

# Exploring teacher-initiated humour in Academic English classes: an Uzbek international university experience

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## Abstract

*As a subject focused on teaching grammar forms needed for academic studies and genres of academic writing, Academic English may seem tedious at times. Sometimes it is a complex subject for students who are fresh to academia and it needs a peculiar didactic approach to provide a smooth transition of students from general to academic English writing at a university level. One of these approaches may be using humour during classes. The current research explores teacher-initiated humour in Academic English classes at Westminster International University in Tashkent and its effects on students. Besides, it seeks answers to questions as to what types of humour teachers employ during the class mostly, how often they use humour, as well as students' and teachers' recommendations given on how to use humour in class. This study uses both qualitative and quantitative data extraction methods in the form of an online questionnaire with students and a semi-structured interview with teachers. Obtained results show that affective and social roles of humour, its quality of lessening anxiety, creates favourable conditions for students and teacher's connectedness, which outweighs other humour's roles. Besides, mnemonic and engaging roles of humour received a solid support in the respondents. To obtain a more positive effect, it is recommended that teachers, when incorporating humour in class, apply a systematic approach. Humour should be planned beforehand and needs to be appropriate. Moreover, it should be used with moderation.*

*Keywords: teacher-initiated humour, humorous effects, humorous discourse, humour in classroom.*

## 1. Introduction

Students are the group of people who study following traditional patterns of teaching at their universities. They attend lectures and seminars in search for knowledge and skills they will use in their future career. There are different methods of teaching students depending on the subject taught. Selecting a method to teach is a crucial mission for a teacher because, currently, teaching is similar to a fight for the students' attention due to the availability of numerous distractors

(such as smartphones or laptops connected to the Wi-Fi available at the University). One of the ways of making the lessons more accessible and appealing to students is using humour in the teaching and learning process. Integrating humour in teaching and its influence on the flow of the lesson and on students are still underexploited research areas in Uzbekistan. Thus, in order to fill this gap, the current research was undertaken at Westminster International University in Tashkent (WIUT). It aims to investigate the frequency of teacher-initiated humour in Academic English classes at WIUT. The study also explores humour genres teachers prefer to use. Besides, the effects of humour as well as students' and teachers' suggestions on how to better integrate humour into class are investigated.

The module of Academic English is a core year-long module taught to the third level students at WIUT. It is oriented to teach the fundamentals of academic English, including basic academic genres, academic vocabulary, frequently used grammar patterns, argumentation, searching for suitable sources, referencing, plagiarism matters, and presentation skills. Overall, 15 instructors teach Academic English to about 40 groups of students. Level 3 students are those who take the "The Certificate in International Foundation Studies" (CIFS) course. They are mainly graduates of high-school, academic lyceum or vocational college who are new to academia and are mostly perplexed and timid when they start their studies at WIUT. This may be explained by the fact that they start their studies in a new system (British Educational System is in use at WIUT) and some of them face problems with English as the medium of instruction at the University.

## **2. Literature review**

The effects of incorporating humour have been studied by multiple researchers since the 1970s. In his study, Veith (2007) discovered that using humour during classes may favourably affect the retention of information transmitted during classes. Besides, students experience learning as a fun activity which helps them to open up themselves and socialize with each other, both with their groupmates and the teacher, which, in turn, helps the teacher to build a good rapport with them.

Motlagh, Motallebzade and Fatemi (2014) came to the conclusion that humour, in general, is a good tool to stimulate learning, especially when developing reading comprehension skills. Moreover, they approved of the idea of humour's effect on increasing intrinsic motivation in the class. Furthermore, Doyon (2003) expressed the opinion that in order to nourish students' enjoyable learning experience, one can use jokes, anecdotes and games. Chergui (2018), on the other hand, investigated humour's impact on establishing rapport between the teacher and students. She stated that using humour by the teacher increases their approachability and sustains a favourable environment, thus enlivening the learner's progress.

Also, Muqun and Lu (2006) mentioned that incorporating humour in the class from the target culture should be done, in order to cover potential culture gaps. Moreover, using humorous elements in class is also a good approach to learn new words because to understand a word, one needs first to comprehend the socio-cultural frame of the target culture. Wagner and Urios-Aparisi list six effects humour can make on students:

1. teaching effectiveness;
2. student learning;
3. creating an enjoyable classroom environment;
4. higher student motivation;
5. more positive evaluations of teachers by students;
6. enhanced teacher immediacy in the classroom.

(Wagner and Urios-Aparisi 2011: 403)

Anthony (2013) concluded that there are 7 roles of humour in conventional face-to-face classes: affective, mnemonic, linguistic, cultural, engaging, social, and attention-getting roles. The

affective role is about humour's function of lowering anxiety and fear; the mnemonic role of humour means fostering retention of the material taught with the use of humour; the linguistic role implies introduction of language forms and stimulation of students' noticing, whereas the cultural role suggests using humour to understand the culture of the target language country better; the engaging role of humour indicates creating a classroom environment in which students freely interact with each other and the teacher; the social role of humour assumes humour's role in giving off the feeling of togetherness (connectedness); and the last, attention-awakening role, aims to attract students' attention (Anthony 2013).

