

THE USE OF HUMOUR IN THE ESL CLASSROOM

RAYMOND A/L MARIADASS @ MANICKAM

**A THESIS SUBMITTED
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE
OF MASTER OF EDUCATION**

**FACULTY OF LANGUAGES
UNIVERSITI PENDIDIKAN SULTAN IDRIS**

2007

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the work in this dissertation is my own except for quotations and summaries which have been duly acknowledged.

01.10.2007

RAYMOND A/L MARIADASS @ MANICKAM

M20041000154

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

To the Almighty who gave me the strength and patience, to complete this challenging study.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank my family for the sacrifice and support given by them to me to enable me to complete this study. My wife, Perabavathy a/p Parumal @ Perumal and my son, Noah.

My parents, Mr. A.P.S. Mariadass and Mrs. A. Lourdumary for being my role models and for their inspiration and support. They taught me the value of education and made sacrifices to ensure that I get a proper one. My brother, George and my sister, Jacey for the courage and support. My grandmother, Madam Lani, for her encouragement and love.

Great appreciation goes to my supervisor, Dr. Goh Hock Seng for his invaluable advice, guidance, tolerance, suggestions, patience and most of all for generously sharing his vast knowledge and expertise in the field of research.

Not forgetting, Associate Professor Dr. Sali Zaliha bt. Mustapha, Dr. Mariam bt. Mohamed Nor, Dr. Ghani b. Abu, Dr. Nor Azmi Mostafa and Mr. Ahmad Zainuri b. Loap Ahmad for their kind assistance, guidance and reflective comments for this research especially during my proposal vetting.

Many thanks, to all my friends who shared their knowledge and experience regarding this study especially to Mr. Chandra Mohan a/l Krishnan, Mr. Rabendra Dev Prasad a/l Prasad VPN, Mr. Ilengoven a/l S. Krishnasamy, Pn. Lee Lian See, Mr. Maniappan a/l Kandan, Mr. Chan Fook Keong, Mr. Nithiaselvan a/l Thamatharan and Mr. Shuibun b. Hamid.

My heartfelt gratitude to all the principals, the English teachers and students of the Secondary schools in Larut, Matang and Selama District who were involved in this study, for their kind support and cooperation which have made the collection of data possible for the study.

Last but not least, I also would like to thank the Principal, Tuan Haji Yahaya b. Abd Wahab, The Head of the English Panel, Miss Louisa Ng Suan Choo and English teachers of Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Darul Ridwan, Taiping, Perak who rendered their help and co-operation for this study.

ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to find out the teachers' and students' views on the use of humour in the ESL classroom. The study was conducted in 14 Secondary schools (7 urban, 7 rural) in the Larut, Matang and Selama District. 130 English teachers and 420 Form 4 students participated in this study. Two sets of survey questionnaires were used to collect data. The first set was given to the teachers and the other to the students. Nonetheless, items used for both the questionnaire were similar. Then the collected data was analysed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Windows 11.5 Version. Descriptive statistics such as frequency, percentage and crosstabs were used to describe the data. The findings showed 95% of the English teachers and 97.6% of responded positively to the use of humour in the ESL classroom. Teachers and students agreed to 15 out of 16 reasons for using humour whereby the percentage of agreement was above 80%. The reasons include the use of humour to provoke thinking, relieve stress, motivate, gain attention, reduce anxiety, increase confidence, create excitement, create healthy environment, enhance communication, reinforce knowledge, help understand other cultures, increase interest, encourage participation, retention and explain complicated topics. On the other hand, teachers and students disagreed to the use of humour to embarrass students. From the findings, it is evident that teachers had used humour in their English classrooms and students viewed it to the same extent. The responses to the questionnaires showed that humour helps students in learning the English Language. Therefore, humour should be included in the teaching and learning process.

