

# TEACHING THE HUMOROUS TEXTS IN ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE (EFL) CLASSROOM

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**Abstract:** *Humor is an important tool to achieve certain purposes. Humor is at first a type of language behavior. Even though humor, as a linguistic and interactional process, appears to be a universal human phenomenon, it is more obviously embedded in situated socio-cultural context than most other communication. Humor is a (socio)linguistic and sociocultural phenomenon which has a wide range of instructional values. Humorous texts are a reading material in EFL classroom in Indonesia. Discourse analysis has recently begun to explore humor in discourse from both the linguistic and socio-cultural perspective. The present paper addresses how to present and analyze the humorous texts taken from the Reader's Digest magazine in EFL classroom which covers (1) the structure and the linguistic devices of humor discourse, (2) the pragmatics and cultural content of humor discourse, and (3) how to present the humorous texts in EFL classroom.*

**Abstrak:** *Humor merupakan suatu perilaku berbahasa and berfungsi sebagai alat penting untuk mencapai tujuan tertentu. Meskipun humor juga merupakan fenomena manusia yang bersifat universal, humor berkaitan erat dengan suatu budaya tertentu dan memiliki nilai-nilai pembelajaran. Teks humor merupakan salah satu materi pengajaran membaca bahasa Inggris sebagai bahasa asing (EFL) di Indonesia. Paper ini membahas bagaimana mempresentasikan dan menganalisis teks humor yang diambil dari majalah 'Reader's Digest' yang meliputi: (1) struktur dan perangkat linguistik wacana humor, (2) kandungan pragmatik dan kultural wacana humor, dan (2) cara mempresentasikan teks humor di dalam kelas.*

**Key words:** teaching, humorous texts, EFL classroom

## A. INTRODUCTION

It is widely acknowledged that teaching and learning languages involves far more than targeting surface grammatical or lexical systems. The other aspects of language have been referred to as invisible, as they are often the most difficult to teach and acquire, given their subtlety and complexity.

Humor can be defined by two criteria (Attardo, 2003). The first one is whether the event elicits laughter or smiling. The second one is whether it was produced with the intention of eliciting laughter or smiling. Although humor can be considered as the interaction between linguistic process and contextualized reality and highly depended on the situated context, first of all, it is a kind of speech activity. Linguistic devices,

such as the vocalization, the lexis and the syntax, are the important factors that construct humor. The linguistic devices can be broken down into three levels: humor at the phonetic level, humor at the lexical level, and humor at the discourse level.

The present paper discusses how the teaching of humorous texts could be approached in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom. It will also offer ideas on how to use *Reader's Digest* humorous short-texts as a source of authentic socio-cultural teaching materials for EFL students and will describe how to use the humorous texts to arrange lessons into pre-, during-, and post-reading activities, as outlined by Rucynski (2011: 8-15), to help students learn English and understand important elements of a particular foreign culture and society.

Specifically, the present paper addresses the following questions:

1. What linguistic devices are used for creating humorous effect in verbal interactions?
2. What humorous effects result from the social interactions between (or among) the interlocutors?
3. How can the *Reader's Digest* humorous short texts be presented in the EFL classrooms?

## **B. THE TEACHING OF READING IN EFL CLASSROOM**

Similar to other Asian EFL contexts, English education in Indonesia was focused traditionally on developing students' grammar, reading, and writing skills while oral communication skills were given little or no attention. More recently, however, the Indonesian Ministry of Education has initiated changes in its efforts to reform English education at all levels in Indonesia.

The current goal for English education is to develop Indonesian citizens who will be competently functional in English in international settings. At the tertiary level,

the primary purpose of English education is to prepare graduates who will be capable of communicating in English with speakers of other languages for work purposes. As long as colleges and universities strive to reach this goal, they are able to establish their own standards for instruction.

The combined thrust of the structuralism, the functionalism, and the cognitive psychology has dominated English as a Second Language (ESL)/English as a Foreign Language (EFL) methodologies and approaches, and such thrust has overemphasized what Carter (1997: 60) calls “the transactional uses of language (i.e. the transacting of information, goods and services)”. Its overemphasis on the form-focused literacy, task-oriented communicative exercises, vocabulary-grammar-translation lessons “at the expense of interactive uses . . . and creative uses of language has resulted in promoting English language materials which are loaded with psychologically meaningless information and facts that are hardly relevant to students’ lives (values, emotions, tastes, attitude, self-esteem, spirit, wish, interests, concerns, etc.). Traditional tests (including TOEFL, TOEIC, and college entrance exams) based on these materials have been highly inadequate for encouraging discourse-oriented, socio-cultural, affective, and humanistic aspects of language learning/teaching.