Furthermore, the effects of using humour in the college context were studied by Dieter (2000). He emphasized that using humour during classes can be an effective tool if it is appropriate, well planned and not offensive. His survey results revealed that the majority of respondents react positively to the utilization of humour in class. Medgyes (2002), on the other hand, identified three important qualities of humour: universal, culture-specific and idiosyncratic. Schmitz, relying on the opinions of Long and Graesser (1988), divided humorous discourse into three groups: "universal (or reality-based joke)", "cultural joke or cultural-based joke" and "linguistic joke or word-based joke" (2002: 93-94). In both divisions of humorous discourse, the universal type implies discourse which is easily understood by everyone and jokes which may be categorized as international, may be translated into other languages and still keep their hilarious punch line. Culture-based or culture-specific jokes are jokes that may be understood only in a specific culture. The only difference in these two categorizations is in the third type of humorous discourse. Medgyes (2002) pointed out an idiosyncratic type of humorous discourse which is only understood by a specific person, i.e., the perception of humour may differ from person to person, whereas Schmitz relates the third type to linguistic or word-play jokes which are based on the play with language forms. Schmitz (2002) also suggested that the universal type of humour may be incorporated already at the beginner's level of study and continued at all levels. Furthermore, a linguistic joke is better to be used at an intermediate or advanced level; and all types of humorous discourse may be used at the advanced level.

### **3. Methodology**

The research group consisted of level three students and 15 Academic English instructors working at WIUT. The methods used in this study were a survey conducted among students using a free Google Forms tool and a semi-structured interview with teachers. Overall, 104 students, the majority of whom ranged from 18 to 26 years old (87.5%), took part in the questionnaire and the gender balance consisted of the following percentage: 55.8% male (58) and 44.2% female (46) students. In order to obtain quantitative data for analysis, the online questionnaire was mainly used, to reach a larger number of people in a relatively short period of time (the response period was 3 weeks). A semi-structured interview with teachers was used to receive deeper insights and teachers' perspective into the matter of the effects of incorporating humour into the classes. By answering the questionnaire, students gave their consents to participate in the research and consent forms were filled in by the teachers who gave the interview; thereby, the ethical issues were considered.

The questionnaire comprised 12 questions: 8 multiple-choice questions, 2 yes/no questions, 1 open-ended question, and 1 agree/disagree matrix Likert scale question. Demographic information was requested in the first three questions of the survey, such as the age, gender and IELTS score of the participants. The remaining questions were aimed at finding out if Academic English instructors employ humour during classes, what the frequency of using humour in class is, and what types or genres the teachers mostly use. It should be stated that because Dieter

(2000) did his research in higher educational context, some of his survey statements (on which students should have agreed or disagreed) were used as a model for the questionnaire in the part asking about the effects of humour used by the teacher, as perceived by students, and about humour's other functions in class. This was done with the intention of comparing the findings of the current research with the outcomes of Dieter's study. Furthermore, the last question of the survey was an open-ended question asking students to give their suggestions to teachers on how to employ humour during lessons.

In its turn, the semi-structured interview consisted of 12 questions: 1 multiple-choice question, 1 yes/no question, 1 agree/disagree matrix Likert scale question, and 9 open-ended questions. The goal of conducting a semi-structured interview with teachers was to disclose the teachers' insight on the usage, effects and features of humour during classes. Sometimes the questions given to the teachers resembled those given to students in the online survey. Thus, the given answers allowed revealing the opinions of both students and teachers about the same matters.

## **4. Results**

This section describes the obtained results of the survey and the semi-structured interview. Hence, it is divided into two parts: 4.1. Survey results and 4.2. Interview results.

### **4.1. Survey results**

The answers to the question about IELTS score revealed that students with IELTS score 6.0 and 6.5 made up an equal proportion, i.e., for both 6.0 and 6.5 IELTS scores, 24 students checked the box. 15 students had an IELTS score of 7.0 and the same number of respondents had 7.5. Furthermore, 13 students stated that their IELTS score was 5.5 and, overall, 4 students had IELTS score 8.0. Besides, 9 students have entered the CIFS level after completion of pre-university courses (which aim to develop students' language skills from B1 level to B2 upon completion, according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)) delivered by WIUT teachers.

