

The Application of Humor in English Vocabulary Teaching

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Abstract

This study centered on the use of humor in English vocabulary instruction and carried out an in-depth examination of its theoretical underpinnings and practical approaches; as an manifestation of linguistic cleverness, humor is of great significance in teaching in line with the Affective Filter Hypothesis and the Constructivist Learning Theory as it vigorously arouses students' interest and drive, turning the traditionally monotonous vocabulary learning into something delightful and thus making language input more efficient in a laid-back setting; by means of techniques like pun and association, it boosts deep vocabulary retention, fosters long-term learning motivation through new experiences and closes the psychological gap between teachers and students with funny words and deeds, shattering traditional communicative obstacles; at the same time, teachers need to proficiently utilize techniques such as pun and exaggeration for humorous teaching but also have to concentrate on strengthening their own sense of humor; research showed that this humor-based pedagogy created novel ways to enhance the quality of English vocabulary teaching and was an effective method to promote students' English learning.

Keywords

Humor; English Vocabulary Teaching; Humor-based Pedagogy; Vocabulary Retention; Learning Motivation

1. Introduction

Humor, having its own special allure, represents the culmination of human intelligence and language art and serves to shatter monotony, alleviate strain, and foster camaraderie; in the realm of English education, it is highly crucial as it can infuse vigor into instruction and Suhomlinsky (1981) stated that "If a teacher is devoid of a sense of humor, a formidable barrier of mutual misunderstanding will arise between teachers and students: teachers fail to comprehend children and children fail to understand teachers." Vocabulary instruction constitutes a significant aspect of English teaching and conventional vocabulary teaching typically relies on rote memorization, so students often find it tedious and difficult to grasp and recall words, yet humor can convert monotonous vocabulary memorization into an engaging learning

encounter, enabling students to effortlessly acquire knowledge while laughing, creating a positive and dynamic classroom environment, spurring students' enthusiasm for participation, making them shift from "being made to learn" to "learning voluntarily", and effectively lessening students' academic stress, diminishing anxiety, lightening the mental load, and allowing them to understand and remember words more productively in a relaxed and enjoyable state; delving deeper into the function and application tactics of humor in English vocabulary teaching holds great significance for reforming English teaching approaches, enhancing teaching quality, and promoting students' overall growth, not only assisting students in achieving more progress in English study but also cultivating their positive and optimistic learning mindset, establishing a firm base for future development.

2. The Definition and Theoretical Basis of Humor

2.1 The Definition of Humor

In the teaching of the English language, what is termed "teacher humor" pedagogically speaking is when educators intentionally use humorous language in classroom situations to make instructional activities more effective, encourage learners to be more engaged and foster a positive learning environment (Mo & Pan, 2013) and as a teaching tool it boosts students' motivation and reduces their language-learning anxiety thus making language acquisition more efficient and based on the origin of the word "humor" (Luo, 2013) this practice goes beyond just being funny but is a strategic language-related art that expresses deep-seated meanings through cleverness and in the end represents language-based wisdom that changes teaching methods by means of multi-level communication skills.

2.2 The Theoretical Basis of Humor

2.2.1 Affection Filter Hypothesis

The Affection Filter Hypothesis put forward by American linguist Krashen views emotional elements as a "filter" during the language-learning process, so in English study, aspects like students' learning drive, self-confidence and anxiety act as filters for the incoming language information, thus when students had strong learning drive, were fully confident and not very anxious, this "filter" was like an open gate allowing a great amount of language inputs to flow into the brain easily which made it easier for knowledge to be absorbed and internalized, but conversely, if students lacked learning drive, were lacking in self-confidence and were deeply troubled by anxiety, the "filter" would close, impeding the effective reception of language information and leading to poor learning outcomes.

2.2.2 Constructivist Learning Theory

The Constructivist Learning Theory posits that learning is in no way a passive pro-

cess where students simply receive knowledge, rather it is a dynamic one in which they take an active part to build a new knowledge framework founded on their pre-existing knowledge and experience and in this process, the learning context and interaction with other people are of crucial significance.

