

Impact of Humour-based ESL Teaching on the Speaking Skills of Pakistani ESL Learners

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Abstract

English is a global lingua franca and has become necessary for everyone to learn it. In Pakistan, there is a need to find the ways and means to make this learning process easy and enjoyable. The present study explores the use of humour-based material to improve the speaking skill of Pakistani ESL learners. Although research on humour is growing across the globe (Farahani & Abdollahi, 2018) but in the context of Pakistan limited studies have been conducted in this regard. Humour, if included in teaching, helps the learners to learn with less conscious effort (Nayyar & Zeeshan, 2017). This study used IHPT and focused on understanding how humour-based teaching material affects the speaking skill of learners. A quasi-experimental design with two intact classes of Bachelor of Science comprising 30 students each was adopted in the study. By using an IELTS speaking test, a pretest was conducted and the post-test was conducted after the 10 weeks of treatment. The results show that the students in the experimental group improved their speaking in terms of fluency, lexical resources, and pronunciation while the improvement in grammatical range of both the groups was not significantly different.

Keywords: ESL, Humour-based teaching, Speaking skills, Fluency, Language acquisition Lexical resources

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Introduction

Humour, due to its facilitating nature and role in learning a second language, is a subject that has received the attention of the researchers and scholars in the recent years (Uyên & Duyen, 2024; Heidari Shahreza, 2023; Fata, Komariah, & Irfandy, 2018). The studies that have been conducted on the role of humour in the process of language learning and teaching indicated that humour has the potential to play a vital role by encouraging the learners and creating a comfortable environment in the classroom (Muñoz, 2024; Wahyuni, 2017; Huss & Eastep, 2016). Many researchers have also conducted studies on the perception about humour, role of humour and also on its advantages and disadvantages, findings suggest that the use of appropriate and relevant humour in the classroom has been appreciated as it increases motivation and decreases anxiety of the learners by creating a positive environment in the classroom (Lim, 2017; Al-Duleimi & Aziz 2016; Olajoke, 2016). However, the research on the benefits of appropriate and relevant humour in ESL for speaking ability in classrooms is little (Farahani & Abdollahi, 2018). Its reason is not exceedingly difficult to understand as majority of the studies has been conducted in the countries where English is the first language of the learners. Research on the use of appropriate and relevant humour in ESL classroom and its impact on the speaking skills of the ESL learners is less in the world (Farahani & Abdollahi, 2018) and it is even lesser in the context of Pakistan. A majority of research that has been conducted in the Pakistani context is in the form of surveys where the perceptions of the participants about the humour is discussed. Zeeshan and Nayyar (2017) conducted research to know about the views of the M Phil Scholars about the use of humour in the classroom. They interviewed 8 scholars and found that the use of humour in EL classroom lessens anxiety, motivates the learners, relax them and helps learners to retain the shared content.

Uddin, and Rahman (2015) explored the views of students and teachers regarding the inclusion of humour in language classrooms. They collected the data from both the teachers and the students and found that both of them see humour as a stress reliever and a helping hand in the process of teaching and learning the language. Nadeem (2012) surveyed the opinion of the students about the use of humour as a teaching technique and collected data from 100 university students. He reported that students were of the view that the use of humour as a teaching technique motivated them, helped in creating a positive and conducive environment for learning the language and it made the teaching effective. All three of the studies inquired only about the perception of the participants about the use of

humour and its impact on the learners is not studied. They did not study the impact of humour on any of the language skill and particularly on the speaking skills of ESL learners.

Present study is conducted in in Pakistan, where English, the official language of Pakistan, is taken as a symbol of prestige. A common notion about English language in Pakistan is that it does not only help a person in progressing in the society, but it also gives power to an individual. If one wants to lead a progressive and prosperous life in Pakistan, one must know how to communicate effectively in English language, this skill of English serves as a passport to the life of prosperity (Shamim, 2008). Among all the languages that exist in Pakistan, English is the most dominant and prominent language (Pennycook, 2017). The importance of English in the context of Pakistan can be determined by the fact that it is taught in the schools and colleges as a compulsory subject.