Indeed, among the recent developments of significance for English Language Teaching (ELT) are affective sides of language learning/teaching from the humanistic approaches. As proved by humanistic learning models and theories compiled in Arnold’s edition(1999: 3), they have facilitated both self-directed and collaborative language learning process, stretching their paradigm far beyond mere and strict language teaching into “life goals ”. In a language classroom which focuses on meaningful interaction, there is certainly room for dealing with affect. In this context, Stevick (1998:166) speaks of bringing to language teaching a concern for ‘deeper

aims,' for 'pursuing new life goals', not just for reaching certain 'language goals' Both learners' cognitive and affective natures and needs must be dealt with.

Concerned with both cognitive and affective sides of language learning/teaching, this emerging paradigm, in turn, ushers in a primary shift in the current ESL/EFL theory and assessment:2the shift from transactional uses of language towards interactional uses of language, from transmission of knowledge towards an experiential, from learner-centered approach, from form-based learning to meaning-oriented acquisition, from artificial language activities towards actual, creative, subjective, and contextual speech acts, from extrinsic motivation towards intrinsic motivation, from product-oriented learning towards process-oriented learning, from objective functionalism towards discourse-oriented culture, from isolated learning towards collaborative learning, from achievement testing towards authentic assessment, from teacher-as-controller towards teacher-as-facilitator, from non-literary texts loaded with information or facts towards 'language learners' literature,' and finally, from controlled teaching towards heuristic learning and acquisition.

In the teaching of reading in EFL/ESL classrooms, the range of English reading materials currently available to the students of ESL/EFL has been extended and varied. They are ranged from magazine essays, newspaper articles, journal writings, advertisements, brochures, technical instruction manuals, (business)letters or memorandums, biographies, reviews, health or science reports, travel writings, essays, stories, fictions(romances, horrors, adventures, etc.), (text)books, news scripts, and so on. Teaching/learning English through English humor can be an excellent aid to this shift. The relevance of English humor as a component of the humanistic ELT is well argued, and ways to incorporate English humor into ESL/EFL lessons are well suggested by many theorists and practitioners in the field of TESOL.

A resourceful material for presenting English humor is the humorous short-texts of *Reader's Digest*. The aim of this paper is to help make English humor accessible to the students of ESL/EFL, so that their various experiences through activities for English poem can be a useful part of their overall English language learning.

Humor, as a narrative genre, is one of the course materials to be taught in EFL classroom in Indonesia, notably in secondary school levels. Some substantial body of research has indicated that there is the facilitative role of humor in general education as well as second language teaching/learning processes. The use of humor in the classroom has been suggested to increase instructional effectiveness, increase message persuasiveness, create an enjoyable and more relaxed classroom environment, increase student motivation, student learning, and can be used as a means of clarifying course material (Ziyaeemehr, et. al, 2011).

In second language education, the competent use of humor by teachers, therefore, makes contributions to both teaching and learning processes. Even though humor can be used as an aid in teaching almost any academic discipline, it can be particularly useful in teaching a second language since it is communicated through language and can be incorporated in instruction of all four main language skills. Particularly, verbal humor such as wordplays, funny stories, puns, and content related jokes play an important role in L2 learners' development of (socio) linguistic and sociocultural competence. It has been suggested that humor can serve as a formidable tool that can be used for sensitizing students to phonological, morphological, lexical, and syntactic differences within a single language or between a student's L1 and the target language (Deneire, 1995). In the same vein, Medgyes (2002) explains that funny games, stories, jokes, puzzles, pictures, sketches, and dialogues can be fruitfully used for all levels of L2 learners. He also suggests activities for this purpose like recording different types of laughs and providing

students with a list of adjectives (bitter, nervous, polite, hearty, hysterical) to match with each laugh.

### **C. DISCOURSE ANALYSIS, PRAGMATICS AND ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING**

Discourse analysis refers to the new interdisciplinary field between linguistics, poetics, psychology and the social sciences concerned with the systematic theory and analysis of discourses and their various contexts. This inter-discipline has developed as an extension from rather similar interests and problems in these respective disciplines. In linguistics, thus, it was observed that language use cannot properly be accounted for in terms of isolated sentences alone. In literary scholarship, always having been concerned with literary discourses, more explicit models for discourse structures were required in order to assess specific literary or rhetorical structures in literature. Psychology and artificial intelligence have recently also become interested in the processes underlying discourse production and comprehension. Sociology has made a great contribution to the study of the structures and strategies of conversation in social interaction, whereas anthropology has a long tradition of discourse analysis in the study of myths, folktales, riddles and other ritual or culture-specific discourse types.

