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Humour – An ‘Important Spice to Use in Teaching’?

On Humour and Its Uses in
English as a Foreign Language Classrooms

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1. Introduction

Ever since the educational paradigm shift from teacher-centred to learner-centred instruction in the last decades of the past century, there has been a continuous debate and dialogue among researchers, educators and educational psychologists alike on how to enhance teaching and learning processes in order to make them more effective, i.e. more beneficial for student learning. Consequently, teachers have been urged to explore better and alternative ways of teaching to improve their practice and break away from traditional methods of instruction, which are commonly understood to be counterproductive for the development of skills and practices that enable learner autonomy and independence. In addition, there is a large body of literature devoted to the many sources and pedagogical tools that teachers can employ in order to improve teacher-student interaction and learning outcomes. In her study of pedagogical tools and their effects on learning, Chabeli (2008: 51), for instance, identifies “[a] helping attitude, openness, willingness and an empathetic disposition on the part of the teacher” as one of these crucial factors which help to establish a classroom atmosphere conducive to learning.

Another variable, which researchers have often studied in terms of its impact on both teaching and learning, is the use of humour in the classroom. Although research on humour is quite interdisciplinary, there have been many empirical studies conducted in classroom settings which identify humour as an effective strategy for the teacher to put students at ease, as an important ploy to get students’ attention and as a suitable way of keeping the classroom less formal (see Neuliep in Schmitz 2002: 94). Additionally, Deneire (1995: 285) observes that “[h]umor has been [...] shown to have a positive effect on the learning environment, to initiate, maintain, and enhance learner interest, and to facilitate retention.” Wagner and Urios-Aparisi (2011), who study the use of humour in the teaching of world languages, focus on the numerous advantages which humour has in the context of foreign language teaching. The authors are convinced that “research in world language education has revealed the importance of the use of humor in lowering student anxiety and in the learning of pragmatic skills of foreign language students” (ibid.: 401) and they generally view humour as “an important resource for increasing student motivation” (ibid.: 402).

But what exactly makes humour the effective teaching tool that educators and educational researchers like the ones mentioned above claim it to be? And if it indeed is as effective, which forms of humour- for it is a very broad term- are considered 'adequate' in the context of teaching?

This term paper is concerned with the use of humour as a pedagogical tool in the context of foreign language teaching. More precisely, it tries to give an overview of the main reasons for employing humour in the English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom and it also attempts to determine which types of humour are suitable in educational settings, i.e. have the potential to initiate, maintain, and enhance learner interest and contribute to a positive classroom atmosphere which is beneficial to learning.

So far, the reasons for employing humour in the context of foreign language teaching have been studied only by a few authors – Raaf's (2005) comprehensive work including a vast amount of empirical research as well as Thaler's (2012) contributions in a pedagogical journal for English language teaching and Sambanis' chapter on humour (2013: 41-49) in her publication on the relationship between neuroscience and foreign language teaching have probably given the most extensive account. While Wagner and Urios-Aparisi (2011), Wanzer (2012) and Deneire (1995) have also studied different uses of humour in the foreign language classroom, attempting to determine their appropriateness and effectiveness in terms of their pedagogical use, Hackathorn et al. (2011) as well as Horwitz et al. (1986) and Sylwester (1994) have done extensive research with regards to how certain emotions in the classroom affect student learning.

On the basis of this current state of research, supported by some major findings in the fields of neuroscience and biology (see Fry 1994 and 2002; Vrticka et al. 2013), I will briefly examine the main arguments for using humour in the EFL classroom. Due to the limited size of this paper, my analysis will by no means be exhaustive and complete; it will be restricted to what seem to me the four most dominant reasons for employing humour in English language teaching. These include arguments formulated on the grounds of educational psychology and language acquisition, social aspects relating to rapport and teacher immediacy as well as reasons concerning student motivation and the acquisition of relevant linguistic and cultural competences in the foreign language. From this short analysis, I will deduce some possible implications for the use of humour

in the context of EFL teaching, thus identifying the kinds of humour that, if employed appropriately and at the right time in the teaching sequence, can indeed be used to facilitate and enhance teaching and learning processes in foreign language classrooms.

