



## INVESTIGATING INSTRUCTORS' PERCEPTIONS ON THE USE OF HUMOUR IN HIGHER EDUCATION<sup>i</sup>

Reyhan Ağçam<sup>ii</sup>

Faculty of Education, Kahramanmaraş Sütçü İmam University, Turkey

### Abstract:

In psychology, humour refers to 'a specific positive emotion that is elicited by the perception of playful incongruity, usually occurs in an interpersonal context, and is typically expressed by laughter' (Martin, 2007). Existing literature has shown that it is a useful tool in teaching various subjects especially in primary and secondary education. Our study was designed to scrutinize the perceptions of EFL instructors on the use of humour in higher education to reveal whether this is also true for higher education. A total of 42 EFL instructors working at school of foreign languages at three state universities in Turkey participated in this study. A questionnaire consisting of multiple choice and open-ended items was prepared by the researchers, and administered to the participants in order to elicit their opinions on the significance of humour in foreign language education offered to undergraduate students who were studying EFL at school of foreign languages in Turkish institutions of higher education at the time of the study. The overall qualitative and quantitative analysis of the findings demonstrated that the EFL instructors tend to have positive perceptions about the use of humour in language classes; however, they have slight hesitations with its use. The study ends with a couple of pedagogical implications on related findings, and a few suggestions for further research.

**Keywords:** EFL, humour, higher education

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<sup>i</sup>The study was orally presented with the title of "Investigating Instructors' Perceptions on the Use of Humour in Higher Education" during the SSHIF: International Symposium on Global Perspectives on Social Sciences and Humanities in Warsaw, Poland, 16-18 September 2015.

<sup>ii</sup> Correspondence: email [reyhanagcam@gmail.com](mailto:reyhanagcam@gmail.com)

## 1. Introduction

Humour is the tendency of particular cognitive experiences to provoke laughter and provide amusement (Wikipedia). Its global nature, on the other hand, was mentioned by various scholars especially for the last half of the century. Namely, it was proposed to stand as one of the few universals applicable to all people and all languages throughout the world (Trachtenberg, 1979), and to be an inextricable part of the human experience, and thus a fundamental aspect of humanity's unique capacity for language (Kruger, 1996). Likewise, Askildson (2005) advocates that it represents perhaps one of the most genuine and universal speech acts within human discourse. Originating from the humoral medicine in the ancient Greece, which taught that the balance of fluids in the human body controlled human health and emotion, in psychology, it refers to 'a specific positive emotion that is elicited by the perception of playful incongruity, usually occurs in an interpersonal context, and is typically expressed by laughter' (Martin, 2007). According to Freud (1967), it is a sort of defence mechanism that allows one to face a different situation without becoming overwhelmed by unpleasant emotions. Accordingly, most of the well-known theories such as the Anxiety Reduction Theory (Herbert, 1991), the Psychoanalytic Theory (Colema, 1992), and the Arousal Theory (Leftcourt and Martin, 1986) hold that it is an effective implementation device for reducing stress, anxieties, and hostilities encountered in everyday life situations. More specifically, Martin and Leftcourt (1986) notify that it allows people to put distance between themselves and the problem at hand, reducing the stress they are faced.

As for educational settings, Karen (1998) notes that students are faced with a multitude of stressors which arise from both the educational system and the act of growing up as a social being, and that teachers have no control over stresses external to the educational environment, but they do have some control of stresses inherent in the classroom. In this regard, some researchers conclude that humour decreases academic stress and anxiety toward the subject matter, reduces the test anxiety, and that highly anxious students attain better results on the test when humour is employed during testing (e.g., Korabkin, 1988; Meyer, 1990; Sullivan, 1992). In a similar vein, it is considered to enhance learners' self-esteem (Pollak& Freda, 1997), and to facilitate establishing better group interactions and transmitting cultural mores (Coleman, 1992). Studies conducted on the use of humour in educational settings have revealed that it strengthens teacher-student rapport by enabling students to see teachers have 'well-rounded personalities' (Colwell & Wigle, 1984; Ackerman & Dummer, 1982; Bryant, 1979; Wilson, 1979), that it puts students at ease and makes the learning process more enjoyable (Pollak& Freda, 1997), that it functions as stimulator, illustrator, and motivator and reduces tension in the classroom (Kelly, 1983), and as a tool in teaching subject matters of sensitive nature (Johnson, 1990).

