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**THE USE OF HUMOUR AS A STRATEGY IN ADULT LANGUAGE TEACHING AND
LEARNING**

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Abstract

Committing errors is one of the features of language learning because errors reflect the learners' progress in the language and further give insight into how they can be helped to improve in the language. However, correcting someone's errors may be misunderstood and found offensive by the learner. One of the strategies devised by Nigerian content creators is to use their art to correct common errors in the use of the English language in the country. The aim of this study, therefore, is to discover how the comedians correct errors without attracting negative reactions from their fans and viewers. Four Nigerian comedy skits used to correct errors in English were qualitatively analysed through the lens of Gruner's Superiority Theory of Humour. Findings reveal that the dramas focus on teaching proper vocabulary, sentence construction, and grammar for use at given contexts. It is also discovered that the comedians make their audience feel superior by ensuring that actors, who commit errors, are the targets of their humours. The study concludes that correcting errors with humour prevents language learners from feeling directly attacked and recommends its usage in language teaching and learning sessions.

Keywords: humour, errors, language, superiority theory of humour

1.1 Introduction

Language is an important component of every human society because it enables easy transmission of meaning. An inappropriate expression can cause distortion of meaning and in the process, elicit negative reactions. In most cases, an expression is considered inappropriate if it contains words that do not align with the context of use. Poor sentence construction and ungrammatical expressions are also instances of errors in language use. Though these errors may cause distortion of messages, they give insight into the learners' level of knowledge on the concerned language and how they can be aided to become more proficient. Fortunately, these inaccuracies can be prevented and corrected through effective language teaching process.

As crucial as language teaching is, it is not without its challenges. Some of these challenges result from the large number of students managed by teachers, the diverse background of students, differences in the linguistic needs of learners and the strong influence of first language on the performance in the target language (Kaptengei 28). Learners' negative attitudes and difficulties with learning the target language also pose as factors that make language teaching challenging to teachers (Fissol 86). Another factor that makes it difficult for learners to interact in a target language is the presence of several dialects in the language, which they may need to learn to be able to use the language effectively (Alanazi 18061). In addition to these, learners find it difficult to acquire enough vocabulary that can allow them to use their target language to communicate in different contexts.

Apart from the general challenges that accompany language learning, it has been observed that adult learners of a language face specific challenges that may not be experienced by younger learners. Cozma, for instance, observes that adult learners of English face cognitive and physical fatigue during learning sessions as a result of the amount of energy they exert while carrying out the multiple responsibility they have (1212). This causes them to respond slower to language teaching and learning process. Cozma also observes that adult learners struggle with confidence in their abilities to learn a new language and that such experience can cause anxiety in them (1212). Isik reiterates the problem of anxiety that is found in adult learners, which he believes is caused by lack of courage (74). Other challenges faced by adult learners, which affect their use of the target language are insufficient vocabulary, poor knowledge of grammar, lack of time, and limited exposure to the language (Isik 74). This is why Shoiria maintains that many adult language learners are reluctant learners (128).

The challenges faced by language learners, including adult language learners, and their teachers have motivated humourists and comedians to use their art as a means of complementing classroom learning activities. The aim of this study, therefore, is to explore the use of humour as a tool for language teaching and learning. Specifically, the study's objective is to discover the strategies used in Nigerian comedy skits to teach language effectively and how such strategies can help adult language learners to improve in the target language. That way, the study shows how languages can be revitalised with humour.

2.1 Conceptualising Humour

The usual perception of humour is that it is something that makes people laugh. However, Adetuyi et al. explain that it is uneasy to define humour because what is found humorous by one party may be found offensive and serious by another (3). They maintain humour must elicit laughter in the audience and Adetunji reiterates that any intended humorous event or conversation that fails to perform its primary duty, which is to elicit laughter, should not be regarded as humour (1). If this perception is followed, it means that the term humour

may never exist because it may be difficult for an intended humorous event to evoke the desired laughter at all times.

