

An Evaluation of the Use of Humor in ELT Coursebooks

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine EFL (English as a foreign language) teachers' views on the use of humor in ELT (English Language Teaching) coursebooks for adult learners. In as much as the use of humor in English classes has been widely advocated by scholars, the researchers decided to examine to what extent this element has been incorporated in ELT coursebooks. To fulfill this goal, three widely-used ELT coursebooks for adults, namely American English File, English Result and Top-Notch were selected to be evaluated by teachers who had the experience of teaching them. An eight-item rating questionnaire was given to 120 randomly selected teachers from 10 English language institutes in Tehran. The collected data revealed that based on the teachers' views, the use of humor in the target coursebooks was around average. The results also showed that among the three coursebooks, English Result had a statistically more significant position in incorporating humor. Moreover, the findings revealed an advantage for the use of humor in receptive skills over productive skills. This study also assessed and compared the use of humor in all eight items of the questionnaire. Apart from American English File, inspection of the participants' gender seemed to indicate that there was no significant difference between the participants' gender and their judgment of humor. It is both felt and recommended that materials writers include more elements of humor in ELT coursebooks.

Keywords: EFL teachers, ELT coursebooks, humor

1. Introduction

People mean different things when they think about humor. In spite of the widely-held belief, humor is not all about laughter or jokes.

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This complex social and psychological phenomenon is an emotion which is a sign of intelligence. Humor decreases stress levels, promotes interaction with other people, and helps us handle difficult situations better. With this new understanding of humor, bringing it to our home, workplace, or even classes is advantageous. In the field of ELT (English Language Teaching), students sometimes get discouraged by the difficulties involved in learning a new language. Here is the place where the teacher's sense of humor or alternatively the use of humorous materials could play a crucial role in helping bored learners. This effective tool is likely to develop and encourage creativity through a positive classroom atmosphere.

2. Review of Literature

Humor is not all about joking and laughter when spending time with friends and family. In fact, it is the sudden awareness of an alternative construction of a distressful situation which leads to relief and joy (Boeree, 1998). In the field of ELT (English Language Teaching), humor is defined as any physical action or spoken statement intentionally or otherwise that causes students to react by laughing, giggling, smiling, etc. (Faulkner, 2011). In the last two decades or so, scholars have made a number of studies about the effectiveness of humor in second language acquisition and its impact on improving reading, writing, speaking, and listening. These studies indicated that humor reduces tension (Berk, 2000), improves classroom climate, maximizes student-teacher rapport, facilitates learning (Stopsky, 1992), and boosts self-confidence and success (Pollack & Freda, 1997). Based on the results of these studies, foreign/second language teachers are recommended to include humor in their materials (Aboudan, 2009). Moreover, students also show positive attitudes toward the use of humor in language classes (Barnes & Lock, 2010). They stated that humor increases their concentration and interest since it combats boredom and helps them cope with learning difficult materials (Askildon, 2005).

Research has shown that humorous sentences and examples have a positive impact on retention abilities (Garner, 2006; Kaplan & Pascoe, 1977; Schmitt, 1994) and students who studied vocabulary through humorous lessons performed better on achievement tests than those who did not (Aria & Tracey, 2003).

A number of studies have examined the impact of humor on improving the four language skills. In one of these studies, two groups of twenty students who were studying humorous and non-humorous texts during their reading sessions in the EFL context of Iran were compared. The experimental group with humorous materials showed a significant improvement in both recall and reading comprehension tests (Hayati et al., 2011).

In another study by Rafiee et al. (2010), the experimental group, which practiced the listening skill using humorous songs, outperformed the control group with conventional material on listening comprehension. However, the effect of humorous songs did not show much difference between immediate and delayed recall listening test scores. The result of the impact of humor on the speaking skill has also been consistent with the findings of the previous two studies. Syafiq and Saleh (2012) found that humorous materials and classroom atmosphere increased students' motivation to speak in EFL classes.

One of the most important issues after choosing appropriate humorous materials in the classroom is its interpretation, which is widely believed to be difficult for learners, particularly at elementary levels. In this regard, Bell (2009) argues that proficiency does not play an important role in interpreting humor since students have adequate potential for making and enjoying different kinds of humor in any category even in early stages of learning a second or a foreign language. Therefore, humorous materials can be used with students in all levels of proficiency.