2. General Facts about Humour

In general terms, humour can be described as “anything that people say or do that is considered funny and tends to make others laugh” (R.A. Martin in Vrticka et al. 2013: 860). As such, humour is defined in very broad terms and it can be seen to involve two components: the cognitive component; i.e. “the mental processes that go into both creating and perceiving [...] an amusing stimulus”, and the affective component, “the affective response in the enjoyment of” that specific stimulus (ibid. 860). Thus, the experiencing of humour involves both the processes of comprehension and appreciation, the latter of which is often linked to a feeling of amusement, mirthful laughter and enjoyment (see also Özdoğru and McMorris 2013: 136).

The type of humour enjoyed by humans, i.e. the act of “enjoying incongruity” through the mental play with either words and objects (see Vrticka et al. 2013: 861), is nowadays known to be a human-specific characteristic which is not learned, as it was previously assumed, but rather “a genetic, biological characteristic of the human race” (Fry 1994: 111). Thus, no person, regardless of their cultural and linguistic background, is generally found to be without a sense of humour, but the statement or object that is perceived as funny is strongly dependent on one’s own character, situation and culture. “A sense of humor” can, as Fry (1994: 112) remarks, accordingly be seen as “a kind of psychological fingerprint, distinctive for each person”. However, there is believed to be a distinction between a form of humour with universal appeal, which is recognized and enjoyed throughout the world, and other varieties of humour, which are typically only understood by a distinct group of individuals in certain cultural, linguistic or social contexts (see ibid.: 112 and Schmitz 2002: 93-110).

The appreciation of humour, however, does not only depend on the situation or context of its occurrence, but also on its specific form and function. In terms of its form, Wagner and Urios-Aparisi (2011: 400) observe that one can differentiate “between complex manifestations of humor that are associated with behaviors such as joking, teasing and humorous stories and simple phenomena such as irony or hyperbole that

generally can be reduced to the utterance stratum”. With reference to the functional component of humour, it is Schmitz (2002: 90) who observes that “humorous statements can have very different functions in spoken and written discourse [...]; some involve satire, a play on words, while others have as their target, [sic] criticism of either men or women or a particular group, nation or race.” Although humour can appear in various forms, within the field of humour research, however, the joke is deemed to be the primary object of study (see Wagner and Urios-Aparisi 2011: 400 and Schmitz 2002: 91).

3. Reasons for Using Humour in the EFL Classroom

The previous chapter has indicated that in the appreciation and production of jokes and other kinds of humour context plays a very vital role. In the classroom where humour is defined as “an act performed through linguistic and non-linguistic means by any of the participants”, i.e. students or teacher (Wagner and Urios-Aparisi 2011: 400), humour, too can occur in various forms and serve different purposes. While Schmitz (2002) analyses and proposes a division of classroom humour into three basic groups; universal, cultural and linguistic¹, other researchers have studied the effects of these various forms of humour on both teaching and learning. Wagner and Urios-Aparisi, for instance, summarize the results of previous studies on humour in classroom settings (2011: 403) and note that the teacher’s use of humour has been mostly linked to the issues of teaching effectiveness, student learning, classroom atmosphere, student motivation, the evaluation of teachers by students and teacher immediacy.

Although it has been almost impossible to measure the direct effects that humour has on students’ learning outcomes (see Wagner and Urios-Aparisi 2011: 403-404), researchers nonetheless deduce many benefits of implementing humour in the classroom with regards to its effects on learning. Some of the most important arguments for using humour in foreign language teaching will be summarized in the following subsections.

¹ For Schmitz (2002) see also section 4 on the different forms of humour and the ones that are appropriate in classroom settings.

3.1 Arguments from Educational Psychology

One of the main arguments for using humour in the classroom originates in the field of educational psychology. Among educational psychologists, it is a well-established fact that learning is most effective when it is connected with positive emotions and performed whilst being in a positive mood (see Sambanis 2013: 41). Since the affective component of humour is very often equated with a burst of mirthful laughter and the experiencing of positive emotions (see section 2), it, too, is said to enhance learning processes in the classroom. Although brain research suggests that humour cannot be localized in a distinct brain region for it “does not have a simple or attenuated representation in the human brain” (Fry 2002: 317), many studies have identified the hippocampal region as taking on a central role during humour experiences (e.g. Vrticka et al. 2013: 863 and Sambanis 2013: 42).

