



On the Effects of Teacher's Sense of Humor on Iranian's EFL Learners' Reading Comprehension Ability

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Abstract

Teacher's sense of humor is like a miracle in creating effective teaching and learning environments where there is no place for stress and anxiety but instead intrinsic motivation is enhanced. The present study aims mainly, to explore the effects of teachers' sense of humor of EFL intermediate learners' reading comprehension ability. Having administered a test of reading proficiency, 58 learners are selected and assigned into control and experimental groups. Also two English language teachers, based on TOEFL and Humor Questionnaire, are selected to teach these learners. The process of teaching and the materials were the same for both groups. But participants in humor class were taught in a well-defined humorous environment managed by the teacher. Considering the control group, the process of teaching reading texts was conducted in a normal manner. To measure the relationship between EFL teachers' sense of humor and EFL learners' intrinsic motivation in reading comprehension ability, an Intrinsic Motivation in Reading Questionnaire (IMERQ) including reading curiosity, is given to experimental participants both at the outset and at the end of the course. Finally based on the data, it was found that teachers' sense of humor was effective in improving learners' reading comprehension ability and enhancing intrinsic motivation. The findings can also provide pedagogical implications for considering teachers' sense of humor as an intrinsically motivating learning tool.

Keywords: sense of humor, intrinsic motivation, reading comprehension, intermediate

1. Introduction

Reading plays an important role in language learning development and it can be considered as one of the main goals by many foreign language learners. They want to be able to read for updating their knowledge, new information, career, pleasure, enjoyment, and other purposes. Teachers can increase their students' habit of reading by providing suitable opportunities and interesting environments and appropriate texts.

A significant teacher personality characteristic which is to be investigated in the present study is teacher's sense of humor. Evidence indicates that teachers' sense of humor is related positively to increasing EFL learners' intrinsic motivation resulting in better academic achievements supported by Renninger (2000) maintaining that the intrinsic motivation is crucial in engaging people while doing the task, and, on the other hand, motivation is a key factor in comprehension of a text supported by Guthrie and Scaffidi (2004).

Therefore, the present study aims to find the effect of such psychological traits as sense of humor possessed by English teachers and Iranian EFL learners' intrinsic motivation in reading comprehension ability. The focus is mostly upon this whether such effect is positive or not. To this end both psychological aspects including teachers' sense of humor and learners' intrinsic motivation are dealt with.

1.1 Statement of the problem

Regarding language learning reading is one of the four major skills positively related to other skills such as writing, speaking and listening. EFL teachers are responsible for creating a motivational environment. So using strategic behaviors from English teachers in any form which may increase the learners' intrinsic motivation during the reading process. One of such techniques is use of humorous behaviors in any form including telling a joke, using funny gestures, funny drawing on the board, caricature and etc. the current study tries to investigate this effect namely teachers' sense of humor and EFL learners' intrinsic motivation in reading comprehension ability. Therefore the study aims to find answers to the following questions:

1) Does the teacher's sense of humor have any significant effect on Iranian EFL learners' reading comprehension ability?

2) Does the teacher's sense of humor have any significant effect on Iranian EFL learners' intrinsic motivation?

To achieve the statistical answer to the question the null hypotheses are stated as:

H01: Teacher's sense of humor doesn't have any significant effect on Iranian EFL learners' reading comprehension ability.

H02: Teacher's sense of humor doesn't have any significant effect on Iranian EFL learners' intrinsic motivation.

2. Literature Review

Human being seems to be eager to read. Reading in second/foreign language can be more challenging compared to mother tongue. Over the past decades several studies have been done in reading ability. For instance Rivers, (1981), states that reading is a most significant activity in every language class, not only as a source of information and a pleasurable activity, but as a means of strengthening and developing one's language knowledge.

Having concerned the importance of intrinsic motivation in enhancing reading, Tercanlioglu (2001) states that increased intrinsic motivation has been shown to have links to greater interest in the reading material, higher reading performance, greater amount of reading, higher frequency of reading, higher achievement in text-comprehension tasks and higher sense of competence.

