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Neff, P. and Dewaele, Jean-Marc (2023) Humor strategies in the foreign language class. Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching 17 (3), pp. 567-579. ISSN 1750-1229.

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Humor Strategies in the Foreign Language Class[1]

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Abstract

Humor can provide a multitude of benefits for language learners, including improvement of classroom atmosphere (Dewaele et al., 2018) and a reduction of anxiety (Tarone, 2000). Moreover, the integration of humor into language lessons has been strongly endorsed by both students and instructors (Askildson, 2005; Azizinezhad & Hashemi, 2011). What is less clear is which types of humor strategies are seen to be most effective, as well as the degree to which learner characteristics affect their responses to humor. This study examines the influence of L2 proficiency, foreign language enjoyment (FLE), and attitudes about humor language learning on L2 learners' (N=243) reactions to a variety of humor strategies used in the language classroom. Regression analysis revealed that proficiency had little bearing on learner preferences, whereas FLE, and especially attitude towards in-class humor, had a much greater influence on preferred strategies. Overall, spontaneous humor, memes and cartoons were the most strongly endorsed strategies.

Keywords: humor strategies, foreign language education, foreign language enjoyment

Introduction

Making students laugh is probably the closest teachers come to being stand-up comedians. In the same way professional performers vie for laughs, enlivening the classroom with a carefully-selected joke, visual gag, or spontaneous quip can be intensely gratifying and potentially addictive for the instructor. And yet, humor is a complex interactional device that resists definition. In their attempts to characterize humor, researchers have variously described it as “a cognitive state of mirth” (Meyer, 2000, p. 313), “a nonserious social incongruity” (Gervais & Wilson, 2005, p. 399), and “anything done or said, purposely or inadvertently, that is found to be comical or amusing” (Long and Graesser, 1988, p. 4). It can be expressed both verbally, through wordplay, and nonverbally, through facial and body movements or visual gags. Laughter, a common outcome of humorous episodes, has been theorized to be a physiological manifestation of mental catharsis (Holland, 1982) and, as indicated by the phrase “laughter is the best medicine,” is noted for its healing ability, which rivals that of actual medicine (Aaker & Bagdonas 2021; Holden, 1993). Moreover, humor includes psychological, social and cultural dimensions, often in service of eliciting an emotional response (Martin, 2006; Martin & Ford, 2018). What these various aspects illustrate is that, when it comes to discussing “humor,” delineating the contours can be challenging. And yet, humor has the ability to cut across cultural boundaries and be instantly recognizable when it is effectively employed. This dissonance between humor’s inherent complexity and discursive universality makes attempts to identify and

[1] To cite this article: Peter Neff & Jean-Marc Dewaele (2022): Humor strategies in the foreign language class, *Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching*, DOI: 10.1080/17501229.2022.2088761
To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/17501229.2022.2088761

characterize it analogous to the US Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart's famous non-definition of pornography— "I know it when I see it."

Complications aside, this is not to say that we should despair of clarifying what humor is or determining how we may benefit from it, especially as a component of the foreign language teaching and learning. Humor has been shown to provide a multitude of benefits, including improvement of classroom atmosphere (Dewaele et al., 2018), reduction of anxiety (Tarone, 2000), the potential to act as a mnemonic device (Schmidt & Williams, 2001), and even its role in better test preparation (Swanson, 2013), among others. Moreover, the integration of humor into language lessons has been strongly endorsed by both students and instructors (Askildson, 2005; Azizinezhad & Hashemi, 2011; Neff & Rucynski, 2017; 2021). Thus, humor should be taken seriously as a potentially powerful tool within a teacher's pedagogical repertoire. But what type of humor? And for which students?

The purpose of this study is to arrive at a better understanding of how humor strategies are perceived by learners within the context of the foreign language (FL) classroom. Additionally, we seek to discover what the relationship is between humor strategies and Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE), as well as the degree to which language-learner proficiency affects views towards different humor strategies.

