Can Humor Competence Be Taught?

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Abstract: Humor competence is an important aspect of sociolinguistics for EFL learners to understand and appreciate humor. Differences in language uses, cultures and society can cause obstacles for achieving humor competence. However, it is necessary to define exactly what knowledge is necessary to a non-native speaker to process humor in L2 (Attardo, 2010). This paper is concentrated on an application of Semantic theory of humor (Attardo and Raskin, 1991), scalar implicature of unqualified humor support to humorous texts(Hay, 2001) and pragmatic competence Bachman (1990) for formulating EFL learners' ability to appreciate humor in English jokes.

1 INTRODUCTION

The term "competence" is defined as "the capacity, skill or ability to do something correctly or efficiently, or the scope of a person or the scope of a person's or a group's ability or knowledge". More clearly, it is "the quality of being competent; adequate; possession of required skill, knowledge, qualification, or capacity". Thus, one's humor competence is that someone is qualified at recognizing, understanding and appreciating the humor in humorous texts and more than that they can produce humor.

However, understanding and recognizing humor seems difficult for EFL learners in some non-native contexts in which English is not used out of the classroom since what one culture can laugh at (superiority), laugh about (incongruity) or laugh in spite of (relief) may vary widely from one country to another (Geddert cited in Deneire, 1995). Actually, differences in language uses, cultures and society can cause obstacles for learners in trying to achieve humor competence. Attardo (2010) states that it is important to specifically determine what knowledge is necessary to a non-native speaker to process humor in second language.

2 HUMOR AND SENSE OF HUMOR

What is humor? In Ermida (2008)study, the term "humor" is derived from the Latin word "humor"

which referred to the four basic body fluids such as blood, phlegm, black bile and yellow bile. At that time, it was believed that good health depended on the balance of these four fluids in one's body. Diseases or bad temperaments occurred for the incorrect mixture or disorder of these fluids. A person was recognized to be in good health when these fluids were balanced. In the 16th century in England, humor represented a prevailing mood quality which could be positive (good humor) or negative (bad humor). Thus, there goes a saying "To be in a good humor" which means that a person is in a cheerful mood (Beermann and Ruch, 2009). Besides, humor was related to a virtue when it contributed to tolerance and benevolence (Beermann and Ruch, 2009). During the 19th century, humor was emanated as an essential virtue with an association of a strong and optimistic character (Martin, 2007).

Today, humor is preferable to any place and is settled as a valued characteristic in anyone who has a sense of humor. Moreover, humor is an umbrella term that covers all the synonyms and overlapping meaning of humor and humor-related subjects not just in neutral and positive format as comic, ridicule, irony, mirth, laughable, jolly, funny, ludicrous, merry, etc. but on negative forms as sarcasm, satire and ridicule (Attardo and Raskin, 1991). The 20th and 21st centuries have seen a series of studies on humor topic towards positive outcomes of using humor in health, education and the workplace.

The term "sense of humor" is understood with reference to both humor creation and humor

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appreciation, which is so all-inclusive and highly-prized that (Edwards, 1997) remarks ""He has a grand sense of humor" is also synonymous with "He is intelligent, he's a good sport, and I like him immensely"" (Edwards, 1997). Thus, when a person is said to have sense of humor, he firstly can laugh at things he finds to be funny, laugh a great deal and easy to be amused, and secondly he can tell funny stories and amuse other people (Edwards, 1997). However, not all people have sense of humor always laugh at humor and vice versa. A person who has little sense of humor can appreciate and laugh at a comic because humor appreciation is an element of the mind while sense of humor is mostly in favor of in-born (Edwards, 1997). Therefore, it can be stated that sense of humor relates to human behavior and is part of humor in terms of ability. Then what part of humor can be appreciated and what knowledge to be developed for the ability?