For its benefits to instructional efficiency and students' psychological well-being, it was found to encourage students to feel secure while trying new things (Harris, 1989), to foster creativity and imagination (Neuliep, 1991; Karobkin, 1988; Perret, 1984, Ziv, 1983; Bergen, 1990), to facilitate creative thinking, and function as a necessary tool for problem solving (Colema, 1992; Allen, 1996; Steele, 1998). Besides, it was reported to help students learn and retain more information (Chanfel, 1990), to develop their critical thinking skills (Whitmer, 1986), and higher-order thinking skills and to create modes of thinking that are investigative, seeking, grasping, and filled with trial and error (Nielsen, 1987). Some other studies indicated that it also contributes to classroom atmosphere aids in creating an open communication climate in the classroom (Herbert, 1991; Krobkin, 1988), relieving the pressure to provide two conflicting sides with the opportunity to cool off (Iapoce, 1990), making taboo subjects more acceptable (Bryant et al., 1979), and reducing tension, alleviating boredom and stimulating interest (Sudol, 1981; Gorham & Cristophel, 1990). It is also noteworthy that it was proved a preventative technique to counteract undesirable behaviour due to its ability to reduce tension (Ackerman & Dummer, 1982), and it communicates issues related to classroom management without lessening teacher's authority or embarrassing students, as suggested by Powell (1985) and Proctor (1994).

Bryant et al. (1979) identify units of humour as jokes, riddles, puns, funny stories, humorous comments, and other laughing situations. Cohen, (1999) describes three laughing situations as (i) being laughed at (usually unpleasant or fearful experience), (ii) making others laugh (a fun, personally rewarding situation, and (iii) being able to laugh at oneself (considered to be an admirable quality). According to him, humour can have positive and negative influence on the classroom environment depending on these situations. O'Donnell -Trujillo and Adams (1983) propose that humour can have positive effects when it is delivered an amusing thought or joke at the beginning of the class, humorous stories or anecdotes relating student, student-oriented activities containing comic materials, and commercial breaks. Barioud (1988), on the other hand, warns that humour causes distraction in the classroom when used at the wrong time, that it's likely to turn the classroom into a circus when overused, and that it damages self-esteem of the students when used inappropriately. Similarly, Sullivan (1992) reminds that when it is employed irrelevant to the subject matter, it may cause in loss of valuable class time and poor class management. Accordingly, Bryant and Zillman (1983) contend that teachers of young children should avoid using humour unless they are certain that the students have enough knowledge to understand it, and Sullivan (1992) suggests that they should never joke about a student's name because of the potential damage to the student's self-esteem, that they must recognize when humour is not appropriate, and that they should not simply tell jokes in class, but should keep their humour relevant to the instruction since this reduces class time and may result in sexist and racist humour that will create problems (Cited in Steele, 1998).

Nonetheless, the related literature shows that it functions remarkably well in foreign/ second language teaching. Askildson (2005), for instance, is of the opinion that the employment of humour within the context of second language pedagogy offers significant advantages for both the language teacher and learners. According to her, it lowers the affective filter and stimulates the presocial behaviours that are essential for success within a communicative context. It can be used in teaching formal linguistic features as well as cultural and pragmatic components of the target language. To be more specific, it is suggested to be used as a formidable tool for sensitizing students to phonological, morphological, lexical, and syntactic differences within a given language or between the students' L1 and the target language (Deneire, 1999 cited in Askildson, 2005: 49), and to teach structural components of language (Vizmuller, 1979). Additionally, Trachtenberg (1979) asserts that joke telling in an ESL context provides ideal opportunities for mini-grammar or semantic lessons. Chaniotakis (2014) examined perceptions of teachers working at Greek primary schools on the use of humour in their classroom. His findings have revealed that teachers did not consider humour as an important feature of their role. According to them, fair treatment of students, expert knowledge of the curriculum, friendliness, patience, and establishing clear rules are more important than humour. The study has also indicated that teachers fear that they might lose control of the classroom, that they don't believe in the positive effects which humour may have on learning, and that they perceive teaching as a serious subject matter. Another study conducted by Aboudman (2009) on female students' perceptions of the use of humour in a second language classroom has shown that the students believe humour reduces tension, improves classroom climate, increases teacher-student rapport, facilitates learning, and increases their success and motivation. In a recent scale-adaptation study, Yirci et al. (2016) found that humour orientations of Turkish school administrators' do not significantly differ regarding such variables as age, gender, type of institution worked for and branch, and that their humour orientation was not adequate.

