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THE ROLE OF HUMOUR IN TEACHING FOREIGN LANGUAGES: A STUDY ON ENHANCING ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING

Rolul umorului în predarea limbilor străine: un studiu privind îmbunătățirea
învățării limbii engleze

Adrian NĂZNEAN

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THE ROLE OF HUMOUR IN TEACHING FOREIGN LANGUAGES: A STUDY ON ENHANCING ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING

Adrian Năznea*

George Emil Palade University of Medicine, Pharmacy,
Science, and Technology of Târgu Mureș
Petru Maior Faculty of Science and Letters
Târgu Mureș, Romania
adrian.naznea@umfst.ro

Abstract

This article investigates the significance of incorporating humour as a pedagogical tool in teaching foreign languages, with a specific focus on English language instruction. The study aims to explore the impact of humour on students' motivation, engagement, and overall language acquisition process. To gather empirical data, an online survey was conducted among a diverse group of language learners, consisting of individuals from various linguistic backgrounds and proficiency levels.

For this study, a survey of 34 questions was designed (multiple choice and Likert scale) and anonymous answers were collected online. The survey assessed participants' perceptions regarding the use of humour in language classrooms, their experiences with humorous teaching techniques, and the perceived effects of humour on language learning outcomes. Quantitative and qualitative analyses were employed to evaluate the collected data and draw meaningful conclusions.

Findings from the survey highlight the significant role of humour in language pedagogy. The results demonstrate that using humour in English language instruction not only enhances students' motivation and engagement, but also provides a positive classroom atmosphere. Furthermore, humour was found to promote vocabulary retention, improve pronunciation skills, and facilitate cultural understanding.

* Lecturer, PhD, Science and Letters Department, Petru Maior Faculty of Science and Letters, George Emil Palade University of Medicine, Pharmacy, Science, and Technology of Târgu Mureș, Târgu Mureș, Romania.
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9191-6302>

Overall, this research emphasises the importance of humour as a valuable tool in foreign language classrooms, particularly in English language instruction. By employing humour strategically, language instructors can create a lively and conducive learning environment that promotes effective language acquisition, boosts students' confidence, and cultivates a positive attitude towards language learning.

Keywords: English language learning, foreign language instruction, humour as a pedagogical tool, humour in language teaching, motivation.

Rezumat

Acest articol analizează utilizarea umorului ca instrument pedagogic în predarea limbilor străine, cu un accent special pe predarea limbii engleze. Studiul își propune să exploreze impactul umorului asupra motivației studenților, implicării acestora și asupra procesului general de achiziție a limbii străine. Pentru colectarea datelor empirice, am realizat un sondaj online în rândul unui grup divers de cursanți de limbi străine, format din studenți din diferite medii lingvistice și niveluri de competență.

Pentru acest studiu, am conceput un sondaj de 34 de întrebări (cu alegere multiplă și scală Likert), iar răspunsurile anonime au fost colectate online. Sondajul a evaluat percepțiile participanților cu privire la utilizarea umorului la cursurile de limbi străine, experiențele lor cu tehnici de predare umoristică și efectele percepute ale umorului asupra rezultatelor învățării limbilor străine. Am utilizat analize cantitative și calitative pentru a evalua datele colectate și a trage concluzii semnificative.

Rezultatele sondajului evidențiază rolul semnificativ al umorului în predarea unei limbi străine. Rezultatele demonstrează că utilizarea umorului în predarea limbii engleze nu numai că îmbunătățește motivația și implicarea studenților, ci și favorizează o atmosferă pozitivă în clasă. Mai mult, umorul contribuie la reținerea vocabularului, îmbunătățește abilitățile de pronunție și facilitează înțelegerea culturală.

Acest studiu subliniază importanța umorului ca instrument valoros la orele de limbi străine, în special în predarea limbii engleze. Utilizând umorul în mod strategic, profesorii de limbi străine pot crea un mediu de învățare animat și favorabil, care promovează dobândirea eficientă a limbii străine, sporește încrederea studenților și cultivă o atitudine pozitivă față de învățarea limbilor străine.

Cuvinte-cheie: învățarea limbii engleze, motivația, predarea limbilor străine, umorul ca instrument pedagogic, umorul în predarea limbilor străine.

