THE HUMOUR THEORY APPROACH: SIMPLIFYING THE TEACHING AND LEARNING OF THE ENGLISH GRAMMAR IN A DIGITAL AGE IN NIGERIAN COLLEGES OF EDUCATION

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Abstract

*English functions as a second language (ELS) in Nigeria. In the area of grammar especially, various methods are applied in teaching the language to facilitate learning. But however method is adopted; experience has shown that students of Nigerian colleges of education, as second language learners, find it problematic and tedious to learn the grammar of the language. This is the focus this paper – applying the technique of humour to alleviate the problem of teaching and learning the grammar of English in a second language environment. The study is hinged on two humour theoretical frameworks, namely; **affiliative** and **aggressive** humour theories. Two research questions guided the study. As methodology, two control and experimental groups were created by the researchers to examine possible merits or demerits of applying affiliative or aggressive humour in teaching any topic in the grammar of English. The findings demonstrate that injecting humour (depending on the type), as part of classroom activities can facilitate or hinder students' mastery of grammar lessons. In conclusion, the paper, among others, recommends that teachers of English as a second language should make teaching and learning the grammar of English a fun by employing various suitable humour techniques.*

***Key words:** Affiliative humour, aggressive humour, English grammar, and digital age.*

Introduction

Grammar of English simply refers to the linguistic rules governing the appropriate use of the language. These include the rules of tense, concord, inflection, parts of speech, punctuation and so on. For effective use of the language by second language learners, there is need for the mastery of the rules governing the use of the language. It is for this reason that the principal objective of teaching and learning the language in a second language environment is to produce near-native competent speakers of the language. This can only be attained through formal and structured teaching and learning processes. But it is argued in quarters that formal teaching and rigorous study of grammar of English has no bearing on the development of communication skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing by second language learners. This view argues that that the skills for using a language can be acquired, not necessarily by rigorous study of its grammatical rules, but by actual use of the language in practical communication events. This view tilts towards the **trial and error theory** of second language learning. Still, for some others, an approach which blends the above two views is the most effective way for acquiring communicative competence in English as a second language. The above perspectives are traditional methods. But however, good the traditional methods may

prove to be in teaching the grammar of English as a second language, the present paper differs from the traditional views by arguing that injecting humour in teaching the grammar of English is a more effective approach in teaching and learning it in a second language environment.

The focus of this paper is thus, on how best to apply the technique of humour for effective teaching of English grammar in a second language environment where the learners find it problematic to master the rules of the language. Learning the grammatical rules of English is often boring to second language learners, especially when taught by a stuck in the mud teacher. To a second language learner of English whose main objective is the acquisition of communicative competence in the language, the teacher needs ingenuity in classroom management to dexterously guide the learner in mastering grammar rules without harping on learner errors. One of the approaches to attain success in this is through the strategic use of humours.

In Nigeria, learners' native linguistic backgrounds differ from English. On account of this, for a successful delivery of English grammar lesson in today's digital age in the country, the teacher should also assume the role of a story teller, without necessarily being a comedian. Playing on the learners' sense of humour, teachers should be skilful in using games and exercises to facilitate their teaching. In a strategic and orchestrated manner, the teacher should spice up their English grammar classes with humours for easy and smooth flow of class activities.

When suitably chosen and properly handled, humour, especially affiliative (associative) model, is a handy teaching aid (Martel et al, 2003). It has social bonding effect that makes the teacher and their students to work as a team. To serve its purpose, it requires an innovatively resourceful teacher to select a humour appropriate for each lesson objective and learning needs of their students. Summarily, therefore to simplify the teaching and learning of the English grammar in a digital age in a second language environment, like Nigerian colleges of education, the teacher should apply positive humours that boost and massage the ego; and avoid negative and body-shaming types which offend and debase people.

This study is **significant** in many ways. As an empirical study, it would make a valuable addition to the existing body of linguistic literature on second language teaching and learning. Two, the outcome of the study would be of much help to teachers of English in Nigeria, and other climes where the language is taught as a second language. Again, language planners and curriculum designers would be exposed to the positive effects of humour on teaching the grammar of English as second language. Furthermore, the outcome of the study would highlight the catalytic role of humour in enhancing the second language learners' proficiency in English. It is for these reasons that the purpose of this study, is specifically to demonstrate the effectiveness of humour in teaching the English grammar when suitably applied in Nigeria's digital world of today.