Turning to the description of the findings connected with humour usage in class and its effects, the results show that about 83% of all Academic English teachers use humour during their classes. According to the data, the frequency of employing humour during classes is as follows: 'sometimes' – 51% 'often' – 28%, 'rarely' – 12%, and 'always' – made 7%. The variable 'never' was chosen by only one student (1.1%). Mostly, students understand humorous elements the teacher uses, which comprises 61% for 'always', 27% for 'often' and 10% for 'sometimes'. The options 'rarely' and 'never' were chosen by an equal number of students (1.1% each). Humour used by the teacher relates to the class material, in most of the cases, as the variables 'always' and 'often' were selected altogether by 50% of students. 36% of students think that such humour is 'sometimes' connected to the class material. The eighth question in the survey was a checkbox type of multiple-choice questions in which students should have chosen which type or genre of humour the teacher uses (definitions of humorous genres were given in the question itself so that students did not feel confused). Notably, the 'jokes' category leads as the type of humour used by the teacher (57%, i.e., 52 students checked the box). The humorous element used in class which was second in popularity is 'situational' one (a funny remark resulting from a certain situation), with 53% (48 students). Sarcasm (40%, i.e., 36 students) was used more often than irony (35%, i.e., 32 students), in the students' opinion. The least preferred humorous genres proved to be cynicism (9%), comic videos (4%) and cartoons (0%).

Table 1 shows the findings regarding the effects of humour used by the teacher on students. As it can be observed, humour lessens the anxiety level and makes students feel safe; thus, they are open to ask questions. In addition, students support the idea that humour is a good way to establish rapport with the teacher. It also motivates them and helps to remember and understand the material better. Humour gives students an impetus to share their opinions with their groupmates, feel engaged in the group work and make jokes themselves. Modest support was given to the idea of humour's enhancing listening and speaking skills (more than 20 students supported this idea). The claims that teacher's humour distracts students from the lesson, feeling offended by teacher's self-deprecating humour and losing respect for the teacher (as a result of his/her use of humour) received minimal support and accounted for 4.2%, 1.1% and 0%, respectively.

Table 1. The effects of humour used in class

The effects of teacher's humour	Percentage of selected variables
It distracts me from the lesson	4 (4.2%)
It establishes a good rapport between me and the teacher	47 (49.5%)
I lose respect for the teacher (a lesson is a serious thing)	0 (0%)
I feel motivated for the lesson (e.g., to complete a task)	38 (40%)
I feel offended because teacher's humour is sometimes biting (self-deprecating or negative)	1 (1.1%)
I remember the lesson's material better if the teacher uses humour	46 (48.4%)
I understand the lesson better if the teacher uses humour	37 (38.9%)
I feel safe (not anxious)	38 (40%)
I feel free to ask questions posed by the teacher and answer his/her questions	56 (58.9%)
I share my opinions freely during classes	43 (45.3%)
I also make jokes after I experience teacher's humour	31 (32.6%)
I feel engaged in the group works	39 (41.1%)
It improves my listening skills	26 (27.4%)
It improves my speaking skills	22 (23.2%)
Most frequent answers given to the option 'other'	No answers were given to this option

The Likert scale question 10 in the survey delved deeper into the matter, asking the students to express their opinions about the given statements and revealed the results which are illustrated in Figure 1.

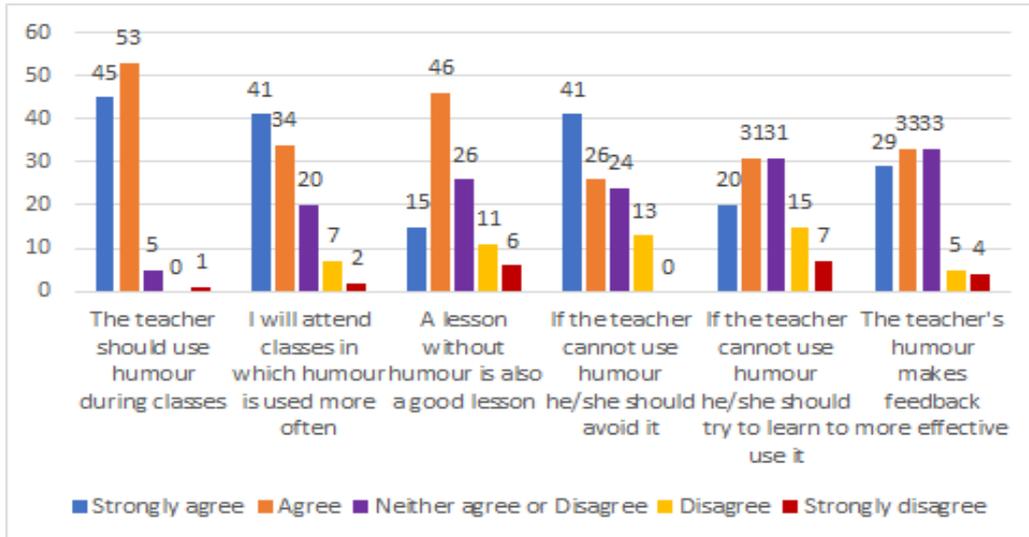


Figure 1. Students' opinions about different statements on humour usage during classes

As Figure 1 reveals, 98 students, to a different extent, opt for the usage of humour by the teacher during classes. Moreover, students are more willing to attend classes during which humour is employed (75 students agree with statement 2). It should be stated that a majority of students agree that a lesson without humorous elements used is also a good lesson (61 students agree with this statement). However, 26 students expressed their neutrality and 19 students disagreed with the statement. Interesting reactions were received for the two opposing statements: “If the teacher cannot use humour, he/she should avoid it” versus “If the teacher cannot use humour, he/she should try to learn to use it”. Thus, students mostly agreed that if the teacher cannot use humour properly, he/she had better abstain from using it (67 students mostly agreed and 13 students disagreed). 51 students agreed that teachers should learn how to use humour during classes, 22 students disagreed and 31 students neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement. Furthermore, feedback which is given with a portion of humorous elements was deemed more effective, as 62 students agreed, 33 students stayed neutral and 9 students disagreed with the statement.