The hippocampus is commonly understood as a novelty detector, responsible for the formation and retention of memory. As such, it selects relevant information from an incoming stream of new impressions that seem worthy to retain, causing memories to be formed and become hard-wired in the brain, thus making them remembered for a longer period of time (see Fry 2002: 318-319). Consequently, through this hippocampal response to particularly striking novel stimuli, it is memories which are linked to positive emotions that are prioritized and hence “tend to be easily recalled during a similar emotional state later on” (Sylwester 1994: 63).

Many studies conducted in classroom settings confirm this positive influence of humour on learning and memory. While Garner (2006) shows that students who listened to a lecture containing humorous elements were able to remember significantly more information from that lecture than students who listened to the same speech without humorous insertions, Hackathorn et al.’s findings (2001: 120) demonstrate not only “that recall and recognition are enhanced through humor, but [they] also provide new evidence that humor increases one’s ability to understand the information”. In addition, Schmidt (1994) also found that humorous sentences were recalled significantly better by students than non-humorous ones.

What all of these findings from previous studies have in common is that they suggest that humour experiences are closely related to memory for it has proved significantly easier for participants to recall information conveyed with the help of humour.

Consequently, the findings from educational psychology confirm what Knight (in Fry 2002: 318) has termed the human “bias of remembering the unusual”. One can hence deduce from these findings that positive emotions aroused through humour can help direct attention, which in turn enhances memory and facilitates learning.

While positive emotions created by humorous experiences help to direct attention which in turn aids learning, negative emotions like feelings of anxiety and stress have proved to be counterproductive to retention and learning. As Sylwester (1994: 62) remarks

[w]hen our ability to fend off danger triggers a stress response, cortisol [...] is released by our adrenal glands. [...] While low levels of cortisol produce the euphoria we feel when we’re in control, high levels triggered by the stress response can induce the despair we often feel when we’ve failed.

These high cortisol levels brought about by feelings of anxiety and stress are eventually able to attack and destroy the hippocampal neurons responsible for learning and retention. Consequently, these negative emotions undermine the hippocampal activity of the brain and can subsequently restrict a person’s ability to learn (see *ibid.*: 64).

From an educational psychology perspective, the use of humour can hence be seen to possess a dual-advantage with regards to the initiation and facilitation of learning processes: firstly, humorous anecdotes told by the teacher or funny and entertaining teaching materials have the potential to “serve as a ‘hook’ for remembering important content” (Chabeli 2006: 57). From that perspective, humour can be understood to serve both as an important learning tool and memory aid. And secondly, the use of humour can assist in the creation of a more positive and relaxed classroom atmosphere, which in turn helps with the reduction of student anxiety and dissolution of emotionally stressful classroom situations and thus eliminates decisive factors which are counterproductive to learning.

3.2 Arguments of Language Acquisition

As the arguments from educational psychology have shown, humour can enhance learning processes in two ways: both directly, through emotional appeal and stimulation of our cognitive processes responsible for retention and memory, and indirectly, through the creation of a more positive classroom atmosphere which in turn proves conducive to learning. From a language-acquisition point-of-view, both these factors

also play a very important role when it comes to determine the reasons for why humour should be used in the classroom.

The main argument for implementing humour in the foreign language classroom is based on Krashen's popular Input Hypothesis (1985), which he developed within the context of second-language learning in the later decades of the past century. According to Krashen, a student's feeling of anxiety builds up an affective filter, a mental block which makes the individual generally unreceptive to language input. Thus, the learner cannot utilize "the comprehensible input [he or she] receive[s] for language acquisition", which keeps him or her from making further progress in that specific target language (ibid.: 3).