These are certainly not all the disciplines involved in the study of discourse: theology, psychotherapy, law studies, etc. also have various kinds of discourses as their objects of inquiry. Our point is that the basic similarity between the objects, i.e. forms of language use, discourse and their communicative contexts, requires an interdisciplinary approach. Textual structures are in part very general, and so are the principles and processes of their production and reception in the communicative context. Moreover, in order to understand the specificity of various discourse types

as they are studied more exclusively in the disciplines mentioned above, a more general understanding of discourse is necessary.

There are a number of points where such an interdisciplinary study of discourse seems to be relevant in education, notably in institutional education in schools and universities. A serious insight into the nature of texts and their contexts might provide some useful suggestions for applications in educational practice in general, and in the study of language and communication at school and universities in particular.

Intuitively speaking, discourses play a primary role in education: most learning materials consist of texts: manuals, textbooks, instructions, classroom dialogue, etc. Therefore, first of all, the structures of discourses used in education: style, contents, complexity, etc. should be systematically analyzed. Secondly, it should be assessed how the various uses of such texts influence the processes of learning: the acquisition of knowledge, beliefs, opinions, attitudes, abilities, and other cognitive and emotional changes which are the goals of institutional education. Finally, the relationships between textual structures, textual processing and the structures of the socio-cultural contexts should be made explicit in such a study: different levels, types of education, social background and cultural variation require different kinds of language use and communicational forms.

#### **D. THE NATURE OF HUMOR**

Humor can broadly be identified as a form of communication in which a created stimulus may act to provide pleasure for an audience (Gulas and Weinberger 2006: 95). Generally, humor is suggested as being a term applied to all literature and to all informal speech or writing in which the object is to amuse or arouse laughter in the reader or hearer (Gulas and Weinberger 2006: 21–22).

Humor is a phenomenon that always requires a high level of motivation from the viewer, who is then more likely to remember it (Newman 2004: 88; Gulas and Weinberger 2006: 57). Indeed, if the intended audience does not understand the wit or is annoyed by it or is even offended in some ways, the speakers or writersers will not have reached their primarily goal (Viveiros 2003, cited in Gulas and Weinberger 2006: 63). This statement highlights that humor is efficient only when the advertiser knows the target audience and its response to humor. Humor is subjective and is particular to a societal culture.

Humor can be analyzed within the challenge framework, specific to a particular culture, as outlined in Gulas and Weinberg (2006). In this model, the challenge is triggered by one or more of three humor mechanisms, namely incongruity, arousal/safety, and superiority. It is put into action through the use of different enabling factors), including play signals, familiarity receptivity, surprise, and arousal, which in turn help the reader in decoding the humor response (mirth). These phenomena have a major impact on the viewer's state of mind, resulting in both cognitive and affective reactions (Gulas and Weinberg 2006: 137). Humor can be analyzed within the challenge framework, specific to a particular culture, as outlined in Gulas and Weinberg (2006). In this model, the challenge is triggered by one or more of three humor mechanisms, namely incongruity, arousal/safety, and superiority. It is put into action through the use of different enabling factors), including play signals, familiarity receptivity, surprise, and arousal, which in turn help the reader in decoding the humor response (mirth). These phenomena have a major impact on the viewer's state of mind, resulting in both cognitive and affective reactions (Gulas and Weinberg 2006: 137).

## E. THE STRUCTURE OF HUMOROUS DISCOURSE

Although there is no general acceptance in classifying humor, a conceptual starting point can be established by asserting that humor is triggered by particular mechanisms (Spotts 1987). These can be grouped into three main categories; namely the cognitive theory, the superiority theory, and the relief theory (Spotts *et al.* 1997: 20; Norrick 2003: 1333). First of all, cognitive mechanisms are related to the structure of the message (Spotts *et al.* 1997: 20–21). According to Stern (1990, cited in Spotts *et al.* 1997: 19), incongruity is the most prevalent characteristic in cognitive devices. Based on the work conducted by the pioneers in the field, Kant and Schopenhauer, Morreal (1983, cited in Spotts *et al.* 1997: 19) claims that humor can be achieved by mere surprise or inconsistency. Indeed, research has revealed that the pleasure derived from incongruity is the divergence between the conceptions that listeners or viewers hold in their minds, and what happens to upset their expectations in a playful context of confusion and contrasts (Newman 2004: 91; Norrick 2004: 1334–1335). However, incongruity becomes stronger only when it follows a resolution process and is understood and accepted by its audience (Gulas and Weinberger 2006: 23-26). Through the use of incongruity, jokes produce a mirthful response based on structural contrasts (Raskin 1985).

