

## **Humor as a tool to Teachig Effectiveness**

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Improving teaching quality and effectiveness should be one of the primary concerns for any educational system. Research suggests that the use of humor (to engage students in laughter) in teaching can have positive effects on students' learning (Garner, 2006). The current paper intends to find out how/If teachers' use of humor in class improves teaching effectiveness, precisely, in terms of motivation, effective class engagement, anxiety reduction, stimulation of thoughts, interest in studies and fostering positive teacher-student relationship. The sample comprised of 100 students; (50 men and 50 women) and 200 teachers from different government and private universities (using convenient sampling) in Lahore. Students' Opinion of Teaching Scale (Makewa, Elizabeth & Genga, 2011) was used to assess students' ratings of teaching effectiveness. Results indicated a positive relationship between teachers' use of humor and student's motivation, their anxiety reduction, class engagement, fostering teacher student relationships and teaching effectiveness. Overall, students rated those teachers more effective who used humor in their teaching style as compared to those who did not. The findings are important and useful in raising teaching quality and effectiveness by developing/introducing training modules to advance teaching methodologies.

*Key Words:* Humor, Teaching and learning skills, Teaching Methodology

Educational institutions are trying hard to ensure quality education by updating and advancing contents and methodologies. However, the emphasis is placed more on the course material and curriculum, and less on methodology. There are numerous factors that can influence student's interest, attention, participation and learning in a classroom setting. Chabeli (2008), for instance, identified helping attitude, openness, willingness and an empathetic disposition on the part of the teacher as important factors that can lead to conducive classroom atmosphere. What are the other factors that give rise to effective teaching and learning? Research indicates that

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teachers' use of humor in class could be one important factor that makes students want to go to class. There is found to be a positive influence of humor on students' class attendance (Ardalan, 2017). Present research aims to answer whether humor leads to teaching effectiveness, and toward more conducive educational environment?

Teachers are constantly in search of creative and innovative teaching strategies that can grab the attention of students' in class room like other activities of media, internet, entertainment capture such as pictures, animation, videos, projectors and films (Shabiralyani, Hasan, Hamad, Iqbal, 2015). Most of the teachers want that in addition to having student learning their course material, students should enjoy the time of class (Burgess, 2005). Teachers have focused more different effective approaches which lead to more academic success in students. For these teachers, success may be found in approaches that make relevant connections and encourage higher-order thinking (Darling-Hammond, Flook, Cook-Harvey, Barron & Osher, 2019) Interestingly, one element of human development and neuroscience that has been predicted to academic excellence is often overlooked by teachers, and that is humor. Humor has both physical and psychological effects on students. Humor can serve to relax muscles, stimulate circulation, and breathing and to decrease levels of stress hormones. Psychological effects of humor and laughter can be: decreased tension and stress, reduce anxiety, quality of life, boost up self-esteem and motivation (Cann & Collette, 2014). Humor has shown therapeutic qualities such as relieving tension, increasing curiosity and comprehension, and reducing stress (Garner, 2006). Because laughter helps us stay mentally healthy, it is even called the "safety valve for sanity".

What comes first to mind when someone hears the word "humor"? Mostly, people take the laughter and cracking jokes as humorous. However, Scott, Lavan, Chen and McGettigan (2014) stated that laughter is not merely associated with humor but it's more about social relationships. Laughter is like a social emotion, as it occurs in social interactions and is associated with agreement, bonding and affection. It is a social signal that appears only in the presence of others and it disappears when there is no audience, which indicates its social value as it binds people together. Researchers so far has described humor as a response to pleasurable or amusing physical, emotional, or cognitive stimuli that affect brain in an interesting way. It involves complex mental processes that go into both creating and perceiving such an amusing stimulus and resulting in a pleasurable response (Buckman, 2010). Therefore, humor used in classrooms would be beneficial for students and enhance their learning.

