

ASSESSING HUMOUR APPRECIATION AMONG TERTIARY STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

As simple as it may seem, humour is in fact a pivotal part of general human interaction. The subject of humour and its influences has long been explored in many fields and later extended into the field of teaching. These studies reported positive influence of humour in teaching and advocated its insertion in the classrooms. Therefore, the objective of this study is to assess humour appreciation of 10 narrative jokes among tertiary students in order to provide more teaching materials that can be used by educators. A purposive sampling of an intact group, which consisted of 27 students, was included in this study. The findings revealed three narrative jokes that were rated humorous by the participants themselves. Moreover, statistically significant differences were also detected in humour rating between male and female participants. Thus, these are hoped to add to the existing body of knowledge on humour application in language teaching.

Keywords: *humour, humour appreciation, humour application, tertiary students, language teaching*

INTRODUCTION

Humour can be described as a unique and universal aspect in human experience (Hayati, Shooshtari, & Shakeri, 2011). Humour has, over the years, sparked the interests of past philosophers and researchers to explain and explore what actually causes people to perceive humour in various things, events or contexts. Studies have proven that humour is, in fact, significant in many aspects of our lives such as in terms of physical health (Hummell, 2015) as well as of our affective factors (Herzog & Strevey, 2008; Lee, 2014) to name a few. The study on humour and its influences have also extended into the teaching field. Many of such studies reported humour is

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indeed influential in teaching and learning (Hayati & Shoostari, 2011; Fitzgerald & Craig-Unkefer, 2008; Zabidin, 2015; Zabidin, 2018).

In general, humour is valued in both spoken and written forms of human communication (Lee, 2014). Although it is subjective in nature and its comprehension and production could not be physically measured, humour value can be assessed with the rating of an appropriate sample of judges (Kozbelt & Nishioka, 2010). Due to the numerous reports of its positive influence in many aspects and especially in the education field, application of humour in the classrooms has been advocated as an effort to facilitate teaching and learning. Hence, it is indeed beneficial to measure the learners' appreciation of humour to provide an addition to educators' teaching tools and aids. In sum, the objectives of this study are to assess appreciation of 10 narrative jokes among university students, add more teaching materials that can be used by language instructors in their classrooms, and ultimately, provide more insight into the use of humour in the education setting. It was also an interest of the researchers to explore if there is any statistically significant difference in the ratings of narrative jokes between male and female students involved in this study.

Humour in General

Humour can generally be described as any comic, absurd, or incongruous quality that sparks the feeling of amusement and that contradicts our real-world knowledge and expectations (Zabidin, 2018). Often, we would find inexplicable and unexpected things or events as amusing. Abdulmajeed and Hameed (2016), meanwhile, defined humour as "anything that people say or do and is perceived as funny and tends to make others laugh". There are three theories behind humour as explained by Perks (2012): Incongruity Theory (amusement that derives from unexpected occurrence or surprise that contradicts with experience and expectations), Relief Theory (amusement that derives from release of built-up emotion) and lastly, Superiority Theory (amusement that derives from elevated feeling of self-worth after mocking a target). Fitzgerald and Craig-Unkefer (2008) further added that humour can be divided into two major categories: non-linguistic humour found in physical actions and pictures as well as linguistic humour found in vocal (phonology and sound system) and verbal (semantics and word meanings).

When humour is present in any social situations, we laugh as a natural reaction. Researchers of language fields recognised humour as a fundamental aspect in interaction and viewed it as one of the many puzzling issues in the field (Yang, Lavie, Dyer & Hovy, 2015). Considering humour is a significant element in communication, it has a vital influence in forming connection with others. The more humorous a person is regarded, the more socially accepted the person is deemed of (Abdulmajeed & Hameed, 2016). Nahemow (1986), as cited in Shammi & Stuss (1999), explained that humour contributes to the development of character and conduct. This is also elaborated by Lee (2014) who described humour as a tool to substitute an individual's anxiety and nervousness and boost self-confidence once the focus of interaction is shifted to humour instead of his or her flaws.

People often say that laughter is the best medicine. According to Lefcourt and Martin (1986), as cited in Shammi and Stuss (1999), humour also aids in managing day-to-day stress and improving health apart from its positive influence on communication. Hummel (2015), in his review of past studies, highlighted positive correlations between humour and health issues, such as dropped in sugar levels, stronger immune system, better sleep quality, and improved blood circulation. It was found that our body would positively react, whether consciously or unconsciously, when exposed to an environment that is full of humour and laughter. All in all, humour has been documented by past researchers to influence our lives in general or otherwise.

