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The Effect of Context (Humorous vs. Non-humorous) on Vocabulary Acquisition and Retention of Iranian EFL Learners

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Abstract

For almost four decades, ESL/EFL scholars have been trying to find which learning type, contextualized vs. decontextualized, leads to better vocabulary acquisition and retention. In an attempt to solve this problem, this study tried to examine the possible effectiveness of using humorous context on vocabulary acquisition and retention. Another issue that was undertaken in the present study was comparing the efficiency of contextualized and decontextualized vocabulary learning and retention. For this purpose, 58 Iranian EFL learners were categorized into 3 groups: a) humorous, b) non-humorous, and c) decontextualized. The findings were analyzed using one-way ANOVA and Tukey post hoc test. As the results revealed, the participants in decontextualized group outperformed the participants in both humorous and non-humorous groups. However, it should be noted that the performance of humorous group was significantly better than the performance of non-humorous group.

Keywords: Vocabulary Learning, Vocabulary Retention, Humor, Context

1. Introduction

A word is the most important component of communicative competence, and hence communication. Some scholars, such as Decarrico (2001), believe that no matter what language– first, second, or foreign– we are learning, vocabulary is a fundamental part of its acquisition. The significance of vocabulary acquisition and its centrality in language learning have been acknowledged by various ESL and EFL scholars (Grabe, 1991; Huckin&Coady, 1999; Laufer, Elder, Hill, & Congdon, 2004; Laufer & Hulstijn, 2001; Read & Chapelle, 2001; Schmitt, Schmitt, & Clapham, 2001).

With the advent of different teaching and learning approaches and methods, vocabulary teaching and learning was approached differently. The late 1980s and early 1990s is the time span during which vocabulary study and teaching came to be recognized as important and necessary. In this period, with the advances in computer-assisted research and insights provided by psycholinguistic studies, vocabulary received the attention it deserved (Decarrico, 2001). Prior to this time, vocabulary study had been neglected due to the belief that vocabulary could take care of itself. Such negligence is attributed to language teaching approaches that were dominant throughout the 1940s to the 1980s.

Hunt and Beglar (2002) present three approaches to teaching vocabulary: (1) incidental learning, (2) explicit instruction, and (3) independent strategy development. Many studies have been undertaken by scholars on how vocabulary can be acquired incidentally. Despite the efforts of these studies, the results are not as satisfactory as they should be. As Nation (2006) states, the comparison of the results of learning vocabulary from context and intentional vocabulary learning–learning words in isolation– has shown that the latter has yielded better results. Similar results were found in the studies carried out by Laufer and Paribakht (1998), and Webb (2008a). As

Webb (2008b) suggests, one can attribute these less than satisfactory results to the context in which the words appear. Studies carried out on the effect of different contexts on vocabulary learning have ended with contradictory results, which show that context plays a role in the learning process (Webb, 2008b).

Yet another factor that affects learning in general and might have an effect on vocabulary learning is motivation. As Laufer and Hulstijn (2001) state, "motivation promotes success and achievement in L2 learning" (p. 1).On the role of interest in learning, Bergin (1999) notes that "promoting interest can enhance learning if applied appropriately" (p. 87). He further adds that one way to increase interest in learners is the use of humor. The study and use of humor has been advocated in many fields, e.g. psychology (Newirth, 2006; Summerfelt, Lippman Ira, & Hyman Jr., 2010), discourse studies (Holmes & Marra, 2002; Lin-qiong, 2007), and EFL/ESL studies (Askildson, 2005; Minchew & Hopper, 2008). However, as Celik (2004) asserts in comparison with other fields, humor is understudied/underused in ESL/EFL classrooms.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Contextualized vs. Decontextualized vocabulary acquisition

There is no consensus among scholars regarding the efficacy of contextualized and decontextualized vocabulary learning. Some take sides with the contextualized mode (e.g., Krashen, 1989; Oxford & Scarcella, 1994), while others strongly recommend a decontextualized mode for learning vocabulary (e.g., Qian, 1996; Laufer, 1991). Below, you can see some studies in which either contextualized, decontextualized, and/or a combination of both were examined.