In the twenty first century, when English has become a lingua-franca, the number of students who are interested in learning English as a second language around the globe has enhanced and is increasing day by day (Crystal, 2012; 2013). Keeping this thing in mind that English is of immense importance in the context of the global village, in Pakistan, students start learning this language from class one. Although this learning of English comprises many years, the students still face many difficulties when it comes to speaking of English language (Ahmed, Pathan, & Khan, 2017). Khan and Khan (2016) conducted a study in the two districts of South Punjab (Pakistan) to explore the obstacles faced by the college student. They collected the data with a questionnaire from the teachers and students. In the findings they reported that the students face many problems like lack of motivation and discouraging behaviour of the teachers which leads to a very inconducive environment for learning. Awan, Azher, Anwar, & Naz, (2010) investigated the relationship of student's classroom anxiety with their achievement. In their survey they collected that data from 149 university students who were enrolled in the English learning programs. Based on their findings, they concluded that learning English in the Pakistani context was difficult because of the teacher centered classrooms, where reading and writing were given prime importance and listening and speaking skills were neglected. The students feel anxious and discouraged as the environment of the classroom is not friendly. In such a scenario, students do not get many chances to practice their communicative skills and feel disappointed (Madsa, 2012; Harmer, 2001). Inclusion of all these elements in the class makes the classroom difficult for the learners as they feel anxious and demotivated, and as a result they lose their interest in learning a second language (Abu-Rabia, 2004). They

do not take part in classroom discussions, which affects their ability to communicate confidently.

Humour, which can work as a catalyst in the process of learning a second language, is missing here. Use of humour in the classroom can have direct as well as indirect effects like retention of the information and creation of a conducive environment for the process of language learning. James (2004) is of the view that humour is one of the top five traits of an effective teacher. Banas et al. (2011) presented a review of the humour in educational settings; in their review they state that humour helps in creating a relaxed environment for learning in which students feel motivated and learn quickly. So far, many studies have been conducted on the use of humour in English language classrooms, some of them are reviewed here.

Aboudan (2009) conducted a study in UAE to investigate the effectiveness of humour as a pedagogical tool in language classrooms. He conducted three studies on the female students, studying in the different levels of language classes. The first study was conducted to know the opinion of the about the effect of humor on “learning, attention and concentration” (p92). He collected the data from a group of 200 females. Many of the respondents reported that humour helped them in learning difficult materials and they paid more attention when the teacher used humour in the classroom. The second study was an experimental study involving 160 students to investigate the influence of humour on the atmosphere of the classroom. 71% of the students reported that humour contributes positively to the classroom atmosphere. The third study investigates the “effects of teaching with humour on students learning” (p92). Aboudan (2009) reported that addition of humour in teaching made the lectures more interesting for the learners and they felt motivated and actively took part in the class.

Syafiq and Saleh (2012) investigated the effectiveness of humorous material in an EFL classroom to enhance the speaking skill of the learners. A sample of 80 participants, enrolled in Tarbiya Program of STAIN Kudus (Indonesia), was selected out of the population of 242 students. These 80 participants were divided into two groups (control and experimental). In the beginning, a pre-test was conducted and at the end of the experimental group's treatment a post-test. Research results show that the experimental group participants performed better than those of the control group. In conclusion, the researchers suggested that use of humorous material in the class increases the speaking competence of the learners.

Farahani and Abdollahi (2018) conducted experimental research to analyse the effectiveness of humour as a teaching technique to improve the

speaking skills of Iranian EFL learners. The study included 60 intermediate EFL learners studying in a language institute in Tehran. An Oxford Placement Test was conducted to check the homogeneity of the groups. Results were presented in the forms of mean and standard deviation, which showed that both the values of experimental group were higher than the control group; it meant that there was a significant difference in the learning of both the groups and humour improved the speaking skill of the experimental group.