However, Firjatullah et al. challenge the assertions of scholars, such as Adetunji and Adetuyi et al, by stating that humour may fail to achieve its primary purpose because of variations in emotions at the point of the humorous activity (1). They explain that the differences in reactions to humour should not be used as a yardstick to specify which event is humorous and which is not. Mulyadi et al. agree with the view of Firjatullah et al. by explaining that humour is identified by the presence of stimuli, which can trigger laughter (Mulyadi et al. 3). In other words, as long as an act or a conversation can evoke laughter in the audience, it should be considered as humour. This study, therefore, reiterates and conceptualises humour as anything that can induce laughter, smiles, and relaxation in the audience.

2.2 Previous Studies on the Use of Humour in Language Teaching and Learning

Scholars have examined the use of humour in language teaching to identify its effect and features. Wagner and Urios-Aparisi are among these scholars and their study focuses on the roles of humour in language teaching and learning. They observe that humour helps to create a relaxed atmosphere for learners and also provide contexts that enable effective communication with the target language (405). Stankic agrees with this and further states that it is very effective when teaching vocabulary and grammar to advanced foreign language learners (261). Its usage has been shown to improve the proficiency of language learners. Nevertheless, Isagan et al. explain that humour is also effective when teaching language to college students (15).

Akbari further states that humour helps language teachers to prepare their students psychologically and socially for their learning activities (100). He also observes that it is effective in EFL classes because language teachers can adopt it to teach grammar, literature, and vocabulary. He maintains that language teachers can be effective and achieve positive results if they adopt humour as a teaching technique. Brahmbhatt maintains that humour can only be effective in this case if there is a synergy among the humour, the humourist, and the learner (422). He explains that a joke loses its significance if it is said at an improper time and context. In addition, the culture, social values, and norms of learners should be considered while creating and using humour in classroom language activities (Neff and Rucynski 2). Doing such will not only ensure the effectiveness of humour in language teaching but also guarantee its acceptance by the learners.

Andarab and Mutlu examine the features of humour that is used in language classes to discover their forms (32). They discover that language instructors adopt humour in classroom activities irrespective of their ages, genders, and the level of learners they instruct. In addition, they observe that the humour used in class teaching and learning can be categorised as affiliative, self-enhancing, self-defeating, and aggressive. While the first two categories are considered benign, the latter two are perceived as injurious to the learners. Nevertheless, Andarab and Mutlu do not specify which category of humour is more effective in language teaching. However, it has been observed that humour needs to lighten and relax the learning atmosphere for effective teaching and learning to take place (Azizinehad and Hashemi 2094; Wagner and Uriosi-Aparisi 405; Akbari 101). This means that injurious humours may fail to achieve their positive effect purposes.

Humour has also been discovered to be beneficial to teachers as it aids them to deliver their lectures effectively. Ameen explains that this is most crucial in EFL classroom,

where teachers are faced with the task of teaching learners from diverse backgrounds (2). He states that learners' motivation introduced by humour lessens teaching loads and makes work easier for teachers because learners are more agreeable and willing to participate in learning activities. Neff and Rucynski reiterate that humour promotes positive affectivity in the classroom, which teachers use advantageously to establish a positive relationship with learners (2). Mai reveals that humour motivates teachers and makes them more enthusiastic to teach because it improves the learning atmosphere and enhances learners' engagement (873). All these show that humour is a beneficial and crucial tool in language teaching and learning.

2.3 Theoretical Framework

This study adopts Gruner's Superiority Theory of Humour. Gruner postulates this theory to address beliefs that humour is created when people are ridiculed as a result of their mistakes, flaws, disgrace and pains (1). He explains that it is not every humorous conversations or acts that focuses on making jest of people's unfortunate experiences and misfortunes because there are instances where people laugh at jokes that do not ridicule others (Gruner 2). Gruner states that humour should be perceived as a game, where there is a target, a winner, and a loser (2). The target of the humour refers the individual, event, idea, or circumstances that is being addressed. This target is usually the competition in the game of humour, whereby the humourist attempt to make the loser. The winner in most cases is the audience, who are motivated to laugh at the loser because they see themselves as the winner of the game and, hence, superior to the other party.