1. Introduction

Humour is an ever-present and versatile aspect of human life that we encounter in numerous activities in our daily routines. It represents a fundamental component of human communication and interaction, transcending the boundaries of culture, language, and society. Whether in informal chats with friends and family or in the most formal of scenarios, humour acts as a potent tool for building connections, diffusing tension, and even conveying intricate concepts. Its unmistakable presence is evident in popular culture, where comedians, sitcoms, and comedic movies gain widespread recognition and popularity. Additionally, humour pervades our digital age, with internet memes, social media jests, and viral videos shaping contemporary avenues for humour dissemination. Its omnipresence is probably rooted in its profound impact on human psychology and social interactions, rendering it a subject of substantial interest across diverse fields such as linguistics, psychology, and education.

Humour has been a part of our lives for ages with a rich and extensive history that dates back thousands of years. The culture of ancient civilizations, such as the Egyptian, Greek, or Roman, had their forms of humour, often relying on satire, wordplay, and comedic performances. In ancient Greece, playwrights like Aristophanes wrote comedies that mocked and satirised contemporary society and politics, often featuring absurd situations and exaggerated characters. During the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, humour was often connected to religious and moral themes. The medieval period saw the emergence of morality plays, which used humour to teach moral lessons. Moreover, *commedia dell'arte*, a form of Italian theatre in the Renaissance, featured improvisational comedy with stock characters and humorous situations. We cannot ignore the tremendous contribution that the world's most renowned playwright had. William Shakespeare's plays used clever wordplay, mistaken identities, and witty dialogue to create humorous plots.

A next stage of development in the history of humour was the Enlightenment era in the 17th and 18th centuries which brought forth satire as a powerful form of humour. Satirical writings by authors like Jonathan Swift, Voltaire, and Alexander Pope critiqued society, politics, and institutions, often for the

purpose of challenging authority and advocating for social change during this period. Vaudeville, stand-up comedy, and the rise of the comedy club in the 20th century further popularised humour as a form of entertainment. In the modern era, humour has evolved with the advent of radio, television, film, and the internet and comedic genres such as sitcoms, sketch comedy, and improv have flourished with numerous comedians who have become iconic figures for their observational humour.

2. Literature review

2.1. Humour as a therapeutic approach: the healing power of laughter

Laughter can be sparked by a diverse array of factors, including humour, jokes, comedy, parody, wordplay, and puns. What distinguishes laughter is its remarkable ability to have therapeutic effects. Baid and Lambert (2010) discuss the importance of using humour, games, and fun activities in nursing and midwifery education to engage students and promote meaningful, active learning. Their study explores the benefits and limitations of humour in education, emphasising that appropriate humour can create a positive learning experience by increasing attention, reducing anxiety, and generating a positive attitude. The authors suggest that games and activities can help break the ice, encourage team building, and promote peer learning.

Wilkins and Eisenbraun (2009) take into account the physiological benefits of humour and laughter, which are grounded in three main theories of humour: the relief theory, the incongruity theory, and the superiority theory. However, regardless of the specific theory, laughter offers physiological advantages. This is because humour and laughter can serve as instinctive coping mechanisms to help people deal with life's challenges and stress. Finding humour in difficult situations can replace negative emotions with positive ones, aiding in coping. Additionally, laughter can increase pain tolerance, reduce bronchial asthma symptoms, decrease skin-related allergic reactions, and potentially alleviate symptoms associated with diabetic complications. In the case of health benefits, humour and laughter play an important role in individual and group psychotherapy for individuals with serious mental illness with such positive impacts on health as pain relief, immune function, stress

reduction, and improved interpersonal processes. The integration of humour into therapy and support programmes can contribute to improved emotional well-being and a more positive outlook on life for those living with serious mental illness (Gelkopf, 2011).

Additionally, in terms of the benefits of humour in psychotherapy, according to Saper (1988) there are therapists who advocate for the judicious use of humour to enhance the therapeutic process, as well as therapists who caution against it due to the fact that it may hinder progress or be misunderstood. All of these may be rooted in the fact that effectiveness of humour in healing can vary significantly based on individual differences in both patients and therapists regardless of the approach involved: Provocative Therapy or Natural High Therapy.

In terms of pain management, humour, particularly in the form of engaging and humorous videos, can help children tolerate painful procedures (Stuber et al., 2009). The two-phased pilot study by Stuber et al. explored the relationship between laughter and pain appraisal and tolerance concluding that, while humorous videos increased pain tolerance in children, there was no significant change in their subjective appraisal of pain severity. Additionally, the number of laughs did not correlate significantly with pain appraisal or tolerance.

