

# There's Aha! in Haha: Unraveling the Serious Side of Humor in the Classroom

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**Abstract** In a fast-changing classroom setting, one must consider the importance of knowing the qualities of who occupy the four corners of the classroom - the 21<sup>st</sup> century learners who have distinct personalities specifically in a dynamic learning environment. This study is designed to explore the experiences of three high school students from Cabarroguis National School of Arts and Trades who experienced humor as a strategic tool in teaching. Qualitative data were gathered from the informants' interview. Data were processed through document trail among the informants to confirm the veracity of their claims based on the transcriptions. Thematic analysis unraveled four themes on the experiences of the informants: (1) Distinguishing the Ideals, (2) Strict and Serious: A No-No for the Young Learners, (3) To Laugh is to Remember: Humor Aids Recall, and (4) To Laugh is to Connect: Humor Magnets Attention. It is concluded that 21<sup>st</sup> century learners are idealistic learners who easily get bored with strict and serious classroom atmosphere but aroused with instructional humor which attracts their attention, maintains their discipline, and improves their performances.

**Keywords:** instructional humor, 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learners, action research, CNSAT-Quirino, philippines

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## 1. Introduction

As we face a new millennium in the field of education, it becomes evident that the 21<sup>st</sup> century learners have different needs compared to the 20<sup>th</sup> century learners. Today's education is more than just coveting information but most especially, transforming and relating such information into meaningful real-life experiences. This sudden shift in the education curriculum then requires 21<sup>st</sup> century teachers to cater the needs of the new generation of learners.

In a Philippine classroom setting, one of the most alarming issues especially in public schools is the ineffective classroom management due to the population of students. In the data that has been presented by the Department of Education (DepEd) in 2018, every June, over 22 million basic education students start a new school year in the Philippines, and almost 4.1 million of them or 18 percent of the entire student population, have no choice but to attend overcrowded public schools. In some areas, classes hold over 100 students which is more than twice its prescribed 45 students per class. With the growing population of students in every class and the implementation of the new curriculum which is the K-12 curriculum, varied teaching strategies come into action and one is humor as a teacher's quality and a tool in teaching. Humor is defined as the ability to amuse or to

become comic, especially as expressed in literature or speech. Humor makes people react more positively to one another when it is present [1]. Using humorous methods has been proven to be effective not only in capturing the student's attention, but also in improving the student's retention of the topics [2,3].

### 1.1. Objectives of the Study

This study explored the experiences of high school students when humor has been used as a strategic tool in teaching.

Specifically, this study sought to (1) document the student's learning experiences with the use of humor as a strategic tool in teaching and (2) capture the factors that contributed to the success of using humor as a strategic tool in teaching.

### 1.2. Theoretical Framework

**Instructional Humor Processing Theory (IHPT).** Instructional Humor Processing Theory is being proposed as an elucidation for why some types of instructor-generated humor improve student learning and others do not. The Instructional Humor Processing Theory postulated that humor related to instructional content complements with positive student learning, while inapt forms would not. When relating to the study, consistent with IHPT, humor

related, an apt form of instructional humor, was positively related with student learning and development [4].

**Incongruity-Resolution Theory.** Deckers and Kizer define incongruity as the divergence between an expected and actual state of affairs and has long been recognized as a condition for humor [5]. With that, humor as an instructional technique can create an atmosphere that amplifies cognitive growth, generates interest, and can enliven engagement.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1. Design

This study employed Qualitative Research design using Phenomenology as a form of inquiry. Thus, the informants' lived experiences were described as related to a phenomenon they have in common. It made use of interactive interview with open ended questions to document the experiences of the informants towards humor as a strategic tool in teaching. Document trail was also employed where the transcripts were presented again after the transcription of the voice recordings for the informants to see whether they want to emit something from the transcripts and to assure the truthfulness of the informants' claims before it underwent data analysis.

In the analysis of data, the researcher applied thematic analysis which involved examining, pinpointing, and recording of the patterns or themes that were manifested on the claims of the informants.

These qualitative data allowed the researcher to make a judgment on the prevalence of views about the experiences of Cabarroguis National School of Arts and Trades students in learning English with the use of humor as a strategic tool in teaching.

### 2.2. Intervention Program-Project *HARHAR*

The Project *HARHAR* stands for *H*umor to Aid *R*ecall and *H*umor to Amplify *R*esponsiveness. The intervention program was conducted for a month which involved instructional humor during discussions. A series of humor-injected instructions were applied in every discussion. The intervention assured that the applied instructional humor falls under "appropriate humor" in order to inflict knowledge and understanding in a friendly and healthy way.

### 2.3. Informants of the Study

The researcher employed purposive sampling method by choosing three Grade 9 students of Cabarroguis National School of Arts and Trades for school year 2018-2019. Their names were hidden under code-names to protect their confidentiality. Before the interview was conducted, the informants were briefed about their voluntary participation in the interview. They were also assured that they can terminate the interview anytime.

## 3. Results and Discussions

Based on the data gathered from the inquiry-based analysis based on the research problem, the following themes were formulated:

**Distinguishing the Ideals.** Students find relief when freedom is involved inside a classroom. Specifically, the notable characteristics that define 21<sup>st</sup> century learners are: insufficient professional boundaries due to socialization, hunger for immediate feedback, strong sense of entitlement, lack of critical thinking skills, unrealistic expectations, too much involvement of the parents, and reliance of a "how to" guide to succeed in and out of the classroom [6]. The following transcripts show what an ideal classroom atmosphere looks like for the informants.