Over the years, Krashen's *Affective Filter Hypothesis* has been verified by several scholars, including Horwitz et al. (1986) who examined the effects of student anxiety in foreign language classrooms. Their observations show that anxious students are "uniquely unable to deal with the task of language learning" (1986: 130) and they are more prone "to avoid attempting difficult or personal messages in the target language" (ibid.: 126). Although anxiety is also experienced outside the foreign language classroom, most researchers seem to agree with Krashen that there is a distinct form of student anxiety that becomes increasingly apparent when learning a language (see Wagner and Urios-Aparisi 2011: 404 and Horwitz et al. 1986). To them, the fact that students are forced to communicate in a language which they cannot yet fully master or control seems to further reinforce an already stressful classroom situation. This perception becomes especially apparent in Dörnyei's publication (2001) on teaching motivation where he seems to be convinced that students learning a language experience a distinct and somewhat natural form of anxiety. To him, "the language classroom is an inherently face-threatening environment, with learners being expected to communicate using a severely restricted code" (ibid.: 91).²

Tied to the students' experience of anxiety are usually even more severe consequences that many teachers often do not take into account. Anxiety and the students' inability to perform in a foreign language very often lead to bad test results and grades and the

² This perception eventually even caused educators and psychologist to give the students' anxious state of mind during language teaching its own name, i.e. *foreign language anxiety*.

teacher's misinterpretation of the students' actual language ability, as highlighted by Horwitz et al (1986: 127):

The resulting poor test performance and inability to perform in class can contribute to a teacher's inaccurate assessment that the students lacks either some necessary aptitude for learning a language or sufficient motivation to do the necessary work for a good performance.

Due to these greater consequences and the vast degree of emotional stress that some students are claimed to experience while learning a language that is not native to them, it becomes particularly important for the teacher to employ specific techniques that help to create a more relaxed classroom atmosphere and "allay students' anxiety" (ibid.: 125). Humorous discourse employed by the teacher, either through humorous materials, infused in teacher-student interaction or as a general conversational tone among the students themselves hence becomes an effective classroom management tool that is able dissolve an authoritative and tense classroom atmosphere.

In summary, from a language-acquisition point-of-view, there are good reasons for employing humour in the classroom for it can reduce foreign language anxiety and hence make the students more likely to participate in and become engaged with the target language. Thus, as Chabeli (2008: 55) correctly remarks, "[u]sing humor that is appreciated by learners can act as intrinsic motivator because it will elicit positive emotions while generating sustained interest and involvement in the construction of one's own learning."

3.3 Arguments of Rapport and Teacher Immediacy

The previous subchapters have shown that the teacher's use of humour can result in the reduction of classroom anxiety, which makes students more likely to focus their attention on learning a language, to perceive learning processes as fun and thus increase the learners' overall achievement in terms of learning, retention and memory. Yet, as many empirical studies in classrooms have demonstrated, humorous discourse initiated by the teacher does not only influence learning processes in the classroom, but it also has an impact on the social relationships between teacher and learners.

Ever since Hattie (2009) published the findings of his famous meta-analysis of quantitative measures, analysing the effects of different factors on educational outcomes,

the relationship between teacher and student has been identified as being one of the decisive variables for learning in the classroom. Sambanis (2013: 44-45) who comments on Hattie's findings for the purpose of her own argumentation for implementing humour in the foreign language classroom, remarks in this context: "Die Lehrer-Schüler-Beziehung rangiert mit einer Effektstärke von $d = 0.72$ im Bereich der starken bis sehr starken Effekte, was deren Relevanz eindrucksvoll unterstreicht." Thus, it becomes apparent that the relationship between students and teacher is indeed an important variable in the classroom that affects learning, on which humour could have some favourable impact.

Within the field of humour research, the fact that there is an increasing social bond between people who have been laughing together has been verified in different domains. Fry (1994: 115) who studies the biological processes involved in an individual's experience of humour, argues, for instance, that "[a]n elevated level of mental and emotional interactiveness develops between people who have been laughing together, reflecting the infectiousness of this exhilaration." From a socio-psychological perspective, the act of collective laughing has also been linked to the formation of some sort of 'in-group solidarity' brought about by shared experiences which have been reported to strengthen in-group dynamics and establish a feeling of unity (see also Wagner and Urios-Aparisi 2011: 411). From that point-of-view, humour can be seen to be a helpful tool for the creation and facilitation of group processes in the classroom.