Hospitalised children can benefit from laughter and improve their sleep with the aid of medical clowns. Additionally, the study by Shimshi-Barash et al. (2024) found that the presence of a medical clown can reduce hospital stay in children aged 2-17 most likely due to the fact that medical clowns can distract the child and lighten the situation of his/ her hospitalisation.

Tooper's study discusses the role of humour in occupational therapy and its potential therapeutic benefits highlighting that humour and laughter have been integral parts of human life for centuries, but their conscious use as therapeutic techniques is relatively recent because health specialists have been slow to adopt humour in therapy due to professional and cultural attitudes that sometimes view humour as frivolous. Her findings highlight the fact that humour is a valuable adjunct to occupational therapy, playing a role in reducing stress, promoting engagement, enhancing problem-solving skills,

and fostering positive attitudes. By using humour effectively, occupational therapists can create a more supportive and enjoyable therapeutic environment that benefits both therapists and patients (Tooper, 1984).

Moreover, laughter yoga, comprising the three parts: childish games, meditation relaxation, and laughter yoga practice, was proven beneficial in the decrease of perceived stress levels in lung cancer chemotherapy patients and came with the added benefit of a positive impact on mental health (Han et al., 2023). Furthermore, laughter yoga has also been found to improve glycaemic levels in type 2 diabetes individuals and decreased HbA1c (haemoglobin A1C) levels over a 12-week study period (Hirosaki et al., 2023).

2.2. Humour in the classroom

Within the realm of education, humour assumes an essential role that extends beyond mere frivolity or insignificance; rather, it plays a central part in nurturing active participation, facilitating the learning process, and cultivating a welcoming and inclusive classroom atmosphere. Laughter often resonates through the corridors of educational institutions as instructors harness humour as a pedagogical instrument to render learning more engaging and approachable. Going beyond its immediate influence on the emotional well-being of students, research has demonstrated that humour can enhance cognitive functions like memory retention, critical thinking, and effective problem-solving.

Various types of humour have been used and explored in education settings across cultures. Whether through linguistic or non-linguistic means, humour finds its expression in the classroom environment. Language play, a multifaceted concept involving wordplay, the creation of fictional words, and the playful exploration of pragmatics in language, encompasses humour manifesting in various forms like riddles, puns, and playful episodes, all of which contribute to the enjoyment derived from linguistic engagement (Petraki & Pham Nguyen, 2016). A study conducted on Vietnamese teachers and students in higher education focussed on teacher-initiated humour, in other words, attempts to stimulate laughter or amusement, stemming from materials, lesson content, or classroom interactions, typically resulting in laughter, smiling,

or other signs of amusement. The investigation revealed that the most common type of humour used was humorous comments, often employed at the beginning and end of lessons, along with other types including funny stories, jokes, and funny examples. The study also noted that the choice of humour seemed to be influenced by the nature of the lesson content, with “dry” courses (business translation, phonetics and phonology, literature) incorporating less humour (Petraki & Pham Nguyen, 2016).

The use of humour as an instructional tool in an asynchronous online module designed to teach information literacy (IL) to first-year students was assessed in the study by Wegener. The results indicated a statistically significant improvement in student learning based on pre-test and post-test scores. A survey on the use of humour and attention grabbers in the module showed positive responses from students, highlighting benefits such as increased engagement and approachability of librarians with generally positive feedback from students (Wegener, 2022).

Language play has also been used in teaching English as a foreign language, namely situations of manipulating the language and/ or its functions to generate fun. A study found that, in a relaxed classroom atmosphere, young learners of EFL allowed for language play in the forms of sound play, word switching, and role play (Gheitasi, 2022). Gheitasi’s study found that young language learners derived great pleasure from discovering and creating enjoyment in their educational experiences and were actively engaged in linguistic, semantic, and pragmatic play, providing them with opportunities to practise and explore language.

On the other hand, despite its universal nature, humour is also influenced by culture and the personality of the individual engaging into it (Neff & Rucynski, 2021). Moreover, humour may be perceived differently by gender and its perception may also depend on female versus male role expectations (Kotthoff, 2006).