Originated by Plato, the superiority theory – also called the disparagement theory concentrates on the social function of humor (Gulas and Weinberger 2006: 26; Spotts *et al.* 1997: 19). Hobbes (1840: 1909, cited in Norrick 2003: 1333) defines humor as “the sudden glory arising from the sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others”. This illustration can be explained by Gruner (1997, cited in Gulas and Weinberger 2006:26), who suggests that the superiority theory can be clarified in terms of superiority, aggression, hostility,

ridicule or even degradation. Superiority seems to be present even in humor that appears to be harmless.

Last but not least, the arousal (relief/psychodynamic) theory implies that there is a psychological release in that humor helps vent tension. It is suggested that people joke about things that make them feel unsure and/or uncomfortable as a way of releasing feelings of tensions (Gulas and Weinberger 2006: 28). According to Freud (1905: 1960, cited in Spotts *et al.* 1997:19), humor is a safety valve which allows the relief of forbidden feelings.

It is interesting to note that Freud (cited in Gulas and Weinberger 2006: 98–99) believed that the pleasure obtained from wit comes about either tendentiously or non-tendentiously. Tendentious wit refers to the execution of a message through the use of aggression or sexual forces. On the other hand, non-tendentious wit relies on a more playful means using absurdity and nonsense.

Kelly and Salomon (1975, cited in Gulas and Weinberger 2006: 100) propose five main categories of enabling factors which help to achieve humor: “(1) puns – the humorous use of a word or phrase in a way that suggest two interpretations, (2) an understatement representing something as less than the case, (3) joke-speaking or action without seriousness, (4) something ludicrous – that which is laughable or ridiculous, (5) satire-sarcasm used to expose vice or folly”.

Linguistic devices, such as the vocalization, the lexis and the syntax, are the important factors that construct humor. The linguistic devices into four levels: humor at the phonetic level, humor at the lexical level, and humor at the discourse level. Humor at the phonetic level is based on the homophones, the laughter particle, and some vocalization; whereas Humor created by lexical devices includes words and phrases. Most humor is based on two strategies: using word substitution and using vernacular dialectal slangs. Word substitution indicates that changing certain words

in an established sentence in order to provide humor. Discourse devices are rendered in the interaction between the initial sentence and the response to this initiation. Moreover, humor at the discourse level is extremely depended on the context. The approach to examine humor at the discourse level is to examine how one character initiates a discourse and how another character responds to it and to examine the context in which the story in the humorous short-texts takes place.

Shade (1996) cited in (Golchi and Jamali, 2011: 185) provided a more clear classification for humor in classroom. Based on his classification, humor is classified into four major categories:

1. Figural humor that includes comic strips, cartoons and caricatures. This form of humor appears in a variety of media and involves the use of drawing to deliver the humor.
2. Verbal humor that consists of jokes, puns, riddles, satire, parody, irony, wit, limerick and anecdote. This form involves the use of language and often depends on the use of incongruity as demonstrated through contradiction, understatement and exaggeration.
3. Visual humor that includes sight gags, practical jokes, clowning, impersonation, impressions, etc. this category depends on visual cues for the humor to be effective.
4. Auditory humor that includes impersonations, impressions, noises and sounds. This form depends on auditory cues for the humor to be effective.

Hativa (2001) cited in (Golchi and Jamali, 2011: 185) provided a similar classification of humor in teaching. She classified humor in three main categories. The first category is verbal humor that consists of jokes, anecdotes, language play, etc. The second one is nonverbal humor such as cartoon, caricature, photon and visual pun. The last one is combined verbal and nonverbal humor that consists of

impersonation, parody, satire, monologue and skit; whereas Chee (2006) also classified humor in teaching into four major categories:

1. Textual: stories, jokes
2. Pictorial: cartoons, comics
3. Action/Games: theatre, video, role play, simulation, contests
4. Verbal: Puns, word games, acronym

## **F. THE PRAGMATICS OF HUMOR**

A linguistic theory that only addresses purely linguistic issues must be considered an incomplete linguistic theory. Effective communication cannot be achieved if extra-linguistic factors are ignored, and it is here that pragmatics comes into the picture. Over the past years different definitions of pragmatics have been provided; however, most authors agree on defining it as the study of the negotiation of meaning in interaction which takes place between speaker and hearer in a given context of utterance (Leech, 1983; Levinson, 1984; Thomas, 1995; Yule, 1996). In particular, pragmatics deals with the mismatch between what is said and what is really meant since, in most communicative scenarios, speakers mean more than they say in a strictly semantic sense.