Pitts, White, and Krashen (1989) studied acquiring incidental vocabulary knowledge through novel. The participants read two chapters of a novel containing Russian slang words. As the results reveal, the participants acquired some slang while reading; 1.81/28 and 2.42/30. The authors attributed this small gain to factors such as text difficulty, inadequate encounters with the words, participants' lack of interest in the story, post-test's not being representative of all the words learners were exposed to. The authors believe that although the gains were small, some learning happened; i.e. vocabulary can be learned incidentally through context.

Mason and Krashen (2004) conducted a study to examine the claim made by Coady (1997), that explicit instruction is more effective than incidental vocabulary learning. They compared the vocabulary gains of two groups, using 2 different methods. In one group, the new words were presented to the participants through reading the stories to them, "story-only" group. The second group, "story-plus-study" group, not only heard the story, but they also were presented some supplementary activities to focus their attention on the new words. This study, as the authors claim, is not a comparison of "pure-acquisition" with "acquisition plus supplementary learning." "The subjects in the 'story-only' condition were told which words were target words and were clearly focused on form. The result of their study shows that learning vocabulary through additional focus on form, traditional vocabulary exercises, is not as efficient as learning vocabularies through hearing them in the context of stories.

The findings of Mason and Krashen's (2004) study are in sharp contrast with what Paribakht and Wesche (1997) found. Paribakht and Wesche (1997) conducted a study in which they compared the effectiveness of two reading tasks with different follow-up activities on vocabulary learning of 38 ESL learners. Both groups were exposed to the target words through two thematically-related texts. The first group, Reading only, answered to comprehension questions and the second one, Reading Plus, completed some text related vocabulary activities. Although the administration of the VKS revealed that both tasks lead to vocabulary gain, the vocabulary gain of the Reading plus group was higher. Moreover, this group was able to use the words productively, i.e. using the newly-learned words in sentences while the Reading Only group only showed mastery of the target words at recognition level.

2.2 Humor

Schmitt (1994) studied how retention would differ with regard to sentences that are humorous and the ones that are not. He found that the participants remembered the humorous sentences with greater ease than the non-humorous sentences. Learners were, also, tested to see whether they could recognize the words that appeared in the humorous context or not. The results show that they had a better ability to recall the words that appeared in the humorous sentences. Since this study was carried out in the realm of psychology, no attention was paid to the vocabulary knowledge of the participants. Similarly, Kaplan and Pascoe (1977) stated that groups receiving lectures with more concept-related humor performed much better in recalling examples. The authors further add that although the comprehension was not affected, there was a better recall of humorous examples than the non-humorous examples.

Garner (2006) studied the use of humor as a pedagogical tool and its impact on learners' learning and retention

abilities. He also measured the extent to which the course, the teacher, and the teaching method, when accompanied by humor, were satiating for the learners. The 117 participants were randomly assigned to two groups, and were given three 40-minute lectures on research methods and statistics; one group received these lectures with humor added to them. To make sure that the materials added to these lectures were humorous, a group of academic experts were asked to decide whether they were humorous, appropriate, and related to the content of the material under instruction. The findings of this study indicate that the humor group's ratings of the teacher, the course, and the teaching method were higher than standard group's ratings. In addition, the humor group had learned and retained the lectures' information much better than the other group.

One of the shortcomings of studies conducted on the effectiveness of humor on learning is that they are mostly anecdotal, and the ones that are not anecdotal are in the form of self-reports (e.g., Wanzer et al., 2010). And as Berk (1996) maintains, in classrooms humor is almost never used methodically and is not directed towards a specific learning goal. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, to date no empirical studies have been done to measure the effectiveness of using humor on EFL vocabulary acquisition and retention.

This study is an attempt to compare the possible effectiveness of two types of vocabulary learning: contextualized versus decontextualized. It aims at determining the impact of context on the acquisition and long-term retention of vocabulary by Iranian EFL learners. Moreover, it tries to answer the question whether context type, in this case humorous context, plays a facilitative role in the acquisition and retention of vocabulary by Iranian learners or not. Based on the purpose of the study, the research questions are as follows:

1. Does humorous context have an effect on learning new vocabulary by Iranian EFL learners as measured by receptive tests?

2. Does humorous context have an effect on learning new vocabulary by Iranian EFL learners as measured by productive tests?

3. Does humorous context have an effect on the retention of new vocabulary by Iranian EFL learners as measured by receptive tests?

