

Humour as EFL Learning- Teaching Strategy

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Abstract

It has been argued that humour is beneficial in the classroom because it increases social bonding between teachers and students, salience of information, and ultimately recall and retention. The current study attempts to test some assumptions about humour as a pedagogical tool. Results have indicated that using humour to teach material significantly increases students' overall performance. This study provides some valid evidence that humour may maximize the learning outcomes of the college classroom settings.

Keywords: Humour, EFL, Strategy, Learning

1. Introduction

Humour originally is a Latin word referring to one of the four fluids of the body (blood, phlegm, choler, and black bile), a balance of which was thought to determine one's health. A person with a good balance, i.e. in good health, was said to be "in good humour." Then, during the Renaissance period humour became a term for one's insanity. It was not until the 18th century that there was a shift in the meaning of humour to refer to normal human behaviour (Morrison 2008) and, later, to the modern sense of 'a personality characteristic' (Billig, 2005, 12). With the pedagogical framework, Wanzer, Frymier, Wojtaszczyk & Smith (2006) defined humour as 'anything that the teacher and/or students find funny or amusing' (ibid, 182). This definition suggests that humour could come from either the teacher or the students, or even another source, and might be acknowledged or enjoyed by one party only.

Leung (2004, 1) defines humour 'the ability to understand, enjoy, and express what is amusing'. This definition focuses on the 'reception', not on the 'creation' end of the humour continuum, and thus, unlike Wanzer et al.'s (2006) definition, has more to do with 'humans' than 'things'.

On the other hand, laughing depends on the ability for a subject to find a pun, joke or other humorous text funny or not. Therefore, Attardo (1994, 3) defines humour as a competence. First he (ibid) admits that there is no watertight definition for humour, as such Sinicropi (1981) expresses the need for a rigorous definition of humour:

The lack of a rigorous, or at least reliable, definition of humour and of its categories causes... another difficulty that hinders research"

Accordingly, defining humour as a competence implies the recognition of humorous texts by a speaker and his/her ability to produce them without necessarily being aware of the rules that govern humour.

Linguistically, humour is an act performed through linguistic or nonlinguistic means by any of the participants. "This act is the result of two incongruous scripts (a cognitive structure internalized by the native speaker and represents the native speaker's knowledge of a small part of the world)" (Raskin, 1985: 81).

Humour is also identified as verbal and non-verbal types or a combination of both. Verbal or word-based humour includes: wordplays, funny stories, puns, content related jokes, comic irony, metaphor, hyperbole, metonymy, riddles, funny examples/stories, etc. Examples of non-verbal or slapstick types of humour comprise funny facial expressions, gestures, and making faces. Combined verbal and nonverbal forms may include impersonation, parody, satire, monologue and skit (Hativa, 2001).

In language learning environments, the use of humour can not only serve as a means of amusement but it is a matter of rehearsal which entails not necessarily fun but a means of developing linguistic skills.

Humour is cognitively and pedagogically important. For instance, instructional humour has been touted as an excellent way for students to learn vocabulary, increase critical thinking, practice semantics, and remember more information. (Hackathorn, J. et al: 2011). As such, using humour to teach material may significantly

increase students' overall performance, i.e. humour may maximize learning outcomes in college classrooms (ibid).

To sum up, humour as a multidisciplinary phenomenon can be viewed from differing points of view depending on its specific context of use: from social to psychological, from philosophical to physiological, and from linguistic to a layperson

2. Benefits of Humour

2.1 Physiological Benefits of Humour

The main physiological effects of humour have been documented as: increasing blood circulation, muscle relaxation, aiding digestion, and facilitating recovery from surgery (Borins 1995; Cousins 1979; as cited from Ruch 2007:179).