Pragmatic competence is defined as the ability to communicate effectively and involves knowledge beyond the level of grammar (Thomas 1983). Crozet (2003) states that some of the rules that govern interactions but that are not immediately obvious have been referred to as *invisible* rules. Teaching pragmatic competence is widely regarded as an integral part of learning and teaching a language, and has been widely investigated (Bardovi-Harlig 1996; Rose and Kasper 2001; Bardovi-Harlig and Griffin 2005). Kasper (1989) includes the ability by learners to use speech acts in socially appropriate ways as part of what she calls a speaker's *declarative* knowledge of the target language. Studies of cross-cultural pragmatics report that the

way speech acts are realized varies across languages. This variation can sometimes cause misunderstandings, or what Thomas (1983) called pragmatic failure, which occurs when learners transfer first language (L1) pragmatic rules into second language (L2) domains. This transfer of rules can lead to stereotyping about particular speech communities, as speakers may be perceived as being rude or inconsiderate. Teaching communication according to the socio-cultural rules that govern speech acts in a given speech community is a valuable way to make students aware of what is valued within a culture and how this is communicated.

Raising pragmatic awareness can foster what Kramsch (1993: 236) calls 'intercultural competence', where speakers of other languages can become aware of what she terms 'the third place'. Bardovi-Harlig (1996) argues that the classroom is a place where pragmatic instruction can occur. Rose and Kasper (2002) review a series of studies that tested the effectiveness of explicit teaching (which Schmidt, in Rose and Kasper 2002: 255) called 'the noticing hypothesis' versus no instruction. They conclude that pragmatics has shown that explicit instruction of the target language pragmatic rules is effective in acquiring pragmatic competence. For example, Koike and Pearson (2005) found the rate of acquisition of pragmatic competence was faster when English-speaking learners of Spanish received explicit instruction and feedback. Alcón Soler (2005) compared two groups of Spanish high-school students and found that the group that received explicit instruction showed a greater speed of acquisition in how to give suggestions in English. Bardovi-Harlig and Griffin (2005) conducted a study in which one of the tasks consisted of noticing and repairing the speech act of apologizing. The authors reported that explicit classroom instruction can benefit ESL learners from different backgrounds even if more advanced learners may develop awareness without instruction. Instructional methods in the above studies included focus on-form, feedback (Koike and Pearson 2005),

discourse completion tasks and recasts (Alcón Soler 2005), and viewing and identifying pragmatic infelicities, followed by role play (Bardovi-Harlig and Griffin 2005). Rose and Kasper (2001) provide further insights into the benefits of both implicit and explicit teaching of pragmatic skills, as well as instructional methods for teaching and testing them.

### **G. THE CULTURAL CONTENT OF THE HUMOROUS SHORT-TEXTS OF *READER'S DIGEST***

Most teachers of English as a Second/Foreign Language (ESL/EFL) would agree that their job is not just to teach language, but also to teach culture (Rucynski Jr., 2011: 8) Indeed, Krasner (1999) argues that it takes more than just linguistic competence to be proficient in a foreign language. Byram and Risager (1999: 58) also describe the language teacher's role as "a professional mediator between learners and foreign languages and culture".

Humor obviously varies from culture to culture. Although there are various cultural backgrounds in the humorous short-texts in the *Reader's Digest* magazine, the magazine is much more lauded for its intelligent and sophisticated humor. The result is plenty of laughs for the related-cultural native people, but a real challenge for the average non-native English speakers of the culture. Humor is very culture based, and—expanding on the issue of cultural literacy—Ziesing (2001: 8) explains that "understanding humor requires a number of cultural reference points, including history, customs, games, religion, current events, taboos, kinship structures, traditions, and more". Additionally, humor in the *Reader's Digest* magazine can be sarcastic or even dark, causing confusion as to why some certain people consider such things funny. Finally, the humor sometimes uses clever puns or wordplay, which the average English language learner would not easily understand.

As an iconic mainstay of the world popular culture for decades, the *Reader's Digest* short-texts constitute an obvious choice for teachers looking for authentic materials for EFL students. Despite the difficulties the humorous texts pose for non-native English speakers, careful structuring of lessons into pre-, during-, and post-reading activities will make the humor perception accessible. Additionally, knowledge of the humorous texts will improve students' cultural literacy and help them communicate with other English-speaking people. Finally, using episodes as part of a thematic unit makes the texts much more than just mindless entertainment and can help students understand deeper issues about a certain foreign culture and society.

When choosing cultural content for the EFL classes, there are two basic criteria to be considered. First, will the content help students to understand more about the target culture? Second, will the content help students to actually communicate with people from the target culture?

