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# Inside Jokes: English Language Humor From the Outside

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University of San Francisco

**Inside Jokes: English Language Humor From the Outside**

A Thesis Presented to  
the Faculty of the School of Education International and Multicultural  
Education Department

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages

by

Mieka D. Strawhorn

September 2014

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## ABSTRACT

Humor is a complex and dynamic mode of communication that serves a number of important social functions. While humor is found in all cultures, English language learners (ELLs) in the United States must learn to navigate American humor with all of its inherent cultural, social and linguistic particularities. The ability to appreciate, comprehend and produce humor is a critical and necessary skillset for full fluency in English. Research has been done on the subject of incorporating humor into the language classroom and the benefits of doing so are myriad (Bell, 2005; 2009). However, very little research has been done on the possibility of explicit instruction in English language humor as a topic of study in its own right.

This study addresses that gap in literature by reporting the views, experiences and advice of ELLs who have faced the challenge of becoming fluent in English language humor. The 10 participants in this study are interviewed about their perceptions of American humor, asked about specific challenges they faced and reported on methods they used to enhance their competence using English language humor. Drawn from their voices, recommendations are made for the possible inclusion of explicit humor instruction in the English language classroom

as well as suggestions for ways educators can support students in achieving competence in English language humor.

## CHAPTER I - INTRODUCTION

### Statement of the Problem

Mark Twain (1907) once quipped “English humor is hard to appreciate, though, unless you are trained to it. The English papers, in reporting my speeches, always put 'laughter' in the wrong place” (p.2). While Twain is poking fun at British humor, one could argue the same about American humor; unless you are trained to it, the joke may be lost. The problem for many English language learners (ELLs) is that fluent understanding of English language humor is both linguistically and culturally challenging and opportunities to be *trained to it* (as Twain puts it) are not readily available within the standard TESOL curriculum. While the benefits of using humor as a teaching tool in the EFL/ESL classroom are widely extolled (Askildson, 2005; Pomerantz & Bell, 2007), explicit instruction of humor forms and usage is largely ignored as a virtue in and of itself. The lack of dedicated attention paid in the English language classroom to the variety, prevalence and complexity of American humor may be problematic.

In order to achieve true fluency in English, the ELL must navigate the linguistic and cultural landscape of English language humor with speed, accuracy and efficiency. The subjectivity, variety, and sociocultural context inherent in humorous language can be challenging for ELLs who must find their way inside both the language and the culture of their new surroundings (Mitchell, Graesser & Louwerse, 2014). The appreciation and application of humor may require the ELL to tap into a wide variety of linguistic skills such as syntax, prosody, figurative speech, lexical items and semantics (Monnot & Kite, 1974; Lems, 2011). Given the importance of these skills, there is surprisingly little literature or research dedicated to the explicit teaching of humor in English language classrooms.

### Purpose of the Project

The purpose of this project to seek out and report on the experiences of adult ELLs who are now living in the United States and to examine the challenges they faced with the detection, comprehension and production of humor in English as they were first navigating the landscape of American language and culture. From the information gleaned from those first-hand reports, I plan to theorize on the possible benefits of treating humor explicitly as a distinct and unique linguistic and cultural phenomenon and, if warranted, make recommendations for the use of explicit instruction in humor within a TOEFL curriculum.

I chose this subject because, like many Americans, humor plays an important role in my day-to-day discourse, both professionally and personally. The use of humor is intrinsic to my ability to express my personality, values and beliefs. Additionally, my ability to detect and understand humor deployed by others is critical for forming and maintaining relationships. A deficit in these skills would mean a core change in who I am and how I interact with the world. Like myself, English language learners are dependent on a full range of linguistic expression in order to build and express their identity, and humor is a prevalent mode of expression in American culture. Therefore, by addressing humor explicitly, language teachers may be able to enrich the cadre of linguistic expression available to our students. The results of this study may offer TESOL professionals insight into the struggles faced by ELLs when learning to identify and implement humor and encourage them to consider incorporating explicit instruction of humor into the TESOL curriculum.



### Research Questions

The research questions presented here were used as guiding questions in a conversational interview. Therefore, this list is by no means exhaustive but merely representative of the line of questioning posed to participants during the data collection phase.

- Do you see humor primarily as a cultural skill or as a linguistic skill?
- Would you consider yourself a *funny* person? How important is your sense of humor to your identity?
- As an ELL, have you ever had a section, lecture or class that focused primarily on the production of or the understanding of humor?
- Do you think it would have been helpful to have received explicit instruction in humor when you were learning English?
- Can humor be taught?

A further breakdown of the questions asked and answered throughout the interviews is presented in chapter three.

### Theoretical Framework

This study is informed by two significant linguistic theories: Grice's Cooperative Principle (1975) and Lave & Wenger's concept of Communities of Practice (1991). The former addresses the pragmatic competence required for English language humor fluency and the latter speaks to the importance of that ability as it relates to integration into American cultural life. The Cooperative Principle (CP) is rooted in the idea that in order to verbally communicate effectively, a mutually agreed upon adherence to certain conversational norms (or maxims as Grice has identified them) must take place. Grice details four maxims that are necessary for cooperative communication. Briefly, those maxims are:

1. Quality - Say only what you know to be true
2. Quantity - Don't say too much or too little
3. Relation - Keep your comments relevant to the matter at hand
4. Manner - Be clear and avoid obscurity (Grice, 1975 as cited in Celcia-Muricia & Olshtain, 2000).

When these maxims are flouted by the speaker, the interlocutor must rely on contextual implicature and inference in order to fully understand the meaning of the utterance (Lindblom, 2000; Davies, 2007; Murray, 2011). An ELLs' ability to successfully make inferences based on context when maxims are flouted (intentionally or unintentionally) is essential to their overall pragmatic competence (Chang, 2011; Ifantidou, 2011; Murray, 2012). Studies have found that the application of CP can be useful for intercultural learning (Murray, 2012) and that the study of pragmatic norms can have a positive effect on ELLs' pragmatic competence (Ifantidou, 2011).

Fine-tuned pragmatic competence is essential for detecting and participating in many forms of humor. In fact, much English language humor relies on the intentional flouting of Grice's maxims. For example, detecting sarcasm requires the interlocutor to know that the speaker is flouting the maxim of quality intentionally. This is often done quite discreetly; in fact the humor frequently relies on the subtlety of the utterance. In order to cooperate with this type of interaction the ELL may require near native fluency, especially if the speaker of the utterance is not well known to them.

Another important theory that underpins this study is Lave and Wenger's concept of Community of Practice (1992; Wenger, 1998) which can be defined as any group with shared norms, beliefs, behaviors and expectations (Wenger, 1998; Evnitskaya & Morton, 2010). Wenger (1998) theorized that identity can be constructed through participation in and by the adoption of

the values and beliefs of the community of practice (CofP) with which one engages (Trent & DeCoursey, 2010). Lave and Wenger (1998) used the terms “apprentice” and “master” to describe the dynamic between those already at the heart of a CofP (master) and those seeking entrance (apprentice) into the community (as cited in Vaughan, 2007, p. 176). In order to function as a full-fledged member of a CofP one must acquire fluency in the discourse of that community. One of the hallmarks of a CofP is a shared language, or as Gee (1999) described it, a “social language”, one which may include specialized jargon, grammars, syntax and registers (p. 46). Studies have shown that language plays a big part in identity building and group membership (Cashman, 2008; West, 2008; Andrew, 2012) and that participation in English speaking CofP can alleviate social isolation caused by feelings of linguistic deficiency (Li, 2012).

Naturally, humor is frequently a significant component of the linguistic repertoire of many CofPs. According to Wenger (1998) “local lore, shared stories, inside jokes, knowing laughter . . .” are indicators that a CofP has formed (p. 48). Humor is often used as a social binder and the ability to engage in humorous language play may be crucial for gaining entrance into a variety of communities. ELLs living in the United States must grapple with linguistic and cultural differences that may keep them from fully participating in many communities both socially and professionally and humor is a significant component of many of CofPs.

### Methodology

For this study, a qualitative research approach was be used. In order to allow participants to express fully their personal experiences and perspectives on English language humor, this study implemented conversational interviews as the means towards that end. A purposive sampling of participants was chosen based on the following criteria: Participants were adult, non-

native speakers of English living in the United States with sufficient English language proficiency to converse in-depth about humor and culture using figurative and abstract language. Participants were culled from within the researcher's immediate and extended social circle. Because of a small initial recruitment rate, a chain referral request was also deployed to ensure a large enough sample size.

Interviews were recorded and conducted by telephone and in person. During the interviews, participants were asked a few open-ended questions about their personal experiences as ELLs. Interviews were scheduled with the participants directly, in advance, via email or telephone at a time that was convenient for them.

#### Limitations of the Study

The limitations of this study are numerous. The method of data collection was imperfect whereas some subjects were interviewed by telephone while others in person. Additionally, some of the telephone connections were poor which may have impacted the flow and ease of the conversation. The researcher's familiarity with the subjects varied and also may have had an impact on the interviews and likely affected the overall dynamics of the conversation. The inexperience of the researcher may have affected the results.

Demographically the participants were similar; all were college educated and worked in professional, white collar positions. The age range of participants in this study was another key limitation. Most of the participants were between the ages of 35 - 45 (as is the researcher) and therefore part of the same generation. Humor styles identified by the participants may have had a generational component. These factors pose significant limitations to this study as it represents only a small segment of ELL populations.

### Significance of the Study

The inclusion of the first hand experiences of ELLs in humor research is limited (Bell & Attardo, 2010). This study seeks, in a small way, to amplify the background voice of the ELL and to allow them to address the issues they have faced on their road to English language fluency. The gathering and sharing of the personal experiences and opinions of ELLs may provide valuable insight into the needs and wants of students and in turn help teachers and course designers to shape their approach to teaching humor in the ESL/EFL classroom. Possible innovations in humor instruction would in turn benefit future and current ELLs by providing focused instruction in humor detection, comprehension and use from both a linguistic and cultural perspective; instruction that may smooth the way on their journey towards English language fluency.

### Definition of Terms

**Appreciation:** the ability to comprehend and understand the basis or conceit of a humorous utterance or act.

**Detection:** the ability to identify when an attempt at a humorous utterance or act has been made.

**Fluent/Fluency:** processing a linguistic ability in English close to that of a native speaker and marked by fluidity, accuracy and automaticity and having the ability to express and comprehend abstract concepts (Kuhn, Schwanenflugel & Meisinger, 2010; TESOL Inc., 2006).

**Humor/English language humor:** Verbal or physical play meant to amuse. Incongruous, ironic or figurative wordplay. Amusing joke or story (Random House Webster's College Dictionary, 1995).

**Production:** the ability to create and deliver a humorous utterance or act.

**TESOL curriculum:** the aggregate of courses and areas of study for teaching English to speakers of other languages commonly agreed by the academic field.

