

Laughing matters: how humour affects pragmatic competence in Indonesian second language learners

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Abstract

Humour plays a crucial role in communication, but its complexity poses problems for second-language learners, especially when interacting across cultures. Indonesian English learners often cannot understand humour due to differences in pragmatic conventions, limited exposure to humour, and cultural cues. Therefore, this study investigates the impact of humour on Indonesian L2 (Second Language) learners' pragmatic competence and the type of humour that best affects their language acquisition. A multi-method approach was adopted, with an initial test and final post-test assessments. Nineteen classroom observations were made during the lessons, and 80 advanced-intermediate English learners were interviewed. During the four-week experiment, participants were exposed to different types of humour: slapstick, wordplay, irony, and sarcasm. The study revealed a significant improvement in pragmatic competence as post-test scores increased from 53.78 to 65.72 ($p < 0.001$). Slapstick and puns were the most popular forms of humour, while sarcasm and other forms of humour that could not be

understood without cultural context caused more difficulty for participants. The study calls for explicit instruction in humour comprehension and real access to actual comic discourse. Although the project has its merits, its short duration and the small number of learners involved suggest that further research should be conducted to validate these findings across various learner populations over time. The present research provides an important reference for introducing humour into language teaching. It offers an innovative perspective on how this can improve L2 learners' pragmatic competence.

Keywords: humour, Indonesian EFL learners, L2 learning, pragmatic competence, second language acquisition.

1. Introduction

Understanding humour in a second language is often a silent struggle. Humour is one of the most complex forms of social communication (Dyner & Chovanec, 2021; Elayan et al., 2022; Gonot-Schoupsinsky et al., 2020; Kaltenbacher & Drews, 2020). No culture is without its humour, and this also applies to people belonging to many cultures around the world (Cooper & Schweitzer, 2024; Jiang et al., 2020; Lu, 2023; O'Neill & Jazaieri, 2024; Zhai & Wibowo, 2022). Furthermore, humour is based on cultural elements (linguistic perspective, cognitive perspective), which can be quite challenging for second language (L2) learners—individuals acquiring a language that is not their native tongue—to master across cultures (Zhai & Wibowo, 2022). From a pragmatic perspective, humour can serve as a tool to build social solidarity (Salami, 2011), make conversations much more pleasant, and reduce critical sting towards oneself and others; however, it is largely overlooked in pragmatic studies. However, humour in the target language is also a complex area for L2 learners (Bui & Tai, 2022; Ko & Eslami, 2021; Zhang & Aubrey, 2024).

In Indonesia, understanding humour in L2 English is even more conspicuous due to pragmatic and cultural differences between Indonesian and English (Haziq et al., 2024; Mayahi & Jalilifar, 2025). Humour in English regularly relies on puns, irony, sarcasm, and social references (Arief, 2024; del Pilar Salas-Zárate et al., 2020; Malyuga et al., 2020), that are not always easily understood by Indonesian L2 learners. This confusion can lead to miscommunication and pragmatic failure in cross-cultural interaction. Furthermore, the lack of exposure to authentic humour in the target language is also an obstructive element in developing pragmatic competence among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, referring to those who learn English in environments where it is not the primary language of communication (Hofmann et al., 2023; Miller et al., 2021). While the challenge remains, some students demonstrate a remarkable ability to recognize intricate jokes through extensive exposure outside the classroom and a driving fascination to better understand the language in all its nuanced aspects, including the intimate cues behind what makes others laugh.

In the Indonesian context, English is positioned as a foreign language rather than a second language. It is formally taught across educational levels, but outside the classroom, its usage remains limited. For most students, who are taught through their textbooks and examination-oriented instruction, exposure to authentic English, especially of an informal and humorous variety, is scarce. Not using English in everyday life is a big hurdle to cross when learning the lingo, so learning to comprehend humour in this second language becomes difficult.

Indeed, the appearance of digital media—funny memes, comedy shows, and other entertaining content on the internet—has recently enhanced English language learners' exposure to humour in the target language (Kamath & Alur, 2024; Rodriguez-Guillen et al., 2024; Skurka & Lee Cunningham, 2023). Increasingly, social media platforms, including Instagram, TikTok

and YouTube, have served as a key source for language learners to grasp the jokes of the natives (Alkaraki et al., 2024; Tan et al., 2022). Nevertheless, although the exposure to such humorous online content is gradually increasing, to the best of the authors' knowledge, no studies to date systematically examine whether this increasing exposure to comedy in English contributes to the pragmatic development of Indonesian English learners. So, this research aims to examine how humour is perceived by secondary language learners in Indonesia, including how much familiarity with funny online content can provide an understanding toward the proper use of this language element.

Several previous studies have examined the relationship between humour and pragmatic competence in second language acquisition. Bell and Attardo (2010) found that humour can enhance L2 learners' pragmatic comprehension by providing a more authentic and interactive context for communication. Taguchi (2019) emphasizes that pragmatic facets, including humour, require more rigorous exposure so that learners can grasp implicatures, implied intentions, and differences in societal norms in cross-cultural interaction (Taguchi & Yamaguchi, 2019). Furthermore, Robinson et al. (2024) note that humour plays an important role in building social cohesion and increasing learners' confidence in using the target language more naturally, whether through short, pithy jokes or longer, more elaborate comedic pieces. Using humour has been shown to build interpersonal bonds even when it complicates what is being communicated.

