Humour in the classroom: Teachers’ perceptions
Nikos Chaniotakis
University of Thessaly (Greece)
chaniot@uth.gr

Abstract
The key questions of this study are whether Greek primary school teachers acknowledge the benefits and risks of involving humour in the classroom, how important they consider it, and to what extent and in which way they incorporate it into their teaching. Exploring the teachers’ perceptions on the importance and use of humour, may help remove misconceptions and traditional approaches associated with the notion, that humour is not appropriate in teaching or that humour concerns only those who “have it in them”.

Keywords: primary school, humour, classroom, teacher’s perceptions
1. Introduction

In the past humour had no place in education and the scientific community displayed no interest in it\(^1\). In recent years, an increased number of empirical research focuses in the importance of humour in the classroom\(^2\). The majority of teachers incorporate humour, one way or another, in their teaching practice, although some avoid it completely\(^3\). On their behalf, students clearly prefer teachers with humour\(^4\), but unfortunately the opposite is not the case: teachers don’t express preference for students with humour (e.g. class-clowns), but rather consider them as a problem\(^5\). Research has shown many benefits of humour in teaching and has highlighted the positive impacts it can produce regarding classroom climate and learning\(^6\). In Greece, however, humour does not concentrate the interest of educational researchers.

2. Research findings

2.1. Importance of humour to teachers

Research findings regarding the reasons why teachers use humour in the classroom, revealed that they use humour to a) improve the atmosphere in the class and their relationship with their students, b) deal with difficult situations and discipline problems, c) reduce the tension and pressure of teaching, d) draw the attention and interest of their students, e) promote learning and f) preserve their own interest and improve their mood during teaching\(^7\).

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2.2. Forms of Humour

Bergen\(^8\) concluded from her research that nursery school and first grade primary school teachers tend to encourage a sense of humour in their pupils and exploit a variety of strategies so as to increase the pleasure of teaching and learning. Teachers who use humour, display a generally more lively and cheerful mood, they often laugh at themselves, they are not afraid to laugh at their own mistakes, they habitually encourage their students to express humour and generally bring to the classroom the sensation that learning can occur with humour, without sacrificing the required constant, systematic effort and vigilance\(^9\). Preschool teachers who participated in the research, carried out by Taratori et al.\(^10\), reported that they always use humour in their teaching, especially in the form of jokes, funny stories, puns, puzzles, riddles and cartoons. A study of Neuliep\(^11\) with secondary school teachers revealed that the humour recorded in classrooms took the form of: a) humour expressed by the teacher towards him/herself, b) humour directed at a student, c) innocent humour, d) humour from an external source (cartoon, comics etc.), e) non verbal humour. The humour directed at students was sometimes positive and other times negative; that is to say, it could involve teasing in a positive lighthearted mood or it could be deeply insulting and humiliating. Lastly, in one other study it was observed that secondary school teachers used sarcasm and irony, imitations of students, jokes, and to a lesser degree different puns, anecdotes and non-verbal humour\(^12\).

2.3. The impacts of humour in teaching

Research findings seem to suggest that, when humour is positive, students are motivated, feel more cheerful, ease their anxiety, exhibit greater interest and contribution to the lesson and generally enjoy a more positive atmosphere in the classroom\(^13\). Research for the impact of humour on learning, revealed very positive results\(^14\), which were related on the one hand to

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9 Bergen, D. ibid.
10 Taratori et al. ibid.
11 Neuliep J.W. ibid.
20 Garner, R.L. ibid.
the fact that humour attracts the attention and interest of the audience, and on the other hand that the atmosphere in which learning takes place is pleasant. Positive results of learning with humour occurred with students who had a low attention span as well as in cases, where the attention and motivation for learning was at a low level. If the students pay attention and have strong motivation, then the use of humour again has a positive effect on learning, but to a lesser degree.

The studies that examined the impact of humour on students’ anxiety, focused on the most stressful educational experience: the examination ordeal. The research results in this area are not clear and it is difficult to draw concrete conclusions. The only point where there is concurrence is that the studies concerning the opinions of the examinees reported very positive views about incorporating humour in examinations. Yet in relation to the research which examined reducing anxiety and stress, the findings are contradictory; some studies support a reduction of stress and improvement in performance, while others do not.

2.4. Frequency of humour
An earlier survey of Wells at the elementary school classrooms showed that teachers tried an average of 5.53 humorous attempts during a teaching hour of 50 minutes. In research conducted by Bryant, Comisky & Zillmann, 70 classes of tertiary education were recorded and analyzed in order to examine the humour utilized by university professors. It was established that on average, the instances of humour applied in one 50 minute class was 3.34.