4. Does humorous context have an effect on the retention of new vocabulary by Iranian EFL learners as measured by productive tests?

Based on the research questions above, four null hypotheses were developed by the authors:

H0 (1): Humorous context has no effect on learning new vocabulary by Iranian EFL learners as measured by receptive tests.

H0 (2): Humorous context has no effect on learning new vocabulary by Iranian EFL learners as measured by productive tests.

H0 (3): Humorous context has no effect on retention of new vocabulary by Iranian EFL learners as measured by receptive tests.

H0 (4): Humorous context has no effect on retention of new vocabulary by Iranian EFL learners as measured by productive tests.

3. Method

3.1 Participants

82 Iranian EFL learners took part in this study. The participants were all female and ranged in age from 16 to 28. The learners had studied English for at least two years in Saba English Language Institute in Tehran. To ensure that the participants were at the same level of English language proficiency, the *Oxford Placement Test* (OPT, 2004) was administered to them prior to the treatment. After the administration of this test, those participants who had a score below 120 and those with a score above 134 were discarded from the study, giving us a total of 77 learners. Of these 77 students, 19 (pilot group) were assigned to rank the texts for their humorousness. The other 58 were divided into 3 groups; the humorous group (HG), non-humorous group (NHG), and comparison group (CG). The HG (experimental group1), consisting of 24 learners in 3 classes, received the target words through humorous contexts. The NHG (experimental group2), 17 learners in 2 classes, worked on the target words through non-humorous texts. And, finally, the CG (comparison group) consisted of 17 students in 2 classes. The targets words presented to this group were decontextualized.

3.2 Procedure

In order to have homogeneous groups, the OPT (2004) was administered to the primary 82 participants of this study. Based on their performance on the test, 77 of the participants were selected for the present study. 19 of

these participants were asked to rate 42 texts, taken from http://dir.yahoo.com/entertainment/humor/jokes/, to see whether they would find these texts humorous or not. As Paribakht and Wesche (1999) assert, one of the criteria in choosing a text is for it to have a manageable difficulty level. To take this assertion into account, these 42 texts had been analyzed to see whether they have the same readability level using the online Fox Readability Index and Flesch Reading Ease.

The participants had been provided with a definition of humor in advance of ranking the texts. In order to avoid any kind of confusion on the side of learners, the instructions were given in their mother tongue, Farsi. Afterwards, the mean for each of the texts was calculated and those texts with a mean below 3.2 were discarded from the study, leaving us with 20 texts.

In order to have texts with similar contents in both groups, the punch line of these 20 texts were changed and 2 native speakers of English were asked to evaluate the texts for their authenticity. Both of them agreed that only three of the texts seemed unnatural.

The participants who were in charge of ranking the texts had been asked to underline the words they did not know which amounted to a total of 78 words. These 78 words were administered to the remaining groups through the VKS. The words that were known by even one of the learners were discarded from the study. The not-yet-known 62 words were presented to the participants during 3 weeks for 7 sessions. The classes the participants attended were held 3 times a week for 1 and a half hours. A half hour of each session was devoted to practicing the new words, except for the CG, which spent 15 minutes of each session on the TWs.

Each session the participants received around 9 words. HG received the TWs through humorous contexts, and NHG through non-humorous texts. Each text was followed by some questions. The types of questions that followed the texts were a) literal comprehension questions, b) inference questions, and c) prediction questions. These questions came in various forms: a) true or false, b) wh-questions, c) MC, and d) fill in the blanks. The TWs in the text were accompanied by single glosses. Since the institute in which the study was carried out had an English-only policy, the glosses were L2 synonyms of the TWs. The TWs presented to the CG were devoid of any kind of context, i.e. they were decontextualized. The participants in this group were given a list of words accompanied by their L2 meanings. The follow-up activity assigned to this group was a set of questions targeting the words they just studied. Since the cued fill-in-the-blank question type was new to all of the participants, it was introduced to them as a follow-up activity during the third treatment session.