Review of the Literature

Humor in the Language-learning Classroom

Humor is a fundamental element of human discourse and as such has a place and function within the domain of language education. Nevertheless, only in the past quarter century has interest in the role that humor can play within the language-learning environment come to the fore. Deneire (1995) was one of the first to highlight the necessity for language teachers to consider the potential benefits (and pitfalls) of in-class humor as well as its importance in learners' developing intercultural competence. Studies by Cook (2000), Tarone (2000), and Schmitz (2002) soon followed, examining the importance of humor and *language play* in FL education, including the potential for in-class humor to lead to increased proficiency among FL learners. Similar investigation was undertaken by Askildson (2005), who concluded that learners and teachers alike perceived humor to be an effective aid for learning and instruction.

Proceeding from these early examples in the literature, the bulk of humor research as relates to language learning has emerged in the last 10-15 years. In particular, the work of Nancy Bell and Anne Pomerantz (Bell, 2009; Bell & Pomerantz, 2015; Pomerantz & Bell, 2011) has emphasized the previously underappreciated and understudied role of humor as a component of learner growth. In their 2011 study (Pomerantz & Bell, 2011), for instance, the researchers found that humor enhances the in-class experience and learning outcomes by providing students with a means to experiment and stretch the bounds of formalized language education, especially in contexts where "oppressive" institutional practices may otherwise dampen learner enthusiasm. They further proclaimed the essentialness of humor in a later study (Bell & Pomerantz, 2014), even going so far as to assert that, more than being a pleasant diversion, humor should instead be considered "an instructional goal" due to its ability "to develop learners' metalinguistic awareness and communicative/interpretive repertoires" (p. 40). Bell and Pomerantz's (2015) book two years later attempted to situate the role of humor and language play within the classroom through in-depth discussion of when, why, how, and how much these phenomena

should (or should not) be applied when teaching languages, arguing in particular for humor's affective, cognitive, and social benefits. In their conclusion to the text, the authors restate the importance of humor as a communicative resource for learners that can enhance their social well-being, even contending that humor should not only be present in language learning but incorporated into teacher development programs.

On the whole, Bell and Pomerantz's contemporaries have echoed these endorsements, albeit with occasional caveats. Forman (2011) earlier found the introduction of humorous language play into the language classroom to bring about affective, sociocultural and linguistic benefits for Thai learners of English. Waring (2013), in an examination of playful talk among ESL learners, concluded that humorous interactions among students allowed them to broaden their sociolinguistic competence and communicative repertoire, mirroring previous assertions by Tarone (2000) and Bell and Pomerantz (2007). Neff and Rucysnki (2017) surveyed English language learners across Japan, finding them to overwhelmingly support teachers who include humor as part of their instructional style, especially as a way to improve their learning motivation.

With these affirmations noted, several have also remarked on the potential pitfalls of excessive or injudicious jocularity, comments that reflect what Askildson (2005) referred to as the potential "double-edged sword" of humor, "capable of improving or harming the classroom learning environment depending on its employment by the teacher" (p. 48). Stroud (2013) and Ziyaeemehr et al. (2011), for example, described the risk of teachers who constantly joke not having their classes taken seriously by learners. Zhang (2005) discussed the possibility of classroom humor being in opposition to cultural expectations, with humorous output by English instructors in China sometimes resulting in greater "communication apprehension" among learners. There is also the potential for less-proficient learners who are unable to understand or engage in FL humor to experience feelings of alienation (Bell, 2009).

Proficiency and Humor

Until recently, the common perception about humor competency in a foreign language was that it was a concern best saved for advanced learners (Forman, 2011). After all, why confuse or antagonize less proficient but otherwise capable students by emphasizing the ability to tell jokes or grasp the subtleties of often culturally-entrenched witticisms? But this logic has come increasingly under challenge of late. Humor, levity, and laughter are universal and often instinctual phenomena in human communication, and thus, as the topic of humor in language learning has received more attention, so has the question of how best to utilize it with learners of varying abilities.

Early discussion of humor in the language classroom tended towards general advisement of caution due to learners' assumed lack of awareness of discourse rules, social norms, communication strategies, and linguistic knowledge (Deneire, 1995; Vega, 1990). However, such broad-swath admonishments later evolved into more empirically-supported analysis and balanced conclusions, such as a study by Bell and Attardo (2010), who determined there to be seven "levels" or reasons for failure to understand humor in a second language, including issues of pragmatics and lexical knowledge. Other small-scale studies involving EFL students have come to similar conclusions (Hodson, 2008; Semiz 2014).