The students of the Department of English, Nwafo Orizu College of Education, Nsugbe, formed the research population of this study as learners of English as a second language. Through purposive random sampling method, a sample population of 50 students was selected from the one hundred level students of the NCE programme, as representative population.

The **design** of the research is **quantitative** in nature. The researchers applied affiliative and aggressive humour approaches to teach English tenses to two separate groups of students for a period of two weeks. One of the researchers took the experimental group while the other one taught the control group. The topic was on tenses of English. At the end of the two weeks, a written assessment test was given to the two groups. The students were given a narrative essay in which they were required to demonstrate their narrative skill of past events by using correct tenses. At the end of the exercise, the scores of the experimental and control groups were compared to determine how their performances differed on account of the use of different variants of humour on the two groups.

Theoretical Framework

This research is hinged on two theories, namely; **affiliative humour** and **aggressive humour**

theories. These are two out of the four wellbeing-related humour styles propounded by two personality psychologists – Rod A. Martin and Patricia Puhlik-Doris in their 2003 "Development of the Humour Styles Questionnaire." **Affiliative** humour theory is also known as positive or associative humour theory. It aims at making others merry by joking with friends, making fun of oneself, or just telling one odd and funny story or the other. According to Makewa, Role and Genga (2011), teachers apply affiliative humour to enhance their teaching efficiency. It has bonding effect – it creates friendly and relaxed classroom environment, and builds rapport between teachers and students. On the contrary, **aggressive** humour is an unfriendly humour which ridicules and disparages others. It comes in form of sarcasm, mockery and other body-shaming jokes that tend to embarrass and debase others. This type of humour makes the classroom environment unfriendly. It distances and alienates the teacher from his students. It is for this reason that scholars differentiate between *appropriate* and *inappropriate* humour in referring to the positive and negative types of humour observed in classroom settings (Wanzer et al, 2006). On account of this, it is advisable that, for lesson objective to be attained, the types of humour applied "should be constructive, understandable by all learners and be relevant to the content and/or be compatible to the learning environment," (Chabeli, 2008, p. 58). These two theories are relevant to this study, because the kind of humour employed by the teacher in teaching grammar of English in today's digital age in Nigeria can either enhance or hinder the attainment of lesson objectives. The theories will help to account for why the experimental group performed well, while the performance of the control group was abysmal.

Review of Relevant Literature
Prior to the 20th century several theories have been adduced to explain the philosophical, mathematical, sociological, anthropological, psychological as well as linguistic functions of humour (Dynel, 2009). However, despite the avalanche of such theories of humour in several fields of learning, it was only in the 20th century that studies began to discover its pedagogical usefulness in educational settings (Fadel & Al-Bargi, 2018). Through these studies it was discovered that humour: enhances instructional effectiveness (Englert, 2010); lowers student anxiety and makes for relaxed classroom environment (Neuliep, 1991); causes higher student motivation (McCrosky, Richmond & Bennett, 2006), and; improves student learning (Neuliep, 1991).

According to research findings, within the context of the classroom, humour significantly facilitates second language teaching and learning by promoting and harnessing classroom dynamism and interaction. For instance, Pomerantz and Bell (2011), maintain that humorous interaction creates room for students to actively participate in classroom activities; and that strategic use of humour positively affects learner's cognitive processing and second language learning. Furthermore, many researchers have shown that teacher's resourceful incorporation of humour into English as a second language (L_2) teaching has positive results on learning (Hayat, Shooshtari & Shakeri, 2011; Stroud, 2013).

Humour has as well been claimed to be "…influential as a way of establishing friendships," (Abdulmajeed & Hameed, 2017, p. 42). Ross (2005) describes it as "something that makes a person laugh or smile," (p.1). For the classroom purposes, scholars categorize humour into two types. Martin et al (2003) suggested a model of **affiliative** and **aggressive** types of humour. The former is positive, associative, and integrative, while the latter is negative, pejorative and disintegrative. Through jokes, affiliative humour entertains people. With jokes, according to Makewa, Role and Genga (2011) teachers enhance their teaching skills. Use of comics also facilitates rapport building between the teacher and their students. On the other hand, aggressive humour, in form of derogatory and body-shaming jokes, negatively creates rancour between the teacher and their students. This situation makes learning difficult since it discourages students from active involvement in class

activities. This, according to some scholars, goes to show that, depending on context, there are *appropriate* and *inappropriate* humours, (Wanzer et al, 2006). In other words, while some humours are *suitable* in certain contexts, they are *unsuitable* in others.

