

The Use of Humour in EFL Classrooms: Comparative Conversational Analysis Case Study

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Abstract

Utilising a sequential explanatory mixed-methods approach, the current case study investigates the characteristics and frequency of the usage of verbal humour that positively or negatively affects the Saudi English as a Foreign Language (EFL) tertiary-level students across two different English language proficiency levels. The participants included 42 EFL teachers and 138 male EFL students from the English Language Institute (ELI) in King Abdulaziz University. The students were enrolled in the beginners (E101) and intermediate (E104) English language proficiency levels. The mixed-methods approach was implemented using audio and video recordings and a questionnaire as the data collection instruments. The findings stated the four main characteristics of both positive and negative verbal humours in Saudi EFL classrooms. These findings revealed that humour was more frequently used at the intermediate than at the beginner level, and that the most effective forms of humour at both levels involved language play, irony, jokes, and self-defeating humour. Suggestions, recommendations, pedagogical implications have also been presented.

Keywords: classrooms, coding scheme, conversation analysis, humour, Saudi EFL context

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I: Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

Humour is certainly not a recent phenomenon, as it is a biological attribute that all humans possess (Polimeni & Reiss, 2006). Since ancient Greek times, numerous theories have sought to explain humour and its functions, including its sociological, anthropological, psychological, philosophical and linguistic features (Dyrel, 2009). Despite such theories and research attention, it was not until the 20th century that humour was conceptualized as a pedagogical tool in educational settings. As time has passed, various studies have documented humour's positive pedagogical effects at a variety of educational levels; these effects include increased instructional effectiveness (Englert, 2010), lower student anxiety, the creation of a relaxed classroom environment (Neuliep, 1991), higher student motivation (McCroskey, Richmond, & Bennett, 2006), improved student learning (Baringer & McCroskey, 2000), and enhanced clarification of course materials (Downs, Javidi, & Nussbaum, 1988).

In relation to second language (L2) and foreign language (FL) teaching, a growing body of research has acknowledged the significant role which humour has in helping an individual understand a L2/FL (Bell, 2005) and in facilitating language learning (Broner & Tarone, 2001). Nonetheless, in contrast to its positive roles in academia in general and L2/FL classrooms in particular, humour can also be used divisively to disparage others: it can be used to control and mock nonconforming behaviour, exhibit power or status differences, or suppress undesired actions (Martin, 2010).

1.1.1 Benefits of Humour in Education and Language Teaching

In language classroom contexts, scholars have emphasized the positive role of humour in language learning, in as much as it promotes classroom interaction. For instance, Pomerantz and Bell (2011) indicate that humorous interactions not only allow students to present their classroom identities: they also provide opportunities to produce more complex and creative acts of language use than would be typically found in an L2 classroom. Hence, it can be said that the appropriate use of humour positively affects learners' cognitive processing and L2 learning. Moreover, Cornett (1986) claims that: "humour is one of the educator's 'most powerful resources' in achieving a variety of beneficial educational outcomes, including such potential effects as controlling problematic behaviour and facilitating foreign language acquisition" (p. 8). Furthermore, many scholars have shown that teachers' incorporation of humour into English as a foreign language (EFL) teaching has positive effects on learning (Askildson, 2005; Hayati, Shooshtari, & Shakeri, 2011; Stroud, 2013).

1.1.2 Barriers of Using Humour in Education and Language Teaching

In conceptualizing its drawbacks, it is clear that humour should be used cautiously, as it can be a powerful medium for communication impediment in pedagogical settings. In this regard, Garner (2006) asserts that for humour to be most effective in an academic setting, it must be specific, targeted, and appropriate to the subject matter. In the English a second language (ESL) or EFL contexts, it is believed that many factors could be attributed to humour's positive or negative effects on the learning process. Among these factors is the cultural background of the teacher and that of the students, as well as each learner's L2 proficiency level.

1.4 Statement of the Problem

In Saudi Arabia, ur Rahman and Alhaisoni (2013) report that relentless efforts have been undertaken by policy makers to enhance EFL teaching standards and student achievement. Nevertheless, many Saudi EFL learners are low achievers (Alrabai, 2017). Many reasons have been cited for Saudi EFL learners' low achievement levels, including their lack of exposure to second language (L2), having no interest in learning the target language (TL), and their resistance to active participation. Ansari (2012) also adds that the vast majority of Saudi EFL learners lack motivation vis-à-vis studying the language, as they mainly (or exclusively) aim to pass their assessments. Therefore, although Saudi EFL learners may spend many school years learning the English language, they still tend to graduate from high school with minimal command of the English language, and this is problematic when they later enrol in university.

In the context of the English Language Institute (ELI) at King Abdulaziz University, besides the aforementioned reasons for low levels of achievement among Saudi EFL learners, other explicit factors appear to be problematic. Amongst these factors are the prescribed textbook - which adopts the communicative language teaching approach - and the learners' low proficiency levels in the TL, which makes the materials presented in class too difficult for them to absorb or to handle through verbal interactions (Shah, Hussain, & Nasseef, 2013). Such factors juxtapose, and their negative effects manifest in the ELI's EFL classroom.

With due consideration of all the previously noted factors, this study argues that humour can improve the teaching and learning processes in the Saudi EFL setting in general and the ELI context in particular. This assertion stems from the fact that humour has the advantage of being applicable to any approach or teaching method (Schmitz, 2002). Thus, when humour is appropriately employed in a communicative language classroom, it can assist positively in the teaching-learning process by building an environment conducive to learning.