Eventually, the last question in the survey was an open-ended question asking for students' suggestions on how humour could be used in class. While answering this question, some students have first listed the effects of humour, both positive and negative ones, and after that gave their recommendations. Students believed that teacher-initiated humour helps to establish good rapport between the teacher and students. In addition, it improves the atmosphere in class and enhances students' mood, thus countering boredom. Humour also helps students to be involved in class, to understand the topic better and to remember the material. In their answers, students reiterate the idea to abstain from the use of cynicism and sarcasm. Besides, according to their recommendations, jokes about nations, races and religions should also be a ‘taboo’ in class. Other factors which need to be considered based on the students' answers include students' dispositions (with some, a teacher may joke and with some he/she cannot because of personality traits); age of the students (the teacher needs to ask himself/herself if students are mature enough to understand the joke); the seriousness of the task (if the task is complex and significant, better not to use humour); measure (humour should be used in a balanced way and should not be overused); and relatedness to the topic of the classes' topic (for instance, humour can be used as a part of the lesson when the teacher wants to set examples about the topic of the lesson). Overall, students recommend the teachers to practice humour beforehand if he/she is not sure of the effect it may result in and to be natural.

## **4.2. Interview results**

Academic English teaching team at WIUT comprises 15 lecturers. Out of 15 teachers, 11 of them are female and 4 are male. In order to find out their opinions on the possible effects and characteristics of teacher-initiated humour, they were invited to participate in a semi-structured interview. According to the responses of the teachers, all of them use humour during their classes, but with different frequency. 5 of them use humour every lesson, 3 of them use it 'often', 1 teacher responded that she 'usually' uses humour in her class, and 4 teachers declared that they 'sometimes' use humour. Only 1 teacher stated that he uses humour depending on the level of rapport that he has with the group: "In some groups – often, in some others – not as much".

Teachers were asked if they use humour on a planned basis or utilize it naturally based on a situation. 14 teachers responded that humour during their lessons comes naturally and is initiated by them based on a situation. One teacher held a partial position and said that she sometimes plans humour usage in her class beforehand. Furthermore, with a small difference in percentage (53.3% for 'no' and 46.7% for 'yes'), teachers believe that not all students comprehend the humour they generate during the class.

Regarding the question about the reasons why teachers use humour during their classes, they gave the following responses:

- to create positive atmosphere,
- to reduce anxiety and stress,
- to make the learning process interesting,
- to engage students,
- to break the ice,
- to build trust and rapport,
- to promote understanding and retention of the lesson's material,
- to hint at students' mistakes in a more comfortable way,
- to eliminate boredom,
- to attract the students' attention,
- to show that the teacher is open, friendly and not strict,
- to manage the classroom,
- to mitigate the situation for shy students,
- to make the content relevant to students' real life experiences,
- to entertain.

The sixth question was about the types of humour the teachers employ during their classes. As the question was a multiple-choice checkbox question, they could choose more than one option. The findings indicate that teachers mostly use 'jokes' (86.7%) and they like to ironize (86.7%). They also utilize situational humour (80%) frequently. Furthermore, sarcasm was chosen by 9 teachers (60%), which is one more than pun that was chosen by 8 teachers (53.3%). Uzbek culture-specific humour was chosen 5 times and the overall percentage constitutes 33.3%. Moreover, cartoons and comic videos are used by the teachers at a low rate. Comic videos are used a little more than cartoons and the usage percentage of both types made 20% and 13.3% respectively. The least preferred type of humour to be applied during the lesson is 'cynicism' (6.7%).

Further, teachers were asked about the time to use humour during classes in the seventh question. Most teachers (9 of them) hold the opinion that there is no best time to implement humorous elements and, therefore, it should be used at a moment when it fits the situation and the context. Moreover, some teachers agree that using humour becomes effective when students feel tired (closer to the end of the lesson) and show signs of distraction (3 teachers). 2 teachers claimed that they employ humour at the beginning of the lesson. Furthermore, one interviewee, when responding to this question, noted the occasions when she usually made use of humorous elements during the class: "If I want to teach a student a lesson on his mistake done several

times, I use humour. Sometimes students do not learn unless you bring a funny example, so I use humour in that case too”.