Despite these cautions, lack of a certain degree of proficiency is no longer seen as the imposing impediment to humor use that it once was. Even Bell and Attardo (2010), in presenting their seven levels of failed humor, emphasize that most of these are similar to reasons that humor does not succeed with L1 speakers—"these data suggest that NNSs [non-native speakers] do not fail differently, they just fail more" (p. 441). Schmitz (2002) considered the issue of proficiency directly by categorizing humor into three types—universal/reality-based, culture-based, and linguistic/word-based—with recommendations for when to introduce each when teaching learners at varying points in their linguistic development. Davies (2003) and Bell (2009), however, later argued against such a systematic approach, insisting that it oversimplifies the complexities of humor while asserting that examples from all three categories can be used with learners of different proficiencies. What these diverse opinions show is that, far from being avoided with less-proficient learners, humor should instead be employed, albeit with consideration for their pragmatic and lexical abilities matched with appropriate humor strategies.

Humor Strategies

Much of the literature written about humor teaching strategies has tended to fall into one of three categories: theoretical pedagogical frameworks, humor taxonomies, and real-world classroom-oriented suggestions. Examples of the first include Cook's (2000) classification of different types of language play and Wanzer, et al.'s (2010) Instructional Humor Processing Theory, or IHPT. These frameworks identify the important role that humor plays in learner development and explore approaches whereby instructors can maximize educational outcomes. IHPT, for example, posits that when humorous content is strongly related to the learning material, and includes elements that enable students to better process that material, learning is enhanced.

Taxonomies of humor types usually represent attempts to classify in-class humor into different categories, with or without connection to underlying frameworks. Examples include a broad collection of humor strategies by Banas et al. (2011), Wazner et al.'s (2006) list of "appropriate" humor types according to students, and Shade's (1996) categorization of humor strategies into one of four subtypes. Because there are nearly as many attempts to categorize humor types as there are types to humor to categorize, there naturally exists a great deal of overlap among these and other taxonomies of classroom humor.

Within the specific field of FL education, examples can also be found of the third type of humor literature—practical teaching suggestions. Many of these publications, such as books by Medgyes (2002) and Rucynski (2017), serve as mechanisms for teacher-to-teacher lesson sharing. Descriptions of strategies are detailed and procedural, intended to provide instructors with a variety of humor-injected activities without necessarily being rooted in underlying theories of humor. In terms of empirical evidence supporting or disproving the use of specific humorous approaches, however, there is little to report. Despite this, there are indications that that one size does not fit all when it comes to humor strategies in the language classroom, such as a recent study of English instructors in Japan (Neff & Rucynski, 2021). The researchers found the participants to employ an unexpectedly broad array of humorous approaches (at least 18 in total) in their teaching repertoires.

Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE)

When MacIntyre and Gregersen (2012) introduced Positive Psychology to the field of applied linguistics, researchers became aware that too much attention up to then had been paid to

what learners did wrong and how much they suffered from anxiety rather than focusing on the growing list of things that learners did right and the feelings of pride and joy that emerged as they progressed on their FL learning journey. It became clear that a more positive, holistic paradigm was needed in order to move away from a deficit perspective (Dewaele et al., 2019; Dewaele & Li, 2020; MacIntyre, Gregersen & Mercer, 2019). Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014; 2016) introduced the concept of Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE) in order to complement the existing concept of FL classroom anxiety (FLCA) and defined FLE as a complex positive emotion that "occurs when people not only meet their needs but exceed them to accomplish something new or even unexpected" (2016, p. 217). They also found that teachers who combined humor with encouragement and praise, created a social environment that was conducive to FLE (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014).

