Teacher Attitudes to Humor in L2 English Discussion Classes
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ABSTRACT

This paper describes an investigation into the attitudes of instructors teaching L2 English discussion class (EDC) at Rikkyo University to the use of humor in their classes. A survey was conducted which aimed to discover whether use of humor was widespread in the program, and if so, whether this was supported by pedagogic or personal reasons. It was found that the majority of teachers do either actively try to use humor, or take opportunities to do so when they arise. In contrast, respondents were mostly undecided or in disagreement as to whether students should be responsible for generating humor. There was agreement that teacher-generated humor (TGH) contributes to an enjoyable learning atmosphere and that students are more likely to learn when they enjoy their class. However, many respondents felt that humor was not a prerequisite of an enjoyable class. Further reasons for humor use that were selected in the survey showed that in addition to learner outcome oriented goals, teachers also have personal motivations for generating humor in class. These findings will be further discussed below and some personal perspectives shared on the implementation of TGH in class.

Keywords: control, shift, escape*

INTRODUCTION

What is humor? We all know when we find something funny, the effects are clear, a smirk, a laugh, or a backrush of tea flooding the nasal cavity; however, the catalysts for such physical responses are so many and varied that people have struggled to coin a single word capable of covering them all. For the time being, we have settled on 'humor' (see Martin, 2007 for a detailed history), which in this paper is taken to mean *any interaction, verbal or otherwise, that results in laughter or amusement*. The notion of interaction is especially important to this definition in the context of the EFL classroom, where initiation, intent, and response are under such close scrutiny. Any communication initiated by teachers or students is goal directed, so whether this is focused on influencing the classroom atmosphere, constructing or enhancing one's identity in the group (this includes the teacher), or on achieving the course aims, it is clear that there is something at stake in every interaction. Consequently, there is risk involved when we embark upon any kind of communication, due to the possibility of failure and any negative outcomes of this with respect to our intended goal. In the EFL classroom, this risk is magnified when we choose to communicate with humor. Indeed, even when attempting to be amusing amongst those with a shared L1 and similar cultural background we are mindful of the fact that a misunderstanding could occur, or in the worst case, offence could be taken. Furthermore, the success of humor is said to depend on simultaneous appreciation of the expected and the absurd, when the audience is instantaneously shifted from a "goal-directed" or "telic" state to a "playful" or "paratelic" state, as in my poor attempt above*, allowing a comical comparison of the expected and unexpected to resonate in the mind (Martin, 2007 p.6). In an environment such as the EFL classroom, where both linguistic and cultural comprehension can be significantly reduced, it is therefore even more of a challenge for the teacher to smoothly manufacture such moments. For this reason, if we are going to initiate humor in class we must be mindful of the risks involved, and what is more, prepared to turn the situation to our advantage should our use

of humor fail. If we are unable to do so, there is a very real chance that damage could be done to both the classroom atmosphere and the relationship between students and teacher.

BACKGROUND

Humor is commonplace in most forms of social interaction and it seems reasonable to assume that this is true in exchanges between students and teachers. Classes are often evaluated, officially or not, in terms of whether they are 'fun' so again one would think that humor plays a part in achieving this. One of the aims of the survey was to ascertain whether the use of humor was indeed common, at least at the institution in question. Beyond this necessary first step, it was hoped that a clearer understanding of teacher motivations for using humor would be reached. Prior to discussing the results, it is important to provide some background on what constitutes in-class humor and a brief introduction to some of the reasons why teachers may use humor that formed the basis for questions included in the survey.

