

Humour in the classroom: forms and functions among Iranian EFL teachers

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Abstract

The present study was conducted with the purpose of investigating the use of humour by EFL teachers in a private language institute in the context of Iran. In so doing, the study made an attempt to identify the forms of humour EFL teachers opt to use more frequently in relation to the students' teaching in the classroom through observing their classroom teachings. Moreover, an interview was held with the EFL teachers to seek their perceptions with regard to the functions humorous language can serve in the process of language teaching and learning and their suggestions as to the implementation of humour in the classroom. The findings of the study demonstrate that Iranian EFL teachers show the inclination to use jokes, physical humour and riddles more frequently than other forms of humour. Moreover, the results of the interview reveal that EFL teachers assign some more commonly functions to the humorous language in the classroom such as creating a cheerful and friendly atmosphere, acting as a relaxing, comforting, and tension reducing device, increasing student interest and enjoyment, increasing learners' concentration and motivation, and finally improving the quality of learning. Finally, the suggestions for appropriate use of humour and implications of the study are discussed in the result and conclusion sections, respectively.

Keywords: EFL Teachers, humour forms, humour functions, classroom.

1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, the subject of humour and its effects on language learners' performance has received a lot of attention (Heidari-Shahreza & Heydari 2018). Despite several definitions, humour is typically understood as the production and conveyance of (conceptual) incongruity, which frequently causes its audience to laugh (Banas et al. 2011). Based on the four broad concepts of *language*, *logic*, *identity*, and *action*, humour may be divided into linguistic, ideational, existential, and physical categories, respectively (Juckel et al. 2016; Heidari-

Shahreza 2017). Thus, verbal humour is the construction of a humorous message by the use of words and linguistic techniques like puns, allusion, sarcasm, and jokes. Regarding the relationship between humour and language Alemi et al. (2021) maintain that they are both theoretically and practically intertwined (Alemi et al. 2021). In fact, verbal humour has been identified as a component of language play. Similar to this, language play is a metacognitive activity that involves (creative) altering linguistic aspects that are present in a specific situation in order to produce humour and/or to fulfil other (e.g. language learning) aims (Cook 2000; Bell et al. 2014). In a similar vein, Bell & Pomerantz (2016) defined language play as “any non-serious manipulation of language for either public or private amusement”. In other words, play frequently creates a sense of merriment in the speaker and interlocutors, allowing for humour to occur. Because a lot of language play contains humour (e.g., jokes, banter, hilarious anecdotes), the terms *language play* and *humour* are sometimes used interchangeably (Bell & Pomerantz 2016).

It is widely agreed that humour is difficult to describe. Humour is described as the deliberate use of verbal and non-verbal communication to elicit laughter and delight, as well as the transmission of incongruent yet entertaining messages (Martin 2007). According to Wagner & Urios-Aparisi (2011), humour in the classroom is an act done by any of the participants (i.e., students or teachers) using language or nonlinguistic methods. As pointed out by Bakar & Kumar (2019), there are three dominant theoretical perspectives in relation to humour consisting of the incongruity, relief, and superiority theories. From an incongruity theory lens, people are inclined to laugh at things which are surprising or contain elements which violate the already established patterns of thinking (Martin 2010). Based on relief theory, laughter as a physical reaction to successful humour (Lynch 2002; Alsop 2015) can contribute to the reduction of nervousness, stress, and anxiety (Bakar & Kumar 2019). From a superiority theory perspective, humour is characterised as an incidence of laughing at someone’s failure or reckless behaviour (Zillmann 1983) in which the winner of the joke considers themselves as having superiority over the loser of the joke (Gruner 2000).

As many scholars maintain (e.g. Martin et al. 2003; Wanzer et al. 2006; Frymier et al. 2008; Bieg & Dresel 2016), incorporating humour as a multidimensional concept has proven effective in teaching. A rising number of language education researchers argue for the use of humour in teaching, citing “a plethora of studies applauding the potential of humour in education” (Bieg et al. 2017: 24; see also Wulf 2010; Bell & Pomerantz 2016; Heidari-Shahreza 2021). Meanwhile, every educator should strive to develop positive relationships with their students. The use of humour can assist students in changing their minds about the instructor and make the latter more appealing (Eskey 2010). Similar to this, Micari & Pazos (2012) found that a student’s final grade increased in proportion to how positively they perceived their relationship with the professor—that is, how much they revered the professor, felt at ease talking to the professor, and how much the professor respected them. Additionally, a good rapport with the instructor predicted students’ assurance in their capacity to succeed in the course.