Further research into the sources of FLE revealed that the teacher played a central role in boosting and maintaining FLE (Dewaele et al., 2018). Positive attitudes towards the teacher, enhanced by the teacher's frequent use of humor to create group solidarity and friendly behavior, were strong predictors of FLE among Chinese EFL students (Jiang & Dewaele, 2019). This was reinforced by students explaining that their teacher was the main cause of their FLE compared to their FLCA, confirming a previous study on an international sample of FL learners (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2019). Further research on Chinese EFL students based on the focused essay technique (Jiang, 2020) showed that FLE was positively related to teacher happiness, friendliness, kindness, and, crucially, frequent use of humor. Similarly, Elahi Shirvan et al. (2020), who combined idiodynamic and enjoymeter data with journal and interview data from Iranian EFL students, found that the teacher was the typical cause of spikes in FLE among individual learners through being encouraging and creating a pleasant and supportive classroom atmosphere while regularly using humor. Dewaele, Saito and Halimi (2021) investigated the effect of teachers' frequency of using the FL in class, their predictability and their frequency of joking on levels of FLE among Kuwaiti FL learners over the course of one semester. The most interesting finding was that students whose teacher joked infrequently reported the sharpest drop in FLE over the semester. In other words, the absence of joking weighed increasingly heavily on students' FLE as the semester progressed.

Purpose of the Study

Despite humor being a relatively new area of focus in the language education literature, it is nonetheless broadly considered to be an effective tool for instructors to employ for a number of reasons, including benefits to learner affect, social engagement, and learning outcomes. What is also clear is that humor can take many forms, some of which are perceived to be (or may actually be) more effective than others in their potential to achieve these benefits. As opposed to classroom learning in the L1, within the field of language education additional considerations of learner proficiency and enjoyment studying the FL further complicate the agenda for instructors who wish to introduce a degree of levity into their teaching environment.

The purpose of this study is to determine the degree to which FL learners endorse a variety of common humor strategies used in language education as well as how these perceptions are colored by FL proficiency, frequency of in-class humor, degree of foreign language enjoyment, and perceptions of the role of humor in language learning. To these ends, we have formulated the following research questions:

1) Do FL students favor certain humor strategies in the language classroom?

2) To what degree are these attitudes influenced by learners': FL proficiency, foreign language enjoyment, perceptions of humor in the language classroom, and frequency of teacher humor use?

Methodology

Participants

A total of 243 FL learners participated in the study, and their characteristics can be found in Table 1. A strong majority (> 60%) were from the UK or the EU, and more than half were under 20 years old at the time of taking the survey. In terms of gender, more than 70% identified as female, with the others identifying either as male or not specifying a gender. A little over half were studying English as their first FL, and self-declared proficiency in the first FL ranged from beginner to advanced, with nearly two-thirds of participants selecting either intermediate or high intermediate ability.

Table 1. Participant demographic characteristics

Characteristic	*n*	%
Nationality		
EU/UK	151	62.1%
Eastern Europe	68	28.0%
Asia	15	6.2%
North America	5	2.1%
Central/South America	3	1.2%
Oceania	1	0.4%
Age		
14-19	146	60.1%
20s	71	29.2%
30s	12	4.9%
40s	4	1.6%
50s	7	2.9%
60s	3	1.2%
Gender		
Female	175	72.0%
Male	50	20.6%
Unspecified	18	7.4%
Language studied		
English	132	54.3%
Language other than English	111	45.7%
Declared FL proficiency		
Beginner	25	10.3%
Pre-Intermediate	28	11.5%
Intermediate	81	33.3%
High-Intermediate	77	31.7%
Advanced	32	13.2%

Data were collected through snowball sampling (Ness, Evans & Rooney, 2013). Calls for participation were sent through personal emails to colleagues, FL students, and friends all over the world, asking them to forward the link to their own colleagues and FL students. The call for participation was also put on social media platforms used by FL teachers asking them to forward the call to their students.

Instrumentation

The primary instrument in the study was a survey that included five components: 1) demographic data, 2) background information about participants' language study and context, 3) items measuring foreign language enjoyment, 4) items measuring attitudes about humor use in the language classroom, and 5) responses to eight different humor strategies. For the purposes of the study, the first four components were the independent variables (IVs) while the fifth

represented the dependent variables (DVs). Demographic data are detailed in the table above; the other four components will be discussed in turn.