Humour also improves the body's immune system (Martin & Dobbin, 1988), stimulating circulation and improving respiration (Fry & Rader, 1977; Fry & Savin, 1988), increasing the level of endorphins that help in pain tolerance (Berk et al., 1989), and lowering blood pressure (Fry & Savin, 1988). The relief theory of humour incorporates a physiological viewpoint in which laughter is seen as a venting of nervous energy. Freud supported this theory of humour. He believed that psychic energy is used in humorous situation and, as it becomes overabundant, is released as laughter, a physical process. In short, it seems possible to say "Laughter is the best medicine" is proved with science. (ibid)

2.2 Psychological Benefits of Humour

Olpin and Hesson (2013, 368) illustrate the main psychological benefits of humour which consist in: 1. reducing stress, anxiety, and tension. 2. elevating mood, self-esteem, hope, energy 3. enhancing memory, creative thinking and problem solving 4, improving interpersonal interactions (Olpin and Hesson, 2013, 368).

Learning activities always cause a certain level of tension and anxiety in learners. Humour may act as incentive to learners to find the learning process funny and enjoyable, rather than a dead boring business (Berk, 1996; Kher, Molstad & Donahue, 1999).

2.3 Social Benefits of Humour

Social benefits of humour and laughing are many: strengthening of relationships, attracting people to each other, enhancing teamwork, defusing conflict, and promoting group bonding. People with a good sense of humour may be more socially competent, thus better able to salve social tensions, which in turn may result in more intimate relationships (Sinnott, 2013, 88).

People with a sense of humour are also imaginative and flexible in their outlook, which makes them more open to different views and suggestions. Humour can also diffuse tense situations or help express criticism in a less serious and threatening way (Axtell, 1998; Morreall, 1997). Morreall (1997) also listed various situations in which humour may provide a helping hand: announcing bad news, apologizing, handling unreasonable complaints, commanding and warning, evaluating and criticizing, handling conflicts, and much more.

2.4 Educational Benefits

In general, it has been suggested that humour in the classroom help reduce tension, stress, anxiety, and boredom. The direct benefits of humour in education include: improved retention of information (Garner, 2006; Kaplan & Pascoe, 1977), better understanding of materials (Lucas, 2005) and increased student performance (Berk, 1996; Ziv, 1988).

In addition, some of the benefits of humour in education include the improvement of problem solving, both interpersonally and in group setting; putting the educator and the participants at ease; and the promotion of expression and exchange of ideas. (ibid)

Humour is the recognition and the verbal or written expression of that which is funny, ludicrous, or amusing. It connotes kindness, a genial quality and wit. Wit, on other hand, denotes intelligence. Witty remarks reflect a quick ability to perceive and respond to incongruities and are designed to be entertaining: sharpness, cleverness, spontaneity my characterize wit. Wit is then a form of humour.

3. Humour in EFL Teaching

Generally speaking, a sense of humour makes the classroom environment lively and it reduces anxiety by creating a free and easy atmosphere.

Krashen (1987) wrote about the negative effect of anxiety on the student's ability to learn ESL. For a dreaded course like English especially in an ESL environment, humour can help increase motivation, self-confidence and bridge gap between teachers and students. By means of humour, the students can maximize ESL lessons through easy understanding and long term retention.

Munoz (2005, p.24) argues that 'humour is closely related to memory since it is easier to recall an experience that occurred in a humorous context...'. Tosta (2001, 27) asserts that the funny teacher is not a clown figure, he is a serious conscientious professional who believes in the meaningfulness and effectiveness of having fun while learning and making clear-cut distinctions.

Humour could be positive or negative. One may take this or that stand for choice by basing his judgment only on the end result in any humorous act. It is negative when it results in distance, repulsion, nervousness while positive humour leads to interest, easiness, calmness etc. Bergen (1992) opines that teachers who use strategies that promote the connectedness between humour and learning usually provide students with their best school experiences especially when these ESL teachers share the same background culture with most of the students.

Munoz (2005) asserts that humour facilitates the acquisition of vocabulary and helps distinguish figurative from literal meaning. Similarly, it helps develop visual memory and improve the capacity to solve problems whether linguistic or otherwise. The activities that are made use to cement humour in EFL classroom range from idiomatic expressions, riddles, or proverbs, pronunciation, games, comics, the use of regalia, jokes or typical grammatical errors. This leads to higher language proficiency and to a better control of the pedagogical settings.