In Indonesia's English language learning context, research exploring humour as a pragmatic tool for skill development remains quite limited. Tianli et al. (2024) research shows that most English learners in Indonesia struggle with sarcasm and pun-centred humour due to limited vocabulary and insufficient exposure to authentic humour in English. However, the analysis did not explicitly consider how different forms of humour (e.g., memes, stand-up performances, or film dialogues) can enhance pragmatic skills. Furthermore, while several studies have highlighted the benefits of using humour in language acquisition (Bryant & Zillmann, 1989; Reddington, 2015; Savage et al., 2017), there remains a gap in understanding the particular systems of how humour can enhance L2 learners' pragmatic skills in Indonesia. Furthermore, no work has methodically measured the potency of different types of humour in Indonesia's English language learning context.

Thus, this study aims to fill the gap by investigating the role of humour in the development of pragmatic competence of Indonesian English learners, considering the most effective types of humour and their implications for language learning strategies. The study is also expected to contribute to the global field by expanding the understanding of how humour as a linguistic phenomenon can help L2 learners develop pragmatic competence in different cultural contexts.

To address these questions, the current study utilized a multi-method approach including classroom observations, pre-and post-test and semi-structured interviews. Using an intervention that introduced different varieties of English humour to 80 advanced-intermediate Indonesian EFL learners over four weeks, we demonstrated that laughter has benefits for language comprehension. The data were thematically analysed to understand the changes in learners' pragmatic competence and the types of humour that produced the most effective learning outcomes.

Based on the above background, this research seeks to answer the following main questions:

- 1) How is humour in the target language (English) understood by second-language learners in Indonesia?
- 2) To what extent does exposure to humour in English help to improve the pragmatic competence of Indonesian L2 learners?

This research has several main objectives, namely:

- 1) Analyse the relationship between the understanding of humour and the development of English learners' pragmatic competence in Indonesia.
- 2) Identify the most effective types of humour for enhancing pragmatic competence in the Indonesian context.
- 3) Explore applications of humour in language teaching that can be replicated in different countries.

2. Methods

This study aims to systematically explore how exposure to humour affects the pragmatic skills of English learners in Indonesia. A mixed-methods approach combining quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis was used to gain a well-rounded understanding. Changes in pragmatic skills after exposure to comic content were measured through surveys and testing. The themes provide insight into how learners engage with and understand English humour in the wild, facilitated by the data derived from the focus groups and interviews. The participants' perspectives on what facilitates or hinders humour recognition in a new language expose the nuances involved in acquiring this sociolinguistic competence. The mixed-methods approach allowed for an assessment of the humour incorporation effectiveness and the in-depth exploration of human factors driving pragmatic, flexible interpretations by learners

2.1. Research design

This study use quasi experimental design pretest and posttest in the absence of management group, to look to calculate how many improvements in cognitive auditory comprehension in members, after being given humour in English. In addition, The qualitative data was collected through both interviews and classroom observations to gain thorough qualitative data regarding learners' processes of understanding humour and challenges. This analysis employs a mixed-methods approach to provide richer and more comprehensive findings, which mitigates some of the restrictions that may arise from using a single technique. The quantitative information from the pre-test and post-test will furnish an objective picture of the members' pragmatic competence progress. On the other hand, the qualitative data from the interviews and observations will create a richer insight into the ways in which Indonesian English learners process and interpret humour. The learners learning humour had struggles ranging from cultural to linguistic. But most said that their enjoyment and understanding improved significantly after looking at examples of humour in the classroom.

The intervention involved four general types of humour mentioned in pragmatic and cognitive humour discussions (Davis, 1990; Martin, 2007): slapstick, word (pun), ironic, and sarcastic. This categorization derives from Attardo's General Theory of Verbal Humour (2001), that highlights script opposite, logical procedures and narrative strategies in the humour-processing model. The most common interpretation of slapstick is exaggerated violence that triggers laughter because of an image or visual tool. Wordplay requires manipulation of language and double meanings, every challenging for learners who are not proficient at idiomatic expressions. Irony and sarcasm, which are more sophisticated forms of feigned passion, depend on those speaker intentions being recognized and an incongruity between the literal and the implied established in context, a community of liturgy often based in shared cultural assumptions. The types of humour were embedded in selected materials (e.g., films, memes, stand-up routines) to explore their differentiated effects on learners' pragmatic competence.

2.2. Participants

This study consisted of English as foreign language learners at different educational levels in Indonesia. The selected ones, came from any number of universities, language course and bilingual schools. They were selected based on how many requirements were fulfilled, ensuring their relevance to the research aims. Crucially, candidates had to show an intermediate-to-advanced level of fluency, measured on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages scale of B1 — which is intermediate — to C1, which is advanced. Such a threshold in proficiency level was needed due to the nature of pragmatic features found in English humour that rely on language play, irony, sarcasm, and other linguistic figures that draw on such knowledge available only from a more advanced level, as Taguchi (2019) had mentioned. Some participants were simply more language-savvy than others, which is to be expected as any natural human quality is on a bell curve.