Bilokcuoglu and Debreli (2018) discuss the potential of humour in creating a positive environment by establishing a way of teaching which is less authoritarian and leads to the reduction of affective filters among learners. They are of the view that humour has a lot of potential that is still not explored to its full because some teachers view humour as a distraction rather than a tool for effective learning. Humour, if used appropriately, helps to create a sense of belonging for students as it allows them to participate without losing face. Bilokcuoglu and Debreli (2018) concluded by stressing the need for more research on humour in language classrooms. The objectives of the study are:

- To investigate the impact of use of humour-based lesson plans on the speaking skill of Pakistani ESL learners
- To analyze the improvement in the speaking skills between an experimental and a control group.

Literature Review

In the process of learning a language one has to acquire all four skills of language namely reading, writing, listening and speaking. Reading and listening are called passive or receptive skills while speaking and writing are the active or productive skills. Amongst all four, speaking is considered as the most important skill in learning a second or foreign language. Brown and Yuke (1983 as cited in the Rao, 2019, p 8) say, "Speaking is the skill that the students will be judged upon most in real life situations". Bueno, Madrid, and McLaren (2006: 321) are of the view that, "speaking is one of the most difficult skills language learners have to face."

Definition and Theories of Humour

Study of humour is not a new phenomenon (Samira, 2020). It was an area of interest of the philosophers like Plato and Aristotle of ancient Greece. Since it is an old phenomenon, it is defined differently by researchers. Pinheiro, (2016) states that "Humour can be defined as anything that is

perceived to be funny comical or assuming” (p. 2). Sen (2012) says, humour is “an amusing communication. It helps to foster positive emotions and cognitions among individual, group, or organization” (p. 1). Adamle and Ludwick (2005) defined humour as “an intrinsic social phenomenon occurring in all groups throughout human history” (p.287). Mkadem, (2017) considers humour as a “universal humour trait”. Cook (2000) defines humour as “language play”, now this word refers to playing with both form and meaning of the language in order to create humour. Martin and Kuiper (2016) are of the view that “Since the start of the 21st century, the investigation of various psychological aspects of humour and laughter has become an increasingly prominent topic of research” (p.498). In the present study humour is defined as “any spoken, written, visual or performed action that the students or teacher find funny or amusing in class, even if it is not inherently funny” (Gonulal 2018:142).

Theories of Humour

There are three most popular theories of humour namely superiority, incongruity, and arousal relief theory (Banas et al., 2011; Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2004). The first theory of humour is ‘superiority theory’, this theory has been prevalent since the time of Plato and Aristotle, this theory describes that “laughter is an effect of a feeling of superiority due to the depreciation of other people” (Shoda & Yamanaka, 2021). In the incongruity theory, incongruous is something that violates our mental patterns and expectations eventually causing a laughter. According to Kant (1724–1804) as cited in (Scheel, 2017, p 13), incongruity is “Humour where the punchline or resolution is inconsistent or incongruous with the set-up”. Although humour is a complex phenomenon and is defined differently by different scholars but the element of incongruity remains constant across the definitions. Third theory of humour is the arousal theory, it is also called “the release theory”. The focus of this theory is on the release of psychological tension with the help of laughing (Meyer, 2000; Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2004). which theory of humour did you use to guide your research?

Instructional Humour Processing Theory

Wanzer, et al. (2010), Based on the incongruity theory, presented the ‘Instructional Humour Processing Theory’ (IHPT). According to IHPT, humour supports instructions if its presence is recognized by the learners and they interpret it as humour and then process it by making the connection between the instructional information and humour used in the

context (Farhana, 2018). IHPT also indicates that in order to get maximum benefits from the

instructor's humour the students must resolve the incongruity otherwise students may get confused and will not be able to reap the benefits of used humour. Sidelinger (2014) also states that IHPT not only helps the learners but it also helps the instructor to maintain a positive effect in the class.