1.5 Study Significance

It is anticipated that this study's outcomes will help teachers, educators, teacher training program designers, and curriculum designers identify the positive and negative effects of using verbal humour in the EFL classroom and provide them with a well-informed basis for understanding the benefits of using humour in Saudi EFL classrooms. The study is also expected to highlight the drawbacks that might be caused by inappropriate employment of humour and to provide understanding about the relationship between humour use and the L2 learners' proficiency in the TL.

1.6 Purpose of the Study

This case study aims at investigating the characteristics and the frequencies of verbal humour that positively or negatively affect the Saudi EFL tertiary-level students across two designated, different English language proficiency levels; beginner (101), equivalent to A0 on the common European framework of reference for languages (CEFR) and the intermediate (104), equivalent to B1 on the CEFR. The comparative prospect aims at indicating whether or not the learners' proficiency level has any correlations with the use of humour during L2 classroom interactions.

1.7 Research Methodology

To achieve the purpose of this study, a mixed-methods approach was employed with quantitative and qualitative data presented. Ten-hour audio and video-recordings of nine EFL classrooms in addition to a questionnaire for thirty-three EFL teachers' perceptions about the uses of humour in the Saudi EFL classrooms were used to collect data. In addition, a coding scheme has also been used as a checklist to facilitate typifying the instances of humour in the video-recorded lessons.

1.8 Research Questions

The present study was guided by the following three research questions:

RQ1: What are the main characteristics of verbal humour that may contribute positively in the Saudi EFL classroom?

RQ2: What are the main characteristics of verbal humour that may contribute negatively in the Saudi EFL classroom?

RQ3: What are the differences in the frequency and effect of verbal humour used in the two English language proficiency levels during the observed EFL lessons?

1.9 Delimitations of the Study

The present study is delimited to male students enrolled in two levels of proficiencies in the foundation year at the ELI at KAU; the beginners (101) and intermediate (104). The study is delimited to its time; the third module of the academic year 2014/2015. Finally, the study is not considering other extraneous variables such as the teachers' teaching methods or the materials they use.

2. Literature Review

Humour has been a fascinating phenomenon to study as far back in history as the times of great philosophers of Plato and Aristotle to more recent times of Bergson and Freud (Chiaro, 2017). However, humour has only emerged as an appreciated area of academic inquiry in the last half of the century. Today, a great body of research exists on the topic in academia within many disciplines which include mathematics, psychology, anthropology, sociology, literature, medicine, philology, education, semiotics and linguistics (Attardo, 1998).

2.1 Defining Humour

Originally, humour is a Latin term derived from the word '*umor*' which refers to '*bodily fluid*' (that controls human's good health and emotions). Later, there has been a drastic change in defining humour to characterize "something that makes a person laugh or smile" (Ross, 2005, p. 2). In relation to the educational context, researchers tend to identify humour from differing points of view based on its specific context of use. Bekelja Wanzer, Bainbridge Frymier, Wojtaszczyk, and Smith (2006) have defined humour as "anything that the teacher and/ or his students find funny or amusing" (p. 182). Tuncay (2007) has defined humour in language classrooms as the ability of "understanding not only the language and words but their use, meaning, subtle nuances, the underlying culture, implications and unwritten messages" (p. 2). Apte (1985) has approached humour from an anthropologic perspective which has offered various definitions of humour where he states two particular elaborations on humour: "1) sources that act as potential stimuli and 2)

behavioural response that are expressed as smiling and laughter” (p. 13-14). Meanwhile, spontaneous humour includes irony, sarcasm, teasing, and word play along other forms of humour which could be represented through giving humorous examples to practice or illustrate a grammatical point. It can also be present while exchanging questions, answers, comments, remarks, or explanations during classroom interactions (Martin, 2010).

2.2 Forms of Humour in Literature

Norrick (1993 as cited by Norrick, 2003), has indicated that forms of humour seem to: “fade into each other in conversation” (p. 1338), which evidently makes it problematic to distinguish between them. The different types of humour include irony, teasing, banter, language play, joke or joking, riddles, as well as other forms.

Irony refers to the use of implicit or ambiguous speeches or utterances that have double meanings such that when irony is involved. A subtype of irony is referred to as sarcasm. According to Haiman (1998), sarcasm is: “overt irony intentionally used by the speaker as a form of verbal aggression” (p. 20). In other words, sarcasm is more likely to be used for aggressive purposes in speech and more, is more likely to hurt the feelings of its target than other simple forms of irony.

Teasing is a provocation, which is made intentionally and is always accompanied with playful casual remarks to comment on something relevant to the target (Keltner, Capps, Kring, Young, & Heerey, 2001). Teasing can have positive as well as negative effects. Although teasing carries the risk of being offensive, some researchers have proven that it can have positive effects by creating intimacy as it works in uniting people against absent others or to demonstrate insider knowledge (Boxer & Cortés-Conde, 1997).

Banter as a term is used to describe the scenarios where teasing happens back and forth resulting into a verbal match up (Goatly, 2012). The main intention of banter is to create a social bond through acceptance-friendship strategies; however, it becomes unsuccessful when the recipient does not respond. In this case, banter can easily have negative effects and consequently turns into negative teasing.

Language Play is perceived as a conscious repetition or modifications of linguistic forms like syntactic, phonologic or lexemes patterns (Belz, 2002). Language play is the most relevant type of humour to the FL classroom context since playing with words and their meanings can be a very typical type of interaction for students in this specific context (Tarone, 2000). Many studies have reported the usefulness of language play in L2/FL classrooms (Sullivan, 2000).