The postulation of Gruner's Superiority Theory of Humour provides this study with the perspective for analysing the data collected for the study. Its three projected components of humorous events – target, winner, and loser – are used to examine the humorous conversations extracted as data for this study in order to identify the ideas, errors, individuals and language usage that fall under each category (that is, the targets, winners, and losers). This enables the study to reveal how humour is used in the comedy skits to teach language and to further disclose how it can help in classroom language teaching activities.

3.1 Methodology

The data for this study were collected from four comedy skits performed by Nigerian actors and actresses. The comedies were purposively selected and downloaded from the YouTube channel of Edem Victor, a movie producer and content creator. The films that were selected are those that starred Modola Osifuwa, a Nollywood actress that is popular for her roles as a 'grammar police'. The comedy skits were transcribed into texts before their linguistic contents were qualitatively analysed. Gruner's Superiority Theory of Humour provides the theoretical perspective for examining the use of humour as a device for teaching language in the selected videos.

4.1 Data Presentation and Analysis

The presentation and analysis of the data collected for this study is segmented into two sections to capture the use of humour in vocabulary and grammar teaching.

4.1.1 Use of Humour in Vocabulary Teaching

The data collected capture the use of humour as a tool for teaching English vocabulary and its proper usage. Excerpts 1 to 4 and Tables 1 to 4 present and analyse the expressions that capture instances, where the comedians use humour to achieve such purpose.

Excerpt 1

A: And you know, before anything, our wedding **has land**.

- B: Wait, what did you say?
 A: I said before you know anything, our wedding has land.
 B: Because it's a container, Oga Collins. How could our wedding land? Is it a flight that would land? Does it have wings? Oh my God, does it fly in the air?
 A: Look, I was just saying that...
 B: Before you know it, our wedding **'is going to be around the corner'**. Period. That is the correct and appropriate manner to lay out that line of thought.
 A: Oh, yes.
 (from *My Genius Girlfriend*)

Table 1. Analysis of Excerpt 1

Component	Particular
Purpose	To correct the use of 'land' as a time referent for an event that is about to take place.
Target	The individuals using the expression in the wrong context.
Winner	The audience after learning the correct expression from the actor.
Loser	The actor that used the expression in the comedy show.
Achievement	Taught the audience the appropriate way of expressing such incident.

Excerpt 1 and Table 1 present the use of humour to correct the wrong use of an expression in the wrong context. The focus here is the use of 'land' as a way of saying that an event is about to take place. The target of the humour is any individual that uses this expression in such a context. However, the actor that used the expression is the loser because he is the individual the audience laugh at. The audience, on the other hand are made the winners because they have learned the correct thing to say and hence laugh at the actor who does not. The humour achieves its purpose by teaching the audience how to express themselves in such situation.

Excerpt 2

- A: I got stuck in a **complete standstill**
 B: **Traffic**
 A: That's what I just said.
 B: No, you said 'complete standstill'. You could have just said **'heavy traffic'**.
 (from *Grammatical Date*)

Table 2. Analysis of Excerpt 2

Component	Particular
Purpose	To correct the use of 'complete standstill' in place of traffic jam.
Target	The individuals using the terms in the wrong context.
Winner	The audience after learning the correct expression from the actor.
Loser	The actress that used the expression in the comedy show.
Achievement	Taught the audience the appropriate way of expressing such incident.

The purpose of Excerpt 2 and Table 2 is to correct the use of 'standstill' as a way of expressing traffic jam. The target of the humour is any individual that wrongly describes the incident but the loser is the actress that is caught in the comedy show using the wrong expression. This makes the audience the winners. The scene also achieves its purpose by teaching the audience the right thing to say.

Excerpt 3

A: Besides, I am fasting, **water fasting**.

B: Do you mean **liquid fasting**?

A: **Water fasting**. I know what I said.

B: Oh, **you are only taking water**?

A: Yes.