Humour and Education

During the twentieth century "humour was considered unscholarly as a teaching strategy" (Karobkin, 1998, p 154). On the other hand, Dziegielewski, Sophia F., Jacinto, George A., Laudadio, Angela, & Rodriguez, Loloma Legg (2003) advocated the use of humour in an educational setting as it facilitates the process of learning. In the past, classrooms were teachers centered but now they are becoming more and more communication centered and teachers are incorporating humour in their lessons as ice breakers (Margoob, 2017). Wulf (2010) suggested to include humours items in the tests as it can diffuse the test anxiety of the learners. It means that the presence of humour in the classroom helps the learners to learn in a better and relaxed way. Humour serves as an important tool in the classroom and if it is incorporated wisely, it makes the learning fun (Rianita, Sari, & Yandra, 2023).

Humour has many pedagogical benefits as well (Lovorn & Holaway 2015; Mantooth 2010; Wanzer, Frymier & Irwin 2010). For example, whenever researchers write about the classroom environment, humour is reported as a helpful tool that affects the climate of the classroom in a positive way by helping the learners to fight against the boredom, anxiety, and to make the process of learning an easy one and full of fun (Gonulal, 2018). Use of humour inside the classroom reduces stress and anxiety and helps to create a positive environment where the learners can learn the language in an enjoyable way (Dewaele, Witney, Saito, & Dewaele, 2018).

Berk (2000) while investigating the effects of humour in testing and stated that both the graduate and undergraduate students felt that the use of humour reduced their anxiety and helped them to perform well in the tests. Moreover, studies show that use of humour in the classroom enhances the learning experience of the students (Knowles, 2021; Gonulal, 2018; Wanzer et al. 2010). Wanzer et al. (2010) developed the instructional humour processing theory (IHPT), which proposes that humour has the power to increase the attention of the learners. This increase in the attention helps the learners to store more and more input in their minds.

Language Classrooms and Humour

Learning a language means learning all four skills (reading, writing, speaking and listening) of language (Margoob, 2017). Humour can facilitate the process of learning all these four skills of language. Motlagh, Fateme Ghanei, Motallebzade, Khalil, Fatemi, Mohammad Ali (2014) conducted research on learners' reading comprehension ability. It was an experimental study involving 58 students of intermediate level. Data was collected through the pre and post tests and a humour questionnaire. and, in the conclusion, they stated that "humour can be employed as an effective language learning tool in EFL contexts as a whole, and in reading classes in particular" (p5). Humour plays a very vital role in motivating the learners to write (Margoob, 2017) as different comic books and funny pictures, graphics and dialogues serve as writing prompts and lead the learners towards creative writing. Speaking is the second productive skill, Farahani and Abdollahi (2018) conducted experimental research on the topic "Incorporating Humor to Develop EFL Learner's Speaking Ability and Willingness to Communicate." There were 60 participants in the study, a TOEFL based speaking test was used as an instrument to collect the data. A treatment of 8 sessions was given to the experimental group. The results of the study show "a significant difference of 95% certainty in terms of speaking ability" (p. 205). So they have approved that humour plays an effective role in improving the speaking skills of the learners. Dornyei (2001) also supports that humour should be incorporated in the process of teaching as it will help in the establishing an enjoyable environment for the learners. Similarly, Garner (2003) advocates that if a contextually suitable humour is included in the classroom it helps to improve the atmosphere of the classroom and eases the process of language learning.

In the context of a second language learning, use of humour as a specific pedagogical tool was examined by Askildson (2005). He reported that both teachers and students perceived humour as an important part in the process of language learning. Ziyaeemehr, Kumar, and Abdullah, (2011) conducted their research to get an insight about the use and non-use of humour in ESL classrooms, they conclude that "avoiding humour in the classroom may limit the learners' access to L2 linguistic and cultural resources inherent in humorous exchanges" (p 116). They also state that "appropriate verbal humour in the classroom can create opportunities to enhance the learning of a second language" (p. 117). Similarly, Bell and Pomerantz (2015) used the term 'safe house' while discussing the potential of humour in the process of language learning. Bishay, (2019) is of the view

that humour is an important element in ESL classroom as it creates a conducive environment for the learners.