Humour in Education and in Language Teaching

Humour, according to Masek, Hashim and Ismail (2018) as well as Machlev and Karlin (2017), is one of the many instructional elements that has the ability to majorly impact learning-related interaction. When humour is embedded in the learning-related interaction, it triggers students' interest more, and this leads to better academic performances as learning quality improves (Masek, Hashim & Ismail, 2018). Neff and Rucynski (2017) also added by saying that when humour is integrated in the classroom, the learning atmosphere is more conducive as it reduces, if not eliminates, anxiety and stress among the students. This indirectly creates a learning environment filled with warmth and love (Bolkan, Griffin & Goodboy, 2018), and when students are happy and relax with the environment, they become more at ease with the learning process (Banas, Dunbar, Rodriguez & Liu, 2010).

Bolkan, Goodboy and Myers (2017) agreed that humour brings many significant outcomes to teaching and learning, and these outcomes not only benefit the students, but the instructors as well. When students are happily active in classroom learning and interaction, it helps instigate and boost their learning desire to perform better academically (Bolkan, Griffin & Goodboy, 2018). Kaufman and Tatum (2017) also supported this by adding that when students learn through humour, it strengthens the bond they share with the other students and improves results. Hence, humour undoubtedly shows better output with regards to students' performances as it has the power to make students more disciplined, more focus, more active and more passionate with their learning (Banas, Dunbar, Rodriguez & Liu, 2010; Bolkan, Goodboy & Myers, 2017; Masek, Hashim & Ismail, 2018; Machlev & Karlin, 2017; Neff & Rucynski, 2017).

According to Hayati and Shoostari (2011), when humour is interwoven in a language teaching and learning classroom, what stood out the most was its impact on students' comprehension and retention skills. The results showed observable impact on these two skills as documented by Zabidin (2015). She experimented with a group of students during a language class and from the four reading sessions conducted, the students' vocabulary tests results improved when they were given humorous texts, as compared to those given non-humorous texts. Zabidin (2018) affirmed that one of the ways to integrate humour as a teaching aid in a reading class is during the stage of pre-reading. In conclusion, using humour as a tool during learning-related interaction

has proven to be positively significant in creating an effectively favourable learning environment for both the learning instructors and the learners.

Humour Appreciation

According to Moran, Rain, Page-Gould and Mar (2014), people show reactions to situations that are considered funny or humorous, such as through smiles or laughters. This behavioral response of emotion is known as humour appreciation; one's ability to understand the information and react accordingly. However, reactions may vary depending on one's perception and comprehension towards the situation (Moran et al., 2014). The failure to understand the joke will only result in minimal response or no response at all. Gignac, Karatamoglou, Wee and Palacios (2013) further added that an individual's ability to relate to the content leads to humour appreciation. Even though humour is part of everyday life, it is highly influenced by culture (Jiang, Li & Hou, 2019). Since culture, knowledge and experience that one possesses contribute to optimal comprehension, it explains why a joke is funny to some but not to others. Humour appreciation has also been proven to involve the cognitive process in specific regions of the brain as it requires semantic association. The right hemisphere and frontal lobe of the brain process linguistic and contextual knowledge, interprets direct and indirect communication and also causes change in personality. This is where the association process between information gained and the knowledge, experience and cultural influences takes place. According to Shammi and Struss (1999) as well as Campbell and Wallace (2015), the cognitive process in the right hemisphere of the brain determines emotional responsiveness thus, effects one's reaction to humour. Sezgin & Hatipoglu (2017) further elaborated that age is also a determining factor in humour appreciation, as cognitive development and comprehension is very much age related. This fact explains the difference in the elements of the humour that is regarded as funny to people of different ages. What is considered humorous to an adult may not have the same effect on a child and is also a reason why a baby can really laugh from a simple pick-a-boo.

Humour has the power to change people's behavior by putting a smile on their faces or tickling their funny bone till they break into a smile or a laughter. Appreciation, meanwhile, can be measured by the affective response or behavioral reaction that corresponds to the humour presented. Therefore, it can be concluded that humour appreciation is dependent on comprehension, ability to relate to the content, age and cognitive development and it can be measured by assessing people's reaction to humour.

METHODOLOGY

Sample and data collection and analysis methods

According to Creswell (2012), it would suffice for educational researchers to apply a purposive sampling of an intact group to avoid disruptive lessons where 15 participants in a group. For this study, a total of 27 pre-Diploma students from the faculty of Business Administration in Universiti Teknologi MARA, Melaka were involved. The participants possessed low English proficiency level where among them, 10 received grade C, another 10 received a D, while the other 7 participants received a grade E on their English Paper in the final year of secondary school level test, Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM). The English Language course they were undertaking at the moment of the study was a comprehensive and rigorous course, aimed to substantially improve their English Language proficiency for the duration of their study in UiTM.