A study by Farnia and Mohammadi (2021) investigated the perceptions of humour in English language classrooms among both English language teachers and learners with results indicating a positive attitude from both groups towards the use of humour in L2 classes. The authors’ findings suggest that

humour can play a crucial role, easing students' anxiety, encouraging a closer connection between teachers and learners, and establishing a comfortable learning atmosphere. Nevertheless, the study warns teachers to exercise caution regarding the type and frequency of humour used in the classroom in order to prevent potential issues of inappropriateness or overuse.

Abdulmajeed and Hameed experimented the use of humour in teaching inherent and non-inherent adjectives and found that the role of instructional humour in aiding learning is significant, however, its effectiveness greatly depends on the students' capacity to perceive it accurately in order to avoid ambiguity and misunderstanding, which may lead to undesired confusion (Abdulmajeed & Hameed, 2017).

3. The study

The use of humour in a classroom setting offers numerous advantages, notably the ability to alleviate or minimise the stress and anxiety often associated with learning a second or foreign language. Additionally, humour serves to encourage and stimulate interaction among students and their peers or instructors (Rashidi et al., 2014). In order to examine the role of humour in the foreign language classroom, we conducted a survey between July 2023 and January 2024. Because no personal identifiers were requested, collected or stored, ethical approval was not sought. The questionnaire was distributed to students at George Emil Palade University of Medicine, Pharmacy, Science, and Technology of Târgu Mureş and 108 respondents completed it. It comprised 37 questions, all of which were compulsory. Depending on the content of the questions, the students could choose only one answer (the one that best applied to their experience) or several answers.

The study group was mainly comprised of undergraduate students (N = 107, 99.07%), only 1 (0.92%) student was enrolled in a master's degree. The respondents were able to choose their experience related to the use of humour in the following foreign languages: English, German, French, Romanian, and other (see Figure no. 1).

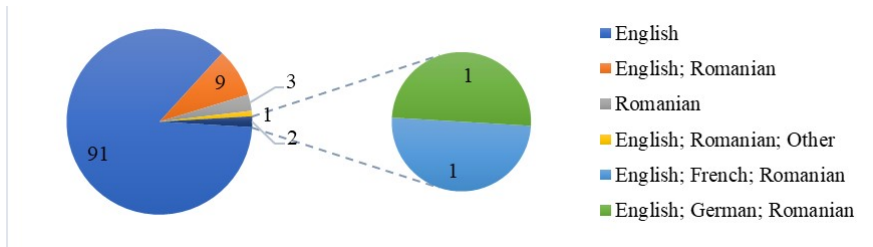


Figure no. 1. Number of responses in terms of language learning experience

Regarding the field of study, our respondents came from health sciences (medicine and dentistry) and humanities (Romanian language and English language). The health sciences respondents were enrolled in medicine (both Romanian and Hungarian) while the dentistry students were enrolled in both Romanian, Hungarian, and English study programmes.

In terms of distribution, 87% were studying health science, while the remaining 13 were students in the humanities (see Figure no. 2).

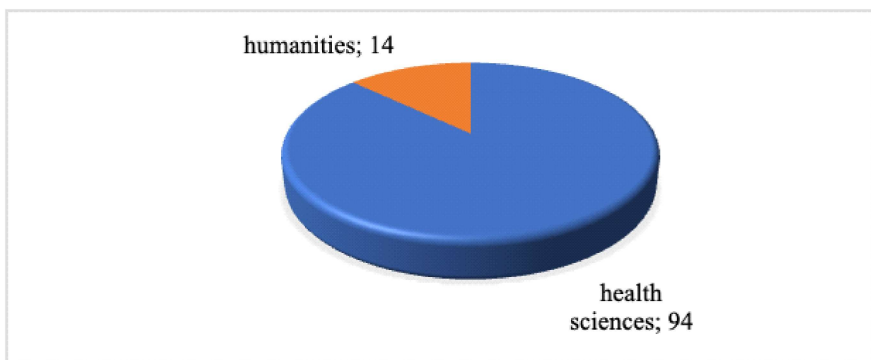


Figure no. 2. The number of respondents according to their field of study
(N = 108)

4. Results and discussions

The respondents were asked about their attitude towards the use of humour in the foreign language class based on their own experience and were able to choose different degrees of comfort ranging from very comfortable to very uncomfortable (only one answer per respondent was possible). Table no. 1 displays the answers related to the attitudes of the surveyed population towards the use of humour in the classroom.

