

Shift To The Future: The Prospects Of Enhancing English Proficiency And Personal Development Through Humorous Texts

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ABSTRACT: Texts as the most pervsasive use of teaching material play strategic roles in a foreign language teaching and learning. They provide samples of real language use in appropriate social contexts so that they provide input model for learners learning English as a foreign language such ones in Indonesia. Texts can also generate classroom interaction between the teacher-students and the students-students, thus minimizing the teacher dominance and maximizing the students' involvement. It therefore promotes collaborative as well as autonomous learning environment. Humor is the most interesting and puzzling aspects of human behavior. It has been rightfully argued that it plays an important role in an individual's development, as well as in interpersonal communication (Mihalcea, 2007). A humorous text, as one of the text-types, is to communicate a certain attitude of humor performed by the text. It has the ability to make one feel amused or amusement. It can evoke and make him laugh. It thus brings about happiness to the readers. The humorous texts help the learners read an authentic text and have fun in their English class as well. The aim of this paper is to explore a possibility of using humorous texts is to help Indonesian learners of English improve the language proficiency. It approaches the humorous texts from various viewpoints: their social functions, generic structure, and lexicogrammatical features.

Key words: humorous texts, English proficiency, personal development

Humor is everywhere. One can find humor in our conversations, in the movies, on televisions, in books, newspapers and magazines, on the radios, etc. There is nowhere that has not been filled with humor and there is no field, where it is marriage, education background, work, family, politics, religion, nationality—any field one name it — that has not been ridiculed. It is one of the most interesting and puzzling aspects of human behavior, and it has been rightfully argued that it plays an important role in an individual's development, as well as in interpersonal communication.

As a language phenomenon, humor is pervasive in literature, in the movies, on televisions, in our life, etc. In daily communication, humor ameliorates human relations, improves the communicative atmosphere, but also is endowed with the symbol of personal wit, glamour and education. (Wenzhen, 2005: 12). Besides, humor exists across languages and cultures as an essential human characteristic. Responding to humor is part of human behavior (Raskin, 1985: 2).

A humorous text, as one of the text-types or genres, is to communicate a certain attitude of humor performed by the text. It has the ability to make one feel amused or amusement. It can evoke and make him laugh. It therefore brings about psychological relief, to get rid of problems or simply for fun to the readers.

To have the ability to read and understand English texts is an important skill both in English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language. Consequently, the learners should be familiar with different types of texts. One of them is humorous texts. In fact, the field of English language teaching is an area for application of the verbal humor because it creates an ideal atmosphere in learning.

In studying a complex individual human being and his language and his language, teachers should have some qualities to enhance their student's study of language and its use as a vehicle of communication with the complex enterprise of language teaching and learning. In addition, the teachers must pay attention to the cognitive, aesthetic and

moral development experienced by their students. Teaching of humorous texts may be applied in classroom activities and will make materials relevant and meaningful to the students.

The present paper aims at analyzing the feasibility of using humorous texts in *Reader's Digest*, a popular magazine, as teaching tool for teaching ESL/EFL and how it contributes to enhance the students' English proficiency and their personal development. It is hoped that this article will provide a starting point for the teachers to integrate humorous texts into their teaching methods. It seems worth making an attempt to trace some of the significant strands the texts to reveal its depth and to make them aware of its effectiveness to give dynamics in teaching.

THE NATURE OF HUMOROUS TEXTS

This section addresses the nature of the humorous texts including (a) humorous texts as a narrative text, (b) the social function, (c) the generic structure, and (d) the lexicogrammatical features.

Humorous texts as a narrative text

Raskin's Semantic Theory of Humor (1985) states that a text can be characterized as a single-joke carrying text if: (1) the text is compatible, fully or in part, with two different scripts, and (2) the two scripts with which the text is compatible are opposite. Therefore, humor is supposed to satisfy two basic conditions (1) funny or laugh-causing; (2) having deep meaning or making people think about something.

Anderson and Anderson (1997: 8) have cited that there are two main categories of texts- literary and factual. Literary texts include stories, movie scripts, limericks, fairy tales, plays, novels, song lyrics, mimes, and soap operas. They are designed to appeal to readers' emotions and imaginations; they can make the readers laugh or cry. They can also make the readers think about their own life or consider their beliefs.