Despite being a humorous short-text, it provides adequate cultural content and hence easily satisfies these two criteria. Being a humorous short-text does not equal a lack of seriousness or sophistication. But in fact, it offers some sophisticated comedy and satire. This seriousness may refer to the world's social issues including nuclear safety, immigration, gay rights, and sexual harassment. EFL teachers less familiar with the show should therefore be aware that the humorous texts are not intended to teach children. Both the language level and content make it a text appropriate only for adult students. Again, despite being a short text, it is also a great springboard for serious discussions about a certain foreign culture and society.

In addition to providing a look at daily life and controversial issues in a particular society, the *Reader's Digest* humorous short-texts also satisfy the second criteria of helping English language students to communicate with other English-speaking people. When learning a foreign language, students need more than

grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation; another important skill is cultural literacy regarding the target culture. Popularized by E. D. Hirsch (1987: 32), cultural literacy refers to the “shared knowledge” people need “to be able to communicate effectively with everyone else”(Rucynski, 2011: 9-10).

Despite the benefits of using *Reader’s Digest* humorous texts in the classroom, understanding such humorous texts is obviously a challenge for non-native speakers. Therefore the following presents some of these challenges and provide tips for making the texts more accessible to students. Firstly, as they might with any magazine, TV show or movie, non-native speakers will struggle with the advanced vocabulary and slang used in the humorous texts. It is worth repeating that despite being a short humorous text, it is primarily designed for an adult audience, meaning the vocabulary used in the texts is not basic. As previously mentioned, the texts have tackled many serious topics, increasing the chances that advanced or technical vocabulary will be used. Additionally, the texts have been known to create their own vocabulary, such as *XXL-ing* which means “making it very large” or “Don’t have a cow” (“Don’t get so upset”) and “Eat my shorts” (“Leave me alone”), are rarely used outside of *Readers’ Digest* context. While it may be part of cultural literacy, such odd slang will present comprehension problems for non-native English speakers.

#### **H. PRESENTING THE HUMOROUS TEXTS OF *READER’S DIGEST* IN EFL CLASSROOMS**

Unlike spontaneous use of humor and premeditated use of humor, the teaching of humor deals with authentic materials. The average comedy movie, TV series, standup performance, or song might require more lesson time and preparation time than most teachers can afford. However, there is a wealth of shorter

material available, including one-to-four-panel comic strips from daily newspapers and TV commercials. It is also possible to find relatively self-contained scenes from movies and TV shows that focus on single jokes (Quock, 2007: 535).

This section offers a wide variety of practical, innovative, and motivating classroom activities concerning the English humorous texts, notably the ones of the *Reader's Digest* magazine, as adapted from Maley and Moulding (1985: 137-39) serving as both input and output in the English language process They include:

1. Researching on any cultural, literary, biographical, and historical information which can help student better make sense of the humor
2. Deducing meanings from the context
3. Completing a paraphrase of a humorous story (cloze-style)
4. Choosing the best paraphrase among a few
5. Predicting what's coming next after reading only one paragraph of the humorous text at a time
6. Improving on a given paraphrase (replacing, adding, or omitting words, images, etc.)
7. Ordering jumbled sentences or paragraphs in the correct sequence
8. Paraphrasing a humorous text
9. Rewriting a part of a humorous text in one's own words and ideas to offer different messages
10. Filling an omitted word, phrase, or line in relation to its context (a list of words, phrases, or lines can be provided)
11. Replacing figurative languages with other ones
12. Transforming a humorous text into 'everyday' style (dialogue, diary, speech, etc.)
13. Rewriting or improving the concluding lines with one's own ideas

14. Answering questions which arise from 'problem lines' in a humorous text (discussing any unfamiliar vocabularies, syntactic features, rhetorical devices, etc., correcting them, if possible, and comparing their effects on the overall meaning of the humor)
15. Decoding complicated lines (ambiguous meanings) in terms of everyday language (Provided a few brief interpretations to select through group-work the most appropriate one)
16. Identifying the title of a humorous text among many
17. Arranging a humorous text while providing punctuation)and comparing it with its original one
18. Discussing similarities/differences between humors of the same subject or thesis
19. Writing a group-humor or an individual humor and exchanging it for a comment
20. Finding a humor in everyday life
21. Discussing the attitude, mood, tone, gist, or narrator of a poem
22. Discussing the theme of a humor and writing out personal experiences related to the theme
23. Doing a creative role-play based on the theme, story, and subject of the humor
24. Altering a humorous text's point of view (i.e., from the 1st person point of view to the 3rd ppv)
25. Matching words to definitions, pictures, etc.
26. Analyzing the stylistic device of repetition of key phrases and discussing how it contributes to the overall effect of the humorous text

