

Examining the Effect of Humorous Texts on Vocabulary Learning and Rate of Motivation among Iranian EFL Learners

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Abstract

1 In reality, sense of humor is like a miracle in creating effective teaching and learning environments. The present report aims mainly at exploring the effect of humorous texts on vocabulary learning and rate of motivation among Iranian intermediate EFL learners. Having administered a test of vocabulary proficiency, sixty EFL learners were selected from a high school and were assigned into control and experimental groups. Two English language teachers, based on TOEFL and Humor questionnaire, were selected to teach these learners. The one interested in using humorous text was asked to teach vocabulary to the experimental group. The other teacher instructed vocabulary to the control group in the normal traditional way. Each study group consisted of thirty subjects. The process, time period and sessions of teaching and the materials were the same and equal for both groups but the method was different for each group. In simple terms, participants in humor class were taught in a well-defined humorous environment managed by the teacher. To measure the relationship between humorous texts and EFL learners' motivation in learning vocabulary, a proficiency vocabulary test was administered for both groups at the end of the course. Finally, with regards to obtained data, it was revealed that teaching vocabulary through humorous texts was touching in improving learners' vocabulary ability and enhancing their rate of motivation. In summary, comparing the results of pre and post-test indicated that using humorous texts as a treatment had a marked influence on Iranian high school intermediate male and female students' vocabulary achievement when compared to the traditional way.

Keywords: vocabulary achievement, motivation, humorous texts, intermediate.

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1. Introduction

Learning vocabulary is a crucial instructional aim for teachers in all content areas particularly in schools (Harmon, Wood, & Kiser, 2009). Saengpakdeejit (2014, p.148) claims that the EFL learners use the English language both inside and outside the classroom settings, they still face problems in their learning and they generally see unknown words as the first problem to overcome. Learning new vocabulary is an integral part of learning a new language. Some researchers predicted that in order to understand nontechnical English text, learners should know at least 5000 lexical items (Nation, 2006). Mastering an extensive vocabulary is one of the largest challenges in learning a second language. Educators know that words and vocabulary strongly impact learners' lives. In reality, educated individuals are often identified by their written and spoken vocabularies (Blachowicz & Fisher, 2004). Vocabulary is a core component of language proficiency and provides the basis for effective communication. Maintaining a large store of vocabulary is a demanding job for language learners and L2 teachers want to know which strategies and tasks are more effective in helping their students acquire as much vocabulary as they can in the most economical way (Khoii & Sharififar, 2013). Vocabulary connects the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. There are various interesting views from many educators concerned with vocabulary learning/acquisition stating how vocabulary is important to language learning in the four skills Mostaan(2013).

According to Toyoda (2007), vocabulary is central to language and is of significant concern of not only EFL learners in reading significance to language learners. Words are the building comprehension, but also those who want to learn English blocks of a language since they label objects, actions, language outside the academic atmosphere. Vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) have been appealing to teachers and learners because learners of a foreign language are confronted with vocabulary learning right from the very beginning of language instruction, and it is a never-ending, challenging task. Nowadays, it is almost accepted that vocabulary learning is a vital component both of acquisition of one's native language and of learning a foreign language (Morra & Camba, 2009). McCarthy (cited in Fan, 2003) states that vocabulary constitutes the biggest part of the meaning of any language, and it is the biggest problem for most learners. He firmly believes that language is lexis-driven, and vocabulary learning is also the real key to second language learning. He believes that learners will be more successful if they can develop their own techniques and disciplines, i.e. 'strategies', for vocabulary learning. Based on Mawter (2006), the exploration of humorous texts enhances thinking skills and broadens our awareness of the world in a

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relevant, enjoyable and challenging way. Humor requires us to be flexible in our thinking. We must consider multiple perspectives, compare established facts with alternatives simultaneously, observe and interpret, reason and infer, value and judge (or suspend judgment) as well as tolerate paradox, predict consequences and develop options. With humor, minds are open to change (based on additional information, opinions, data or reasoning), even when faced with contradictory information. As Hayati et al (2011) mention humor is a unique, though universal part of human experience and is fundamentally manifested and expressed through language. It is prevalent in all languages and cultures. Therefore, the employment of humor within the context of second language learning offers great advantages to both language teacher and learner.