4. Data Analysis

This research adopts both qualitative and quantitative techniques. The data used in the present research have been obtained from Iraqi EFL teachers (n = 15) and students (n = 80) at Al- Iraqia University, College of Arts, Department of English Language Studies. All the participant instructors hold Ph.D. and MA degrees in ELT. The teachers are both males and females, with ages ranging from twenties to early fifties and years of teaching experience ranging from three to thirty-five years.

The questionnaire has been taken from Olajoke (2013), Morrison (2008), Askildson (2005), and modified by the researchers.

The teachers' questions are about their preconceptions of humour, whether it is a useful teaching strategy or not, and how often they use humour as a strategy in their EFL classes.

The data used in this paper have been collected by using DCTs (discourse completion task). The questionnaire contains questions that relate to the implication of humour in the EFL classrooms. The student's questions are divided into two sections: section A is to elicit information on the benefits of humour to students, and section B sheds light on the attitudes of students as regards the use of humour in EFL teaching contexts. The discussions of result of findings have been based on percentages. And since humour may occur spontaneously during the process of teaching and learning, the best way to investigate it is by direct observation to snatch the spontaneous or "unintentional" use of humour by teachers who may not always intend to do, and to capture the instant reactions of the students as well.

4.1 Results of the Study

4.1.1. Results from Students

The questionnaire has been administered to a sample of 80 Iraqi students who have been enrolled as undergraduate students in the University of Al- Iraqia, Baghdad. The descriptive statistical analyses of students' responses concerning the benefits of humour are shown in Table (1). Figure (1.1) presents the students' agreements on the questionnaire items, while figure (1.2) shows their disagreements and their uncertainty about the items is illustrated in figure (1.3).

Table 1. Students' responses to the survey items

Items	Agree		Disagree		Neither agree nor disagree	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
A1) Humour reduces tension.	73	91.25%	2	2.5%	5	6.25%
A2) Humour bridges gap between teachers and students. i.e. it makes teachers more approachable in classes.	73	91.25%	1	1.25%	6	7.5%
A3) Humour makes the class interesting.	64	80%	3	3.75%	13	16.25%
A4) Humour encourages the students' attendance in classes	67	83.75%	4	5%	9	11.25%
A5) improves your ability to learn a language in the classroom	70	87.5%	3	3.75%	7	8.75%