Summarizing the major findings in the field of previous humour-orientation studies, Wanzer (2002: 119) also points towards the significance of humour as an important means for the teacher to gain liking with his or her students. Wanzer (ibid.: 119) defines humour orientation as "a communication-based personality trait measured by the HO scale [...], which assesses an individual's predisposition to use humor frequently and in a number of different situations as well as their self-perceived effectiveness in producing humorous communication." People who score high on the HO scale have generally been found to have a greater sense of humour and to be socially more attractive than people with a low HO score. According to Wanzer, students who participated in previous studies on humour orientation also "reported learning more from professors perceived as high in HO". In addition, the students' perception of a teacher's HO score "was positively associated with their affective and cognitive learning" (ibid.: 119).

Thus, the findings from humour-orientation research affirm Thaler's (2012: 7) line of argumentation who reports that students tend to evaluate teachers with a sense of humour higher, assign them more professional competence and generally like their lessons better in comparison with teachers who display a low or seemingly no sense of humour. From a motivational point-of-view and to enhance one's own teaching attractiveness and competence, it can therefore be very advisable for instructors to implement humorous discourse in their own teaching practice.

In terms of teacher immediacy, the teacher's sense of humour is also often claimed to reduce the emotional and intellectual distance between teacher and learner. Chabeli (2008: 55) who studies the perceptions of nursing students on humour as a pedagogical tool to facilitate learning, reports that the students believe that "[h]umor strengthens social relationships among learners and teachers" and is able to "reduce the authoritarian position of the teacher". In addition, Chabeli's study shows that humour has the power of promoting what she terms 'emotional intelligence', "the capacity for recognizing our own feelings and those of others, for motivating ourselves and for managing emotions well in our relationships" (ibid: 56). Chabeli (ibid.: 55) also reports that the nursing students believed "the more laughing [there is in the classroom], the smaller the distance between the learners and the teacher." Wanzer (2002: 119) confirms this statement in her own study on humour in the classroom, reporting that "[w]hen students view their professors as using humor frequently and effectively, they also view them as more immediate." The overall tenor from these studies is that teachers who are perceived as having a high sense of humour also appear more immediate. This correlation could be explained by the overlap in behaviours that the teacher uses when he or she is being funny or immediate. In both cases, Wanzer believes the teachers to display the same behaviour e.g. smile often, use gestures, change their voices etc. (ibid.: 119).

All the above-mentioned findings from empirical studies demonstrate that humour does indeed have a positive impact on the teacher-student relationship for it works as some kind of immediacy behaviour that helps to build a more relaxed atmosphere in the classroom which is desirable for successful learner-centred and autonomous learning. However, it has to be noted that there are also some side effects if the teacher wishes to establish rapport with the students but fails to employ humour correctly. Firstly, as has been noted above, some types of humour create a feeling of collectiveness, an 'in-group

solidarity'. Those students, however, who do not share the relevant background knowledge that leads to the understanding of a humorous instance might therefore be likely degraded to the 'out-group', which results in them feeling left out. Thus, if employed incorrectly, humour could indeed split the classroom and create divisiveness and even feelings of frustration, anxiety, and confusion among learners (see Chabeli 2008: 57). Secondly, if the teacher fails to use humour that is comprehensible for the students or uses humour that is self-disparaging and aims at self-mockery, he or she could lose respect and credibility as a teacher or even his or her (previously good) reputation. Therefore, and "[b]ecause middle and high school students are especially sensitive to anything that might, even loosely, be perceived as a criticism, it is important to use humour with care." (Hall in Wagner 2011: 406).