In another study Piaw (2012) studied the effects of using content-based humorous cartoons in learning materials to improve students' reading rate, comprehension and motivation and concluded that indicate that the content-based humorous cartoons in the course material had improved reading rate, comprehension and reading motivation among student teachers. The findings reveal that the pictures used increased the student teachers' contentment from mastering complicated ideas provided for them in the reading material and increased their challenge; strengthened their efficacy; increased curiosity; increased their involvement.

The employment of humor by a teacher can set people at ease especially in anxiety-provoking environments and helps reduce the power differential between students and staff (Baid, & Lambert, 2010).

Regarding the effects of teacher sense of humor on students' intrinsic motivation, Punyanunt (1997) states that if the students like their teacher's sense of humor in the class, they are more intrinsically motivated to do what s/he asks them, and they perceive the teacher powerful. Thus it can be said that such perception is the result of close relationship between teacher and student. Such relationships in classes where students need to be free and relaxed to express their ideas and discuss over the subject may be found more important. For example in a reading class where students are provided with some texts to be read, analyzed, and comprehended, students' engagement in class discussions and activities may lead to better outcomes.

Blyth and Ohyama (2011) explored the effects of using humor in EFL classroom. Data from first-year students in two universities were collected, and it was indicated that students' achievement in vocabulary and language awareness was measurable.

Ketabi and Simin (2009) investigated Persian EFL teachers and learners' attitudes towards humor in class. Results of their investigation strongly confirmed a perceived effectiveness for humor as an effective teaching and learning tool in EFL contexts. Also, the authors recommend the necessity of a careful balance to avoid creating a ridiculous environment.

In contrast with the previous research, the present study employed an individualized approach in which the focus was on the effects of EFL teachers' sense of humor on improvement of intermediate EFL learners' reading comprehension as well as their intrinsic motivation towards reading.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

At the outset of the study 100 male intermediate students, aged 17-19, studying in intermediate level at Shiraz, Iran were selected for the purpose of the study. In order to homogenize, the participants' proficiency test was administered (Nelson proficiency test). Mean and SD were calculated. Fifty-eight subjects whose scores were one SD above and below the mean were found to be valid to be included as the subjects of this study in control (N=29) and experimental (N=29) groups.

Also 8 male English teachers, with a bachelor degree in English teaching, of Shiraz high schools were asked to complete a Humor Questionnaire and answer the questions of TOEFL Test. Then, two teachers based on TOEFL and Humor Questionnaire were selected to teach the classes.

3.2 Instrumentation

In order to collect data such instruments as following were employed in this study:

3.2.1 Humor Questionnaire

In order to measure the teachers' sense of humor in the class this questionnaire, developed by Rieger (2010), retrieved from the internet was utilized. English teachers were asked to complete this questionnaire exactly based on their psychological traits.

3.2.2 Teacher proficiency test (adopted from TEFEL Test)

In order to select two valid teachers responsible for teaching the subjects, this kind of test was administered to. After calculating, two teachers whose scores were similar were selected for the project.

3.2.3 Intrinsic motivation in English reading questionnaire

After assigning the participants to control and experimental groups, an Intrinsic Motivation in English Reading Questionnaire (IMERQ) including reading curiosity (6 items), reading involvement (6 items), importance of reading (2 items) and work avoidance (4 items), adopted from Wigfield and Guthrie (1997), was provided and the subjects were asked to complete. Participants were also provided with this questionnaire (see appendix C& D) at the end of the course in order to see whether teachers' sense of humor can have effects on students' intrinsic motivation in reading ability or not.

3.2.4 Nelson proficiency test

In order to homogenize the participants and also to assign them into two groups in terms of their language proficiency a 50-item Nelson English Language Proficiency Test (section 300D, adopted from Parvaresh, 2008) was employed. This multiple-choice test comprised 50 items ranging from cloze passages, vocabulary, structure, and pronunciation.