3. The Present Study

Most of the previous studies conducted on the effectiveness of humor on learning have been mostly anecdotal or in form of self-report (Wanzer et al., 2010). Furthermore, very little research has taken into account the use of humor in language learning materials. To fill this gap, this study aims to explore two issues: Investigating the use of humor in three widely-used ELT coursebooks for adults in Iran and exploring the use of humor in different components of these three series. In this respect, the study is an attempt to answer the following research questions:

1. Do ELT materials writers include humor in ELT coursebooks designed for adults?
2. Based on EFL teachers' ratings, which one of the selected coursebooks has the greatest degree of humor?
3. Which components in the coursebooks have the highest/lowest inclusion of humor?
4. Which rating scale from one to seven has the highest frequency in each coursebook?
5. Is humor judged differently by male and female teachers?

6. Are these three books significantly different in the case of humor use?
7. To what extent do receptive and productive skills include humor in each coursebook?
8. To what extent do the sub-skills (grammar and vocabulary) include humor in each coursebook?

First, three ELT coursebooks were chosen to be analyzed for the use of humor. A questionnaire was developed to be used to this end. The questionnaire was distributed among 120 randomly selected teachers from 10 different institutes. All these experienced teachers were selected from well-known English language institutes in Tehran, Iran. After collecting the questionnaires, the researchers wrote down the collected data in three different tables for each book and conducted a descriptive analysis of the data.

4. Method

4.1 Participants

The participants in this study were 120 EFL teachers (60 males and 60 females) with an average age of 28. The teachers had at least 1.5 and at most 14 years of teaching experience. Only 43% of them had a university degree in majors related to the English language such as English literature, English language translation and TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language).

4.2 Materials and Instrument

Three internationally well-known coursebooks, namely *English Result*, *American English File*, and *Top-Notch* were selected for the analysis of their contents in terms of humor. The main reason for selecting these three series was that they are widely taught in the context of the present study (Iran), which provided the researchers with an opportunity to administer the questionnaire to a reasonably large number of participants (40 teachers for each series).

The instrument used in the study was a questionnaire developed by the researchers (see Appendix A). The questionnaire required the teachers to rate eight items from one to seven. Each item belonged to one particular section of each book.

The sections include pictures and illustrations, the four skills (listening, reading, writing, and speaking) as well as the sub-skills (grammar and vocabulary), and the teacher's guides.

4.3 Procedure

In order to collect the data, the researchers selected three coursebooks for adult learners, namely *English Result*, *American English File*, and *Top-Notch*. After designing the questionnaire including eight items regarding the use of humor in pictures, speaking, reading, writing, listening, grammar, vocabulary and the teacher's guides, the researchers randomly selected ten English language institutes in which these coursebooks were taught. The questionnaires were distributed among the teachers in person to make sure they would be filled in completely and to provide further information in case of ambiguity.

5. Results

Having collected the questionnaires from 120 participants, the researchers wrote down the results of each book in an individual table, including each item's individual ratings and participants' background information.

5.1 Investigating Research Question One

This research question explored the degree of humor inclusion in the selected coursebooks. As shown in Table 1, *English Result* with a total mean of 26.47 had 54%, *American English File* with a total mean of 30.27 had 47%, and *Top-Notch* with a total mean of 26.85 had 47% use of humor. Since the inclusion of humor in these three books is around average, materials developers should consider including more elements of humor.

Table 1. Descriptive Analysis of Data

Coursebook	Mean	SD	Max	Min
American English File	30.27	4.93	42.00	19.00
English Result	26.47	7.29	43.00	13.00
Top-Notch	26.8500	4.00992	35.00	18.00

5.2 Investigating Research Question Two

The second research question explored the best coursebooks regarding the use of humor. As seen in Table 1, these three coursebooks are only slightly different with regard to the use of humor. In spite of this minor difference, *English Result* shows the highest use of the humor. In the hierarchy order, *English Result* is followed by *American English File* and *Top-Notch* based on obtained means.