(from *Grammatical Date*)

Table 3. Analysis of Excerpt 3

Components	Particulars
Purpose	To establish the difference between 'water fasting' and 'liquid fasting'.
Target	The individuals using the terms interchangeably to mean the same thing.
Winner	The audience after learning the differences from an actor.
Loser	The actress that attempted to impose the improper use of 'liquid fasting'
Achievement	Taught the audience the appropriate meaning and context for using each term

Excerpt 3 and Table 3 clarify the difference between 'water fasting' and 'liquid fasting'. In this case, the actress that attempted to correct the actor is made the loser because she exposed her ignorance while attempting to correct someone's use of English. Nevertheless, in the act, the audience is taught of the difference between the two terms and the context to use each.

Excerpt 4

A: So tell me, what will you say is your **biggest strength**?

B: I would rather say '**most valuable asset**' instead of 'biggest strength'. It sounds less like a wrestling competition and it's more professional. What do you think?

(from *The Chaotic Job Interview*)

Table 4. Analysis of Excerpt 4

Components	Particulars
Purpose	To correct the use of 'biggest strength' while referring to someone's capabilities and skills
Target	The individuals that use the expression.
Winner	The audience after learning the correct expression from an actress.
Loser	The actor that used the expression in the comedy show.
Achievement	Taught the audience the appropriate term to use in such context.

Excerpt 4 and Table 4 correct and teach the expression to use in the given context. Though the target is any individual that uses the inappropriate term, 'biggest strength', the loser, who is laughed at, is the actor that said it. The audience is made the winner here because they learned the right thing to say without being exposed to the embarrassment of being corrected in the open.

4.1.2 Use of Humour in Grammar Teaching

Some of the scenes in the selected comedy skits are observed to address and correct grammatical errors. Examples of conversations in such scenes are presented in Excerpts 5 to 8 and analysed on Tables 5 to 8.

Excerpt 5

- A: And just yesterday, he told me that he **will be** going to Ibadan for a seminar.
 B: You are reporting something that already happened, right? 'He **would be**' at the time. 'He would be'.
 (from *Grammatical Police*)

Table 5. Analysis of Excerpt 5

Components	Particulars
Purpose	To correct the wrong use of tenses in expressions.
Target	The individuals using the expression.
Winner	The audience after learning the correct tense from an actress.
Loser	The actress that misused tenses in the comedy show.
Achievement	Taught the audience how to report past event.

Excerpt 5 and Table 5 capture and correct wrong use of tenses while reporting past events. The humour targeted speakers that usually commit this error but the actress that made the ungrammatical expression was made the loser. The humour is also used to teach the audience the appropriate tense to use and the reason for that.

Excerpt 6

- A: Why are you applying for the role of an administrative officer? How does that **relate with** what you studied?
 B: **Relate to...**
 A: Excuse me?
 B: You just said 'relate with', which is a common grammatical error. The right preposition to use is 'to'. So you say, 'how does that relate to what you studied?'
 (from *The Chaotic Job Interview*)

Table 6. Analysis of Excerpt 6

Components	Particulars
Purpose	To correct the wrong use of a preposition in a collocation.
Target	The individuals using the expression.
Winner	The audience after learning the correct usage from the actress.
Loser	The actor that used the expression in the comedy show.
Achievement	Taught the audience the appropriate preposition in the concerned context.

Excerpt 6 and Table 6 present and analyse humour that corrects the use of preposition. Its target remains the individuals that commit such errors while the loser is the actor that committed the error. The audience is the winner because they have learned the correct preposition.

Excerpt 7

- A: **Sorry to interrupt**
 B: Well, 'sorry to interrupt' is still not a complete sentence. It's a phrase. You could say, '**sorry to interrupt you guys.**'
 C: Because he needs to say a clause, right?
 B: Yeah.
 C: But I think he should say, '**I am sorry to interrupt you, sir and ma'am.**'

(from *Grammatical Date*)

Table 7. Analysis of Excerpt 7

Component	Particulars
Purpose	To correct the use of fragmented expression in formal occasions
Target	The individuals making such errors
Winner	The audience that know and those that recently learned the correct expression from the actress
Loser	The actors that used the fragmented expression in the comedy show.
Achievement	Taught the audience the appropriate way of expressing themselves in formal conversations

Excerpt 7 and Table 7 present and analyse an error involved in making incomplete sentences during a formal conversation. The actors used the humour to reveal the correct expression and further explain the reason the incomplete sentence is inappropriate. The actor that made the fragmented sentence is the loser in this situation while the audience is the winner.