ABSTRAK

Kajian ini bertujuan untuk mengenalpasti pandangan guru dan pelajar terhadap penggunaan humor dalam pembelajaran Bahasa Inggeris sebagai bahasa kedua. Kajian ini telah dijalankan di 14 buah sekolah menengah (7 bandar, 7 luar bandar) di daerah Larut Matang dan Selama. Seramai 130 orang guru bahasa Inggeris dan 420 orang pelajar Tingkatan 4 telah menyertai kajian ini. Dua set soal selidik telah digunakan untuk mengumpul data. Set pertama telah diedarkan kepada guru bahasa Inggeris dan yang kedua kepada pelajar Tingkatan 4. Item yang digunakan dalam kedua-dua soal selidik adalah sama. Data yang diperolehi kemudiannya dianalisis dengan menggunakan Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Windows Versi 11.5. Statistik deskriptif seperti frekuensi, peratusan dan 'crosstabs' telah digunakan dalam menghuraikan data. Hasil kajian mendapati 95% guru dan 97.6% pelajar memberikan pandangan positif terhadap penggunaan humor dalam kelas bahasa Inggeris. Guru-guru dan pelajar menyokong 15 daripada 16 sebab menggunakan humor yang mana nilai peratus setiap item tersebut melebihi 80%. Sebab-sebab yang dimaksudkan adalah penggunaan humor untuk mencetuskan pemikiran, mengurangkan stress, memotivasikan pelajar, menarik perhatian pelajar, meningkat keyakinan, mewujudkan suasana yang seronok, mewujudkan suasana pembelajaran yang sihat, meningkatkan komunikasi, mengukuhkan pemahaman, membantu memahami budaya lain, meningkatkan minat, menggalakkan penglibatan, mengingatkan pelajaran dan menerangkan topik yang sukar. Walaupun demikian, kedua-dua kumpulan responden tidak bersetuju terhadap penggunaan humor untuk memalukan pelajar. Hasil kajian juga telah menunjukkan dengan jelas bahawa guru bahasa Inggeris sememangnya menggunakan humor dalam kelas mereka dan pelajar juga mengakui penggunaannya. Respon mereka melalui borang soalselidik menunjukkan bahawa unsur humor juga dapat membantu pelajar dalam pembelajaran Bahasa Inggeris sebagai bahasa kedua. Oleh yang demikian unsur humor perlu disisipkan dalam proses pengajaran dan pembelajaran.

TABLE OF CONTENT

		Pages
DECLARATION		ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT		iii
ABSTRACT		iv
ABSTRAK		v
LIST OF TABLES		xiii
LIST OF FIGURES		xv
LIST OF SYMBOLS, ABBREVIATIONS OR NOMENCLATURE		xvi
CHAPTER 1	INTRODUCTION	
1.0	Introduction	1
1.1	Background of the Study	2
1.2	Statement of the Problem	5
1.3	Purpose of the Study	6
1.4	Research Questions	6
1.5	Significance of the Study	7
1.6	Conceptual Framework	7
1.7	Limitation of the Study	10

	Pages
1.8 Definition of Terms	11
1.8.1 Humour	11
1.8.2 Location	11
1.9 Chapter Summary	11
 CHAPTER 2	
REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE	
2.0 Introduction	13
2.1 Definition of Humour	14
2.2 Theories of Humour	17
2.2.1 Superiority Theory	17
2.2.2 Incongruity Theory	18
2.2.3 Relief Theory	19
2.3 The Benefits of Humour in Learning	20
2.3.1 Humour and Retention	23
2.3.2 Humour and Motivation	27
2.3.3 Humour, Stress and Anxiety	29
2.3.4 Limitations of Using Humour	31
2.4 Humour in the Second Language Classroom	34
2.5 Application of Humour in the ESL Classroom	39
2.5.1 The Effect of Humour in Reading and Writing	39
2.5.2 The Effect of Humour on Vocabulary and Grammar	42