27. Translating an English humorous text into the student's native language  
(individual or group)
28. Explaining the humor in the text
29. Discussing the underlying cultural assumptions of a humorous text
30. Writing a short humorous text and exchanging it with classmates

These activities have been developed, tried, and tested by experienced teachers of English in their classrooms around the world. Many practitioners have found them encouraging students not only to approach English language learning in a spirit of discovery of meaning but also to express their self (emotions and thoughts) freely. As humanist approaches prove, this experience of exercising freely their imaginative and cognitive ability, while working with texts creatively, subjectively, and collaboratively, is very invaluable to enable them to improve their overall language and discourse competence. Hence, if English humor as a language material is integrated with other forms of English language, it can better offer "a rich resource for input to language learning" (Maley and Duff, 1985:7).

The benefits of including such English humorous texts in teaching English language can be classified in terms of aesthetic, linguistic, pedagogical, and heuristic advantages. First of all, the themes the English humorous texts deal with are related to common areas of all human experiences, although the way they are treated differs to various extents in terms of culture. Carefully-selected English-written humors offer various themes which are relevant to the interests and concerns of learners as they provide them with "meaningful and memorable contexts for processing and interpreting new language" (Lazar, 1993:17). Hence, well suited for content-based approaches, English humor can act as a powerful stimulus to the student's own reflective thinking and emotions, which will elicit more expressions of opinions, reactions, and feelings for "more mature and fruitful group discussion" (Maley and

Moulding, 1985:135). Thus, English humor can be used as the basis for generating at once the student's involvement and his/her subjective, creative, and meaningful responses. An understanding and explicating of the ways in which the themes are dealt with in English language can also help improve not only language awareness but also cultural awareness.

Next, most of current English language-teaching materials run the risk of trivializing content for the sake of highlighting the language. Being made to be "exposed to the surfeit of rapes, abortions, drugs and bombs," learners are likely to lose interest in the act of reading itself (Maley and Duff, 1989:8), hence missing a chance for "the flow of reading" in which they can acquire a great deal of new vocabularies and sentence structures. Still worse, even important experiences such as love, death, life are frequently dealt with in terms of matter-of-facts (journalistic) manners, and therefore, they fail to provide learners with excellent opportunities not just to reflect their life but also to express their personal opinions, reactions and feelings. However, English humors touch upon non-trivial areas of human experience and heighten the student's awareness of even the apparently trivial. Hence, they elicit a strong subjective investment in poem-centered activities, which, combined with group interactions, is a powerful motivational factor in language learning.

Also, English humors expose par excellence learners to "fresh and unexpected or creative uses of language" in relation to vocabulary, syntax, semantics, morphology, structure, etc. (Lazar, 1993:15), which are beyond their fixed dimension only to embody multiple layers of meaning. In order to understand their specific effect (that of various 'forms ') on the making of meaning, learners need to be actively and creatively involved in not only considering the ways in which this effect is achieved by departing from a norm of English but also explicating the ways in which this specific style contributes to a build-up of a particular communicative effect in a particular

context. By asking learners “to explore such sophisticated uses of language,” the teachers are “encouraging them to think about the norms of language” (Lazar, 1993:18). An in-depth awareness of such creative facility with language can be a valuable ground for both understanding pragmatic functions of language uses and promoting creative play with English language in writing and speaking. The process of doing with language subjectively, creatively, and collaborative plays an important role in not only defusing learners’ fear but also expanding and developing their confidence in using it in an actual situation.

Such pragmatic and creative uses of English language already prevail in everyday language: advertisements, political speeches (or cartoons), comedies, talk shows, jokes, and even in everyday conversation. Furthermore, the teachers also help learners develop their “abilities to infer meaning and to make interpretations” on the linguistic and contextual basis by developing their “sensitivity to the web of associations which link words to each other,” to “the weight and quality of words,” and finally to “the limitations of their use in everyday speech (Maley and Duff, 1989:12). Since any language act (even plain language) positions language users in a creative interaction (or reaction to) with texts, an interpretation including the drawing of inference on what is produced by language is required on the part of language users. The experience of decoding uses of humorous language is “transferable to most language learning contexts in which meaning, because they are not always immediately transparent, have to be experienced, negotiated, or ‘read’ in the sense of interpreted between the lines” (ibid:155). This capacity gained from such experience “can then be transferred to other situations” as follows, where a creative and contextual interpretation needs to be made on the basis of “implicit or unstated evidence” (Lazar, 1993:19) fictions, editorials, defense in court, playful speech, jokes, white lies, pretending statements, playing devil’s advocate, political slogans, riddles,

metaphors, idioms, allusions, signs, suggestions, connotation, proverbs, contracts, etc.