In all the above empirical studies, there is a yawning gap which needs to be filled. The gap is that, to the best of our knowledge, none of the above studies said anything on the use of humour in the teaching and learning of the grammar of the English language in a second language environment like, like the college of education setting in Nigeria. This is the gap this current study intends to fill.

Research Questions

This research was guided by two research questions.

1. To what extent can affiliative humour enhance the teaching and learning of the English grammar in today's digital age in Nigeria?
2. To what degree can aggress humour hinder the teaching and learning of the English grammar in today's digital age in Nigeria?

Research Method

Using convenience random sampling technique, the researchers selected **fifty** students from the 100 level NCE students of the Department of English, Nwafo Orizu College of Education, Nsugbe, Anambra State, Nigeria. The selected fifty students, serving as sample population, were divided into two groups of twenty-five each, without gender bias. One group served as a control group, while the other one was used as an experimental group. These students were grossly deficient in the rules of the grammar of the English, especially the tenses of irregular verbs. Being their teachers, the researchers had earlier discovered that the students have foundational problems of not being well groomed in the morphological rules governing the formation English tenses, and their essence in communication. They wallowed in inter-language errors without seeing the need for them to improve on their communicative efficiency through adequate mastery and proper application of the English tenses. These discoveries were repeated after series of performance tests before this experiment. The researchers also tried all known methods of second language teaching without encouraging results. The efforts of the researchers started posting some positive results when they had a hunch to innovatively tackle the problem by teaching tenses with personality-enhancing anecdotes, hilarious jokes and short comics.

The affiliative humour approach was applied on the experimental group of 25 students by one of the researchers. The linguistic devices of humour employed included irony, riddles, jokes, metaphor, euphemism, ambiguity and pun. These devices included giving and explaining practical examples on how to use various tenses in sentences, with the students fully engaged in various comic, humorous, funny, incongruous linguistic activities that easily elicit genuine social laughter. This was done in several ways. Some were asked to tell folktales involving the tortoise as a trickster character. Some were asked to give account of the funniest comedies they had watched. The third sub-group of the experimental group was asked to narrate story about an imaginary novelty football match between the Catholic Men Organization (CMO) and Catholic Women Organization (CWO) of any parish they had watched. The narratives were specifically chosen to highlight the use of the past tense to narrate past events. They were rendered in both oral and written modes. The oral aspects were done severally before the written version which was done once. During the oral presentations, which were student-centred, the teacher (one of the researchers), with smiling face, drilled the students and jocularly corrected their spoken errors instantly in a very convivial and playful manner. The written version was also done in the same friendly and camaraderie atmosphere.

The control group, as explained earlier, was taken by the second researcher of this study. The group,

25 in number, was also divided into three sub-groups. They were given the same narrative topics as the experimental group. The teaching they received did not go beyond normal traditional methods of teaching. The encounter was more or less teacher-centred without any touch of humour. With stern face, the students' spoken learner-errors were corrected amidst insults and name calling. They were body-shamed with negative humours that deflated their egos. The written version was conducted in a core traditional way which some scholars describe as "sit-down-bring-out-your-exercise-books" method (Abdulmajeed & Hammeed, 2017, p. 45). They were not accorded any self-respect, neither was there any room for them to participate as team members. Below is the table outlining the result of the above exercise.

Research Findings and Discussion

GROUPS	SCORES ABOVE 50%	SCORES BELOW 50%
Experimental Group	23	2
Control Group	3	22

The above table displays the scores of the written test of both the experimental and the control groups. The results show that **23** students out of 25 in the experimental group scored **50%** and above, while just **three** out of the 25 students in the control group scored **50%** and above. On the other hand **two** out of 25 students in the experimental group scored below **50%**, whereas **22** out of the 25 students in the control group scored below **50%**.