The main text types that fall in this category are narrative, poetic, and dramatic. A narrative text is a piece of text which tells a story and, in doing so entertains or informs the reader or listener (ibid: 8). It is composed of its generic structure starting with orientation

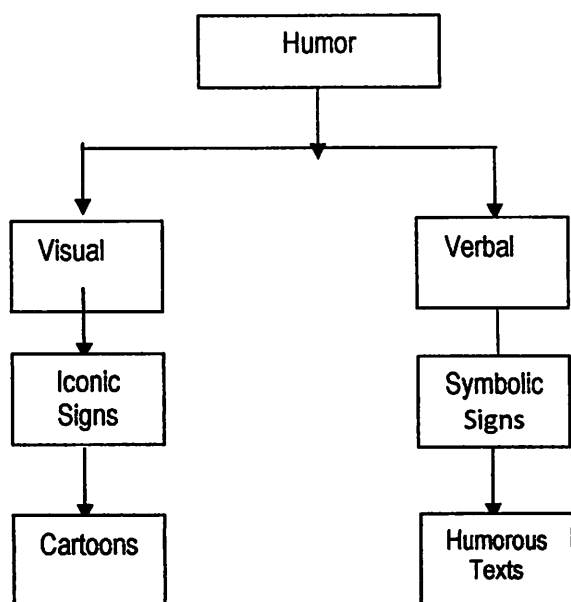
(scene setting and introduction), evaluation (stepping back to evaluate the plight), complication (crisis), resolution (crisis is resolved) and ended with re-orientation.

While Anderson and Anderson (1997: 8) have stated that a narrative comprises an orientation (a paragraph, picture or opening chapter in which the narrator tells the audience about who is in the story, when the story is taking place, and where the action happening), a complication (a chain of events that influence what will happen in the story), a sequence of events where the characters react to the complication, a resolution in which the characters finally sort out the complication, and a coda (a comment or moral based on what has been learned from the story. The last is optional.

There are many different types or genres of narratives including humor, romance, crime, real-life fiction, historical fiction, mystery, fantasy, science fiction, diary-novels, and adventure. There can be a combination of narratives within each of these different types. For instance, a crime novel may include romance and mystery. Similarly, an adventure narrative may include humor and romance (ibid: 18).

Hempelmann and Samson in Raskin's *The Primer of Humor Research* (2008) have broken down humor into two broad categories: visual or pictorial and verbal humor. Their major difference is in their semiotic nature. While verbal humor uses symbolic signs, visual humor employs iconic signs. The following diagram shows the kinds of humor:

Figure1. Kinds of Humor



(Hempelman and Samson, 2008: 609)

The Socio-Cultural Functions of Humorous Texts

A humorous text serves a social function. It is constructed to make the audience or the readers laugh as part of telling a story (Anderson and Anderson, 1997: 18). It is usually concerned with social problems. It is thus concerned with the linguistic character of social and cultural processes and structures. It is due to the fact that society and culture are dialectically related to discourse; every single instance of language use reproduces and transforms society and culture (Tischer, Meyer, Wodak, and Vetter, 2000: 146).

A humorous text typically contains jokes. Joke as a verbal humor that happens in daily lives provides the use of the language naturally. Joke in the form of text gives some pleasure and fun as the nature of joke itself is arousing laughter or smile. Laughter is most of the times assumed to energize people.

As humor exists across all languages and cultures as an essential human characteristic, the need to express amusement lightheartedness in life makes humor central to human interaction. Humor can be used as a marker or solidarity and bonding a specific social contexts.

A humorous text may reflect one's culture. To fully understand that type of text, one should deal with the cross-cultural

understanding and intercultural communication. This means that to understand the message of the text involves knowing the linguistic rules, having the language skills, and adequate information about the social and the cultural background of both participants of communication. Linguistic rules and language skills practiced in class will be meaningless without involving culture of the language as stated by Kramsch (1993: 8):

Cultural awareness becomes an educational objective in itself, separate from language. If however, language is seen as social practice, culture becomes the very core of language teaching. Cultural awareness must then be viewed both as enabling language proficiency and as being the outcome of the reflection on language proficiency.

Accordingly, humor can be used as a marker of solidarity and bonding in specific social context and humor is steeped and shaped by culture.