Table no. 1. Attitudes of respondents towards the use of humour

Overall comfort level	Number of responses	Percentage
Very comfortable	55	50.92
Comfortable	44	40.74
Neutral	8	7.40
Uncomfortable	1	0.92
Very uncomfortable	0	0

As far as the role of humour in the classroom is concerned, the vast majority of the respondents highlighted that humour played a crucial role in reducing anxiety and stress or contributed to creating a comfortable and relaxed learning environment (total value 82.40%). A smaller percentage considered that the use of humour led to enhanced student engagement, while even fewer respondents believed that humour had a positive impact on improved language retention. Interestingly, no respondents identified humour as a tool for promoting cultural understanding, with this category receiving a 0% response rate, despite the fact that our population came from various cultural backgrounds (see Figure no. 3).

One particularly interesting section of the questionnaire regarded the specific types of humour that students found enjoyable during their language classes. Designed as a multiple-choice format, this question provided respondents with the flexibility to select multiple options according to their preferences (see Figure no. 4).

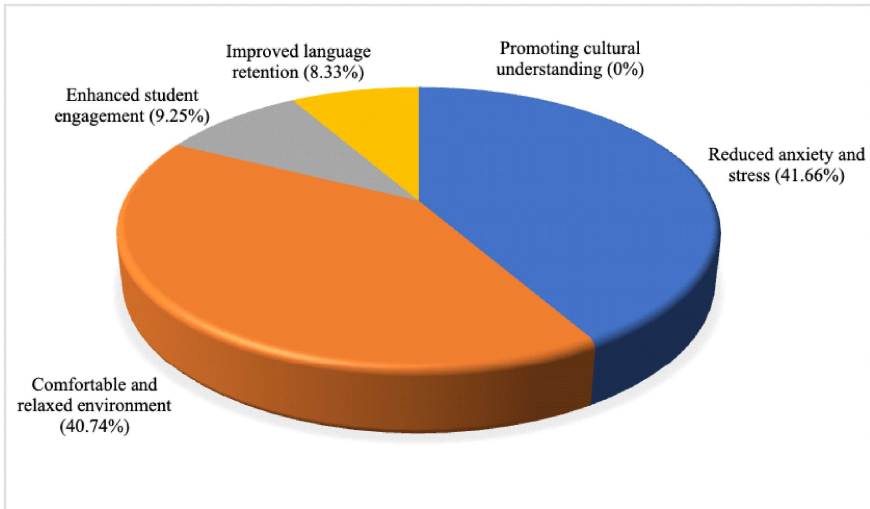


Figure no. 3. *The role of humour in the classroom*

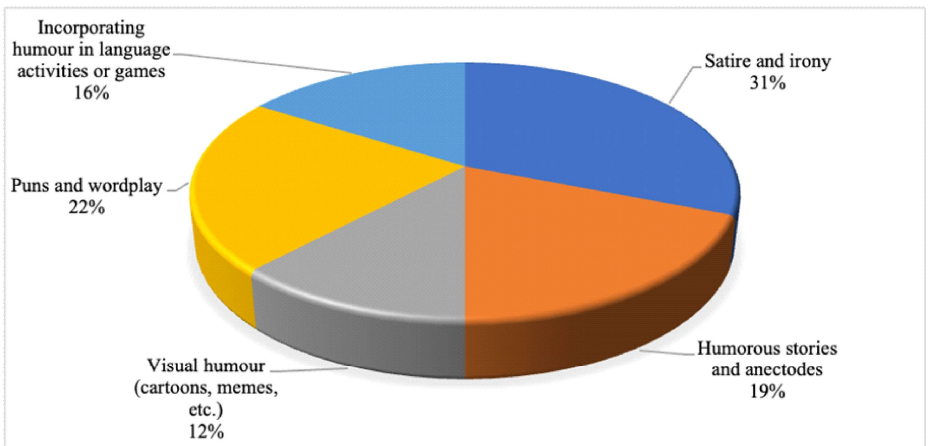


Figure no. 4. *The types of humour preferred by the respondents*

As per the respondents, a significant majority concurred with the assertion that humour can enhance vocabulary acquisition in a foreign language classroom (strongly agree + agree = 98.14%), apart from having a distinctive role in creating a positive learning environment (see Table no. 2).