However, there is some evidence where researchers did not support the use of humor in class, however, it is important to know that what kind of humor to be used and for what purposes. Gablinske, (2014) investigated the effects of humor by soliciting teacher's (rather than the student) perceptions of their own humor usage and its effects in the classroom. Among the most commonly stated reasons for employing humor were that it relaxes, comforts and reduces tension and anxiety of students in class. The study also reports the humanizing effects of humor on the teacher's image, and on increasing student's interest and making the learning experience more enjoyable. Thus, humor used in a positive way, with knowledge that it has positive effects, would actually produce positive consequences for both teachers and students. Research highlights, that if we provide some joyful or relaxing moments with students in class, especially during/after delivering tough and thoughtful material, would help students not only to relax, but also help understand and retain the material by judging the quality of the relationship (Gablinske, 2014). Humor contributes to better classroom environment, establish and maintain rapport, create motivation for learning, and enhance acquisition and retention (Chen, 2007; Moore, 2006). Humor does decrease stress, tension and anxiety in students, which they have towards subject material and class environment (Verma, 2007). It helps create positive image of the presenter and more engagement on the part of the participant (Bootz, 2003) One important factor in use of humor is its relevancy; humor must be related to course material, audience, and should be in the context of learning environment (Garner, 2005). Humor, to be effective in class, actually must compliment the contents to make learning more efficient rather than distracting from the original topic/content.

Research supports the use of humor for better educational learning outcomes. When students are asked to describe exemplary teachers, one of the main characteristics they choose is a sense of humor. Students frequently recall that their favorite teachers made them laugh and more importantly made learning fun (Glasgow & Hicks, 2003). However, despite known positive effects of humor, there is no emphasis on changing teaching methodologies, or teacher training, orienting them with the use of this skill as a tool or methodology (Ali, 2011). A lot of attention is being given to the curriculum content, ignoring the fact that teachers need lots of training on how to create engaging lessons out of that "content" of the curriculum (Flanagan, 2007). Developing countries (such as Pakistan) need teachers training more than industrialized countries (Ali, 2011) so the students can learn without any anxiety and barriers. In developing countries, like

Pakistan, teachers mostly use traditional, old school methods to teach students. It is important to note that with the changing era, new methods need to be used to engage students in an attractive educational setting. Use of humor as a learning/teaching strategy would attribute to better and increased comprehension of the subject content and toward more comfortable learning environment. However, very few researches in Pakistan have focused on this. Hence, it is important to study class room humor in Pakistan. Current paper focused on finding whether use of humor in class-room would predict teaching effectiveness. The current paper hypothesized that humor would significantly predict student's motivation, anxiety reduction, class engagement, stimulation of thoughts and interest, and teacher-student relationship.

### **Method**

The Correlational cross-sectional design was used to find out the relationship between the teacher's use of humor in teaching and its relationship with students' rating of teaching effectiveness in terms of their motivation, their class engagement, anxiety reduction, stimulation of thoughts, and positive teacher-student relationship. Cross-sectional design was used to compare teacher who uses humor and one who does not at a one point in time.

### **Sample**

The sample comprised of 100 students collected through convenient sampling from government and private universities of Lahore with the age range of 20 – 25 years ( $M= 20.46$ ,  $SD = 2.40$ ). 50% of the sample were men and 50% was women. Moreover, 50% of the students were from public universities while the other 50% were from government universities. About 83% of the sample were from undergraduate (BS) programs. The average GPA of the sample was 3.24.

Each student rated two teachers ( $n=200$ ), one who, they think, use humor in class (delivers lecture in amusing/comic/funny and interesting way), and the others who do not (subjective assessment). Ratings for 200 teachers were obtained. The average teaching experience of the teachers was 6.5 years, 40% of the teachers had PhD degree, 60% were women, and 71% were married. All information was taken from the students.

## Measures

Students' Opinion of Teaching Scale (Makewa, Elizabeth & Genga, 2013) was used. In first part, the questionnaire contained six subsections/divisions. The first sub-division had questions measuring the extent of the use of Humor in the classroom by the teachers (item 1-8); the next dealt with motivation of the students (items 9-13), creation of engaging in lessons (14-18), anxiety reduction in students (items 19-23), stimulation of thought and interest (items 24-27), and fostering of a positive teacher-student relationship (items 28-31). Questions in the second part were general, they measured students' general/overall ratings of the teachers (4 items).