3 HUMOR APPRECIATION

It is complicated to classify humor because there is no universal theoretical framework which can satisfactorily account for all types of humor and the functions that they serve. However, humor has its classification. Humor can be either verbal or non-verbal, a subjective experience or serve communicative purposes, draw upon common everyday reality or consist of fiction and imagination, charm or attack, be created spontaneously or be used as a well-prepared technique of personal and professional interaction and even can be a simple joke told among friends or amount to the sophistication of Shakespeare's plays Ermida (2008). Actually, jokes have the characteristics of verbal humor (VB) which is related with words, sentences, texts and discourse. A joke is made up of grammatically well-formed sequence of words and postulates some conventional linguistic analysis of text and make statements involving concepts such as "words", in spite of the fact that it sometimes goes beyond the convention labeling needed for pure linguistic purposes (Ritchie et al., 2013).

A peculiar element of contrast is symbol of the joke. Fischer (1889) proposes the characteristics of verbal humor be seen as a *playful judgment* which is merely a force which is necessarily used both to imagine objects and clarify them. The force can illustrate thoughts or more clearly it helps produce a comic contrast. Joke contains a contrast, but not between ideas. It is the contradiction between the

meaning and meaninglessness of the words. In fact, joking is merely playing with ideas, at least two which are distinct and irreconcilable but self-consistent (Fischer, 1889). A typology of verbal humor in terms of humorous techniques includes two properties: (1) *Condensation*; and (2)*Double Meaning or displacement,*"a change in the way of considering something" (Freud, 1974, p. 74). It is proven to be equivalent to the incongruity/ contrast theory that "the pleasure in a joke arising from a "short circuit" …the two circles of ideas that are brought together by the same word" (Freud, 1974, p. 110), which means one circle of one idea to another and being apart are "circumlocution" for contrast.

Actually, the contrast is an alternative element of the incongruity theory which is among the three theories of humor (Attardo and Raskin, 1991). Incongruity is the core of all humor experiences. It contains something unexpected, out of context, inappropriate, unreasonable, illogical, exaggerated, and so forth and serves as the basic vehicle for the humor (Freud, 1974). In other words, incongruity is regarded as the prerequisite of the humor and the humorous effect arrives when the incongruity is interpreted. Martin (2007) says "the humorous effect comes from the listener's realization and acceptance that s/he has been led down the garden path..."

Freud (1974) explains the incongruity that humor is created out of "a conflict between what is expected and what actually occurs in a joke, the most obvious feature of much humor is an ambiguity of double meaning, deliberately misleading the audience, and is a punch line". (Freud (1974) says "Humor arising from disjointed, ill-suited pairings of ideas or situations or presentations or ideas or situations that are divergent from habitual customs from the bases of incongruity." And more clearly, Freud (1974) defines "Incongruity, associating two generally accepted incompatibles; it is the lack of a rational relation of objects, people, or ideas to each other or to the environment." Ritchie et al. (2013) concretely describes the way the incongruity-resolution concretely works in case of a joke formation. A joke consists of a "set-up" and a "punch line". The punch line conflicts with a perceived interpretation of the set up. The punch line can be resolved with an alternative interpretation of the set up. Also, Attardo (2010) confirms that to create humor, the incongruity must be resolved.

Similarly, the process of appreciating the humorous effect of a joke is to experience two phases. (Freud, 1974) suggests a model highlighting the role of incongruity and resolution in the generation of humorous effect. It consists of two

stages in which the key of humor lies in the initial one in which an incongruity is detected by the hearer. Then while the hearer tries to solve the incongruity or make sense of the joke, he or she will search for a cognitive rule that reconciles the incongruous part, and upon finding a resolution to the incongruity, he or she will be relieved and perhaps will also be humorously entertained (Martin, 2007, p. 64).

The process of perceiving and understanding in this two stage model is a cognitive one and generally agreed Beermann and Ruch (2009), but the way resolution is achieved is various in different jokes. Joke (2) is simply found the wife's utterance by the end of the joke for its resolution. On other occasions, the hearer has to "backtrack and choose another interpretation (initially more unlikely and not as relevant, but eventually correct) in order to realize she or he has been fooled into selecting that initial interpretation (the one initially relevant), and set upon a different path of joke resolution". Thus, it is not easy to understand the incongruity because it has a level of difficulty in interpreting the language of incongruity.

