

# Humor in Teaching Malay Language: A Malaysian Case

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## Abstract

Effective learning can only occur in a healthy, vibrant and a democratic society, when there is humor in the process of teaching and learning. However, humor is often neglected and given less attention in the teaching and learning proves currently. Thus, this study was conducted to identify the extend of the practices of humor in teaching and learning by the Malay language teachers apart from identifying the type of humor that are often used these teachers, and the effect of these practices on teachers and students. This study was conducted among the teachers and students of secondary schools in the Northern District Peninsular Malaysia through the utilization of questionnaires, interviews and observations. A total of 68 teachers

responded to the questionnaire. Meanwhile four teachers were selected through "opportunity sampling" was observed and interviewed on a continuous basis. In addition to this, a total of 119 students from the classes that were taught by these four teachers selected through 'opportunity sampling' were involved in responding to the questionnaires. Hence the findings indicated that the Malay language teachers were already practicing humor in their teaching and learning, but at a moderate level. However the type of humor that is often practiced consists of jokes, satire, funny comments, funny words, and cartoons. Concurrently, findings also indicates that the practice of humor can provide a positive impact on students, forge closer and friendlier relationship with teachers and reduce feelings of 'fear' between teachers and students as well as fostering positive values among students and the community. Furthermore, the results of interviews and observations also revealed that the ability of teachers to teach with humor helps them in reducing their emotional stress. In fact, teachers can build self-esteem, self-motivation and meet their commitments effectively.

**Keywords:** Humor, Language Teaching, Malaysian Schools

## **1. Introduction**

Humor is an expression of feelings (emotions) that are delivered through a communication or action, for example flat-tease, joke, sarcasm, and a smile (Ziegler, 1999). Typically Freud (1905/1960) who introduced the concept of humor in “Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious” argued that there are two types of humor: non-tendentious and tendentious. Freud’s initial distinctions between the two humor types were insightful and were illustrated in his subsequent humor studies. Early research on teachers’ use of humor in classroom conducted by Bryant, Comisky, and Zillamn (1979), found that teachers’ practically uses both tendentious and non-tendentious types of humor.

Subsequently, substantial literature of research on humor and education suggests that, humor actually assists in the creation of an informal environment, promotes relaxation and reduces stress of individuals (Ulloth, 2002). Moreover, humor also found to have positive psychological and physical benefits on health and well - beings (Hyrkas, 2005). Accordingly, McMahon (1999) found that the application of humor in the English language classes can make students feel good and creative because they can enact the funny characters. Meanwhile, White (2001) also found that the application of humor in teaching and learning reduces stress, attracts students to study and create a healthy learning environment. Hence, Sarah, Robert, and Lin (2004) found that the use of humor in the classroom at college, allows students to understand the concepts that are being taught by lecturers with ease. This helps the students to be more attentive, motivated and encourages them to be more creative and open to new ideas. Correspondingly, humor is also found to be positively associated with improvement in performance, positive emotions and reduces feelings of sadness and isolation (Berk, 2001). Similarly, humor also has a positive influence on improved creativity, performance and teamwork (Hassed, 2001). Despite such significance and scope, humor is rarely employed in the classroom on a conscious level among language educators especially in Malaysian education settings. Therefore, the goal of this study was to examine the elements of humor often used and employed by language teachers in classroom and its’ impact of the students’ performance and achievement.

## **2. Humor -Theoretical Perspectives**

In the present study, two related theoretical perspectives; incongruity and superiority theories are used to form a frame of understanding on how teachers’ humorous messages, were cognitively and affectively processed by students in the classroom. Hence, the Incongruity theory (La Fave, Haddad & Maesen, 1996) is assumed to be activated with the basic presumption that individuals enter into situations with a given set of expectations of appropriate behavior. Therefore, for humorous messages to be processed and subsequently evaluated as funny, the receiver must initially identify an occurrence that is consistent with their expectations. If this is coherently applies, then, this incongruity are perceived as humorous; then, on the other hand, if the incongruity is too absurd or unfounded for the recipient to comprehend or their inability to digest the message as it was intended, then they cannot “get” the joke. Meanwhile as for the superiority theory (Zillmann & Cantor, 1996) mostly addresses the affective element of humorous messages by explaining that are likely to view humor attempts favorably when they target individuals we dislike or when the targets

are not recognized as part of our reference group. Conversely, we are less likely to find humor attempts as funny when they target individuals we like (Cantor & Zillmann, 1973). Therefore, disposition and incongruity theory may explain why some types of humor were identified as appropriate and inappropriate for use in the classroom setting.