Table 1

### *Psychometric Properties of the Scales.*

Scale	k	$\alpha$	M	SD	Cutoff
Humor production	8	.96	27.8	9.8	24
Motivation	5	.89	18.1	5.5	15
Creation of engaging in lessons	5	.90	18.0	5.3	15
Anxiety reduction	5	.86	18.0	5.5	15
Stimulation of thought	4	.86	14.8	4.5	12
Fostering positive teacher-student relationship	4	.89	14.4	4.8	12
Overall teacher ratings	4	.86	12.3	3.2	12

The questionnaire had high reliability (Cronbach's alpha = 0.92). The subscales ranged from an accepted reliability to a good reliability; ranging from 0.60 to 0.80. Overall, the scale had an accepted reliability (Makewa, Elizabeth & Genga, 2013). Along with this, demographic information about students and teachers were collected, including age, gender, qualification, experience, students GPA etc.

## Procedure

Permission letter was taken from the universities to collect data after approval of research from board of studies. Permission was taken from the respective authors to use their tools for research. Participants were approached using the convenience sampling technique. They were briefed

about the study, and written informed consent was taken. Tools were administered, students were asked to fill out questionnaires for two of their teachers (one who uses humor in class and the other who do not) from the current department. Average time to complete the assessment measures was 20 minutes (plus minus 3 minutes). Overall the response rate was 87%. Data was analyzed using SPSS 20.

### Results

First of all, descriptive and reliability analysis were carried out. The scale (Students' Opinion of teaching) indicated good reliability with Cronbach alpha ranging between .86 to .96 for full scale as well as six subscales, indicating that scale is highly reliable (see Table 1). Furthermore, separate descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) were calculated for teachers who use humor and those who do not use humor. Results indicated large effect sizes (Cohen's *d*) for both groups of all sub scales of teaching effectiveness. Teachers who used humor were significantly rated higher, than those who did not, on motivation, anxiety reduction, class engagement; thought stimulation, fostering positive student teacher relationship, and overall teaching effectiveness (see Table 2).

Table 2

*Comparing Teachers who use Humor with those who do not on Teaching Effectiveness*

Variables	<u>Use Humor</u>		<u>No use of H</u>		<i>t</i> (198)	<i>Cohen's</i>
	( <i>n</i> =100) <i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	( <i>n</i> =100) <i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
1 Humour production	36.1	3.6	18.4	3.2	36.7**	2.02
2 Motivation	22.3	5.6	13.1	4.5	12.5**	1.82
3 Creation of engaging in lessons	22.1	5.3	13.1	4.3	13.2**	1.86
4 Anxiety reduction	21.8	5.5	13.9	4.3	11.3**	1.80
5 Stimulation of thought	18.0	4.5	11.6	3.8	10.9**	1.54
6 Fostering positive te student relationship	17.6	4.8	11.3	4.2	9.9**	1.40
7 Overall teacher ratings	14.7	3.2	8.8	2.6	14.3**	2.9

\*\*  $p < .001$

Furthermore, it was hypothesized that humor would predict higher ratings from students on each subscale of teaching effectiveness. There was found to be significantly high positive correlation between subjective and objective assessment of teachers use of humor ( $r = .67, n = 200, p < .0001$ ). Regression coefficients were calculated using humor (continuous score on humor production) as independent single predictor of teaching effectiveness. Results indicated that humor significantly predicted student's motivation, anxiety reduction, and class engagement, stimulation of thoughts and interest, and teacher-student relationship (see Table 3). Humor as a single continuous predictor, explained almost 50% of the variance in overall teaching effectiveness.

Table 3

*Linear Regression using Humor as Independent Predictor of Teaching Effectiveness*

Variables	<i>R</i>	<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	<i>β</i>
1. Motivation	.84	.71	.77**
2. Creation of engaging in lessons	.81	.66	.77**
3. Anxiety reduction	.80	.65	.72**
4. Stimulation of thoughts	.78	.62	.72**
5. Fostering positive teacher student relationship	.77	.60	.77**
6. Overall teacher ratings	.76	.58	.50**

\*\*  $p < .001$

Overall, students rated those teachers more effective, more motivating, more class engaging, stimulating their thoughts and interest, having a better student teacher relationship, who use humor in class.

### Discussion

The current research aimed at finding ways to improve teaching methods, so quality education and conducive environment may be created for students for better learning. One factor that could contribute to effective teaching methodology is the use of humor.