When teachers were asked about the effects of teacher-initiated humour on their students, 7 of them shared the opinion that, in general, it is positive. Students feel relaxed, confident and start participating in discussions and asking questions eagerly. As one teacher stated: “It [humour] creates a relaxed atmosphere for students and weakens students’ ‘affective filter’. A term coined by Stephen Krashen”. Another positive outcome of humour usage can be observed in establishing rapport with students. Teachers think that by employing humour in class, they imply their approachability and friendliness. Thus, even shy students can feel that they are in a safe situation and, as a result, engage in the class more actively. Moreover, some of other effects which were mentioned by teachers include: improving the mood of students by eradicating boredom, helping students to remain focused by increasing their attention during classes, increasing learning effect, and working with students’ mistakes in a more mitigating manner. However, one teacher indicated that students do not react to teacher-initiated humour “in a particular way”. Sometimes, as one teacher shared her observations, they react even negatively: “I observed a positive reaction, but not everyone liked my sarcasm. I know it from students’ feedback”.

Question 9 was a Likert- scale type of question and teachers were asked to share their opinions, i.e., indicate if they agree or disagree with the given statements. Figure 2 illustrates the results obtained for the question 9:

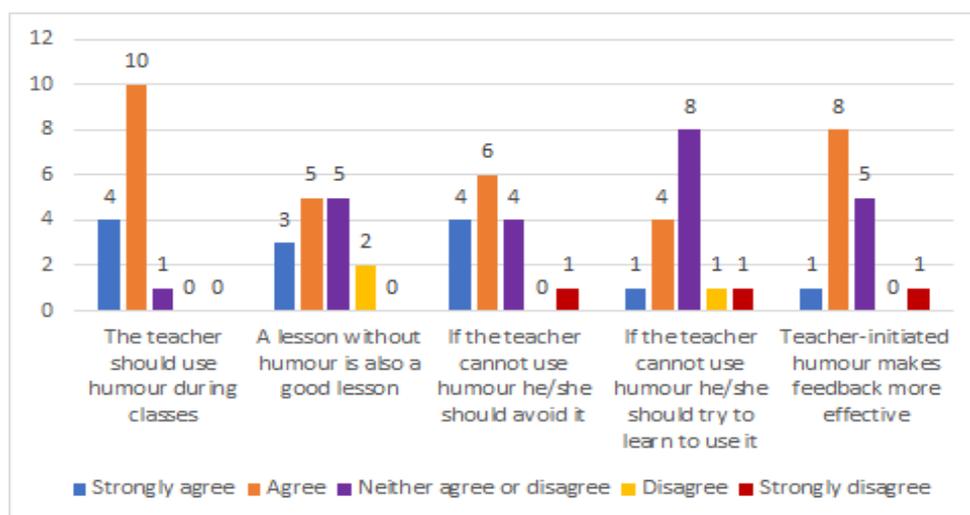


Figure 2. Teachers’ opinions about different statements on humour usage in class

The data given in Figure 2 shows that the majority of teachers (14) agree, to a different extent, that teachers should use humour during their classes. As it can be seen from the answers to the second statement, 8 teachers think that a lesson without humour is also a good lesson, whereas 5 teachers found it difficult to take a concrete position. Thus, they neither agreed or disagreed, and 2 teachers disagreed with the statement 2. One interviewee who agreed with statement 2, in addition to her answer, commented that, without humour, lessons may be boring; however, using a lot of humour may also produce unwanted effects: “Too much humour is also not good. Once, I observed one of our colleague’s lessons and there was too much humour. Coz students started making jokes outside of the class with the teacher too. I just did not like that”. Furthermore, 4 teachers strongly agree, 6 teachers agree, 4 neither agree or disagree, and 1 teacher strongly disagrees that if a teacher cannot use humour, he/she should avoid it. The answers to statement 4, which implied that teachers who cannot use humour should try to learn to use it, show that

the majority of respondents (8 teachers) take a neutral position about it. 5 teachers agree with the statement to a different extent, while the options ‘disagree’ and ‘strongly disagree’ received equal support (1 each). Regarding the assumption that teacher-initiated humour makes feedback more effective, it can be observed in Figure 2 that 9 teachers support it. 5 teachers could not take one side and they chose the option ‘neither agree or disagree’ and 1 teacher strongly disagreed with the statement.

Question 10 was asked as a supplement to question 6 regarding the usage of Uzbek culture-specific humour in class. Those who checked the box ‘Uzbek culture-specific humour’ (5 teachers) while answering the question 6 were additionally asked to give examples for humour related to the Uzbek culture that they used during their lessons. One interviewee said that he sometimes uses this type of humour but, at the time of the interview, he could not remember any examples. Two teachers suggested that Uzbek traditional proverbs sound funny if they are directly translated from Uzbek into English. These teachers stated that they often make use of this strategy during their classes. Furthermore, one respondent shared the following example which was connected with a widespread stereotype about female drivers in the Uzbek culture:

“In seminar 21, we said that babies might develop prejudice towards the speakers of a language different from their mother tongue. Many students did not know what prejudice/bias stands for. So, I used an example of female drivers who are mocked by male drivers as “quli qiyshu” [“crooked handed” – direct translation from Uzbek] while driving in Uzbekistan”.