## CHAPTER II – REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### Introduction

Over the decades, humor scholarship has spanned a number of disciplines including (but not limited to) linguistics, literature, sociology, history, psychology, philosophy and education (Bell, 2011). The scope of recent literature on the subject of humor is broad and expansive and speaks to the prominence and importance of its role in human society. The existence of humor is common to all cultures yet is diverse enough in its variety, form and function to warrant attention across multiple disciplines. For the purposes of this study I have narrowed down the scope of literature reviewed into three thematic categories. The first category encompasses research on the mechanical and linguistic workings of humor and ways in which it can be created, detected and appreciated. The second category involves research that addresses the cultural and contextual nature of humor and the pragmatic requirements for its understanding and use. Lastly, the third category presented here explores research on the pedagogical benefits of including humor in the ESL and EFL classroom.

### Review of the Literature

These categories represent literature that informs the purpose and helps to shed light on the problems outlined in my study. By investigating the mechanics of humor, I hoped to better inform my assumption that English language learners may encounter both similarities and differences in the mechanics of humor in their native language that may affect their ability to comprehend and create humor in the L2. Research on the cultural and contextual nature of humor

informs my assertion that humor is a major component of pragmatic competence and therefore a worthwhile avenue of study for ELLs. Finally, by reviewing existing literature about the implementation of humor within the TESOL curriculum, I hoped to better understand the practicalities and benefits of doing so as more clearly identify the dearth of literature associated with explicit humor instruction in the classroom, something I may ultimately champion.

### **The mechanics of humor**

The first category of articles selected for review in this study help to demonstrate the mechanical, linguistic and paralinguistic complexity involved in the creation and perception of English language humor. Considerable research has been dedicated to the topic of irony in both written and spoken language. Irony can be defined as non-literal utterances where the intended meaning is in opposition to what is actually said (Bryant, 2010; Pexman, Whalon & Green, 2010) and can include other linguistic forms such as hyperbole and sarcasm. Differentiating between sincere and ironic speech can be challenging to ELLs for a number of reasons.

Bryant and Tree (2005) sought to determine if the idea of an “ironic tone of voice” was a measurable marker of ironic speech (p. 258). They suggested that what is commonly thought of as an ironic tone of voice, consisting of specific and recognizable sets of “signature acoustic features” might in natural, spontaneous speech actually be a combination of a number of different prosodic features and therefore could not be universally recognized as a single tone of voice (p. 258). Bryant and Tree tested their theory by presenting a pool of 50, native English speaking college students with recorded utterances that had been filtered to remove lexical information with only prosodic features remaining. Utterances were recordings of talk radio programs and were filtered and transferred to audio cassette tape. Study participants were asked to listen to the filtered utterances and rate the level of sarcasm they heard on a scale from one

(not sarcastic) to seven (very sarcastic). Bryant and Tree concluded that participants relied on a wide variety of prosodic features when making their determinations about the levels of sarcasm in the recordings.

About their findings, Bryant and Tree (2005) stated that “these data speak to the high degree of similarity and overlap in which varying emotional and linguistic messages can manifest prosodically and conceptually” (p. 272). They also concluded that “what seems like an ironic tone of voice is likely an emergent product of interpretations informed by multiple sources of information, many not acoustic” (p. 272). Bryant and Tree therefore concluded that there is no smoking gun that indicates the absence or presence of sarcasm but rather a number of clues the interlocutor must employ in order to make that determination.

The study by Bryant and Tree (2005) is somewhat limited by the fact that only one type of medium was tested; that of the talk radio show. Whether such material should be considered natural or spontaneous could be debated. What are the personas being constructed by the speakers? Is there any diversity in age, nationality and dialect of the speakers and what was the subject matter discussed and who was the intended audience? All of these factors may have had a significant effect on the results. What this study does tell us is that detecting sarcasm is complex and may require an agile and keen ear as well as the ability to pick up on non-auditory clues. I would be interested to see a similar study done with both native and non-native English speaking participants. Such a study would inform my research significantly.

Burgers, van Mulken and Schellens (2013) focused their attention on co- textual markers, or “metacommunicative clues” in verbal and written irony which play a role in humor support strategies (p. 46). Burgers et al. sought to identify the following: “which co-textual irony markers can be identified in written discourse?”, “how often are different types of co-textual irony



markers used in written discourse?” and “are co-textual markers of irony used differently across various written genres?” (p. 50). Texts for examination were comprised of a random sampling of various Dutch newspaper sections (written in Dutch) including advertisements, columns, book and film, reviews, and letters to the editor (p. 52). A total of 180 ironic utterances were identified and 2042 possible co-textual utterances.

The types of written markers identified in this study included repetition of ironic statements, the use of hyperbole, understatements, metaphor and rhetorical questions. Burgers et al (2013) also identified a number of “mood markers” such as change in register, cynicism and use of humor to set up subsequent humorous utterances that serve as humor support strategies, a concept popularized by Hay (2001) (p. 60). In answer to their second research question, Burgers et al found that hyperbole was the most frequently used marker to indicate ironic utterances in the selected samples and humor was found to be the most frequently used mood marker. In answer to the third question of the study, results showed that irony found in advertisements and letters to the editor were marked less frequently than irony in newspaper columns, suggesting that different genres inspire the use of irony differently (p. 64).

The study by Burgers et al (2013) is included in the review of literature because it informs the present study in two ways. Firstly, the research was done in Dutch and the results indicate that use of irony is not unique to English and as Bell (2007) suggested, the universality of certain types of humor mean that language learners may already have many of the linguistic and paralinguistic skills necessary to decode ironic speech and text. The difficulty for ELLs may simply be a matter of learning how to transfer their existing knowledge from one language to the next. The second reason this study is included is that it covered a variety of different genres unlike the previous study (Bryant & Tree, 2005) which only addressed a single and quite narrow

genre of talk radio shows. Since ELLs are exposed to so many different genres of spoken and written discourse, it's important to understand the nuances if we are to consider teaching them.

Hay's (2001) study into humor support strategies has been widely referenced in the research of humor scholarship across disciplines. Hay surveyed strategies deployed by the interlocutor in support of spontaneous humorous interaction, reviewed the role of pragmatics and posits that the audience plays a "vital role in the construction of humorous discourse" (p. 56). Reporting on data from a previous research study (Hay, 1995 as cited in Hay, 2001), the most commonly recognized support strategy is laughter but Hay asserts that laughter is only a small part of a larger structure of strategies used. Other strategies detailed were the contribution of further humor (verbal sparring, trading barbs and ironic responses), echoing (repeating what the speaker says as if "savoring the humor", p. 63), offering sympathy (usually in response to self-deprecating humor), and overlap and heightened involvement (using various means to signal interest or appreciation).

Arguing that context will dictate the strategy deployed, Hay (2001) suggested that laughter (or lack thereof) is by no means the only indication that humor has been perceived and appreciated. Additionally, Hay identified four implicatures associated with humor support; recognition, understanding, appreciating and agreeing. The first three are treated as part of a scale on which the preceding must occur before the other can be applied. Hay stated that "understanding entails recognition, and appreciation entails both recognition and understanding" (p. 67). These steps can be manipulated by the audience to withhold full support of the utterance, for example, "an explicit statement of understanding will implicate lack of appreciation" (p. 67). In other words, one can understand a joke yet fail to communicate that understanding as a tacit indication that they did not find it funny.

A final implicature identified by Hay (2001) was agreement. Agreement as a support strategy is of note as it can work to mitigate or exacerbate face threatening acts, especially in instances where teasing or self-deprecating remarks are the form of humor being deployed. Hay described a “delicate tension between the need to support, and the need to deny the message” (p. 74). Negotiating the appropriate support strategy may be perilous and require an adept pragmatic sense.

An important data set Hay (2001) identified is of particular interest to the present study as it outlines some causes of unsupported humor which may pose comprehension and production concerns for English language learners. Hay offered that “insufficient contextualization”, “assuming too much background knowledge”, and “misjudging the relation between speaker and audience” are a few possible causes for failed humor. These are all matters of social or linguistic competence that may affect ELLs at a higher rate than native speakers. Hay concluded that full humor support in natural, spontaneous discourse is a complicated matter that calls on the audience to use a wide range of pragmatic and linguistic skills. This study is included in the review of literature because it informs numerous other studies in the field of humor and linguistic scholarship. Additionally, the data presented is born of true, spontaneous humor and clearly demonstrates the collaborative nature of humorous interaction. Language learners on either the production or reception end of this type of discourse will want to do hold up their end of the conversation.

Bell (2007), focusing on the comprehension of humor rather than its creation and function, sought to expand on the findings of Hay (2001) and Carrell (1997, as cited by Bell, 2007) by exploring conversational humor (as opposed to script based humor) with a cross-cultural perspective. Using the data generated from a previous study by Bell (2001), tape

recordings of two advanced level ELLs in conversation with native speakers, Bell (2007) made the case that non-native speakers are frequently attributed with having a lack of humor competence based merely on their position as an ELL. Bell further stated that this may lead to unwarranted adjustment in how native speakers interact with them which could in turn lead to marginalization.

Bell (2007) first outlined the progression of one subjects' "joke competence" (p. 373) in relation to a particular native speaking interlocutor. Bell found that the more familiar the subject became with the interlocutor, the better she was able to detect and respond to her joking appropriately. This observation was made to counter Carrell's (as cited in Bell, 2007), assertion that joke competence is "'relatively static' and 'virtually stable'" (p. 374).

Bell (2007) then expanded on the work of Hay (2001) by making a distinction between appreciation and understanding. She used a sample of data in which the subject is interacting with two native speaking interlocutors, laughing along with their jokes as an example. Upon later discussion with Bell, the subject revealed that she did not really understand the script that was being presented (a back and forth about a particular American stereotype) but understood it to be funny and enjoyed the discourse because of the physicality of the interlocutors. She understood the basic premise but not the details yet it did not deter her from full enjoyment of the exchange. Bell used this data to counter Hay's assertion that full appreciation entails full comprehension. Bell stated that "This example shows how understanding, like appreciation, can be of varying degrees, and that appreciation does not necessarily imply full understanding" (p. 377).

To further support her claim that "second language users are often accorded a lower status than native speakers and are not treated as full and equal conversational partners", Bell (2007) supplied data from a conversation where the subject, again conversing with a native

speaking interlocutor, seemed superficially to not get the joke resulting in the joke being repeated for her benefit. However, upon subsequent questioning, the subject revealed that she had in fact initially gotten the joke but simply had not found it very funny and therefore did not supply full support.

Bell (2007) used two final examples of data to address Hay's (2001) take on agreement as a means of humor support specific to showing approval of a topic. Bell argued that agreement should be more widely considered to include other functions of humor. Bell concluded that by expanding on the work of Carrell (1997) and Hay (2001) and extending the principles they outlined to non-native speakers of English, a clearer picture of true humor competence could be made.

This study is important to the present study as it provides clear examples of Hay's (2001) principles in action as they relate to English language learners. It also provides support for the claims this study makes on the possibility of marginalization based on an ELL's perceived linguistic competence in English language humor.

