

# The Application of Humorous Song in EFL Classrooms and Its Effects on Listening Comprehension

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## Abstract

Language learners need to feel secure and to be free of stress so they can focus on language tasks (Ellis, 1994). A language teacher should use different tools to encourage students and make them involved in learning process. Humor and song are effective tools, as they develop creativity and make the class environment an appropriate setting for language learning. This paper examines the effects that humorous songs may have on listening comprehension and on immediate and delayed recall by a group of EFL learners. To achieve this aim, an experimental research study was conducted in Iranian English Institutes. A pre-post design was applied to explore whether humorous songs could enhance listening comprehension in EFL learners. The findings show that the experimental group outperformed the control group in a listening comprehension test, but humorous songs' effect does not make much difference between immediate and delayed recall test scores.

**Keywords:** Humor, Song, Listening comprehension, EFL learners

## 1. Introduction

With the decline of the dominance of structural syllabi in EFL classrooms, humor was implicitly reintroduced alongside a new emphasis on its authentic, relaxed and creative effects in language learning (Byrant, Comisky & Zillman, 1979; Zillman and Byrant, 1983). Humor actually came to be employed to produce a resourceful encouraging lesson, not only for elementary levels, but also at upper-intermediate and advanced levels.

The concept of humor is associated with the concept of interest, laughter, smiling jokes, ect. The effects of humor in language classrooms could be the injection of motivation, removing anxiety and stress and creating a comfortable environment for foreign language learners (Deneire, 1995). Humor can be regarded as a reinforcing tool to make students remember what they should know about the central part of every culture and also know something about the traditions and beliefs of that culture (Guegan & Fisher, 1975). Higbee (1996) believes that attention is one of the key factors in learning, as students need to pay attention to a concept in order to remember it. Also Girdfanny (2004) advises teachers to use humor in language classrooms because when they use it, the students pay more attention in order to not miss any of the jokes or witticisms. Beside that, humor can open students to new ideas and increase their motivation, because they are more willing to take risks and view mistakes as opportunities for learning (ibid: p, 18).

Humor can have positive effects on students in communication classrooms where the accent is on verbal authentic communication, participation and interaction (Provine, 2000). As Provine puts in " humor can allow the shy or timid students in the class to participate with the group." He believes that if it is used properly, humor allows the students to feel a part of class and possibly contribute without losing face, feeling exposed or vulnerable (ibid: p. 58).

Beside the effects of humor, one can regard the effects of song in language learning. Song can have a two-fold effect in the process of language learning. The first effect is the one like humor, as a tool to release the tension and anxiety caused by the process of language learning (Langfit, 1994). The other aspect of song is its relationship with the underlying principles and the mental processing of language at the metalevel (Fiske, 1993; Heller & Campbell, 1981;

Sloboda, 1985; Swain, 1986).

Researchers agree that infants learn their native language by principles that make sense of aural information so that it can be reasonable to approach language acquisition in a similar way (Jackendoff, 2003) and because song is also acquired through the aural sense, musical activities can be suggested as an aid in second language acquisition.

Until recently, research on the use of humor and song as a pedagogical tool in the foreign language classroom has been rare. Although numerous studies have shown positive effects of humor (e.g. Morkes, J., Kernal, H., and Nass, C. , 2000; Tosta, Antonio Luciano, 2001; Burgess, R, 2000; Bell, N.D. ,2005) and song in language classrooms (e.g. Kumai, N., & S. Timson, 2006; Wallace, W. T. , 1994; Gromko, J. , 2005), the intention to use humor and song in the classroom has still been met with ridicule and joking. There are teachers and researchers who believe that although students are enjoying in these kinds of classes, they are not learning anything.

Regarding the points mentioned above, the present study aims to find the answer to the following questions:

1. Does applying humorous song in EFL classrooms improve learners' listening comprehension?
2. Does applying humorous song in EFL classrooms have a greater effect on the learners' immediate recall compared to their delayed recall?

### *1.1 Related Literature Review*

Researches within the field of education and other closely related disciplines of the social sciences have approached the study of humor from two distinct perspectives. The first is concerned with the direct effect of humor on learning and information retention. That is to say many researchers have investigated whether humor has a direct effect on improvement in both information gain and retention (e.g. Snow, 1992; Barfield, Dycus, Mateer, & Melchior, 1998)

The second perspective examines the possible effects of humor on the general classroom environment and its indirect effects on learning. In this study, the focus is on the second perspective because the second one has proven to be more fruitful in terms of measurable effects (see Krashen, 1981, 1982; Horwitz, 1986; MacIntyre, 1995).