To collect the data, participants were gathered for a reading session. During the session, the participants were given a set of 10 narrative jokes, taken, and adapted from Reader's Digest Asia. They were then asked to read, rate, as well as categorise the jokes as: 1) not funny at all, 2) slightly funny, 3) moderately funny, and 4) very funny. Descriptive analysis and t-test analysis were later done by using SPSS.

Instrumentation

A similar set of narrative jokes was administered and presented to a different sample as a pilot study in Zabidin (2015). The study involved 20 learners of English as a second language with an average to a high-level proficiency in English. They either received grade A or B in their final year of secondary level test, the SPM English paper. In this pilot study, similarly, 10 narrative jokes were given to the participants to read and rate for them to be used in further studies. The result revealed that four out of eight narrative jokes received mean scores above 2.5 and were later applied in subsequent study. The following is the recorded mean scores from the pilot study:

	Joke 1	Joke 2	Joke 3	Joke 4	Joke 5	Joke 6	Joke 7	Joke 8	Joke 9	Joke 10
Mean Scores	2.05	2.50	2.80	3.20	2.60	2.65	3.15	2.75	2.90	2.55

Table 1: Mean Scores of the Narrative Joke Rating in Zabidin (2015)

FINDING & DISCUSSION

Descriptive statistics & Analysis

Out of the 27 students who participated in this study, 8 of them were males (29.6%) and 19 were females (70.4%). They were 18 years old and were of low English proficiency level as they received either C, D, or E grade for their English Language subject in their Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) examination.

Table 2 revealed the mean scores of the 10 narrative joke rating in this study and that only three (Joke 3, 4, and 7) out of the 10 narrative jokes received mean scores above 2.5. This is an apparent contrast as compared to findings discovered by Zabidin (2015) who reported 9 jokes with 2.5 and above from the rating made by the participants. Nonetheless, it is worth to note here that the rating patterns appeared to, some degree, mirror one another. Mean scores for Joke 1 were the lowest while mean scores for Joke 3, Joke 4, and Joke 7 were among the highest in both studies. This showed that Joke 1 was viewed the least humorous among the 10 narrative jokes while Joke 3, 4, and 7 were deemed humorous by the participants of both studies.

	Joke 1	Joke 2	Joke 3	Joke 4	Joke 5	Joke 6	Joke 7	Joke 8	Joke 9	Joke 10
Mean Scores	1.33	1.70	2.74	2.56	2.25	1.81	2.63	2.11	1.92	1.85

Table 2: Overall Mean Scores of the Narrative Joke Rating

Further analysis using independent sample *t* test with an α of .05 was conducted to explore if there is any statistically significant difference in the ratings of the 10 narrative jokes between the male and female students involved in this study. As shown in Table 3 and Table 4, statistically significant differences were detected in the rating of Jokes 2, 7, 8, 9, and 10 while no statistically significant difference was found in the rating of Jokes 1, 3, 4, 5 and 6.

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Joke 1	Male	8	1.125	.353	.125
	Female	19	1.421	.837	.192
Joke 2	Male	8	2.125	.640	.226
	Female	19	1.526	.611	.140
Joke 3	Male	8	3.125	.834	.295
	Female	19	2.578	1.070	.245
Joke 4	Male	8	2.750	.886	.313
	Female	19	2.473	.841	.192
Joke 5	Male	8	2.250	.707	.250
	Female	19	2.263	1.240	.284
Joke 6	Male	8	2.000	1.195	.422
	Female	19	1.736	.805	.184
Joke 7	Male	8	3.125	.640	.226
	Female	19	2.421	1.070	.245
Joke 8	Male	8	2.875	1.125	.398
	Female	19	1.789	.854	.196
Joke 9	Male	8	2.625	.744	.263
	Female	19	1.631	.760	.174
Joke 10	Male	8	2.500	.925	.327
	Female	19	1.578	.837	.192

Table 3: Group Statistics

For Joke 2, there is statistically significant difference in ratings done by male ($M = 2.13$, $SD = 0.64$) and female ($M = 1.53$, $SD = 0.61$) with $t(25) = 2.29$, $p = 0.031$. For Joke 7, there is statistically significant difference in ratings done by male ($M = 3.13$, $SD = 0.64$) and female ($M = 2.42$, $SD = 1.07$) with $t(21.55) = 2.12$, $p = 0.047$. For Joke 8, there is statistically significant difference in ratings done by male ($M = 2.875$, $SD = 1.13$) and female ($M = 1.879$, $SD = 0.85$) with $t(25) = 2.74$, $p = 0.011$. For Joke 9, there is statistically significant difference in ratings done by male ($M = 2.63$, $SD = 0.74$) and female ($M = 1.63$, $SD = 0.76$) with $t(25) = 3.12$, $p = 0.005$. For Joke 10, there is statistically significant difference in ratings done by male ($M = 2.50$, $SD = 0.96$) and female ($M = 1.58$, $SD = 0.84$) with $t(25) = 2.53$, $p = 0.018$.