Joke/ Joking is defined by Morrison (2012) as: "a short story or short series of words spoken or communicated with the intent of being laughed at or found humorous by the listener or reader" (p. 202). Schmitz (2002) has classified jokes into three categories, these are: universal jokes, culture jokes, and linguistic jokes. Notably, Shade (1996) has referred to some types of jokes that are considered inappropriate within the classroom context such as: “sexual jokes, ethnical /racial jokes, religious jokes, hostile jokes, and demeaning to Men/ Women jokes” (Shade, 1996, p. 87).

Riddles is a word game that has a question-answer format involving an enigma; a puzzling fact, which is similar in nature to a joke and usually has a surprising funny answer. In classrooms, riddles should be related to the subject matter with the objective of encouraging students to analyse and discuss ideas by using their higher order thinking skills to solve them (Shade, 1996).

Other forms of humour include funny story, visual humour, and physical humour. Researchers have advised using certain forms of humour with L2 learners based on their proficiency levels (Bell, 2005; Schmitz, 2002).

2.3 Social Functions of Humour

Wagner and Urios-Aparisi (2008) have mentioned that humour in the classroom context shares a wide range of common characteristics and functions with those found in the ordinary social talk. According to Attardo (2010), *social management*, *decommitment*, and *mediation* are among the social functions of humour. Martineau (1972) has also identified three social functions of humour, these are, *consensus*, *conflict*, and *control*. More recently, Hay (2000) has identified three social functions of humour among friends. These functions are: solidarity-based humour, humour to serve psychological needs, and power-based humour. As a matter of fact, the social functions of humour are vast and exceed the aforementioned ones but only those which have immediate connection to the scope of this study have been covered.

2.4 Positive and Negative Taxonomies of Humour in Classrooms

Researchers have classified classroom humour into several taxonomies according to the manner it is utilized in that specific context (Bryant, Comisky, & Zillmann, 1979; Downs et al., 1988; Frymier, Wanzer, & Wojtaszczyk, 2008; Gorham & Christophel, 1990; Martin, 2010; Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray, & Weir, 2003; Wanzer, Frymier, & Irwin, 2010). Such taxonomies have mushroomed into numerous categories of humour the simplest of which classifies humour into positive or negative types based on their effects. Martin et al. (2003) have suggested a model that categorizes humour types into positive (or affiliative) humour and negative (or aggressive) humour. The affiliative humour aims at entertaining others by joking with friends, narrating humorous stories about oneself, or by telling various odd and funny things. Makewa, Role, and Genga (2011) have revealed that most of the teachers use affiliative humour to add to their teaching efficacy and that students have reported that they appreciate affiliative humour because it builds up positive rapport between the teacher and his/her students. On the contrary, aggressive humour (exhibited through the use of ridicule, sarcasm, mocking, or other disparaging humour) is seen as a negative type of humour as it mainly aims at manipulating or denigrating others. Other scholars have attempted to classify the types of humour in classrooms according to their correlation to the lessons' content. For instance, Bekelja Wanzer et al. (2006) has used the terms 'appropriate' and 'inappropriate' when referring to the positive or negative types of humour that occur in classroom settings. Therefore, it is seen imperative that, in classrooms, the types of humour employed "should be constructive, understandable by all learners and be relevant to the content and/or compatible to the learning environment" (Chabeli, 2008, p. 58). More recently, Bekelja Wanzer et al. (2006) have revealed that humour related to instructional content would positively correlate with student learning, while inappropriate forms like other-disparaging and offensive humour would not. In

summary, there exists a variety of approaches in classifying the types of humour enacted in classrooms. Thus, for humour to be efficient and productive in any educational context, it is deemed necessary to take into consideration the type of humour employed regarding its appropriateness and offensiveness.

2.5 The Study of Humour in Classrooms

Many researchers and educators such as Harmer (2010) and Cook (2000) have acknowledged the importance of language play or humour in language learning. In an EFL and L2 contexts, many scholars view humour as an integral part of foreign language acquisition. For instance, Deneire (1995) see that humour should be integrated in the EFL/L2 classrooms arguing that “well-developed communicative competence implies humour competence and vice-versa” (p. 294-5). Wagner and Urios-Aparisi (2011) have also suggested that humour should be an integral component of the FL curriculum to promote authentic and communicative uses of language in the classroom and the integration of linguistic and cultural information. Deneire (1995) has highlighted that, within the EFL classroom, humour can both be used “as a technique to introduce linguistic phenomena and cultural knowledge” and “as an illustration and reinforcement of already acquired cultural and linguistic knowledge” (p. 286).

2.5.1 Humour and the Linguistic Competence

From a linguistic point-of-view, humour can elevate the L2 learners' linguistic awareness. Deneire (1995), for instance, has argued that through the use of humour, language learners become “sensitive to the structural and the semantic differences between different languages” (p. 291). Thus, many researchers have been investigating the pedagogical benefits of humour in the context of EFL learning (Cohen, 2017). Additionally, Bell (2005) revealed that interactions occurred during the humorous frame were recalled significantly better than the items of serious interactions. Lucas (2005) indicated that planned tasks designed to facilitate focus on form through humorous materials required the learners to excessively focus on the linguistic form. Moreover, Tocalli-Beller and Swain (2007) indicate that the collaborative negotiation of meaning has helped some of students who did not comprehend the meaning of the given puns or riddles at the first place to understand the items and eventually produce them. Furthermore, inserting humorous instances like jokes in EFL classes can also make students more attentive to structural and semantic differences between two languages and raise students' intercultural awareness (Deneire, 1995; Schmitz, 2002).