Basically, to incorporate humor in teaching, Ulloth (2003) encourages educators to firstly develop their own sense of humor by surrounding themselves with comedy and jokes. She suggests the need for tutors to develop a humorous presentation style through the usage of cartoons, humorous stories and anecdotes to engage the students the learning environment. In a similar manner, Lee and Lamp (2003) suggest the use of role-play techniques to get the students involved in learning. Nevertheless, the extent of effectiveness of using humor by a tutor is largely dependent of their ability to pick up cues and needs (Wanzer & Frymier, 1999). Therefore, teachers, who are able to apply the elements of humor in teaching and learning practices, create fun and positive impact on students (Hayden-Miles, 2002). Moreover, humor can encourage students to feel comfortable and acts as an element to inspire creativity, reduce stress, and encourages students to perform at their best (Slade, 1999).

### **3. Purpose of the Study**

In pertinent to the premise above, this study was carried out to investigate the applications of humor in the practice in the teaching environment of the Malay language classrooms. In addition to this, the study also seeks to identify the elements of humor that are often used by teachers and its impact on teaching and learning effectiveness on students.

### **4. Research Methodology**

#### *4.1 Participants*

In the development to investigate the extend and the scale of the application of humor in teaching classroom, the study had utilized the use of mixed method procedures in four randomly selected national secondary schools in the northern states of peninsular Malaysia. A total of 68 language teachers, engaged in teaching Malay language in schools currently were selected to answer the administered questionnaires. Whereas, four teachers, each from the participating schools (namely T1, T2, T3 and T4), were selected through using purposive sampling method to participate in the interview sessions. In addition to this, a total of 119 students of these four teachers participating in interviews were chosen as samples to answer questionnaires administered.

#### *4.2 Instrument*

Generally, to probe the study, participants were surveyed and evaluated on their practices of humor usage and the effect within the Malay language classroom through the use of questionnaires. These utilized questionnaires administered to the teachers and student were modified and translated from the original version by Torok, Mc Morris, and Lin (2004) which consists of 25 items divided into two sections and tested with a 4 point Likert scale. In the first section, the respondent was assessed on the frequency of humor elements practiced in teaching and learning by teachers in the classroom. While, in the second section, the

respondent was required to answer statements relating to the application of humor in the teaching and learning. Overall, the Cronbach alpha reliability values obtained from a pilot study for both sets of instruments in this study was 0.902 and 0.910 respectively.

### 4.3 Procedure

The respondents were engaged in the study after being given short briefing and explanation by the researcher. Participants were given a thorough instruction to complete the questionnaire given. Subsequently, all the responses were analyzed using descriptive statistical analysis procedure. While the interview sessions were held after the quantitative data collection period. The duration of the interviews was approximately two hours and the researcher analyzed the data according to individual responses.

## 5. Results

### 5.1 The frequency of Humor Elements Used in the Teaching of Malay Language

The frequency of humor elements in the teaching of Malay language was studied by using descriptive analysis and the findings are presented as in Table 1.

Table 1. The Frequency and Percentage Distribution of Humor Elements Practice

| Scale                | Teacher Ratings |      | Student Ratings |      |
|----------------------|-----------------|------|-----------------|------|
|                      | f               | %    | f               | %    |
| Absolutely No Use    | 2               | 2.9  | 3               | 2.7  |
| Sometimes Use        | 11              | 16.2 | 19              | 16.2 |
| Use                  | 31              | 45.6 | 48              | 40.5 |
| Frequent/regular Use | 24              | 35.3 | 39              | 32.4 |
| Very Frequent Use    | -               | -    | 10              | 8.2  |

The findings from Table 1, show that humor was used by teachers during the teaching of Malay language. Whereby, it is understood that the teachers and students concurrently agree that the prevalence of the practice of humor elements in teaching of Malay language in classroom but are generally dominant at the level of 'use' and 'regular use' compared to the response of 13 teachers showing (19.1%) at the 'absolutely no use' or 'only sometimes use' level of element of humor in teaching. Relatively, the similar situation was derived from the response of the students with a total of 22 respondents or a total 19.9% of the students agree that the use of humor in teaching is still at the 'absolutely no use' and 'occasional/sometimes use' level. However, despite this, a total of 10 respondents (8.2%) agree that their teachers 'very often use' humor in the teaching of Malay language.