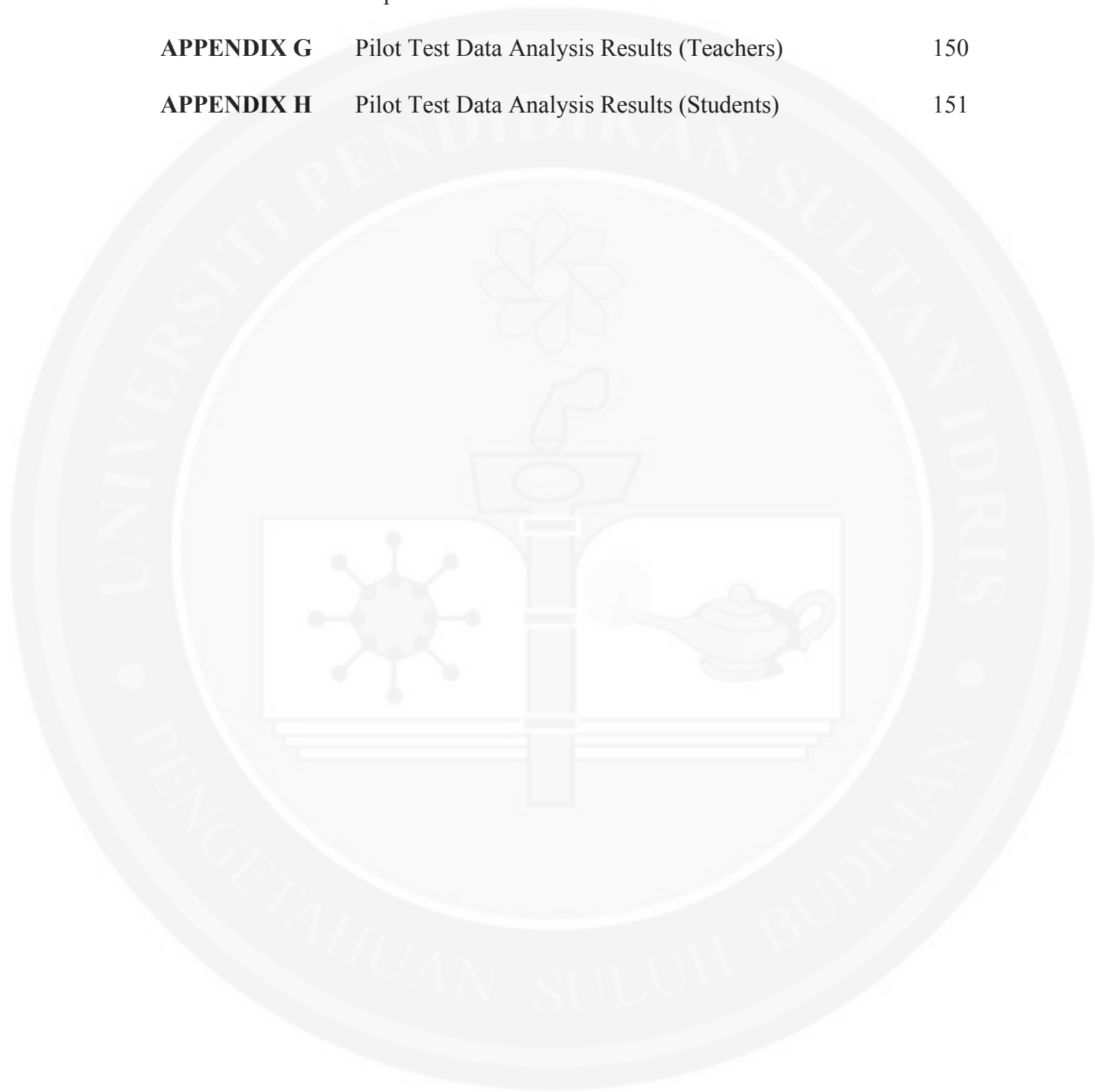
	Pages
2.5.3 The Effect of Humour in Communication	44
2.6 Teachers' Perception on the Use of Humour in the Classroom	46
2.7 Teachers' Reasons for Not Using Humour	48
2.8 Students' Perception on the Use of Humour in the Classroom	50
2.9 Strategies for Using Humour	55
2.10 Chapter Summary	57
 CHAPTER 3	
METHODOLOGY	
3.0 Introduction	60
3.1 Research Design	60
3.2 Sample	62
3.3 Instrumentation	63
3.3.1 Section A: Demographic Data	63
3.3.2 Section B: Teachers' and Students' personal response	64
3.3.3 Section C: Teachers' and Students' views	64
3.3.4 Section D: Personal Response	65
3.4 Pilot Study	65
3.5 Data Collection Procedures	67
3.6 Data Analysis Procedures	68
3.6.1 Descriptive Statistics	68

	Pages
3.7 Chapter Summary	70
 CHAPTER 4 ANALYSIS OF RESULTS	
4.0 Introduction	71
4.1 Respondents	71
4.2 Research Question 1	73
4.2.1 Teachers' Views	74
4.2.2 Students' Views	76
4.2.3 Urban Versus Rural	79
a. Teachers' Use of Humour	79
b. Language	80
4.3 Research Question 2	82
4.3.1 Teachers' Views	82
4.3.2 Teachers' Written Responses	87
a. Language Skills	88
b. Other Aspects of Language	88
c. Rapport	89
d. Teaching and Learning	89
4.3.3 Teachers' Suggestions	92
a. Usage	92
b. Application of Humour	93
c. Literature	93
4.4 Research Question 3	94
4.4.1 Students' Views	95