What forms does humor take in class? As mentioned above, humor comes in many forms. It may be planned, such as a formulaic joke e.g. "Two Japanese students of English *work* into a bar…", a funny anecdote, or humorous images included in supplementary materials. Conversely, it can be spontaneously produced like an impromptu play on words, a comical gesture, or a sound effect (see Banas et. al, 2011 for more examples). There is less need to be apprehensive about what kinds of humor students can enjoy than many teachers think, for as Bell (2009) states, "any type of humor can be constructed at any level of sophistication' and that seemingly challenging forms of humor such as wordplay can be appreciated, and sometimes produced by even lower proficiency learners. For instance, I recall one of my own students incapacitating his classmates by poking fun at his own propensity for humor while taking a swipe at university attendance rules with, "Three jokes is one absence." (three (sic)'lates' being the original). Hence, as long as the teacher has a good appreciation of what students can comprehend, avoids formulaic jokes that are culturally specific, keeps humor within a frame of reference that is known to them, and avoids offensive humor, or that which may ridicule others (see the formulaic joke above for an example of failure on all points), then the available repertoire for use in class is significant.

Why use humor? Studies seem to prove that students have a positive attitude towards the use of humor in class, for example, Aboudan (2009) reported that 88% of a group of 160 female ESL students surveyed at the United Arab Emirates University felt that it made the learning environment more enjoyable, while Stroud's (2013) survey of Japanese high school students found that a majority considered relaxation and increased participation to be additional benefits of in-class humor. With respect to language acquisition, there is less empirical evidence to support claims that learning can be solely attributed to the use of humor. For while it may be possible to demonstrate the effectiveness of humor in particular teaching situations, such as enhanced acquisition of new vocabulary items through the use of comical examples of usage, the benefit of sporadic use of humor in class is more likely to be as a contributing, rather than primary factor in language learning. In other words, the advantages revealed in the student surveys above may facilitate language acquisition by contributing to students' positive attitudes towards the learning situation, which are said to correlate with gains in their second language achievements (see Masgoret and Gardner, 2002). Questions were included in the survey to ascertain whether teachers truly believed that humor in general (not solely teacher-generated) has positive effects in these two areas, classroom atmosphere and learning.

The "tension-releasing function of humor" (Martin, 2007 p.20), which appears to have been recognized by students above, I believe, may also have stress-reducing benefits for the teacher. Teaching can be an anxiety-inducing job for a number of reasons, not least because the teacher is

human and feels a need to be liked and appreciated. This can be difficult when the teacher's roles in class include some that could seem incompatible with this need e.g. maintaining discipline, giving negative feedback, and being partly responsible for constructing an enjoyable class atmosphere. The degree to which this is true for each individual is of course in question, but generating humor may be one way in which teachers can express their humanity and enjoy a good rapport with students despite the complex and sometimes contradictory nature of their role. Questions were included in the survey to gauge to what degree teachers have learner outcome oriented reasons and/or personal reasons for generating humor.

DATA COLLECTION

A survey was produced titled 'Teacher Attitudes to Humor in Class' with the definition of humor given above included in the instructions. It was decided not to provide examples of humor as this could result in respondents answering with a set of limitations in mind regarding what constitutes humor. Furthermore, it was felt that considering the wide range of humorous interactions possible, the author would be unlikely to accurately predict what forms teachers preferred, and so providing examples that fell outside of these, could lead to the respondents forming a negative impression of the inquiry before even starting to answer the questions.

An initial "item pool" (Dornyei and Taguchi, 2010 p.40) of 40 questions was created then divided into the five distinct content areas that were to be investigated:

    A. Do the majority of teachers feel that humor in class creates a positive atmosphere?
    B. Do the majority of teachers believe that humor has a positive effect on learning?
    C. Do a majority of teachers generate humor in class?
    D. Do teachers have learner outcome oriented reasons for generating humor?
    E. Do teachers have personal/psychological reasons for generating humor?

From this point, questions that were very similar to others or deemed to fall on the margins of the content areas were cut, resulting in a pool of 30 questions that were then divided to produce five *multi-item scales* of six questions, one scale for each content area. This was done, as it is in line with recommendations that use of a multi-item scale of not less than four items provides more reliable results than a single question on the content area when investigating "abstract, mental variables" like attitudes (Mackey and Gass, 2012 p.76). The items from each scale were then distributed randomly in the survey. The decision to do so was made in order "to create a sense of variety and to prevent respondents from simply repeating previous answers" (Ibid p.78), though it is recognized that this may have had a negative impact on the aesthetics of the layout (see Dornyei and Taguchi, 2010 for argument in favor of grouped items). As a further precaution against repeat answers, a line was included in the instructions to advise respondents to read the questions carefully as some may seem similar.