### **Culture and context**

There are many moving parts that make up the mechanics of written and spoken humor but the cultural, contextual and comparative aspects of humor deserve equal attention. Bell (2011), a major contributor to the base of existing literature in humor study within the field of TESOL, sought to bolster the connections between the fields of humor and L2 pragmatic scholarship (Bell, 2005, 2007). Bell mined the corpus of humor research and applied its principles and findings to L2 acquisition research and made suggestions that may help language learners improve their L2 humor competence. Since humor scholarship has so many facets, Bell narrowed her focus to a few key factors; topic (race, sex, age, religion etc.), contextual clues

(laughter, repetition, register, prosody etc.), the various forms of humor (jokes, sarcasm, puns, irony etc) and the functions of humor (building relationships, establishing common ground, regulating behavior). Bell also discussed how humor functions in dynamic social contexts (work, school, social life). Here Bell's (2011) findings are summarized:

- **Topic:** Bell reported that there are six topics that receive humorous treatment most frequently throughout the world; sex, gender, age, language, politics, religion, and ethnicity. She argues that while the topics may be universal, the understanding and agreement about what belongs in each category and how it is treated is not. What is appropriate in one culture may not be in another and determining the appropriateness of certain topics can pose a challenge to those outside of the culture. Bell suggested that L2 learners may wish to keep a record of topics to help them learn to identify appropriate topics of humor (p. 141).
- **Context:** Bell concluded that contextual clues such as the use of laughter help make humorous intentions clear to interlocutors. Prosody, repetition, register and explicit reference that humor is being used are other forms of what Bell calls "a play frame" that indicate the intended nature of a humorous exchange (p. 142).
- **Form:** Bell stated that taxonomies of different types of humor are problematic and that much conversational humor is usually a mixture of different types. Bell suggested that the difficulties in naming all types of humor can actually help ELLs by encouraging discussion which may guide them in identifying similarities and differences found in their L1.
- **Function:** Bell reviewed the many functions humor serves especially its emotional, societal and pragmatic uses. Bell emphasized that ELLs need to learn

about the function of humor and said “it is thus crucial for learners to be aware of the messages that might be contained beyond the humor” (p. 147).

- Social Context: Bell emphasized the possible pitfalls that ELLs may face if they fail to recognize organizational principles of humor and that “status, role relationships, interlocutor familiarity, and setting all play an important part in determining who can joke with whom” (p. 147).

Bell (2011) concluded that more research must be done but that based on her initial findings some explicit instruction in humor could be beneficial. Bell then offered some cautious suggestions for how humor instruction might be incorporated into the language class. This study is included here because of all the researched reviewed, it came the closest to answering the questions posed about explicit teaching of humor in the present study. Bell built a strong case for explicit humor instruction yet appears reluctant to advocate it until further, extensive research has been conducted. This raises a question; why don't these findings lead to a more forceful recommendation? Are there dangers or drawbacks to giving explicit instruction in humor comprehension and usage?

Dewaele (2008) explored the notion of appropriateness and the difficulties in establishing a norm across cultures and languages. Dewaele reached back to a web-based questionnaire devised for a previous study (Dewaele & Pavlenko, 2001-2003 as cited in Dewaele, 2008) for data from L2 learners about their views of appropriateness and language across different languages in order to inform an outline of the implications of approaching appropriateness in the classroom.

Dewaele (2008) reported that even coming to a consensus about the definition of appropriateness has been a challenge for researchers. Identifying appropriateness is generally

thought to be a facet of communicative competence that includes linguistic, sociocultural and contextual factors and is central to pragmatic competence. Appropriateness is a central theme in humor research and therefore important to explore for the purposes of the present study.

Dewaele (2008) described some of the difficulties facing researchers that issues of appropriateness may create. For researchers, the slippery task of making judgments about appropriateness which are “not static but highly fluid” (p. 250) is an issue. Another concern to researchers is that making a judgment about appropriateness requires knowledge of the relationship between interlocutors; information normally not processed by researchers. That information is known only to the participants in a typical research setting (p. 250). Additionally, when researching interaction between native speakers (NSs) and L2 users, both perspectives must be taken into account in order to make a determination on appropriateness. In order to obtain the perspective of L2 users, an online questionnaire was created and deployed between the years 2001 and 2003. The questionnaire, called the Bilingualism and Emotion Questionnaire (BEQ), asked respondents to report on a multitude of situational linguistic choices, identify preferred words for a given situation and respond to open-ended questions. The database contained feedback from 1,579 multilingual participants speaking a total of 77 different L1s (p. 255). The data suggested that L2 learners, once they reach sufficient proficiency become aware of the differences in the norms of appropriateness between languages which can be a source of concern and anxiety.

Dewaele (2008) concluded by outlining some implications this data may have for foreign language teaching. Dewaele stated that the data highlights the importance of including discussion about appropriateness in the language classroom as part of overall sociolinguistic and sociopragmatic competence and suggests consciousness-raising activities as a means of



instruction. While the study found that many respondents learned appropriateness in their target language only after fluency was achieved (and in many cases, only after living in abroad where the L2 is spoken), Dewaele suggested that instruction at the emergent phase could be beneficial. Though this article only discusses humor in passing, the overall theme of appropriateness and sociocultural pragmatics is critical to the investigation of L2 humor acquisition. This study is included here because its data came from a wide sample of L2 speakers and represented their personal experiences in dealing with potentially tricky cross-cultural communication. It is important to acknowledge that there is a pattern of anxiety and stress caused by unfamiliarity with cultural appropriateness and humor usage may be a large part of that picture for some language learners.

Shively (2013) presented a case study of an American student, Kyle, studying abroad in Spain and viewed his experiences in L2 (Spanish in this case) humor acquisition through the lens of language socialization. Shively first reviewed current and historical literature on the role of humorous language play during L2 acquisition and reported that humor is and should be used as a tool towards improving the classroom atmosphere and that the ability to use humor is essential to overall linguistic competence. Shively also reviewed literature on the mechanics involved in the comprehension and production of humor for the L2 learner.

Shively (2013) explained the theory of language socialization which she referred to as a process by which an individual is socialized in the ways of meaningful and appropriate use of language for any particular culture. Shively emphasized that “a key component of language socialization is the involvement of more knowledgeable individuals who guide novices’ participation” (p. 933). It is through this theoretical framework that Shively analyzed the data collected from Kyle which consisted of audiotaped natural conversation between Kyle and native

Spanish speakers (his host family and a friend) as well as field notes, interviews and Kyle's journal.

Shively (2013) looked at failed attempts at humor, use of deadpan humor (humor lacking contextual clues) and humorous revoicing and tracked Kyle's progression of his used of each over a four month period (p. 936). Of particular relevance to the present study, Shively presented the following analysis of the reasons for the failure of Kyle's attempts at humor.

Considering all of the conversations with Paola throughout the semester, Kyle's humor appeared to fail primarily for four reasons. First, lack of shared knowledge likely caused failure. For example, in several instances, the topic of Kyle's humor involved American cultural references with which Paola was not familiar. A second apparent cause of failure involved humor that Paola seemed not to find amusing (e.g., joking about seeing a dead horse). Third, in some cases, Kyle tried to initiate a play frame while Paola was talking about a serious topic and she appeared to want to maintain a serious perspective. A fourth cause of failed humor—as was observed in Excerpt (1)—occurred when an utterance was delivered with no contextualization cues to alert the hearer to the playful intent. (p. 938)

Over time, Kyle's attempts at humor were more successful and the number of failed attempts decreased. Shivley (working from Kyle's own reflections from his journals and interviews) credited his improvement with learning and using vocabulary and phrases common to those he heard his Spanish speaking friends use instead of simply translating vocabulary and phrases from English. Kyle also got to know his interlocutors better and began to pay attention to what topics and situations were deemed appropriate. Kyle also made an adjustment to the style of sarcasm he deployed.

Shively (2013) then discussed the other changes in Kyle's use of humor and shifted focus once again to language socialization. The data was drawn from Kyle's journals where he reported his reflections on what factors were most critical to the development of his humor competence. Kyle stated that observation and asking for clarification while participating in humorous interactions helped his sense of appropriateness. Shively concluded that for Kyle, observation, developing relationships, seeking the expert help of native speaking friends were the methods that most improved his ability to make successful attempts at humor. Those methods are essential components of language socialization.

This study helps to clarify the role of native speaking interlocutors and highlights some of the culturally dependent challenges faced by L2 learners wishing to improve their humor competence. While the L2 in this study is Spanish and not English as in the current study, the cultural factors at play are universal and therefore pertinent to the research here.

### **Pedagogical applications**

Askildson (2005) conducted a qualitative study to investigate language learners' and language teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of using humor in the language classroom. In the study, Askildson reviewed evidence that humor usage is a proven method for lowering students' affective filters, creating a more relaxed atmosphere, reducing tension and increasing student interest in subject matter. In addition to atmospheric benefits, Askildson also reported that targeted use of humor can help language learners' understanding of a number of linguistic features including phonology, morphology, lexicon and syntax (p. 50) as well as improve social and cultural pragmatics (p. 52). The literature supporting these claims is abundant but Askildson sought to find out if teacher and student perceptions of these benefits were congruent with those findings.

Study participants were surveyed via questionnaire and asked for perceptions of the effectiveness of the inclusion of humor in the language classroom. Teachers and students were given different questionnaires. The results showed that student respondents generally felt “noticeably to considerably more relaxed” when humor was used in class and reported that humor increased their interest level in language learning (p. 54). Additionally, students and teachers indicated that humor usage made teachers more approachable in class. Finally, Askildson (2005) found that nearly all respondents felt that humor “created a more comfortable and conducive learning environment overall” (p. 54). Linguistically, most respondents said that targeting humor was important to overall language learning. Most students (65%) indicated that humor helped with their cultural learning “noticeably more to considerably more” where teachers responded positively to cultural learning assistance at 82% when humor was used (p. 55). The results of this study, while small in scope, are a convincing argument for the inclusion of humor in the language classroom. While the present study seeks to address explicit humor instruction, it is important to keep in mind that humor appears to be a popular topic and device among both teachers and students making a transition between using humor and teaching humor a compelling prospect.

Wagner and Urios-Aparisi (2011) reviewed the findings of a number of previous studies on the benefits and functions of using humor within a *world language classroom*. They stated that the use of humor has been shown to reduce student anxiety, mitigate face threatening acts, increase student motivation and enhance teacher immediacy. Wagner and Urios-Aparisi outlined different methods for including humor in the classroom as well as the effect different methods might achieve. For example, by reviewing data taken from a University level Spanish class they hypothesized that:

The use of an inherently humorous activity such as singing in situations in which it is not expected can facilitate memorization as well as the opportunity to create a relaxed learning atmosphere to increase the students' confidence to speak and use the target language. (p. 405)

Wagner and Urios-Aparisi (2011) also briefly discussed humor as content in the world language classroom and suggested that humor, being a “crucial part of real-life communication”, can be a means of integrating cultural information and promoting student desire to use the target language (p. 406). Wagner and Urios-Aparisi then outlined a number of prominent theories on humor across multiple disciplines including pragmatics, script theory and discourse analysis. Finally, Wagner & Urios-Aparisi outlined their own coding system for humor categories as follows:

- A) production
- B) interpretation and reception
- C) functions of humor
- D) contents (p. 413)

The above represents a broad categorization; the study broke each of these categories down into finer detail. The purpose of the coding scheme was to assist future researchers (Wagner & Urios-Aparisi included) in the synthesizing of data for the purposes of humor study in the world language classroom.

Wagner and Urios-Aparisi (2011) concluded by outlining plans for a long term project on humor in the world language class on a broad scale that would include data from different levels of instruction from different parts of the world.

This study is included here because it provided a clear outline of the different purposes and effects of humor usage within a wide context of second language acquisition. It is also useful in that it summarized many important studies done within the field of humor research.