	Pages
4.4.2 Students' Written Responses	102
4.4.2.1 Positive Views	102
a. Improve English	103
b. Reduce Boredom	103
c. Rapport	104
d. Literature	104
4.4.2.2 Negative Views	105
4.4.3 Students' Suggestions	106
a. Usage	106
b. Types of Humour	107
c. Other feedback	107
4.4.4 Comparison of Teachers' and Students' Responses	108
4.5 Research Question 4	110
4.5.1 Urban and Rural Students' Views	111
4.5.2 Types of Humour	113
4.6 Chapter Summary	115
 CHAPTER 5	
CONCLUSION, INTERPRETATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS	
5.0 Introduction	116
5.1 Humour in the ESL classroom	116
5.2 Teachers' Views	117
5.2.1 Advantages of Using Humour	118
5.2.2 Disadvantages of Using Humour	120

	Pages
5.3 Students' Views	120
5.3.1 Benefits of Humour	121
5.3.2 Disadvantages of Humour	122
5.3.3 Types of Humour	123
5.4 Implications	123
5.4.1 English Teachers	124
5.4.2 Institutions of Higher Learning	124
5.4.3 Policy Makers	125
5.5 Limitations	125
5.6 Further Research	126
5.7 Summary	126
BIBLIOGRAPHY	127
APPENDICES	
APPENDIX A Overall Results of Teachers Reasons for Using Humour in the ESL classroom	134
APPENDIX B Overall Results of Students Responses on the English Teachers Reasons for Using Humour in the ESL classroom	135
APPENDIX C Teachers' Questionnaire	136
APPENDIX D Students' Questionnaire	141
APPENDIX E Approval Letter from Educational Planning and Research Development, Ministry of Education	148

	Pages
APPENDIX F Approval Letter from Perak State Education Department	149
APPENDIX G Pilot Test Data Analysis Results (Teachers)	150
APPENDIX H Pilot Test Data Analysis Results (Students)	151



LIST OF TABLES

Table	Pages
3.1 Distribution of the Sample	63
3.2 Framework of Analysis	68
4.1 Distribution of Information on Teachers' Background	72
4.2 Distribution of Information on Students' Background	72
Distribution of Information on Students' Background (Continue)	73
4.3 Teachers' Views on the Use of Humour	74
4.4 Teachers' Responses on the Use of Humour	74
4.5 Teachers' Responses on the Language Used when Using Humour	75
4.6 Students' Views on the Teachers' Use of Humour	76
4.7 Students' Responses on the Teachers' Use of Humour	77
4.8 Students' Responses on the Language Used when Using Humour	78
4.9 Comparison of Teachers' and Students' Response based on Location of Schools	79
4.10 Language Used by the Teachers based on Location of Schools	80
4.11 Teachers' Reasons for Using Humour	82
Teachers' Reasons for Using Humour (Continue)	83

Table	Pages
4.12 Teachers' Written Responses	87
4.13 Teachers' Other Reasons for Using Humour	88
4.14 Students' Responses on the English Teachers' Reasons for Using Humour	95
Students' Responses on the English Teachers' Reasons for Using Humour (Continue)	96
4.15 Students' Written Responses	102
4.16 Other Benefits Gained by Students from the Use of Humour	102
4.17 Differences between Teachers' and Students' Agreement on the Reasons for Using Humour	109
4.18 Comparison of Responses with the Highest Range of Disagreement	110
4.19 Comparison between Urban and Rural Students on the Reasons for their ESL Teachers Using Humour.	111
Comparisons between Urban and Rural Students on the Reasons for their ESL Teachers Using Humour (Continue)	112
Comparisons between Urban and Rural Students on the Reasons for their ESL Teachers Using Humour (Continue)	113
4.20 Types of Humour preferred by Rural and Urban Students	114

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure		Pages
1.1	Conceptual Framework of this study	9

LIST OF SYMBOLS, ABBREVIATIONS OR NOMENCLATURE

ESL	English as Second Language
L1	First Language
L2	Second Language
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
VCD	Video Compact Disc
DVD	Digital Versatile/ Video Disc



CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction

Learning a language is considered a daunting task for many students. It needs hard work and a great deal of effort on the part of the learners as well as the educators. In Malaysian schools, English is taught as a Second Language. The English Language is viewed as a critical subject recently due to the declining standard of English among students (Chee Choy & Troudi, 2006). Various approaches and methods are employed in order to improve the standard of English among students.