Using the 62 TWs of the study, the researcher developed 124 items to be used in the post-tests. 62 of those items were in the receptive mode (MC questions) and the other 62 in the productive mode (cued fill-in-the-blank questions). These 124 items were administered to two groups, consisting of FCE (First Certificate in English) students. Each group received 62 questions, one receiving the productive test, and the other the receptive one. These participants were not allowed to consult a dictionary while answering the test items. The time they spent on answering those items was not set in advance; they could answer them at their convenience. However, they had been asked to write the time they started taking the test and the time the test was done on their test papers. The facility and discrimination value of each item was calculated, and those having the same facility and discrimination indices were used in the post-tests, which came to a total of 98 items.

One session after the treatment was over, the participants were administered a surprise test, the immediate post-test. This test consisted of two sections, productive and receptive. The productive test, consisting of 20 items, was the first test administered to the participants. They had 30 minutes to complete this test. After this test was done, the participants were asked to answer the 20 receptive items for which they were allowed 20 minutes. After a three-week interval, the delayed post-test was administered to the participants. This test, too, consisted of two sections, productive and receptive. The items used in the immediate post-test were not used in the delayed post-test. The participants had 30 minutes to answer the 20 productive items, and 20 minutes to answer the 20 receptive ones. Each item in both the immediate and the delayed post-tests was given a score of one, each test having a total score of 20.

4. Results

As Table 1.shows, the results indicate a statistically significant difference ($F (2, 55) = 11.02$, $p = .001$).

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Table 1. The results of one-way ANOVA for the receptive immediate post-test.

	SS	df	MS	F	Sig.
Between Groups	153.85	2	76.92	11.02	.001
Within Groups	383.66	55	6.97		
Total	537.51	57			

*p< .05

In order to determine which group outperformed the others in this test, a post hoc analysis, using the Tukey test, was done which is reported in Table 2. below.

Table 2. Multiple Comparisons of the receptive immediate post-test.

Groups	Mean Difference	Sig.
HG vs. NHG	3.89	.001
CG vs. HG	2.07	.042
NHG vs. CG	1.82	.119

*p< .05

As Table 2. shows, the difference between HG and NHG is statistically significant (Mean Difference= 3.89), p= .001. This reveals that humorous contexts help learners acquire receptive vocabulary knowledge. The difference between CG and HG is also significant, (Mean Difference= 2.07), p= .042, showing that when it comes to receptive vocabulary knowledge word lists are superior to humorous contexts. No statistically significant difference was found between NHG and CG.

Table 3. The results of one-way ANOVA for the productive immediate post-test.

	SS	df	MS	F	Sig.
Between Groups	98.59	2	49.29	7.14	.002
Within Groups	379.68	55	6.90		
Total	478.27	57			

*p< .05

As Table 3. illustrates, the difference between the means is statistically significant ($F(2, 55) = 7.141$, p= .002< .05). In order to pinpoint the difference between the groups, a post hoc Tukey test was used (see Table 4.).

Table 4. Multiple Comparisons of the productive immediate post-test.

Groups	Mean Difference	Sig.
HG vs. NHG	2.98	.002
CG vs. HG	2.15	.032
NHG vs. CG	0.82	.634

*p< .05

As Table 4. shows, the difference between HG and NHG is statistically significant (Mean Difference= 2.98), p= .002. The mean difference between CG and HG is also statistically significant (Mean Difference= 2.15),

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p= .032. There is no statistically significant difference between NHG and CG. These findings reveal that the use of either humorous contexts or word lists improves productive vocabulary knowledge, while non-humorous contexts do not so.

Table 5.The results of one-way ANOVA for the receptive delayed post-test.

	SS	df	MS	F	Sig.
Between Groups	190.83	2	95.41	18.34	.001
Within Groups	286.07	55	5.20		
Total	476.91	57			

*p< .05

As Table 5. demonstrates, the difference between the means is statistically significant F(2,55)=18.34, p=.001. A post hoc Tukey test was run to see where the difference(s) lie(s) (see Table 6.).

Table 6. Multiple Comparisons of the receptive delayed post-test.

Groups	Mean Difference	Sig.
HG vs. NHG	4.32	.001
CG vs. HG	2.43	.004
NHG vs. CG	0.82	.050

*p < .05

As can be seen in Table 6., the difference between HG and NHG is statistically significant (Mean Difference= 4.32), *p*= .001. The mean difference between HG and CG is also statistically significant (Mean Difference= 2.43), *p*= .004. There is no statistically significant difference between the performance of NHG and that of CG. These results indicate that humorous contexts make a difference in the retention of receptive vocabulary knowledge, as do word lists. Nonetheless, it should be pointed out that the participants in CG outperformed the participants in HG.