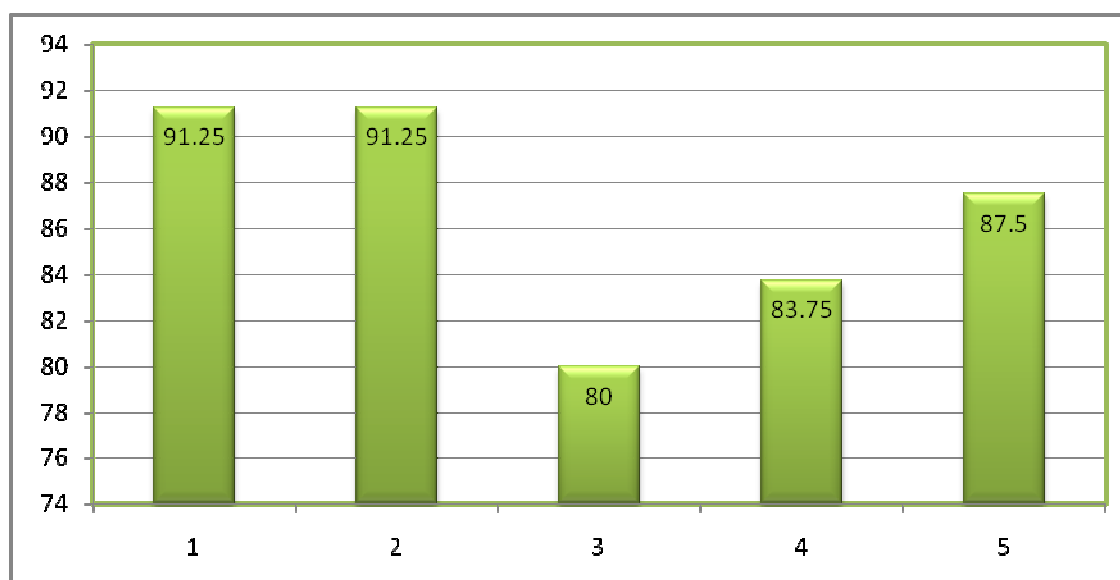


Figure (1.1) the students' agreements

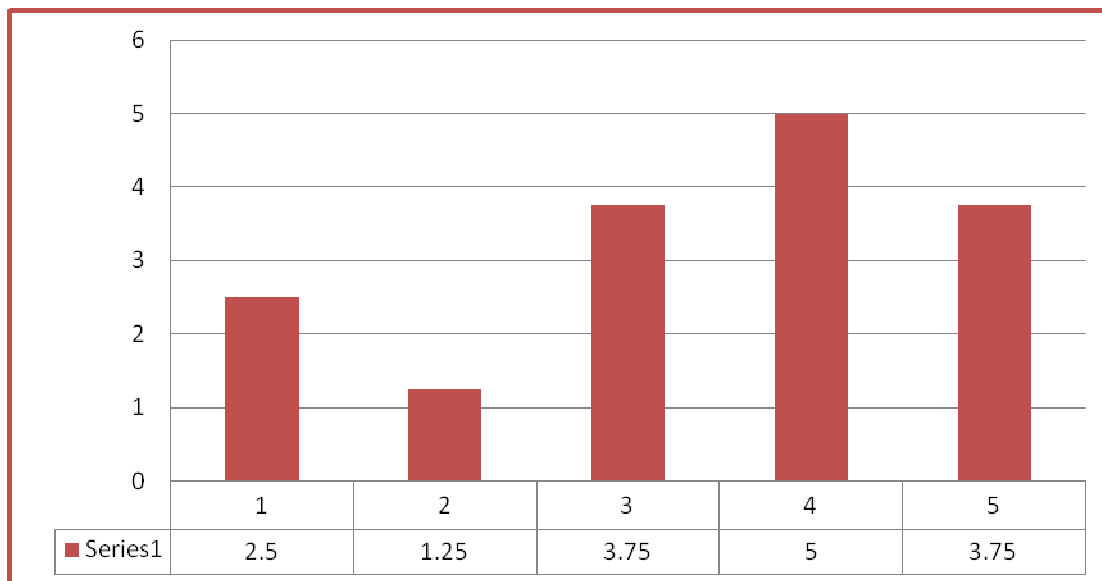


Figure (1.2) the students' disagreements

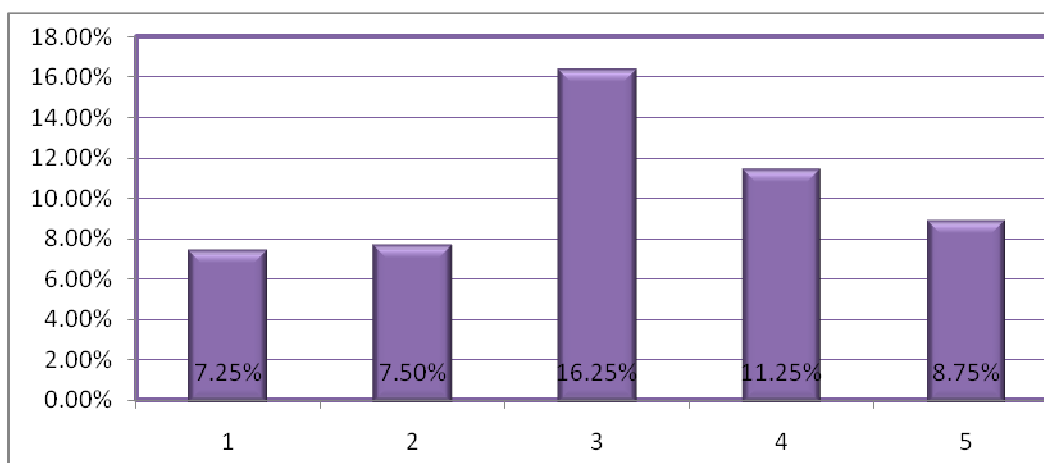


Figure (1.3) the students' uncertainty

Section B of the questionnaire is concerned with the attitudes of students in relation to the use of humour in EFL teaching contexts. The results are shown on table (2).