Pomerantz and Bell (2011) explored the role of humorous language play in the classroom as well as the possibilities for its use as a linguistic safe-house “in which students can experiment with particular classroom identities, critique institutional/instructional norms, and engage in more complex and creative acts of language use” (p. 149). For this study, Pomerantz and Bell used data collected from a Spanish as a Second Language conversation course at a U.S. university. Students were recorded while working in small groups on a task over the course of 15 weeks. Pomerantz and Bell sought to identify how and when humor was used and they looked for evidence of humor being used as a safe-house by looking at “performance, calibration and layered simultaneity” (p. 152).

The results identified three examples of humor having been used as a safe-house. In the first example, one participant, Ravi, initiated a humorous performance which Pomerantz and Bell (2011) determined allowed him to construct a number of identities for himself. Using humor, Ravi positioned himself as “funny guy” and “expert, but rebellious, Spanish Speaker” (p. 154). Ravi also used humor (sarcasm) to critique the class structure and question the presence of the researcher. In the second example another participant, Jim, was able to successfully renegotiate his identity where “as such, the safe house, which is co-constructed, serves a dual purpose: It hosts a possible act of subversion, while simultaneously allowing for the peaceful resolution of a potentially face threatening moment” (p. 155).

In the final example, Pomerantz and Bell (2011) wished to show how a safe-house can be constructed in the open rather than subversively in the classroom. A criticism about the English

proficiency level of the teaching assistants (it was argued that they did not speak English sufficiently well to help students succeed in the course) was raised in the one of the small group discussions. Kevin, a participant in the study, then used an exercise where he was addressing the entire class to humorously draw attention to the issue. In doing so a safe-house had been created with the teacher participating in the exchange, effectively sanctioning it. Once Kevin had opened the door to the safe-house, other students felt emboldened and the “expressive possibilities in the classroom” were changed (p. 156).

Pomerantz and Bell (2011) concluded that the use of humor in the classroom had many positive effects on the class dynamic and allowed students the opportunity to “break free of the restrictive patterns of interaction” sometimes found in the language classroom (p. 157). They stated that humor was conducive to linguistic development and that humor should not be viewed as necessarily disruptive but rather an opportunity for growth and exploration. While Pomerantz and Bell don’t advocate explicit humor instruction as suggested in the present study, their expanded view on the function and benefits of humor in the classroom bolster the position of humor’s value for language learning.

### Summary

The literature presented here is only a small fraction of the existing research on humor studies in its own right as well as in a second language learning context. The prevalence and breadth of the current research speaks to the importance of humor in our society. Humor affects our personal and professional relationships, our emotions and our moods.

Humor has a unique ability to allow us to express our personalities, beliefs, wants and needs. Being fluent in a second (or third or fourth etc.) means processing strong pragmatic competence and having the ability to express a range of feelings and emotions and conduct

multiple discourses, many of which have humor as a major component. The present study draws on the mechanical, linguistic, pragmatic, cultural and pedagogical themes found in the research presented in the review of literature in an attempt to discover if humor should be addressed explicitly within the TESOL curriculum.

## CHAPTER IV - RESULTS

### Introduction

The purpose for this study was twofold: First, to identify areas of difficulty in appreciating, comprehending and producing humor in English and secondly, to determine if explicit instruction in English language humor might be beneficial to English language learners (ELLs). To those ends, this study sought the experiences and input of adult English language learners who were fluent enough to discuss the topic of humor in-depth. Fluency was determined by either personal association with the participants or surmised from their professional standing within the American workforce. Using the invaluable input of the subjects, recommendations will be made for the treatment of humor within the TESOL curriculum.

### Overview of Participants

Participants in this study are identified by a pseudonym of their own choosing. Minimal personal information was collected about participants in order to preserve privacy. Approval from the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRBPHS) at the University of San Francisco (USF) was obtained and the study was deemed to involve minimal risk to participants.

All of the participants in this study were adults whose native language was other than English. They were all fluent in English to the extent that they were able to engage in meaningful, sustained conversation about humor and their experiences as an ELL. All



participants were also currently residing in the United States. The participants were either personal acquaintances or came to learn about the study by word of mouth through friends or coworkers. Although I did not specifically collect data about age, it can be determined from various responses that the participants ranged in age from early-thirties to mid-sixties. The participants' native countries were France, Japan, Russia, Switzerland, Taiwan, Togo, Turkey and Vietnam as outlined in Table 1. The data presented in this table includes native language, sex, age when participant first became an ELL and the length of time they had lived in the United States. This data was self-reported and generated during the initial stages of each interview.

*Table 1*

Linguistic background of participants

Name (pseudonym)	Sex	Native Language	Age of first acquisition	Years living in the United States
Anara	F	Russian	10	19 years
Bonny	F	Mandarin Chinese	3	12 years
Christine M.	F	French	High school	33 years
Koko	M	African languages (not specified) and French	18	22 years
Ayşe Yılmaz	F	Turkish	11	19 years
Janine	F	Swiss German	5	20 years (est)
Jun	F	Japanese	12	13 years
Aki	F	Japanese	13	17 years
Titou Fournier	M	Vietnamese	8 or 9	10 years
Sergey S.	M	Russian	14	4 years

Research Questions

**Linguistic background**

Due to the conversational nature of the interviews conducted for this study, there was some variation in the sequence and wording of the research questions. Even so, there were

several guiding questions that were posed in common to all of the participants. The first set of questions were used to determine basic information about the participants and were as follows:

1. What is your native language?
2. At what age did you first begin learning English?
3. What were the circumstances?
4. How long have you lived in the United States?

I elected to only solicit basic demographic information and rely more on referential and anecdotal information to inform this study. However cursory the above information seemed at the onset of the research, the information garnered had significant bearing on the participants' overall perceptions and experiences. Native language and subsequently native culture had a marked impact on the participants' experience with American culture and English language humor. Additionally, age of acquisition and length of residence in the United States informed the participants' answers to the subsequent questions.

### **Other guiding questions**

The following questions were asked of most of the participants at some point in the interview. For the most part they were presented in the order detailed in this section; however in some cases the conversation dictated the sequencing. This outline of questions is not exhaustive but rather representative of the line of questioning implemented for this study and includes a brief description of the reasoning behind their inclusion.

After establishing the linguistic background of participants as outlined above, participants were asked if they thought of humor as a primarily a cultural skill or a linguistic skill. This inquiry was conceived to frame the conversation and to help to establish the scope of the study. Participants were then also asked to state whether they considered themselves to be a *funny*

*person* and to describe the extent to which their sense of humor informed their overall personality. This question was posed in order to gauge the importance of humor in the lives of participants. A factor to consider before drawing conclusions to the data generated by this question is that of interest in participating in this study. Persons who consider humor to be important in their lives may be naturally more inclined towards participating or showing interest in such a study.

Participants were asked if they felt they could produce and understand humor equally well in English as they could in their native language. Since all of the participants in this study are currently fluent in English, it was informative to learn if they felt equally fluent in English language humor as they did in general English language usage. The resulting answers to this questions also proved fruitful in providing information about how acculturated to the United States some of the participants felt.

In an effort to provide an understanding of American humor as seen from an outside perspective as well as to establish common ground across cultures, participants were asked if they could identify any similarities or differences between American humor and the humor found in their native languages and cultures. Naturally, the participants could only provide their own personal perspectives and any larger generalizations would be unfounded. Even so, the results were informative and provided significant insight into the experiences of the participants. To further elicit personal experiences, participants were asked if they had ever felt excluded or marginalized based on their ability to produce or appreciate humor. This question was asked in order to determine what the interpersonal and emotional effects, if any, were experienced due to the participants' limited linguistic abilities with English language humor.

Lastly, participants were asked if they had ever had any explicit instruction in humor and if they thought that such instruction might have been beneficial to them. Participants were also encouraged to detail what techniques or activities they implemented of their own volition that were most beneficial to their overall understanding and education in American humor usage. This was perhaps the most informative line of questioning as it directly relates to the problem statement at the heart of this study. This study was in part a reaction to the lack of research or literature on the subject of explicit humor instruction in English as a foreign or second language classes. Participants' answers to these questions informed my recommendations at the conclusion of this study.

## Findings

### **Cultural or linguistic?**

In most of the interviews conducted for this study, one of the first questions posed to participants asked if they thought of humor as a primarily cultural skill or a primarily linguistic skill. Of the 10 respondents, three stated that humor required a combination of linguistic and cultural skills. The other seven participants felt that humor was primarily a cultural skill. Ayse Yilmaz stated "I see it as a, I think, as a cultural skill, like a social skill almost. Yeah". This view of humor as a social skill was later echoed by several others and will be addressed more explicitly later in this section under the heading Small talk.

Titou Fournier when asked if he could express himself equally well in English as he could in his native Vietnamese answered:

Uh I mean that's the problem. I mean I; yes. Yes. I can express myself really in English, uh but for, to make joke and everything, I still can't do that as well as I did in Vietnamese. I think part of it; yeah. I think part of it is because of the culture context,

the culture background that uh things that I find funny uh people don't think funny or, you know, vice versa.

Koko had a similar answer to the same question; if he could express himself humorously in English as he could in his native language(s). He said:

Koko: No.

Researcher: No?

K: Not at ... No. Still not and I've been here for a long time.

R: Oh, yeah. I know. Well that was the other question.

K: And I ... there's still a lot of things that are funny here that I don't understand mainly because I'm missing so much of the culture. That's what it is.

Several respondents articulated that they believed the two skills to be layered with the linguistic aspect being the base and the cultural aspect enveloping the whole or adding an additional layer. Cristine M. was asked if she thought humor could be taught in a classroom setting and answered by stating "I think kind of humor comes later when you have mastered enough language skills that then you can start. You know, it's like, uh, learning to walk before you can dance a little bit". She went on to say:

It kind of ... It kind of gives you a, a great flavor of, uh, the culture, uh, what's important and what's you know ... I ... It's really it's a great way to kind of gain insights and understanding into, into a country through humor.

None of the participants felt that humor was solely a linguistic skill and noted that gaining the cultural knowledge needed to create and comprehend English language humor did not come easily.

**Appropriateness.**

One factor closely tied to cultural knowledge is appropriateness. Both topical and situational considerations must be made to successfully engage in humorous interaction. Making a determination about what is appropriate where may require keen cultural knowledge and is something that was challenging for many of the study participants.

Titou Fournier explained that in Vietnam, imitations and portrayals of homosexuality are widely considered funny and not offensive but that he understood that similar jokes made in the United States might not be taken in the same spirit. When asked about the similarities and differences between American and Vietnamese humor he offered the following example.

Titou Fournier: Uh there are a few actually. Uh one of the things I thought about this morning was this um; this might sound weird, but one of them is for example, you know, uh, uh, for example, in in Vietnamese culture ...

Researcher: Uh-huh.

T.F.: ... um, um, uh, you know, being gay is funny. It's really mean, but ...

R: Okay.

T.F.: It's true. You know, being gay is funny. So, for example, in; some comedian in Vietnamese uh, like television, they, they uh, they, for example, men, a male comedian, they'd play a gay man. They dress like woman and then they act funny, they talk funny.

R: Right.