It is also evident from the results of an interview with a teacher who stated that: -

*"... I cannot be serious from the time I enter the class till the bell rings. So, sometimes when I teach, I use humor as well. I disturb my kids, I tease them. But they are not meant to be embarrassed. Not good to embarrass our students. Moreover, they are already big, and will easily feel offended." (T 1)*

## 5.2. Elements of Humor that are being Practiced by Teachers.

Elements of humor that is often used by teachers when teaching the Malay language are shown in Table 2 below: -

Table 2. Frequency and Percentage Use of Humor

| Type of Humor  | Teacher Ratings |     | Student Ratings |     |
|----------------|-----------------|-----|-----------------|-----|
|                | Mean            | SD  | Mean            | SD  |
| Funny stories  | 2.88            | .95 | 3:32            | .80 |
| Funny comments | 2.84            | .89 | 3:19            | .75 |
| Witty          | 2.90            | .93 | 3.92            | .86 |
| Cartoons       | 2:19            | .96 | 2:22            | .70 |
| Satire         | 2:22            | .82 | 2.70            | .77 |
| Funny Action   | 2:38            | .77 | 3:00            | .87 |

The findings from the table above, explains that both the teachers and students agree that ‘witty’ is the most common element of humor used(mean = 2.90 teachers, students mean = 3.92)., compared with 5 other types of humor. Both the teachers and students also agrees that the “funny story”stands as the second choice in the most frequently used humor by teachers during lessons (mean = 2.88 teachers, students mean = 3:32). This is followed by the “funny comments” humor (mean = 2.84 teachers, students mean = 3.19). Unfortunately, teachers and students agrees that the “cartoon” type of humor are rarely used in teaching and learning (mean = 2.19 teachers, students mean = 2.22).

The result of interviews with teachers showed that teachers are more interested in “witty” kind of humor. For example,

*“When I tease them, I joke, I made funny story, they laugh, smile. There are also students who like to add on. More than me, but I do not bother because I think they also should give their opinion. If we get angry, they will not dare to speak up again.”(T2)*

Through this, it can be concluded that the Malay language teachers choose the type of humor based on the needs and goals, but the elements of humor used most frequently are “witty”and “funny stories”.

## 5.3 Effects of HumorPractice

### 5.3.1 On Teaching and LearningEffectiveness.

Descriptive findings on the effects of humor on teaching effectiveness are shown in Table 3 below: -

Table 3. Frequency distribution, percentage and mean of Teaching and Learning Effectiveness

| Item                                                          | Teacher Ratings |     | Student Ratings |     |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------|-----|-----------------|-----|
|                                                               | Mean            | SD  | Mean            | SD  |
| Creating a healthy learning environment                       | 4:09            | :50 | 3.97            | .52 |
| Facilitate the control of discipline                          | 3:56            | .60 | 3:54            | :50 |
| Students easily understand the lesson                         | 3.76            | :55 | 4:22            | :57 |
| Enhancing student engagement                                  | 4:00            | .65 | 3.84            | .60 |
| Facilitate students to remember lessons                       | 3.82            | :40 | 3.95            | .66 |
| Students are encouraged to give opinions                      | 3.74            | :35 | 3.97            | .70 |
| Students are able to explain the subject content              | 3.63            | :30 | 3.86            | .79 |
| Students are able to answer comprehension questions correctly | 3:40            | :25 | 3.95            | .86 |

The findings in Table 3 shows that as rated by teachers, the impact of humor practice in teaching and learning processes from the descending order of the mean are as follows; "to create a healthy learning environment" (mean = 4:09); "enhance the participation of students" (mean = 4.00); "assist the students to remember lessons "(mean = 3.82);" students easily understand the content of education "(mean = 3.76), and" encourages students to express opinion "(mean = 3.74). Hence, teachers' ratings seem to be parallel with students' ratings in the effects of the humor practice but in a different sequence. According to the students, the effects of humor practice in teaching and learning process makes it "easy to understand the subject matter" (mean = 4:22); "encourages students to express opinion" (mean = 3.97); "create a healthy learning environment" (mean = 3.97); "facilitate students to remember the lesson"(mean = 3.95), and "students should be able to answer comprehension questions correctly (mean = 3.95).

