Google form. Teachers’ questionnaire consisted of 11 close-ended questions concluding with one open-ended one. In six items, five-point Likert scale was used (from strongly agree to strongly disagree) and in the rest items, a three-point scale was used, ending with one open-ended item about their opinions on the identified topic.

Sample Size

The sample consisted of teachers teaching at UG/PG levels in various universities across India. Total 147 teachers from 86 universities/colleges/institutions from 21 states in India participated in the survey. Demographically, the sample is relatively small, considering the vast number of higher educational institutions in India and its total number of teachers; however, it covered a broad spectrum of the country having respondents from different states and institutions.

Data Analysis

As indicated, the data was collected through questionnaires and to ensure authentic responses, sharing of personal details like name, affiliation etc in questionnaire was made optional. The responses of 147 teachers were recorded and analysed using non-parametric statistical techniques such as percentage, frequencies of numbers converted into percentage and the same is represented through graphs, pie charts for analysis and drawing suitable conclusions by correlating them to the previous researches and theories on humour. However, in this study, almost all the teachers belonged to the domain subject area of English language teaching and literature. The statistical data has been presented in tabular and graphic forms.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of the Sample

Total respondents	Teaching program level			Gender	
	UG	PG	Both	Male	Female
Teachers (147)	72 (49%)	12 (8.2%)	71(48.3%)	75 (48.6)	72 (51.4)

The participants included 72 teachers teaching UG programmes, 12 teachers dealing with only PG programmes and 71 of them teaching both programmes. As observed, of total 147teacher respondents, there was almost a balanced gender distribution with 48.6 per cent males and 51.4 per cent female participants.

Do you think humour can be used as a pedagogical tool?



Figure 1. Humour as a pedagogical tool

Figure 1 shows that 92.5 per cent of teachers attributed humour to be used as a pedagogical tool. Very negligible i.e. 2 per cent teachers negated the statement whereas 6 per cent were unsure about its applicability and implication as a tool the in teaching-learning process. The figures represent that majority of the teachers recognise humour as a potential tool in the teaching-learning process and agree to the positive attributes of using humour as an innovative strategy for betterment of classroom discourses. This is suggestive of the necessity of inclusion of humour in academia.

Table 2. Teachers' Perception towards Humour and Its Inclusion as a Pedagogical Tool during Teaching

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Mean
Assigned score (Integer) →	5	4	3	2	1	
1. Subject-related humour is necessary to create interest. Do you agree?	14	6	41	58	28	
2. Can humour help in making online teaching interesting and effective?	100	40	4	2	1	
3. Do you feel humour can generate interest towards learning in the class?	81	50	12	2	2	
4. Humour brings a sense of bonding between teacher-student relations. Do you agree?	88	50	4	2	3	4.21
5. Do you agree English language teachers have larger scope in handling sessions in a humorous way?	81	46	15	2	3	
6. Do you think use of humour would destroy classroom environment or distract students?	101	39	6	-	-	

The tabular data shows that central tendency or average sentiment score of teachers towards all six Likert items reflected through mean is 4.21 which means that teachers' perception towards humour is fairly positive. Majority of teachers either agree/strongly agree to Likert item number 2, 3, 4 and 5 which signifies that teachers do consider that humour can help in making online teaching interesting; it can generate interest towards learning in classroom. Similarly, majority of teachers are of the opinion that the application of humour can create a congenial relationship and bonding between teachers and learners. Drew C. Appleby (2018) is of the view that "Humor can also lead to the establishment of student-teacher rapport, which is another characteristic of master teachers". As far as teaching English as a subject is concerned, teachers feel that they have greater scope in using humour in the language classroom. Despite this, some teachers, while responding to item, perceive that the application of humor during teaching need not necessitate interest. This is because humour is not the only means to generate interest. Many other factors such as use of graphics, animations, audio-visual tools, delivery of content, using appropriate non-verbal communication during instruction may aid in creating interest and motivation in the classroom. Using humour during teaching hours is not a routine practice for most teachers and therefore majority opines that its application in formal learning environment may cause hindrance, distract and divert student's attention. Nevertheless, as a whole, teachers' average tendency and attitude towards using humour for enhancing teaching-learning process is positive which is reflected in the Mean i.e. 4.21. This section shows that although most teachers demonstrated mixed opinions and fear using humour, there is an inclination towards attempting to use humour as a pedagogical learning strategy for effective delivery in the classroom dynamics.

Results and Discussion

The results of the present study show that there is a meaningful connect between humour and the teaching-learning process. Majority of teachers have pointed out that humour makes an impact in a classroom environment, especially considering the engagement of classes in the online mode. Teachers have pointed out that humour as a pedagogical tool can become an efficient strategy for handling classroom sessions, laying emphasis on how it generates interest and also creates focus in the class. Since the majority of teachers belonged to the subject domain of Language and literature, they claimed that they have better scope of using humour in the English classes. In the last section of the questionnaire, an open-ended question was included to understand their perception about humour as pedagogy. One teacher respondent articulates, "Humour is like an energy drink during the long hours of the teaching process".

Another respondent says “humour acts like a medicine to erase boredom and enable students to stay awake”. These responses communicated and validated the utility of humour in generating a better learning platform.

This study can be co-related to the New Education Policy 2020 which emphasises the adoption of newer techniques, strategies and good practices that can enable better teaching and thereby have a good impact on learning abilities of the students. In this line of thought, it is understandable that subject-specific humour, when efficiently and carefully handled, can yield good results for both the teacher and the student. However, it should be kept in mind that deliberate attempt to evoke laughter may appear artificial and unnatural. A classroom session should be made appealing. As a teacher uses different methods, techniques, materials, audio-video aids, models, power point presentations and so on, humour can also be used as an effective pedagogical tool.

Conclusion

The findings of the present study confirm the significance of humour in the Indian classroom scenario and indicate that if used aptly, can bridge the gap between teacher and student in the teaching-learning environment. Based on the evidences attained, this research argues and establishes that humour is a necessity in the teaching-learning process and teachers must know the art of correlating humour to their academic discussion. Thus, the study undertaken clearly demonstrates that humour can be an effective pedagogy in higher education and related implications. The findings also suggest that teachers should be encouraged to undergo formal training in understanding the nuances of using subject-specific humour for effective classroom management.

Limitations and Scope for Future Studies

This study has taken into account mostly teachers belonging to the language and literature domain. Hence, further studies can be undertaken by taking different perspectives and encompassing teachers from other subject areas.

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