3.4 The Competence Argument

While the previous arguments concerning teacher immediacy and rapport and the findings from educational psychology outlined above address the general benefits of humour as a pedagogical tool in the context of teaching, there are also numerous advantages that humour has for the acquisition of foreign language skills. As Deneire (1995: 286) points out, within the English as a foreign language classroom, humour can both be used "as a technique to introduce linguistic phenomena and cultural knowledge" and "as an illustration and reinforcement of already acquired cultural and linguistic knowledge"³. Thus, humour cannot only be employed to make a language lesson more enjoyable, but it can also be used as a teaching device to enhance the students' language proficiency in both linguistic and cultural terms.

Many scholars have previously highlighted the importance of humour in foreign language classrooms with regards to the acquisition of relevant skills in the target language, and they have come to view humour as being an integral part of foreign language acquisition. While Thaler (2012: 6) believes it to be desirable to strive for what he calls 'humour competence' in the teaching of English as a foreign language, other scholars like Deneire (1995: 294-5) view postulating humour competence as a fifth competence as "unjustified" for they believe a "well-developed communicative

³ Note, however, that Deneire (1995: 294) recommends to never use humour "as a technique to acquire **new** [emphasis added] linguistic and world knowledge, but rather as an illustration and reinforcement of acquired [...] knowledge".

competence implies humor competence, and vice-versa". Wagner and Urios-Aparisi, too, see humour as an integral part of the foreign language curriculum. To them, the

[c]urrent approaches in world language acquisition promote authentic and communicative uses of language in the classroom and the integration of linguistic and cultural information. Consequently, being a crucial part of real-life communication, humour represents content in world language classes. (Wagner and Urios-Aparisi 2011: 406)

In addition, they are convinced that students who wish to achieve advanced levels of language studies are required to understand all humorous discourse in the target language (see *ibid.*: 406-407). Thus, so the consensus, in order to improve students' communicative competence in a foreign language, humorous materials and discourse should be intentionally used and taught as content in the classroom. In addition, since the understanding of humour in a foreign language requires both cultural competence and linguistic competence (see Deneire 1995: 294), the students can be seen to benefit from humour in two ways, as will be briefly outlined below.

3.4.1 Humour and the Acquisition of Linguistic Competence

The general agreement among researchers and educators is that in order to achieve advanced language skills, students of English have to be able to identify and understand humorous instances in the target language. From a linguistic point-of-view then, the humour used in the foreign language classroom can become a very helpful teaching device to create linguistic awareness. Deneire (1995: 291), for instance, believes that through the use of humour, students become "sensitive to the structural and the semantic differences between different languages" while gaining an insight which kinds of humour are appropriate in different contexts (see *ibid.*: 293). In addition, Schmitz remarks that "English has a large stock of phonological jokes that bring together different meanings of a specific word or relate different word sense that sound alike" (2002: 101). Students of English are therefore expected to identify puns and plays of words in order to successfully communicate in the target language.

In the English as a foreign language classroom, puns do indeed pose a great challenge for students. They demand first an understanding of the underlying incongruity and then a general ability to resolve or interpret it (see also Hackathorn et al. 2001: 116). Therefore, Schmitz (2002: 101-104) recommends that puns and plays on words should

first be introduced at an advanced level of language studies for it is only then that students have acquired the necessary linguistic skills in order to understand these expressions. In terms of translation exercises, difficult linguistic humour such as puns could also pose a challenge to the less advanced students of English. As Schmitz referring to Liebold remarks (2002: 106), “the translation of humor necessitates ‘...the decoding of humorous speech in its original context’ into another language ‘which successfully recaptures the intentions of the original humorous message’.” As a consequence, if a student is not able to master both the target language and the source language extremely well, he or she will not be able to translate the jokes of a foreign language without losing some of its humorous qualities (see *ibid.*: 89-93).

Consequently, from a linguistic perspective, introducing humour in foreign language teaching can be a motivating way to make the students aware of specific features in the phonology, morphology and syntax of the target language. Inserting humorous instances like jokes in translation and mediation classes also makes students attentive to structural and semantic differences between the two languages and it can raise students’ intercultural awareness for they see that some humorous expressions are almost impossible to translate into another language without losing their humorous effect.