Items related to the participants' language-learning situation included what language(s) they were studying, self-declared proficiency, and frequency in which their teacher uses humor in their class. Each of these items had response choices that fit the nature of what was being asked, so for example, five ability levels were given as choices for the item about proficiency but time adverbs were used when asking about frequency of their teacher using humor. Mean score for proficiency was 3.26, SD = 1.14, with scores ranging from 1 to 5. Mean score for humor frequency was 2.96, SD = .92, with scores ranging from 1 to 5.

The next part of the survey was the Short-Form Foreign Language Enjoyment Scale, a nine-item scale designed by Botes, Dewaele and Greiff (2021) that is a shortened version of the original 21-item scale (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014). The underlying factor structure of the scale contains one higher-order FLE factor and three lower-order factors, namely Personal Enjoyment (3 item, e.g. "I enjoy my FL class"), Social Enjoyment (3 items, e.g. "There is a good atmosphere in my FL classroom"), and Teacher Appreciation (3 items, e.g. "My FL teacher is encouraging"). Items were measured on a five-point Likert scale from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". In this study we focus exclusively on the higher-order factor "FLE". Mean score for FLE was 3.90, SD = .60, with scores ranging from 1 to 5. Internal consistency was high: Cronbach alpha = .86.

After the FLE items, the next four statements were items measuring respondents' attitudes about the role humor in the language classroom, taken from the humor-in-language-learning survey used by Neff and Rucynski (2017). The purpose of these items is to gain insight into survey takers' perceptions of the role of humor in language learning through their response to statements about humor's essentialness to the learning process. Mean score for humor in language learning was 3.85, SD = .71. Internal consistency was good: Cronbach alpha = .79.

The final section of the survey comprised items relating to eight different humor strategies used in the language-learning classroom. Participants were asked to respond to a series of six Likert-scale items evaluating each of the eight strategies, thus totaling 48 items in this section. Strategies were chosen for their variety and distinctiveness, relative universality, ability to be explained simply on the survey (with visual support), and multiple prior mentions in the literature on humor in education (see table 2).

Table 2. Humor teaching strategies in the survey

Strategy	Primary source	Humor Form (from Shade, 1996)
Cartoons	Bryant et al. (1981)	Figural
Puns	Bryant et al. (1979)	Verbal
Faces	Wazner et al. (2006)	Visual
Props	Wazner et al. (2006)	Visual/Auditory
Voices	Wazner et al. (2006)	Auditory
Spontaneous	Wazner et al. (2006)	Verbal
Memes	McCabe et al. (2017)	Figural
Role plays	Neuliep (1991)	Verbal/Visual/Auditory

Regarding the latter, information was triangulated from two main sources—the collection of humor strategies along with their primary sources (mostly from Bryant et al. (1979, 1981 and Wazner et al. (2006)) compiled by Banas et al. (2011) in their review of humor in educational settings and Shade's (1996) collection of humor forms described in his book on humor in the classroom. Six of the eight strategies—cartoons, puns, funny faces, props, funny voices/impersonations, and spontaneous comments—were discussed in both sources. Memes were selected as a more recent strategy, mentioned by McCabe et al. (2017). Role plays (Neulip, 1991) were also selected as they are a more student-centric humor strategy than the others in the study.

Another consideration in selecting these eight strategies was to include exemplars from the humor-teaching framework developed by Shade (1996), in which the author divides classroom humor into four broad categories, or "forms"—figurative, verbal, visual (including physical humor), and auditory—based on the characteristics of the humor strategy being employed. We chose representative examples for each of these categories within this framework, with each form represented at least twice in the final list (see Table 2).

In the survey, each strategy is introduced with both a text description about a hypothetical teacher who uses that type of humor ("Teacher "A" regularly brings funny cartoons in the foreign language as a teaching aid") as well as a photo or illustration that visually conveys the humor strategy (such as a humorous cartoon in the above case). This was then followed by six Likert-scale items referring to the perceived effectiveness of the strategy, including its potential to improve class atmosphere, make learning more interesting, increase motivation, etc.

Procedure

After the survey items were finalized, an online version was created through the use of an internet survey site (sogosurvey.com). Response options were either drop down items (for list choices) or radio buttons (for Likert-scale items). Participants were given a link to the survey landing page, from which they could begin the survey. Average time to complete the survey was 21 minutes.