Attempts of creating a compassionate environment in the classrooms have the root in Humanistic teaching and Suggestopedia Approach which will be briefly explained below:

#### *1.1.1 Humanistic Teaching*

Humanistic approach to teaching tries to secure a positive atmosphere before a learner begins an effort to remove the possible negative effects of language learning. This approach emphasizes the role of activities in making students feel relaxed and remember the happy times of their lives (Moscowitz, 1987) Therefore one of the milestones of this approach is to deal with the eradication of anxiety.

#### *1.1.2 Suggestopedia*

According to Bancroft (1997), one of the unique features of this method is to have a relaxation session for unconscious assimilation of the lesson materials. He also adds, "the students are trained to breathe deeply and rhythmically in harmony with the teacher's voice" (p. 193), in order to eradicate those psychological barriers to learning. In this method, music has the function of increasing self-esteem through increased self-satisfaction in musical performance and also to energize and bring order (Richards, 2001).

In addition to these approaches and schools of thought, many researchers have investigated such indirect effects of humor in more specific environments. In a departure from the previous humor related research, a qualitative study of college students about the effects of appropriate humor uses on classroom environment was carried out. The students were given two open-ended questions about their teacher's applications of humor in classroom. The researchers identified eight major categories of appropriate and inappropriate humor, with 47% of the appropriate examples being related to course content-college. Findings also show that students found this type of humor can make the classroom more interesting, more improved\_ classroom climate and also it helps students recall information more easily and conveniently. In this study, one subcategory of appropriate "related humor" was using media or external objects (e.g. cartoons) to enhance learning. (Wanzer, Frymier, Wojtaszczyk & Smith, 2006).

In a similar study relating the use of humorous objects in classrooms, Rule and Schneider (2009) found that the appropriate use of humor is beneficial in classrooms in K-12 settings. The use of humor cartoons to teach concepts and vocabularies enhance students' motivation and understanding of content, deepen their recall and serve to integrate the valuable realm with the verbal to better meet students' needs and styles." (ibid: p. 7).

The importance of song and music in language learning roots in the works of Gardner's "Multiple Intelligence Model" (1993). This model proposes as view of natural human talents. Gardner (1993) claims that his view of intelligences is culture free and avoids the conceptual narrowness usually associated with traditional models of

intelligence. The fourth talent proposed by Gardner is the musical talent which is having a good ear for music, as is strong in singers and composers. The idea of Multiple Intelligences helps teachers and parents to recognize their learners'/children's particular gift and provide learning activities based on those inherent gifts (Richards & Rogers, 2001).

More recent researchers also point out the significance of employment of song in language classrooms. In a study, Schon et al (2007) compared language learning based on speech to language learning based on sung sequences. They hypothesized that, compared to speech sequences, a consistent mapping of linguistic and musical information would enhance learning. Results confirmed the hypothesis showing a strong learning facilitation of song compared to speech. Most importantly, the study shows that learning a new language, especially in the first learning phase wherein one needs to segment new words, may largely benefit of the motivational and structuring properties of music in song.

## **2. Methodology**

In this section, the methodology used to elicit and analyzed of data is to be explained.

### *2.1. Participants*

Thirty female students who studying at the Iranian institutes of English language were asked to fill up a background questionnaire (see Appendix 1) and also take a listening test at the beginning of the study. This test aimed to match the participants and make them more homogenized. The study was begun with 30 female EFL learners at the intermediate level in 15-25 age groups. Because the study had an experimental research design, the following ways to simply randomize the participants were used; each female participant was given a number from 1 to 30. Those who had odd numbers were categorized as control group and those with even numbers as experimental one.

### *2.2. Materials*

A standard proficiency listening test (TOEFL Test, version 2009, see Appendix 2) was given to participants to determine their listening proficiency level. After instruction, the participants were tested by the same test to see if there is any difference between their test scores. The study was based on the use of humorous songs in EFL classrooms. For this purpose, the poems written and sung by Shel Silverstein were chosen. Shel Silverstein (1930-1999) was an American poet, singer-songwriter, musician, composer, cartoonist, screenwriter and author of children's books. Silverstein confirmed that he never studied the poetry of others and therefore developed his own quirky style: laid-back and conversational, occasionally employing fancy and jokes.