Excerpt 8

- A: It is not by removing your belt. It is not removing it. **If you make me lost my temper** right now, you will not believe your eyes.
- B: Baby, you can't say, 'don't make me lost my temper.' That is a huge grammatical blunder that will be punishable offence under the law for anyone, who claims to speak English as a language. Oh my God, we are still in the present. So you are supposed to say, **'do not let me lose my temper.'**

Table 8. Analysis of Excerpt 8

Component	Particulars
Purpose	To correct poor expression of time
Target	Individuals that use tenses inappropriately
Winner	The audience
Loser	The actor that used the captured expression in the comedy show.
Achievement	Taught the audience the correct tense to use in such a situation

The humour captured in Excerpt 8 and analysed in Table 8 is designed to correct the wrong use of tenses in expressions. The target of the humour remains the individuals that commit errors while expressing time while the loser is the actor that is laughed at for committing such an error. The audience that laughed at the actor are the winner of the game.

4.2 Discussion of Findings

The analysis of data shows that the selected comedy skits were successfully used to deliver lessons on the use of the English language. They address issues that are related to word choices, sentence construction, and grammar. These observations align with the findings of Stankic and Akbari, which reveal that humour is used in teaching grammar and vocabulary (Stankic 262; Akbari 100). This then indicates that humour can help adult language learners to overcome some of their challenges, especially insufficient vocabulary and poor knowledge of grammar (Isik 74). The study further observes that the dramas focus on correcting errors the users of English commit by first stating the errors, revealing why they are incorrect expressions, and then revealing the accurate thing to say. They create humour while correcting the wrong errors and ridiculing the actors that committed them. This can remove

anxiety and low self-confidence from adult learners. That way, they are able to teach the English language to their audience.

Another observation made in this study is that the actors used humour to create a conducive learning environment for their audience. They do this by making the actors that committed errors the losers and receivers of the humour. Even though the purpose of these dramas is to dissuade the audience from using certain inaccurate expressions, they avoided a direct attack on them by shifting the direct target of the ridicule from them (the audience that commit such errors) to the actors that represent them. That way, the audience do not only laugh at the foolery of the affected characters but also fail to see themselves as objects of the humour. As a result, they do not feel directly attacked while they learn the proper ways of using the target language. If such strategy is applied in teaching language to adult learners, the rate of reluctant adult language learners (as observed by Shoiria 128) may reduce.

5.1 Conclusion

Humour has been described as anything that can make people laugh or smile. It can be an act, a behaviour, or an expression, which can lighten the atmosphere, entertain the audience, and prepare them psychologically and socially for lessons. In addition to these, it can be used as a means of delivering critical information and messages. These qualities make the concept an important tool in language classrooms, where teachers can utilise it to deliver their lessons.

This study observes that Nigerian comedy skits have proved to be effective means of correcting common errors used by Nigerians when they speak the English language. Actors in these skits make hilarious expressions that reveal inappropriate use of English terms in certain contexts as well as ungrammatical sentences that can distort intended meanings. The hilarity they create with the wrong expressions and the manner they use to correct them capture the attention of their audience and further deliver important language lessons to them. However, since the actors that construct the wrong expressions are the direct targets of the humour, the audience are prevented from feeling directly attacked. Hence, comedy skits that adopt this strategy in language teaching and learning are effective means of teaching language to adult learners.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on the observations made during the course of this study, the following are recommended:

1. Language teachers should adopt humour as a technique for teaching vocabulary and grammar to their adult learners.
2. More actors and dramatists should use their arts and platforms to teach proper use of language to their audience.
3. Users of endangered languages should sponsor dramas and comedy skits that will reveal their language to their audience. This will help them revitalise their language.

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Appendix

Links to Videos

1. The chaotic job interview. <https://youtu.be/hZfDDYEiPCM>.
2. Grammatical date. <https://youtu.be/KSOhsZtJ2yM>.
3. Grammar police. <https://youtu.be/IOcPRCkbePc>.
4. My genius girlfriend. https://youtu.be/avrOlu_X9B0