2.5.2 The Relationship between Humour and EFL/L2 Proficiency Level

Most researchers have asserted that in order to understand humour, L2 learners need to comprehend the literal meaning that the lexical and syntactic clues of utterance convey. Besides, they need to be able to detect any mismatch between the literal meaning and the conversational or situational context. Such abilities increase in parallel to the development of the learners' L2 proficiency. Consequently, two main features determine L2 learners' successful or unsuccessful interpretation of humour. First, the learners' L2 proficiency level which proposes that learners have acquired more sociocultural information about the target culture. Second, the audio, visual, and discourse contextual sources available which provide nonverbal, prosodic, and linguistic cues that signal incompatibility with a literal interpretation.

Overall, the few studies that have been conducted so far, concerning the connection between humour and L2 proficiency level, show that L2 learners are able to both understand and produce humorous utterances. There do appear to be some constraints on this ability related to the linguistic proficiency and the degree of cultural background knowledge, but Davies (2003) research on joking suggests that the use of the context can help learners interpret humorous utterances. As such, it is thought that the participants of low and high L2 proficiency level can understand humour but with varying degrees of difficulty that relates their knowledge about the target cultural and linguistic humour.

3. Research Methodology and Procedures

3.1 Research Design and Methodology

This research study is based on the sequential explanatory mixed methods research design. It involves the data collection and analysis utilising qualitative and quantitative approaches throughout this research study (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). As such, the quantitative data was gathered initially via the distributed questionnaires which have been conducted to obtain insights into the teachers' perspectives on the uses of verbal humour in the Saudi EFL context. The qualitative data phase on the other hand, was collected via video and audio recordings of nine Saudi EFL classroom interactions, which have been transcribed verbatim to investigate the characteristics of verbal humour in terms of its positivity, negativity and frequency of uses across two different L2 proficiency levels.

3.2 Research Instruments

To achieve its purposes, the present study employed a questionnaire, classroom observations, audio and video recordings as data collection instruments.

- a) **The Format of the EFL Teachers Questionnaire** used in the current study has included both closed (n= 14) and open-ended items (n= 3). Participants were surveyed on their perceptions of verbal humour usage and effect within the Saudi EFL classrooms using an anonymous and voluntary online questionnaire.
- b) **EFL Classroom Observations** were conducted using note-taking through the use of classroom humour coding scheme which observes the production of humour, reaction or interpretation of humour, content delivered through humour, and instructional and social function of a humorous instance (Silverman, 2015). In addition to the colour coding scheme used, the researchers added the following codes to mark the instructional function of humorous instances: a) repairing, b) eliciting, c) modifying, and e) scaffolding the interactions or (f) others (to indicate other functions).
- c) **Video and Audio Recordings** using a high-quality Sony® digital camera and recorder has been used to record approximately ten hours of teacher-students and students-students' interactions in nine Saudi EFL classrooms of levels 101 and 104.

3.3 Participants

In this study, the conveniently selected samples consisted of (138) Saudi male Arabic speakers EFL students aged between 18-19 years old and (42) EFL teachers enrolled in English language institute ELI at KAU. Thirty students were enrolled in the beginners (101) level (and most of them are repeaters) and the remaining 108 students were enrolled in the intermediate (104) level.

3.4 Data Collection Procedures

The data of this study has been collected during the third week of the third module in the academic year of 2014-2015. For the questionnaires, the data was collected via mailing a URL link to 30 participating teachers in this study. Prior to the actual data collection, piloting the questionnaire has been considered as a preliminary step to anticipate possible problems related to comprehension of the items and analysis of the data. Piloting the questionnaire has been conducted during the month of October 2015. A total number of (10) EFL teachers at the ELI responded to the pilot questionnaire and their responses revealed that all the items were clear and could easily be understood by the rest of the participants. With regards to qualitative data, it comprised a total of 10 hours of 12 recorded lessons from nine classrooms, with some teachers been recorded twice, over the period of two weeks.

3.5 Data Analysis

Following the questionnaire data collection phase, statistical analysis has been performed based on the analytical descriptions which appear in the form of pie charts that Google forms simultaneously create according to the participants' responses on each item. The statistical analysis file was later downloaded in an Excel® sheet format to simplify the analysis of results, and consequently, answering relevant research questions of the current study. Lastly, the data has been analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences software (IBM SPSS Statistics 22®).

The video and audio recorded lessons which have been fully transcribed using a notation convention system derived from the work of Walsh (2013). The data was further reviewed to detect different instances of humour. After identifying these instances, they were further analysed, compared and divided into different humour types, such as irony and word play. Later, the coding scheme of classroom humour was used to set the types of humour according to their:

- 1) Production
- 2) The participants' reactions or interpretations of these instances
- 3) The lesson content delivered through humour and
- 4) The instructional and social function of humour in the observed EFL classrooms.
- 5)

4. Data Analysis and Results

4.1. Reliability of the Questionnaire Constructs

The Cronbach alpha value of the raw data was 0.813. The Cronbach alpha coefficient for this study exceeded 0.8, thus satisfying the internal consistency requirements (See Table 4.1).