(Example 1)

One more example which was given by another teacher is connected with the recently much discussed Uzbek film director who is criticized for low quality films:

“Once I had to use trends happening on Uzbek social media channels to explain a complex notion to students. It was about ‘predicting content of listening’ skill. Here is how I used it: ‘Imagine you watch so many Uzbek movies, any movies made by Uzbek directors and companies, and even *that director*<sup>1</sup> movies (this is the moment of a joke, as *that director* is an outspoken poet, commonly trolled for filming low quality movies, too many movies which have the same content, characters and events). So that next time when any movie by *that director* appears, you start predicting what’s going to happen in the movie by just looking at the title of the movie. This is what we call predicting. You start predicting because you have enough background knowledge, and you start using your background knowledge to predict the content of listening and/or reading texts’. This was a joke. So, the student who knows who is *that director* could appreciate the joke but those who did not know this specific director did not understand the meaning and the purpose of the joke”.

(Example 2)

Question 11 was given to find out if teachers suggest other teachers (colleagues, mentees and novice teachers) to use humour during classes. Teachers (10) mainly asserted that they suggest their colleagues to employ humour during lessons. However, some of them provided requirements to follow when utilizing humour in class, such as to use humour “in appropriate and relevant situations”, to know the audience well before using humour and to regard the ability of using humour and employ humour if one can use it “effectively only”. One respondent suggested that other teachers should use humour in class because “it can create rapport and break the ice between the teacher and students”. One more interviewee supported this rationale and mentioned that he already had had an experience of being suggested to use humour during classes in a teacher education institution. Notably, one teacher referred to her online teaching experience and supported the idea of using humour by other teachers because, as she claimed, “when teaching online, humour brings people closer”. 5 teachers indicated that they cannot

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<sup>1</sup> The phrase “that director” in italics is used instead of the name of the mentioned film director.

recommend other teachers implementing humour in class by stating different reasons. One of the reasons which was indicated was that a teacher may feel insecure when using humour. One more reason referred to the impossibility of teaching or training others on how to use humour. Furthermore, one respondent, when replying to that question, expressed the following view: “Not really. I feel like it’s a personal choice of each teacher. We should also take into account the teachers’ temperament, comfort with using humour, and teaching experience. Student-teacher rapport also plays a great role on the levels of comfort with which teachers can or cannot use humour”. One interviewee said that she was hesitant whether teachers can use humour properly, whereas another teacher claimed that she did not suggest it to anyone, or cannot suggest in general, without providing grounds for her response.

The last question in the interview was an open-ended question in which respondents could provide any other relevant comments. One of the interviewees stated: “To be frank, humour is best applied with groups that have good discipline, dynamics and level of perception; these prerequisites let the teacher feel more willing to keep a friendly, less tense atmosphere in class by giving students a kind of a breathing space”.

## **5. Discussion**

As can be observed from the survey and interview results, the majority of students (83%) and all interview respondents confirm that Academic English teachers use humour during their classes. It is necessary to note that, as regards both students’ and teachers’ responses, teachers do not use a systematic approach in applying humour during classes. As stated by teachers during the interview, they use humour at different time intervals because it mainly depends on the appropriate situation and context. This may serve as an explanation as to the students’ responses in the survey, who stated that teachers do not employ humour during their classes (17%), as, perhaps, they simply missed the humour or it was not notable enough to remember that moment from the lesson.

According to students’ responses, the understanding level of the teacher’s humour by students in class is relatively high (61% for ‘always’ and 27% for ‘often’). Nevertheless, the attitude of teachers to students’ comprehension level as regards teacher-initiated humour proved to be a little inconclusive because 53.3% of interviewed teachers opted for ‘no’ and 46.7% chose ‘yes’. Continuing the point on the relatively high comprehension level of teacher-initiated humour resulting from students’ survey responses, this outcome may be related to student’s language proficiency levels (IELTS 5.5. – 13 students; IELTS 6.0 and 6.5. – both 24 students; IELTS 7.0 and 7.5. – both 15 students; IELTS 8.0 – 4 students; pre-university course graduates/B2 level – 9 students). WIUT accepts students with an IELTS score of minimum 5.5 if there are no other candidates with higher scores. Thus, 5.5 – 6.5 is considered to be an upper-intermediate or independent user level, according to CEFR (British Council, no date; Council of Europe 2001). According to Schmitz (2002), at this level, students can already understand universal and linguistic jokes. Besides, the higher the level, the more understanding blocks for linguistic and culture-based humour should fall (Schmitz 2002). Still, some answers from the students’ survey were observed showing lower understanding levels (10% for ‘sometimes’ and ‘rarely’ and ‘never’ 1.1% each). Correspondingly, some teachers also shared their scepticism about the fact that students comprehend all the humorous elements introduced. Two teachers in the interview stated that students do not understand humorous situations, connecting it to language barriers which, in turn, contradicts Schmitz’s opinion. Despite the fact that students have IELTS certificates referring to certain levels, some students may still struggle to understand the language elements teachers use. Moreover, another explanation for this outcome could be explained by the idiosyncrasy of humour’s perception (Medgyes 2002).