Moreover, the chosen candidates had significant exposure to English through both academic opportunities and social contexts. Promoter aspects included pursuing relevant college majors like English Literature or English Language Education and participation in language classes or bilingual settings. Exposure to a more target tongue will probably offer a greater pragmatic knowledge of how to interpret humour across cultures. A further important criterion was being available to take part in all periods of the research. Participants were required to consent to participate in the pre-assessment, humour-centred classes, post-assessment, interviews, and classroom observations. Participants must be fully committed to achieve valid and reliable data on how they are ability to develop their pragmatic skills after being exposed to humour on the target language.

Purposive sampling was used to recruit eighty respondents whose characteristics were pertinent to the research objectives that examine mediated humour exposure and pragmatic competence development. These groupings allowed for detailed examinations of comedic workspace and its relationship with gains in interlanguage through overlapping cohorts. This approach seek to generate insights that reflect how levity impacts learners' ability to use English successfully beyond the classroom. Identifying distinct typical impact profiles across low- and high-level English-aspiration Indonesians may provide pragmatic development strategies that best enable humour's utility. As aims interrogate correlations between joyous seconds and authentic uptake boosts, light shone on latitudinal and longitudinal differences between and within levels of expertise may direct more focused pedagogical applications pointing towards engagement's incentive power.

2.3. Data collection

Methods for data collection in this research integrated both quantitative and qualitative approaches to yield a holistic outcome. The methods used were an experiment pre and post-test, in-depth interviews, and classroom observations.

The experiment, consisting of a pretest assessing pragmatic competence prior to experiencing English humour, Discussions on missing characters from movies memes and stand-up comedy made for the light-hearted pre-test. A four-week intervention involved the provision of humour-based learning materials. Authentic forms of English media — such as movies, comedy routines, and internet memes — used to practice understanding the pragmatic aspects of humour. When the intervention was finished, participants completed the pre-test again to measure their understanding growth after becoming exposed to humour in the target language. A pre-test assessing familiar discourses gauged participants' initial understanding of humour's pragmatic role. The humour comprehension section of the assessment was adapted from the work of others. A month-long course then challenged them with parody news, leading to a better understanding of humour through real English media. Once the intervention was over

they retook the pre-test to determine whether their understanding had improved following exposure to humour.

In addition to conducting the experiment, the researchers also interviewed participants in depth to gain a richer understanding of their perspectives regarding humour's role in learning English and the challenges encountered in comprehending humour in the new language. The interviews followed a semi-structured format, allowing participants to share experiences and views openly. This approach also allowed investigators flexibility in exploring aspects germane to the research with participants.

To augment the data from tests and interviews, evaluators directly observed class sessions where humour was an instructional technique. Focusing on several key facets, these observations chronicled participants' spontaneous responses to humour in English, strategies to comprehend humour (e.g., direct translation, contextual inference, cultural reference), and classroom dynamics when humour featured prominently in teaching. Later, analysts employed discourse examination of the observation notes to identify interaction patterns revealing the development of pragmatic skills.

2.4. Data analysis

The data examination in the investigation was led by two fundamental methods, specifically measurable examination to prepare quantitative information obtained from the pre-test and post-test, and discourse and subject investigation to break down subjective information gathered through meetings and study hall perceptions. This dual approach was chosen to ensure that the research findings would show quantitative contrasts in the students' pragmatic understanding and provide a deeper understanding of their encounters in understanding humour in English.

Statistical information from the pre-test and post-test was broken down using paired t-tests to decide whether there was a huge improvement in the members' pragmatic abilities after the humour-based intercession. Furthermore, a straight regression examination was utilized to comprehend the relationship between the level of humour presentation and the improvement in pragmatic ability. This investigation aimed to recognize the extent to which introduction to humour in English influences the advancement of second language understudies' pragmatic abilities.

On the other hand, the subjective data collected through in-depth interviews were analysed thematic. This enabled the analyst to identify significant instances within the members' experiences and understanding of humour in English, including the challenges they faced in understanding humour based on other cultures. From perceptions of the study room, pragmatic discourse inquiry deconstructed not just what members knew about language, but how they engaged within correspondence interactions, processing humour in a language learning situation (including how they used explicit linguistic techniques to understand and reply in relation to stereotypical or humour-inducing situations encountered in language learning contexts).

3. Results

This part will be elaborating and paying attention the findings of this research focusing on the humour exposure and its correlation to the development of pragmatic competence of Indonesian EFL learners. The findings demonstrate significant gains in learners' capacity for pragmatic interpretation of humour following a humour-based instructional intervention. Slapstick and wordplay were the easiest type of humour used, and sarcasm and cultural references were tougher. Moreover, learners reported several obstacles to understanding and producing humour, including cultural unfamiliarity, limited vocabulary, and psychological discomfort in social settings.

3.1. Indonesian English language learners' ability to understand humour

The ability of English language learners in Indonesia to understand humour showed significant improvement after receiving a humour-focused intervention. Statistical analysis showed that the mean pre-test score before the intervention was 53.78, while the mean post-test score increased significantly to 65.72 after the intervention. This mean increase of 11.94 points is supported by the result of a paired t-test, which gives a T-statistic of 23.28 with a P-value of 4.05E-22, meaning that this difference is highly statistically significant.