Most of the participants responded positively to the use of humor in the classroom. Their responses indicated that they not only appreciated teachers' use of humor in the classroom, but they felt more motivated, relaxed, and comfortable with the teachers who used humor. The findings of the current study exhibited a strong, positive, and significant relationship between the teacher's use of humor and students' motivation, their anxiety reduction, their engagement in class, stimulation of their thoughts and interests, healthy teacher-student relationships and overall teaching effectiveness (Makewa, Elizabeth & Genga, 2013). This is also consistent with the previous literature. Studies support that teacher's use of humor does improve overall teaching and learning, decreases anxiety, increases and improve student-teacher communication, and help forming trusting relationships with instructors (Ahern, 2009; Chauvet & Hofmeyer, 2006; Golchi & Jamali, 2011; Lei et al., 2010; Moscaritolo, 2009; Torok et al., 2004).

Humor is linked with students' motivation. Teachers can develop strategies, how and when they can motivate their students. Research shows that humor help teachers in better and more lasting motivation (Chen, 2007; Moore, 2006). Humor helps in igniting and sustaining a positive energy that is so vital to ultimate success. Research on motivation has confirmed the fundamental principle of causality: motivation affects efforts, efforts effects results, and positive results lead to an increased ability and success. It suggests that by improving students' motivation, teachers are/can increase students' ability to learn.

The results also highlighted that humor increases students' engagement in class at the cognitive level, facilitating the learning process, which is also supported by cognitive learning theories. Cognitive elements like perceptions, memory, and thinking get better and facilitates in learning process (Candela, 2012). Humor improves the classroom environment by motivating the students to think and to memorize in a more relaxed way (Martin, 2007), resulting in positive learning outcomes.

Use of humor in class has shown to decrease students' anxiety. The results of a current study confirmed the findings of other previous researches, where humor has shown to make students enjoy and laugh in class, resulting in lesser anxiety and stress, and ultimately toward better students' learning (Verma, 2007). Humor in the classroom provides that stress free environment in which students can freely share their ideas, thoughts, and creativity that will foster positive relationship between teacher and students as confirmed by the results of the present study. Thus,

humor seems to have many important implications toward teaching and learning process, making learning more contextual, enjoyable, and effective.

Evidence that use of humor may lead to more effective learning was obtained by comparing students' GPA in the subjects of those teachers who use humor and those who do not. The results clearly indicated that students scored high GPA ( $M= 3.24$ ,  $SD =.52$ ) in subjects that were taught by teachers who use humor as compared to those who do not ( $M= 3.01$ ,  $SD =.46$ ). This finding supports the purpose of this study

Some teachers view humor as inappropriate for the classroom, believing it is their responsibility to teach, not to entertain. On the contrary; while humor should not be used for its own sake, it can be used effectively as a tool to engage students, to enliven the classroom, and to enhance learning (Garner 2006). Humor can be the avenue by which one grabs the attention of disinterested students and those who claim they dislike studying. Not only can interesting, fun activities and creative teaching approach spark students' interest, but such activities can also promote learning and help students gain new perspectives on old concepts (Cann & Collette, 2014; Ardalan, 2017) which is also consistent with the results of the present study that humor leads to effective learning in the students.

Although the results of this study are encouraging, however, the scope of the study is somehow limited. Future research can focus on types of humor and their effects on learning, such as positive and negative (sarcasm) types of humor, and how each type compliment to effective teaching methodology. Categorizing the type of humor with the emotional and academic results can help in designing training for teachers. The training can be used by teachers to further use and understand humor as an effective tool in educating students. Furthermore, future directions could also include teachers' age, gender, and personality of the teacher and how these individual characteristics interact with situational factors such as subject/study area, level of education, and class size. Personality can be studied in detail with the implications of humor. Understanding the type of personality associated with the type of humor used can also help in hiring and training teachers.

Laughter is contagious, infectious, and communal. Sense of humor counts as a virtue, as it helps in handling so many conflicts and stresses in the real world. It is often a desirable and sometimes required skill for better job performance. Displaying a sense of humor in the classroom indirectly

conveys to the students that having a sense of humor is good (Burgess, 2005; Cann, & Collette, 2014; Gablinske, 2014). It would help them learn to laugh, enhance student's motivation, their anxiety reduction, class engagement, fostering teacher student relationships and teaching effectiveness. Learning this skill would help them solve many serious, important, and real things in life teaching students' the importance of humor and laughter can improve their overall take on life. Humor can be used as an effective teaching tool. It could be incorporated into teaching methodologies and teaching training modules to enhance the learning process, however, we need to know when, why and how.

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