Humour as Teaching Material in The Classroom

The Present Study

Body of research on use of humour inside the language classroom is not huge, a lot of research remains to be done on this specific topic (Askildson, 2005; Bell & Pomerantz, 2014; Bilokcuoglu & Debreli, 2018). Much of the research that has already been done is either questionnaire-based studies like Neff and Rucynski, (2021), Tran (2020), Lim (2017), Ağçam (2017), Hoang, and Petraki, (2016), Duleimi and Aziz (2016), and Askildson's, which provide more quantitative findings, or simply theoretical discussions on humour's potential in language classrooms. The current research aims at providing on strong empirical evidence on the impact of humour-based materials on the speaking skills of Pakistani ESL learners.

Research Methodology

Research methods are the designs for collecting, recording, analyzing and interpreting the data in research studies. A researcher needs to spend his time and employ rigorous effort to choose these ways because these ways guide and steer the whole process of research. They also help the researcher in developing logic which is helpful for the interpretation of their collected data in the end of this whole process (Cresswell, 2009). A quasi-experimental, non-equivalent design is used to explore the connection between the humour-based lessons and the speaking skills of Pakistani ESL learners in the present study. In the present study, non-representative purposive sampling is used. Though non-representative purposive sampling has its limitations but it is still in common practice for small scale research (Chu, 2013; Bryman, 2008). For the purpose of current study, two classes of BS communication skills (comprising 30 students each) were selected as sample. One class named as group A, the controlled group, while the second class, group B was named as experiment group.

Instruments

Since the present study opted a quasi-experimental design that comprises a pretest and post-test both. An IELTS speaking test was used before and after the completion of the experiment. An IELTS speaking test is designed to assess the speaking abilities of the individual. It comprises

three parts, in the first part examiner introduces him/herself and asks about general topic, in the second part the candidate is given a que card and he/she has to speak for 1-2 minutes about the topic given on the card, in the third part the examiner asks further questions related to the topic given on the card.

Data Collection Procedure

The experiment for the present study was carried out for ten weeks. At the first stage an IELTS certified evaluator conducted a pre-test of the learners to check the prior ability of the students in speaking. At the second stage, controlled group did not receive any treatment but the experiment group was treated for ten weeks. The treatment, in form of well-planned lesson plans developed by the researcher, was applied on experimental group; whereas, the controlled group was taught through the traditional method already in use. The lesson designed by the researcher included funny videos, pictures, stories and jokes. A student-centered teaching approach was adopted in the lesson for the experimental group. Many activities like role play, class discussion, interview practice was included in the lessons for the students. After the treatment of ten weeks a post-test was conducted to check the speaking ability of both the groups.

Results

Collected data was analyzed with Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 21 and a paired sample t test was applied to the collected data. The results of the study show that at the time of the pretest the difference between the speaking performance of both the groups was not statistically significant but towards the end, the treatment proved to be a differentiating factor. The speaking performance of the experimental group was improved. Their score of pretest and posttest indicates that the treatment affected the speaking performance of the learners in a positive way. The results and detailed discussions are as followed.

Experimental Group

Comparing the pre-test and post-test results of the experimental group

A paired sample t-test was applied to compare the mean score of the pretest and posttest of the experimental group. It was found that, as presented in the following table 1, that the pretest has a mean score of 4.950 before the treatment with a standard deviation of .5309 whereas the posttest has a mean score of 5.667 after the treatment and a standard deviation of .6065.

This suggests that the mean score of post-test is higher than the mean score of pre-test.

Table 1: Paired Samples Statistics in the experimental group

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pretest	4.950	30	.5309	.0969
Post test	5.667	30	.6065	.1107

Table 1 shows the overall score of the control group, where the 'p' value is .184, this value is higher than .05, it indicates that there was no significant difference in the performance of control group while table 2 shows the results of the experimental group the 'p' value of the experimental group is .000 which is less than .05 which means that there was a significant difference in the performance of experimental group.