Obrst (2012) graphically depicts a spectrum of the linguistic humor at a linguistic structural level focused on the incongruity theory (Figure 1). Under the incongruity theory, a linguistic structural level comes up from a basis on sound or word, syntactic attachment, sentence to higher grades as discourse, genre, world etc. It is an incongruous generation which is given by the humor provider and then possibly understood by the humor consumer as permitting anomalous interpretations. In order to understand such above cognitive process, speakers, especially EFL learners of L2 need to achieve humor competence (Attardo, 2010).
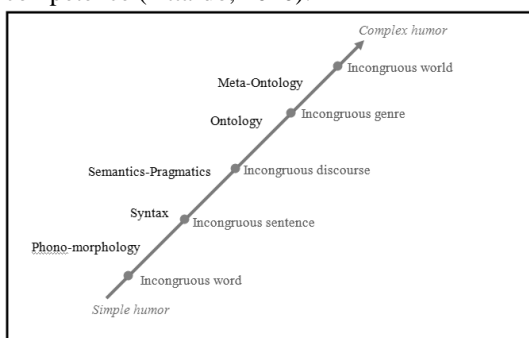

Figure 1. Linguistic humor structure spectrum (Obrst, 2012).

4 COMPONENTS OF HUMOR COMPETENCE

In order to appreciate humor in jokes a person has to have humor competence because "*the humor competence would allow a given speaker to recognize humor, just like a native speaker could recognize a grammatical sentence, without being able to explain why it was grammatical*" (Attardo, 2010). Then, there appears to be one main interaction between the joke audience and the humorous text (the joke) which is divided into three sub-correlations in the process of making sense of or appreciating humor in English jokes.

At first, humor competence is considered in the correlation between the joke audience's linguistic knowledge and the language of the joke, which leads to a successful interpretation. Typically, Attardo and Raskin (1991) Semantic Script Theory of Humor proposes a semantic-pragmatic process of humor manifestation. The so-called semantic *Script-switch trigger* plays an important role in the operation of a humorous text. It is a switch from a normally-constituted text into a humorous script Attardo and Raskin (1991) that makes up the joke. The contrast of the two scripts, an incongruity between the two induces a humorous effect, so jokes contain elements of contrast as mentioned above or ambiguities of different types (Obrst, 2012)

Attardo and Raskin (1991) defines humor competence (HC) is "*the ability of native speaker to pass judgments as to the funniness of a text*" in his proposed semantic theory of humor with the aim at formulating a set of conditions which are both necessary and sufficient for a text to be funny. The conditions for interpreting a joke text should be ascertained between the reader and the writer of the humorous message. Sequentially, the prerequisite for a joke text to be funny is focused on the term of "*share*" (Attardo and Raskin, 1991). They are reader/hearer and the joke text writer/speaker who have to share the knowledge of presupposition, implicature of the ambiguity, the context, the language and the structure of the text (Freud, 1974, Attardo and Raskin, 1991, Ritchie et al., 2013). Consider the following joke:

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(1) In the dinner of a southbound
train, a honeymoon couple noticed two
nuns at another table. When neither
could decide what they should order
from the menu, the husband volunteered
to settle the question by asking the
nuns, who seemed to be enjoying their
meal very much.
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> "Pardon me, Sisters," he said, pausing politely before the nuns' table, "but would you mind telling me your order?"
>
> One of the nuns smiled at him. "Not at all," she said cheerfully. "We're Carmelites!"

(Attardo, 2010)

It is sure that reader/hearer cannot interpret joke (1) when he/she does not satisfy the conditions for a text to find it funny. The conditions are as follows.

- The presupposition to be shared: `Carmelite nuns`
- An implicature to be interpreted by R/H: `order`
- A possible world to be recognized: `Dining on the train`
- Humor language occurring: `speech act joking (misunderstanding)`

(Attardo and Raskin, 1991, p. 57)

In his semantic theory, Attardo and Raskin (1991)) highlights the importance of linguistic theory with two components of the "*lexicon*" and the "*combinatorial rules*" that supply speakers with knowledge of word meaning and sentence meaning for complying with the requirements of detecting and marking the source of ambiguity, disambiguating a potentially ambiguous sentence in a non-ambiguous linguistic or extralinguitic context, interpreting implicatures where present and potential implicatures wherever possible, discovering the presuppositions of the sentence if any, and characterizing the world in which the situation described by the sentence takes place, in the aspects pertinent to the sentence. In addition, the SSTH represents a pragmatic process of humor expression when there is a transfer from bona-fide into non-bona fide communication. In the premise of the so-called no-bona fide communication, humor is created when jokes flouts Gricean Cooperative principle and its maxims Grice (1991) and has its own principles.