T.F.: So the audience aren't laughing at them being gay, but they laughing at them being funny as a gay man. So that; you know, that's one of the things that are different from Vietnamese humor and American humor. I

mean here people don't laugh at that, right? For example, in a party, in a Vietnamese party if I; okay, for example, in a Vietnamese party with all Vietnamese friends, if I all of a sudden, you know, act gay ...

R: Right.

T.F.: ... and then, and then joke uh, you know, with a gay man voice or, you know, like being a really, ah, ffff how do I say it ...

R: Effeminate?

T.F.: Yeah. Yeah, you know, and then friend would like laugh like, you know, laughing out loud about that. You know, but if I did that, you know, in American party, you know that will, will be really offensive.

After this exchange the researcher asked if Titou felt that the reason for the different reception this type of joke would receive in the United States was because Americans were more sensitive about issues involving homosexuality. He answered:

Titou Fournier: Yeah. Well, I mean I'm not sure it's a sensitive uh; sensitivity isn't the question here. I mean it's just a culture context. For example, being gay in Vietnam is not that offensive.

Researcher: Right.

T.F.: Like being fat in Vietnam, actually I can see that as a good thing because Vietnamese culture; the backgrounds, the people were hungry before and then if you're being fat it's really good.

Titou Fournier's observations show an astute understanding of culture dynamics that indicate the difficulty and possible perils an English language learner may face in determining appropriateness. For a number of participants, being unsure of appropriateness and fear of the

consequences of not getting it right hindered them from making attempts at humor in the early stages of their humor development.

Aki also addressed appropriateness, particularly as it relates to Asian cultures and American culture. She had asked the researcher about the demographics of the other study participants, specifically if any other Asian people were being interviewed and gave the following reason for her interest.

Aki: Yeah. But sometimes, I mean, I just personally feel that probably it's not that Asians are like accustomed to humor. I mean, I think each culture has its own way of, you know, having fun.

Researcher: Yeah.

A: You know, saying jokes. But sometimes, you know, like in making fun of people, or saying jokes in front of your boss or something, you know, is considered, like, inappropriate or impolite.

R: Right.

A: So, to, so, if you grow up in that kind of environment, and then coming to the US where people, you know, to me, like literally freely talks their minds, you know.

R: Right.

A: So, that definitely is a culture shock, and in combination with the lack of vocabulary and ...

R: Yeah.

A: Not understanding the verbal conversation, uhm, definitely is a challenge, I think, especially for an ESL student.



Aki's observations emphasize the connection between appropriateness and overall pragmatic and linguistic competence. Making jokes with one's boss and coworkers is extremely common in the United States but may be verboten in other cultures. Similarly, the types of jokes and subject material that are appropriate for the workplace is heavily reliant on cultural and social norms that may be particular to one type of industry or company. ELLs aren't alone in having to navigate issues of appropriateness, especially in the workplace, but being new to the overall culture may make it particularly challenging.

Janine, a mathematics professor, was describing the time it took for her to become comfortable enough to make jokes in her classroom and getting the "tone right". The researcher asked if she thought she could do the same if she was teaching in Switzerland and she stated that she didn't think it would be "proper" to make jokes in a Swiss classroom. However, here in the United States she felt it was appropriate to make jokes in class to "lighten up the mood".

Bonny felt that her co-workers were particularly adept at humor, something she emulated and hoped to get better at. She said "It's really tough for me to, as funny as they are and funny and appropriate at the same time at the workplace. So, um, yeah, I don't think I'm as capable". According to Bonny, her ability to navigate humor in the workplace is still not at the level she'd like it to be despite having lived in the United States for over a decade. In the workplace, the ramifications of making an error in appropriateness could be pronounced. At the same time, not engaging in the joking culture of the workplace at all could also have negative consequences.

### **Perceptions of American humor**

This section will outline the four main components of humor that were commonly identified as being representative of American humor as a whole: References to popular culture, sarcasm, banter and finally, humor used as conversational or social lubricant (which for the

purposes of this study is identified as small talk). Participants in this study noted many specific difficulties in participating in these types of humor and those challenges will also be detailed in this section.

### **Pop Culture, slang and acronyms.**

The intersection between popular culture and slang has been previously identified (Bucholtz, 2006) and both were cited in this study as being a common feature of American humor. Popular culture references, slang words and acronyms all require a cultural familiarity many of the participants felt difficult to achieve.

Nearly all of the participants identified American humor as relying heavily on references to popular culture, especially references to television and movies. Koko, when asked to identify similarities and differences in the types of humor found in the United States as compared to his native Togo responded:

It's definitely different types. Um... Humor here tend to be driven a lot by, okay, I guess pop culture is what you call it. And over there it's not because there's not much... there's not much pop culture over there. So actually it's pretty dry over there to tell you the truth. [laughter].

Koko was later asked if he could remember a time at which he felt left out or excluded because of missing or not understanding jokes and he replied that it had happened many times. The following exchange was in response to that question:

Researcher: Yeah. Can you think of anything specific?

Koko: I do that with you guys all the time, where you have jokes that, um, you have to basically be born here to understand it.

R: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

K: They're probably from the 90s or 80s or things like that.

R: Right. Yeah.

K: Which I don't know anything about, and especially pop culture. I'm not [laughs] a pop culture person, so yeah. Oh, yeah I miss that quite a bit.

Ayse Yilmaz was also asked if she could recall a time she felt left out or excluded in conversation based on her understanding and ability to engage in American humor and provided an answer very similar to Koko's as evidenced by the following exchange.

Ayse Yilmaz: Yeah. I think there were times when, like, in a group where people are making a lot of references to, you know, cultural...

Researcher: Mmhmm...

A.Y.: comm-, knowledge that I wasn't familiar with, like...

R: Yeah.

A.Y.: it could be "Star Wars," like, the movie...

R: Yes. Right.

A.Y.: or it could be like ...

R: Like pop culture references?

A.Y.: Yeah. Yeah.

Ayse Yilmaz and Koko both felt that Americans relied heavily on shared knowledge of popular culture when joking and interacting humorously and that their lack of that knowledge was a significant barrier to participating in such exchanges.

Ayse Yilmaz and Koko were not the only ones who felt this way. Janine was asked what aspects of American humor were the most challenging for her to comprehend, she answered:

Well, for me because I'm somewhat of a cultural, uh, pop-culture ignorant, anything that had to do with pop-culture was harder to understand, just because the context was not natural to me. I grew up without a T.V. ...

The supremacy of pop-culture as the most challenging aspect of humor to comprehend was echoed by Titou Fournier in the exchange below. Also asked if he had ever felt left out of social situations he answered:

Titou Fournier: Yes. A lot of times. Even now sometimes, actually when my coworker, you know, making some jokes...

Researcher: Uh-huh.

T.F.: about like, you know, pop culture, uh and then I realize that I have like really; I have random gaps in pop culture in America.

R: Sure.

T.F.: For example, some TV shows I didn't watch when I was like in my teenage years because I was in Vietnam and, you know, uh, you know my friends are here, uh so yeah. Yeah. Sometimes I, you know, when hanging out with a group, you know, I understand perfect English now, but uh, but sometimes they make some jokes and I was like why is this so funny and then I'm the only one who is not laughing. But yeah, but so many times I felt that way.

R: So do you think that's usually because of the; a lot of American humor is so pop culture oriented?

T.F.: Uh, I think ...

R: Do you think that's mostly pop culture references or is there something else that was keeping you from understanding?

T.F.: Oh, for me it's; yeah, definitely. It's just the pop culture gaps that I missed. Yeah. For me it's pop culture. But it's real interesting, your question what about uh, you know; yeah, I think a lot of American jokes are um; yeah, referencing through to pop culture. That's kind of true. That's interesting.

For Titou Fournier, pop culture was the most difficult aspect of American humor to comprehend. Like Janine, he cited a lack of exposure to American T.V. growing up as the cause of his unfamiliarity with many of the cultural references he felt were prevalent in American humor. For him as well as for Janine, it wasn't a linguistic failing, they understood the words but the cultural relevance was lost and therefore so was the humor.

Jun echoed this observation citing a lack of shared common knowledge as the biggest challenge in the comprehension of American humor for her. She said:

Jun: I understand people use, there's certain phrases that they know, not the difficult phrase, but, uh, has some meaning that everybody understand ...

Researcher: Mm-hmm.

J: But if you didn't grow up here, you don't know what you're talking about.

Later during this exchange she specified "Yeah. It might be some phrase from the old TV show or the humor that the comedians say or whatever about there's something with ... I don't know". While Jun didn't use the term "pop culture" her description of the challenges she faced mirrors that of the others cited in this section.

Slang words were also singled out by a number of participants as being commonly used in humorous exchanges on the United States. Slang has a cyclical connection to popular culture, one influencing the other (Bucholtz, 2006), and is frequently used for comedic effect in the United States (Zhou & Fan, 2013). Colloquial vocabulary, abbreviated and shortened words, and acronyms are all features the participants in this study struggled with in the appreciation and production of humor in English.

Ayse Yilmaz, when asked whether she thought humor was more a linguistic skill or a cultural skill, identified slang and natural speech as being difficult to comprehend, especially in the high school setting. She said:

Ayse Yilmaz: Hmmm. So linguistic-wise, it was, I found, initially, like people, thought-, talked really fast, so, and they combined words together so it was hard to understand...

Researcher: Yeah.

A.Y.: in the beginning, and, yeah, a lot of slang words, at, at high school, you know.

For Ayse Yilmaz, the slang words and colloquial speech she found herself surrounded by had an isolating affect when she first moved to the United States especially since she was one of the few ELLs at her school.

Most of the participants indicated that what they had learned in English language classes, both in the United States and abroad, was very different from the way people actually communicate in the United States. Aki, when asked about her views of American humor styles stated:

Aki: Well, I mean, for ESL students, I think it's the big barrier is the vocabulary, you know.

Researcher: Uh-huh, yeah.

A: You don't, you don't learn the slang, but it's just nowhere to be found in the text book, you know. Like, uhm, you know, "Hello Mary," "Hello Bob." You know, people don't talk like that much. You know, it's more like, "Hey, what's up?"

Like Aki, many of the participants cited a lack of exposure to natural language within the English language classroom as having a negative effect on their overall communication skills once arriving in the United States.

Aki went on to describe a time when a miscommunication occurred between herself and a new American friend she had met in college. The two were to go out for the evening and Aki carefully chose her outfit to impress. Aki described the situation in the following exchange.

Aki: And, and when I met her in the lobby, uhm, she was like, "Hey, you know, Hey Aki, like I like... She meant, like, I like your pants.

Researcher: Uh-huh.

A: But so, like, "Your pants are tight." Like tight meaning like, you know, cool, like it's...

R: Right. Right. Slang.

A: Stylish.

R: Right.

A: And I literally took it, you know, okay, the word "tight."

R: Uh-huh.

A: Okay. Is it too small on me? Does it look funny on me? So I literally like turn around, try to like go back to the room and change.

R: Oh, no.

A: And she just like, she just bursted out laughing like, "I didn't, I didn't, like, criticize you. I just meant it's like cool. Like you look good." But I didn't know what cool means. Cool is like temperature cool.

R: Right. Right.

A: So like, you know, within this like five, ten minutes of conversation, like I only got probably like half of what she was saying, and everything that she said was good and positive, I just didn't get it.