In addition, the effect size test (Cohen's d) of 1.19 indicates that the effect of the humour-based intervention on L2 learners' pragmatic understanding falls into the category of large effects. In other words, exposure to humour in the target language significantly impacts learners' ability to grasp pragmatic implications. The 95% confidence interval (10.92 - 12.96) also confirms that the increase in scores is not the result of chance but a genuine effect of the intervention.

The intervention undoubtedly benefited all participants based on their pre-and post-test scores. In particular, those who started with a rudimentary understanding of humour in English, as evidenced by a pre-assessment score below 50, showed significant improvements after exposure to the comedic materials. For example, one such individual started with a pre-test score of 35.87 but subsequently jumped to 46.23. At the same time, a participant who demonstrated a more nuanced understanding before the intervention, as evidenced by his pre-test score of 70.38, jumped even higher to 84.11 on the post-test. Irrespective of the participants' different baseline language skills, whether nascent or well-developed, all benefited from immersion in the humour-centred curriculum. The versatility of this pedagogical technique suggests its potential to strengthen intercultural communication skills at both elementary and advanced levels.

Firstly, the standard deviation of 9.54 for the pre-test and 10.54 for the post-test scores shows differences in the participants' understanding of humour. Still, the scores rose consistently for almost everyone. This experiment confirms that humour can serve as a valuable teaching method for improving the practical skills of second language learners in Indonesian contexts. It suggests we rethink our approaches and incorporate cultural relevance and authentic scenarios into language teaching. Rather than bland, uniform strategies, tapping into humour's innate diversity engages learners through simple and sophisticated jokes. Not only did the results vary between individuals, but the anecdotes and routines - some elaborate, others brief - also varied, resulting in well-rounded growth. This study offers promising ideas for teaching that are both thoughtful and lively (see Table 1).

Table 1. Statistical summary of pre-test and post-test results on pragmatic competence development

Parameter	Value
T-Statistic	23.28
P-Value	4.05e-37
Mean Pre-Test Score	53.78
Mean Post-Test Score	65.72
Mean Score Increase	11.94
Standard Deviation Pre-Test	9.54
Standard Deviation Post-Test	10.54
Effect Size (Cohen's d)	1.19
Confidence Interval (95%)	10.92 - 12.96

3.2. The impact of humour exposure on pragmatic competence

The experimental results revealed that exposure to humour in English positively impacts the improvement of pragmatic proficiency among Indonesian English language learners. Before the humour-based mediation, the mean pre-exam score of the participants was 53.78, but after the mediation, the mean post-exam score increased significantly to 65.72. This average increase of 11.94 points suggests a change in the understanding and use of language in pragmatic situations.

The statistical tests showed that this progress was statistically significant. A paired t-test between the pre-test and post-test results yielded a t-statistic of 23.28 with a P-value of 4.05E-22. These results indicate that the discrepancy between the pre-and post-test results is not random but is statistically significant. In addition, Cohen's d value of 1.19 indicates that the effect of humour exposure on learners' pragmatic competence is in the large effect category.

The 95% confidence interval ranges from 10.92 to 12.96, indicating that this increase in scores has a small margin of error and reflects the true impact of the intervention. The data distribution showed that most participants experienced an increase in scores following the humour-based intervention. The variation in score improvement ranged from 2.41 to 24.32 points, with most participants experiencing an improvement of more than 10 points.

While some participants showed modest gains from their pre-test scores, others showed more substantial growth following the intervention. One individual improved from a pre-test score of 35.87 to a post-test score of 46.23. In contrast, a peer with a higher pre-test score of 70.38 improved to 84.11. Interestingly, the variability between participants increased after the learning experience. Where the standard deviation was 9.54 before, it increased to 10.54 after. This suggests that the intervention had a different impact on the students, with a wider range of results evident at the final assessment than before the program (see Table 2 and Figure 1).

Table 2. Effect of humour exposure on pragmatic competence

Parameter	Value
Number of Participants	80
Average Pre-Test Score	53.78
Average Post-Test Score	65.72
Average Score Improvement	11.94
Pre-Test Standard Deviation	9.54
Post-Test Standard Deviation	10.54
Minimum Score Improvement	2.41
Maximum Score Improvement	24.32
T-Statistic	23.28
P-Value	4.08e-37
Effect Size (Cohen's d)	1.25
Confidence Interval (95%)	4.24 - 21.47