1.1 Humor and Motivation

Humor is a complex topic that has been examined by some of the greatest thinkers on the planet. It is a difficult concept to define or achieve, yet is a universal experience in daily life (Dehjalali & Izadpanah, 2017). Student motivation can be affected by a number of factors. The level of difficulty of material presented, the kinds of activities used, support of classmates, and encouragement of the teacher are only some of the factors that are often mentioned as having an effect on the language learning experience. Even more importantly, the mood of the classroom can contribute a great deal to the learning process in the second language classroom. Previous research showed that humor can be beneficial to classroom learning (Cornett, 1986; Fisher, 1997). Humor can promote understanding, and hold the attention of the students.

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). According to Ghanei Motlagh, et al (2014), 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.

Regarding the effects of teacher sense of humor on students' intrinsic motivation, Punyanunt (1997) pinpoints 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

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provided with some texts to be read, analyzed, and comprehended, students' engagement in class discussions and activities may lead to better outcomes.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Second language learners realize that their limited repertoire of vocabulary knowledge greatly affects their ability to convey their intended meaning in communications using the target language (Read, 2004). It seemed that vocabulary learning was vital to success in second language learning. English language, like any other language, has different areas that students should study, such as vocabulary, grammar, spelling, listening and reading. The problem is that students who have received several years of formal English instruction frequently face difficulties to use or remember the words of language, whether in the spoken or written form. You may see someone who has studied 18 to 20 terms in an institute but he/she is unable to express himself/herself in English. The gravity of the situation comes to eyes when, if not many, some technical subjects are not satisfactorily learned until the students study relevant text books and useful materials in English. Most students have problems when they are asked to learn the new words in a single lesson. Some of them who have found the job very difficult will quit the job at the very beginning, and some try to memorize a word list. Hence, the current study was an endeavor to identify whether the use of humorous texts by teachers for instruction can serve as a helpful way in improving two word verbs among senior high school EFL learners in English language intermediate high school EFL learners in (Iran).

1.3 Research Questions and Hypotheses

The present study is designed to answer the following questions concerning the effect of humorous text on teaching vocabulary items.

1. Does the use of humorous texts have any significant impact on Iranian intermediate EFL learners' learning of vocabulary?
2. Does the use of humorous texts have any significant impact on Iranian EFL learners' rate of motivation?

In the following these hypotheses were made:

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1. The use of humorous text has no significant impact on Iranian intermediate EFL learners' learning of vocabulary
2. The use of humorous texts has no significant impact on Iranian EFL learners' rate of motivation

2. Review of the Related Literature

2.1 Background

5 After a long period of relative neglect, language teachers and researchers have recently been cognizant of the fact that vocabulary is an important aspect of language, which is worth investigating. However, learners usually admit that they experience considerable difficulty with vocabulary and many of them identify the acquisition of vocabulary as their greatest source of problems. The problem is to discover which ways or skills will best help learners better learn, retain and retrieve vocabulary. Consequently, it is essential for language teachers to be aware of the effectiveness of different methods of vocabulary teaching to choose the ones that are the most effective to their students; this is what we follow in this experimental study. As time passes, more people are learning English. Nowadays, the whole world seems to speak English. As David (2009) asserts, it is the language of travel, tourism, science and technology. It became a universal language that covered all aspect of life, where people of different nationalities used it to communicate with each other and it became the language of science, technology, politics, economy and education. There is now general agreement among vocabulary specialists that it is at the heart of communicative competence. Knowledge of vocabulary plays a significant role in almost all domains of language pedagogy and educational settings (Alavi & Akbarian, 2008). Research justifies the fact that vocabulary is a sine qua non of reading and other skills (Nassaji, 2003). As a matter of fact, this study was an attempt trying to explore the influence of humor on vocabulary and motivation of Iranian EFL learners. As Freud points out, humor is strongly connected to other parts of the personality and surely helps EFL learners understand other facets of language (Shahlou & Izadpanah, 2016).

2.2 Theoretical and Empirical Background

According to Hayati (2011), humor is a unique, though universal part of human experience and is fundamentally manifested and expressed through language. It is

