

AN INVESTIGATION OF THIRD GRADERS' LISTENING COMPREHENSION OF HUMOROUS CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

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This study was an investigation of third grade boys' and girls' listening comprehension of selected categories of humor present in children's literature. The listening comprehension of the nonhumorous and humorous story elements within humorous picture books was examined to determine if significant differences exist between third graders' comprehension of the two.

A review of the relevant research indicated that children are very interested in reading books that are humorous (Gates, 1930; Gunderson, 1957; Kirsch, Pehrsson, and Robinson, 1976; Peltola, 1963; Smith, 1962; Witty, Coomer, and McBean, 1946). It was also found that age and cognitive development make a difference in how a child responds to humorous stimuli. However, the research of sex differences was divided concerning the role sex has in comprehension of humor (McGhee, 1971; 1976a; Petry, 1978; Zigler, Levine, and Gould, 1967).

The limited research of humor's effect on learning and comprehension vary from humor having a facilitating effect to its having no effect (Curran, 1973; Davies and Apter, 1980; Ferris, 1970; Hauck and Thomas, 1972; Houdoumadi, 1977; Kaplan and Pascoe, 1977; Terry and Woods, 1975; Weinberg, 1973; Zillman and Williams, 1980). A positive relationship appears to exist between listening and reading comprehension, making it possible to draw conclusions about children's reading comprehension of the humorous and nonhumorous elements of picture books through their listening comprehension (Berger and Perfetti, 1977; Devine, 1978; Duker, 1961; Durrell, 1969; Elgart, 1978; Kirkham, 1977; Kreamer, 1973).

Therefore, oral presentation of humorous stimuli could allow for the social interaction that is important in much humorous material as well as differences in reading ability among the third graders. The review of the research suggested that picture books would be an appropriate context for measuring children's listening comprehension of humor in literature because

of their value in developing the oral language and reading competence of young children (Curtis, 1968; Dwyr, 1976, Rohwer and Matz, 1975).

The subjects for the study were 67 third grade students, 36 boys and 31 girls, from a rural county in northeast Georgia. The students were from heterogeneous classrooms and their reading levels were average and below average.

The materials used were 36 tape recorded humorous picture books. These humorous picture books were representative of nine categories of humor defined by Kappas (1965): exaggeration, surprise, slapstick, the absurd, human predicament, ridicule, defiance, violence, and verbal humor. Four books were selected for each of the nine categories; each selection was a book judged to be an appropriate representation of that category.

The instrument used in this study was a researcher—designed multiple choice test consisting of ten items, five measuring the listening comprehension of nonhumorous story elements and five measuring the listening comprehension of humorous story elements. Such a test was constructed for each of the 36 humorous picture books.

Data collection consisted of the following. During a five week period, groups of approximately 15 students at a time listened to the tape recorded humorous picture books. The sample of 36 picture books was randomly assigned to the four classes of third graders so that each class listened to nine picture books, one from each of the nine categories of humor. For each book, the multiple-choice test was administered with the researcher reading the test aloud to the students.

The following hypotheses, stated in the null and tested at the .05 level of significance, were concerned with third grader students' listening comprehension of humorous picture books. The categories of humor referred to in the hypotheses were those compiled and defined by Kappas (1965).

1. There will be no significant differences in the listening comprehension among the categories of humor.
2. There will be no significant differences between the listening comprehension of humorous and nonhumorous elements of the books.
3. There will be no significant differences between boys' and girls' listening comprehension

A repeated measure of analysis of variance with category

being the repeated factor was used to test Hypothesis One. If the analysis of variance resulted in a significant F value, Duncan's New Multiple Range Test (Kirk, 1968) was used to determine the sources of differences. An analysis of variance was also used to test Hypotheses Two and Three. The .05 level of significance was set to reject the null hypotheses.

Findings

Hypotheses One stated that there would be no significant differences in third graders' listening comprehension among the categories of humor. Results of the analysis of variance were significant, $F(8,520)=7.434, p < .05$.

The analysis indicated that there was a significant difference in third graders' listening comprehension among the categories of humor. A Duncan's New Multiple Range Test was computed to compare the listening comprehension means of the nine categories of humor. Results indicated that the absurd category was comprehended to a significantly greater degree than the categories of violence, slapstick, ridicule, defiance, and verbal humor. Human predicament and surprise were comprehended to a significantly lesser degree. Since a number of the comparisons categories, Of the nine categories, violence was comprehended to a significant lesser degree. Since a number of the comparisons revealed significant differences, Hypothesis One was rejected.

Hypotheses Two stated that there would be no significant differences between the listening comprehension of humorous and nonhumorous elements of the picture books.

The analysis indicated that there was a significant difference [$F(1,65)=16.171, p < .05$] between third graders' listening comprehension of humorous and nonhumorous elements of the picture books. A comparison of the mean scores of third graders' listening comprehension of humorous story elements indicated that the nonhumorous story elements were comprehended to a significantly greater degree. As a result of the statistical analysis, Hypothesis Two was rejected.

Hypothesis Three stated that there would be no significant differences between boys' and girls' listening comprehension of the picture books.

The computations indicated that there were no significant differences; therefore, Hypothesis Three was not rejected.