Later, Attardo and Raskin (1991) developed the SSTH into the GTVH (General theory of verbal humor), in which new elements of humor competence are added, namely six knowledge resources including (1) the Script opposition, (2) the Local mechanism, (3) the Situation, (4) the Target, (5) the Narrative strategy and (6) the language. That means a speaker has to pass these if he/ she knows the two different and opposite scripts of a joke, the playful logic instrument of the opposition, the contexts involving he objects, participants, places, activities in joke-telling, the stereotypes or the butt of the joke, type of the jokes, and information or

wording in jokes (Attardo, 2010). However, Attardo and Raskin (1991) semantic theory just introduces humor competence on the surface of linguistic competence and semantic competence in relation with words and sentences and rules, but there are no other ideas on culture or society that supports to develop humor competence. Chiaro (2006) constitutes humor competence with three elements, namely the linguistic, the socio-cultural and the poetic which indicate respectively for (i) the ability to understand the meaning of the words to be signaled in a joke, (ii) the ability to identify the social context or the cultural feature to be attached in the joke and (iii) the ability to interpret or read the figurative language to be embedded. The model shows a strong social dimension of understanding humor in jokes. Consider the following joke.

(2) `Guess who quit smoking?`

`David Koresh.` (Carrell, 1997)

Joke (2) is at first is a common type of question and answer in the mode of bona-fide communication Attardo and Raskin (1991) where there are smoking people and it is normal when people stop smoking. However, it is a real joke in the form of riddle. The punch line "David Koresh" should force the audience to reinterpret the question if he was a smoker but then realize that the joke plays on "smoking" that is the character Koresh is related with a social event in America. If the audience interprets the implicature in the punch line, the mode of communication is changed (shifted) into non-bona-fide communication. If the audience still sees the question as a normal one, the communication does not change. Then the joke text fails because no humor can possibly result on the part of the audience and that text can never get any level of humor competence. And this takes place unconsciously. (Carrell, 1997, p. 179) also suggests two main factors to affect this failure: *one is that the audience is unfamiliar with the form of the joke text; and the other is the audience is not in the possession of one or more of the semantic scripts necessary to identify and subsequently process the text as a joke, or both.*

With joke (2), the problem is not at its structure, but its content. The joke text hinges on the knowledge of both David Koresh and the fire at the Branch Davidian compound near Waco, Texas, on April 19, 1993 (Carrell, 1997). The audience cannot interpret the joke because they are not in the possession of such script, the one which contains that information. Simply they see the question and answer are in bona-fide conversation because they do not know who David Koestler is. Thus it can be practically known that joke competence is the ability

to read the second script of the joke. And the audience can be "*equipped with more information from the joke teller and endeavor to reprocess the joke text through his or her joke competence*" (Carrell, 1997, p. 180). This creates a second correlation between the joke audience's style reference and the language of the joke, which results in either appreciation or non-appreciation (Carrell, 1997)

Hay (2008) has also proposed a similar point when discussing humor support strategies. She talks of qualified and unqualified humor support, of which the latter involves a scalar implicature (where "implicature" is taken to mean communicative implication). The three implicatures are *1. Recognition, 2. Understanding,* and *3. Appreciation* (Hay, 2008), which is similar to Raju's three "mental operations" above. However, researchers have wondered that when a joke is appreciated there may be a neglect of being amused. Therefore, Hay (2008) when discussing humor support strategies, adds a fourth element of ***agreement*** into the three implicatures discussed (*recognition, understanding, appreciation*). That is, in such cases there is dependence between *appreciation* and *agreement*. Hence, she also notes that it is possible for someone to be simultaneously offended and amused so that they support the humor but express disagreement e.g. '*laughter followed by an explicit cancellation such as "that's cruel*". This appears an interaction between joke audience's attitudes and beliefs and the content of the joke, which induces either appreciation or offence. Integrating the model of humor competence (Chiaro, 2006; Hay, 2008), it is obviously seen that the knowledge to be essential for appreciating humor in English jokes is acquired in a system of competence: linguistic-semantic competence, socio-cultural competence and poetic competence.