Interviews with teachers also support the above findings. For example,

*"If we are always serious in the classroom, students are afraid, they also don't want to talk or give opinion. I personally do not like to be in a class where there was only my voice alone. So, if we have good relationships with students, we will be confident in the classroom. Cooperation will exist. To me, the use of humor paves the way to establish good relationships between teachers and students." (T 3)*

*"The important thing is my students feel comfortable, happy and able to learn well. So, what I find is, when I occasionally joke in class, my students gave good responses, they enjoy learning. In my opinion, they are interested in my teaching. For example, when I have class discussion, my class is not just silence or too serious. They can discuss and present views. To me this is important, if students feel comfortable and happy in class, they can easily remember and understand what they have learned." (T 2)*

### 5.3.2. On students

#### a. Cultivate Positive Values and Socialization

The findings from Table 4 shows that the practice of humor in teaching and learning of Malay Language can help to inculcate moral values among the students and help them understand the community values. This is evident when teachers and students agreed that the application of humor can "create cooperation between teachers and students" (mean = 3.99 teachers, students mean = 4:05); "enhance students' appreciation of values in language" (mean = 3.71 teachers; min students = 3.75), and "help students understand and appreciate the characteristics of community" (mean = 3.66 teachers, students mean = 3.65).

Table 4. Mean and Standard Deviation in Values and Socialization (Community)

| Item                                                                         | Teacher Ratings |     | Student Ratings |     |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------|-----|-----------------|-----|
|                                                                              | Mean            | SD  | Mean            | SD  |
| Enhance students' appreciation of moral values in Malaylanguage              | 3.71            | .98 | 3.75            | .87 |
| Help students understand and appreciate the characteristics in socialization | 3.66            | .76 | 3.65            | .88 |
| Students can better appreciate the literature                                | 3:53            | .75 | 3.61            | .98 |
| Enhance collaboration between teachers and students                          | 3.99            | .68 | 4:05            | .97 |

#### *b. Increase Self Efficacy*

In addition, another positive impact that is agreed to by the teachers and students as shown in Table 5, was to enhance student self-efficacy, such as reducing stress, tension, anxiety and self motivation. According to Bandura (1984), the founder of this concept, self-efficacy is defined as a belief or confidence that a person is able to produce or do something to affect his life. Whereby, the confidence will significantly affect how people feel, think, motivate themselves to act. Hence, the study conducted by Bandura (1984) and the researchers have proven that a strong self-efficacy will improve the performance and personal well-being in many respects.

Table 5. Distribution of Mean and Standard Deviation of Student Self Efficacy Increase

| Item            | Teacher Ratings |      | Student Ratings |      |
|-----------------|-----------------|------|-----------------|------|
|                 | Mean            | SD   | Mean            | SD   |
| Reduce pressure | 4:24            | 0.76 | 4:11            | 0.89 |
| Reduces anxiety | 3.94            | 0.87 | 4:05            | 0:56 |
| Reduce stress   | 4:06            | 0.88 | 4:14            | 0.76 |
| Self Motivation | 3.81            | 0:46 | 3.92            | 0.86 |

## 6. Conclusions

In conclusion, the study finds that teachers and students do practice the use of humor in teaching and learning during the Malay language classroom. Consequently, it was derived from the study that humor in classroom is not only the right of teachers but also the rights of students' and they both can cultivate a cooperation and mutual understanding of each other. Furthermore, humor in the classroom can also improve the atmosphere of the classroom and

make learning more fun and attractive to students, besides making the teaching and learning in classroom more lively and conducive. The use of humor also can help the teacher to achieve his/her task in making the students to be more interested in learning.

Further to this, the study also found that Malay language teachers recognizes, that the use of humor in the classroom generally improves the interaction between students and teachers whilst making the students feel comfortable and to communicate better. This finding is consistent with Lear's (1999) view, which states that the use of humor will be able to tear down the barriers in communication. Such communication will enhance students' motivation and enthusiasm and this will make teaching more meaningful. Thus giving avenue for the students to speak up and give their views or opinions.

Finally, it is safely adhered that the use of humor in Malay language classrooms contributes to a more positive impact to both the students and teachers. Whereby, it increases the effectiveness of teaching and learning, fostering values and community, and enhances students' self-efficacy. Thus, humor can contribute to the effectiveness of teaching and learning process, including the Malay Language. However, this study reviewed only the short-term effects of teaching and learning within the classroom and on self-reports. Therefore, further studies should be carried out to examine the effect of humor on student academic achievement in the long term.

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