### *2.3. Procedure*

Most English institutes in Iran use Interchange book series as their course material, therefore these kinds of institutes were chosen to further homogenize the participants. Each lesson in the book has at least 7 minutes listening part.

Before the treatment, the participants were given a standard proficiency listening test to determine their listening proficiency level. Different listening activities of the course materials were selected to be given to participants as the pre-test. The participants have not done these activities before, therefore the listening parts were unheard by them. During learning phase, participants were told they would listen for several minutes to a song (see Appendix 3) immediately after they worked on the course material. The participants listened to songs for seventeen sessions (each session lasted 90 minutes). The instructors were required not to ask any questions after the songs ended to be sure that the students were relaxed while listening to the songs. Immediately after the treatment ended, the same listening activities were given to the participants, as the post-test, to measure their immediate recall. After 3-weeks of interval, without any listening activities, participant took the same selected listening test to measure their listening enhancement in terms of their delayed recall. The results will be discussed in the following section.

## **3. Results and Discussion**

This study attempts to find answers to two questions; the effect of applying humorous song on listening comprehension of EFL students and also its effect on EFL students' immediate and delayed recall. The result section presented in two parts; the first part deals with the analysis of control and experimental groups and the second one, which is an intra-group analysis, is the statistical analysis of experimental group.

### *3.1 Statistical Analysis: Part 1*

Table 1 shows the descriptive summary of information needed for each of the control and experimental groups. Test 1(both A and B) is the test given to the control group and Test 2 (both A and B) is given to the experimental group.

As it is shown in table 1, the mean in each group in the pretest is almost the same; it indicates the homogeneity of participants. But after the treatment, the mean in the posttest of experimental group has increased, compared to the

posttest in control group.

In table 2, the statistical analysis of a paired-samples t-test taken by SPSS 15.0 is displayed:

A paired-samples t-test was conducted to evaluate the impact of the intervention on students' scores on the listening comprehension test. There was a statistically significant increase in listening comprehension test from the second test part A ( $M=41.33$ ,  $SD=10.60$ ) to part B ( $M=54.00$ ,  $SD=10.55$ ),  $t(29)=-4.219$ ,  $p\leq 0.05$ . The eta squared statistics (0.07) indicated a moderate effect size (according to Cohen, 1988). As regards the first group, i.e. the control group, p. value is more than 0.05, therefore, the difference between two pairs is not significant.

Figure 1 shows clearly how the means in two groups differ in pre and posttest.

### 3.2 Statistical Analysis: Part 2

In this part, the descriptive and statistical analysis needed for answering the second research question, i.e. the effect of song on students' immediate and delayed recall, will be discussed. The table below shows the descriptive analysis of these two groups:

In table 4, the mean in intra-group analysis has changed and increased to some extent. Because this experiment had small samples, and the data did not meet the stringent assumptions of the parametric techniques, a Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test was conducted to measure the effect of song on participants' immediate and delayed recall. Table 2 shows the result.

As it is indicated in the table, the sig. level is not equal to or less than 0.05 therefore it can be concluded that the two sets of scores are not significantly different.

## 4. Conclusion

This study attempted to shed more light on the use of humor and song on Iranian EFL students. It aimed to find the answer to two research questions; the effect of humorous songs on participants' listening comprehension and the effect of song on participants immediate and delayed recall. The outcome of this study substantiates the initial belief regarding the fact that experimental group learners were able to enhance their listening comprehension skill and humorous songs have a moderately large effect on their listening comprehension scores. As regards the second question, the difference between participants' scores in immediate recall test and delayed recall test was not significant and therefore song does not have impact on participants in this regard.

The research presented here is part of a vast amount of literature that provides evidence for the benefits of humor and song in language classrooms. The majority of empirical studies conclude that humor and song have positive effects on the language learners, regarding the way these tools create a constructive learning atmosphere and eradicate possible negative affective factors such as lack of self-confidence, of motivation, the existence of anxiety and stressful environment.

Besides, humor and song are not just to help learners to get rid of their psychological barriers but also may provide numerous benefits to language learners. As Medina (1990) concludes about the importance of song, and certainly humor, "the use of music to promote second language acquisition should occupy a more important role in the second language curriculum. This can easily be accomplished by increasing the frequency with which songs are used in the curriculum", therefore they are instructional tools every teachers can use.

Regarding the implication of this study, it can be mentioned that the most important contribution of this study will be its classroom applications. If learners are in settings in which the environment is creative and enjoyable, their motivation for learning English would increase and anxiety and stress would decrease.