A rising number of academics suggest that humour has got an essential role to play in foreign language learning, although identifying exactly what that function is often be difficult (Neff & Rucynski 2021). Furthermore, current language learning research has highlighted the significance of student-centred learning as well as the advantages of a supportive and psychologically secure classroom setting (Benson 2012). Language play, which has been acknowledged as a beneficial resource for creating possibilities for creativity, unstructured communication, pleasure in the language process, and enhancing student confidence and motivation, has gotten a lot of attention in this context (Cook 2000; Carter & McCarthy 2004; Bell 2011, 2012). While the word *language play* can have varied connotations in different settings, Bell & Pomerantz (2016: 104) defined it as “any non-serious manipulation of language for either public or private fun” in the field of language training. Since Cook’s foundational

work (2000), an increasing number of scholars from a variety of educational contexts have advocated for the use of language play in the language classroom as a way for students to participate in more creative, exciting, and realistic language usage in a safe setting (e.g., Forman 2011; Waring 2013). In fact, one reason instructors may incorporate humour into their teaching is the possible positive impact on the learning process. For example, humour has been shown to improve a teacher's image and evaluation (Torok et al. 2004), make learning more fun (Medgyes 2001; Schmitz 2002), and promote motivation and learning (Frymier & Weser 2001). Similar to this, several educators and experts assert that humour has got the greatest effect on the learning process by boosting students' motivation to study a language. This might be accomplished by presenting the humour of the target culture(s) or by utilising (planned or unplanned) teacher-generated humour (Neff & Rucynski 2021). In a similar way, as asserted by Dewaele et al. (2018), incorporating creative or hilarious language into language learning classrooms can create an engaging environment that more closely resembles real-world language usage. Therefore, humour has also been demonstrated to improve learning and speed (Berk 2002; Garner 2003; Torok et al. 2004; Hackathorn et al. 2011), emphasising the need of bringing humour into the classroom.

Another reason for integrating humour into the classroom can be linked to its potential in the effective regulation of emotions and cognition and contributing to positive impacts in this regard. For instance, humour has been shown to lower exam anxiety and increase test performance (Berk 2000; Berk & Nanda 2006), improve problem-solving abilities, and encourage students to think creatively and critically (Dorman & Biddle 2006; Wanzer et al. 2010). All of the prior research suggests that humour has got a high potential for boosting second language engagement, students' pleasure of learning, minimising language anxiety, and improving the classroom environment (Cook 2000; Pomerantz & Bell 2011; Wagner & Urios-Aparisi 2011; Benson 2012; Dewaele et al. 2018).

Although many studies have been conducted on the positive roles humour plays in mediating learners' feelings and learning speed, to the best knowledge of the researchers, there is little research into teacher humour forms and functions in the real classroom in an Iranian EFL context (e.g., Heidari-Shahreza 2018). Therefore, this study, drawing on discursive analysis, aims to conduct an inquiry into the forms of humour Iranian EFL teachers in private language institutes prefer to utilise while teaching. Moreover, the study attempts to delve into their perceptions regarding the functions humour can serve in the classroom and their recommendations as to using humour appropriately in the classroom.

The classification of humour forms is based on a number of criteria: forms (the forms humour takes, such as jokes or comments), subjects (who/which humour is directed at, such as the teacher himself/herself, the students, or the topic, the lesson), relevance (to the lesson or the presentation involved in the studies), and levels of preparation (Petraki & Nguyen 2016). The taxonomy of Bryant et al. (1980) is utilised as a preliminary step for categorising humour, which includes jokes, riddles, puns, humorous stories, visual humour, physical humour, and other topics. Additionally, it allows for the emergence of humour types from the observations. In doing so, the current study aims to address the following questions.

2. Research questions

1. What forms of humour do Iranian EFL teachers prefer to use during teaching?
2. What are the Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions towards the functions of humour in the classroom?
3. What are the Iranian EFL teachers' suggestions for an appropriate use of humour in relations to the students?