ASH

...My ideal classroom atmosphere is a light one which makes you feel free to voice out your insights. An atmosphere where you are relaxed and happy but learning still exists...

JEB

...It is better when it is fun (atmosphere) because everyone participates and more of us are able to recite when being asked and it is better when there are jokes so that the lectures will not be boring...

LUI

...I think the ideal atmosphere inside a classroom is a jolly one. The kind of classroom where everyone participates and, at the same time, is well organized...

**Strict and serious: A No-No for the Young Learners.** Students feel bored and scared to participate in a class with a serious and strict approach of a teacher. In the study of Reference [6], it is stated that the 21<sup>st</sup> century learners anticipate rules and regulations along with their enforcement. Parent-driven time-oriented lifestyle with a few "spare" time describe the childhood of 21<sup>st</sup> century learners. Moreover, it is claimed that "teacher's employment of humor was connected with the students' idea about the teacher having a 'good attitude' toward them, 'wanting success for them', and expression of 'thoughtfulness for them' [7].

They tend to set their standards based on how they are being treated by their parents which causes them to easily hate and feel uneasy on a different teaching strategy. The following transcripts show how 21<sup>st</sup> century students react on a strict and serious teaching approach.

ASH

...At first, we were scared to recite because of the strict approach of the teacher. With that, we just chose to go out of the class because of the boredom - it was too serious. We did not feel like listening and it was like nothing registered inside our brains. That is why sometimes we just tend to chat with our seatmates to avoid falling asleep...

JEB

...It was scary to recite and at the same time we felt too lazy to do so. It was too boring to listen that is why we just tend to go out. It feels boring to see a teacher's strategy who just seems like he/she just follows a plan. It feels demotivating to study and nothing registers in our brain. Sometimes, we just make noises to reduce boredom...

LUI

...It is not pleasing because it feels scary to recite and also feels like anytime we commit a mistake, we get scolded. Almost half of the class also seems like they have their own agenda instead of listening, others are also outside the classroom chatting...

**To Laugh is to Remember: Humor aids recall.** Injecting instructional humor during a lesson has a huge impact to aid recall. Information mixed-up with humor is recalled easier than plain information [8]. In a research that was conducted by Reference [2], it was found out that assessment results improve in lectures with humor treatment than non-humor treatment lectures. This is coined to Instructional Humor Processing Theory which claims that an appropriate form of instructional humor, is positively associated with students' learning and development [4]. Humor arouses the students' classroom engagement which is manifested in their higher test results.

The following transcripts show how the informants' scores improve due to the retention of the lessons aided by instructional humor as a tool in teaching:

ASH

...The atmosphere in the class has improved because of the jokes that were injected and it even made the topics easier for us to understand and remember. If there is a quiz the day after the class, we could still remember what have been discussed even without reviewing...

JEB

...It has improved a lot because we remembered the lessons easier which then resulted to higher scores. Lui and I even got a perfect score in the exam because we were able to remember everything that has been discussed...

LUI

...It was just like magic because we remember the lessons easier unlike before. If there is a quiz the day after the discussion, we remember everything without reviewing because of the jokes that make it remain in our memories...

**To laugh is to Connect: Humor Magnets Attention.** Humor has been shown to increase attention and interest. According to a research by References [9,10], anything that exceeds expectations or surprises a person, such as humor, can lead to psychological arousal. This can alter an inattentive learner into a slightly attentive learner, which improves performance. Humor also has the ability to reduce the psychological gap between a teacher and a learner. Moreover, it was found that humor banks to the sense that a teacher is approachable [11,12]. The resulting increase in interactions leads to a better and more meaningful student-teacher connection. Humor elicits a positive effect in learners, which in turn creates a pleasant and enjoyable learning environment. This can reduce fears about studying difficult subjects. These claims are coined with Incongruity-Resolution Theory [4] which posits that humor as an instructional technique can deliberately create an atmosphere that amplifies cognitive growth, generates interest, and can enliven engagement.

The following transcripts show how 21<sup>st</sup> century students' attentions are being aroused by humor as a strategic tool in teaching:

ASH

...The atmosphere became lighter and we were not scared or shy anymore. We became closer to him in the sense that there was no aura that kept us from participating anymore. When he observed that our attention is diverted, he will then use jokes to take it back and it was very effective on us...

JEB

...We became more eager to come to class and to participate. Before, when he arrives, it was like nothing. We did not want to come inside; however, we even raced to get inside the moment we see him arriving from afar when he changed his style in teaching...

LUI

...The difference is very clear because everyone suddenly became participative. We were not shy anymore and we felt connected with the teacher. Even our discipline has improved. The funny part was when my classmates who were not interested before suddenly became the ones to ask whether the teacher was present or not because they were excited for the class...

## 4. Conclusion

Based on the findings of the study, the following are concluded: The informants' learning experiences towards humor as a strategic tool in teaching are centered on Distinguishing the Ideals, Strict and Serious: A No-No for the Young Learners, To Laugh is to Remember: Humor Aids Recall, and To Laugh is to Connect: Humor Magnets Attention. Moreover, the 21<sup>st</sup> century learners are idealistic learners who easily get bored with a strict and serious teaching strategy but tend to get more excited with instructional humor which causes them to be more participative and disciplined in class. They also tend to have higher test results.

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