A Likert scale was chosen to record respondents' level of agreement with each item. Numerical values were assigned to each response (from 5 for 'strong agreement' to 1 for 'strong disagreement') to allow for calculation of how positive each respondent's overall attitude was to each content area. When items asked for a response where agreement showed a negative view of the content area, then these values were reversed before calculating the total score (see Ajzen 2005). These numerical values were also used to calculate a total score for each item that would make it easier to see which items generated the most agreement amongst the respondents. The numerical values were not included in the survey that was distributed.

From this point, a first draft of the survey was piloted on a sample of four instructors. This sample size is far smaller than is recommended, however, as the target sample was likewise small (there are 41 full-time instructors in the program) it could not be expanded without significantly reducing the final sample size. In spite of this, the piloting proved useful in that it highlighted certain questions that were ambiguous and required editing or replacing, and also resulted in the final selection of the 5-point answer scale, where a scale of agreement was chosen over one of frequency. After editing, the final draft of the survey was distributed by email to the target sample.

RESULTS

A total of 32 instructors (78% of the target) completed the survey, 23 of whom were male and 9 female. Average teaching experience within the group was 8 years and there were 7 respondents who identified an alternative to English as their L1. Following is a breakdown of the results by content area (A to E as above). Items in each scale have been numbered from one to six for ease of analysis. Tables show the total of respondents' answers to each item (SA: Strongly Agree, A: Agree, Un: Undecided, D: Disagree, and SD: Strongly Disagree) and the score (a higher value signifies more responses in agreement with the item). Finally, a chart is included to provide a visual representation of the level of positivity found towards the content area.

Table 1. Do the majority of teachers feel that humor in class creates a positive atmosphere?

	SA	A	Un	D	SD	Score
1. Humor helps to improve the class atmosphere.	16	16	0	0	0	144
2. In-class humor confuses some students. ®	3	17	6	6	0	113
3. Students do not enjoy humorless classes.	0	6	7	17	2	81
4. In-class humor leads to disciplinary issues. ®	2	10	12	8	0	102
5. Humor is not necessary for students to enjoy class. ®	1	7	3	17	4	80
6. In-class humor can defuse a tense atmosphere.	9	20	3	0	0	134
Totals	31	76	31	48	6	654

® responses reversed to show degree of positive attitude to content area
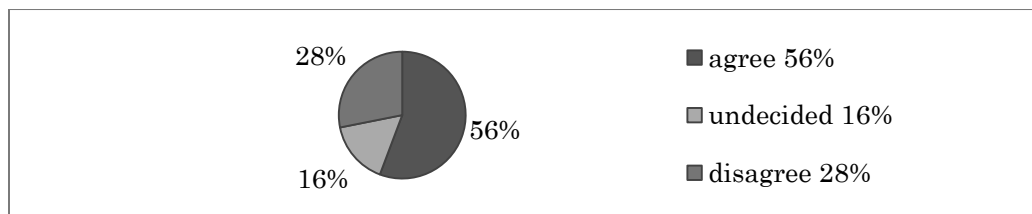
Figure 1. Percentage of agreement for content area A.

Responses to some items in this area suggest that most teachers believe that humor is a contributing factor to a good classroom atmosphere (items 1,2,4, and 6), but that humor is not essential to students' enjoyment of class (items 3 and 5). These results highlight a problem with the scale, in that all items are not clearly focused on the same area of inquiry. This was further evidenced by a low Chronbach Alpha coefficient of 0.661 (scales B to D generated more reliable coefficients), showing that this scale lacks reliability in terms of measuring a single attitude. Mackey and Gass (2012) advise that any scale that generates a coefficient below 0.60 should be re-examined, and ideally, this issue should have been rectified before distributing the survey,

however, the opportunity was missed due to a combination of a researcher blind spot i.e. my focus on humor caused me to assume an exclusive correlation between humor and enjoyment, and the limitations of a small pilot sample. Nevertheless, the results are interesting, with 66% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that humor is not necessary for students to enjoy class (item 5), we can see that many teachers in the program feel that there are other ways for students to enjoy class than through humor. One further point of interest is the high level of agreement with item 6. One could extrapolate that teachers on the course value humor as a 'mood changer'; a means to overcome or move on from a study related difficulty or an interpersonal issue that has subdued the atmosphere.