Integrating humor into vocabulary instruction could create an engaging and vibrant learning scenario for students and thoroughly arouse their learning enthusiasm; for instance, while expounding on the word “pest”, the teacher humorously stated: “Fellow students, pests are really bothersome, so when we come across ‘pest’, we need to get rid of it and swiftly remove these pests.” This humorous way of creating situations made students highly interested, so they actively drew upon their pre-existing life experiences and knowledge reserves to take part in the process of constructing vocabulary meanings, consequently they not only deeply grasped the meaning of the word but also could nimbly utilize it in actual communication, thus enhancing the effectiveness of vocabulary learning.

3. The Key Roles of Humor in English Vocabulary Teaching

3.1 Stimulating Students’ Interest and Learning Motivation

The ambience within the classroom has a significant bearing on the efficacy of teaching to a large degree and vibrant classroom undertakings along with a laid-back and agreeable classroom environment can get rid of students’ negative feelings, enable them to keep in the optimal learning mode within a relaxed and dynamic setting and enhance the efficiency of learning (Li, 2016), but in the conventional English vocabulary teaching scenario, students frequently find themselves in a passive position regarding knowledge reception as teachers tediously expound on words and students apathetically imitate and write down while the classroom air is listless and gloomy which severely curbs students’ learning zeal, nevertheless, the incorporation of humor can effectively transform this state and stir up students’ internal eagerness for active learning as it can immediately alleviate students’ unease about memorizing words, allow them to effortlessly recall the spelling and sense of words during laughter, render vocabulary study no longer tedious and facilitate the smooth absorption of language knowledge.

3.2 Helping Deep Memory of Vocabulary

Knowledge per se is rather solemn, but when folks convey and utilize it, a great deal of fascination emerges, ranging from seriousness to liveliness and humor, from dullness to amiability and interest, and since humor can evoke a sense of joy and invigorate the classroom ambience, it enables students to study in a laid-back and cheerful mood, Bulgarian psychologist Lozanov once stated that “Unconscious psychological activities in a relaxed and joyful state are most beneficial for spurring personal super memory (Gao, 2008)”, in English vocabulary acquisition, memorizing

words presents a tough challenge for students, the conventional rote-learning approach frequently causes students to get stuck in the tedious scenario of mechanical repetition, resulting in a poor memory outcome and easily forget, however, humorous teaching allows students to effortlessly and thoroughly remember words via intriguing memory techniques like homophones and associations, take “hesitate” for instance, it could be divided into “he” (he), “sit” (sit), “ate” (the past tense of eat) and humorously expounded as “He was sitting there eating, appearing hesitant to carry on”, thus enabling students to firmly recall the word, these funny memory methods ingeniously capitalize on the brain’s predilection for novel and engaging information, convert vocabulary learning from painstaking rote-learning into enjoyable exploration and discovery, and assist students in surmounting the vocabulary-memorization hurdle.

3.3 Cultivating Lasting Learning Motivation

Humor is able to not only spark students’ interest in learning right away but also keep on providing students with a steady flow of motivation during the long-term process of vocabulary acquisition so that they can keep devoting themselves to learning, and the building up of an English vocabulary is a lengthy and painstaking task so if students fail to constantly reinforce what they have learned then the words which they memorized due to their novelty in the initial stage would be easily forgotten, nevertheless funny elements could continuously offer students new and engaging ways to learn which lightened the burden of study and made them maintain their eagerness to learn more words, for instance prior to the weekly English vocabulary test teachers might spend several minutes playing the “funny word relay” game with the students where the teacher provides a word like “fat” (meaning fat) and the first student has to swiftly come up with a related word that can be humorously explained such as “fatter” (meaning fatter) and say something like “My cat eats so much that it gets fatter and fatter just like a little balloon.” after that the next student takes over and so on, this amusing review approach makes students no longer see the test as a source of stress but rather anticipate demonstrating their vocabulary knowledge during the game and as time goes by it fosters a lasting drive to learn and turns vocabulary learning into an active and pleasurable activity.