The Generic Structure of Humorous Texts

According to Swales and Bhatia in Celce-Muria and Ohlshtain (2000: 6), a genre is a recognizable communicative event characterized by a set of communicative purpose(s) identified and mutually understood by the members of professional or academic community in which it regularly occurs. Both writers emphasize the communicative purpose of the text as the most important feature related to genre. It is this communicative purpose that shapes the genre and gives it internal structure.

A genre has a particular schematic structure: a distinctive beginning, middle, and end. It is this which constitutes the genre of a text (Hyland, 1992: 15-17). A typical generic or schematic structure of a humorous text is (a) an orientation in which funny character names and unusual setting are usually introduced, (b) a complication in which something 'crazy' happens, (c) a sequence of events which may include funny things said by characters, imaginative ideas, extraordinary things happening to ordinary people, making fun of serious situations, exaggeration, and

comedy of errors, and (d) a resolution (Anderson and Anderson, 1997: 18).

One of the ways to comprehend the funny part of the humorous text is to identify the generic structure of the text. It is due to the fact that the funny part usually lies in the last part of the text, i.e. the last sequence and may be as the resolution. A humorous text is mainly composed of three elements: (1) scene orientation which sets the scene, (2) events which tell what happened, and (3) humor twist which provides a 'punch line'. Each text in the data of the present study follows the sequence of those elements and shows that the funny part or the humor twist lies in the end part of the text (Anderson and Anderson, 1997: 18). The following exemplifies the generic structure of the humorous texts:

An elderly couple goes to Burger King, where they carefully split a burger and fries. A trucker takes pity on them and offers to buy the wife her own meal.

"It's all right," says the husband. "We share everything."

A few minutes later, the trucker notices that the wife hasn't taken a bite.

"I really wouldn't mind buying your wife her own meal," he insists.

"She'll eat," the husband assures him. "We share everything."

Unconvinced, the trucker implores the wife, "Why aren't you eating?"

The wife snaps, "Because I'm waiting for the teeth!"

(Reader's Digest, 2009: 92)

In this example, the humorous text is constructed by the three elements: scene orientation, event(s), and humor twist. The orientation serves as background or introduction in which the narrator tells the readers about who is in the story, when the story is taking place and where the action is happening. While a sequence of events influence what will happen in the story in which the characters react the 'absurd' thing happening, the humor twist serves as the punch line of the joke. This clarifies how the three elements construct the humorous texts.

The previous humorous text indicates that the orientation introduces the characters in the story, i.e. the couple and the truck driver as in *An elderly couple goes to Burger King* and

A trucker takes pity on them. The introduction also describes how the characters are like and how they look alike. The couple are old (*elderly*) and the truck driver is a compassionate and caring person (*takes pity on*).

The next element is the chain of events. Each of the humorous texts has its own sequence based on the development of the story itself. The previous humorous text has three ones. One starts with the arrival of the elderly couple into Burger King. The husband was eating, but the wife was not (*the wife hasn't taken a bite*). This draws attention of the trucker. This develops when the trucker offers them to buy meal for them as in "*I really wouldn't mind buying your wife her own meal,*" The development of the study continues as the husband kept on refusing his offer ("*She'll eat,*" *the husband assures him. "We share everything."*) and the trucker continued wondering why.

After the sequence of events, humor twist functions as the humorous punch line of the text. This element provides a humorous ending for the text so that it will give amusement to the readers at the end of the reading. This is also reflected in the humorous texts being investigated in the study. In the previous humorous text, for instance, the story ends up surprisingly with the wife's unexpected answer that she was actually awaiting their false teeth as in *the wife snaps, "Because I'm waiting for the teeth!"*

The Lexico-Grammatical Features of Humorous Texts

An aspect of the humorous texts with respects to considerations relevant to language teaching is cohesion. The use of various cohesive ties to explicitly link together and the propositions in a text results in cohesion of that text. The most obvious structural features and of such connected discourse are the cohesive ties including the grammatical ties and lexical ties.

There are four types of grammatical ties- reference, ellipsis, substitutions and conjunctions, whereas the lexical ties include repetition and lexical chains (Halliday, 2002: 5-22; Celce-Maria and Ohlshtain, 2000: 7; Cook, 1994). Through these two types of cohesive ties, how a humorous text is

connected can reveal. One will eventually amused by the joke in the humorous text.