Table 2. Do the majority of teachers believe that humor has a positive effect on learning?

	SA	A	Un	D	SD	Score
1. Groups that laugh together learn together better.	7	13	10	2	0	121
2. In-class humor is beneficial to student motivation.	9	18	4	1	0	131
3. In-class humor can get in the way of learning opportunities. ®	3	12	9	8	0	106
4. Students are more likely to learn when they enjoy their class.	18	14	0	0	0	146
5. Humor in class is detrimental to learning. ®	11	15	3	3	0	130
6. The presence of humor in class has no effect on student learning. ®	4	19	7	2	0	121
Totals	52	91	33	16	0	755

® responses reversed to show degree of positive attitude to content area
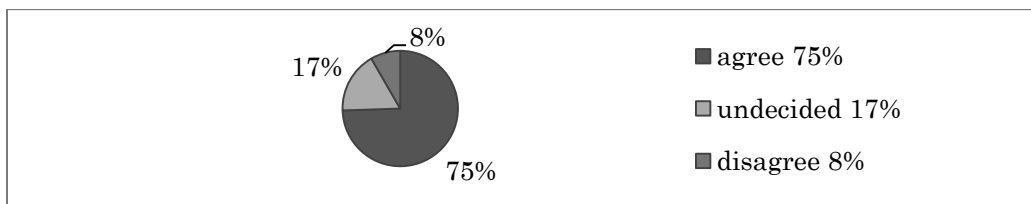

Figure 2. Percentage of agreement for content area B.

The highest percentage of positive attitudes was expressed towards this area, with item 4 generating the highest score of any in the survey. In light of what was said about the limitations of content area A, it should be recognized that this item does not focus exclusively on enjoyment through humor. However, other items in the scale, notably items 2 and 5, suggest that few teachers see humor as detrimental to learning and many recognize a link between humor and motivation. This is important considering the positive role that motivation plays in students' achievement of learning goals. The fact that there was little disagreement and no strong disagreement further support a hypothesis that the teachers who participated in this study see humor in general (i.e. not specifically that generated by the teacher) as having a positive effect on learning. However, all things must be in moderation, so perhaps the eight respondents who felt that humor can get in the way of learning opportunities had overuse in mind when answering item 3. It is possible that more could have been learned about teacher attitudes in this area, had a question on the frequency of in-class humor been included in the survey.

Table 3. Do a majority of teachers generate humor in class?

	SA	A	Un	D	SD	Score
1. Students should generate humor rather than teachers. ®	0	13	14	3	2	102
2. I try to generate humor in my classes.	11	12	3	5	1	123
3. I sometimes re-use successful examples of humor.	13	17	0	2	0	137
4. I am confident using humor in class.	7	18	3	3	1	123
5. Students view teachers who use humor as unprofessional. ®	3	14	13	2	0	114
6. I don't plan to use humor, but take my chances to be funny if the opportunity	4	16	4	7	1	111
Totals	38	90	37	22	5	710

® responses reversed to show degree of positive attitude to content area
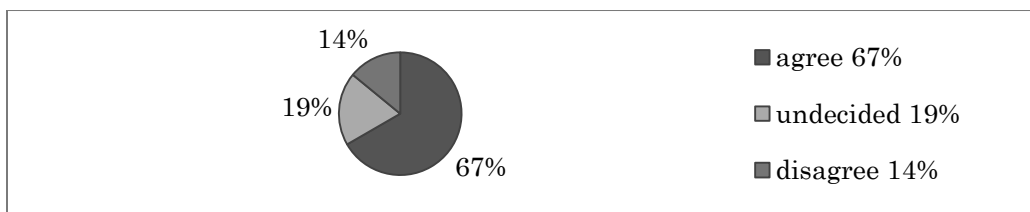

Figure 3. Percentage of agreement for content area C.