Although the situation wasn't necessarily one where Aki didn't get the joke, her misunderstanding of the slang words "tight" and "cool" stifled the flow of conversation and caused her embarrassment and discomfort. Trading compliments in a light-hearted manner was beyond her linguistic ability at the time even though she knew the literal meanings of the words being used; the resulting laughter was at her expense. Luckily her friend took the time to explain her intention and Aki said that her friend later became her "slang teacher".

Similar to slang words and colloquial speech, Christine M cited the use of acronyms as being a feature of American humor that was particularly baffling to her as a new arrival in the United States. She gave a specific example of not understanding the term JAP (Jewish American Princess) being used in a humorous context. Slang, references to pop culture and acronyms were all cited as being a significant component of American humor. They posed a challenge to the ELLs in this study and breaking into the secreted world of shorthand communication took the



participants years to accomplish and with a few feeling as if there was still room for improvement.

### **Sarcasm.**

Another prominent feature of American humor that was identified by the participants in this study was the use of sarcasm. Ayse Yilmaz, Aki and Bonny all expressed that they had at times been perplexed by sarcasm and that mastering its nuances was particularly challenging. Bonny, when asked if sarcasm (which she had previously noted as being a hallmark of American humor) was a component of Chinese humor or if she thought it was more prevalent in the United States responded:

Oh, it, it, I think it's totally an American thing and I think it's a very special thing about American culture, and something that, um, Chinese people need to get [laughter] or, you know... mm-hmm.

Bonny felt that the use of sarcasm for humor was a particularly American phenomenon, one that is important for ELLs to master. Bonny detailed some of the challenges she faced in comprehending sarcasm, a style of humor she noted was commonly used in her workplace.

Bonny said of the difficulties she had in learning to detect sarcasm:

Bonny: [laughs] I've made so many mistakes where people say, "Oh, you know, that is just so easy," or whatever, like, if they say that. And I would totally misunderstand, I would be like, "Oh really, like, you think it was easy? Like, it took me, you know, hours." And then they'll be like, "Psh! No, like, I meant, you know, it was really hard."

Researcher: Right.

B: So you know, at times, [laughs] I need to like, you know, seem kind of stupid and like, assume the other and, you know, most, most of the time people would let me know. And like, "Oh! Okay, you know, so and so was being sarcastic about this or that."

Bonny felt that there was a need to make oneself vulnerable and face sarcastic remarks head on in order to make a determination about the intent of the speaker.

Another participant who identified sarcasm as one of the most prominent features of American humor was Ayse Yilmaz. Her experience with sarcasm was shaded by her overall impression that it was mean spirited. She was asked about isolating experiences she'd had as an ELL being unused to American humor. She responded:

Ayse Yilmaz: Yeah. Um, yeah, I think that was hard. And then initially, I think even now, like, sarcasm, it can be offensive...

Researcher: Mmhmm.

A.Y.: because, uh, in Turkey, we don't have s-, like in Turkish culture, we don't have sarcasm...

R: Mmhmm.

A.Y.: as a part of humor. I mean, some people use it, but it's really rare. But it's kind of, like, it's not nice.

For Ayse Yilmaz, learning the style of American's use of sarcasm was more than a linguistic challenge, there was also an emotional component that countered her personal views of appropriateness.

Aki's early experience with American sarcasm was also uneasy. She credits this partially with her own personality, describing herself as a serious person who tends to take things at face value earlier in the interview. When asked if she thought humor could be taught she replied:

Aki: I would say so because um, I think, I mean, I mean, I know everybody has different opinions, but.

Researcher: Uh-huh.

A: Uhm, in my case, like in, I'm just a person who takes whatever people like to say, like, sometimes a little too seriously.

R: Uh-huh.

A: It takes time for me to get the jokes or...

R: Right.

A: Or to get the humor. And I think there's a lot of, you know, sarcasm involved in humor here. So like sometimes I, you know, I didn't really fully understand the, you know, the, you know, kind of fun element behind the sarcasm.

So while Aki understood the nature of sarcasm, the challenge for her was to, as she says, find the fun in it. Similar to Ayse Yilmaz, Aki also initially found the tone of sarcasm less than humorous.

While many participants identified sarcasm as prominent feature of American humor, not everybody had difficulty with it. Anara stated that sarcasm was one of her favorite types of humor and indicated that sarcastic could describe her own sense of humor. Koko also indicated that he particularly enjoyed sarcastic humor (specifically political comedians Bill Maher and Dennis Miller) and that comedians in his home country of Togo also use sarcasm.

**Banter.**

American humor, according to some of the participants in this study, is unique in that it frequently relies on quick exchanges, one-liners and witty remarks as opposed to a heavy reliance on physicality (a major component of Japanese humor according to Aki) or storytelling (as Ayse Yilmaz characterized Turkish humor). Bonny said of American humor, compared to Taiwanese humor, “Um, yeah. I think, um, American humor involves a lot of, I would say, like, bantering, I guess. Um”. Comparing Turkish humor with American humor Ayse Yilmaz said:

Ayse Yilmaz: So I think Turkish humor [pause] I don't know, my first, I never thought about this, but my first ga-, gut react-, reaction is that maybe Turkish humor has more story to it...

Researcher: Mmhmm.

A.Y.: like more context. Whereas English humor, or American humor has more, like, like, one sentence, or like, or one off, or wittier response, or you know, it's... [end of utterance]

While Ayse Yilmaz and Bonny felt this quick back and forth was unique to American humor, Jun stated that there is a similar style of humor in Japan but that she is unable to reproduce it in English. When asked to identify similarities and differences between American and Japanese humor Jun stated:

Jun: Hmm. Well, Japanese humor to me is, uh, um, you know, it's sort of like the catch ball with the words. If you said this, you said this, and uh ... that, that's what the Japanese comedians do on TV.

Researcher: Mm-hmm.

J: And, um... so, conversation goes like a catch ball. You talk like that and then they talk to you like that and then they... it goes fast and ... but, uh, it's hard to say, but, uh, I don't... I, I can't do that in... in English.

Jun's perception of Japanese humor was not markedly different from other participants' descriptions of American humor yet the ability to participate in a quick exchange style of humor did not come easily for many.

### **Small talk.**

A number of participants in this study noted that Americans showed a propensity for small talk and that humor played a role in the typical types of casual exchanges initiated by Americans. Earlier in this section Ayse Yilmaz described humor as a "social skill". When asked to expand on the idea of humor being a social skill she responded:

Ayse Yilmaz: Because we use it a lot to break the ice. To, like, fill in awkward moments

Researcher: Mmhmm. Mmhmm.

A.Y.: and, yeah, make other people comfortable or make people like us. You know? So...

Later in the conversation the topic of small talk came up again and the following exchange ensued:

Researcher: So what you [laughs] -You'd said something about um, how we use humor to like, defuse awkward situations.

Ayse Yilmaz: Yeah.

R: that kind of um...

A.Y.: Yeah.

R: linguistic competence.

- A.Y.: Right.
- R: Um, would you say that that is something that's similar in Turkish... culture or language?
- A.Y.: No.
- R: So it's um, is,... is there like, not a lot of collaboration? Like you know...
- A.Y.: No.
- R: you tell a joke, I tell a joke. Not a lot of back and forth?
- A.Y.: No, no. That's a very interesting point, because I think here, like, when you do that, people understand what you're doing and they help you.
- R: Right, yeah.
- A.Y.: There is collaboration, but in Turkey, you might get like a wall in Turkish culture.
- R: Mhmm (affirmative).
- A.Y.: You know? Yeah. That has happened to me, in fact, where... Yeah.
- R: Did you ever find it was challenging to know how... I mean was that a difficult thing to learn? Was how to kind of how to engage in that...
- A.Y.: Yeah.
- R: cooperative language play?
- A.Y.: Yeah, yeah, because at first... I think it was also part of the whole like, talking to strangers thing. This whole, uninhibited, say whatever is in your mind...
- R: Yeah.

A.Y.: talk to whoever, and like, yeah, make small talk. I was actually thinking of that today, like, that I have gotten good at small talk and that's like, just by living here. I don't think in Turkey we have as much small talk. I mean I'm sure we do...

R: Mhmm (affirmative).

A.Y.: but it's like here it's sort of an art.

For Ayse Yilmaz, the back and forth method of joking she identified as typically American was closely related to striking up conversations with strangers and the ease with which Americans share personal information. She later added:

Ayse Yilmaz: But it's like, people expect you to make it [small talk].

Researcher: Yeah.

I: And they, yeah they help you out.

M: And do you think that, um...

I: Yeah.

M: humor is, is a part, part of that?

I: What is part of... ?

M: Um, humor is part of that small talk?

I: Yeah, yeah, definitely it's part of that like ice breaker...

Small talk and humor, for her, were intertwined and both required extensive practice for her to feel comfortable engaging in in English.

Bonny also stressed that learning how to make small talk was a skill that required prolonged practice and development. When asked if she thought humor was a significant aspect of small talk she responded:

Bonny: Yeah, actually, yeah, I think so. And, you know, and that sort of small talk, especially when you're trying to get to know someone, sort of on the very...

Researcher: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

B: uh, surface level or in the beginning, um, some small talks and some, like, sort of witty exchanges, um...

R: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

B: I think it's pretty... it happens a lot. And even if you know you're it, even if it's, you're not in a work situation, like say...

R: Yes.

B: like at an airport, or like, you know...

R: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

B: somebody sitting beside you on an airplane, like, having some sort of exchange like that is really common and kind of, kind of a skill that...

R: Yeah.

B: you need to develop too.

Bonny found that the ability to engage in small talk, especially humorous small talk, was skill that was particularly important for her professional life. She stated that she was making an ongoing attempt at bettering her ability to socialize at work (with both co-workers and clients) which required her to improve her aptitude with English language humor.

In addition to the most pronounced trends in the participants' perception of American humor seen above, there was another observation of note. Sergey S. stated that he could not determine a unified national humor due to the diversity of cultures to be found in the United



States. Bonny and Aki also described their workplaces as being culturally diverse and that dynamic coming into play in humorous interaction.

### **Humor and personal expression**

All of the participants in this study were asked if they considered themselves funny. They were also asked how their sense of humor influenced their sense of identity. This elicited useful information about the role of humor in their lives. Some felt that their ability to create and engage in English language humor had a direct effect on the personality they projected to others. Jun stated that she didn't generally think of herself as a funny person but added that she had difficulty speaking with English speakers and that she couldn't be as humorous as she might normally be if she was speaking Japanese. She later went on to state that she felt "shyer" when communicating in English and that in turn made it more difficult to make friends. For Jun, her English language humor skills caused her to act and feel differently which had an impact on her ability to make new connections. Aki also thought that being funny made it easier to build relationships and start conversations; citing her husband's gregarious personality as evidence. However, she did not feel that humor necessarily "defines a character" but was rather one of a number of positive personality traits.

Similar to Jun, Sergey S. noted that it was easier for him to be funny in his native Russian than it was in English. When asked if he could express himself equally well in Russian as he could in English he said the following.

Sergey S.: For sure, I'm uh, much more fun person in Russian than in English.

Researcher: Okay. So do you see that's something that you are... Does that frustrate you in any way or do you feel like it... it will just come in time?