Several pedagogical tools were also developed to fulfil this task. These pedagogical tools include instructional practices such as journal writing or using daily oral language exercises; or resources such as textbooks, ICT or curriculum materials that provide such instructional practices. In doing so, there may be a tendency for many teachers to be rigid in their teaching whereby their aim is to complete the syllabus and prepare the students for the examination. This is because many teachers view language learning as a serious business and the methods adopted only emphasize

the development of the language skills such as listening, speaking, reading and writing.

Teachers tend to look at one side of enhancing language learning and forget another important aspect that is the element of fun in the classroom. An American educationist, Associate Professor Dr. Lee Mullally, claims that educators must know how to loosen up and make a classroom lively as students are more motivated to learn when they are in a happy mood (Arni Abdul Razak, 2004, New Sunday Times). Teachers who can make their classroom livelier will be able to attract their students' attention successfully. One of the pedagogical tools suggested is the use of humour in the ESL classroom.

A lot of researches have been conducted in Western countries on humour in various fields such as education, medicine and others (Collins, 1997; Vadillo, 1998; Whisonant, 1998; Tatum, 1999). However, very little research has been conducted in Malaysia on how students and teachers view humour as a teaching tool in ESL classroom.

1.1 Background of the Study

Humour was not viewed as a pedagogical tool until the middle of this century (Loomax & Moosavi, 1998). This was largely due to the view of education as a serious formal endeavour. But then, as time passed, educators started to search for effective methods which could help students to learn. Although teachers are equipped with various strategies, they still need to figure out the best way to present the information to their students. One of the strategies which is believed to produce results

is the use of humour as a pedagogical tool in the classroom. The use of humour in the educational field is a rather recent phenomenon.

Studies from several researchers (Rhem, 1998; Derks, Gardner & Agarwal (1998); Kher, Molstad & Donahue, 1999) indicated supportive results towards the use of humour in teaching. Humour not only lowers students' anxiety but also enhances learning on a purely cognitive level (Rhem, 1998). Besides that, humour is also identified as a teaching technique for developing a positive learning environment (Kher, Molstad & Donahue, 1999). It is crucial for the teachers to create a conducive environment for learning as they play a critical role in the classroom. When teachers establish a supportive social climate, students' minds are stimulated and they become more attentive (Kher, Molstad & Donahue, 1999).

Other researchers explored the perception of students towards the use of humour in the classroom. Students, in a study by Bryant, Comisky, Crane & Zillmann (1980), feel that professors who used humour are better teachers than those who did not use humour. Similar results were gained through a study conducted by Pollak & Freda (1997) whereby students preferred teachers who have a sense of humour. They also pointed out that their favourite teachers are the teachers who made the class fun in a variety of ways. Most of the researches conducted are focussed on learning and very little research has been carried out to examine the effectiveness of using humour in the ESL classroom in particular.

Vadillo (1998) stated that he has been using humour as a way of promoting students interaction in his English Language classroom. He found that students' interaction increased and they were more motivated to learn the language. According

to another researcher Province (2000), cited by Chiasson (2002) agrees that humour can allow the shy and timid students in the class to participate with the group especially in the EFL/ ESL classroom. Apart from increasing student interaction, humour could also facilitate retention. Derks, Gardner & Agarwal (1998), in their study looking at differences in sentences recall between those that were shown humorous sentences and non-humorous sentences, found that humorous sentences were better remembered than non-humorous sentences. This clearly indicates that humour has positive effect on cognitive processing.

Although, the above studies found humour to be an effective teaching tool, the use of humour still depends on the teachers. In reality, there are of course, many possible reasons given by teachers for not using humour in a language classroom. Sinclair (2002) asserted that teachers are frequently unwilling to take a perceived risk, protesting that they are 'unable to tell a joke', or that they might lose control as this would lead to disruptive behaviour among students. Although teachers give all kinds of excuses for not incorporating humour in their teaching, the reason behind this attitude is that the teachers simply do not know how to use humour effectively in the classroom (Sinclair, 2002). Teachers need to come out from this 'cocoon' and try out humour in their teaching.