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prevalent in all languages and cultures. Therefore, the employment of humor within the context of second language learning offers great advantages to both language teacher and learner. Second Language Acquisition (SLA) researchers have been very slow to investigate and recognize the great potentials of humor within the language classroom. In recent decades, some studies and surveys have been carried out on the pedagogical effects (both affective and cognitive) of humor whose results show a considerable positive shift of view toward the application of humor in language classroom. Results from a survey by White (2001) show that both teachers and students believe that humor should be used to relieve stress, gain attention, and create a healthy learning environment. Supporting the positive effect of humor on language learning, Schmitz (2002) holds that presentation and study of humor should be an important, integrated part of foreign language classes. He adds that using humor in language courses, in addition to making class more enjoyable, can contribute to improving students' proficiency. 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. White (2001) show that both teachers and students believe that humor should be used to relieve stress, gain attention, and create a healthy learning environment. Supporting the positive effect of humor on language learning, Schmitz (2002) holds that presentation and study of humor should be an important, integrated part of foreign language classes. He adds that using humor in language courses, in addition to making class more enjoyable, can contribute to improving students' proficiency.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

The main concern of the present study is to investigate whether the EFL learners' progress significantly differs by using humorous texts or not. To carry out this study, a total of 60 male participants at secondary school in Ilam city in the spring of 2017 were randomly selected from two high schools for boys and girls totally including 185 students. A general English proficiency test was administered for selecting the four groups two of them in the experimental groups and the other two groups in the control groups. Put another way, experimental groups included 30 subjects of both gender.

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There also thirty subjects in the control group. Totally, there were one experimental and one control group in this study.

3.2. Instrumentation

The main sources of data collection for this study at the outset of the study were pre and post-tests and humorous texts. Classroom observation procedures were grouped into three major categories: (a) those that focus on the learners, (b) those that focus on the humorous texts, and (c) those that focus on the classroom environment. This work is a first step towards building using humorous texts models that enable individuals to learn words and create a positive motivation in this regard. Three different instruments were used in this study: Oxford solutions test, Vocabulary test developed by the researcher, and motivation instrument. Oxford solutions test consisted of 70 items. This test is used for determining learners' level of proficiency. Vocabulary test was developed by the researcher based on the contents of the texts taught during the treatment period. The function of posttest test was to assess the learners' progress in vocabulary and the rate of motivation. The standardized test was used for validating the research made test. Reliability of the instruments was estimated through KR-21 approach. The criterion related validity of the vocabulary test was estimated through running correlation coefficient between the learners' scores on researcher made and standardized tests. The motivation questionnaire developed by (Garner and Lambert, 1972) was also used before using humorous texts and after using humorous texts to see whether there is any difference between their motivations rate.

3.3 Procedure

These studies dealt with the visible impact of using humorous texts on learning vocabulary and motivation rate. There were 30 subjects in each r class group. What was the overriding importance, however, was examining the intended trend on learning vocabulary and motivation rate. It should be pointed out both groups were equally divided into two groups via a pre-test according to the obtained scores (see table 1). The items of pretest were selected from Oxford Solution Test. Motivation questioner developed by (Garner and Lambert, 1972) was also used before using humorous text and after using humorous texts to see whether there is any difference between their motivations. Two kinds of texts were used in this study. a) Humorous texts b) non-humorous texts. Humorous texts which consisted of fun stories, jokes and comic scripts will be selected from different sources (such as internet, American short funny stories). Both groups

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were under the instruction of their own teachers in the same high school for two sessions a week during the same educational year. The two experimental groups were taught by a teacher resorting to using humorous texts trend but the control groups were taught in the normal traditional way. To see the effectiveness of using humorous texts on enhancing the learning of words and motivation rate, the treatment was conducted 8 weeks in 24 sessions. The same procedures were used for the control group through non-humorous text.

3.4 Data analysis

Having data collected, the researcher processed the data using the statistical package for social science (SPSS/PC). Then to compare the results and to measure the difference the statistical procedure of the T-test measurement was used to determine the difference between the two groups, the scores are shown in table 2. Having data collected, the researcher processed the data using the statistical package for social science (SPSS/PC). then to compare the results and to measure the difference the statistical procedure of the T-test measurement was used to determine the difference between the two groups. Since there were two groups in the study, the statistical design of the study was independent T-test.

The data of the study were analyzed through descriptive and inferential statistics. Independent sample t-test and multivariate analysis of the variances was run for measuring the impact of humorous texts on EFL learners' vocabulary retention and motivation as well as the interaction between gender and the dependent variables (motivation and vocabulary learning). To analyze the data obtained through the post-test, the T-test procedure was employed and the results reported. Independent sample t-test was run to compare the vocabulary learning and motivation rate of the groups on the post-test. A one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was also used to compare the gain score of learners from different proficiency groups. A final posttest was administered to determine the relationship between proficiency level and effectiveness of using humorous texts on learning and improving vocabularies and motivation rate. The results of pre and post tests were analyzing by SPSS software. The mean, SD, DF and other estimations of pre and posttests were calculated (see results in the coming chapter). In the pretest, as the mean and standard deviation showed, there was no significant difference between mean scores of experimental and control groups. This means that English language proficiency of four groups, i.e. experimental and control, to some extent, was equal. Based on the posttest, the mean and standard deviation in the

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control groups were bigger than that of control groups. Thus, it would be concluded that mean differences of experimental and control groups were statistically significant. This can be attributed to the affirmative impression of humorous treatment on male and female English language vocabulary and motivation rate of Iranian EFL students.