Survey participation was completely voluntary and anonymous, and participants were informed upon taking the survey of its purpose and asked to agree to the collection of their data for research purposes. They were also given the option to discontinue the survey at any time and request that their data not be used. Data collection and analysis followed the ethical guidelines set out by both researchers' institutions. All 243 participants responded to all of the items on survey, and none opted out or requested that their data not be used.

Analysis

For quantitative analyses, all survey responses were first converted into numerical data. Descriptive statistics were then extracted for both the dependent variables (the eight humor strategies) and independent variables (*FL proficiency*, *foreign language enjoyment*, *attitudes about humor in language learning*, and *frequency of teacher humor use*), including mean scores, standard deviations, and minimum and maximum response values. Two variables (*FL proficiency* and *frequency of teacher humor use*) were represented by a single item on the survey, so original values were used in those cases. All of the other variables were represented by multiple items, so mean scores were first calculated for each participant before calculating the

overall means. A series of QQ plots showed that the eight dependent variables followed a normal distribution well (available from the authors on request).

Next, Pearson product-moment correlational analysis was run between the eight dependent variables to determine the degree to which participants perceived them to be distinct or similar according to their responses. Finally, for each humor strategy DV, a multiple regression analysis was conducted in order to measure the strength of the four IVs as predictor variables. For each regression model, an R-squared valued was calculated and IVs that were found to contribute significantly to the model were reported.

Results

Descriptive statistics for the dataset can been seen in Table 3. Three humor strategies—*spontaneous comments, memes,* and *cartoons*—had higher mean scores (≥ 4.7) than the other five strategies. The lowest two lowest means—for *faces* and *props*—were below 4.0 indicating less enthusiasm for these strategies. Across all eight strategies, mean scores ranged from the minimum to the maximum possible and displayed fairly even distribution if somewhat right skewed.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics for the dependent variables (ordered according to mean value)

Variable	*N*	*M*	*SD*	Min	Max	Cronbach's α
Unplanned	243	4.81	0.97	1	6	0.93
Memes	243	4.72	1.09	1	6	0.95
Cartoons	243	4.70	0.88	1	6	0.93
Role plays	243	4.42	1.14	1	6	0.96
Puns	243	4.38	0.95	1	6	0.93
Voices	243	4.27	1.2	1	6	0.96
Props	243	3.95	1.19	1	6	0.95
Faces	243	3.61	1.37	1	6	0.96

Looking at the strategies according to their "humor form" classification, those categorized as either "figural" or "verbal" humor (*cartoons*, *puns*, *memes*, *spontaneous comments*, and *role plays*) had higher means than those in the "visual" or "auditory" categories (especially *faces* and *props*). The mean for *role plays*, a humor strategy that could potentially include elements from three of the four categories, was approximately midway between the most and least endorsed strategies.

As mentioned earlier, total mean scores for the four IVs were calculated either from raw scores for each participant (when derived from a single item) or individual mean scores extracted from a group of items (for *FLE* and *humor in LL*). All four variables were measured on continuous scales, with a range of 1 to 5 for *proficiency*, *humor frequency*, *FLE* and *humor in LL*. The latter two IVs were Likert-scale variables, with any mean score above the midway point (2.5) indicating agreement and thereby a degree of endorsement for the variable. Both of these had mean scores above 3.8, thus indicating positive feelings about foreign language enjoyment and humor in language learning. Self-reported *proficiency* values peaked in the intermediate and

high-intermediate levels across the participant pool, and the mean for *humor frequency* was just below 3.0 (on a 1 to 5 scale) corresponding to a response of "sometimes" when asked how often their instructors tended to joke in class.

In the next step of analysis, a Pearson product-moment correlation was run for the eight DVs (humor strategies). Results can be seen in Table 4.

Table 4. Pearson correlations for the dependent variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Cartoons	—	.47**	.20**	.31**	.30**	.40**	.52**	.31**
2. Puns		—	.19**	.18**	.18**	.36**	.31**	.12
3. Faces			—	.34**	.35**	.15*	.19**	.22**
4. Props				—	.52**	.24**	.36**	.46**
5. Voices					—	.24**	.37**	.40**
6. Spontaneous						—	.47**	.32**
7. Memes							—	.27**
8. Role plays								—

*p < .05. **p < .01.