In addition, the Mean values in Table 3 and the t values in Table 4 pointed out that male participants recorded lower means for Jokes 1 and 5 while their rating of the rest of the jokes showed higher means. This indicated that there were some variations in terms of humour appreciation between male and female participants of this study. From the male and female participants' rating of the jokes, the variations in the mean values recorded indicated observable difference between the two. In short, the analysis revealed that the male participants seemed to appreciate the narrative jokes presented to them more as compared to the female participants.

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances				t-test for Equality of Means				
		F	Sig.	t	Df	Sig. (2- tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Joke 1	Equal variances assumed	3.911	.059	-.956	25	.348	-.296	.309	-.934	.341
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.291	24.963	.208	-.296	.229	-.768	.176
Joke 2	Equal variances assumed	.850	.365	2.291	25	.031	.598	.261	.060	1.136
	Equal variances not assumed			2.246	12.676	.043	.598	.266	.021	1.175
Joke 3	Equal variances assumed	1.405	.247	1.283	25	.211	.546	.425	-.330	1.422
	Equal variances not assumed			1.422	16.906	.173	.546	.383	-.264	1.356
Joke 4	Equal variances assumed	.044	.836	.768	25	.450	.276	.359	-.465	1.017
	Equal variances not assumed			.751	12.610	.467	.276	.368	-.521	1.073
Joke 5	Equal variances assumed	5.215	.031	-.028	25	.978	-.013	.470	-.982	.956
	Equal variances not assumed			-.035	22.316	.973	-.013	.378	-.797	.771
Joke 6	Equal variances assumed	2.899	.101	.670	25	.509	.263	.392	-.545	1.071
	Equal variances not assumed			.571	9.795	.581	.263	.461	-.767	1.293
Joke 7	Equal variances assumed	4.965	.035	1.722	25	.097	.703	.408	-.137	1.545
	Equal variances not assumed			2.107	21.546	.047	.703	.334	.010	1.397
Joke 8	Equal variances assumed	.730	.401	2.744	25	.011	1.085	.395	.270	1.900
	Equal variances not assumed			2.446	10.569	.033	1.085	.443	.103	2.067
Joke 9	Equal variances assumed	.080	.779	3.117	25	.005	.993	.318	.337	1.649
	Equal variances not assumed			3.147	13.504	.007	.993	.315	.313	1.672

Joke 10	Equal variances assumed	.160	.693	2.531	25	.018	.921	.363	.171	1.670
	Equal variances not assumed			2.427	12.099	.032	.921	.379	.094	1.747

Table 4: Independent Samples Test

DISCUSSION

With regards to the obvious difference of the mean scores of the 10 jokes in this study as compared to Zabidin (2015), one of the most plausible explanations is the participants' comprehension of the content. As described by Moran *et al.* (2014), perception of humour is influenced by comprehension of the content of the joke. Considering that the participants in this study were of low English proficiency level, they were unable to understand what was being delivered, thus were not able to appreciate the jokes. They then rated the narrative jokes low without fully understanding the content. Compared to these students, Zabidin (2015) included participants of average to high level of proficiency in her pilot study which might explain the higher mean scores. This clearly showed that language proficiency level and comprehension of content are vital in humour appreciation.

In addition to comprehension of the content, there are other factors that could also result in varying degrees of humour appreciation such as the relatability of the subject matter or context of humour (Gignac *et al.*, 2013) and cognitive developments (Shammi & Stuss, 1999; Campbell & Wallace, 2015; Sezgin & Hatipoglu, 2017). One possible reason for why the male students reported higher mean scores as compared to female students is the male participants in this study could relate to the context of the narrative jokes presented more while the female participants had difficulty to relate the jokes to themselves. Their interests and preference could also have a play in this. The cognitive developments between the male and female students involved in this study might also differ which then lead to varying humour appreciation recorded. Further studies are needed to explore this. As Yang, Lavie, Dyer and Hovy (2015) stated, humour is a fundamental aspect in interaction, yet is still considered as one of the many mind-boggling issues to date.