The results of this study can be useful for material designers as well. If they consider the significance of humorous songs in classrooms, they can provide books with these kinds of materials to create more relaxing process of language learning for learners.

Another implication of the research will be for EFL teachers. They should teach language in such a way that they can increase learners' motivation and interest by applying any existing tools, including humorous song.

However this study has certain limitation. The sample gathered for the experiments was small in number; therefore, the results tend to be tentative. Furthermore, in order to obtain better results it is of great importance to develop materials adapted to non-native learners. If the materials used in this study are to be used in a foreign language classroom, they should be in higher quality sound and slower text reading pace.

A great deal stands to be gained through further study of humorous song in EFL context. Thus, it would be interesting to compare the effect of humorous song between different proficiency levels. Also it would be useful to carry out a further research on humorous song between male and female EFL students and compare the results.

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### Appendix 1.

#### BACKGROUND QUESTIONNAIRE

Please fill in the following form with information about yourself. This information will be seen only by the researcher(s) and will have no bearing on your grade. Your name will only be used for matching purposes, your response is **completely confidential**.

**Name:** -----

**Sex:** -----

**Age:** -----

What is your native language? -----

Have you studied English before? **YES / NO**

Have you lived in a English-speaking country for 30 days or more? **YES / NO**

If yes, check the length of stay:

**1-3 months** ----- **4-6 months**----- **7-11 months**-----

**1 year**----- **More than one year**-----

How often do you listen to English songs?

**5**      **4**      **3**      **2**      **1**  
**Very Often**      **Often**      **Occasionally**      **Rarely**      **Very Rarely**

### Appendix 2.

*Model Test 1: TOEFL Test, version 2009*

#### Listening 1 "Learning Center"

1. What does the woman need?
  - a) A meeting with Professor Simpson
  - b) An English composition class
  - c) An appointment for tutoring
  - d) Information about the Learning Center
2. Why does the woman say this?
  - a) She is worried that she cannot afford the service.
  - b) She is trying to negotiate the cost of the sessions.
  - c) She is showing particular interest in the man.
  - d) She is expressing surprise about the arrangement.
3. Why is the man concerned about the woman's attendance?
  - a) If she is absent, her grade will be lowered.
  - b) He will not get the paycheck, if she is absent.
  - c) She has been sick a lot during the semester.
  - d) He grades need to be improved.
4. What does the man agree to do?
  - a) He will show the woman how to use the library.
  - b) He will write some composition for the woman.

- c) He will talk with the woman's English professor.
  - d) He will show the woman how to improve her writing.
5. What does the man imply about the woman's teacher?
- a) The professor is very difficult to understand.
  - b) He does not know where she came from.
  - c) Her student seems to like her teaching style.
  - d) He is familiar with her requirement.

*Model Test 2: TOEFL Test, version 2009*

### **Listening 2 " College Campus"**

6. What is the purpose of this conversation?
- a) The woman is encouraging the man to be more serious about his studies.
  - b) The woman is looking for alternatives to living in dormitory housing.
  - c) The man is convincing the man to join the International Student Association.
  - d) The man is trying to find out why the woman didn't go to the talent show.
7. What does the man imply about the house where he is living?
- a) He prefers the house to the dorm.
  - b) He is living at the house to save money.
  - c) He does not like doing chores at the house.
  - d) He thinks that the house is very crowded.
8. How does the man feel about the International Student Association?
- a) He is sorry that only women can join the club.
  - b) He enjoys meeting people with different backgrounds.
  - c) He wishes that they would have more activities.
  - d) He will probably join the organization.
9. What does the woman mean when she says this:
- a) She is trying to persuade the man.
  - b) She is not sure that she understood.
  - c) She is expressing doubt about the time.
  - d) She is changing her mind about going.
10. What does the woman agree to do?
- a) Join the club
  - b) Eat at a restaurant
  - c) Go to a meeting
  - d) Study with the man

### **Appendix 3.**

SICK

"I cannot go to school today"

Said little Peggy Ann McKay

"I have the measles and the mumps,

A gash, a rash and purple bumps.

My mouth is wet, my throat is dry,

I'm going blind in my right eye.