Table no. 2. *Perceptions on the impact of humour on the learning environment*

Humour creates a positive learning environment	Number of responses	Percentage
Strongly agree	40	37.03%
Agree	66	61.11%
Neither agree nor disagree	1	0.92%
Disagree	1	0.92%
Strongly disagree	0	0%

Data in Table no. 3 illustrate respondents' perceptions of the effectiveness of humour in the foreign language class. The majority considered humour to be very effective, while a quarter of the surveyed population found it somewhat effective. Only 3 respondents expressed a neutral stance, stating that humour was neither effective nor ineffective.

Table no. 3. *Effectiveness of humour*

Effectiveness of humour	Number of responses	Percentage
Very effective	78	72.22%
Somewhat effective	27	25%
Neither effective nor ineffective	3	2.77%
Somewhat ineffective	0	0
Very ineffective	0	0

Another question of our survey aimed to explore the respondents' perceptions regarding potential challenges or drawbacks associated with the use of humour in foreign language classes. By asking this question, we sought to identify any reservations or concerns learners might have about incorporating humour into language learning environments. The responses gathered shed light on

the varied perspectives of the participants, revealing insights into their considerations and apprehensions related to the application of humour as a pedagogical tool, most of the respondents considering that the use of humour may be challenged by language and cultural barriers (see Figure no. 5).

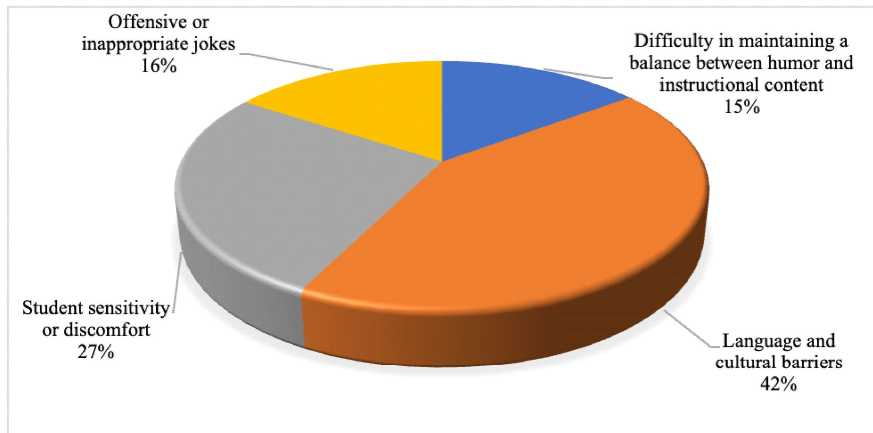


Figure no. 5. *Challenges and drawbacks of humour*

The respondents were asked to share their experiences regarding which language skills or areas of learning they believed benefited the most from the use of humour. The results revealed a somewhat diverse distribution of preferences among the participants, nevertheless, over half of them identified speaking and pronunciation as the skills that benefit most from humour, highlighting the potential impact of humour on oral communication. Listening comprehension followed with 29 responses indicating its perceived relevance to understanding spoken language in a humorous context (see Figure no. 6).

Another question aimed to identify the typical reactions of respondents to humorous elements in foreign language lessons. The majority, comprising 52 respondents, reported actively engaging with humour by laughing, while 54 participants expressed a positive reaction by smiling and appreciating the humorous elements. Only one respondent indicated a neutral stance, displaying no particular reaction to humour, and one other participant found humour distracting (see Table no. 4).