3. Method

In the current study, an ethnographic qualitative approach (Creswell 2008; Mills & Morton 2013) is adopted with the objective of providing answers to the research questions targeting the kinds of humour utilised by Iranian EFL teachers, their attitudes towards the functions humour can fulfil and their recommendations pertaining to the appropriate use of humour in the classroom. This study employs an ethnographic qualitative approach to elicit teachers' perceptions of the role of humour in the language classroom. Therefore, in this study, a combination of observations and interviews is utilised and enables a more comprehensive exploration of the phenomenon of humour in the classroom and encourages participants' -emic-explanations on their use of humour. Observations and field notes were used to answer the first research question and interviews aims to address the remaining two research questions.

Observation is a commonly used method to collect data in social sciences (Lichtman 2010), especially in ethnographic studies. The researcher observes group behaviour as it occurs naturally in the setting, without any simulation or imposed structure (Ary et al. 2019). The use of observation as a method is considered to be appropriate as the study aims to investigate the use of humour occurring in class during the process of teaching and learning, and helps to capture the natural or unintentional use of humour by teachers which they may not always remember, and the instant reactions from students, which teachers may not always notice (Petraki & Nguyen 2016). Field notes observation sessions were employed and served as the basis for reflection during interviews which followed observations (Silverman 2006). The teachers have not been told that the focus of this study is the use of humour in the classroom to avoid preparation and to allow them to act naturally and to observe the validity issues.

A semi-structured interview (Dorney 2007) is employed in this study to address the research questions and come up with in depth responses on the part of teachers. The interview questions is primarily targeted at examining Iranian EFL teachers' preferred forms of humour, their perceptions of the functions humour serve and the suggestions concerning the implementation of humour forms in the classroom. The interviews were conducted in participants' mother tongue (i.e., Kurdish) to avoid communication breakdowns due to the possible inconvenience caused by the use of English by non-native speakers.

4. Data collection procedure

First, twenty EFL teachers (both male and female) working in an English institute in Eslam Abad Gharb, Kermashan, Iran were invited to participate in this study. They obtained their university degrees in disciplines relating to English language instruction. In doing so, in line with the ethical issues in research (Ary et al. 2019), at the very outset of the study, one session was devoted to a friendly interaction with the participants to provide a comfortable atmosphere for cooperation and inform them about the purpose and procedures of the study. In this regard, the participants' privacy was respected, and they were asked whether they allow for their class to be observed, and if they were willing to attend a subsequent semi-structured interview. Additionally, they were guaranteed that their identities would remain anonymous. As can be seen in Table 1, the participants in this research consisted of 20 female teachers between the ages of 20 and 35. In fact, in the institute in which the study was conducted, only two male teachers were working at the time of the research and they were not included for the sake of sample homogeneity. With regard to the experiences, most of the teachers enjoyed a good number of years of teaching experience. Finally, in regard to their degree, most of the teachers

held BA and MA in TEFL (Teaching English as a foreign language) with the exception of two teachers who had BA in English translation.

Table 1. Demographic information of EFL teachers

Age	Gender		Experience					Degree		
	M	F	0-5	5-10	10-15	15-20	more	BA	MA	PhD
25-38	0	20	3	6	6	5	0	12	8	0

After obtaining their informed consent, one of the researchers observed a total of 30 classes led by 20 different instructors who afterwards took part in a semi-structured interview. In average, there were about 15 students in each class. The sessions typically lasted 90 minutes. Each data collection session took an average of roughly 70 minutes, totalling 270 minutes of observation. In this study, humour was defined as attempts made by teachers to elicit laughter or amusement. However, the failed humorous actions and comments on the part of teachers did not get counted. Some of the contextual cues taken into account in relation to the use of humour by the EFL teachers included varying intonation, smiles, laughter, and facial and body movements. Also, all of these contextual cues contributed in one way or another to creating a humorous and amusing atmosphere in the classroom. These attempts at humour may stem from the teaching materials, the course topic, or the interactions among the students in the class (such as their actions or their answers to the teachers' questions), and they usually result in smiles or laughter (Petraki & Nguyen 2016).

Finally, following the observations, from right after the lesson to one week later, interviews with instructors were done. The instructors' recall and ability to reflect on their lessons was aided by the short interval between observations and interviews.