Table (2) responses concerning humour benefits

Research Questions	Response (Percentages)	
	Yes	No
B6. Understanding humor in ESL teaching	73.75%	26.25%
B7. Recommendation of the use of humor	88.75%	11.25%
B8. Understanding of humor in L1 than L2	75%	25%
B9. Withdrawal by students	58.75%	41.25%
B10. Humour is waste of time	22.5%	77.5%

Discussions

The results show that the majority of the students with the percentage of (91.25%) agree on the statements which read: "*Humour reduces tension*", and "*Humour bridges gap between teachers and students*". This suggests that the students' have taken for granted that humour effects are positive in nature and constructive as well because it makes students more comfortable and less tensed. It also effects their impression and the image they form about their teachers. The statement "I'm feeling more close to teachers who use humour... makes me feel closer to him/her" is admired by the majority of the students. Only one student stands against this statement and this forms the percentage of only (1.25%) of the whole population while 6 students with the percentage of (7.5%) are hesitant and show signs of uncertainty over the statement since they have been unable to make up their own minds. Thus, they neither agree nor disagree.

The results have also illustrated the students' perceptions of the effective role humour may vitally play in encouraging them to attend classes. Therefore, (83.75%) of the population affirms this role. Meanwhile, (80%) of the population approves humour enactment to making EFL classes interesting, effective and pedagogically beneficial.

Humour and Foreign Language Learning

To validate the main aim of the paper and to highlight the place of humour in EFL settings, the questionnaire items (A3) and (A5) are designed to ask the students about how humour could possibly be making the class interesting and dynamic. Then the items enquire if the use of humour would efficaciously improve the students' ability to learn a language or not. The students confirm that humour is important to foreign language learning. This can clearly be seen when they have aired their views regarding the following questionnaire statements: '*Humour in FL increases my interest in learning that FL*' and '*Humour improves my ability to learn a FL*'. (See Table (1) and Figure (1.2)).

Both these statements have received more than 50% of total responses that support agreement: 80% (64 students) side with 'increased interest' and 87.5% (70 students) stand with 'improved ability'. Yet, only (3.75%) of the students' responses have not given voice in the agreement on both of these statements. These two statements explicitly refer to the affectivity of cognitive factors underlying the learning process. Students' opinions show that humour could positively influence the learning process and thus motivating students to learn a foreign language, and, at the same time, equipping them with better ability to do so.

The students strongly disapprove the statement that reads as: '*Humour is a waste of precious learning time.*' Their disapproval is shown in Table (5). A total of 62 out of 80 students disagree with the same statement, making up 77.5% of the total responses. These students do not think that the learning time is being wasted by the use of humour. On the contrary, they believe that humour is a valuable learning tool. That is why only 22.5% of the responses side with the statement.

The item (B8/ Understanding of humor in L1 than L2) is designed to highlight the effect of humour in L1 and L2 pedagogical settings. Their responses are contained in Table (5) which express their attitudes towards the positive impact humour may have in the learning of different languages, i.e. their mother tongue (Arabic) and the foreign language they are learning (English). The results show that the students may welcome the use of humour in English learning context, while some of them still believe that understanding what humour is in the same context may still be an impediment for them. When asked whether they can understand the use of humour in English language learning context, 75% (60 students) respond positively, whereas only 25% (20 students) respond negatively.