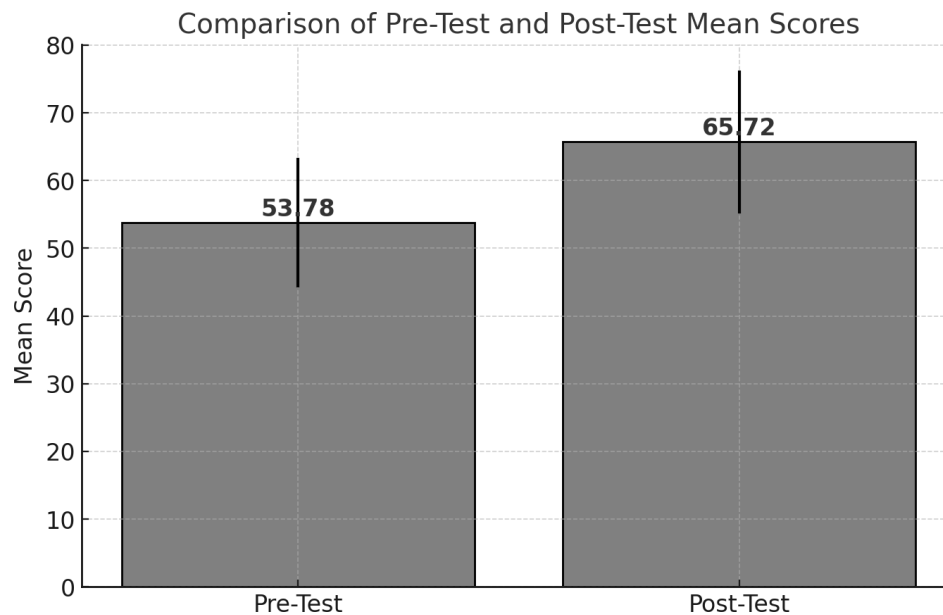


Figure 1. Comparison of pre-test and post-test mean scores in pragmatic competence development

3.3. Effective types of humour for Indonesian L2 learners

The results revealed significant differences in the ability of English as a Second Language learners to understand different types of humour in the Indonesian context. Of the six humour categories tested, slapstick humour and puns were the easiest to understand, while dark humour and cultural references were the most difficult.

The highest mean comprehension was for slapstick humour (mean = 80.5; SD = 4.8; participant comprehension = 89%). This suggests that humour based on (high frequency) physical movements (e.g., trip fall) or more explicit comedic situations are easier for L2 learners to process as they require less pragmatic interpretation and complex cultural background (e.g., good stuff bad people in some contexts). Wordplay had the next best comprehension score (75.2, SD = 5.4), followed by irony (62.8, SD = 6.3), with 65% understanding the pun.

Dark humour, on the other hand, had the lowest comprehension score of 39.8 (SD = 9.5), with only 32% of participants understanding it correctly. Cultural references were another area where learners struggled, with a comprehension score of 47.6 (SD = 8.2) and a comprehension percentage of only 49%. Sarcasm was in the middle of the spectrum, with a comprehension score 50.4 (SD = 7.1), and only 54% of participants could get it right. These data suggest that types of humour that are more culturally contextual or dependent on pragmatic inference are much less accessible to Indonesian L2 learners. In contrast, more explicit forms of humour, such as slapstick and puns, are more accessible (see Table 3).

Table 3. Comprehension of different humour types among Indonesian L2 learners

Types of Humour	Average Comprehension	Standard Deviation	Percentage of Participants Understanding (%)
Wordplay	75.2	5.4	82
Sarcasm	50.4	7.1	54
Irony	62.8	6.3	65
Slapstick	80.5	4.8	89
Cultural References	47.6	8.2	49
Dark Humour	39.8	9.5	32

To further illustrate the comparative accessibility of humour types, Figure 2 provides a visual representation of participants' comprehension scores and understanding percentages across categories.

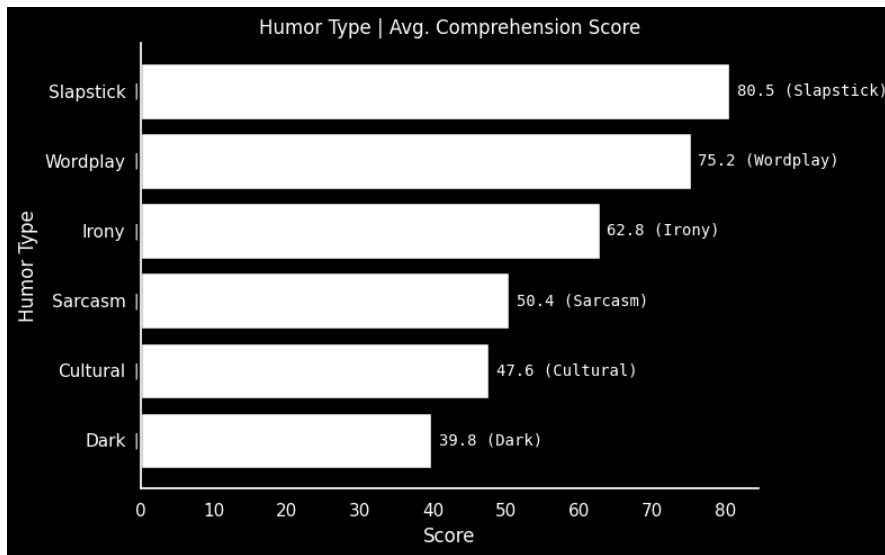


Figure 2. Comparison of comprehension levels across different types of humour among Indonesian L2 learners.

3.4. Challenges in learning humour as a pragmatic strategy

Thus, the findings of this study show that Indonesian English as a second language (L2) learners face several obstacles in understanding humour as a pragmatic strategy. Here, cultural, linguistic, psychological, and social issues affect how learners understand and use humour in communicative exchange -- as seen in Tabel 4.