Although there are negative feedbacks (Sinclair, 2002) from the teachers regarding humour, many studies (Whisonant, 1998; Williams, 2001; White, 2001; Torok, et al 2005) showed positive results. Malaysian teachers could utilize humour in their teaching to create a healthy learning environment in their English lessons. Humour could be a new and innovative approach to teaching English in Malaysia. In fact, Datuk Seri Hishammudin Tun Hussein, the Minister of Education stressed that

teachers should be creative and innovative in their teaching (The Star, 12 December 2004). So, teachers can try out using humour as a new technique in their classroom and hopefully the results would be fruitful in the Malaysian setting.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

English is taught as a second language in Malaysia but it is more perceived by students as a foreign language. They learn the language because they have to, not because of a love for or an interest in it (Choy & Troudi, 2006). This has contributed to the declining standard of the English Language in Malaysia (Norrizan Razali, 1992; Choy & Troudi, 2006)

Although students receive six years of formal classroom instruction in primary schools and five years in secondary schools, they still develop a kind of anxiety toward the English Language (Nor Shidrah Mat Daud, Nuraihan Mat Daud & Noor Lide Abu Kassim, 2004; Shahrier Pawanchik, 2006). This language anxiety further impedes their learning whereby it affects the development of their language skills. Another problem which exists in students is their unwillingness to participate and to take risks in using the English Language in the classroom (Chandrasegaran, 1981; Sinclair, 2002). Besides that, students also do not have the confidence to speak in English (Shahrier Pawanchik, 2006). These are a few reasons which contribute to the deteriorating standard of English among students.

In order to overcome these issues, students need to see learning English as fun and interesting. Humour can be an element which could play an important role in language learning. Therefore, the teachers' and students' views on the use of humour

in the ESL classroom in the secondary schools need to be examined. There were several studies (Whisonant, 1998; Williams, 2001; White, 2001; Torok, et al 2005) which were carried out in the Western setting regarding the role of humour in education. Most of the studies focused on the use of humour in the higher learning institutions such as universities and colleges. The findings from these studies showed positive results. However, in the Malaysian setting, such studies have not been carried out especially on humour and language learning. This provides a need for the researcher to pursue this study.

1.3 Purpose of the Study

This study aims to examine the teachers' and students' views particularly on the reasons for using humour in the ESL classroom. Besides that, the researcher intends to find out to what extent English teachers use humour in their lessons.

1.4 Research Questions

This study is aimed at finding the answers to the following questions:

1. To what extent do ESL teachers use humour in their language classroom?
2. What are ESL teachers' views on the use of humour in the ESL classroom?
3. What are ESL students' views on the use of humour by their teachers in the ESL classroom?
4. Are there differences between urban and rural students' views on the use of humour in the ESL classroom?

1.5 Significance of the Study

Teaching the English Language is very challenging particularly when it is in the context of the second language. Teachers often venture into various strategies to enhance language learning among students in the ESL classroom. However, teachers may not have realized that humour could be an effective tool which can be used in their classroom. It is the intent of the study to provide teachers with clear information on the use of humour in the ESL classroom. Besides that, the study would determine to what extent English teachers use humour in the classroom.

The findings from this study would provide some insights pertaining to teachers' and students' views on the use of humour in the ESL classroom. The information gained from this study would facilitate language learning as well as to help teachers in their instruction. It also would aid teachers in making rational decisions in incorporating humour in the ESL classroom. Furthermore, the findings provide an understanding on when and why humour should or should not be used. On top of that, the study would provide a basis for other educators, who may have overlooked humour as an important element in teaching. The new ideas and suggestions might be a major step in assisting teachers to improvise their teaching methods in order to enhance language learning among the ESL students.

1.6 Conceptual Framework

This study is to examine the views of teachers and students on the use of humour in the English Language classroom. The conceptual framework (see Figure 1) for this

research is based on a study done by White (2001), theories of humour and related studies in the field of humour.

The reasons for using humour in the ESL classroom were derived mainly from White's (2001) study and the other reasons were sourced from the related studies to suit the present study. Eight of these reasons which were taken from White's (2001) study include the use of humour to provoke thinking, relieve stress, motivate, gain attention, create healthy learning environment, embarrass students, reinforce knowledge and help understand other cultures. The other eight reasons were derived from the related studies (Torok et.al, 2005; Chik & Wan, 2001; Check, 1997; Collins, 1997; Berk, 1996 & Ellemeier, 1991) were the use of humour to reduce anxiety, increase confidence, create excitement, enhance communication, increase interest, encourage participation, retention (remember lesson) and explain complicated topics.

Three theories on humour; Superiority theory, Incongruity theory and Relief theory act as a basis for this study. These theories revealed how humour actually works and supports the reasons listed by the researcher from the studies in the field of humour.

These reasons set up a basis for the researcher to examine the views of teachers and students on the use of humour in the ESL classroom. The comparisons between the responses given by both the respondents are examined to determine the use of humour in the language classroom. All these will bring to light whether the use of humour in the language classroom is viewed positively or not.