5. Data analysis

Thematic content analysis was conducted to analyse the data for the teachers' use of humour forms in the classroom and their responses to interview questions. Thematic analysis lends order and meaning to the data through categorising participants' descriptions (Dörnyei 2007). Initially, the first researcher transcribed and categorised the teachers' preferred kinds of humour observed. After double-checking the transcriptions to check any mismatch with the audio-recordings, the transcriptions were once more reviewed and coded using keywords from the interview questions by the first researcher. Such a categorisation led to the identification of the recurrent patterns in the teachers' responses. Then, in order to observe inter-rater reliability, the second researcher examined the highlighted codes and the final themes elicited by the first researcher. They negotiated over the points of difference until they reached complete consensus. Finally, drawing on frequency counts and descriptive statistics, the recurrent themes and patterns in the transcriptions were grouped together and their frequencies were counted. In so doing, the themes and patterns were placed into a thematic table according to the interview questions along with the representative excerpts from the teachers. Subsequently, all the patterns were carefully categorised to summarise the key themes in the interview data.

6. Results

6.1. EFL teachers' preferences of humour forms

To answer the first research question addressing the forms of humour teachers prefer to use in their classroom, the first researcher observed the classes of 20 EFL instructors teaching in a private language institute. In fact, the researcher looked into 270 minutes of class interaction with each session taking an average of roughly 70 minutes. Moreover, he took notes of the most frequently used types of humour while teachers were teaching English to the EFL students. The findings are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Frequency of teachers' use of humour in the classroom

Humour forms	Frequency	Percent
Jokes	5	25%
Riddles	4	20%
Puns	1	1%
Humorous stories	3	15%
Visual humour	2	10%
Physical humour	5	25%

As shown in Table 2, *jokes* and *physical humour* had the highest frequency (25 percent) among EFL teachers in an Iranian private language institutes. It indicates that teachers made use of jokes and physical humour more frequently than others forms of humour in their interacting with the students while teaching English materials to them. In addition, *riddle* was also commonly utilised by the teachers. In fact, riddles were the third most frequent kinds of humour teacher drew on during student teaching. The fourth form of humour which was also almost high in frequency was observed to be humorous stories teacher tended to tell when they were talking about a specific topic or in relation to a grammatical or lexical point triggering them to narrate a related funny story. *Visual humour* and *puns* as kinds of humour were less frequently used by EFL teachers in comparison with other humour forms.

Table 3. Iranian EFL teachers' use of humour forms in the classroom

Humour forms	Iranian EFL teachers (T1-T20)				
Jokes	T1	T5	T10	T11	T20
Riddles	T3	T5	T13	T18	
Puns	T8				

Humorous stories	T6	T14	T17		
Visual humour	T12	T16			
Physical Humour	T2	T7	T9	T10	T15
No Humour	T4	T19			

As can be seen in Table 3, the first researcher, in his observing the classes held by the 20 participant teachers of the study, came to the following findings: T1, T5, T10, T11, and T20 mainly made use of *jokes* in their instructional practices in the classroom. It is noteworthy that T5 also utilised *Riddles* as frequently as T10, T11, T13, and T20. Moreover, only T8 mostly tended to use *Puns* as a way to create a humorous atmosphere for the students. T6, T14, T17 opted for *Humorous stories*, and T12, T16 were observed to use *Visual humour*. Finally, T2, T3, T7, T9, T10, and T15 by and large employed *Physical humour* in the classroom. However, two teachers (T4 and T19) did not bring any abovementioned humour forms into play in their teaching English to students.

6.2. Teachers’ perceptions with regard to the functions of humour forms

In order to answer the second research question addressing EFL teachers’ perceptions towards the functions of humour in the classroom, teachers’ responses to interview questions were transcribed verbatim to achieve closeness to the data.

Any gaps in the transcriptions were examined. Following the collection and organisation of the data, the researchers began the iterative process of reading, analysing, and coding the information to transform it into pictures that accurately represented the perceptions of the teachers in the private language institute. To look for common themes in the teachers’ perspectives, the researchers analysed interview transcripts. Then, the instructors’ responses were categorised broadly to reflect the main themes that appeared in all of the interviews. The primary recurrent themes provided by teachers about their perceptions of the functions of humour were extracted through thematic analysis of the responses to interview questions from instructors. The extracted themes are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Extracted themes with regard to the teachers’ perception to the functions of humour

Extracted theme	Frequency	Percent
Creating a cheerful and friendly atmosphere	8	21.62%
Renewing learners’ energy	2	5.40%
Arousing learners’ curiosity	1	2.70%
Improving their speaking skill	2	5.40%
Improving the quality of learning	3	8.10%

Reducing educational burnout	2	2.70%
Acting as a relaxing, comforting, and tension reducing device	6	16.21%
Increasing student interest and enjoyment	6	16.21%
Improving learners' motivation	3	8.10%
Increasing learners' concentration	4	10.81%

As indicated in Table 4, the majority of the teachers (21.62%) were of the opinion that humour can give rise to a cheerful and congenial atmosphere in relation to the students in the classroom. They referred to the ways humour can establish such a pleasant ambience. For instance, they talked about the humorous actions they tend to take which bring about laughter, vibrancy, and joy. Following are the excerpts taken from the interviews with the teachers in which they elaborated on the themes with regard to the functions of humour.