Discussion of the Findings

According to the incongruity theory upon which this investigation was based, humor arises from "disjointed, ill-suited pairings of ideas or situations that are divergent from habitual customs" (Keith-Spiegel, 1972, p. 110). Investigators advancing the incongruity theory surmise that incongruous relationships are always present in humor. Considering the incongruity theory from a developmental perspective, McGhee (1979) suggested that in the first seven or eight years the child goes through stages which correspond to particular cognitive acquisitions. Third graders should be within stage four, which is the most complex. During this stage, humor first begins to resemble the humor of adults. Children are now becoming aware of the ambiguity that may exist in the meanings of words. The eight year old child is less egocentric and more likely not to appreciate humor of a cruel or violent nature unless the act is recognized as accidental or unintentional.

The results of the third graders' comprehension of humorous picture books support the theory by McGhee (1979) that stage four children usually avoid humor of a cruel and violent nature, since books in the violence category were significantly less comprehended than the other eight categories. Perhaps this avoidance does not allow the student to concentrate on or attend to humorous stimuli; therefore, these stimuli are not comprehended as well as other types.

Although certain categories of humor are comprehended to a significantly greater degree, the nonhumorous story elements were comprehended to a significantly greater degree than the

humorous story elements. Terry and Woods (1975) also found similar results with third graders concerning humorous and nonhumorous testing materials. The researchers attempted to explain their findings in terms of the relationship between age and test anxiety and between humor and arousal. As a person advances through educational levels it is assumed that the importance of academic testing increases, therefore, so does test anxiety. Thus it is assumed that third graders are less tense than older children. Terry and Woods (1975) stated that perhaps these students were even below the optimum level of tension for effective test performance. The researchers speculated that the combination of instructions deemphasizing the importance of the test and the humor manipulations would have further reduced students' level of test anxiety. If third graders are initially low in arousal, then further reduction would be revealed in lower performance. Perhaps a similar phenomena occurred in the present study. The children were very relaxed and appeared to feel that the data collection sessions were enjoyable. Apparently they looked forward to the researcher's visits and anticipated listening to the humorous stories with excitement. The researcher always emphasized at the beginning of each listening session that the students were to do their best, but that their performance would not affect their grades. While listening to many of the humorous story parts the children would laugh and "roll on the floor with glee." Although this relaxed atmosphere added to the children's enjoyment of the stories, it may not have facilitated the memory or understanding of humorous story elements.

Davies and Apter (1980) found no significant differences between scores obtained as a result of children viewing either a humorous or nonhumorous audiovisual slide-tape teaching program. The researchers stated that perhaps the type of humor used could be important and more research was needed. However, the present study revealed that among different types of humor, the nonhumorous story elements were significantly better comprehended. In past humor research, the comprehension of humorous and nonhumorous information was measured using different content.

Therefore, even though an attempt may have been made to select materials that were equal in difficulty and interest level, the question of whether the nonhumorous or humorous materials were inherently more or less difficult or interesting still exists. The present study employed humorous elements and nonhumorous elements from the same source, thereby decreasing the likelihood that the difficulty and interest level of the materials would affect the results. Because the nonhumorous story elements were significantly better comprehended in this study, it is evident that humorous information is more difficult for children to understand.

No sex differences were found in the comprehension of the categories of humor. Unfortunately, most of the studies which investigated sex differences have limited this investigation for the most part to the appreciation of humor. And those investigations which studied the comprehension of humor usually were not concerned with sex differences (McGhee, 1971; 1976b; Zigler, Levine, and Gould, 1966, 1967). The investigation done by Petry (1978) revealed that no sex differences existed in third and fifth graders' comprehension of humor in literature. Her findings are in agreement with the findings of the present study, which also found no sex differences. However, further research is needed since little investigation of sex differences in children's comprehension of humor has been done.

Implications for Classroom Instruction

The present study has generated a number of implications for classroom instruction. Teachers should know that significant differences do exist among types of humor students comprehend. Therefore, the use of humorous materials should stress those types of humor children especially prefer and comprehend.

Other types of humor can be included; however, the teacher should make certain that students understand the humor by giving special attention to the more difficult types.

The present study revealed that no significant differences exist between third grade girls' and boys' comprehension of different types of humor. Therefore, it should be possible to employ similar humorous materials with each group. Since other research has revealed conflicting results, teachers should observe characteristic patterns within their own classrooms and make judgment as to whether different types of humor are comprehended by boys and girls.

Humor has been found to have both facilitating effects on comprehension in some studies and no facilitating effects in others. Because the present investigation revealed that non-humorous story elements were better comprehended, the researcher feels that humor should be incorporated in the reading classroom with caution. Evidence from the present study does not support the idea that humor might facilitate comprehension. Therefore, perhaps teachers should build upon the children's appreciation of and interest in humorous stories to improve their comprehension of humorous story elements. Students could be allowed to share the humor through open discussions, oral reading, and role playing of humorous story parts. During teacher directed questioning, emphasis should be placed upon the understanding of why humorous story elements are perceived as funny and how these relate to the nonhumorous story elements. In addition to encouraging the comprehension of humor within reading materials, teachers could possibly use humor to gain the students' attention before important nonhumorous information is presented. Although research is needed concerning this idea, it may be speculated that humor could be used to facilitate learning and comprehension even when the humorous stimuli is not a part of the information being learned.

Perhaps the most important implication is that educators should not assume that children equally appreciate and understand all types of humor. If teachers want children to appreciate and understand all categories of humor then it should be recognized that some categories will require more instruction and exposure than others.

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