Furthermore, as the results show, with slight differences from both students' survey and teachers' interview results, teachers mostly employ jokes, irony, situational humour (a language remark inspired by a situation), sarcasm, and puns during classes. Similar results were obtained by Chergui (2018) who states that jokes, language play and riddles prevail in usage by teachers in class. Hence, jokes and situationally funny language compositions may help to suppress stress and instill a more receptive atmosphere in the class (Wagner & Urios- Aparisi 2011). This, in turn, stimulates students' engagement and their higher learning achievements (Said & Weda 2018). Irony and sarcasm may be used to manage the classroom and students' behaviour (Akhtarian & Chalak 2017). However, they may have a "biting" effect and distance the students from the teacher, lowering students' motivation and self-confidence. Besides, sometimes it may be too complicated to decipher the meaning of the teacher's sarcasm and irony (Bryant & Zillman 1989).

The findings reported in Table 1 illustrate the functions which humour may have during classes from the students' perspective. These functions include students' feeling open to ask questions (58.9%), establishment of rapport between the students and the teacher (49.5%), high material retention (48.4%), feeling free to share opinions (45.3%), engagement in group activities (41.1%), lessening the anxiety level in the class and motivation increase (40%), understanding of the material (38.9%), student's making jokes on their own (32.5%) as well as bettering listening (27.4%) and speaking skills (23.2%).

Apart from these functions which stem from students' questionnaires and, in general, resemble the responses given by the teachers, the teachers also indicated some other humour functions in class. These encompass humour's mitigation effect on working with students' mistakes, classroom management effect, mood improvement effect, entertainment effect, and boredom eradication effect. The results acquired may be compared with the 7 roles of humour in class described by Anthony (2013). The fact that the student's openness and willingness to ask questions freely thanks to humour and having a good rapport with the teacher gained much support from students leads to the conclusion that a mutually trustworthy, amiable and easy atmosphere is created because of humour's usage by the teachers. Thus, students appreciate humour's affective role (humour's function of eliminating anxiety and fear) and social role (humour's function of connecting people). By their selections, students also endorsed more mnemonic and engaging roles of humour. Furthermore, humour did not distract students, according to this study (4.2%); instead, it raised their motivation. Thus, its attentional role was underlined (Anthony 2013). The cultural role of humour was not referred to by students in the survey. However, some teachers have shared insights about culture-related humour during the interview. Overall, 5 respondents in the interview said that they use or have used humorous elements related to Uzbek culture, whereas the other 10 teachers were not enthusiastic about using culture-specific humour. One teacher stated that, when using humour, she should ensure that the students are comfortable with the humour used. Therefore, she said: "I try to be alert and culturally sensitive when using humour". As one teacher explained, WIUT is an international university and students of different nationalities study there. Hence, the reason why culture-specific humour is not much used in the lesson's context may be because teachers do not want to upset the students by using some culture-sensitive jokes. Another reason for low usage rates of culture-specific humour may be the specificity of Academic English and its content, which does not require conveying much cultural information specified in the teaching syllabus. Besides, as indicated by one teacher in 'example 2' related to Uzbek culture-specific humour, culture-related humour is sometimes difficult to comprehend. Cultural jokes may relate to different cultural subtleties and customs. Thus, in order to understand them, one should have background knowledge of the specific culture. When expressing his opinion on cultural jokes, Schmitz claimed that:

In order to appreciate this type of joke, learners have to be familiar with the cultural practices of a nation, society or community.

(Schmitz 2002: 103)

Linguistic role's gaining this low prop in the survey outcomes can be interpreted by the lack of systematic approach to the implementation of humour during classes. As it was mentioned by the interviewees, there is a special moment during the lesson in which one feels that it is a suitable time to use humour. Hence, teacher-initiated humour is mostly spontaneous and not planned, as follows from current research findings. Consequently, this prompts the idea that humour is not used with a particular intention of improving language skills of listening and speaking. Thereby, enhancing these competencies in Academic English classes at WIUT occurs on a moderate level (as given in Table 1) as a side effect. However, in order to increase humour's linguistic role, Schmitz (2002) indicates that the usage of humour should be planned by the teacher and it should be an integral part of the lesson. Being planned, but without losing its spontaneity, will increase the efficacy of humour.

Students opt for teacher's abstaining from using humour if they feel doubt concerning humour and they believe that the teacher should learn to use humour during classes (see Figure 1). Teachers, in general, agreed on refraining from the use of humour in class if one cannot use it (see Figure 2). However, teachers could not express a unified position (8 teachers chose the option 'neither agree or disagree') on the assumption that a teacher can learn to use humour during classes. One teacher who disagreed with the statement added that using humour cannot be taught because "It is natural". As she said, "you have it or you don't have it". Not much information was found in literature on whether a teacher can learn to implement humour in class. However, as Abu Bakar (2018) concludes in his research, teachers whom he surveyed expressed the will to have guidance in the area of using humour in class because it might help them to receive insights on how to use humour in a more conscious manner rather than spontaneously. As Huss and Eastep (2016: 44) claim, if the teacher is not confident of his/her abilities to create humorous discourse himself/herself, he/she could use "cartoons", "comics" or "video clips".