(1) Using humour can reduce the level of formality and create a happy environment in the classroom. I usually teach vocabulary in the form of funny games. For example, I ask my students to show a humorous action for every new word they want to learn. In this way, they tend to speak that word with laughter, energy, and pleasure. Moreover, in this way, my students would be able to remember those words more easily in the future as they associate them with those playful and enjoyable games.

(2) Humour in the form of riddles is a really great idea because it is really interesting and students feel excited about answering these forms of questions. After they answer it, they feel like a detective as how they solved such a great problem. In addition, due to the challenging nature of such kind of humour, it impels students to focus their attention on doing riddles-loaded tasks and questions which, in turn, can lead to the enhancement of their concentration.

Moreover, a good number of teachers (16.21%) believed that utilising humour could act as a relaxing, comforting, and stress reducing device which in turn can assist students in concentrating better on what they are doing and learning. Moreover, they were of the view that humour can stimulate students' interest and make the learning process enjoyable for them so that they are spurred to listen more eagerly to learn the materials they are taught in the classroom.

(3) When we don't have stress, we can concentrate on what we are working on, so making use of humour in class helps students to decrease their stress and focus on the lesson. And by using humour, we tell them indirectly we want to help them to learn and not to blame them for their mistakes. Furthermore, it can contribute to a safe and comforting atmosphere in which they would be able to express their voice freely when it comes to talking about different subjects in the classroom whether they be driven directly from the course content and materials or they are posed in an attempt to drive students to actively speak and communicate with each other.

(4) Using humour in class is really a great way to encourage students to learn English and that lesson will stay in their mind for a life. For example, we can use jokes in class when

we think the students are really tired or when that joke is related to our topic. As a matter of fact, by utilising humour, we can pave the way for the students to unleash their potentials as well as refreshing their memory.

Furthermore, the teachers viewed humour in the form of humorous stories as a way of sustaining their learning in the course of a life time. In fact, they considered humour to act as a means improve the quality of student' learning in addition to being a relaxing tool.

(5) Funny stories help teachers to be friendlier with students, so the students feel free to ask their questions without any stress. Stories have this property to stay in mind for a long time. So using funny stories that are read about our title help students to feel relaxed and learn better, and that topic will stay in their mind. In fact, being in a positive and relaxed frame of mind can contribute to the effective processing of instructional content students are exposed to while listening to their teacher or reading a text in the classroom.

(6) Humour as it can be conveyed through funny stories can make students pay more attention to what they are being taught and help them get rid of monotony. Moreover, it can be conducive to a warm environment, establish a good relationship between the students and teacher and make the students feel good about the learning process.

Other functions of humour which were also mentioned by the EFL teachers but were less common by comparison with others included renewing learners' energy, improving their speaking skill, and reducing education burnout.

6.3. Instances of humour

Following are some of the real instances of humour Iranian EFL teachers used while teaching new materials to students in the classroom.

Instance 1:

T: Ok everyone, do you know what a big cheese means?

S1: big cheese!!!! Does that mean a cheese which is big?

T: HHH of course not. It means an important person.

The above instance of humour is categorised as a joke and a pun at the same time, since here a joke in the form of a funny trick is made by mixing up two different meanings of the same word. Additionally, the student has interpreted it literally, while the intended meaning in L2 is different from student's interpretation. This in turn could stimulate laughter on the part of students as they might perceive it as a funny joke.

Instance 2:

T: Ok everyone, say the weekdays?

Ss: Saturday, Sunday, Monday..... Friday.

T: Ahah, what day is today? I think it's Friday, right?

S2: HHH ... No teacher, Fridays are break (she means holiday), so today can't be Friday at all because we're at school!

TL: yeah, that's right!

The humour instance in the above excerpt can be categorised as a riddle. The teacher's intention has been to deliberately induce a riddle to make students come up with the current weekday in the light of saying today is Friday while it is another weekday.

Instance 3:

T: What do you think the word "family" might stand for?