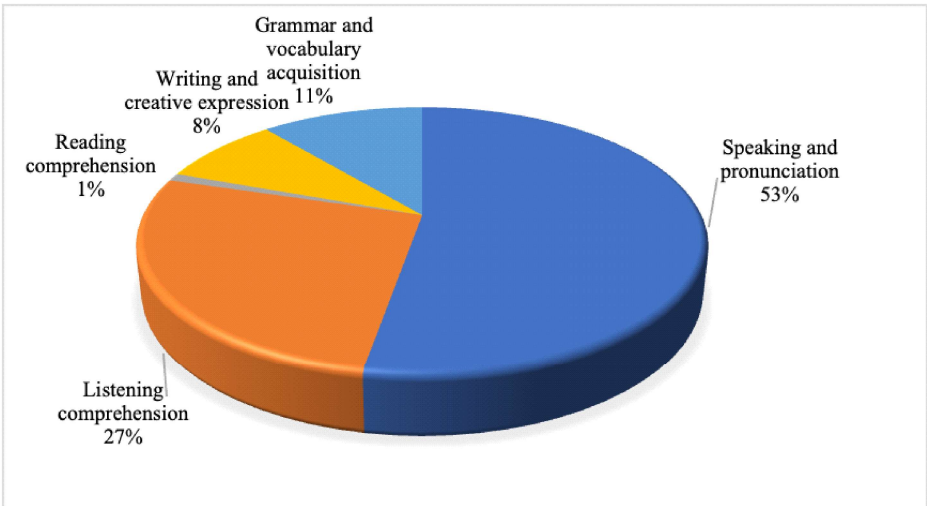


Figure no. 6. Language skills that benefit from the use of humour

Table no. 4. The types of reactions to humour

Reaction to humour	Number of responses	Percentage
Laugh and engage actively	52	48.14%
Smile and appreciate the humour	54	50%
Neutral, no particular reaction	1	0.92%
Find it distracting	1	0.92%

Another question aimed to explore the perceived impact of humour on respondents' motivation to learn in foreign language classes. By asking about the extent to which humour enhances motivation, the survey uncovered the role of humour in influencing the participants' drive and enthusiasm for language learning. Thus, the vast majority considered that humour did impact their motivation in the language classroom (extremely much: 21.3%, very much: 46.3%), whereas over a quarter stated that humour had some influence on their motivation (27.8%).

In terms of the preferred frequency of the use of humour, over three quarters of the surveyed population favoured a balanced approach depending on the context and content, whereas 18 respondents (16.6%) preferred an abundant use of humour to enhance their learning.

The survey also enquired about the respondents' perception regarding the teachers' sense of humour. In terms of importance, the majority of the participants considered that a sense of humour was very important (45.4%), while 38% considered it extremely important, the remaining 16% regarding it as neutral or not essential.

Nearly three quarters of the respondents stated that humour helped them to remember and retain language concepts (extremely much: 29.6%; very much: 39.8%), while for the remaining students surveyed humour did not play such a significant role (to some extent: 29.6%, not much: 0.9%).

In the perception of the surveyed population, a language instructor should use humour to create a positive classroom atmosphere. There was no respondent considering that the use of humour by a language teacher was not important (see Figure no. 7). This is in line with their opinion that humour helps to lower anxiety in the language classroom (see Table no. 5).

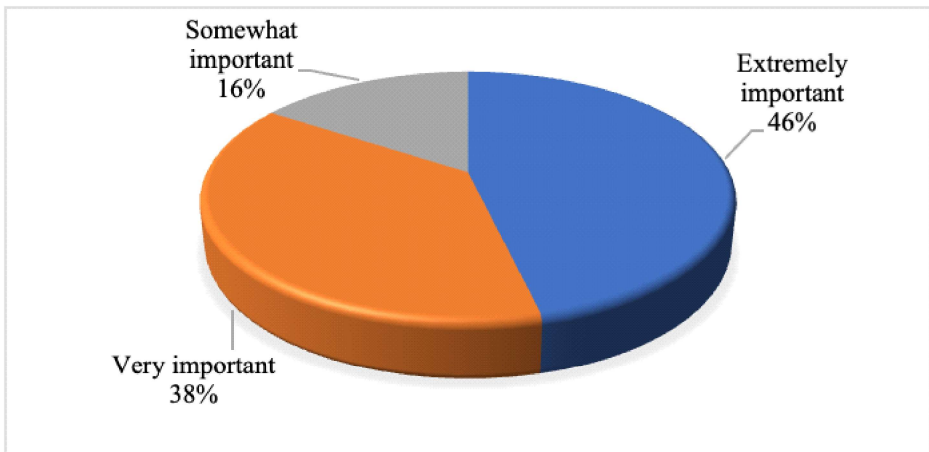


Figure no. 7. *The language instructor's humour*

Table no. 5. The role of humour in lowering anxiety

Humour lowers anxiety	Number of respondents	Percentage
Extremely much	42	38.8%
Very much	49	45.3%
To some extent	16	14.8%
Not much	1	0.9%
Not at all	0	0%

Regarding the role that humour plays in building rapport and a positive relationship between language learners and instructors, the survey results bore resemblance to the respondents’ perception concerning the use of humour in order to create a positive classroom atmosphere (extremely much: 39.8%; very much: 43.8%; to some extent: 15.7%; not much: 0.9%).

The survey results also highlighted the fact that humour in the language classroom helps students to remember and retain vocabulary (see Figure no. 8).