My tonsils are as big as rocks,  
 I've counted sixteen chicken pox  
 And there's one more\_ that's seventeen,  
 And don't you think my face looks green?  
 My leg is cut, my eyes are blue\_  
 It might be instamatic flue.  
 I cough and sneeze and gasp and choke,  
 I'm sure that my left leg is broke\_  
 My hip hurts when I move my chin,  
 My belly button's caving in,  
 My back is wrenched, my ankle's sprained,  
 My 'pendix pains each time it rains.  
 My nose is cold, my toes are numb,  
 I have a silver in my thumb.  
 My neck is stiff, my voice is weak,  
 I hardly whisper when I speak.  
 My tongue is filling up my mouth,  
 I think my hair is falling out.  
 My elbow's bent, my spine ain't straight,  
 My temperature is one-o-eight.  
 My brain is shrunk, I can't hear,  
 There is a hole inside my ear.  
 I have a hangnail, and my heart is \_\_ what?  
 What's that? What's that you say?  
 You said today is .... Saturday?  
 G'bye, I'm going out to play!"

Table 1. Descriptive analysis of control and the experimental groups

|                | Test 1(A) | Test 1(B) | Test 2(A) | Test 2(B) |
|----------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| N              | 15        | 15        | 15        | 15        |
| Valid          | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         |
| Missing        | 40.6667   | 46.6667   | 41.3333   | 54.0000   |
| Mean           | 20.00     | 20.00     | 30.00     | 40.00     |
| Minimum        | 60.00     | 70.00     | 60.00     | 80.00     |
| Maximum        | 14.37591  | 11.75139  | 10.60099  | 10.55597  |
| Std. Deviation |           |           |           |           |

Test 1(A) = pretest in control group

Test 1(B) = posttest in control group

Test 2(A) = pretest in experimental group

Test 2(B) = posttest in experimental group



Table 2. Statistical analysis of control and the experimental groups

|                                | Paired differences |                |                 |   |          | f      | t  | Sig.(2.tailed)       |
|--------------------------------|--------------------|----------------|-----------------|---|----------|--------|----|----------------------|
|                                | Mean               | Std Deviation. | Std. Error Mean | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference |          |        |    |                      |
|                                |                    |                |                 | Lower                                     | Upper    |        |    |                      |
| Pair 1 test 1(A)_test 1 (B)    | -6.00000           | 19.19821       | 4.95696         | -16.6316                                  | 4.63162  | -1.210 | 14 | <b>.246<br/>.001</b> |
| Pair 2 test 2 (A)_test 2 (B) t | -12.66667          | 11.62919       | 3.00264         | -19.10670                                 | -6.22664 | -4.219 | 14 |                      |

Table 3. Descriptive analysis of immediate and delayed recall.

|                |         | Immediate recall | Delayed recall |
|----------------|---------|------------------|----------------|
| N              | Valid   | 15               | 15             |
|                | Missing | 0                | 0              |
| Mean           |         | 54.0000          | 57.3333        |
| Minimum        |         | 40.00            | 40.00          |
| Maximum        |         | 80.00            | 90.00          |
| Std. Deviation |         | 10.55597         | 17.09915       |

Table 4. Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test; Immediate and Delayed Recall

| Delayed-Immediate Recall |              |
|--------------------------|--------------|
| -.742                    | Z            |
| Asymp.<br>(2-tailed)     | Sig.<br>.458 |

$p \leq 05$

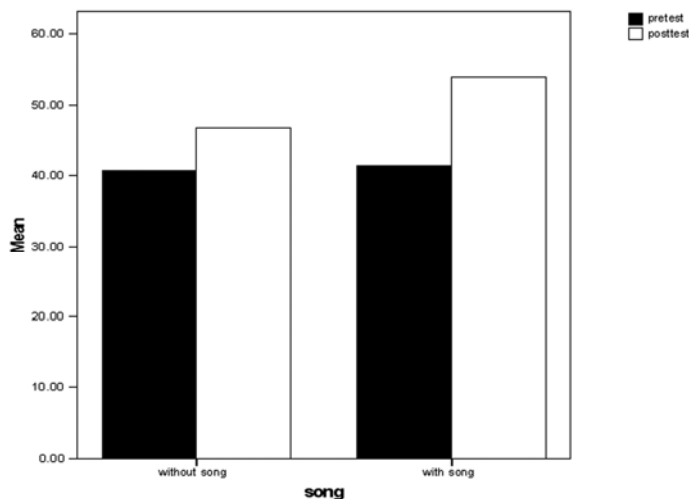


Figure 1. The mean differences between pre- and posttest in control and experimental groups