5 HUMOR COMPETENCE INTERFACED IN PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE

Pragmatic competence (PC) is defined as "the ability to use language effectively in order to achieve a specific purpose and to understand language in context" (Thomas, 1983), "the ability to communicate your intended message with all its nuances in any socio-cultural context and to interpret the message of your interlocutor as it was intended" (Fraser, 1999). Pragmatic competence is a

subcomponent to the more level of communicative competence (Fraser, 1999 ; Bachman, 1990). Bachman (1990) propose an overarching model, named "*Communicative language ability*" which consists of both the knowledge and the capacity for executing that competence in appropriate, contextualized communicative language use (Bachman, 1990, p. 84). This model contributes to broadening the concept of communicative competence, which afterwards is employed extensively in the second language learning and assessing and covers the model of communicative competence. It entails two major dimensions: *organizational competence* and *pragmatic competence* (Bachman, 1990, p. 84-87). Organizational competence consists of grammatical competence and textual competence and pragmatic competence encompasses two main abilities of illocutionary and sociolinguistic competence.

It can be seen that components of Bachman's language competence drive for joke competence and humor competence comprising linguistic-semantic competence, socio-cultural competence and poetic competence. Deniere (cited in Baron-Earle, 1995) points out that "well-developed communicative competence implies humor competence, and vice-versa". He also stresses the language learners also need to develop "a certain level of cultural competence in the target language because a language learner cannot appreciate the humor of that language even if he/she is competent at the target language (Bell, 2007). That is, the non-native speaker needs to become acculturated in the culture of the language she is learning if she ever hopes to understand that speech community's humor. Thus pragmatic competence is essential for humor competence because it provides knowledge of pragmatic conventions to be acceptable and knowledge of sociolinguistic conventions to be appropriate for the language functions in a given context both in competence and performance (Bachman, 1990, p. 87-90).

Illocutionary competence, in Bachman (1990) pragmatic competence, relates to the theory of speech acts referring to utterance acts, propositional acts, and illocutionary acts. These acts respectively indicate "saying something", "expressing a prediction about something" and "the function performed in saying something". Additionally, perlocutionary act is the effect of a given illocutionary act on the hearer. Bachman (1990: 90) clearly describes that to accomplish a success in driving a meaningful utterance it is necessary to use

illocutionary competence with a range of abilities as follows.

a) To determine which of several possible statements is the most appropriate in a specific context.

b) To perform a propositional act which is grammatically well-formed and significantly.

c) To be able to be complied by non-language competency factors

Sociolinguistic competence refers to the ability to perform the language functions, mentioned above, in appropriate ways for various language use contexts. Sociolinguistic competence includes *sensitivities* to language variety differences, to register or language use variation within a variety, to naturalness or native-like manner, to cultural references and figures of speech. Of all the sensitivities such as the ones to differences in dialect or variety, to differences in register, and to naturalness which concern the language performance, and especially the *ability to interpret cultural references and figures of speech* which is related with the interpretation of cultural and figurative language. However, joke telling means reciting jokes which is the lowest level of humor production, so the ability to interpret cultural references and figures of speech is taken as one important element which is suitable with humor interpretation as the key point of humor appreciation.

Obviously, both humor interpreting and producing holds responsible to illocutionary competence and sociolinguistic competence. Likewise, a person who wants to be able to interpret the humor in jokes or tell jokes should be proficient at pragmatic competence. He/she should be able to perceive the humorous language of the joke, be aware of the figurative and cultural styles in the joke and agree with the humorous type of the joke text for appreciating it. Actually, it can be stated that humor competence is interfaced with pragmatic competence in terms of appreciation and performance with system of competence. This system of competence is necessary for EFL learners to develop their humor competence in the broad communicative competence.