Table 7. The results of one-way ANOVA for the productive delayed post-test.

	SS	df	MS	F	Sig.
Between Groups	120.85	2	60.42	13.48	.001
Within Groups	246.54	55	4.48		
Total	367.39	57			

*p< .05

As Table 7. shows, the difference between the means is statistically significant F(2,55)=13.48, *p*=.001. In order to pinpoint the difference between the means a post hoc Tukey test was used (presented in Table 8.).

Table 8.. Multiple Comparisons of the productive delayed post-test.

Groups	Mean Difference	Sig.
HG vs. NHG	3.44	.001
CG vs. HG	1.91	.017
NHG vs. CG	1.52	.098

*p < .05

As can be seen in Table 8., the difference between HG and NHG is statistically significant (Mean Difference= 3.44), p= .001. The mean difference between CG and HG is also statistically significant (Mean Difference= 1.91), p= .017. There is no statistically significant difference between NHG and CG. The findings presented here reveal that use of humor helps learner retain productive vocabulary knowledge. Similarly, word lists help retention of productive vocabulary knowledge.

4.1 Discussion

In this section, the 3 dimensions of the present study will be discussed in turn: 1) receptive/productive dimension, 2) humorous/non-humorous dimension, and 3) contextualized/decontextualized dimension.

4.1.1 Investigating Research Questions One and Two

These research questions explored the effect of humorous context on the acquisition of receptive and productive knowledge of the TWs. For this purpose, a one-way ANOVA and a Tukey post hoc test were run.

As illustrated above, the receptive gains of the three groups were much higher than their productive gains. This low performance in the productive test can be ascribed to the learners' not being used to this kind of measurement, i.e. cued recall task. However, it should be mentioned that cued recall task was introduced to the participants as a follow-up activity in all of the three groups. Webb (2005) maintains that if words are learned receptively, the performance of the learners in the receptive tests will be better; the opposite is true when words are learned productively. He argues that words will be learned receptively through checking dictionaries, matching words with their definitions and meanings, guessing from context, and learning from word lists. In this study, the participants in HG and NHG learned the TWs by matching them with their definitions, and the participants in CG learned them using word lists, they were acquired receptively. This can be an additional reason why learners did better on the receptive test. This finding aligns with the findings of Laufer's (1998) study.

As mentioned previously, the participants in HG outperformed the participants in NHG on both the receptive and the productive immediate post-tests. As a result, the first two null hypotheses, indicating humorous context has no effect on vocabulary acquisition, are not supported. The findings reveal that humor does have an effect on the learning of new material, in this case vocabulary. The findings corroborate the findings of studies carried out by Schmitt (1994), and Kaplan and Pascoe (1977). These researchers found that humor can be used as a tool to facilitate learning. The results of the present study also confirm the statements made by Askildson (2005) and Ketabi and Simin (2009) denoting that humor plays a significant role in learning. One reason for this outperformance can be attributed to the attention-grabbing effect of humor. As Wanzer and Frymier (1999) state, the use of humor results in more attention and attendance on the side of learners that in turn leads to more learning. A similar contention was made by Summerfelt et al.(2010). They assert that the surprise humor brings about can help learners concentrate on an issue. Concentration by itself might not be sufficient for a subject to be learned; however, it is a prerequisite for learning.

Nation (2001, 2007) believes that incidental learning gains are small and they depend on large quantities of input. Moreover, it has been proven in the literature that vocabulary gain through incidental learning is lower and needs multiple exposures to be remembered (e.g., Day, Omura, & Hiramatsu, 1991; Dupuy & Krashen, 1993; Gardner, 2004; Horst, Cobb, & Meara, 1998). This might be the reason for the rather poor performance of the participants in NHG.

However, it should be pointed out that participants in CG outperformed the participants in HG and NHG in both immediate post-tests. The better performance of CG can be attributed to the fact that in both immediate post-tests the focus was on the gains made with regard to knowledge of form and meaning. As Webb (2007b) asserts, it is not surprising that knowledge of form and meaning is gained to a great extant in decontextualized tasks since all the learners do is to link meaning with form. This finding corroborates the findings of Qian's (1996) study in which he found that decontextualized learning is superior to its contextualized counterpart. However, the results of the present study are in sharp contrast with what Heidari Soureshjani (2011) found. This contradictory finding might be the result of the different context types used in Heidari Soureshjani's (2011) study and the present study. Heidari Soureshjani's (2011) used single sentences as context while in the present study jokes were utilized as contexts.