Berk, R.A. ibid.
Pollio, H.R. & Humphreys, W.L. ibid.
In other words, the teaching staff sought to initiate laughter once every 15 minutes on average. The distribution of these figures is of particular significance since 20% of the professors did not use humour at all; 50% attempted to use humour from one to three times, 18% from four to six times and 5% more than ten times per teaching hour. Another study of secondary school teachers revealed that the frequency of humour used within a teaching period was 2.08\(^2\). As regards the amount of humour, no significant statistical distinctions were noticed either between men and women, or experienced and inexperienced teachers.

3. Research

The purpose of this study is to explore the perceptions of teachers regarding the relevance and integration of humour in teaching. In this context we examine how important humour is for teachers, how often they integrate it into teaching, what they regard as its advantages, what risks are involved and what types of humorous behaviour they consider to be most appropriate in the classroom. This study is part of a wider research approach of humour and focuses on quantitative data of the matter in question.

3.1. Method

Participants

The survey involved 766 volunteer teachers of public elementary schools in the regions of Thessaly and Crete. 462 participants were women (60%) and 296 men (39%). Most teachers (55%) were 5-20 years in service, 29% between 2-5 years, 14% over 20 years and 2% had worked less then a year. Considering the age, most teachers (66%) were 30-40 years old, 23% were 40-50, 6% were under 30 and 2% were over 50. Regarding the school region, 39% of respondents were employed in urban schools, 25% in suburban schools and 36% in rural schools (see table 1).

Table 1. Demographics of participants (N = 766)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>296</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>462</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt; 30</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 – 40</td>
<td>473</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40 – 50</td>
<td>178</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt; 50</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt; 1</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^2\) Neuliep, J.W. ibid.
Tools

We used a structured questionnaire with 26 closed and 4 open questions to collect research material. They were constructed for the purposes of current research. Demographic questions concerned a) gender of the teachers, b) age, c) years in service and d) school region. The current results include findings deriving only from the 26 closed questions and not the open-ended.

3.2. Results

Importance of humour to teachers

Participants were given 12 attributes of the teacher in order to put them in a hierarchical order. The most important attribute was rated by respondents to 1 and the least important 12. So, the attributes with the lowest means are the most desirable for respondents and occupy the highest position in the chain of command (see table 2).

Table 2. Attributes of the teachers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Teachers’ Attributes</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st</td>
<td>be fair with the students</td>
<td>2,9</td>
<td>2,0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>master the teaching subject</td>
<td>4,0</td>
<td>2,7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>be friendly with the students</td>
<td>4,2</td>
<td>2,3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4th</td>
<td>be patient</td>
<td>4,6</td>
<td>2,5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5th</td>
<td>be honest with the students</td>
<td>4,9</td>
<td>2,4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6th</td>
<td>make clear rules for the class</td>
<td>5,7</td>
<td>2,5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7th</td>
<td>be an example for students</td>
<td>6,4</td>
<td>3,5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8th</td>
<td>have humour</td>
<td>6,6</td>
<td>2,3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>9th</th>
<th>tell on and off jokes in class</th>
<th>7.6</th>
<th>2.2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10th</td>
<td>have a good appearance</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11th</td>
<td>give good grades</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12th</td>
<td>be strict with the students</td>
<td>10.6</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The teachers reported as most important attribute of the teacher "to be fair with the students". The attributes “sense of humour” and “telling jokes in class” captured correspondingly the 8th and 9th place. Teachers consider as more important attribute than humour: the ability to master and teach skillfully specific subjects, a friendly attitude towards students, patience, being honest, establishing clear rules, imposing themselves as a model for students. On the bottom, they ranked the appearance of the teacher, to tendency to give good grades and stringency. The importance that humour has among the 12 attributes of the teacher was not statistically significant between male and female. The Mann-Whitney control gave respectively p = 0.106 and p = 0.259.

**Forms of humour**

In the question about the forms of humorous behaviour that teachers consider appropriate for teaching, the values of responses ranged from 1 (“I don’t want it at all”) to 4 (“I want it very much”) (see Table 3).

Table 3. Forms of humorous behaviour in the classroom

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The teacher must …</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Accept jokes from her/his students</td>
<td>585</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>270</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Tell every once in a while a joke during the lesson</td>
<td>478</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>274</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Joke with students without offending them</td>
<td>442</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>311</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Ask students to tell a joke or an anecdote</td>
<td>425</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>326</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Bring cartoons or comics to the classroom</td>
<td>323</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>425</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Be serious in class</td>
<td>267</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>486</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Among the humorous forms of behaviour that teachers considered appropriate in the classroom, we found that teachers placed the jokes of students at the top (“I want it much / very much”: 64%), followed by other forms, such as telling a joke in class (63%), joke with the students without offending them (59%) and ask students to tell a joke or anecdote (55%). Most participants agreed that teachers should not be serious in the classroom (65%). On the other hand, most reported that the teacher should not bring cartoons or comics in the classroom (“I don’t want it at all / I want it a little”: 57%) or laugh now and then at himself (68%). 73% disagreed with the question whether the teacher should make as many jokes in class as he can, while almost all of the teachers rejected the humour that is done at the expense of students (99%).