S.S.: Uh, yeah, sometimes it uh, I... I get to a situation where when I start to joke uh, as I would joke in Russian but I for example can't finish.

[Laughter]

R: Uh-huh. Okay. That's great, yeah.

S.S.: That is because it's beyond my ability to express myself in English.

R: Interesting.

S.S.: Yeah and... Yeah, that's uh, definitely...

R: So you have a joke formed in your head in... in Russian that you would like to...

S.S.: Yeah.

R: Express in English but you realize you don't have the... Is it the vocabulary or is it uh, a cultural thing that maybe you... you feel that the joke won't be funny?

S.S.: Most time it's uh, vocabulary. Sometimes it's um, ability to create a one sentence.

Sergey's comment that he was a "much more fun person" in Russian could be interpreted two ways. He might have been describing his general personality or he might have meant to say "funny", describing his productive abilities over his general personality. In either case, Sergey S. describes a scenario where he unable to say what he'd like and what he'd like to say is something that could inform potential interlocutors about his personality; that of a funny person who enjoys making jokes. His persona as an English speaker may not match his persona as a speaker of Russian.

Bonny described herself as funny compared to other Mandarin speakers but not as funny as some of her American coworkers who she feels are funnier. She said that she is actively trying to develop her humor skills to match what she perceived as their elevated skills. Bonny also said that when she first came to the United States, humor was not as important to her as it is today. For Bonny, humor is not a static trait as evidenced in the following exchange.

Bonny: Yeah, when I first came here for college, like, all the struggle and even, like, all through college, all struggle was like, okay I need to understand what people are talking about and I need to do my best to pass whatever, like, do whatever that I need to do to communicate, you know, get my grades, stuff like that. And so, I didn't feel, like, relaxed enough to start because, you know, like, if you're going to tell some jokes, joke around with other people, you're kind of putting yourself on the line, you know, of like, 'Okay, they might hate it or they might hate me.'

Researcher: Yeah.

B: or they say, they might think I'm, you know crazy or... Right, so, you know, it, I think it wasn't until, like, a couple of years after college and I've, you know, started to have a job, I have, like, a pretty steady income. I'm like, "Okay, you know, hey, I think, you know, I can afford to m-m-make fun of myself, and if they don't like it, they don't enjoy the joke, or they don't enjoy my company, or whatever, like, I don't really care."  
[laughs]. That's when, like, I think, a real sense of humor, in myself, sort of started to develop.

- R: And, do you feel like people maybe weren't getting your full personality prior to that time, that, people that you were meeting?
- B: Um, I think they still, they still knew me as me, but at the time...
- R: Mm-hmm [affirmative].
- B: like, I wasn't, you know, I, I didn't care about it as much, so it...
- R: Right.
- B: wasn't exactly part of me, so, it was okay.

According to Bonny, her ability to produce humor in English wasn't tied solely to her linguistic or cultural knowledge. In order to produce and engage in humor she felt that she also needed peace of mind, self-confidence and security before she felt prepared to take the risk of making jokes.

### **Methods applied**

There were two methods that most of the participants in this study reported having used successfully to develop their competence with English Language humor: Language socialization (guided practice with a native speaker) and frequent exposure to natural speech (media). These methods were identified as being the most effective means by which the participants' were able to improve their understanding of American humor and their ability to engage with it.

Many of the participants reported that native speaking friends, relatives or romantic partners were instrumental in the development of their English language humor competence. The types of activities and interactions described constitute language socialization wherein a native speaking person helps to guide and instruct a novice speaker (Kim & Duff, 2012; Shively, 2013). For Aki, her best friend in college was the person on whom she relied during her first years in the United States. In the *Pop culture, slang and acronyms* section of this study, Aki earlier described

a misunderstanding with her friend who told her that her pants were “tight”. Aki was asked about the resolution of that situation.

Researcher: Did she...

Aki: And...

R: Uhm, take the time to, to tell you what those things meant?

A: Yeah. Yeah.

R: Oh.

A: She was actually my slang teacher.

R: [Laughs].

A: Um, we would like walk around the campus, and like, you know, if somebody was saying something like... I was just like, you know, curious then. I was like a sponge at that point, so like, you know, "What does that mean? What do you say?" Um, so it was definitely kind of like an eye opener for me.

R: Yeah.

A: And then, you know, of course I, you know, I didn't, like, mean to, to talk in certain ways, but you know I like that fact that I was learning the way that people talk.

R: Uh-huh.

A: Not a cookie cutter text book English.

Aki's friend took time to help her both by modeling natural speech and by answering questions and allowing Aki a non-judgmental space to practice and learn.

Another useful activity for Aki was watching American television. She watched American programs on her own with the American subtitles turned on in Japan before arriving in the United States. After her move to the United States she took a conversation class where the teacher frequently used situation comedies as a means of demonstrating natural language. In particular Aki remembered watching shows like *Blossom*, *Friends* and *Full House* in the class. She described the experience.

Aki:           Like, "The Blossom." Like, you know, all of that stuff. But you know, I mean, when we look at "Full House" now it's like kind of silly family drama.

Reasearcher: Uh-huh.

A:             But then if you actually listen to them, you know, have a conversation as a family on a day-to-day basis.

R:             Right.

A:             So to me that was more valuable.

Even if the situations presented in the stories were “silly”, the experience of being able to listen in on a typical family conversation in English was valuable to Aki’s linguistic development.

Like Aki, Janine credited a close college friend as well as her husband with providing guidance and assistance in the following exchange.

Researcher:   Hav- have you, have you ever had somebody ever, um, kind of go out of their way to, kind of, be a, a, a humor guide for you, or a cultural guide for you, um, as you, as you?

Janine:        Yep. First my best friend in college, spent a lot of time, trying to, you know, clarify the American way for me, when I first came, and my now-

husband. We've been together for about fifteen years and he gave me all the pop-culture reference, tried to explain to me why things were funny when I didn't get it. Um, so, he's my complete guide to American everything.

R: [laughs] And do you find that that was helpful for you, or did you have...

J: Oh, yeah. Of course.

Janine later went on to explain why she thought that explicit instruction in a classroom setting might not be an ideal way to learn about humor. She said:

I don't know, the things I learned were so all over the place and best done by somebody, you know, walking along with me and hearing the same things I was hearing and explaining them, that I'm not sure that a class would have been able to capture those.

Like many of the ELLs who participated in this study, Janine felt that close personal relationships with native speakers were an important component of her cultural development.

Titou Fournier credits his American born cousins for helping him to develop his English language humor skills. He was asked if anybody had ever gone out of their way to explain jokes or help him understand American culture. Titou Fournier said:

Yeah. Yeah. Actually um, um, um my; you know, most of my family came to America after the Vietnam war in 1975, so uh I have 13 cousins and most of them are born in the US except for me and one more cousin, um so I; when I came over, you know, the people who I hung out the most with are my cousins, so we went to movies, we went; we watched movies at home. We would like hang out and sometimes I didn't understand a joke and then they all like were really supportive and they're like showing me; you know,

explaining to me the context and then why are we laughing and, you know, all that.

Yeah, so my cousins were helping me.

Titou Fournier stated that this type of guidance was the second most helpful aspect of his linguistic development in American humor, the first being watching American television and movies. By watching movies with his cousins he found a way to do both simultaneously.

Bonny's husband also helped her to develop her humor skills by taking her to live comedy shows and introducing her to a variety of comedians and television shows. Bonny said:

You know, beside the mic night, he also supplemented my [laughs] humor education with lots of, like, videos of, like, Eddie Izzard, or, you know, Seinfeld and stuff like that, so [laughs]. So, those situations it was easier to ask him, 'Oh hey, by the way, you know, he said this, like, ten minutes ago, like, why was, like, why was that funny,' etc.

Like Titou Fournier, Bonny found it advantageous to combine the guidance of a native speaker with watching English language programs. Koko, Jun and Christine M. also reported having received help decoding American humor from native speakers and Ayse Yilmaz, counted the programs *Seinfeld*, *The Office* and *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air* as having been helpful to her linguistic development.

### Summary

The data presented here demonstrates the complexity involved in becoming fluent in English language humor. Not only are there linguistic hurdles to clear such as developing the vocabulary and syntax needed to appreciate and produce humor, there are innumerable cultural barriers that must be navigated as well.

As evidenced by the participants in this study, there may be less obvious social and professional ramifications for not being able to fully converse humorously in the United States.



Work and social life were affected by aptitude in English language humor as well as personal expression.

Having the assistance of friends and family proved invaluable to most of the study participants and frequent exposure to natural language were also key. Combining native speaking guides with American media was a successful means of acquisition for some of the participants. Additionally, time and prolonged cultural immersion were critical for acquiring the skills required to fully participate in American humor.

## CHAPTER V – DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### Discussion

While not cited directly, time seemed to be a major factor in the development of an ear for and ability to engage in American humor. Many participants felt that they still had inroads to make in their ability to appreciate, comprehend and produce English language humor. Only four of the participants stated that they felt they could express themselves humorously as well in English as they could in their native language. All of those participants, Ayse Yilmaz, Christine M., Anara and Janine, had been living in the United States for twenty years or more, among the longest of all the participants. Ayse Yilmaz, Janine and Christine said they thought they could express themselves now in English better than they could in their native language and expressed a sense of disconnect or fading familiarity with the culture of their birth.

Another aspect of humor that was not presented in the data but which has bearing on this study is that of perception. Janine's experience was somewhat unique in that she had been speaking English fluently for many years before she arrived in the United States. When she did arrive she had little discernable accent and reported that people often forgot that she was not a native speaker. This resulted in people assuming she understood the humor being used when in

fact she was missing much of it. Titou Fournier similarly reported that his early acquisition of English and resulting, in his words, “good American accent” caused a school counselor (after he had arrived in the United States) to assume he was a native speaker and put him into standard English classes instead of English as a Second Language (ESL) classes.

Both Janine and Titou Fournier were presumed to have a better understanding of colloquial speech and American cultural references than they actually did. This is a reversal of the phenomenon Bell (2007) described where non-native speakers may at times be presumed to have a deficit in their language skills where none exists. Both trends are relevant to the current study in that people’s perceptions of ELLs affects how they interact with them either by changing their discourse to match what they perceive to be the abilities of the non-native interlocutor or to by assuming understanding where none exists.

English language humor affected all of the participants in this study in some way or another. For some it had a big impact on their lives and remains an area of language rife with difficulty. For others, the acquisition of American humor was more seamless. Based on the data collected in this study, there is no denying that humor plays an important role in day-to-day conversation and interactions. Full linguistic competence and fluency in English necessarily involves being able to appreciate, comprehend and produce humor appropriately.

### Conclusion

Using humor in the English language classroom has been credited with providing a number of benefits to students. For example, the use of humor has been shown to lower anxiety, boost student interest and aid in retention (Wagner & Urios-Aparisi, 2011). However, students of English may require more explicit instruction in the form and function of English language humor in order for them to become truly fluent both linguistically and culturally.

For ELLs living and working in the United States, the ability to create and comprehend humor in English is crucial to comprehensive fluency. Humor serves many social functions and one's ability use and understand it appropriately may have wider reaching consequences above simply not *getting the joke*. As Bell (2007) suggested, participating in humorous interaction is a complex process which can result in the marginalization of non-native English speakers if native speakers assume or perceive a deficit in the ELLs' ability to comprehend or use humor.