4.1.2. Results from Teachers

To investigate the pedagogical effect humor in the EFL context, a questionnaire and interviews have been administered to a sample of (15) Iraqi EFL teachers. The teachers' questions are concerned with their preconceptions about the use humour in EFL context and whether or not it is a useful teaching strategy and with how often they use humour in their classes. The results are shown on table (3):

Table (3) teachers' responses and preconceptions

Item	Response	Response	Response	Response	Response
	A	B	C	D	E
1	--	--	40%	53%	7%
2	--	67%	33%	--	--
3	7%	13%	20%	60%	--
4	--	--	27%	60%	13%
5	73%	27%	--	--	--
6	--	--	27%	27%	46%
7	20%	40%	40%	--	--
8	--	--	53%	27%	20%
9	7%	60%	33%	--	--
10	--	--	20%	67%	13%

Discussions

By perusing their responses, it has become evident that humour plays an importantly vital role in the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language.

When teachers respond to (Item #2 about the validity of using humour in EFL context), they assert that they use humour 1-3 times / 4-7 times in an about 67% and 33% of the time allocated to each class session respectively. When teachers respond to (Item #3) they assert that they use 60% of humour in relation to classroom subject matters, and at least 20% in relation to a classroom half- related material. At the same time, they admit that they use 7% of a sense of humour in a classroom that is not related to the subject matter, but still they use it to break the ice and make the class interesting.

By responding to (Item #4) the majority of teachers agree consensually on the idea that the use humour makes their students more relaxed and less tensed. . 60% of the teachers approve the idea that humour makes students "noticeably relaxed" and 27% of them believe that the use of humour makes them "slightly relaxed". Paradox ically, it appears that 73% of students never use humour to communicate in the EFL classes and only 27% of them do so 1-3 times as it is indicated in response to (Item #5).

And when asking the EFL teachers to what degree they believe that humour is important (Item #10), 67% of the answers indicate that he use of humour is 'extremely important' ; 13% " of their answers /responses indicate that its use is ' considerably important' and only 20% of the answers show that its use is ' slightly important'. The teachers' responses to (Item #6) reify that students' ability to learn a foreign language can actually be increased with the help of humourous, comfortable and conductive learning environment. The above mentioned statement is highly applauded by 46% of the teachers' responses.

Additionally, by responding to (Item#8), 53% of teachers' responses back up the idea that an instructors' use of humor would make them more approachable and/or considerably more approachable in class.

The results of the present study, though they may look preliminary in nature, would seem to strongly support many of the beneficial effects of pedagogical humor in the language classroom. The overwhelming majority of those surveyed interviewees and participants indicate that even spontaneous or "unintentional" humour can be an important element of creating an overall environment conducive to learning. Specifically, participants indicate that a reduced anxiety/tension, improved approachability of teachers, and increased levels of interest can all be results of the teachers' use of humor. This can be true for both student and teacher alike that humour creates a powerful in the classroom.

The results show that, although teachers admit the importance of humour (i.e. using a joke, pun, comic strip, funny story, etc.) in providing the students with a stress- free environment, but they, sometimes, are cautious over using it. This could be justified for two reasons .First, some teachers are uncomfortable using humour in the classroom and it may take an experienced teacher to purposefully incorporate humour into one's verbal repertoire. (Hackathorn, 2011:7). Secondly, this can also be attributed to their preconception that using humour with students may cause or lead to disrespect to them or withdrawal on the part of students. However, by

surveying the students' opinions about this matter, we can see that the majority of them reject such a thing since 58.75% of their responses refute the idea which entails that the use of humour may lead to disrespect or withdrawal.

5. Conclusion

Boredom may be the largest obstacle to teaching, and many believe it is up to teachers to spark students' interests in classes. One way to ignite students' enthusiasm is by using humour. In the class room, humour can create cheerful learning climate, enhance social bonding through increased student- teacher interaction, add variety to lectures, decrease test anxiety, and provide enjoyment and laughter

In conclusion, this study has explored EFL Iraqi teachers' and students' perceptions of the vital roles of humour in language teaching and learning, pinpointed the teachers' practices of using humour and the students' responses to teachers' use of humour strategies.. As the data have demonstrated, the use of humorous language in an L2 learning environment provides a wide range of opportunities for learning a foreign language. These benefits consist in: 1. a sense of humour is a desirable quality in teachers and forms an essential part of their personal charisma. 2. humour is an effective ice-breaker. 3. humour relaxes students and makes them more susceptible to learning. 4. students who feel relaxed are more likely to participate in interactive activities in whereby error are made and remedied in front of their peers. 5 humour fosters the subject matter and facilitates deep-level learning. 6 humour brings people together because it is a universal tool that transcends cultural boundaries.