Therefore, these capacities obtained from activities through English poetry can serve as a springboard for expanding learners' communicative competence because English language is not always governed by rules; rather, it stretches beyond ordinary language uses "to achieve different communicative purposes" (Lazar, 1993:100). While reading and processing English poetry, learners learn how to "make use of certain interpretative strategies" which are contextual, creative, and subjective (Lazar, 1993:101) and use them functionally in an actual speech event. Thus, when English is being taught, the teachers are not merely teaching language features, but teaching learners about what that language can function in a particular discourse and how they can understand and retrieve that function in an actual speech act (ibid: 7).

Moreover, making such sophisticated language uses of English humor the basis for generating group discussions and activities is one of the most important benefits of including English humor in teaching English language. Various collaborative (a whole-group or small-group) activities have been developed not only to increase learners' awareness of certain linguistic features but also to stimulate their sense to different uses of English registers. While 1) identifying the ways in which a sentence is newly organized, a new punctuation is created, and new registers are made, 2) pinpointing in what way and why they are unusual, 3) contrasting and comparing them with more commonly accepted uses, and finally 4) commenting on how these creative uses of language contribute to the overall or particular meaning of the humor, learners come to be familiar with the norms or rules from which these creative uses of English language deviate in order to achieve a particular pragmatic communicative effect. In addition, as being participants rather than passive

observers, learners have a better chance to play with new sentences, to create new sentences, to pull them in various ways, to use old words in new ways, to test their elasticity, to explore their limits through a writing workshop in the supportive classroom context (Maley and Duff, 1989:9)

Finally, along with such benefit as previously explained, facilitating and maintaining a harmonic and safe classroom environment is another significant advantage that exploiting the creative uses of English language as encouraging group discussions can afford. As usual, even apparently 'simple' English humors are rich in suggestive, colorful, and associative words and expressions which "speak subtly different messages to different people" (Maley and Duff, 1989:9-10). Each learner's perception and interpretation of the meanings has his/her own validity, and each personal meaning found in the humor is shared, exchanged, negotiated, reinforced, valued, or loosed in the process of interacting freely, safely, funnily with others' findings. In this way, discussion is stimulated, and the teacher serves as a moderator. A safe learning community is created in which critical remarks and words of ridicule are greatly lowered "so that free communication can take place" among learners (Arnold, 1999: 10). Thus, lessening or avoiding whatever might threaten learners' *'language ego'*, the fun discussion activities (small-group or a whole-group) through English humor establish what is defined as "a climate of acceptance," which will not only create, in turn, "an environment of mutual support and care" (quoted in Arnold, 1999: 12) but also "encourage all members (teacher included) to accept the challenges for their own learning". The activities also serve to set up "the tension necessary for a genuine exchange of ideas", the interacting and negotiating of meanings in the classroom, which are the most valuable for an effective and authentic communication. Thus, "reducing anxiety, increasing motivation, facilitating the development of positive attitudes toward learning and language learning,

promoting self-esteem, as well as supporting different learning styles, the English humor classroom shares essential characteristics of cooperative and humanistic learning (Maley and Duff, 1989:10)

## **I. CONCLUSION**

To sum up, humor becomes one of the most valuable educational tools that aid the language acquisition as well as the whole learner's physical and mental development. Even for teachers who are not so inclined, humor in one guise or another can offer a variety of benefits in terms of teaching language and culture, engaging and motivating students, improving classroom atmosphere, and enhancing teacher job satisfaction.

Using humor in learning environment is crucially important. Generally, its importance can be seen from two perspectives. The first one concerns the direct effects of using humor on learning and information retention. 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 one deals with the possible effects of humor on the classroom atmosphere and its effect on keeping student motivated and reducing their affective barriers.

The present paper reveals how the language learning which uses the humorous texts contributes in a significant way to enriching learners' language learning. What the paper is trying to offer is a range/sample of suggestions and ideas about how to use English humorous texts as an effective language material provides a way of integrating a humanistic approach into both language learning process and language classroom, the approach which is characterized by holistic, heuristic, cooperative and interactional activities in their relation to such factors as self-esteem, autonomy, and motivation. It is the writer's hope that the readers will look upon them

as the starting-point rather than the finishing-point of a useful and exciting exploration of language.

Finally, implementation of humorous tools may help teachers create a more appealing atmosphere in every perspective. It is believed that humor in pedagogy is a necessary and fundamental tool whereby teachers can make a positive and appealing atmosphere in class to foster the students' learning. For years, educational scholars have examined the significance and purpose of humor in the learning context. Humor has been seen as enhancement to classroom teaching and learning.

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