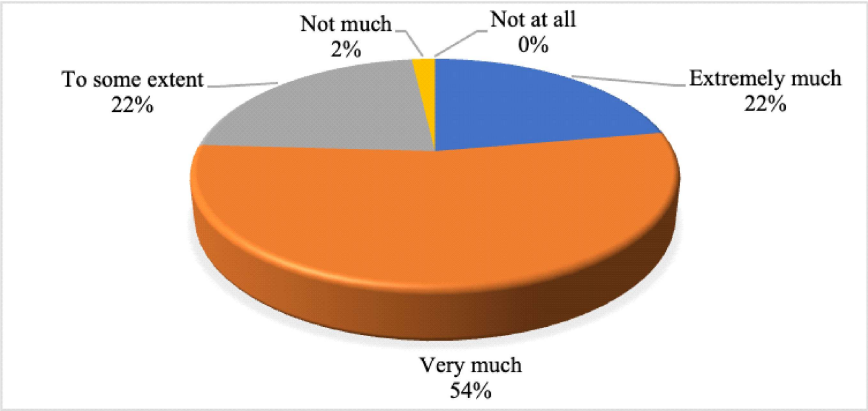


Figure no. 8. Retention of vocabulary aided by humour

An open-ended question of the survey asked students to provide examples related to their observations in relation to the benefits of humour in the foreign language classroom. The question was not compulsory, as such, of the 106 students who responded (98.14%), 31 answers did not provide any examples, respondents used only punctuation marks or “no”. However, some notable answers were: “helping to reduce anxiety and stress”, “feeling comfortable and relaxed”, “understand words”, “learning new things”, “making the class more enjoyable”, “helping to focus”, “helping with pronunciation”. There was one respondent who stated that the use of humour convinced them to attend language classes more often and to keep their English up to date.

On the other hand, humour, in the case of our surveyed population, also caused discomfort with 27.7% of the respondents, and was also to blame for causing misunderstanding or confusion with 25.9% of the respondents. Six of the respondents had been in uncomfortable situations because humour had often been directed towards them (5.5%). The concerns raised by some respondents about potential challenges related to language and cultural barriers indicate a need for thoughtful implementation of humour in diverse language classrooms. It is essential to address these concerns in order to ensure that humour is inclusive and does not inadvertently lead to misunderstandings or discomfort.

The findings of the survey provide valuable insights into the role of humour in foreign language classrooms, specifically in the context of English language instruction. The overall positive attitudes of the respondents towards the use of humour in language learning align with existing research, emphasising its potential benefits in reducing anxiety, enhancing motivation, and creating a positive learning environment. The majority of respondents expressed a high level of comfort with the use of humour in language classrooms, a positive attitude which reflects a general acceptance of humour as a pedagogical tool. Furthermore, the importance placed on the instructor’s sense of humour in creating a positive classroom atmosphere brings into the limelight the role of teachers in setting the tone for humour integration.

The diverse preferences for different types of humour underline the importance of including a variety of comedic elements in language instruction. Recognising and catering for individual preferences can enhance the

effectiveness of humour in promoting engagement and language acquisition. The respondents' belief in the potential of humour to enhance vocabulary acquisition is noteworthy. Additionally, the emphasis on its positive impact on speaking and pronunciation skills suggests its relevance in oral communication, which is crucial in language learning.

5. Conclusion

This study highlights the significance of humour as a valuable pedagogical tool in English language instruction. The positive attitudes, reported benefits, and diverse preferences among respondents emphasise the need for educators to incorporate humour thoughtfully and in a sensible manner, considering the unique dynamics of their language classrooms. Our study revealed that humour was perceived beneficial in the retention of vocabulary (over half of the respondents) and in improving speaking and pronunciation in the foreign language (over half of the respondents). Moreover, humour can also help to build rapport between the language instructor and the learners. Additionally, the survey results also emphasised the importance of the sense of humour that the language instructor should possess, nearly half of the respondents considering it extremely important, nevertheless, humour should be used sensibly in order to avoid confusion, misunderstandings or discomfort with the learners.

As far as the types of humour used in the classroom is concerned, satire and irony ranked the highest in terms of preference, followed by puns and wordplay.

As language learning continues to evolve, recognising the role of humour can contribute to creating engaging, inclusive, and effective learning environments. Further research and exploration in this area can provide additional insights into the different relationship between humour and language acquisition, contributing to the ongoing development of innovative language teaching methodologies.

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