Table 2: Paired Differences in the Experimental Group

	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	(2-tailed)
				Lower Upper	
Pre-test - Post test	-.7167	.4292	.0784	-.8769 -.5564	-.9146
					.000

In the above given table 2, the paired mean difference between the pre and post-test is -.7167 with a standard deviation of .4292. The t value is -9.146 with 29 degrees of freedom, the p value is .00. Which is less than 0.05, which means the intervention used in the experiment helped learners improve their overall speaking skills.

Control Group

Comparing the pre-test and post-test results of the control group

A paired sample t-test was conducted to compare the mean scores of the pre and post- tests of the control group. Results of the test, as shown in table 3, indicate that the pre-test has a mean score of 5.0500 and a standard deviation value of .68670, however the post-test has a mean value of 5.2000 with a standard deviation of .67722. These values indicate that the mean score of post-test is higher than the mean score of pretest.

Table 3: Paired Samples Statistics

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pretest	5.050030		.68670	.12537
Post test	5.200030		.67722	.12364

Table 4: Paired Differences in the Control Group

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In table 4, the mean paired difference between the pre and post-tests is -.05000 and the standard deviation is .20129. The *t* value is -1.361 with 29 degrees of freedom. *P value* is .184 which is higher than .05, so the analysis indicated that there was no significant difference in the speaking performance of the control group at the time of pre and post-tests both. The study shows that use of humour-based lessons helped the learners to improve their speaking skills as the *p* value of the experimental group is lessor than the defined value of alpha of 0.05.

Findings and Discussion

The objective of the present study was “to investigate the impact of use of humour- based lesson plans on the speaking skill of Pakistani ESL learners.” The results of the study show that use of humour-based material inside the classroom aided the learners to improve the speaking skill of ESL learners. Humour, if used in an appropriate way, works effectively to improve the speaking skills of the learners than the conventional materials. The results also reveal that the use of humour inside the classroom proved effective and beneficial for the learners.

The present study's results could be compared with those of earlier studies in this area. This comparison can be helpful in developing a deeper understanding of the idea of incorporating humour in teaching to develop the speaking skills of the ESL learners. Elkhayma, (2021) who found that inclusion of humour makes students more willing to speak and expressive, Abida, Kuswardani, Purwati, Widyastuti, and Darma (2020) found that students showed a positive attitude towards the use of humour in the speaking lesson of a language classroom as it helps them in improving their communicative ability. Farahani and Abdollahi (2018) conducted a study in Irani EFL context where they tried to find that whether use of humour techniques in classroom is effective in developing EFL learners speaking ability and willingness to communicate. In their experimental study they found “a significant difference in level of 95% in terms of the speaking ability and 99% certainty in terms of willingness to communicate between the learners scores in experimental group” (p. 205). Lim (2017) found in his studies that humour is perceived to be beneficial in the process of learning. Pham's (2014) study can also be mentioned here, he aimed to investigate the role of humour in the Vietnamese EFL classroom. He found that the majority of the EFL university teachers and the students have positive perceptions about humour and its role in EFL teaching. He found that humour helps to improve the environment of the classroom as well as the learning of the students, which means that humour has both its affective and cognitive roles. Sunani (2012) conducted research in Indonesia to find the effect of the humour strategy on the students' ability to speak English and found that humour significantly effects the speaking ability of the learner.

Conclusion

Humour- based lesson plans were used in the classroom to see their effect on the speaking skills of Pakistani ESL learners. Pre- and posttests were conducted to examine the learners' speaking skills. The paired sample *t* test

was conducted to analyze the test scores. The results of the study show that the score of the learners in the experimental group is significantly higher than the learners in the control group. The benefit of using humour-based lessons is visible from the findings presented above. This indicates that use of humour-based material in an ESL classroom helps learners to improve their speaking skills. A use of humour-based materials in the classrooms create a conducive environment for the process of teaching and learning. Traditional methods of teaching which are based on rote learning create an environment which neither encourages the students nor develops their learning abilities. Besides, use of humour-based materials inside the classroom makes the teacher approachable and the classroom more open to learning.

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