Ss: (After pausing for a moment trying to get at the answer) we don't know, teacher.

T: Ok, no problem. It stands for "Father and Mother, I Love You.

Ss: HHH (they were laughing in surprise), it's so funny, teacher.

The above instance of humour is categorised as pun. The teacher has done language play with the word "family" and used it as an acronym while in reality the word family has got its own established meaning in English.

6.4. Teachers' suggestions regarding the appropriate use of humour in the classroom

To address the last research question, teachers were questioned on their suggestions for appropriately incorporating humour into the language classroom. First and foremost, the majority of teachers believed that it is important to select and utilise humour forms based on the proficiency level of EFL learners. That is humour content needs to be germane to learners' level. For instance, for learners at lower levels of proficiency, there was an agreement that, it is more appropriate to integrate physical humour and jokes. Because it was believed that these forms of humour could provide for a more intimate rather than formal and unapproachable atmosphere between students and teachers. Moreover, it could significantly affect learners' enthusiasm and the way learners effectively learn materials.

Secondly, there was a consensus among teachers that lesson content should be considered when presenting humour forms in the classroom. That is, humour use should be in line with the topic and content of the lesson to be discussed with EFL learners, especially at the stage of warm up to make it more appealing to learners. This was also viewed to be conducive to effective learning on the part of EFL learners.

7. Discussion

This study was conducted with the purpose of investigating the use of humour by Iranian EFL teachers teaching English in a private language institute in the context of Iran. In fact, the study attempted to address the most frequently form of humour teachers utilises in their teaching English materials to the students through observing their real-time performances. Moreover, it inquired into the perceptions of EFL teachers with the regard to the functions humour can serve in relation to the students and how they implement humour in their classrooms through an interview. Finally, this study looked into the suggestions teachers had as to the appropriate use of humour in the classroom.

The results of the first research question showed that Iranian EFL teachers were mainly inclined to the incorporation of jokes, and physical humour. Moreover, they had also a tendency to draw on riddles and funny stories in their teaching English materials and topics to the students. This finding is consistent with that of Bakar & Kumar (2019), in their study with five lecturers in a university in New Zealand, in which the lecturer had a propensity to make use of riddle as one the of humour techniques during the interaction with his students in order to facilitate students' learning a specific topic. These findings also reflect those obtained by Petraki & Nguyen (2016) who found that the EFL teachers in Vietnam were inclined to the use of humorous comments, jokes and funny stories in their teaching. However, contrary to the

findings of Bakar & Kumar (2019) and Petraki & Nguyen (2016), in the current study it was found that teachers used physical humour apart from jokes, riddles, and funny stories. The reason for the incorporation of physical humour by the teachers in the present study can be related to contextual differences: the studies by Petraki & Nguyen (2016) and Bakar & Kumar (2019) were conducted at university settings, while the context of the current study was a private language institute. Given that university courses invariably deal with discipline-based academic content which renders them more formal instructional settings as compared to private language institutes which aim more at enhancing general communicative abilities, the participants in this study might have felt themselves more at ease to adopt physical humour contrary to university lecturers and teachers. Based on this justification, it can be assumed that the use of humour can be possibly influenced by contextual factors.

The analysis of the second research question which asked for teachers' perceptions towards the functions humour can serve in relation to the students found that most of the teachers believed humour could generate a cheerful and friendly atmosphere in the classroom. Moreover, teachers were of the opinion that humour could serve as a relaxing, comforting, and tension reducing device when it comes to students' engagement in the classroom activities. These findings are in line with the findings obtained by academics in the literature who came to the conclusion that humour has got a great potential for increasing second language engagement and students' enjoyment of learning, reducing language anxiety, and improving the learning environment in the classroom (Cook 2000; Pomerantz & Bell 2011; Wagner & Urios-Aparisi 2011; Benson 2012; Dewaele et al. 2018). Such findings can be theoretically justified in relation to the relief theory of humour as the resulting laughter from humour can lead to reducing stress, tension, and anxiety (Alsop 2015), which can, in turn, culminate in a cheerful, relaxing, comforting, and friendly learning atmosphere as reflected in participants' interview responses in the present study to enhance students' engagement and enjoyment of learning (Dewaele et al. 2018).