In order to fill the research gap in Turkey, our study aims to investigate perceptions of instructors who teach English as a foreign language at state universities in Turkey on the use of humour in higher education. Based on the aim, the study sought for responses to the following research questions:

1. What are the perceptions of EFL instructors on the attributes of teachers?
2. What are the perceptions of EFL instructors on the use of humour in higher education?
3. How often do EFL instructors incorporate humour into their teaching?

The following section is intended to introduce methodological design of the study providing demographic information about the participants of the survey, data collection tool and data analysis.

## 2. Methodology

The sampling of the study was determined through purposive sampling method which allows researchers to handpick the cases to be included in the sample on the basis of their judgments of their typicality or possession of the particular characteristics being sort (Cohen et al., 2011, cited in Wang, 2015: 195). A total of 42 EFL instructors (27 Female; 15 Male) working at three state universities in Turkey were invited to take part in the current study. At the time of the study, their ages ranged from 25 to 48 with a mean of 36;6 years, and they had experience in higher education from 2 to 23 years with a mean of 10;9 years. For data collection, a questionnaire consisting of multiple choice and open-ended items was prepared and administered to the participants by the researchers. It is noteworthy that the questionnaire was produced benefiting from the one previously administered in Chaniotakis (2014), and the findings reported in Blackmore (2013), and the expert opinion was elicited from two instructors working at school of foreign languages at a state university in Turkey. The first part of the questionnaire included five-point likert-type items (pointed from 1=Strongly disagree to 5=Strongly agree) intended to elicit the participants' perceptions about personal and professional characteristics of the teachers. The second part focuses more on the participants' overall beliefs about the use of humour in classroom settings, and its possible outcomes. The open-ended items in the last part were intended to reveal the frequency of the use of humour in higher education, the participants' perceptions as to whether such factors as class size effects the use of humour in foreign language classes, and whether it should be used in higher education. It is also significant to note that no time limit was set for filling out the questionnaire. Subsequently, the participants' responses were qualitatively and quantitatively analysed by the researchers. The findings obtained from data analysis are presented in the following section.

## 3. Findings and Discussion

The first question of the research investigated the perceptions of EFL instructors on the attributes of teachers. The finding have shown that an approximate consensus was revealed on that teachers should fair with students, be honest with students, master the teaching subject, be friendly with students, be patient, be a good model for students, be able to set clear classroom rules, have a good sense of humour, and have a good appearance. These findings are in line with the literature (e.g. White & Roesch, 1993; Murphy, 2004; Aboudman, 2009; Liakopoulou, 2011; Stronge, 2007).

The majority of the teachers remained undecided on that they should be generous with grades; namely, they were split half on this issue. They, on the other hand, don't believe that they should be strict with students. Instead, they reported that they should accept jokes from students, sometimes make jokes, make jokes without

offending their students, and let them tell anecdotes, verifying the conclusions reached in previous studies (e.g. Trachtenberg, 1979; Adams, 1983). They mostly remained undecided or did not agree on that they should be able to laugh at themselves, make as many jokes as possible, and make jokes that are likely to make students look silly. This particular finding coincides with those reported in Sullivan (1992) and Chaniotakis (2014), and it might be attributed to their fear of losing face and control in the classroom.

The second research question was intended to scrutinize their perceptions on the use of humour in higher education. Not surprisingly, most of them agreed or strongly agreed with the statements that humour increases motivation and enthusiasm, and reduces boredom, captures interest in the subject matter, makes it easier to comprehend difficult concepts, enhances feeling of well-being and secure, and facilitates trust between teacher and students as well as among students. They also reported that it reduces anxiety and tension in the classroom, and bridges gap between the teacher and the students. These findings coincide with the existing literature (e.g. Sudol, 1981; Korabkin, 1988; Hars, 1989; Gorham & Cristophel, 1990; Iapoce, 1990; Meyer, 1990; Coleman, 1992; Pollak & Freda, 1997; Aboudman, 2009).