Although nearly every paired correlation met the threshold for statistical significance ($p < .05$), there was not a high degree of correlational strength between most of the dependent variables. Only two outcomes (*props*/*faces* and *cartoons*/*memes*) met or exceeded the level of 0.5—an indication of a high degree of correlation. More than half of the remaining results were close to or under 0.3—the threshold for moderate correlation.

After completion of the preliminary analyses, a series of multiple regression analyses was then undertaken. Mean values for each humor strategy were the DVs while means of the four IVs served as predictor variables. Only variables that reached the threshold of significance ($p < .05$) are reported (Table 5).

Table 5. Results of multiple regression analyses

Dependent Variable	R^2	Predictor Variable	*B*	β	*SE*
Cartoons	.20	FLE	.24	.20	.08
		Humor	.38	.39	.06
Puns	.11	FLE	.17	.13	.09
		Humor	.30	.29	.07
Faces	.04	Humor	.21	.13	.10
Props	.08	Frequency	.09	-.17	-.13
		Humor	.09	.35	.26
Voices	.13	Humor	.44	.33	.08
Spontaneous	.16	FLE	.27	.21	.09
		Humor	.34	.31	.07
Memes	.17	Humor	.49	.40	.07
Role plays	.08	Proficiency	.02	.12	.01
		FLE	.25	.16	.11
		Humor	.24	.19	.08

R-squared measurements ranged from .04 (*faces*) to 0.2 (*cartoons*), a range indicating that participants were responding differently to these humor strategies. All eight regression models resulted in at least one variable that contributed to a significant degree to the model, and the IV *attitudes about humor in LL* was also a significant variable in all cases (sometimes being the only significant variable). Participants with high mean scores on this measure perceive humor to be more of an essential element in the language classrooms than those who do not.

The second strongest IV to contribute to the regression models was *foreign language enjoyment*. which reached the threshold for significance in four of the models: *cartoons*, *puns*, *role plays* and *spontaneous comments*, was also the most strongly endorsed by the participants overall (according to the mean scores above) and, along with *cartoons* and *memes*, among the three strongest models according to the R-squared measure.

The other two IVs—*frequency of teacher humor use* and *FL proficiency*—each appeared only once as significant contributing variables, for *props* and *role plays* respectively, and in each case their contribution to the model was minimal (negative in the case of *frequency of teacher humor use*).

Discussion

The first research question focused on students' preference for particular humor strategies used by the teacher in the FL classroom. It turns out that students had clear preferences, namely spontaneous humor comments made by the teacher, followed by visual humor, namely memes and cartoons. Role play was also appreciated as a source of humor. Faces and props were the least appreciated strategies. What this suggests is that students enjoy spontaneous humor from

their teacher more than any humor that requires an element of artifice and may be perceived as childish or clownish. In other words, the language instructor is expected to use humor to be a good teacher, creating a positive classroom environment, but the humor serves an auxiliary function; it is not an end in itself. Humor is the social glue but not the objective of the class, and students do not want their teachers to perform stand-up comedy in an attempt to draw attention to themselves. This significant students' preference for spontaneous humorous comments by the teacher reflects the finding in Neff and Rucynski (2021) that teachers themselves use this strategy most frequently.

It also confirms the argument put forward by Dewaele (2020) that teachers are like orchestra conductors whose task it is to make sure the players are well-prepared and performing to the best of their ability, and to let the individual players shine while staying out of the limelight themselves. The three most endorsed strategies also resulted in the three strongest regression models. The least endorsed had the weakest models. It is also worth pointing out that most strategies were not strongly correlated. In other words, students' appreciation of one particular humor strategy did not imply them liking the others.