3.2.5 Pre-test (adopted from Khate-sefid pre-university)

In order to make sure that the participants were valid and there was no meaningful statistical difference between Mean of both experimental and control groups and also to compare their pretest means with those of posttest this test including 5 reading passages, consisting of 25 items in form of Multiple-choice, fill in the blank, open-ended and True/False was administered.

3.2.6 Post-test (adopted from Khate-sefid- pre-university)

Finally at the end of the course (lasting for 2 months), a post-test including 5 passages (3 unseen texts, 2 seen texts), consisting of 25 questions in form of Multiple-choice, fill in the blank, open-ended and True/False was administered. This test was administered mainly to indicate the effect of treatment (teacher's sense of humor) on intrinsic motivation in reading comprehension ability.

To ensure the validity of pretest and posttest, two language experts at Islamic Azad University, Torbat-e Heydarieh branch, confirmed that the items inserted in these tests exactly assess testees' reading comprehension ability.

3.3 Procedure

At the outset of the study 100 male students of intermediate level at Shiraz pre-universities were selected as the sample. Then proficiency test were administered. (Nelson Proficiency test). The purpose was to find the valid subjects for the study. Mean and SD of the proficiency test were calculated. Those students with one SD below and above the mean were selected as the subjects. Next, the participants were assigned to experimental and control groups. Here subjects of both control and experimental groups were provided with an Intrinsic Motivation in English Reading Questionnaire (IMERQ), adopted from Wigfield and Guthrie (1997).

Also a humor questionnaire were provided and given to eight male teachers. (B.A, majoring English teaching). Also a teacher proficiency test adopted from TOEFL was prepared and teachers were asked to answer. Two teachers with similar performance in teacher proficiency test and meaningfully different in humor questionnaire were selected as the instructors of this study. It is necessary to mention that the humor teacher was instructed to observe the level and style of humor in the class; e.g. he was asked to use the humor to the extent that the class wasn't become a ridiculous environment where the students make fun of each other. The humorous behaviors employed in class were in forms of telling a joke, using funny gesture, funny drawing on the board, caricature and so on. After assigning the students to control and experimental groups, subjects were asked to take a pre-test, including 5 reading passages, consisting of 25 items in form of Multiple-choice, fill in the blank, open-ended and True/False were administered.

Finally the post-test, including 5 passages (3 unseen texts, 2 seen texts), consisting of 25 questions in form of Multiple-choice, fill in the blank, open-ended and True/False was administered. After calculating T-test value data was analyzed and results was discussed..Also once again subjects of experimental groups were asked to complete the Intrinsic Motivation in English Reading Questionnaire (IMERQ). This was to determine how the treatment can influence students' intrinsic motivations in reading comprehension ability.

4. Results and Discussion

Having gathered the data based on the mentioned data collection instruments and procedures, the researchers analyzed the data and tested the hypothesis formulated for the present study.

To ensure that the tests and questionnaires given to the participants are reliable, Cronbach's Alpha was employed to estimate the reliability indexes.

Table 1. Results of Reliability Indexes

Test	N of items	Cronbach' Alpha
Humor Questionnaire	36	.70
Intrinsic Motivation Questionnaire	18	.63
Reading test	25	.75

As the results in table 1 show the instruments employed by the researcher are reliable since Cronbach' Alpha for very instrument is greater than .05.

4.1 Results of Humor Questionnaire

The eight language teachers selected to complete the humor questionnaire achieved the following scores.

Table 2. Results of Humor Questionnaire

Teacher 1	91.0
Teacher 2	95.0
Teacher 3	83.0
Teacher 4	94.0
Teacher 5	91.0
Teacher 6	113.0
Teacher 7	107.0
Teacher 8	83.0

According to Rieger (2010), "If teacher score was 90-116, he is normal in humor" so teacher number 6 (S=113) was selected to teach in humor class and teacher 8 (S=83) served as a serious one in control group.