Items 2, 3, and 6 in this scale investigate teacher behavior that one would assume correlates to the respondent's attitude to generating humor. What stands out in the answers given to these items is the number of teachers who claim to re-use successful examples of humor (item 3). This suggests that many teachers find sufficient value in the use of humor to have a repertoire, a statement corroborated by the fact that no single respondent gave negative answers to all three of these items. Furthermore, of the two teachers who do not re-use humor, one nevertheless agreed that they take chances to use humor, and the other showed a desire to always strive for new material by agreeing to items 2 and 6. The fact that instructors on the program teach the same topic and target language 12 to 13 times a week provides additional explanation of this result. Finally, it does not appear that confidence is a barrier to the use of humor for the majority of teachers.

Table 4. Do teachers have learner outcome oriented reasons for generating humor?

|	SA	A	Un	D	SD	Scor
1. Teacher-generated humor (TGH) can make a learning point more salient.	3	19	6	4	0	117
2. TGH is effective when dealing with disciplinary issues in class.	1	13	14	4	0	107
3. TGH contributes to an enjoyable learning environment.	12	16	4	0	0	136
4. TGH can be effective when giving feedback on students' points to improve.	4	11	11	6	0	109
5. TGH can increase the participation of quieter students.	1	13	12	5	1	104
6. It is important for students to experience humor in L2.	4	12	11	3	2	109
Totals	25	84	58	22	3	682
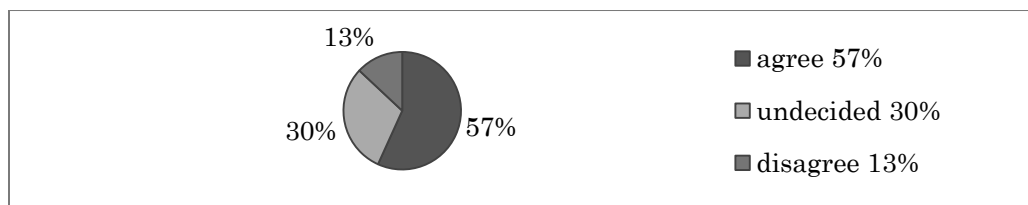
Figure 4. Percentage of agreement for content area D.

The previous scale was used to verify whether teacher use of humor was indeed commonplace in the program, having established that it is, the remaining two seek to gain a better understanding of the reasons for TGH. Scale D confirms that improving the learning environment is again a key motivation (item 3), but also provides information regarding how teachers feel that humor directly relates to helping students learn. In this respect, it is not so surprising that item 1 garnered the highest amount of agreement. Having attended numerous faculty development sessions with these teachers, it has been fascinating to witness first-hand just how creative some can be when it comes to helping students understand how and why we use functions of discussion (e.g. asking for and giving opinions) through the use of humorous devices such as gestures and analogies. It is also interesting to note that many teachers believe that humor is effective for giving negative feedback (item 4). Other items on the scale also achieved reasonable scores, but it must be noted that the number of respondents who were undecided on these issues contributed to the highest total of any scale at 30%. If we combine this fact with a comparison between the results attained on this scale with those on scale B, where 75% of responses were in support of the learning related benefits of humor, it could lead one to conclude that while many teachers believe that humor is beneficial, they do not feel that they can confidently pin point precise examples of when *their use* of humor supports learning.

Table 5. Do teachers have personal/psychological reasons for generating humor?

|	SA	A	Un	D	SD	Score
1. Using humor in class can improve my rapport with students.	15	15	0	0	0	141
2. I generate humor because I don't like the atmosphere in class to be too	4	9	5	10	4	95
3. It is important for me that students enjoy their classes so I try to use humor.	6	18	2	6	0	120
4. I feel pleased when students laugh at my humor.	11	15	6	0	0	133
5. I use humor because serious, humorless groups are difficult to teach.	1	7	4	15	5	80
6. Using humor helps me to enjoy my day.	13	9	6	2	2	125
Totals	**50**	**73**	**25**	**33**	**11**	**694**
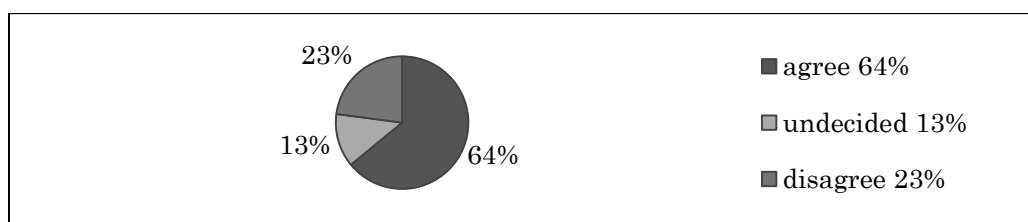
Figure 5. Percentage of agreement for content area D.

The final scale provided some interesting insight into the personal benefits that teachers derive from generating humor. It is clear from the total agreement with item 1 that humor is used as a tool to develop the teacher-student relationship, and importantly, the high agreement with items 4 and 6 suggests that teachers gain as much from this as the students. Common sense dictates that a friendly and enjoyable class atmosphere is as much in the teacher's interests as the students'. Other results (items 2 and 5) help us to add an extra layer of understanding to this. We can see that there is variation in the degree to which teachers use humor to avoid situations that they find uncomfortable. Some teachers, it appears, are more ill at ease with serious groups than others. Such differences are an inevitable result of our varied personalities, however, the results show that irrespective of the burden that a serious group of students places on the individual, humor can be used as a means to alleviate this work-related stress (items 4 and 6).

DISCUSSION

In this discussion, I would like to highlight where my beliefs overlap with the respondents' on the issues raised. These beliefs are informed by my experiences as a teacher and research in the field of SLA. In doing so, I will also share some thoughts on the role of 'familiarity' in the practical implementation of humor, to address the conclusion made about area D that teachers may have difficulty isolating particular instances of when their use of humor supports learning.

First of all, I agree with the three items that were endorsed by all respondents; that students are more likely to learn when they enjoy their classes, and that humor, and I include TGH, can improve the in-class atmosphere and help to build a good rapport with students. Furthermore, I agree with all of the items in part D. However, as I'm sure is the case with many teachers, I am cautious regarding when and how to use TGH. For example, if I am working with a new group of students, I prefer to allow them time to first gain trust in me in my primary role as an educator. I believe that once this trust is established one has more license to utilize humor. A further advantage to delaying the use of humor is that students should be familiar with you, and your classroom routines and language, before it is possible to mix things up for comic effect. Remembering what was said about humor being successful when it provides a contrast with the expected, using it too early seems counter intuitive, and may negatively impact upon rapport by confusing the students. Like many respondents, I actively make use of humor, take chances to utilize it when I feel it will be beneficial, and re-use what has worked for me in the past. In many cases, when this takes place I bear in mind whether students are ready for the humor to work (i.e. do they have strong enough mental associations with the target of my humor to make the comparison I introduce funny). This is an important consideration with many of the humor types that I use in class because they depend on this kind of familiarity. For example, I frequently use, as I know do others, "transformations of frozen expressions" wherein one changes "well-known sayings, clichés, or adages into novel statements." (Martin, 200P p.13) In the classroom, elements of the teacher's high-frequency instructional language are substituted, making for an amusing transformation. For instance, when asking a student to choose a role in pair work, 'Do you want to speak or listen?' becomes 'Do you want to speak or speak?' Though a very basic form of humor, this usually generates amusement and can be used sparingly to encourage quieter, less confident students to initiate.

The previous paragraph outlines my feelings about how student familiarity with the teacher and classroom routines is important for the success of TGH. There are, however, two further kinds of familiarity that I believe can help teachers to produce humor. Firstly, the teacher should also know something about the students and their routines. The benefit of this is that such knowledge can provide material for humorous purposes, which when remembered and used correctly, can

strengthen the connection between teacher and student. Here is one example that shows how knowledge of an individual student can be tailored for humorous feedback on a point to improve.

> **Knowledge:** Student X likes to wake up early and she is always first in class.
> **Point to Improve:** Student X gives the first opinion in the discussion too frequently which impacts negatively on participation of others.
> **Focused TGH:** Teacher points out in feedback that Student X is a 'Starter' (gestures triumphant, raised fist), lauds Student X's ability to initiate (connecting with examples from **Knowledge**) and describes the glittering future that awaits her, then switches tone with a drawn out 'but' and returns to supportive mentor mode to explain how good discussion requires equal, balanced participation from all.

In this example, as is usual, the humor derived from quite basic knowledge, the kind that teachers can acquire through engaging students in five minutes of chat prior to the start of class. Entertaining analogies are easily drawn between daily routines, or the hobbies students enjoy and their performance in class e.g. always eats bread ~ always uses the same expressions, enjoys tennis ~ enjoys fast exchange of ideas in discussion etc. However, to make effective use of such humor, and to ensure that it is not misunderstood as ridicule, teachers must ensure that support is simultaneously supplied i.e. praise accompanies criticism and teacher-student dialogue continues. An additional benefit of this kind of humor is that it allows for an opportunity to bring quieter students into the fold, validating their place in the group and opening an avenue for future interaction with their classmates.

The final kind of familiarity is with the students' culture. In this respect, I believe those forms of culture that might be considered less intellectual are perhaps most important to know, such as TV (shows and commercials), product/brand knowledge, and age-specific pastimes. If the teacher has knowledge of these, then this can be used to good effect with either planned or spontaneous humor. An example of the latter that occurred in one of my classes also serves to provide an instance of when humor can make a learning point more salient. A group of students were discussing the pros and cons of getting your hair dyed, but ran into trouble when trying to articulate that this might cause damage to the scalp. After some negotiation of meaning, they uncomfortably decided on 'damage head skin' as the best translation. When the discussion ended, still unsatisfied with this, they asked me how to say 'head skin' in English. Knowing the catchy jingle that accompanies the advertisement for 'ScalpD', a well-known Japanese shampoo, I was able to simply hum the opening bars for them to realize that it was a word already known to them, but as yet not understood. This resulted in much amusement, and hopefully, a higher possibility of the word being acquired for future use. This particular student-teacher exchange, like many others I have had, also helped me to enjoy my day.

As a final point, I would add that I personally think that it is important for students to become familiar with humor in L2, for humor is an essential part of social 'play'. As Cook (2000 p.150) states, "Knowing a language, and being able to function in communities which use that language, entails being able to understand and produce play with it, making this ability a necessary part of advanced proficiency." To do this, students need teachers to provide them with input by incorporating humor and other elements of fun in their classes. I have often heard fellow teachers saying that it is not our job to 'entertain' the students. Considering that The Oxford Dictionary of English defines 'entertain' as to 'provide (someone) with amusement or enjoyment', I would have to disagree with this sentiment. I believe, as it seems do many of the respondents, that there is much to be gained from making our classes enjoyable for our students.

CONCLUSION

This investigation found that teacher attitudes to humor in L2 English discussion classes are predominantly positive. While it may be difficult to draw conclusions about learner outcomes of TGH, we can see that many teachers have these in mind when using humor in class. The survey results also suggest that this group of teachers have personal motivations for using humor, and that perhaps TGH makes the workplace more comfortable by helping to fulfill the human need to be liked and appreciated. It is hoped that the reader will use the results to examine where their own attitudes to humor lie with respect to their fellow professionals'. Regarding future avenues for investigation, perhaps the next step is to learn more about which kinds of humor teachers and students feel are best suited to contribute to an effective learning environment.

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