4. Results

There is no difference in promoting vocabulary level of learners between resorting to humorous texts application and nonusers.

To answer the research questions 60 male EFL learners with the age range of 15-18 studying in a high school in Ilam city, Iran were selected among 100 students were chosen to take part in a pre-test to be known as homogeneous. The same rooms were used for both groups during the instructional and testing period and while directions were given. This helped to control the extraneous variable due to environment. The same teacher taught both groups. Having administered the pre-test and post-test to the results obtained were collected and registered as follows for the results obtained on pre-test and post-test respectively, and figure 1 for the comparison of both group performances on pre-test and post-test Each group participated in proficiency pre-test first. The first t-test calculation showed that the two groups were homogeneous. Later on; they were taught distinctively one group learning vocabulary by using humorous texts and the other group was taught in traditional way. In reality, those participating who were in experimental group and resorted to using humorous texts outperformed to their counterpart group. According to the data in incoming tables, for control group, the calculated mean and the standard deviation were respectively 44.33 and 11.43, and for experimental group, they were respectively 70.00 and 13.84. The *t*obs was 7.832

4.1: The mean scores of both groups in pre and posttest

Throughout the study two t-tests were administrated. According to Hatch and Farhady (1981) if the t-observed is higher than t-critical, our hypothesis is approved. After there were one dependent variable and one independent variable, a t-test was run; the results are shown in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1: Independent T-test for Both Groups' performance on the pretest

Groups	Mean	SD	N	Df	T obs	T crit.
Group1 (Experimental)	58.36	23.38	30	29	-.055	1.645
Group 2 (control)	58.70	23.16	30	29		
Total			60	58		

$P < 0.05$

Table 4.2: Independent T-test for Both Groups' performance on the post-test

Stems	Mean	SD	N	Df	T obs.	t crit.
G1 (Experimental)	70.00	13.84	30	29	7.832	1.645
G2 (control)	44.33	11.43	30	29		
Total			60	58		

$P < 0.05$

To measure the treatment, both groups were given a similar post-test. During testing administration, both groups favored the similar conditions. As there were one dependent variable and one independent variable, a *t*-test was run; the results were shown in the Table 4.1. Table 4.2 indicates the observed *t* ($t_o = -.055$) is less than the critical *t* ($t_c = 1.645$) with df (58); therefore, the difference between the two groups has not been significant at the level ($p < 0.05$). This shows the groups' homogeneity at the beginning of the experiment. Since the observed *t* ($t_o = 7.832$) is greater than the critical *t* ($t_c =$

1.645) with df (58), the difference between the two groups is significant at the level ($p < 0.05$). In other words, using humorous texts application trait has been effective in developing participants' knowledge of learning words. Thus, it indicates that students' knowledge of two learning words in experimental group improved significantly. As Table 4.2 represents, the calculated mean and the standard deviation for control group were respectively 44.33 and 11.43, and for experimental group, they were respectively 70.00 and 13.84. Results indicated that the mean score of control group which had been 58.70 in pre-test exam reached to 44.33 in post-test exam. It also indicated that the mean score of experimental group which had been 58.36 in pre-test exam promoted to 70.00 in post-test exam. These all indicate that

5. Discussion

The present study was designed to answer the following questions concerning the effect of humorous text on teaching vocabulary items.

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1. Does the use of humorous texts have any significant impact on Iranian intermediate EFL learners' learning of vocabulary?
2. Does the use of humorous texts have any significant impact on Iranian EFL learners' rate of motivation?

Humor has been shown to improve perception of the instructor, improve perception of the classroom environment, and has mixed effects on student learning. This may indicate that their positive experience of humor improved their learning. The outcome of this study substantiates the fact that experimental group learners were able to enhance their vocabulary knowledge and humorous has a moderately large effect on their vocabulary test scores. The difference between participants' scores in post-test and pre-test was significant enough and therefore humorous movie clips have impact on participants' vocabulary learning.