4.2 Data Analysis

Having collected the required data according to the mentioned data collection instruments and procedures, data analysis was conducted and the null-hypotheses were checked.

A) Analysis of Pretest

Using independent samples t-test the means of both groups in pretest were compared and data are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Results of Independent Samples Test for Pretest

Group	N	M	SD	df	t	Sig (two-tailed)
Exp.	29	15.85	3.38	56	.24	.80
Ctrl.	29	16.03	4.02			

Based on the results in Table 3 means of experimental (M=15.85) and control (M=16.03) groups are not significantly different on a statistic basis [$t = .24$, $\text{sig}(\text{two-tailed}) = .80 > .05$,] which confirms that the participants were homogenous at the outset of the course.

B) Results of Posttest

In order to check the performance of both experimental and control groups in posttest t-test was employed. The following tables show the data obtained after analysis.

Table 4. Results of Independent Samples Test for Posttest

Group	N	M	SD	df	t	Sig (two-tailed)
Exp.	29	19.69	3.18	56	2.77	.007
Ctrl.	29	17.07	3.96			

As Table 4 reveals, participants of experimental (humorous teacher) group (M= 19.69, SD= 3.18) meaningfully outperformed those of control (serious teacher) group (M=17.07, SD= 3.96). Since p-value is less than .05. ($\text{sig} = .007$). Therefore, it can be concluded that the difference between means of both groups is the result of treatment (teacher's sense of humor) and not by chance. Accordingly, the first null-hypothesis was rejected and the significant effect of EFL teacher's sense of humor on EFL students' reading comprehension was approved.

C) Results of Intrinsic Motivation in English Reading Questionnaire

To check the effects of teacher sense of humor on EFL learners' intrinsic motivation in reading comprehension paired samples t-test was employed by the researcher. Table 5 summarizes the relevant data.

Table 5. Results of paired samples t-test for intrinsic motivation

Pair1	N	M	SD	df	t	Sig (two-tailed)
Ex.post.	29	59.41	6.00	28	11.60	.000
Ex.pre.	29	39.21	7.82			

Based on data in Table 5, the mean of experimental group in IMERQ was 39.21 at the outset of the study and reached a value of 59.41 at the end of the course. This difference between two means is statistically significant since p-value is less than .05 [sig (two-tailed)=.000<.05]. Accordingly, it can be concluded that the increase in participants' intrinsic motivation score was due to their teacher's sense of humour. Therefore, the second null-hypothesis was rejected.

5. Conclusion

Based on the present findings, EFL teachers' sense of humor can be employed as an effective language learning tool in EFL contexts as a whole, and in reading classes in particular. Regarding the first null hypothesis, it was found that the students taught by a humorous teacher outperformed those students taught by a serious one. This finding further supports the Baid, and Lamberts' claim (2010) indicating that the employment of humor by a teacher can set people at ease especially in anxiety-provoking environments and helps reduce the power differential between students and staff (Baid, & Lambert, 2010).

These positive observed outcomes sound to be achieved through increase in intrinsic motivation (as data related to the second null-hypothesis showed), decrease in the amount of stress and anxiety in the class so on (through observations in every session). EFL learners' reading scores in posttest supported the researcher's claim based on the positive effects of teacher humor on reading comprehension ability.

Analyzing data related to Intrinsic Motivation Questionnaire indicated EFL learners' positive attitudes towards reading after implementation of treatment so that the majority of the participants in treatment group expressed their positive ideas towards the employment of this approach in the class.

Teachers need to make sure of their sense of humor level and must manage the class. Use of an appropriate level of sense of humor, based on the present findings, can have a positive effect in better learning in reading comprehension ability. The present findings can be useful for the members of EFL community including teachers, students, curriculum designers and other scholars. Hopefully, the current findings will pave the way for further research in this field to examine the effects on other variables such as writing, speaking and listening.

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