Interpretation of Results
By interpreting the results of the above experiment, we will simultaneously attempt to provide answers to the two research questions which guided this research. The first interpretation of the results of the experiment in the above table is that the students of the experimental group performed significantly better than those in the control group. This outcome provides answer to the first research question which seeks to know the extent to which affiliative humour can enhance the teaching and learning of the English grammar in today's digital age in Nigeria. The results indicate that affiliative humour can enhance the teaching and learning of the grammar of English in Nigeria.
The second interpretation of the results as contained in the above table indicates that the students in the control group performed abysmally. Aggressive humour was applied in teaching the group. The implication here is that, in answer to research question two, aggressive humour greatly hinders the successful teaching and learning of the grammar of English as a second language in Nigeria.

Conclusion
From in the interpretation of the results of the experiment of this research and the answers to the research questions, it can be inferred that affiliative humour creates friendly and convivial learning environment that can yield positive results. By providing friendly and convivial learning environment, affiliative humour helps to lower the anxiety level, eradicate fear and relieve boredom in the classroom. This helps to make the process of teaching and learning the grammar of English in a second language environment lively and interesting. It allows for learners' active participation in the classroom activities. This invariably enhances the information retention and recall capacity of the learners because they are allowed to do things on their own under the guidance of the teacher.

Again, what the above results demonstrate is that keeping students in happy learning mood in the classroom through affiliative humours motivates them to develop positive attitude towards learning the grammar of the English language. Such jovial environment also encourages them to practise speaking the language among themselves without fear of committing errors, and without the usual

hesitation which characterizes the process of learning how to speak the language. The dullness of the classroom is eliminated as the students laugh at their own mistakes in practising the language.

The encouraging performance of the experimental group in this research has demonstrated the essential place of affiliative humour in teaching the grammar of English in Nigeria. The approach is a kind of breakaway from the inflexibility of the traditional methods. It shifts attention from the teacher and makes class activities learner-centred. This is unlike the traditional method which inhibits students' creativity, demoralises and dulls their interest and appetite, and hinders development of language skills. Furthermore, affiliative humour approach provides a robust learning environment where students and teachers work as a team in the teaching-learning process. Team work between teachers and students is possible because, affiliative humour, in addition to endearing students to their teachers, also makes them happy; a mood which facilitates the teacher's job, and enhances students' learning.

Finally, our experience in this research shows that successful application of appropriate humour in teaching the grammar of English depends on the creative ingenuity of the teacher. Since every English language lesson period is not solely meant for grammar, the teacher of English should devise resourceful and innovative ways to involve grammar in every area of English lesson. By this the researchers are not suggesting that this is the best and easiest method to teach grammar of English. Nonetheless, the result of the research has proved that it is a very effective approach in teaching the grammar of the language. This type of approach also tasks the creativity and resourcefulness of the teacher of English as a second language

Recommendations

Teaching and learning the grammar of English in Nigeria is not an easy task. This is because as a second language (L_2) in the country, the learners already have acquired their native languages before coming to learn English. The social environment of the learners does not also encourage the use of the language in everyday communication. Thus, teaching the grammar of the language in Nigeria is a boring exercise due to various linguistic and extra-linguistic factors.

It is for the above reason that in teaching, the teacher should assume many metaphorical roles. Apart from being surrogate parents and other things, teachers should always regard the classroom as a forge with various pieces of human metals to be crafted and forged into various shapes and forms for diverse social functions. The teacher should be aware that the classroom is characterized by intra-*group dynamics* since it is composed of people with diverse backgrounds, different learning needs and problems. As a group bonded in common purpose of acquiring knowledge, students learn through the process of interaction with the teacher and among themselves. On account of this, and based on the findings of this research, the following recommendations are made to simplify the teaching and learning of English in today's digital age in Nigeria.

i. Teachers of the grammar English as a second language in today's digital age in Nigeria should be innovative and resourceful so as to devise various comic ways to make class activities lively and interesting.

ii. Teachers of the grammar English as second language should make classroom activities learner-centred by creating a convivial atmosphere where teachers and students work as a team through the application of ego massaging humours.

iii. Teachers of English as a second language should make teaching and learning the grammar of English to be a fun by employing various humour techniques.

iv. In the classroom, teachers of English as a second language should apply affiliative humours which have bonding effects, and avoid aggressive humours which disparage and estrange students from their teachers.

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