However, the results of Independent Samples t-test analysis showed that there was a significant difference between the groups in terms of posttest ($p < 0.05$). The posttest scores indicated that the using humorous texts strategy has been positively gained by the experimental groups. The post-test scores of the experimental group indicated that the experimental groups had better improvement compared to the control ones. Descriptive statistics also showed that the mean scores of the experimental groups were greater than that of control groups. Therefore, using humorous texts strategy had positive effects on enhancing vocabulary learning and motivation rate. With regard to

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the obtained results, all the study questions were verified. Because the strategy served the purpose in learning vocabulary and increasing motivation rate for both male and female participants similarly. The results are straightforward and make a strong argument in favor of considering this trend with Iranian EFL learners. The t-test statistics was used to analyze the data collected. Table 4.3 indicates a significant difference between the performance of experimental students and their counterparts who were not significant. A remarkable difference came about between the two groups at the post-test stage. The data revealed a significant difference between the performances of the two groups. This means that learning vocabulary in English by experimental group by resorting to using humorous texts enhances a better understanding of the words. After comparing the two mean scores through t-test calculations, the first two null hypotheses were justifiably rejected and hypotheses three and four were verified.

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The hypotheses of the study were as follows:

1. The use of humorous text has no significant impact on Iranian intermediate EFL learners' learning of vocabulary
2. The use of humorous texts has no significant impact on Iranian EFL learners' rate of motivation

The fundamental aim behind this research was to clarify the effectiveness of teaching vocabulary learning through humorous texts in improving Iranian EFL learners and increasing their motivation rate. Since the experimental groups outperformed the control groups in this respect, teaching vocabulary through humorous texts are supposed to improve vocabulary and motivation rate among intermediate high school male and female students. One possible explanation of such a result is that the use of humorous texts in the classrooms may help students to enhance using words in developing their learning. This explanation is compatible with Worthen, & Deschamps (2008) and Hayati (2011) who investigated the impact of humorous activities on learning and found this trend a positive one. Carroll, D. W. (2008) findings are also in line with the present study results, who claimed that humorous texts have taken researchers and instructional institutes' attention, especially for the last decade.

Moreover, it was observed that based on the findings of this study those using humorous texts outperformed nonusers. Hence, it is logically claimed that such trends

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are good means in teaching. From a general perspective, the results of the study are similar to those encountered in the literature. It was also found during the study that lessons conducted with humorous effects were more fun, had more on-task time and greater participation. The most significant evidence for the academic improvement resulting from humorous texts use was a comprehensive study conducted by Zwaan, & Singer (2008). Based on this study results, it can be claimed that an humorous texts should not only be seen as trends that increase learning words, but also the ones that bring information and communication to the classroom and leads to new teaching and learning activities (Beauchamp and Perkinson, 2005).

The experimental groups scored differently on the post-test, and difference was statistically significant. The researcher's interpretation was that using humorous texts trend has been proved to be effective and has desirable impact on promoting vocabulary and the rate of motivation among Iranian intermediate male and female high school students. The participant groups were not significantly different at the outset of the study; they behaved differently on the final test therefore, it seems justifying to hold the idea that using humorous texts instruction served the intended purpose. The researcher is satisfied to claim that the final calculated *t*-test (7.832) at the $p < 0.05$ level of probability is due to independent variable (using humorous texts). That is, the experimental group outperformed those in the control group. Therefore, in line with the above mentioned statements and the present study, it could be strongly argued that using humorous texts instruction can significantly have influenced EFL language learners' developing vocabulary learning and the rate of motivation.

6. Conclusion

The results related to this study, though preliminary in nature, would seem to strongly support many of the advantageous influences of pedagogical humor in the language classroom as described in the previous literature reviewed above. The overwhelming majority of those surveyed indicated that humor was an important element of creating an overall environment conducive to learning. Specifically, participants indicated reduced anxiety/tension, improved approachability of teachers, and increased levels of interest as a result of humor usage by the teacher. This was true for both student and teacher respondents and thus creates a powerful indicator of perceived effect of humor usage in the classroom. While some of these perceived benefits to humor may be couched within larger frameworks of immediacy behaviors, it seems quite clear that

students and teachers view such effects of humor as sufficiently vital in and of themselves. Clearly then, humor is viewed as an important component for the learning process among both students and teachers and must, therefore, be given enough consideration in the evaluation of pedagogical approaches to language teaching.

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