On the whole, both students and teachers support the idea that humour makes feedback more effective (see Figure 1 and Figure 2). Jawhar (2018) also underlines humour's mitigating role when a student receives feedback by helping a student to save his/her face. In addition, students positively evaluate those teachers who employ humour in class, stating that they would take part in their lessons more willingly (Wagner & Urios-Aparisi 2011).

The results given in Table 1 and Figure 1 should also be partially compared with the outcomes obtained by Dieter (2002). In his research, Dieter emphasised vivid enthusiasm of students towards the usage of humour by the teacher. Notably, the respondents of the present study also expressed substantial support for humour usage. The comparison of some of the assumptions is given below in Table 2. It should be noted that in Dieter's (2002: 21) survey, students were asked to respond 'strongly agree', 'agree', 'neutral', 'disagree', or 'strongly disagree' (where their responses were assigned values from 5 to 1, respectively). In the present research, there were multiple-choice checkbox questions and agree/disagree statements.

Table 2. The comparison of the present research results with Dieter's

Present research: survey questions statements	Present research: survey findings	Dieters' research: survey findings	Dieter's research: survey statements
I remember the material better if the teacher uses humour	46 (48.4%)	Class #1 <b>4.03</b> Class #2 <b>4.02</b> Class #3 <b>3.96</b>	I am more likely to remember class material if it is presented with humor.

I feel free to ask questions posed by the teacher	56 (58.9%)	Class #1 <b>3.97</b> Class #2 <b>3.61</b> Class #3 <b>3.75</b>	I feel more comfortable asking an instructor a question if he/she uses humor in the classroom.
I feel offended because the teacher's humour is sometimes biting (self-deprecating or negative)	1 (1.1 %)	Class #1 <b>1.91</b> Class #2 <b>2.23</b> Class #3 <b>1.94</b>	I am sometimes offended by the use of humor by an instructor.
I will attend classes in which humour is used more often	Strongly agree (41) (39.4%) Agree (34) (32.6%) Neither agree or disagree (20) (19,2%) Disagree (7) (6.7%) Strongly disagree (2) (1.9%)	Class #1 <b>3.89</b> Class #2 <b>4.00</b> Class #3 <b>4.05</b>	I am more likely to go to a class where the instructor uses some humor.
It [humour] distracts me from the lesson	4 (4.2%)	Class #1 <b>3.91</b> Class #2 <b>4.07</b> Class #3 <b>4.00</b>	I am more likely to pay attention to an instructor if he/she uses humor in a lecture.

As it can be observed, in the selected aspects of comparison, assumptions about students' feeling offended by the teacher's use of humour received low support in both cases. Humour's favourable influence on memorization of the material received more support in Dieter's research and slightly lower in the present research. In contrast, 'feeling free to ask questions' rates higher in the current research compared to Dieter's findings. Overall, 75% of WIUT students agree, to a different extent, that they would take part in the classes of a teacher who employs humour, which resembles higher rates in Dieter's findings. Additionally, the present findings show that humour does not distract students from the class and Dieter's research, in its turn, reinforces humour's attentional role (Anthony 2013).

## 6. Conclusion

This study aimed to find out the characteristics and the possible effects of teacher-initiated humour during Academic English classes. As it can be synthesized from the present research, using humour in class produces fine effects, which may help both teachers and students. Thus, teachers at WIUT employ humour widely to establish a pleasant atmosphere in class and relate to the class material during Academic English classes. They mostly use jokes, situational humour (language remarks based on a situation to achieve a hilarious effect), irony, sarcasm, and puns. Some teachers also employ culture-specific humour and, in the context of this research, cultural jokes relate mostly to Uzbek cultural realities. However, other teachers are cautious about using culture-specific humour because, on the one hand, they do not want to upset the students and, on the other, they believe that not all students can comprehend cultural jokes without having specific cultural baggage and cultural awareness. Furthermore, teachers use humour in order to build a rapport with students, engage them in group activities and work on their mistakes. Students confirm that they mainly enjoy teacher-initiated humour and sometimes initiate humour themselves. They feel safe (i.e., not anxious) and free to ask questions, as well as stay motivated during the lesson. Moreover, humour helps the lesson's material retention and its processing.

The results of this research also suggest that the use of humour should be planned in a more systematic way and related to the lesson's content in order to achieve better effects. It should

also be noted that before applying humour in class, the teacher should know his/her audience well, consider the seriousness of the task, keep balance as regards the use of humour, and follow the limitations posed by some 'taboo' topics. One of the detrimental effects of humour is distancing the teacher and the student when the former makes the latter the object of tough irony, sarcasm or cynicism. While some students may bear these types of humour, it is better to be cautious and avoid using them. Thus, one may reckon that humour is a natural communicative means and, if used reasonably in class, may bring much positivity, fun and learners' progress.

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