To investigate the relationship between demographic characteristics of the participants’ and the different humour forms, we applied the chi square test. When asked if the teacher should "laugh at himself", we found a statistically significant correlation with the age of participants $\chi^2 (9, N = 698) = 18.109, p = 0.034, \text{Cramer 's V} = .093$. The older teachers appeared less receptive to the possibility of laughing at themselves, even occasionally. For example, in the age group of 23 to 30, 51% were positively inclined to self-sarcasm (“much/very much”), while between 51-60 we counted merely 20%. At the age of 41-50 it was 27%.

The impacts of humour in teaching

For the question about the benefits of humour in teaching, the participants reported as more important: creating a positive atmosphere in the classroom (“much / very much”: 96%), improving the teacher-student relationship (96%), reducing student anxiety (95%) and relieving pressure during the lesson (93%). This was followed by other benefits of humour, such as attracting the attention of students (81%), dealing with behaviour problems through humour (78%), improving the relations between students (77%), promoting the creativity of students (72%) and retaining knowledge and information from students more efficiently (58%). Among the benefits of humour and the demographic characteristics of teachers no statistically significant relationship was found.

Considering the risks posed by the use of humour in teaching, most teachers did not agree that humour could lead to underestimating the status of the teacher (80%), offending some students (78%) and expressing racist or sexist views in the classroom (77%). The majority also argued that humour does not slow down the pace of teaching (71%) or provoke behavior or disciplinary problems (65%).

As for the risk of creating disciplinary problems there were statistically significant differences among the youngest in years of service and “older” teachers $\chi^2 (12, N = 753) = 24.349, p =$
0.018, Cramer 'V = .104]. Those who worked less than five years as teachers believe, unlike those who have more experience (5 years and over), that the use of humour in the classroom can bring discipline problems. In particular, 33% of the teachers with one year in service reported that there is a risk of disciplinary difficulties (“much / very much”) and only 4% of the teachers with more than 20 years reported the risk of indiscipline (Teachers with 2-5 years: 16%, teachers with 5-20 years: 11%)

As for the possibility of humour disrupting the teaching rhythm, we found statistically significant differences between the ages of participants. [X2 (12, N = 706) = 34.098, p = 0.001, Cramer 'V = .127]. The majority of older teachers (> 50 years) do not believe that there is a risk like that (“at all / a little”: 80%) but the younger teachers (<30 years) consider it most likely (“at all / a little”: 49%). Statistically significant correlation was also found between the age of respondents and the possible underestimation of the teachers’ status through humour [x2 (12, N = 708) = 26.610, p = 0.009, Cramer ’s V = .112]. Older teachers do not believe that humour can undermine their status (> 40 years: 87% “at all / a little” and <30 years: 62% (“at all / a little”).

**Frequency of humour**

To the question concerning how often teachers use humour in class, the majority (43%) reported one to two times per teaching hour, 39% stated that they use humour only occasionally and not on a daily basis, 13 % reported 3-4 times in a teaching hour and a 4% reported more than five times per teaching hour (see table.4).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency of humour in teaching</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. 1-2 times per teaching hour</td>
<td>309</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Occasionally, not every day</td>
<td>275</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. 3-4 times per teaching hour</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. More than 5 times per teaching hour</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Asking how frequently humour was used by teachers in class, we discovered another statistically significant difference between men and women [x2 (6, N = 705) = 27.635, p = 0.000, Cramer 'V = .198]. 46% of female teachers reported that they use humour only occasionally and not on a daily basis, while 28% of male teachers indicated this frequency. Another statistically significant correlation was found between the frequency of humour and years in service [x2 (18, N = 706) = 30.307, p = 0.035, Cramer ’s V = .120]. The “older” teachers appear in greater rates than younger ones to declare that they use humour occasionally and certainly not every day. More specifically, 50% of the teachers with more than 20 years in service reported “not on a daily basis”, while it were only 37% of teachers with less then 20 years in service.
4. Discussion

In this study the teachers did not consider humour as an important attribute of the teacher’s role. In comparison with others attributes, humour was classified in one of the last positions. Teachers considered humour less important than: the fair treatment of students, expert knowledge of the curriculum, friendliness, patience, establishing clear rules, etc. The teachers stated, that being a model for students was more important than to be humorous or to tell a joke in the classroom sometimes. In the research conducted by Kassner\textsuperscript{24}, when asked the same question, teachers placed humour a step higher than in our research. That means they also believed that humour is less important then other attributes.