Table 4.1 Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient

	N	%	Cronbach's	No. of Items
Valid	33	100.0	0.813	13
Excluded a	0	.0		
Total	33	100.0		

4.2. Questionnaire Responses Analysis (close-ended items)

The questionnaire items were purposefully divided into two constructs. The first construct is related to the general information with regards to the participants' native language, years of experience, course taught, and students being taught (newly registered or repeaters). The second construct, which formed the bulk of the questionnaire items, related to the actual pedagogical parameters of using humour in the EFL classroom in the Saudi context. During the data collection, more than half of the participant teachers (60%) were teaching the 101-proficiency level and (40%) of them were teaching the 104-proficiency level. The teachers have also indicated that the majority of their students were newly registered students (73%) while (27%) were repeaters.

The analysis of the second part of the questionnaire is presented in several figures and tables which demonstrate the teachers' responses to the close-ended items (n=13) in percentages format. In the following, the figures and tables are postulated and proceeded with their analysis which highlights the most prominent proportions.

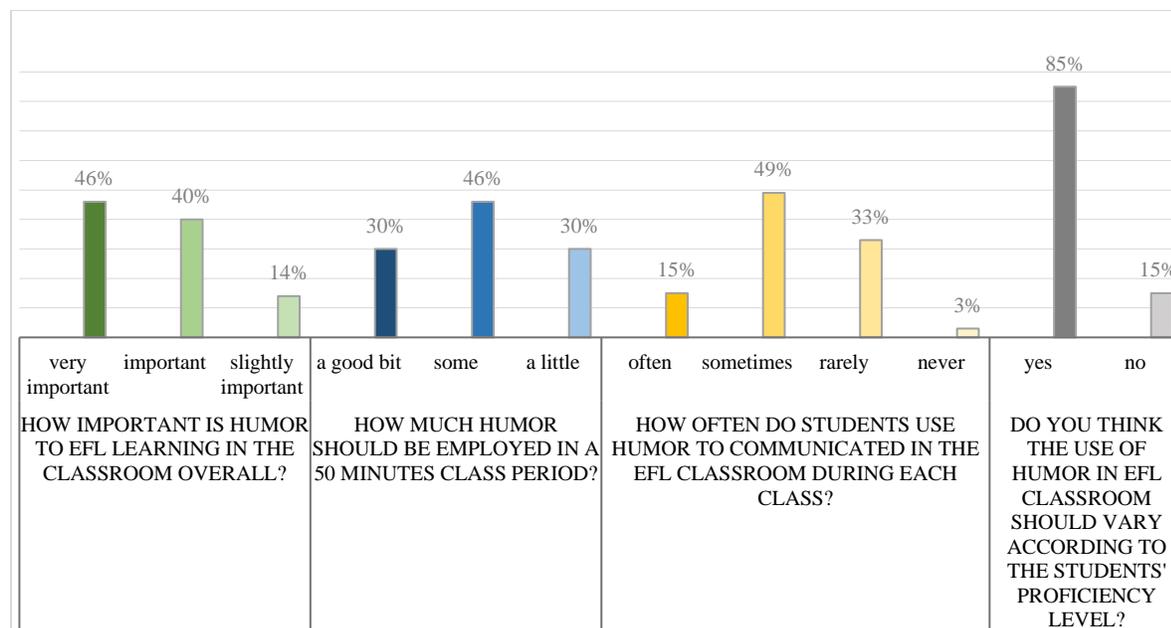


Figure 1 Teachers' responses to items 1, 2, 3 and 4 of the questionnaire

According to figure 1, the vast majority of teachers' responses (86%) revealed that they conceive humour to be important or very important to FL learning. As for the second item of the questionnaire, about half of the teachers recommended that only some humour should be employed in a 50 minutes' class period, whereas (30%) of the teachers believed that it should be used at a sizable bit. Moreover, in their responses to the third questionnaire item, about half of the teachers (49%) reported that the students use humour sometimes in their communications during lessons, meanwhile, about third of the responses indicated that rare students' humorous communications could be found in classrooms.

With regards to the fourth questionnaire item, the teachers' responses revealed that the great majority of teachers (85%) believe that the use of humour in the EFL classroom should vary according to the students' proficiency level and only 15% of teachers believed that it should not.

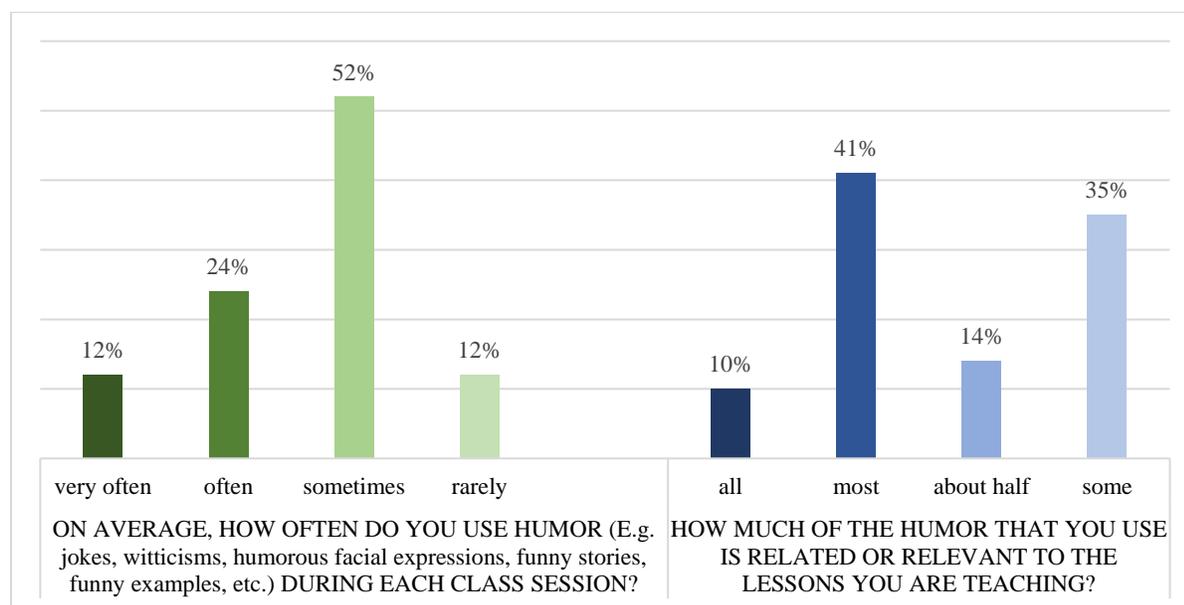


Figure 2 Teachers' Responses to Items 6 and 7 of the Questionnaire

The teachers' responses to items 6 and 7 revealed that more than half (52%) use different kinds of humour (jokes, witticisms, funny stories, etc.) during each teaching session, meanwhile, around quarter of the teachers' responses (24%) indicated that they often use these kinds of humour in classroom. Moreover, the bar graphs in figure 2 show that nearly half of the teachers' use humour that is mostly or entirely relevant or related to the lessons taught. Whereas, the other half of the teachers indicated that some or half of the humour which they use during teaching is relevant or related to the lessons taught.

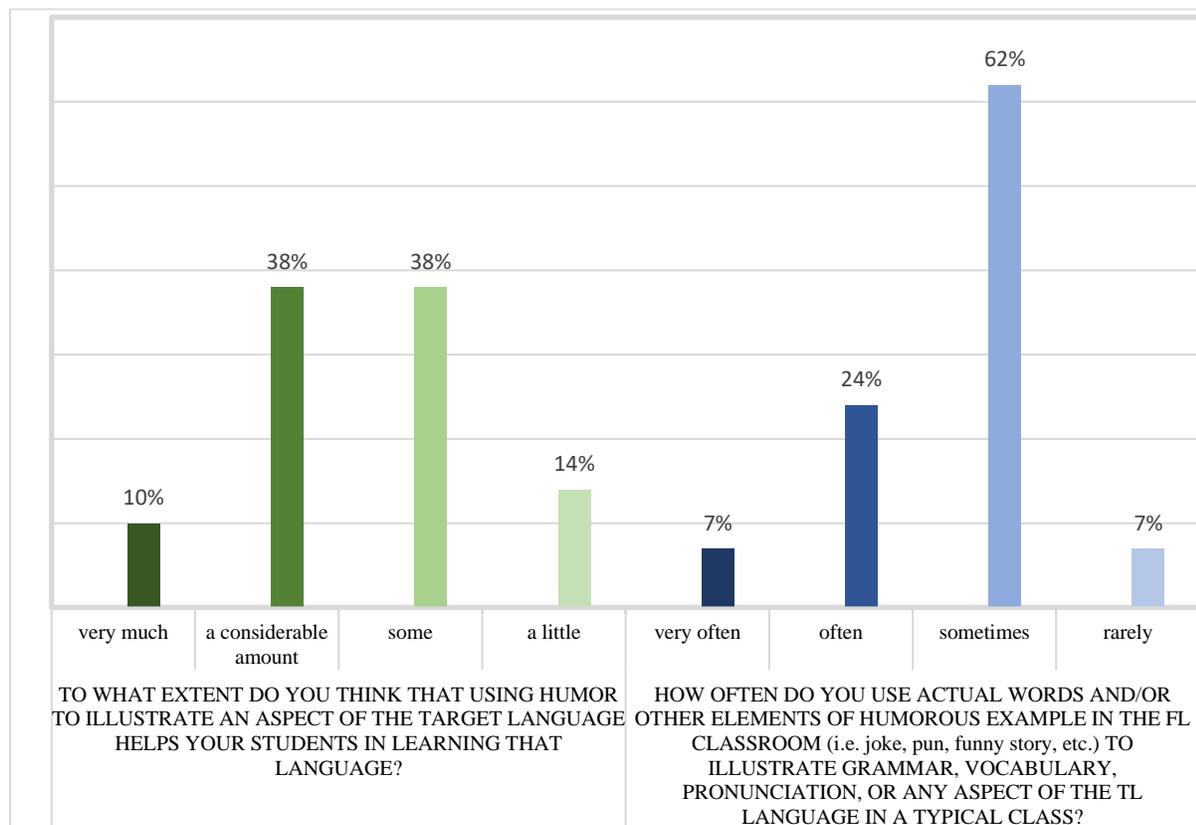


Figure 3 Teachers' Responses to Items 12 and 13 of the Questionnaire

Figure 3 represents the surveyed teachers' responses to items 12 and 13 of the questionnaire. The responses show that approximately half of the teachers (48%) think that, using humour to illustrate an aspect of the language can considerably or verily help their students in learning the TL while 52% of teachers think that it can provide some or a little help. In the same chart, the teachers indicated the frequency of humorous examples or words which they particularly use in the EFL classroom to illustrate grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, or any other aspect of the target language. According to their responses, the majority of teachers (62%) indicated that they sometimes use humour to illustrate aspects of the TL. Meanwhile, nearly third of the responses (31%) revealed that the teachers often or very often use humour for that particular sake.

When the participating teachers were asked specific questions, which required more detailed responses with regards to the use of humour in the EFL classroom, their responses are indicated in the following four tables:

Table 4.2 *To what extent does humour make you students feel more relaxed (i.e. less anxious) in the EFL classroom?*

	Frequency	Percent
It makes them L2ightly more relaxed	5	15.2
It makes them somewhat more relaxed	9	27.3
It makes them considerably more relaxed	19	57.6

4.3 *To what extent does humour in the foreign language classroom increase your students' interest in learning that language?*

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
It has not effect	2	6.1	6.1	6.1
It L2ightly increases their interest	6	18.2	18.2	24.2
It somewhat increases their interest	8	24.2	24.2	48.5
It considerably increases their interest	17	51.5	51.5	100.0

Table 4.4 *Do you think that your use of humour makes you more approachable to students in the class?*

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Yes, it makes me L2ightly more approachable	6	18.2	18.2	18.2
Yes, it makes me more approachable	9	27.3	27.3	45.5
Yes, it makes me considerably more approachable	18	54.5	54.5	100.0

Table 4.5 *Do you think that humour improves your students' abilities to learn the target language in the classroom by creating a more comfortable and conducive learning environment?*

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
It has no effect	1	3.0	3.0	3.0
Yes, it makes the learning environment L2ightly more comfortable	6	18.2	18.2	21.2
Yes, it makes the learning environment L2ightly more comfortable	6	18.2	18.2	39.4
Yes, it makes the learning environment L2ightly more comfortable	20	60.6	60.0	100.0

From tables 4.2, 4.3, 4.4 and 4.5, it can be clearly seen that the majority of teachers had positive responses to statements relating to the pedagogical aspects of using humour in the EFL classroom.

4.3. Frequency and Effect of Verbal Humour across Two Language Proficiency Levels

Two tables (4.6 and 4.7) are presented to quantitatively indicate the frequency and effect of humour as used in the observed (101) and (104) lessons.

Table 4.6 *Frequency and Effect of Verbal Humour in the Beginners (101) Level Lessons*

Form of humour	Frequency of positive effects	Frequency of negative effects	Total Frequency %
Irony	2	0	16.7%
Sarcasm	1	1	16.7%
Teasing	1	1	16.7%
Language play	6	0	50%
Self-defeating style	1	0	8.3%
Total	11	2	13
(%)	(84.6%)	(15.4%)	(100%)
Average per 50 minutes' class session	3 instances		

Table 4.7 *Frequency and Effect of Verbal Humour in the Intermediate (104) Level Lessons*

Form of humour	Frequency of positive effects	Frequency of negative effects	Total Frequency
Irony	6	2	20.5%
Sarcasm	7	1	20.5%
Teasing	3	1	10.2%
Banter	5	1	15.4%
Language play	4	0	10.2%
Jokes	5	0	12.8%
Self-defeating style	3	0	7.6%
Total	33	6	39
(%)	(84.6%)	(15.4%)	(100%)
Average per minutes' class session	5 instances		

As table 4.1 and 4.2 reveal, the frequency of verbal humour forms used across the beginners (101) and the intermediate (104) levels varied considerably. Thus, in the (101) lessons, language play was the most frequently used form at (50%) followed by irony, sarcasm and teasing at equal proportions (16.7%). However, the remaining forms of humour did not exist in the corpus of the beginners (101) lessons. In the (104) lessons, the proportions of irony and sarcasm were similar at (20.5%) for each followed by banter at (15.4%) and jokes (12.8%). Meanwhile, teasing and language play were equally used in these lessons at (10.2%) per each. Notably, the use of humorous visuals and activities was only 5% of the total responses of the participants. Overall, the frequency of humour deployed in these two levels was at the rate of 3 instances per session in the 101 lessons and 5 instances in the 104 lessons. However, the effects of humour were similar in both of levels as about (85%) of the humorous instances were positive and only (14%) were negative.

4.4 Results

Based on the analyses, it could be inferred that certain aspects characterize the positive and negative uses of verbal humour in the Saudi EFL classroom context. Besides, the analyses postulate differences in frequency and similarities of effects regarding the verbal humour forms employed across the beginners (101) as well as the intermediate (104) recorded lessons. All these aspects are presented in the summary of results illustrated in the following subsections.

a. Frequency and Effect of Verbal Humour across the 101 and the 104 levels

The quantitative data of this study helped in gaining knowledge about the differences in frequency and effect of verbal humour between the beginners and the intermediate lessons that might have occurred due to the proficiency gap between the two designated levels. The gleaned data explicates that the frequency of humour in the intermediate level was more than that found in the beginners' lessons. Thus, the average uses of verbal humour in the intermediate level was at (5) instances per a 50-minute session while in the beginners' lessons they occurred at (3) instances per a 50-minute session. This fact has been asserted by the vast majority of surveyed teachers (85%) who confirmed that the use of humour would greatly vary according to the L2 learners' proficiency. Regarding the

effects of humour in both levels, the findings indicate that most of the humorous instances had positive effects at about (84%) per level while only (16%) had negative effects especially when irony, sarcasm and teasing are used. Lastly, teachers' overall perceived views about the use of humour in the Saudi EFL classroom were positive

b. Positive Characteristics of Verbal Humour

The findings also demonstrate that positive humour is always relevant to the course content, constructive and does not target individual students. It is worthwhile noting what most of the surveyed teachers have indicated that, only some or little use of humour is preferable. Hence, humour should be moderately employed in classrooms for it to be positive. According to the analysis, positively employed humour has various instructional benefits in the EFL/L2 classroom that aligns the overall pedagogical goal of the lessons. Lastly, the data reveals that positive verbal humour has pivotal social benefits in the EFL/L2 classrooms. Thus, the analysis of the qualitative data demonstrates the usefulness of 'consensus' humour in narrowing the social distance between the teacher and his students, which created an overall positive classroom rapport. Humour is also beneficial as it helped the students to build in group solidarity amongst themselves. Besides, the surveyed teachers have clarified that humour made their students depart their comfort zones by using the TL whether in their student-student or teacher-student interactions.

c. Negative Characteristics of Verbal Humour

Despite the fact that negative humour could be relevant to the course content, yet, it would not be constructive due to its malproduction. The analysis of data indicated that negative humour could be teacher or student initiated but each with different prospective. Psychologically, negative humour has unpleasant effects on the students and the teachers alike. Thus, through the observations of the video-recorded lessons and the subsequent qualitative analysis, it is found that negative teacher-initiated humour would put students less at ease during or after the use of humour. Results also revealed that the mal-use of humour would eventually hinder the teaching-learning process. Finally, it is deduced that negative humour does not have a particular instructional goal as much as it is deployed to achieve certain social functions. Finally, the overwhelming majority of teachers asserted that humour which is culturally insensitive or that which breaches certain social, traditional and religious as well as political norms/issues in Saudi Arabia would generally be perceived as inappropriate in such a context, and therefore, should be prohibited in the Saudi EFL classrooms.

5. Discussion

To answer the current study's research questions, a sum up the results obtained from the qualitative and quantitative analyses of the data, are collated against existing literature. As for the first research question "What are the main characteristics of verbal humour that may contribute positively in the EFL classroom?", it was deduced that verbal humour positively contributes to the Saudi EFL classroom when it embraces the following four characteristics: being relevant to course content, having purposeful instructional goal, maintaining teacher's credibility, and being comprehensible to L2 learners and suitable to their proficiency level in the TL. Furthermore, verbal humour positively contributes in the Saudi EFL classroom by achieving pedagogical,

psychological, and social benefits. These benefits of humour perceived by the surveyed teachers are consistent with the findings of previous research conducted on the effects of humour on college level students, such as Al-Sudairi (2013), Askildson (2005), Dörnyei and Murphey (2003) and White (2001).

The second research question investigated the main characteristics of verbal humour that may contribute negatively in the EFL classroom, the results indicated that verbal humour negatively contributes to the Saudi EFL classroom when it is characterized by the following: targeting individual students by mocking their behaviours or answers in front of others, targeting teachers to criticize their teaching behaviours, being incomprehensible to L2 learners, and encroaching on the cultural, political or religious norms. Results also revealed that negative humour can put the students as well as the teachers less at ease. However, it is found that students might be more tolerant than teachers in dealing with teacher-initiated humour that targets them individually by mocking or ridiculing. According to the qualitative data of this study, the findings show that humour had specific social functions in the observed lessons. As for students, it is found that humour is used to indirectly address a student's dissatisfaction regarding his instructor's teaching behaviour using the 'conflict' function.

The third research question explored the differences in the frequency and effect of verbal humour used in the two English language proficiency levels during the observed EFL lessons. The quantitative data of this study revealed that humour was more frequently used in the intermediate (104) level than in the beginners (101) level. Overall, the frequency of humour deployed in these two levels was at the rate of 3 instances per each 50-minute teaching session in the 101 lessons and 5 instances in the 104 lessons per similar period. As for, the efficacy differences of humour across the beginners and the intermediate levels, results revealed that the most effective form of humour in the beginner's lessons was language play which stood at the exact rate of (50 %) of the taught (101) lessons followed by irony at (16.7%). Whereas, in the intermediate level classrooms, the most effective form of humour during classroom interactions were jokes at (12.8%) followed by language play at (10.2%).

Other forms of humour were moderately effective in both of the observed levels, these are, sarcasm and teasing. Thus, despite the fact that these forms were pedagogically effective in most of the instances, they have at least once negatively contributed to the Saudi EFL classrooms. Self-defeating humour is one of the most effective styles or types of humour. Pedagogically, this style of humour has been very effective in promoting the student's participation in both levels.

5.1 Conclusion

As per the findings of this study concluded that the use of humour in the Saudi EFL context may positively contribute in the classrooms. When certain characteristics are fulfilled, humour would have several psychological, social and pedagogical benefits in the designated context. On the contrary, humour may negatively contribute to the EFL Saudi classrooms if it embraces some characteristics. The results have also revealed that the use of humour in the (101) lessons is less than that found in (104) lessons, while the effects of humour in both levels were mostly positive.

5.2. Pedagogical Implications

The implications of this study entail that positive humour affords possible means of overcoming such hindering factors, as it can pave the way for L2 learning to take place by creating a more relaxed, motivating, and safer classroom atmosphere. However, certain precautions should be considered when deploying humour in classrooms, and teachers need to first consider its appropriateness in relation to the specific context of Saudi EFL classrooms. Thus, for humour to provide a positive appeal in the classroom, instructors should avoid humour that makes fun of students by disparaging them for their ignorance (low proficiency in the TL) or inappropriate behaviour.

5.3. Recommendation

Findings arising from the present study suggest that teachers' and students' humour, as perceived and practiced, is indeed a significant classroom phenomenon that has multi-layered characteristics and can be exposed to a variety of interpretations. However, several areas remain, that warrant continued investigation into the phenomenon in order to develop further insightful understanding of the topic. It is recommended that a larger, randomly selected sample is chosen so as to compare it to the results in the current study. Furthermore, the authors recommend that similar studies are conducted in different EFL context as well as other contexts where the utilisation of humour is explored further.

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