Participating fully in social and professional settings in the United States frequently necessitates the ability to make humorous small talk, detect sarcasm and ironic utterances, recognize slang words and comprehend reduced forms of language common in colloquial speech. Even the participants in this study who were fluent or near fluent in English when they arrived in the United States found themselves at a disadvantage in the face of American humor.

Very little literature is devoted to explicit humor study within the English language classroom. The purpose of this study was to explore the possible need and feasibility of such instruction by soliciting experiences and advice of ELLs now living in the United States. This study gave the participating ELLs an opportunity to inform the TESOL community about the challenges they faced learning how to appreciate and produce humor in English as well as their thoughts on what techniques and methods were most useful to them as they were learning to navigate the landscape of American humor.

This study is significant in the fact that it fills a gap in the current literature by directly addressing both the voice of the ELL as well as the possibility of treating humor explicitly as a topic of instruction. This study theorized that English language humor poses a number of difficulties for ELLs and that there may be social consequences related to one's ability to detect, appreciate and produce humor in English. The results of the interviews conducted for this study

showed that those hypotheses were valid. Furthermore, the participants of this study helped to generate a number of practical, realistic suggestions for ways to ameliorate some of the challenges posed by English language humor both inside and outside of the English classroom. By eliciting the voices of ELLs from diverse cultural backgrounds this study was successful in addressing a segment of the studies of humor and second language acquisition heretofore left sparse.

### Recommendations

This study generated numerous ideas about how best to assist ELLs in learning to appreciate, comprehend and produce humor in English. Based on previous studies as well as the data generated in the present study, recommendations for how to best address English language humor in the pursuit of cultural and linguistic fluency are made.

The first recommendation is to include some measure of explicit discussion and instruction on the various forms of humor that are most common within the United States in the English language classroom. None of the participants in this study had ever experienced such discussion in an English language class yet all but one thought that it would have assisted them to some degree in their overall understanding of English language humor. Most of the participants felt that humor was best addressed when ELLs had gained more than a beginning level of proficiency. Therefore this recommendation is limited to courses at the elementary level or above. Additionally, explicit instruction in humor is not appropriate for all types of English language classes. Syllabus and curriculum designers should take into careful consideration students' expected learning outcomes for courses and include explicit humor instruction only where appropriate.

A further recommendation would be that teachers and course designers consider the creation of a class or course dedicated to English language humor. Alternatively, due to the cultural and communicative nature of humor, explicit instruction could be included in courses with a heavy cultural and communicative purpose. Students wishing to increase their overall communicative competence and cultural understanding of the United States would likely derive the greatest benefit from explicit instruction and discussion of American humor.

Developing a curriculum of explicit instruction in English language humor could be challenging due to the subjective nature of humor. Educators interested in developing a course or unit of explicit humor instruction would do well to review the work of Bell (2005, 2009, 2011), Pomerantz and Bell (2007, 2011) and Hay (2001) to establish a pedagogical basis for instruction. Other literature on the subject of humor scholarship can be found in the cross-disciplinary journal *Humor*. Instruction should highlight the forms and functions of American humor, expose students to a variety of natural conversation and include open discussion that allows the students to draw on their own experiences and perceptions of humor.

Another recommendation for educators is to consistently be aware of opportunities to expose students to examples of authentic language. Many study participants said that limited exposure to how Americans speak and communicate in the real world hindered their ability to comprehend and produce humor in English. One effective way for an instructor to include natural language in the class is to model it themselves. For many ELLs, especially those in the EFL context, the teacher is the primary source for hearing spoken English. Teachers may be tempted to limit their use of colloquial speech, slang or joking due to the perception that students will not understand. However, many of the participants in the study expressed appreciation for

any opportunity to hear and experiment with authentic language. By incorporating non-standard forms, opportunities for discussion, questioning and explanation will increase.

In addition to teacher modeled natural speech, samples of recorded humorous conversation and dialog should also be included in the English language class. One basic and popular method for introducing students to recorded humor is through the viewing of English language television programs. A few of the study participants reported that they had watched American situation comedies in a language class in the past and that it was helpful in the development of their communicative competence. Not only do television shows provide examples of authentic language but they also supply exposure to a wealth of cultural background.

Video sharing sites like Youtube offer educators an abundance of variety in programming for students at no cost. The television shows *Friends*, *Seinfeld*, *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air*, *Full House* and *The [Bill] Cosby Show* were cited by participants in this study as being meaningful for them as tools towards English language humor competence. More current shows such as *The Big Bang Theory* and *Modern Family* would be suitable as well. Situation comedies work especially well because they tend to represent (or attempt to represent) the current cultural landscape. The dialog generally represents authentic speech, including slang, and provides good exposure to the pop culture landscape of which they are a part. Additionally, situation comedies tend to exaggerate and otherwise make obvious jokes and punchlines using a variety of prosodic devices or in some cases laugh tracks that may help ELLs identify the humor therein.

For all of the participants in this study, learning about humor and learning to engage in English language humor was something that primarily took place outside of the classroom. Most agreed that classroom instruction could only take a learner so far in mastering the cultural

requirements of fluency in American humor. While it is difficult to make a recommendation for what educators can do outside of the realm of the classroom, a recommendation can be made for offering support and for acquiring an understanding and appreciation for the challenges ELLs face when learning to navigate English language humor. According to the participants in this study, becoming fluent in American humor may take years if not decades of practice and exposure. Educators will do well to acknowledge this fact and be willing and able to offer suggestions and support to students at all stages of acquisition.

Many of the participants in this study credited native speaking American friends, family and romantic partners with guiding and instructing them in the ways of American humor and colloquial speech. Students should be encouraged to engage in conversation with native speakers in a variety of contexts to maximize exposure to natural language. Some participants in this study listed asking lots of questions of native speakers, watching television shows and movies in English, and attending comedy shows among the most effective methods they used to increase fluency in English language humor. Native or near native speaking educators can play a role in their students' cultural development by taking on a role of cultural ambassador. Teachers may wish to create and curate lists of appropriate materials that they can suggest to students looking to develop their awareness of English language humor. Language teachers may also wish to help students organize events outside of the class where they can mingle and converse with native speakers. Some activities might be going to see a comedic movie, attending a live comedy show or open mike or helping students to arrange a cross cultural joke sharing activity.

These recommendations may be more challenging to implement in an EFL setting where students may have limited opportunities to interact with native speakers but with the aid of the internet, some of the challenges could be mitigated. Additionally, students not living within the

culture of the United States may not have the need to become fully fluent in English language humor. However, students interested in doing so or students planning to live and work in the U.S. may wish to get a jumpstart on their cultural education. Services such as Skype, message boards, blogs, instant message and Facebook could provide them with a platform for exploring American humor and culture. Many English language television shows and movies are also available to students online.

Ultimately, a student's desire to become fluent in English language humor will be the most critical factor in their success. Having the ability to converse fully in humorous interaction was more important for some of the participants in this study than it was for others. For some the need was urgent and essential to their wellbeing. Others felt humor was a merely a necessary component of their overall fluency. Additionally, the cultural and linguistic background of the ELL influenced their perception of American humor as well as the ease with which they gained fluency. Educators should be aware of the interest level of students when implementing any of the recommendations outlined in this study.

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## APPENDICES

## Appendix A

*Protocol Exemption Notification*

To: Mieka Strawhorn  
From: Terence Patterson, IRB Chair  
Subject: Protocol #298  
Date: 05/19/2014

The Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRBPHS) at the University of San Francisco (USF) has reviewed your request for human subjects approval regarding your study.

Your project (IRB Protocol #298) with the title **Inside Jokes: A study of the possible benefits of including explicit instruction in English language humor within the TESOL curriculum (working title)** has been approved by the University of San Francisco IRBPHS as **Exempt** according to 45CFR46.101(b). Your application for exemption has been verified because your project involves minimal risk to subjects as reviewed by the IRB on 05/19/2014.

Please note that changes to your protocol may affect its exempt status. Please submit a modification application within ten working days, indicating any changes to your research. Please include the Protocol number assigned to your application in your correspondence.

On behalf of the IRBPHS committee, I wish you much success in your endeavors.

Sincerely,

Terence Patterson,

Chair, Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects

IRBPHS - Univeristy of San Francisco

[IRBPHS@usfca.edu](mailto:IRBPHS@usfca.edu)





## Appendix B

**INFORMED CONSENT FORM**  
UNIVERSITY OF SAN FRANCISCO**CONSENT TO BE A RESEARCH SUBJECT****Purpose and Background**

Ms. Mieka Strawhorn, a graduate student in the School of Education at the University of San Francisco is doing a study on possible efficacy of explicit instruction in humor in within a TESOL curriculum. In this study, adult English Language learners currently living in the United States will be interviewed about their experiences with English language humor. Through this study, the researcher hopes to glean information about the challenges faced by English language learners in regards to the comprehension, detection and production of English language humor.

I am being asked to participate because I am an adult living in the United States whose first language is other than English.

**Procedures**

If I agree to be a participant in this study, the following will happen:

1. I will be contacted by Ms. Strawhorn to arrange a time for the interview to take place.
2. At the agreed upon time, I will be interviewed by Ms. Strawhorn by phone and asked about my experiences learning and understanding English language humor. The conversation will be recorded for the purpose of transcription. Recording will be destroyed at the conclusion of the research.
3. I may be contacted again for clarification purposes at a time of my own choosing.

**Risks and/or Discomforts**

1. It is possible (though unlikely) that some interview questions may make me feel uncomfortable, but I am free to decline to answer any questions I do not wish to answer or to stop participation at any time.
2. Participation in research may mean a loss of confidentiality although no names or any other identifying information will appear in any reports or publications resulting from the study.

**Benefits**

There will be no direct benefit to me from participating in this study. The anticipated benefit of this study is a better understanding of challenges English language learners face with the comprehension, detection and production of English language humor.

**Costs/Financial Considerations**

There will be no financial costs to me as a result of taking part in this study.

**Payment/Reimbursement**

I will receive no payment of reimbursement for my time and participation of this study.

**Questions**

I have been given the opportunity to speak with Ms. Strawhorn or about this study and have any questions I may have answered. If I have further questions about the study, I may call her at

( [REDACTED] or [REDACTED]

If I have any questions or comments about participation in this study, I should first talk with the researchers. If for some reason I do not wish to do this, I may contact the IRBPHS, which is concerned with protection of volunteers in research projects. I may reach the IRBPHS office by calling (415) 422-6091 and leaving a voicemail message, by e-mailing IRBPHS@usfca.edu, or by writing to the IRBPHS, Department of Psychology, University of San Francisco, 2130 Fulton Street, San Francisco, CA 94117-1080.

**Consent**

I have been given a copy of the "Research Subject's Bill of Rights" and I have been given a copy of this consent form to keep.

PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH IS VOLUNTARY. I am free to decline to be in this study, or to withdraw from it at any point. My decision as to whether or not to participate in this study will have no influence on my present or future status as a student or employee at USF.

My signature below indicates that I agree to participate in this study.

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Subject's Signature

Date of Signature

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Signature of Person Obtaining Consent

Date of Signature