5.3 Investigating Research Question Three

The third research question explored which components in the coursebooks have the highest/lowest inclusion of humor. The components are ranked in Table 3. Based on the results shown in Table 2, in both *American English File* and *English Result*, illustrations and pictures had the highest rank regarding the use of humor. However, in *Top-Notch* the reading sections showed the highest ranking. The speaking section was followed by illustrations and pictures in both *American English File* and *English Result*. The lowest rank belonged to the grammar section in both *English Result* and *Top-Notch*. While the reading section had the highest rank in *Top-Notch*, surprisingly it had the lowest rank in *American English File*. As the results indicate, these three coursebooks, despite having a similar overall percentage, were quite different in terms of humor inclusion for various elements. These data can help the authors of these coursebooks to compensate for items with humor deficiency like grammar and reading in their subsequent revisions. By using the information, teachers can provide complementary humorous material for the low ranking elements while working on these coursebooks.

Table 2. Mean of Humor in Various Components

American English File								
Item	Pictures	Speaking	Reading	Writing	Listening	Grammar	Vocab	Teacher's Guide
Mean	4.70	4.32	3.02	3.47	4.10	3.30	3.92	3.42
SD	1.09	1.28	1.81	.75	4.10	1.77	1.93	1.94
English Result								
Mean	4.60	3.85	3.35	3.17	3.15	2.42	2.72	3.20
SD	1.23	1.57	1.31	1.43	1.57	1.27	1.44	1.66
Top-Notch								
Mean	3.55	3.85	5.27	2.67	4.35	2.00	2.77	2.37
SD	1.10	1.23	1.10	1.28	1.45	0.87	1.18	1.23

Table 3. Ranking of Humor Components

Books Ranking	American English File	English Result	Top-Notch
1	Illustrations/pictures	Illustrations/pictures	Reading
2	speaking	speaking	Listening
3	Listening	reading	Speaking
4	Vocabulary	Teacher's book	Illustrations/pictures
5	Writing	writing	vocabulary
6	Teacher's guide	listening	Writing
7	Grammar	vocabulary	Teacher's guide
8	Reading	grammar	grammar

5.4 Investigating Research Question Four

Research question four explored which rating scale from one to seven had the highest frequency in each coursebook (see Table 4 for the results).

Table 4. Frequency of the Respondents' Rating

American English File								
Rating	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Total
Count	35	29	81	67	50	49	9	320
Frequency	10.9%	9.1%	25.3%	20.9%	15.6%	15.3%	2.8%	-
English Result								
Count	46	56	83	64	39	23	9	320
Frequency	14.4%	17.5%	25.9%	20%	12.2%	7.2%	2.8%	-
Top-Notch								
Count	41	65	71	67	44	22	10	320
Frequency	12.8%	20.3%	22.2%	20.9%	13.8%	6.9%	3.1%	-

Although the overall percentage of humor use for all the books is around average (3.5), according to Table 4, in all three coursebooks the most selected rating scale is 3 and the least selected scale is 7, which is about 3%. Regarding these findings, teachers rarely selected the highest value (7). This shows that they did not believe that the use of humor in the coursebooks is sufficient. The results indicate that published materials have a long way to go to satisfy teachers when it comes to humor use.

5.5 Investigating Research Question Five

Research question five explored whether humor is judged differently by male and female teachers. According to Table 5, $t(118) = 1.07$, $p = .28$. Therefore, there seemed to be no significant difference between males and females in how they rated the three coursebooks in terms of their use of humor. While in general there was no relationship between gender and rating, there seemed to exist a significant difference between males' and females' rating in one of the series, namely *American English File*.

Table 5. Judgment of Humor by Male and Female Teachers

Gender	N	Mean	SD	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	t
Male	60	28.43	4.92	-	-	-	-
Female	60	27.30	6.55	-	-	-	-
Total	-	-	-	118	.28	1.13	1.071
<i>American English File</i>							
Male	20	31.85	4.63	-	-	-	-
Female	20	28.70	4.82	-	-	-	-
Total	-	-	-	38	.04	3.15	2.105
<i>English Result</i>							
Male	20	26.00	4.62	-	-	-	-
Female	20	26.95	9.34	-	-	-	-
Total	-	-	-	38	.68	-.95	-.407
<i>Top-Notch</i>							
Male	20	27.45	3.59	-	-	-	-
Female	20	26.25	4.39	-	-	-	-
Total	-	-	-	38	.35	1.20	.945

5.6 Investigating Research Question Six

Research question six explored the significant difference among the three coursebooks in terms of the use of humor. Table 6 shows the descriptive statistics for the three coursebooks. As Table 7 shows, $F(2,117) = 5.61$, $p = .005$, so there is a significant difference among the three coursebooks in terms of their use of humor. To pinpoint the difference(s), a post hoc comparison was made (see Table 8).

