

"You Can't Be Serious"- The Perception and Use of Humour in EFL teaching and learning in College Classroom at the University of Bahrain.

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Abstract

The importance of using humour in college classroom cannot be underestimated for not only does it enable the teacher to teach in a relaxed atmosphere of interested students but it also means learning new language features such as vocabulary. Besides, humour is a motivating force in allaying students' fear of participating in class and asking questions. It is believed that humour in the classroom can foster mutual openness and respect and contribute to effective teaching.

This paper attempts to investigate instructors' perception of humour and its use in the EFL classroom. To that end, a survey is given to 30 native and non-native English speaking instructors in the English Language Centre as well as in the English Department at the University of Bahrain. The findings of the survey are analysed and discussed and some recommendations are made.

1. INTRODUCTION

Humour is defined as **"the ability to be amused by things, the way in which people see that some things are amusing or the quality of being amusing"** (www.dictionary.cambridge.org). