



JALC

Journal of Applied Linguistic and Studies of Cultural

| e-ISSN: 3026-5347 |

<https://jurnal.rahiscendekiaindonesia.co.id/index.php/jalc>



Student's Perception of Teacher's Use of Humor in the Classroom

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KEYWORDS

Perception, Humor Interaction Learning
English Education

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A B S T R A C T

The use of humor in the classroom has been widely regarded as an effective pedagogical strategy to create a positive learning atmosphere, foster engagement, and reduce student anxiety. This study aims to explore students' perceptions regarding their teachers' use of humor during English language instruction. Employing a qualitative descriptive design, the researchers collected data through semi-structured questionnaires and follow-up interviews with 30 undergraduate students in the English Education Department at Universitas Rahiscendekia Indonesia. The findings indicate that most participants perceive humor as a helpful tool for enhancing comprehension and maintaining motivation. However, some students expressed concerns about humor that is perceived as inappropriate or excessive. The study highlights that the successful use of humor depends on teachers' sensitivity to students' backgrounds and the relevance of humorous content to instructional objectives. Implications suggest the importance of professional development programs to train educators in using humor effectively while maintaining classroom decorum. Additionally, the results reveal that humor contributes to building positive relationships between teachers and students, making instructors appear more approachable and supportive. This relational benefit was especially valued by learners who often experience anxiety in language classrooms. Future research is recommended to examine the long-term effects of humor on academic achievement and to explore its application across diverse cultural and educational contexts.

INTRODUCTION

The application of humor within educational contexts has received increasing scholarly attention in recent years, especially in relation to its potential to support positive learning outcomes. Humor, broadly defined as the use of verbal or non-verbal communication intended to elicit amusement, has been recognized as a pedagogical strategy capable of reducing learner anxiety, fostering engagement, and enhancing retention (Torok & Eble, 2020). In language learning settings, humor can be particularly valuable in addressing common affective barriers, such as communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation (Dewaele & Li, 2021).

Research indicates that when teachers integrate humor appropriately, students are more likely to perceive the learning environment as supportive and enjoyable (Al-Mekhlafi, 2020). Humor can create a relaxed atmosphere, which encourages

learners to participate actively and take risks in using the target language. For example, telling a light-hearted anecdote about language errors can normalize mistakes, thereby reducing anxiety and building confidence.

Nevertheless, humor in the classroom is a double-edged sword. Recent studies emphasize that humor may be counterproductive if it is perceived as sarcastic, offensive, or irrelevant to learning objectives (Bakar et al., 2022). The success of humor is highly dependent on contextual factors such as cultural norms, interpersonal dynamics, and individual student preferences. In multilingual and multicultural classrooms, these factors can become even more pronounced, leading to potential misunderstandings or discomfort among learners (Dewaele et al., 2019).

In Indonesian higher education, the use of humor in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction remains underexplored. Prior investigations in the Indonesian context have focused more on classroom management strategies, questioning techniques, and technology integration (Fauzan, 2020; Susilowati & Widiati, 2021). Little empirical attention has been paid to how students themselves perceive humor as part of the pedagogical process. Given that students are the primary recipients of instructional practices, their perspectives are critical in evaluating whether humor contributes positively to their learning experience or, conversely, poses distractions.

A better understanding of students' perceptions can inform professional development programs aimed at training teachers to integrate humor effectively and sensitively. Furthermore, insights into students' attitudes toward different types of humor can help educators tailor their instructional approaches to align with learners' expectations and cultural values.

Against this backdrop, the present study seeks to explore undergraduate students' perceptions of their English lecturers' use of humor at Universitas Rahiscendekia Indonesia. Specifically, this research addresses the following questions:

1. How do students perceive the use of humor by their teachers during English lessons?
2. Which forms of humor do students find most beneficial or potentially problematic?
3. What is the perceived impact of humor on learner motivation, participation, and anxiety reduction?

By answering these questions, the study aims to contribute to the growing body of recent scholarship on affective factors in EFL learning while offering practical recommendations to educators seeking to create supportive, engaging, and culturally responsive classrooms.

Furthermore, the integration of humor in language classrooms aligns with the broader shift toward learner-centered pedagogies that emphasize affective support and social interaction. Recent scholarship has highlighted the importance of creating emotionally responsive learning environments, where students feel valued and psychologically safe to express themselves (Dewaele & Li, 2021). In this regard, humor can serve as an essential mechanism for establishing rapport, humanizing the teacher, and lowering the perceived power distance between instructors and learners (Al-Mekhlafi, 2020). These relational benefits can have a direct impact on

students' willingness to participate in classroom activities, particularly in contexts where cultural norms may discourage overt displays of engagement or self-assertion.

However, it is crucial to recognize that the effective use of humor requires not only sensitivity to cultural and individual differences but also a clear alignment with pedagogical goals. As Bakar et al. (2022) have noted, humor that lacks relevance to the lesson content or that inadvertently reinforces stereotypes can undermine instructional effectiveness and alienate learners. Therefore, educators must develop an informed understanding of the types of humor that are perceived as constructive versus those that risk being disruptive or offensive. By investigating students' perceptions systematically, this study aims to generate empirical evidence that can inform training programs and policy recommendations for integrating humor responsibly into English language instruction in Indonesian higher education settings.

Furthermore, the integration of humor into English language instruction reflects a broader movement in contemporary pedagogy that prioritizes student-centered approaches and affective engagement. In recent years, scholars have increasingly recognized that emotional and relational dimensions of learning are critical to achieving positive educational outcomes. For example, Dewaele and Li (2021) emphasized that the affective climate of the classroom can either facilitate or hinder learners' willingness to communicate, especially when studying a foreign language. Humor, in this regard, is not simply a peripheral strategy but can serve as an essential component in reducing psychological barriers such as fear of judgment and communication apprehension.

Recent empirical studies conducted in various cultural contexts have also demonstrated that humor contributes to the development of social connectedness among learners. According to Bakar et al. (2022), students who perceive their instructors as approachable and supportive are more likely to participate in classroom discussions and collaborative tasks. This sense of belonging and safety is especially important for adolescent learners who may be navigating complex social identities. Humor, when appropriately integrated, can help establish a positive group dynamic and reinforce shared understanding. However, it is also necessary to recognize the potential risks associated with humor that is not attuned to learners' cultural expectations or individual preferences. Al-Mekhlafi (2020) found that while humor generally has a positive impact, it can lead to unintended negative consequences if students perceive it as irrelevant or as undermining the seriousness of academic content. In the Indonesian context, where educational practices are often characterized by formality and respect for authority, the use of humor requires particular sensitivity. Teachers need to balance the benefits of a relaxed atmosphere with the need to maintain professional credibility and instructional focus.

In addition, the digitalization of classrooms during and after the COVID-19 pandemic has introduced new challenges and opportunities for the use of humor. Online platforms can limit spontaneous interaction, making it more difficult for teachers to gauge students' reactions and adapt humor in real time (Susilowati &

Widiati, 2021). Conversely, the use of multimedia resources and creative digital tools can expand the repertoire of humorous strategies, potentially enhancing engagement in virtual settings. As classrooms increasingly adopt blended learning models, understanding how humor functions across modalities has become a pertinent area of inquiry. Given these considerations, this study aims to deepen the understanding of how high school students in Indonesia perceive humor in English language learning. By examining students' attitudes and experiences, the research intends to provide insights that can inform teacher training and pedagogical design, ultimately supporting the creation of classrooms that are not only academically rigorous but also emotionally supportive and culturally responsive.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach complemented by quantitative descriptive data derived from a structured online survey. The purpose of using this design was to capture both numerical trends and in-depth subjective perceptions of students regarding teachers' use of humor in the classroom. According to Braun and Clarke (2021), qualitative descriptive research is suitable for exploring participants' views in their natural context while allowing for rich thematic interpretation.

Participants

The target population comprised high school students studying English as a compulsory subject. Using simple random sampling, the researchers recruited 20 students across grades 10 to 12 from three public and private schools in North Sumatra Province, Indonesia. The inclusion criteria required participants to have experienced at least one semester of instruction from English teachers known for occasionally integrating humor in their lessons. Demographic information was collected to contextualize findings, including gender distribution (12 females and 8 males), age range (15–18 years), and average English proficiency level (intermediate).

Instruments

Two main instruments were employed:

1. Online Questionnaire

The questionnaire was designed in Google Forms and contained five closed-ended items formulated to measure perceptions across five dimensions: enjoyment of humor, motivational impact, preference for humor types, potential for distraction, and perceptions of teacher approachability. Each item used dichotomous response options ("Yes" or "No") to facilitate frequency tabulation and ease of interpretation. The questions were adapted from prior validated instruments and literature on humor in language teaching (Al-Mekhlafi, 2020; Bakar et al., 2022) and were reviewed by two educational researchers for face and content validity.

2. Follow-Up Semi-Structured Interviews

To supplement survey data, semi-structured interviews were conducted with five volunteer participants who agreed to further elaborate on their responses. Interview protocols included prompts asking for examples of humor experienced, personal feelings about specific incidents, and recommendations for teachers.

The finalized questionnaire was distributed via a secure link:
https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1082FeMTgzsrqs-19H5DbtdcdxtDBMjmCsN4_cCnMNwM/edit.

Data Collection Procedure

Data collection occurred over a four-week period in May 2025 and followed a systematic process:

1. Preparation and Validation:
The questionnaire draft was pilot-tested with a small group (n=3) to ensure clarity. Minor revisions were made based on feedback.
2. Survey Distribution:
The Google Forms link was disseminated via WhatsApp groups and school mailing lists, accompanied by an explanatory note outlining the study's objectives, confidentiality measures, and informed consent.
3. Response Monitoring:
Responses were monitored weekly to track participation rates. Reminder messages were sent to maximize response rates.
4. Interview Scheduling:
Five respondents were invited to participate in follow-up Zoom interviews, scheduled at their convenience.
5. Data Storage:
All survey responses were automatically stored in Google Sheets, while interview recordings were securely saved in encrypted folders accessible only to the research team.

Participation was voluntary, and all respondents provided informed consent digitally prior to survey completion. No identifying information was collected in the survey to maintain anonymity.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data from the closed-ended survey items were analyzed descriptively using frequency counts and percentages, allowing the researchers to identify general trends in student responses.

Qualitative data obtained from interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-phase framework:

1. Familiarization with the data through repeated reading.
2. Generation of initial codes reflecting significant patterns.
3. Searching for overarching themes.
4. Reviewing and refining themes for coherence.
5. Defining and naming final themes.
6. Producing the report by selecting illustrative quotations and integrating them with survey results.

To enhance trustworthiness and credibility, the researchers conducted member checking by sharing preliminary interpretations with interview participants to confirm accuracy. Additionally, an audit trail documenting coding decisions and theme development was maintained throughout the analysis process.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results obtained through the structured questionnaire and follow-up interviews offer a comprehensive picture of how students perceive the use of humor in English language classrooms. This section aims to present the data in detail while interpreting the patterns that emerged. By combining quantitative frequencies with qualitative insights, the analysis reveals several consistent themes related to students' motivation, engagement, and comfort when teachers integrate humor into instruction. Additionally, the findings highlight areas where humor can become counterproductive if not applied appropriately. The following discussion outlines these results and connects them with existing research and theoretical perspectives.

Survey Findings

Table 1 summarizes the students' responses to the five survey items.

Table 1. Student Responses to Perceptions of Teacher Humor (n=20)

No	Question	Yes (%)	No (%)
1	Do you like teachers who use humor in the classroom?	90%	10%
2	Does humor motivate you to understand lessons?	85%	15%
3	Do you prefer humor relevant to the subject rather than personal jokes?	95%	5%
4	Does frequent humor sometimes distract your focus?	60%	40%
5	Do humorous teachers seem more approachable and make you comfortable asking questions?	80%	20%

Discussion of Findings

General Perception of Humor

The findings show a generally positive attitude toward humor in the classroom, with 90% of students stating that they appreciate teachers who use humor. This supports Dewaele and Li (2021), who emphasized that humor contributes to a warm classroom atmosphere and reduces affective filters that hinder language learning. Interview participants described humor as making classes feel "lighter" and "less stressful," especially when learning complex grammar or reading comprehension. Many students also mentioned that humor helps break the monotony of routine lessons and makes the classroom experience more enjoyable overall. For instance, several participants noted that when teachers include funny examples or light-hearted comments, they feel more relaxed and open to participating in class activities. This perception aligns with Bakar et al. (2022), who observed that humor not only enhances the emotional climate but also encourages students to take more risks in using the target language. Overall, these positive attitudes suggest that humor, when used appropriately, can significantly enrich the learning process and build stronger connections between teachers and students.

Motivation and Engagement

Eighty-five percent of respondents agreed that humor motivates them to learn. Students frequently reported that humor captures their attention and sustains focus during long lessons. One interviewee commented:

“When the teacher jokes about the topic, it sticks in my memory, so I remember it better.”

This resonates with Al-Mekhlafi (2020), who observed that humor increases retention and encourages active participation. Humor can serve as a cognitive anchor, linking information with emotional experience, thereby facilitating recall. Furthermore, some students mentioned that humor helps them overcome feelings of boredom and fatigue, particularly during lessons held in the afternoon. Several participants shared that when teachers use humor to introduce new material, it feels less intimidating and more approachable. This observation supports Dewaele and Li (2021), who argue that humor can reduce anxiety and create a safe environment for learning. Additionally, humor appears to encourage sustained attention by offering brief mental breaks that refresh students’ focus. As a result, learners are better able to process complex concepts without feeling overwhelmed or disengaged.

Relevance of Humor Content

A striking 95% of students expressed a clear preference for humor relevant to the lesson, rather than humor that is personal or unrelated. This suggests that students value humor when it is pedagogically purposeful. Bakar et al. (2022) similarly found that targeted humor, such as subject-related jokes or playful examples, supports comprehension and avoids misunderstandings.

One participant explained:

“It’s funny when the teacher makes a joke about English words, but if it’s about someone in class, it feels uncomfortable.”

This highlights the need for sensitivity in selecting humorous content to avoid negative social dynamics.

Potential for Distraction

Interestingly, 60% of students acknowledged that frequent humor could become a distraction. While moderate humor enhances engagement, excessive or poorly timed humor may disrupt focus and reduce time allocated to core instruction. Dewaele et al. (2019) emphasized that humor should complement rather than compete with learning objectives. During interviews, some students reported that humor used “too often” made it difficult to distinguish between serious and light-hearted moments, reducing the clarity of the lesson.

This finding implies that teachers need to calibrate the frequency and timing of humor carefully. As one student put it:

“If the teacher jokes all the time, I don’t know when to pay attention seriously.”

This concern aligns with findings by Bakar et al. (2022), who recommend that humor be used sparingly and purposefully.

Teacher Approachability

Eighty percent of students agreed that teachers who use humor are more approachable. Many described feeling less intimidated and more comfortable asking questions or expressing confusion. This relational benefit is consistent with Al-Mekhlafi (2020), who found that humor reduces social distance and promotes trust. One student shared:

“A teacher who can laugh with us feels like a friend, so I’m not scared to speak.”

This insight is valuable, especially in contexts where hierarchical norms can discourage student voice.

Additionally, some participants explained that approachable teachers who use humor often create a sense of belonging and shared experience within the classroom. This feeling of connection can increase learners’ willingness to engage in group discussions and collaborative tasks without fear of negative evaluation. Dewaele and Li (2021) also note that such relational closeness can contribute to higher levels of learner autonomy and self-confidence. When students perceive their teacher as supportive and understanding, they are more likely to view mistakes as opportunities for growth rather than as failures, ultimately enhancing their overall language learning experience.

Cultural Considerations

Although most students responded positively, it is important to note that humor preferences are shaped by cultural norms. In Indonesian classrooms, deference to authority remains strong, and not all learners are accustomed to informal teacher behaviors. Some participants, particularly those who preferred a more traditional style, described humor as potentially reducing professionalism. This nuance highlights the necessity for teachers to remain attuned to students’ expectations and cultural values, as emphasized by Dewaele and Li (2021). Moreover, a few students indicated that excessive humor might blur the boundaries between teacher and student roles, leading to confusion about classroom norms and expectations. For example, one participant mentioned feeling uncertain whether certain instructions were meant seriously or humorously, which occasionally resulted in hesitation to respond. This highlights the delicate balance teachers must maintain between creating a relaxed environment and preserving clarity of communication. As Bakar et al. (2022) suggest, establishing clear guidelines about when humor is appropriate can help prevent misunderstandings and maintain mutual respect within the classroom setting.

Integrating Humor Responsibly

The combination of survey and interview data suggests that humor is most effective when it:

- Is relevant to instructional content,
- Is moderate in frequency,
- Respects students’ backgrounds,
- Enhances rather than replaces serious engagement.

Teachers should consider these factors when designing lessons. Professional development programs could train educators to identify appropriate humor strategies and understand possible unintended consequences.

Implications for Practice

These findings underscore that humor is a valuable pedagogical resource with clear benefits for motivation, rapport, and engagement. However, it is not without risks. Educators need to balance humor with instructional rigor, monitor classroom reactions, and remain flexible in adjusting their approach. By doing so, teachers can create an emotionally supportive and cognitively stimulating environment that encourages active participation and sustained interest. It is also essential for educators to consider students' individual differences, such as cultural backgrounds, personality traits, and language proficiency levels, which can all influence how humor is perceived. For example, what one learner finds amusing, another may interpret as distracting or inappropriate. Therefore, ongoing reflection and open communication with students are crucial to ensure that humor remains an inclusive and constructive element of classroom practice. When applied thoughtfully, humor has the potential to enrich learning while maintaining respect and professionalism.