USING HUMOROUS TEXTS TO ENHANCE ENGLISH PROFICIENCY

The Ministry of National Education has adopted English in Indonesia as the first foreign language. It means that if an international communication is needed the first priority and choice therefore will fall on English. As a consequence of this policy, English is determined as a compulsory subject in the national curriculum. It is taught starting from junior high school up to university levels. The final goal of the teaching of English as a foreign language in Indonesia is that learners can use English to master an develop science, technology, and arts, and to contribute to the strengthening of the international relations which will eventually help promote the national development.

Reading as one of the four language skills has been taught in an English as a Second Language (ESL) context as well as in an English as a Foreign Language, (EFL) context. Therefore, both ESL and EFL learners are expected to have ability in reading and understanding English texts since it is considered to be an important skill.

As a humorous text is a multidimensional construct and carries multi-layers of meaning as Grabe and Kaplan in McKay (2006: 110) has stated, reading a humorous text is a complex process in which multiple contributing factors- mainly contexts, texts and readers work together in meaning construction and interpretation. It requires active thinking process on both sides of the writers and readers to obtain certain common grounds on which the writer's message could be conveyed to the readers in an intended meaning (Khan, 2008: 1-21).

What is even more worth noting is the fact that successfully and deeply decoding meaning in a given reading material may require more than general reading skills and knowledge, especially when it comes to reading a genre as highly textual as humorous texts. It is vital that readers go beyond the surface level of the humorous text to analyze its implied message- the ambiguous and hidden messages conveyed through the text. In this instance, the students deal with situations

unique to the text and this ambiguity is subject to different interpretations.

The effectiveness of the type of humorous texts depends on the reader's awareness of internal contexts as created by the narrator. There is also a strong dependency on the reader's external cultural context for the effect of the narrator's intended meaning. It would be necessary to raise students' awareness of the multiple contributing factors which determine success of their reading, their purposes, contexts of situations and the contexts of all cultures need to be paid special attention to. The main important thing is to provide students with ample practice of dealing with authentic materials with which those factors work in an actual, complex way to develop in students' habit of dealing with such a challenging task, using both their reservoirs of rhetorical knowledge and the task of decoding a highly textual genre will be much easier once habit becomes automatic.

By having this kind of practice, the students will be more familiar with multiple forms of evidence needed to be used to support interpretations, for instance, word choice, grammatical choice, and contextual information about the situation or activity as well. Humorous texts can be understood from three angles: logical-rule breaking, rhetoric humor including those employing various rhetorical devices, and cultural humor which depends heavily on the common knowledge shared by a cultural group (Wenzhen, 2005: 22), the students can therefore learn the cultural aspects of the texts, such as values, attitudes, and views of the world (Ellis: 1986: 14-17). When the humorous texts are spoken, they are useful for the development of listening comprehension. Furthermore, the humor should be an important component in translation. In addition to making classes more enjoyable, the use of humor can contribute to improving the students' language proficiency (Schmitz, 1997).

USING HUMOROUS TEXTS TO ENHANCE PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

People all laugh at jokes, exchange humorous stories for entertainment and information, tease one another, and trade clever insult for amusement on a daily basis. As scientists have said, laughing is good for

health. Wild et. al (2003) investigated the neural correlates of laughter and humor. They discovered that the expression of laughter and the perception of humor, depending on the type of humor involved and its mode of transmission, etc., seemed to involve to varying degrees of the right frontal cortex, the medial ventral prefrontal cortex, the right and left posterior (middle and inferior), temporal regions and possibly the cerebellum. This supports what has been said: 'Intellectuality grows in a happy mind'.

As humor is dependent on certain faculties of the brain, such as attention, working memory, mental flexibility, emotion evaluation, and the feeling of positive emotion, humor is also good for mental exercises. It is due to the fact that humor carries multiple layers of meaning, partly as an outlet to express certain emotions as an exercise of the intellect. Goethe once suggested that humor is one of the elements of genius. Humor is also marked by its reliance on quick thinking, creative and inventive use of language. Humorous texts are categorized as complex communicative acts which draw upon certain mental process both in their production and their reception (Galinaes, 2005: 79).

In conclusion, humor is a multifaceted phenomenon and pervasive in written texts. Humor is an essential part of everyday communication and rooted in a cultural and linguistic context. Humorous texts have potential applicability in classroom activities to enhance both language proficiency and personal development. They offer a change from routine classroom activities. They are also a valuable tool to contribute to the students' personal growth.

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