As can be seen in Table 8, as long as the use of humor is concerned, *American English File* is significantly different from both *English Result* and *Top-Notch*, but there is no significant difference between *English Result* and *Top-Notch*. Here again the award for the most humorous book goes to *American English File*.

Table 6. Descriptive Statistics for the Coursebooks

Book	N	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum
American English File		30.27	4.93	19.00	42.00
English Result		26.47	7.29	13.00	43.00
Top-Notch		26.85	4.00	18.00	35.00
Total		27.86	5.80	13.00	43.00

Table 7. ANOVA for the Differences between the Coursebooks

Item Total	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig.
Between groups	350.81	2	175.40	5.61	.005
Within groups	3653.05	117	31.22	-	-
Total	4003.86	119	-	-	-

Table 8. Multiple Comparisons between the Coursebooks

(I)Book	(J)Book	Mean Difference (I-J)	Sig.
American English File	English Result	3.80000*	.008
	Top-Notch	3.42500*	.019
English Result	American English File	-3.80000*	.008
	Top-Notch	-.37500	.952
Top-Notch	American English File	-3.42500*	.019
	English Result	.37500	.952

5.7 Investigating Research Question Seven

According to previous surveys, laughter relieves tension and stress, elevates mood, enhances creativity, and boosts energy and has positive effects on learning, specifically English language skills. All four skills were included in this survey and the seventh research question explored the extent to which humor was used in various skills in the coursebooks.

As shown in Table 9, in all three coursebooks the calculated t value is significant at .05, so there is a significant difference between how productive and receptive skills are rated. As Table 9 shows, receptive skills (listening and reading) were rated to have slightly higher levels of humor. Moreover, the researchers also decided to analyze the coursebooks one by one.

According to Table 9, in *American English File*, the mean of the productive skills is slightly higher than that of the receptive skills. *English Result* has also a slightly higher mean for the productive skills. Contrary to the other two coursebooks, *Top-Notch* was rated significantly higher in terms of receptive skills. These results suggest how the authors of these coursebooks can compensate for the lack of humor in various skills in subsequent editions.

Table 9. Paired Samples Statistics

Pair 1	Mean	N	SD	Productive	Paired differences		t	df	Sig. (2tailed)
					Receptive	Mean			
Productive	7.11	120	2.12	Receptive			2.38	119	.019
Receptive	7.75	120	2.35		-.63333	2.90735			
American English File									
Productive	7.80	40	1.36	Productive			1.92	39	.062
Receptive	7.1250	40	1.	Receptive	.67	2.22			
English Result									
Productive	7.0250	40	2.	Productive			1.438		.158
Receptive	6.5000	40	2.	Receptive	.52500	2.30926			
Top-Notch									
Productive	6.5250	40	2.	Productive			-7.910		.000
Receptive	9.6250	40	1.	Receptive	-3.10000	2.47863			

5.8 Investigating Research Question Eight

The last research question explored the extent of humor inclusion in vocabulary and grammar sections of the coursebooks. According to Table 10, the use of humor in both *American English File* and *English Result* is very close for grammar and vocabulary. The only significant result belongs to *Top-Notch* in which vocabulary is slightly higher in terms of humor use.

Table 10. Paired Samples Statistics

Pair 1	Mean	N	SD	Item6-Item7	Paired differences		t	df	Sig. (2tailed)
Item 6	2.57	120	1.45		Mean	SD			
Item 7	3.14	120	1.64		-.56	1.98			
America English File									
Item 6	3.30	40	1.77157	Item6-Item7	-.62	2.82	-1.39	39	.170
Item 7	3.92	40	1.93996						
English Result									
Item 6	2.42	40	1.27	Item6-item7	-.30000	1.41	-1.33	39	.189
Item 7	2.72	40	1.44						
Top-Notch									
Item 6	2	40	.87	Item6-item7	-.77	1.38	-3.53	39	.001
Item 7	2.77	40	1.18						