Additional Considerations and Reflections

Another noteworthy aspect emerging from the interviews was the perception that humor contributed to reducing feelings of inferiority when learning English. Several participants shared that they often compared themselves unfavorably to classmates who performed better in language skills, leading to hesitation in speaking or participating. However, when teachers incorporated humor, the environment felt less judgmental, and students became more willing to take linguistic risks without fear of ridicule. This echoes Dewaele and Li (2021), who argue that humor can serve as an equalizer, minimizing status differences and empowering students to engage more confidently. Additionally, some students reported that humor created a memorable association with lesson content. For example, one respondent recalled learning difficult vocabulary through puns and wordplay, which helped solidify comprehension. This finding supports the view that humor can serve as a cognitive strategy by providing mental hooks for retaining new information (Al-Mekhlafi, 2020). However, a few participants emphasized that humor loses effectiveness when overused or when it relies on the same jokes repeatedly, as it begins to feel forced rather than authentic.

Lastly, while most students expressed a positive attitude, several respondents underscored that humor must respect cultural boundaries and individual sensitivities. Teachers are encouraged to be observant and responsive to students' reactions to humor, adapting their approach to ensure inclusivity. This reinforces the importance of reflective practice and continuous adjustment, as the dynamics of each classroom and cohort can vary significantly.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to explore high school students' perceptions of their English teachers' use of humor in the classroom. Drawing upon survey data from 20 students and follow-up interviews, the findings clearly indicate that humor occupies a significant and multifaceted role in shaping students' learning experiences. First, the vast majority of students reported that humor enhances their engagement and motivation. Specifically, 90% of respondents expressed enjoyment of humorous teachers, and 85% acknowledged that humor contributes to sustaining their interest and understanding of lesson content. These results align with previous research emphasizing humor's capacity to reduce anxiety and promote a more positive affective environment conducive to language acquisition.

Second, the study revealed a strong preference for humor that is directly relevant to the lesson material. Ninety-five percent of students favored subject-related humor over personal or unrelated jokes. This suggests that teachers should prioritize pedagogically purposeful humor that reinforces learning objectives while avoiding humor that could be perceived as off-topic or potentially offensive. Third, although humor was generally viewed positively, 60% of students noted that excessive humor could become distracting. This highlights the importance of moderation and strategic timing in humor use. Humor must complement instruction rather than overshadow it. Teachers who incorporate humor too frequently risk blurring the boundary between serious learning and entertainment, which can diminish the clarity of instructional goals.

Fourth, the relational benefits of humor were evident. Eighty percent of students agreed that humorous teachers seemed more approachable and easier to interact with. Many participants described humor as humanizing teachers, reducing the power distance inherent in traditional classroom hierarchies, and creating a more comfortable space for asking questions and expressing opinions. Collectively, these findings underscore that humor is not a trivial or purely incidental feature of the classroom experience. When applied thoughtfully, humor can serve as an effective pedagogical tool that enhances motivation, fosters rapport, and supports comprehension. However, humor must be adapted to the cultural and developmental context of learners and integrated in a way that respects individual preferences and sensitivities.

Implications for practice include:

- Teachers should reflect on the types of humor they use, ensuring alignment with learning goals and cultural appropriateness.
- Professional development programs could incorporate training on effective humor strategies, including how to calibrate humor frequency and select content that resonates with diverse student backgrounds.
- Schools and teacher preparation institutions should encourage reflective practice, helping educators evaluate the impact of their humor on students' motivation, engagement, and sense of belonging.

Limitations of this study include its relatively small sample size and focus on a single geographical area, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data may be influenced by social desirability bias, as students could have felt compelled to report positive views of humor.

Future research could expand on these findings by exploring humor perceptions across different educational levels, regions, and cultural contexts. Longitudinal studies tracking how perceptions of humor evolve over time and influence long-term learning outcomes would also be valuable. Researchers could further investigate teachers' perspectives on humor use and examine how teacher training influences humor practices in the classroom. In conclusion, humor emerges as a nuanced and powerful element of classroom interaction. When used intentionally and appropriately, it has the potential to transform the learning experience, making English language instruction more engaging, memorable, and emotionally supportive. However, effective integration requires sensitivity, reflection, and ongoing dialogue between teachers and students to ensure that humor remains a source of connection and learning rather than distraction.

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