Another significant finding of the study is that the participants have some doubts about certain propositions. Namely, they mostly remained undecided as to whether humour facilitates improved learning, elevates self-esteem of the students (N. 14), creates a relaxed and positive learning environment (N. 14), facilitates cooperation among students (N. 14), and enhances retention (N. 14). These results are considered to approve those reported in Sullivan (1992) and Chaniotakis (2014), and to contradict with Adams (1983), Barioud (1988), and Pollak and Freda (1997). Their hesitation to use humour as an instructional element might stem from, once again, their fear of losing classroom control, and offending some students. A male instructor with 8 years of experience in higher education stated,

*"I would not use humour in a large class as much as I do in a class of 25 students. I think it would damage the order and discipline... It should be used in EFL education but carefully and appropriately. It may harm not only classroom management and discipline but also students' attention and studying behaviours. They may end up not giving importance to teacher and lesson."*

A female participant with an experience of 15 year in higher education notes,

*"Yes, it (class size) certainly influences its use as I don't usually feel secure and relaxed in crowded classes, and I don't want to classroom control. "*

Nonetheless, most of them strongly believe that humour is in their nature. Besides, they do not think that it has negative consequences on the learning process, it decreases mutual respect, and it causes loss of control in the classroom. Even a male instructor with 15 years of experience in higher education who reported that he does not often use humour in his classes believes that it should be used in all kinds of education. He goes on to note,

*“Education, except for e-learning where the teaching is organized mainly through machines, is attained by humans, and humour is an essential quality of human beings. Of course, the e-learning programmes can also benefit from humour. However, it is well-established that learning may be more effective when it is connected to positive experiences, and humour provides us with this sort of experiences.”*

He, on the other hand, is of the opinion that it should be carefully used in the classroom, and that its might be used as a medium for increasing intercultural awareness of the students noting that,

*“An important thing for teachers to consider is that they should use the kind of humour that best fits to their nature. A teacher who tries to be funny like an entertainer in a Saturday-evening-show, but in fact a dry sense of humour may appear ridiculous to his/her students. As for everything, teachers should be genuine when using humour. Also, humour that is previously planned by the teacher or a joke memorized beforehand is not something I prefer. Related to foreign language teaching, it can become content to show that different cultures have different senses of humour.”*

In a similar vein, a female instructor with 11 years of experience in higher education states that it should be used to decrease tension of the class as she believes that it enables students to use the target language more frequently in a relaxing atmosphere whereby they are not afraid of making mistakes. Concerning the purpose of its use, a male participant with an experience of 17 years in EFL teaching to adults notifies that it should be used in higher education as long as it takes students' attention to the target language.

The last question of the research aimed to elicit how often humour is incorporated into higher education by EFL instructors. Approximately none of the participants reported that they used humour five and more times per teaching hour. Even so, their responses showed that it is used once or twice by one third of the participants, and three or four times by approximately one third of them during a class hour. The following section offers practical implications driven from the above-mentioned findings of the study, its limitations and suggestions for further research.

#### **4. Practical Implications**

The study has displayed that EFL instructors tend to have positive perceptions about the use of humour in language classes; however, they also have slight hesitations with its use. Hence, they should be encouraged to use humour in their teaching in an appropriate and careful manner. Furthermore, students might be informed about the benefits of humour in teaching and learning, and warned about its possible disadvantages in order to eliminate possible negative outcomes. Both teachers and students might be encouraged to find and share classroom materials that include elements of humour that are prepared taking goals and objectives of the curriculum into account, or just for having some fun together before or after classes. Besides, language classrooms might be decorated with ready-made comics appropriate to the proficiency level of students or the ones created by teachers and/ or students based on related subject matters. Likewise, the students might be watched carefully selected videos which include humour while teaching a particular language item. These videos are believed to be beneficial especially for teachers working with young learners as well as those who work with adults in order to facilitate their learning by decreasing affective filter.

#### **5. Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research**

The current research is confined to the inspection of the use of humour in teaching EFL in higher education in Turkey. The data were elicited from a limited number of EFL instructors working at state universities in the country. So, it might be furthered to investigate its use in counterpart institutions in various countries or its use in different levels of education such as primary and secondary schools. It is also confined to the perceptions of EFL instructors on the use of humour in foreign language classrooms. Accordingly, further studies might be conducted on the use of humour in other classes which is offered through the medium of students' native language. Lastly, further studies might also investigate the perceptions of students attending various programmes at higher education institutions on the use of humour in their classes.

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