Table 4. Challenges faced by Indonesian L2 learners in understanding humour

Barriers to Understanding Humour	Percentage of Participants Experiencing (%)	Difficulty Level (1-10)	Number of Mentions in the Interview
Difficulty Understanding Cultural References	78	8.5	30
Difficulty Catching Sarcasm and Irony	65	7.2	25
Humour Vocabulary Limitations	72	7.8	28
Limitations of Understanding Pragmatic Contexts	81	8.9	32
Differences in Humour Structure in the Original Language	69	7.5	26
Discomfort in Using Humour in Interaction	58	6.3	22

3.4.1. Cultural barriers to understanding humour

The most dominant barrier experienced by participants was difficulty understanding cultural references, with 78% of participants reporting this challenge. A lot of humour in English is based on cultural contexts, social events, or public figures that Indonesian learners are not always familiar with. Some jokes in sitcoms or stand-up comedies often contain satire or social criticism closely related to a particular culture, making it difficult to understand without sufficient cultural background. For example, one participant said:

I often watch stand-up comedy in English, but there are many parts that I don't understand because they mention something that seems very familiar to native speakers but not to me.

(P03, English major student)

In addition, the different structure of humour in the native language is also a complicating factor, with 69% of participants reporting that English humour often has a different pattern or flow than Indonesian humour. In Indonesian, humour is often more explicit and based on situations or simple wordplay. In contrast, in English, much of the humour is implicit, relies on irony, or has elements of sarcasm that require deeper pragmatic interpretation. One participant explained:

I once read a joke in English that I thought was funny, but I didn't laugh because I didn't know where it was funny. Only after it was explained to me by a friend who knew more about American culture did I understand what it meant.

(P14, advanced student)

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(P14, advanced student)

3.4.3. Linguistic barriers to understanding humour

Linguistically, the limited vocabulary of humour was one of the main challenges, with 72% of participants reporting difficulties in understanding humour that uses idioms, slang, or wordplay not commonly found in formal English learning. For example, many English jokes rely on homonyms, homophones, and puns that cannot be translated directly into Indonesian. One participant mentioned:

Sometimes I can understand English conversations well, but when someone makes a pun, I immediately lose the meaning. I must look up the meaning before I can understand the joke.

(P07, language course participant)

Another significant barrier is recognizing sarcasm and irony, with 65% of participants experiencing this challenge. Sarcasm in English is often spoken flatly or even opposite to the actual meaning, making it difficult for learners who are not used to such communication patterns to recognize. One participant described this experience as follows:

I once misinterpreted sarcasm in an English conversation. I thought someone was complimenting me when they were joking or even being sarcastic. This made me feel uncomfortable in the conversation.

(P21, exchange student)

Meanwhile, irony-based humour also requires a deeper contextual interpretation. With 62.8% of participants admitting to experiencing this difficulty, many felt that irony-based humour requires a more complex pragmatic understanding than other forms of humour.

3.4.4. Psychological and social barriers to using humour

In addition to challenges in understanding humour, 58% of participants reported discomfort in using humour in social interactions. Some participants stated that they were afraid of using humour in English conversations for fear of being misunderstood or conveying it in a way that did not conform to the cultural norms of native speakers. One participant explained:

I like to joke in Indonesian, but I am more careful in English because I fear that my jokes will not be accepted or even considered rude.

(P32, English teacher)

This discomfort is also influenced by the lack of exposure to humour in the target language in the context of real interactions. Learners are often only familiar with humour from media such as movies or memes, which do not necessarily reflect authentic communication situations in everyday conversations. One participant highlighted this difference by saying:

I could understand the humour in the film, but I struggled to make my jokes in English. I don't know if the structure of my joke is correct or if the way I deliver it sounds strange.

(P28, intermediate student)

The challenges faced by second language learners are not merely pragmatic linguistic issues but encompass cultural and psychosocial factors that impact their confidence and abilities to communicate through humour. These obstacles underline the necessity of a more contextual and culture-based way of teaching humour to English language learners in Indonesia. Exposure to humour in various contexts — formal contexts such as the classroom or informal contexts such as social media and everyday situations — can improve learners' pragmatic competence. Also, giving clear examples of how to homologate humour effectively is one of the primary ways to enhance and develop cross-cultural communication skills.

4. Discussions

The results of this study show that exposure to humour in English has a significant positive impact on improving the pragmatic competence of English language learners in Indonesia. The increase in the mean score from 53.78 (pre-test) to 65.72 (post-test) indicates that the humour-based intervention helps learners understand implicature, pragmatic inference and social norms associated with using humour in the target language. A paired t-test ($T = 23.28$, $p < 0.001$) showed that the difference between the pre-test and post-test scores was highly statistically significant, with the effect size (Cohen's $d = 1.25$) indicating a large impact.

In addition, this study also identified the most effective types of humour for Indonesian L2 learners. Slapstick humour and puns were easier to understand than cultural references or dark humour, which had the lowest comprehension rate. Barriers to understanding humour were mainly cultural references, sarcasm, limited vocabulary, and differences in the structure of humour in the native and target languages.