Even though the analysis of this study indicated lower mean scores as compared to Zabidin (2015) that used the same set of jokes, the rating of the narrative jokes revealed three texts (Joke 3, 4, and 7) that received high mean scores in both studies. This proved that they were perceived as humorous by the participants. Thus, these three narrative jokes can be applied in the classrooms as an aid in the teaching and learning process. Humour has been identified to generally replace anxiety and boost self-confidence (Lee, 2014) as well as assist an individual to manage day-to-day stress and improve health (Shammi & Stuss, 1999). In the education setting, it has been proven to increase their interest in learning (Masek, Hashim & Ismail, 2018), reduce tension in the classroom (Neff & Rucynski, 2017), and create conducive learning atmosphere (Banas, Dunbar, Rodriguez & Liu, 2010; Bolkan, Griffin & Goodboy, 2018). It has also reported to affect students' comprehension and retention in language classrooms (Hayati & Shoostari, 2011; Zabidin, 2015; Zabidin, 2018).

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RECOMMENDATION

Based on the ratings given by the participants on the 10 narrative jokes, it could be justifiable to employ the three jokes that received mean scores of above 2.5 in English lessons. The three jokes can be added as teaching materials that can be applied in the classrooms. Additionally, it is highlighted in the study that comprehension and language proficiency are crucial in humour apprehension. This further emphasizes that the ability to understand texts could promote or impede humour comprehension and appreciation. Furthermore, the findings also noted significant differences between male and female participants' ratings of the narrative jokes. Evidently, male participants have more appreciation towards humour texts in comparison to their female counterpart in this study.

Humour application in teaching and influence of language proficiency as well as gender should be explored and investigated further. In-depth insight into the issue could be reinforced through the implementation of different research design such as interview, especially towards the influence of gender on humour appreciation. Generalization could also be established by enhancing sample size of future research. In the education field, the humour body of knowledge requires more empirical data on humour in the process of teaching and learning English. Therefore, future studies remain necessary in attaining extensive and profound data.

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Appendix A

Joke 3

Stumpy and his wife Martha frequent the state fair. Every year, Stumpy would say to his wife, "Martha, I'd like to ride in that airplane." And every year, Martha would say, "I know, Stumpy, but that airplane ride costs ten dollars, and ten dollars is ten dollars."

The next year, Stumpy and Martha went to the fair again. He pleaded, "Martha, I'm 71 years old. If I don't ride that plane this year, I may never get another chance." Martha retorted, "Yes, Stumpy, but that airplane ride costs ten dollars, and ten dollars is ten dollars."

The pilot overheard the couple and said, "Folks, I'll make you a deal. I'll take you both up for a ride. If you can stay quiet for the entire time and not say one word, I won't charge you. But if you do, it's ten dollars."

Stumpy and Martha agreed, so up they went. The pilot made all sorts of twist and turns, rolls and dives, but not a word is heard. The pilot did all his tricks all over again, but still, there is no respond from the couple. Finally, they landed. The pilot turned to Stumpy and said, "I did everything I could think of to get you to yell out, but you didn't!"

Stumpy replied, "Well, I wanted to say something when Martha fell out of the plane, but ten dollars is ten dollars."

Adapted from Reader's Digest Asia

Joke 4

A married couple in their early 60s was celebrating their 40th wedding anniversary in a quiet, romantic little restaurant. Suddenly, a tiny yet beautiful fairy appeared on their table. She said, "For being such an exemplary married couple and being loving to each other for all this time, I will grant you each a wish."

The wife answered, "Oh, I want to travel the world with my darling husband!" The fairy waved her magic wand and – *poof!* – two luxury cruise ship tickets appeared in her hands.

The husband thought for a moment: "Well, this is all very romantic, but an opportunity like this will never come again. I'm sorry, my love, but my wish is to have a wife 30 years younger than me."

The wife and the fairy were deeply devastated, but a wish is a wish.

So the fairy waved her magic wand and – *poof!* – the husband became 92 years old.

Adapted from Reader's Digest Asia

Joke 7

A mother went out and left a father to look after their 3-year-old daughter. The father was rarely left to watch over their daughter on his own. Apparently, the girl was playing with her favourite toy, a tea set. While the father was in the living room, engrossed in the evening news on the television, the girl brought him cups of 'tea', which were just water.

After several cups and lots of praises, the mother came home. The father made her wait in the living room to watch their daughter bring him a cup of tea. "It was just the most adorable thing!" the father exclaimed.

Sure enough, the girl came down the hall with a cup of tea for her father. The mother watched him drink it up.

Then, she said (with a mother's typical wisdom), "Did it ever occur to you that the only place she can reach to get water is the toilet bowl?"

Adapted from Reader's Digest Asia