We could explain the above mentioned attitude of the teachers which participated in our survey by comparing them to the potential risks of humour in teaching (e.g. discipline problems, disruption of the teaching rhythm, underestimation of the teacher’s role, negative forms of humour etc.). Moreover, we know from other investigations\textsuperscript{25} that teachers avoid or discourage the humorous situations in their class because (a) they fear that through humour they might lose control of the classroom, (b) they don’t believe in the positive effects which humour may have on learning and (c) they perceive teaching as a "serious matter". When we asked a similar question in our study, the participants underestimated the potential risks of humour and referred to them only in small percentages. On the contrary, the majority of teachers, acknowledged the instructional and pedagogical advantages of humour in teaching.

We could say that teachers somehow idealize humour: on the one hand they underestimate the possible risks and the negative aspects of humour on the other hand they refer very positively to the many advantages of humour in teaching (improving the climate and relationships in the classroom, developing creativity, reducing stress and tensions, attracting attention etc.). However, some positive effects of humour that teachers report, are not empirically validated by research studies. For example, the possibility for the teacher to address disciplinary problems through humour, is often claimed to be a key benefit of humour, but has no scientific evidence\textsuperscript{26}. This idealization is not surprising, since for most people humour is very important in social life and is connected with various positive impacts and above all with the delight and joy that comes with it.

Most "older" teachers, compared with younger, don’t believe that humour underestimates the status of the teacher or that it could disrupt the teaching rhythm, provoke discipline problems in class or express racist and sexist views in a comical way. However, teachers with many years of professional experience, incorporate humour less often in their teaching, than their younger colleagues. This finding is surprising since it differs from other empirical data, which show that novice teachers avoid the humour in the classroom\textsuperscript{27}. One possible explanation is that teachers with many years of experience have accumulated fatigue and lack the freshness

\begin{itemize}
\item Bergen, D. ibid.
\item Neuliep, J.W. ibid.
\item White, G.W. ibid.
\item Vrettos, I.E. (2003). \textit{Non verbal behavior teacher’s and student’s Atrapos}, Athens (in Greek)
\item Neuliep, J.W. ibid.
\end{itemize}
and excitement of the first years. Thus, we can assume that younger teachers, although they seem to have more “phobia” about humour, use more humour in teaching than the older teachers because they are closer in age to their students and are more enthusiastic.

Comparing the gender of the teachers and their frequency of humour in teaching, we found that women, based on their responses, use it less often than men. This finding comes into conflict with other research data, which is not always clear and has been subject to criticism.

Most teachers seemed to welcome jokes and anecdotes from their students in class. This finding is not in agreement with other data, showing that teachers generally do not have a good relationship with humorous students and class clowns. The teachers either, only theoretically permit their students to express humour, or accept it only to a certain degree. In practice, however, they most likely don’t act accordingly. Usually they want to determine exactly when and how often students provoke laughter. This coincides with the observation that the majority of teachers opposed the excessive use of humour in class and stated that a teacher should be serious in the classroom.

In contrast to what students desire, teachers showed reluctance towards self-sarcasm and laughing about themselves. While all surveys have consistently shown that students prefer teachers with humour and particularly those who are self sarcastic, most teachers in our research, especially those with many years of professional experience, appeared to have a negative attitude towards this kind of humour. Nevertheless, research by Kassner showed, in a similar question, that the teachers were inclined very positively, as they placed “self critical humour” in the first position. In our research, the reluctance of teachers to laugh at themselves is likely to be associated with traditional views and perceptions of the teacher’s role. The laughter at themselves (and thus the laughter of the students) might be seen as a kind of unfix of their teaching authority, as a momentary stepping down from the hierarchical cathedra in which they believe themselves to be.

More than half of the teachers do not want to bring cartoons and comics to the classroom. Other studies, however, show that one of the most common forms of humour of the teachers of secondary and higher education is to use of external sources (e.g. cartoons, comics, films, newspaper articles etc.). The use of external sources of humour shows that – in contrast to

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29 Rissland, B. & Gruntz-Stoll, J. ibid.
31 Hobday-Kusch, J. & McVittie, J. Ibid.
Garner, R.L. Ibid.
33 Bergen, D. Ibid.
Neuliep, J.W. ibid.
what most people believe- it is not necessary to be a “born” humorist, to provoke laughter in others. It is necessary to clarify to teachers that the creation of humour is something different from the appreciation and acceptance of humour. The spirit is the producer of humour, not the retailer. But in teaching we are interested in the latter, which, moreover, can not be learned. Therefore, it is not true that only teachers with a good sense of humour merit from the use of humour in teaching and that only these teachers can get students to laugh. Instead, all teachers can use external sources without the need to produce their own humour. Moreover, all classes have students with a good sense of humour and of course, we can utilize them.