The result is that humour can raise L2 learners' pragmatic competence, following a pragmatic theory highlighting the significance of authentic communication (Taguchi, 2019). Humour processing consists of implicit meaning construction. Learners need to connect linguistic information and social and cultural contexts. The trend that scores improved after the intervention suggests humorous learning is more effective than traditional methods that only focus on training grammar and vocabulary for pragmatic skill acquisition.

The difference in understanding different humour types can also be interpreted through Cognitive Load Theory (Zhu & Aryadoust, 2022) and Relevance Theory. Slapstick and wordplay are easier to understand because they are less cognitively demanding and have a direct link to familiar language features. By contrast, jokes based on cultural references or dark humour require a complex interaction of pragmatic competence involving the ability to extrapolate based on social clues or reading the cultural context.

These results align with their previous research on how humour can be important in second language (L2) learners' pragmatic competence. Humour is a way to speed up the process of developing pragmatic skills as it creates a more authentic interaction that can be more interesting for L2 learners to internalize implicit meanings during everyday conversations. Ginzburg et al. (2022) also showed that learners more frequently exposed to humour in the target language (such as jokes, memes, app references, etc.) better capture pragmatic implicatures than those who only study through formal academic material.

This conclusion is supported by Taguchi (2019), who analyses that greater exposure to language in real contexts tends to facilitate pragmatic comprehension, and this should be particularly true for dimensions of pragmatics that are often humorous. According to Taguchi, L2 learners actively engaged in native-speaking communities or exposed to authentic media with humour made great strides in recognizing implied intent, understanding irony, and the ability to instantiate appropriate linguistic patterns based on the contextual situation.

While these are important findings, they do not provide a comprehensive overview of the generalizable types of humour across cultures, as humour is consistently promoted as a universal experience. Yet, this study provides a novel investigation into Indonesia's most effective types of humour, which has not been covered in previous literature. L2 Indonesian learners struggle with sarcasm and humour based on puns due to their inadequate vocabulary size and differences in humour structure between Indonesian and English. However, this study shows that when a certain type of humour is overexposed, such humour can be useful for learning because it constructs meaning with the humour itself and the jokes, especially when it is more explicit, such as slappy/sticky humour and wordplay.

In addition, this research has also provided evidence for faster comprehension of pragmatics through local culture-based humour. Dynel (2009) shows that beyond simple language transfer, there is a need to work specifically on humour adaptation, and the more individuals in a cultural group resemble each other, the easier it is for them to use humour because they share the same humour references. As Dynel (2009) further notes, humour can be a powerful pedagogical tool if it is framed with the learners' cultural background in mind, as cultural features in humour are typically the barriers to cross-language perception.

Furthermore, a study by Bell and Pomerantz (2014) showed that humour promotes pragmatic comprehension and increases L2 learners' confidence in using the target language more flexibly. They found that when language learners were exposed to comedy in the target language, they felt more comfortable participating in informal conversations and were more likely to respond spontaneously to humour.

As observed in the context of English language learning in Indonesia, this study implies the re-confirmation of Hammett et al. (2023) that in terms of memes, stand-up comedy, and films are the main sources of exposure to how humour works in the target language for language learners. With the increased use of social media, English language learners in Indonesia have a greater opportunity to learn humour authentically. However, this study also shows that although humour is more frequently encountered, humour comprehension still relies on individual pragmatic skills that can be improved through a more systematic approach to learning.

Zhou and Lee (2025) recently demonstrated the importance of explicit instruction in teaching humour to L2 learners. The research found that explicit instruction on the composition and function of humour in a foreign language led to greater gains in rhetorical understanding on the part of learners than those who were only passively exposed to humour in the media. This is consistent with the findings of this study, which suggest that humour-informed learning strategies should also be explicit about using humour in authentic interactions.

4.1. Theoretical and practical implications

These findings reinforce that humour is a multi-dimensional pragmatic device that needs to be approached as more than entertainment, requiring contextual depth. According to Dynel (2016), humour enables bridging the social world and can deepen communication and destroy relationships if the other is poorly understood/decoded. (This study shows that L2 learners (of English) have problems with sarcasm and cultural references, which means that explicit teaching of pragmatic language use is needed). Teaching knowledge of humour cannot be limited to teaching language skills but also to teaching intercultural communication. A learner accustomed to literal humour might misinterpret a sarcastic remark such as “Oh, good job!” Only when it is said with a certain tone does it mean something bad. Thus, a more contextualized approach to learning, based on real-life instances of social engagement in the target language, is becoming increasingly common.

Furthermore, this finding supports Taguchi’s (2019) hypothesis, which highlights that exposure to the target language in real communication scenarios greatly supports the development of pragmatic competence. It suggests that humour is a spinal tool for improving pragmatic code and can be applied in language learning as long as a thorough thought process about the indirect meanings in the joke follows it. For example, in a language class, after showing a comedy clip from a film or stand-up comedy, the teacher can ask students to discuss whether there are elements of sarcasm, irony, or cultural reference that need to be explained. We also use interactive and dynamic teaching methods that help to engage students and encourage a natural interest in the subject.