6. Discussion and Conclusion

This study mainly explored EFL teachers' inspections of the use of humor in ELT coursebooks for adult learners. A language teacher needs to know how to engage students and humor is an effective tool to ensure this. This is because it develops and encourages creativity in the target language while helping to create an optimal learning environment (Muñoz-Basols, 2005). As observed before, the findings show that the extent to which humor has been incorporated in these coursebooks is approximately around average. These three coursebook series are slightly different from one another; however, *English Result* is slightly more humorous compared to the other two coursebooks with 7% difference. Since mastery of a language requires the development of reading, writing, listening and speaking skills, students must acquire a constantly growing body of linguistic and semantic information. However, students usually face frustration and boredom in the process of second or foreign language acquisition. Humor is a useful device to overcome this problem. However, the results of the study indicate that these coursebooks seem not to be very successful in promoting class atmosphere and combating boredom.

Humor as a pedagogical device has relaxing, comforting, and tension reducing consequences. It also has humanizing effect on teacher image, and its effect of maintaining/increasing student interest and enjoyment cannot be doubted (Askildon, 2005). Therefore, it is a pedagogical device which has to be included in the curriculum of both language learning and teacher education courses.

Learners can remember and recall humorous examples, vocabulary, grammar rules and sentences much better than non-humorous ones (Kaplan & Pascoe, 1977; Schmitt, 1994). The findings showed that the receptive skills (listening and reading) had higher levels of humor compared to the productive skills. The extent of humor use in vocabulary and grammar sections are solely significant in *Top-Notch* with a little higher rank for vocabulary.

According to the findings, in all the coursebooks the most widely selected scale was number 3, which is below average and shows dissatisfaction of teachers with humor inclusion in coursebook materials and surprisingly the highest scale (7) was chosen by only 3% of the participating teachers.

Although males and females appreciation of humor is contradictory (Robinson, 2001), in case of humor judgment by males and females, there were no overall significant differences. However, there was a significant difference between males and females regarding *American English File*.

Research shows that the positive impact of humor on language learning is obvious (Deneire, 1995). Humor is one of the crucial factors in enhancing critical thinking in learners since it reduces anxiety and stress through biological functions in human body (Berk, 2000) and also enhances self-confidence, performance and motivation. It can enhance learning by promoting interest if applied properly (Bergin, 1999). Thus, for more effective language classrooms, materials developers should consider including more elements of humor in areas like grammar where students are often bore with. Coursebook writers, however, are expected to be aware of the red lines and taboos of different cultures so as not to cause offence in multi-cultural classes.

The present study was only concerned with EFL teacher's views. Further research is needed to explore more ELT coursebooks and evaluate their contents in terms of humor from the learners' perspective as well. This line of research is definitely needed because after all it is the learners who are the main consumers of ELT coursebooks.

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Appendix A

Questionnaire

Please Answer the Following Questions by Writing Down Your Answer in the Space Provided

Section A-Background Information

This section of the questionnaire refers to background or biographical information. Although we are aware of the sensitivity of the questions in this section, the information will allow us to compare groups of respondents. Once again, we assure you that your response will remain anonymous. Your cooperation is appreciated.

1. Gender: Male Female
2. Age (in complete years):
3. Years of teaching experience:
4. Your educational degree:
5. Course book name:
6. Course book volume:
 Beginner Upper-beginner Pre-intermediate
- Intermediate Upper-intermediate Advance
7. The level you mostly teach:
 Beginner Upper-beginner Pre-intermediate
- Intermediate Upper-intermediate Advance

Section B

- Please **rate** the following items regarding the use of humor in the language text book you teach in your classes.

1. Use of humor in **illustrations** and **pictures** of the book.

<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

2. Use of humor in **speaking** sections of the book.

<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

3. Use of humor in **Reading** passages of the book

<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

4. The inclusion of humor in **suggested writing topics** by the book

<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

5. Use of humor in **listening** comprehension exercises of the book.

<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

6. Use of humor in **grammar** sections of the book.

<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

7. Use of humor in **vocabulary** sections of the book.

<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

8. The suggestion of using humorous strategies/techniques by **Teacher's book**.

<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
1	2	3	4	5	6	7