4.1.2 Investigating Research Questions Three and Four

These two research questions investigated the effect of using humorous context on retention of the TWs receptively and productively. To this end, the statistical analyses explained in section 4.2. were used. It was found that humor can make a difference with regard to the retention of vocabulary.

In the delayed post-tests, as was the case with the immediate post-tests, the participants performed much better in the receptive tests in comparison with the productive one. Laufer (2005) believes that acquiring productive knowledge is more difficult than acquiring receptive knowledge. This statement can account for the lower performance of the participants on the productive test. This finding is also in line with the findings of Schmitt and Meara (1997), who found that the gains of receptive knowledge were much higher than productive knowledge gains.

Regarding the effect of context on retention of the TWs, it was found that the participants in HG outperformed the participants in NHG in the delayed post-tests. This finding reveals that humor not only affects learning but also affects long-term retention. This finding is in line with what Garner (2006) and Torok et al. (2010) found. As Summerfelt et al. (2010) stated, one factor that improves memory of humorous material is the arousal caused by jokes' being funny. As stated previously, the jokes in this study were ranked for their humorousness and were found to be funny. The humor-created arousal can be one reason for the better performance of the participants in HG. Rehearsal of jokes by the participants in HG can be another factor contributing to their better performance. This was revealed in a follow-up conversation the researcher had with some of the participants of the HG. The participants stated that they tried to memorize the jokes. Regarding the rehearsal of jokes, Summerfelt et al. (2010) observed, "participants enjoy repeating a joke or a punch line, want to memorize it for later retelling, or think more about a humorous item" (p. 377). This finding aligns with Vahid Dastjerdi, Rafie and Kasaian's (2010) results. The authors found that application of humorous songs helps learners improve their listening ability. This effect was found in both the immediate and delayed post-tests of their study. Celik (2004), also, found that humor can be used to both improve concentration and long-term retention of the taught material.

The poor performance of learners exposed to the TWs through non-humorous context can be attributed to inadequate encounters with words and participants' lack of interest in the contexts provided for them (Pitts, White, & Krashen, 1989). It has been repeatedly mentioned in the literature (e. g., Rott, 1999; Webb, 2007b) that when it comes to incidental acquisition of vocabulary, the number of encounters with an unknown word increases the chance of learning it. And as Webb (2007b) states more than 10 exposures to a word is needed for that word to be fully learned. Also as Hulstijn (2003) observed, glossed words that appear only once are difficult to learn; numerous encounters are needed for the word to be learned.

The comparison of the results obtained from the post-tests revealed that CG outperformed both HG and NHG. This finding indicates that although learning vocabulary through word lists might not be favored from a scholarly perspective (Oxford & Scarcella, 1994), it can (and does) help learners to retain vocabulary knowledge. This finding is in sharp contrast with Oxford and Scarcella's (1994) claim indicating words learned through word lists will be forgotten rapidly. However, it should be mentioned that in the present study only knowledge of form and meaning were tested. This might be the reason why learners in the CG retained the TWs better than the other two groups. This finding is in line with Nation's (1980) assertion; vocabulary learned from word lists will be retained several weeks after the first encounter.

5. Conclusion

As the results revealed, the participants in CG, exposed to the TWs through word lists, outperformed the other 2 groups significantly. However, it should be mentioned that the performance of HG on both the immediate and the delayed post-tests was significantly higher than the performance of NHG.The findings of the present study also revealed that humor can be effective in both learning the TWs and retaining them after an interval.

Based on the findings of this study, it can be suggested that not every context leads to vocabulary learning; therefore, teachers should dedicate some time to finding texts that are appealing to the learners. This aligns with what Paribakht and Wesche (1999) stated; they asserted that the nature of the written text significantly affects vocabulary-learning process. However, with regard to the use of humorous material in the classrooms, a word of caution is in order; care should be taken in selecting those humorous materials that are appropriate. As Wanzer et al. (2010) observed, negative humor results in the reduction of motivation and learning.

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