The second research question dealt with the predictors of students' attitudes toward particular humor strategies used by the teacher in the FL classroom. It is not surprising that the strongest predictor of the eight humor strategies in the classroom was attitudes towards humor in language learning generally. This suggests that such attitudes are linked to appreciation of a range of specific humor strategies. The learners who appreciated humor in their language classes had clearly accepted the view that language learning should not be a dry and humorless enterprise but rather a process characterized by play, laughter, challenge and linguistic experimentation where teachers would joke when things went wrong rather than resort to cold or demotivating comments. This confirms the observation in Pomerantz and Bell (2011) that humor is a useful tool for students to experiment and to stretch the bounds of formalized language education.

The finding that FLE emerged as the second strongest predictor of four of the humor strategies also makes sense. It shows that FLE and attitudes towards humor in language learning are clearly independent dimensions explaining unique variance despite a positive connection between both. Three of the four humor strategies where FLE was strong predictor—*cartoons*, *puns*, and *role plays*—involve explicit linguistic knowledge of the FL, either to understand the humor or, in the case of role plays, to engage in it directly; this is different from less decidedly linguistic approaches such as making funny faces, speaking in humorous voices and using props. The fourth method where FLE was a significant contributor, *spontaneous comments*, was also the most strongly endorsed by the participants overall (according to the mean scores above) and, along with *cartoons* and *memes*, among the three strongest models according to the R-squared measure. Connected to this, humor emerged as a central theme in the enjoyable episodes described by participants in Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014). The relationship between teachers' frequent use of humor and learners' FLE has also been highlighted in studies around the globe (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2019; Dewaele et al., 2018, 2021; Elahi Shirvan et al., 2020; Jiang, 2020; Jiang & Dewaele, 2019).

Frequency of teacher humor use and *FL proficiency* were weaker predictors of *props* and *role plays*. In the case of humorous role plays, this is the only strategy that explicitly involves student participation, and therefore the need to actively use the FL, which may explain the

significance of proficiency for this strategy, although even here its contribution to the model was less than the other two IVs. The weak effect of FL proficiency on appreciation of humor strategies does not imply that FL proficiency does not play a more general role in humor appreciation in authentic interactions, especially outside the classroom where gaps in learners' pragmatics and lexical knowledge might be more serious obstacles as there is little opportunity for them to interrupt the interaction and ask for an explanation (Bell & Attardo, 2010; Hodson, 2008; Semiz 2014). It can be assumed that conscientious teachers are perfectly aware of their students' proficiency and will thus make sure to pitch their humor at the right level. In other words, teachers will avoid making puns with words the students have never heard. Spontaneous humorous comments are likely to be short and simple, so that everybody can laugh together. These comments serve to strengthen group solidarity through a common language and purpose (Schmitz, 2002). That said, teachers may insert slightly more difficult humor in the classroom as a fun challenge, to allow students to rise to the occasion and identify humor even if they do not actually comprehend it completely.

It must be noted that the examples of humor strategies included in this study are by no means a comprehensive collection of those that can be used inside the language classroom—they are merely some of the most common according to previous findings, both our own and those of other researchers and instructors. As stated earlier, comfort level with humor and the ways that that can manifest in a teaching environment are very much an individual pursuit. Although spontaneous comments were the most preferred by participants, for example, the number of directions that these can take belies simple categorization to some degree, being directed variously towards the teaching material, objects in the classroom, external events, an interchange with a student, etc. Moreover, strategies can be used in conjunction, such as using a funny voice with a funny face, or a pun in a role play. Other examples of humorous in-class play can derive from visual gags in a PowerPoint slideshow, funny video clips, storytelling (by either students or instructors), and group activities, such as complete-the-story tasks, that will likely lead to a humorous outcome.

Conclusion

We started the introduction comparing teachers and stand-up comedians, both of whom potentially share the context and ability to make people laugh. Feedback from students on their judgment of various humor strategies in the foreign language classroom suggests that teachers' spontaneous funny comments are the most appreciated. This links with the view that, *unlike* the stand-up comedian, the teacher need not be the sole center of attention. Instead, he or she is a more discreet presence who uses humor as a way to attain certain social and educational goals: a feeling of solidarity, of common purpose, of maintaining a proper perspective learning point and materials, and on the freedom to joke about constraints and limitations. The teacher uses humor to create the positive emotional climate where students of all abilities feel they can learn, where they can experiment with the new language without fear and where they can have a good time.

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