3.4 Narrowing the Psychological Distance between Teachers and Students

In the conventional teacher-student relationship paradigm, teachers frequently stood on the front of the classroom and imparted knowledge in an authoritative manner while students passively listened, and it appeared as if there was an intangible barrier between them so the communication and interaction were inflexible and formulaic; however, humorous behavior and speech could make students relax, which was beneficial for teacher-student communication and interaction, the for-

mation of a cordial teacher-student relationship, and consequently arouse students' strong interest in the course (Zhu, 2013), for instance, once a classmate mispronounced a word because of nervousness when answering an English question in class, at that moment, the teacher could mimic the stammering look and purposely utter the subsequent several words hesitantly, like pronouncing "Let's" as "L-L-Let's" and "continue" as "con-con-continue", then the teacher said earnestly: "Actually, during the English-learning process, everyone would have incorrect pronunciation or wrong words which was quite normal, just like what the teacher had just intentionally mimicked. The crucial point was that we should be courageous enough to speak and keep practicing. This classmate had been brave enough to answer the question and deserved praise! Let's cheer for his courage together!" which not only got rid of the student's embarrassment but also made the student sense the teacher's concern and affection, and made the teacher-student relationship more amicable.

4. The Methods and Techniques of Humorous Teaching

4.1 Making Clever Use of Homophony

In the process of teaching English vocabulary, the effective utilization of homophones could assist students in remembering words more effectively as the homophonic approach, namely, taking advantage of the resemblance in pronunciation between English words and Chinese characters to create a funny and memorable connection such as when expounding on the word "ambulance", the teacher humorously remarked: "Have a look at this word; isn't its pronunciation somewhat similar to ǎn bùnéng sī (This Chinese phrase shows phonetic likeness to the English word "ambulance")?" which made the students have an exceptionally deep impression of "ambulance" in a joyful environment.

4.2 With the Help of Exaggeration

Exaggeration, a highly effective rhetorical device, could render abstract and abstruse words tangible during English vocabulary instruction, impart a vibrant liveliness to them and assist students in comprehension and retention; this technique creates a powerful visual and mental influence by magnifying or diminishing the traits, quantity, extent, etc., of items far beyond the norm, thus intensifying students' impressions of vocabulary; for instance, while elucidating the term "tiny", the teacher spread his arms wide to form a large circle and then brought his fingers close together, leaving a minuscule space, before delivering an over-the-top statement: "Yesterday I witnessed an ant transporting a crumb. In comparison to our eyes, that crumb was as minute as a grain of dust, but for the ant, it was like a colossal 'mountain'. The ant's diminutive body and that enormous 'undertaking' made it seem even more minuscule." When students observed the teacher's exaggerated movements

and descriptions, they were able to deeply etch the meaning of “tiny” signifying smallness into their memories.

5. Conclusion

By delving into how humor functions in the teaching of English vocabulary, this research discovered that it has significantly noteworthy impacts in numerous crucial areas and imparts fresh vigor to the teaching of English vocabulary; as someone who carries out the humorous teaching approach, the development and enhancement of a teacher’s humor-related capabilities are crucial steps so for teachers to cultivate their capacity for perceiving humor keenly, they need to be meticulous individuals during their daily lives, while studying, and in teaching practices and also collect humorous materials extensively; they should take notice of social media trends, read books on humor theory and literary works, and sum up their teaching experiences in order to gradually gain an accurate understanding of when and how much humor to employ and they must master proper humorous expression techniques to guarantee that humor is suitably utilized in classrooms.

In brief, the humorous approach to English vocabulary instruction is of great significance that can’t be overlooked as it activates students’ learning capacity across various dimensions and every aspect, paving a hopeful and innovative route for enhancing the quality of English vocabulary teaching; the vast majority of English teachers ought to fully realize the strength of humor, actively incorporate it into their teaching practices, keep on exploring and innovating so as to build a firm foundation for students’ English study and assist them in soaring in future language learning and cross-cultural exchanges.

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