Concluding from the findings of this study, the practical implications that can be drawn from the study are various applications in language teaching in general, especially the enhancement of pragmatic knowledge through humour. Incorporating humour into the language learning curriculum is one of them. Since humour has been shown to enhance pragmatic competence, language teachers should adopt a more humour-oriented strategy in their pedagogical approaches. Even stand-up comedy, memes, comedy films, or funny social media can be used to teach pragmatic understanding more intuitively. For example, in a learning session, teachers can show amusing memes that are common in English and have a play on words and then ask students to analyse the meaning and how it can be compared to humour in Indonesian. This will make learning more fun and, at the same time, increase understanding of the structure of humour in the target language.

Furthermore, given the popularity of social media in recent years, short humorous content on social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube articles can be a potential area of authentic language use for language learning. Teachers could ask students to find out how humour is used in such short videos and then discuss the pragmatic components in them. I once saw a short video on TikTok explaining how sarcastic tones differ in English and Indonesian. However, this can also be an interesting linguistic discussion about how humour works in different languages and cultures. In this way, students are (passively) exposed to humour in the L3 and actively identify pragmatic patterns present in authentic instances of communication.

A culture-centred approach is another strategy that can be implemented, in which the introduction of humour can be gradual, starting with more familiar types of humour to which learners are already accustomed and then moving on to more culture-specific humour. At the beginning of the learning process, teachers can use situation-based humour (slapstick), which is more universal and easier for L2 learners to understand. After that, students can be taught wordplay, such as relying on homonyms or idioms, which increasingly require more advanced language skills. Once they have an adequate knowledge base, sarcastic humour, and foreign cultural references can be further explored. This is not a bad way of simplifying learners’ cognitive hurdles when it comes to humour in the language they are learning.

For example, in an English class in Indonesia, teachers can introduce a form of visual humour in comedy films that do not use many languages, such as the physical scene in *Mr. Bean*. Once students are used to this form of humour and exposed to memes with puns, they can be asked to watch stand-up comedy clips with sarcasm or cultural references. Through progressive steps, learners can learn how to adopt and adapt different types of humour to the language at hand, leading to better pragmatic competence in intercultural exchanges.

4.2. Research limitations and suggestions for future research

Although this study has contributed to the role of humour in the development of pragmatic competence of English learners in Indonesia, there are still gaps to be addressed. Limitations of the study include that this research only focuses on English learners in one country (Indonesia), which means that the findings may not apply to second language learners in other contexts. However, humour as a communicative phenomenon may be viewed differently across cultures, and difficulties in using humour may have implications for intercultural communication; therefore, a series of similar studies in another language learning system is needed.

In addition, the intervention in this study was delivered over a relatively short period of four weeks. While this period is sufficient to observe short-term improvements in pragmatic comprehension, the long-term effects of exposure to humour remain uncertain. A longitudinal study over a longer period may provide a more accurate picture of how humour comprehension develops and overall language skill improvement.

Another limitation is the lack of a control group in the research design. This study used a pre-test and post-test approach to measure improvements in humour comprehension. Still, without a comparison group who did not receive the humour-based intervention, it isn't easy to ascertain whether the improvements were solely due to exposure to humour or were influenced by other factors. Therefore, future research could adopt a more rigorous design of randomized controlled trials (RCTs) to evaluate humour's effectiveness in language learning objectively.

To overcome this limitation, several future research directions can be explored. This is particularly true in the area of humour in learning languages other than English, which needs to be an area of further development. As each language features distinct pragmatic structures and humour patterns, subsequent research needs to focus on unpacking the role of humour in the acquisition of Mandarin, Japanese, or any other language that possesses its pragmatics. Understanding how humour operates in diverse literary capacities can enhance pedagogical approaches rooted in flexibility and cross-cultural participation.

Furthermore, future studies can investigate the type of humour that serves this function in language learning. This study shows that slapstick and puns are easier for L2 learners to access, whereas humour based on cultural references or sarcasm is more difficult to understand. However, there is still more to discover about how this humour can be used in the L2 curriculum. For example, researchers can experiment with the effectiveness of humour delivery methods, whether using video, animated text, or interaction-based activities would be the best strategy to improve learners' pragmatic competence.

Finally, future research could investigate the long-term effects of using humour in language teaching. Such longitudinal approaches can be used to analyse how exposure to humour may facilitate the development of pragmatic competence over time and how learners may begin to internalize and use humour in their everyday conversations/discourse. As more extensive and comprehensive studies are carried out, the role of humour in language learning can be better developed, and teachers can be given more practical guidance on integrating humour into second language teaching methods.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that humour significantly enhances the pragmatic competence of Indonesian L2 learners of English. The substantial improvement in post-test scores (from 53.78 to 65.72) confirms that humour-based exposure aids in understanding pragmatic implicatures, social norms, and inferential meanings. Slapstick and wordplay were the most accessible humour types, while sarcasm, irony, cultural references, and dark humour posed more significant challenges. The findings align with previous research and extend existing knowledge by identifying humour types most effective for Indonesian learners. The results highlight the need for explicit pragmatic instruction and immersive exposure to real-world humour. Practically, this study suggests integrating humour into language teaching through stand-up comedy, memes, and social media content. While the research offers valuable insights, its short intervention period and focus on Indonesian learners limit its generalizability. Future studies should adopt longitudinal designs to examine the long-term effects of humour in different cultural and linguistic settings.

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