The findings have revealed that humour is very popular among teachers and students as well; teachers are largely confident about the vitality and effectiveness of humour as a significant pedagogical tool. However, the teachers cautions against the use of humour strategies in their classes to avoid disrespect or withdrawal on the part of the students.

Moreover, the students generally have welcomed the teachers' use of humour and preferred humorous teachers. The study also has shed light on some of the requirements of humour in order to be appropriate and effective in classroom teaching settings and the study has also pointed out to the most popular types of humour. Firmly asserting the desirability of humour based on empirical evidence, the study affirms the role of humour in ELT contexts and encourages teachers to use humour in a well-informed manner in order to make language learning as interesting as it should be. Finally, it is generally believed that humour is beneficial and is often advised as a best practice by effective teachers.

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Appendix (1) Teachers' questionnaire

Circle the number that corresponds to your response for each question:

1. How would you rate yourself in terms of your overall effectiveness as a teacher?
(a) Totally ineffective (b) Slightly ineffective (c) Effective
(d) Moderately effective (e) extremely effective
2. How often (on average) do you use humor (i.e. jokes, witticisms, humorous facial expressions, funny stories, etc.) during each class session?
(a) use no humor (b) 1-3 times (c) 4-7 times (d) 8-11 times (e) 12 times or more
3. How much of the humor that you use is related or relevant to classroom subject matter?
(a) none (b) a little (c) about half (d) most (e) all
4. To what degree does humor make your students feel more relaxed (i.e. less anxious) in the language classroom?
(a) increases anxiety (b) no effect (c) slightly relaxed
(d) noticeably relaxed (e) considerably relaxed
5. How often (on average) do your students use humor to communicate in the foreign language during each class?
(a) Never (b) 1-3 times (c) 4-7 times (d) 8-11 times (e) 12 times or more
6. Do you feel that humor improves your students' ability to learn a language in the classroom by creating a more comfortable and conducive learning environment?
(a) Hampers learning (b) no effect (c) slight improvement
(d) Improvement (e) considerable improvement
7. How often do you use actual words and/or other elements of a humorous example in the foreign language (i.e. a joke, pun, comic strip, funny story, etc.) to illustrate grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, or any other particularity of the language during a typical class?
(a) Never (b) 1-2 times (c) 3-4 times (d) 5-6 times (e) 7 times or more
8. Do you feel that your use of humor makes you more approachable to students in class?
(a) Less approachable (b) no effect (c) slightly more
(d) More approachable (e) considerably more
9. In your opinion, what is the ideal amount of humor (i.e. number of humorous items employed) for an environment conducive to learning during a typical class period?
(a) none (b) 1-3 times (c) 4-7 times (d) 8-11 times (e) 12 times or more
10. In your opinion, how important is humor to language learning in the classroom overall?
(a) not at all (b) minimally (c) slightly (d) important (e) considerably important

Appendix 2

Instruction: Please, kindly fill the questionnaire completely by ticking the space you select for each number

	Agree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree
A1) Humor reduces tension.			
A2) Humor bridges gap between teachers and students. i.e. it makes teachers more approachable in classes.			
A3) Humor makes the class interesting.			
A4) Humor encourages the students' attendance in classes			
A5) improves your ability to learn a language in the classroom			

B6) Do you understand humor used in teaching of EFL? Yes..... No.....

B7) Do you recommend the use of humor in the teaching of ESL:

Yes..... No.....

B8) Do you understand humor in first language than English Language? Yes..... No.....

B9) Do you think that humor in EFL can lead to A) Disrespect B) Withdrawal on the part of students.

Yes..... No.....

B10) Do you think that humor is a waste of precious learning time in the classroom.

Yes..... No.....