3.4.2 Humour and the Acquisition of Cultural Competence

In terms of the acquisition of cultural competence, using and studying humour in a foreign language can also have numerous benefits. As Wagner and Urios-Aparisi (2011: 406) point out, “[h]umor is an integral and complex part of every culture that requires deeper understanding of certain phenomena as well as factual knowledge” (Wagner and Urios-Aparisi 2011: 406). Teaching content through humorous material can hence be an entertaining way to inform the students about certain practices and traditions in the target culture. Thus, the use of humour can be a helpful and authentic strategy to deliver content for it can enhance learning both in terms of acquiring factual knowledge about the target culture and creating intercultural understanding.

The importance of teaching humour for the acquisition of cultural competence is underscored in numerous publications about humour in the foreign language classroom. Wagner and Urios-Aparisi, who study the benefits of humour in terms of its intercultural value, deduce that “the word language classroom offers the opportunity to

observe and investigate cultural differences between languages and cultures of the participants of the classroom interactions as well as the target languages and cultures” (2011: 401). Schmitz (2002: 103) further supports this view in saying that “[c]ultural jokes serve as mirrors of the socio-cultural practices of the society and can inform the learner how some members of the community view themselves.” In the advanced stages of language learning then, humour can be employed as a motivating device to introduce new information about the target language and culture, and it can also serve as a valuable tool to initiate and enhance critical thinking about that culture.

However, as Schmitz (*ibid.*: 95) remarks, “humorous material has to be selected to fit the [cultural and] linguistic competence of the students”. Introducing humorous material too early in a teaching sequence, when the students have not yet acquired the necessary cultural and linguistic knowledge to understand it, would be very risky for it would not only destroy the humorous effect of a joke but also overstrain the students’ current language abilities. Thus, humour which cannot be understood by students due their lack of cultural and linguistic knowledge, could seriously undermine learning (see also Deneire 1995: 291-294). Yet one can still conclude that “giving students the chance to experience humor of the target language” at the right time during a teaching sequence “will not only be a motivating factor in their study of language, but will also benefit them in terms of their sense of integration into the social life of the people with whom they are trying to communicate” (Omaggio 2001: 83).

4. Classroom Humour – A Special Kind?

The above outline of reasons for employing humour in the language classroom illustrates some of the numerous advantages which humour has for the learner and the teacher in the context of foreign language teaching. It can, if used appropriately, enhance both teaching and learning processes and improve the relationship between teacher and students. But although past literature suggests that humorous teachers are generally perceived as more effective and competent than non-humorous ones, there are many instructors who do not feel comfortable using humour in the classroom as part of their own “verbal repertoire” (see Hackathorn et al. 2001: 121).

For the teacher there are, however, many other ways of incorporating humour in the classroom besides the display of their own “comedic value” (*ibid.*: 121). Muñoz-Basols

(2005: 42), for instance, observes that “the devices that we can use to add humor to a language class range from idiomatic expressions, riddles or proverbs, pronunciation games, comics, [to] the use of realia, jokes or typical grammatical errors”. There is hence a large reservoir of available humorous material and media which the teacher can use for his or her own language teaching purposes. And, as the previous section has suggested, this humorous material that is employed in the language classroom can either be used to convey knowledge, i.e. to deliver content related to the target language or culture, or it can simply be used as a student motivator that accompanies the content. Thus, as Schmitz (2002: 94) observes, the selection of humorous materials can be adapted to fit “any language teaching approach or method”.

In former publications dedicated to the study of humour and its use in the teaching context, however, scholars have typically differentiated between the kinds of humour that are suitable for use in the classroom context and those that are deemed inappropriate. While Chabeli (2008: 52) divides the different forms of classroom humour along the lines of ‘positive humour’ and ‘negative humour’, Darling and Civikly (1986-87) use the terms ‘destructive humour’ and ‘constructive humour’ to make that same distinction. Yet, other authors such as Wanzer (2002) use the terms ‘good’ and ‘bad’ and ‘inappropriate’ and ‘appropriate’ when speaking about the different forms of humour that occur in classroom settings. But regardless of its name, the general consensus of all these authors is that the kind of humour that can, or rather should be employed in the classroom “is only a very restricted part of the large repertoire of humor varieties we use in daily life”. According to Wanzer (ibid.: 121), this generally excludes humour that “make[s] fun of students, humor based on stereotypes, failed humor, sexual humor, swearing to be funny, joking about serious issues, and personal humor”. To Chabeli (2008: 57), however, “[a]ny humor that is intended to divide people, belittle or ridicule, discriminate, encourage negativity or be at another person [sic] expense” is considered inappropriate in the classroom context. In contrast, the humour that should be used during teaching “should be constructive, understandable by all learners and be relevant to the content and [/] or compatible to the learning environment” (ibid.: 58).