6 L2 HUMOR COMPETENCE CAN BE TAUGHT AND STUDIED

Humor competence is viewed as part of overall communicative competence, and this is "not controversial" (Attardo, 2010). Researchers have studies confirming that pragmatic competence can be taught (Kasper, 1997). Now that pragmatic competence is a component of the broad communicative competence since communicative action includes not only speech acts such as requesting, greeting, apologizing, etc but also participation in conversation, engaging in different types of discourse, and sustaining interaction in complex speech events. In such conversation, speakers are able to promote their imaginativeness and creativeness in their own environment for humorous or esthetic purposes, where the value derives from the way in which the language itself is used such as telling jokes,… (Bachman, 1990). Thus, it is sure that humor competence can be taught.

L2 humor competence is hence needed to be taught in the context of teaching English as a foreign language. Firstly, humorous language helps enrich learners variations of the English language used in different geographic regions (Bachman, 1990). Secondly, learners enhance their knowledge of culture through cross-cultural studies because each culture has its own set of values, norms, and unwritten rules of what is appropriate in humor, and these largely determine its content, target, and styles (Freud, 1974). Thirdly, humor education helps learners embody to the cognitive and mental theory of learning. Lastly, sociolinguistics proposes that true competence in a language is determined by the learners' ability to use language appropriately in the needed contexts. This proposal would certainly include the appropriate comprehension and appreciation of tone variance within written language as an essential part of academic competence. Verbal humor of the characters in humorous episodes which are analyzed reveals important aspects in the definition of social identity and originality (Matthews et al., 2006).

Many researchers have had studies on humor competence in recognition, comprehension, perception and appreciation and achieved positive results. Martin (2007) investigated the problems of understanding jokes in the English language and explored about the advantages of English jokes to improve reading comprehension for Thai Students. Questionnaire containing five jokes was sent to fifty subjects of English major and French major. The jokes were taken from The Reader Digest Magazine following some criteria concerning the length of jokes, joke context, language complexity, and variety of situations. The results show that the students always read English jokes 2-3 times per week and few read English jokes every day.

Table 1: Studies on Humor Competence.

Study	Teaching goal	Proficiency	Languages
Erin Baldwin 2007	Jokes, film clips, cartoons	Doctoral students	L2: English
Douglas Wulf 2010	Joke categories	Advanced students	L2: English
Zsuzsanna Schnell 2010	Jokes	Preschool children	L2: English
Melody Geddert 2012	Reading materials	First-year students	L2: English, Chinese, Punjabi
Maria Petkova 2013	Jokes	Advanced students	L2: English
Richard J. Hodson 2014	Humorous texts: written and spoken (Numerous materials)	Advanced students	L1: Japanese L2: English

Petkova (2013) conducted a study on documenting the effect and perceptions of this curriculum in an intensive English program in Southern California and also investigated the perceptions of second language learners of English about humor in their native language as compared to perceptions about humor in English. By using mixed methods combining a quasi-experimental pre-test post-test design with qualitative data collection, the results showed a T-test with a statistically significant difference in students' perceptions about humor in English. Particularly, Hodson (2014) in Japan had a study on humor competence for university EFL students by using a combination of explicit teaching of humor theories and knowledge schema, teacher- and learner-led analysis of humorous texts, and student presentations and suggested that humor competence training during the course may have aided participants' appreciation of English humor.

Table 2: Studies on Humor Competence (continued).

Study	Research goal(Humor competence)	Design	Assessment/ Procedure/ instrument
Erin Baldwin 2007	Perception	T-test	Question-naire/ Comprehe-nsion questions
Douglas Wulf 2010	Appreciation Socio-cultural knowledge	Classroom-based	
Zsuzsanna Schnell 2010	Comprehension	Classroom-based	Visual humorous test
Melody Geddert 2012	Recognition	Survey	Preliminary investigation/ Questionnaire
Maria Petkova 2013	Perception	Quasi-experimental	Pretest, post test
Richard J. Hodson 2014	Appreciation	Experimental groups	Follow-up joke ratings

7 CONCLUSION

It can be said that humor competence can be taught because it is the ability to recognize, comprehend and appreciate humor. Actually, humor is essential in the modern life and thus necessary in the L2/EFL classroom. Humor competence is a component of pragmatic competence and the fifth component of communicative competence. Hence, it is important to teach humor competence for better communication. System of competence such as linguistic competence, semantic competence, socio-cultural competence and illocutionary competence are needed for humor perception.

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