The findings of this study indicated that teachers regarded the reduction of educational burnout as one of the functions of humour. Since one of the main causes of burnout is the stress experienced by individuals in their environments (Schwarzer et al. 2000; Betoret 2009), the participants of this study have linked the relief-inducing potential of humour to the reduction of educational burnout. However, it should be noted that humour may have a temporary influence on reducing educational burnout due to the diverse sources of stress in learning environments. In essence, humour, due to its relief-inducing potential, can be used to partially help learners feel less exhausted, but it may not offer much in association with cynicism and reduced efficacy as the other two important dimensions identified for burnout in EFL settings (Li et al. 2021).

The results of this study also demonstrated that teachers pointed to increasing learners' concentration as one of the functions of humour. As the results of previous studies show, humour can reduce learners' anxiety (Berk 2000), and anxiety can exert adverse influences on concentration (Yalçın & İnceçay 2014). Accordingly, teachers have highlighted the link between humour and concentration since humour can contribute to the reduction of stress and anxiety as antecedents to decreased concentration.

The use of humour by teachers to boost student interest and enjoyment was also brought to the limelight. This supports the research done by Bieg et al. (2017) with ninth and tenth grade students in German courses, which revealed that humour connected to the course material helped teachers to create a positive atmosphere that, in turn, had a beneficial impact on student enjoyment. However, these findings are not in line with those of Zebila's (2012) study in which the detrimental impacts of humour in the classroom were demonstrated (e.g. the use of humour during a lesson being distracting, humour being a waste of precious learning time in the classroom).

In general, the literature has documented the importance of humour in the classroom (Ziyaeemehr et al. 2011; Ravichand 2013; Rashidi et al. 2014; Ziyaeemehr & Kumar 2014; Heidari-Shahreza & Heydari 2018; Heidari-Shahreza 2020). Humour has got a calming and tension-reducing impact and an effect on improving student attention and enjoyment, which can, in turn, enhance teacher's image positively. It can also reduce boredom (Richvand 2013). In a similar vein, humour could contribute to learners' overcoming their affective barriers. This highlights the importance of incorporating humour into the classroom, as it is not restricted to only providing for a joyful atmosphere. Overall, humour possesses the potential for the provision of more interest and concentration for students in the language learning process via making the materials more appealing to learners.

Additionally, this study might substantiate the issue that the incorporation of creative and humorous language is associated with an enjoyable language learning classroom atmosphere, resembling more closely the real-world language use (Dewaele et al. 2018).

Furthermore, humour utilisation for teaching purposes was perceived by EFL teachers to improve the quality of students learning. This finding broadly supports the work of other studies in this area in which humour has been indicated to enhance learning and speed (Berk 2002; Garner 2003; Torok et al. 2004; Hackathorn et al. 2011). This finding highlights the need to incorporate humour into the classroom.

In response to the last research question, teachers emphasised the EFL learners' level as a requirement for incorporating humour into the classroom. That is, humour should be adjusted to the level of EFL learners. This was viewed as giving rise to a positive and approachable atmosphere in terms of student-teacher relationship. Another important consideration was the appropriate relation between humour, lesson content, and topic. In other words, teachers underscored the importance of choosing humour forms in a way that is relevant to the lesson topic in one way or another. The relevance of humour form to the lesson topic was believed to make the materials more interesting, paving the way for more effective teaching and learning.

8. Conclusion

This study adds to the body of research on the use of humour in language teaching and learning, particularly in connection to the functions that the most popular forms of humour may serve in relation to students' English learning materials and courses, drawing on Iranian EFL teachers' attitudes. In other words, the findings of the present study can provide insights into the forms of humour Iranian EFL teachers are more inclined towards and the roles humorous language can play in the language learning process. According to the findings, humour in the form of jokes, physical humour, and funny stories holds great potential for bringing about joyful and agreeable atmosphere, reducing tension and stress, leading to learners' being more concentrated while doing tasks and providing an encouraging environment for the EFL students. Finally, the findings revealed that humour could contribute to the rise of interest, enjoyment, and motivation in relation to students' learning in the classroom and accordingly enhance the quality of their learning.

This study has got some implications for practitioners who aspire to provide a positive and pleasant language learning environment in which EFL teachers and learners will be able to interact in an intimate manner, feel more motivated and be more concentrated on pursuing their learning purposes. However, the findings of this study need to be treated with caution due to the limited number of Iranian EFL teachers selected from a private language institute. Therefore, future research could be done with a larger number of EFL teachers and even in different contexts such as public schools as well as other private language institutes, which could

corroborate the findings of the present study and provide a more comprehensive picture of how humour is used in the classroom.

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