This accosted relatedness of humour to the teaching content is another important aspect which is often discussed in the literature. While Wanzer (2002: 122), too, recommends linking “humor to the subject matter when possible”, she sees unrelated humour to also

have effective qualities in the classroom either as “an icebreaker or affinity-seeking strategy”. However, she also admits that unrelated humour does not have the same advantages as related humour (see *ibid.*: 122) when compared on the basis of the students’ learning outcomes.

Wanzer is also the one who points out that failed humour attempts on the part of the teacher are almost as bad as using inappropriate humour. Consequently, if students do not understand the humour or if the humour is not perceived as funny – e.g. when it is based on stereotypes or meant to ridicule students or a distinct group of people – then they will view the teacher’s use of humour as a failed attempt and may become distracted from the lesson (see *ibid.*: 123).

5. Conclusion

This brief examination of the findings from different fields of humour research has underscored the value of humour as a pedagogical tool in foreign language teaching. Looking back at the findings presented here, the use of humour in the classroom can be seen to entail both general benefits for teaching and learning processes as a whole and also specific ones when applied in foreign language classrooms.

From the perspective of an educational psychologist, the teacher’s use of humour can be seen to possess a dual-advantage for it has proved to influence student learning in two ways: On the one hand, humour works as an attention-getter, which directly stimulates and influences the student’s mental capacities responsible for memory and learning. Thus, humour becomes both an effective memory aid and important learning tool for the students. As a trigger of amusement and laughter, on the other hand, humour works not only as a student motivator but it also creates a more relaxed and positive classroom atmosphere which in turn is beneficial for learning.

In social terms, in addition to contributing to a more positive classroom environment, humour has proved to be a valuable instrument for establishing a positive relationship between students and teacher. As such, it has the power to reduce the authoritarian position of the instructor, increase teacher immediacy and contribute to the establishment of rapport with the students. Moreover, a teacher’s use of humour can

also positively influence the students' perception of his or her own competences or effectiveness.

With regards to its use in foreign language classrooms, humour has been identified as a powerful means to reduce students' fear of interacting in a foreign language and it hence aids students both in performing in a foreign language and in building and developing foreign language skills. Being an integral part of every language and culture, humour also becomes an effective and motivating strategy to help students develop communicative competence in the target language.

With regards to the students' communicative competence, the advantages of humour are also twofold: On the one hand, humour can be employed as a teaching device to create linguistic awareness and it can also be used as a means of conveying information about the target culture or language and hence enhance the students' intercultural competence overall. Thus, the teaching of humorous content can assist both in the development of relevant linguistic skills and it can also aid the acquisition of (inter)cultural knowledge which the students need in order to be able to successfully interact with members of the target culture.

Overall, all the above-mentioned advantages combined make humour an effective and powerful teaching tool to be used in the foreign language classroom. If employed appropriately and with care, humour can help to facilitate both teaching and learning processes and contribute to a positive classroom atmosphere and to the emotional and mental well-being of all participants involved. Therefore, teachers need to set aside time in order to develop strategies and infuse humour in their own teaching practice for the benefit of their learners as well as their own. In order to be able to use humour successfully, however, teachers should consider and be aware of the role that humour plays not only in the target language and as a pedagogical tool in the foreign language classrooms, but also in the students' personal development. Because only then will the teacher be able to select the appropriate kind of humour from which students benefit both emotionally, socially and intellectually, and only then will humour become the valuable teaching tool and the "important spice to use in teaching" that Chabeli (2008: 55) claims it to be.

6. References

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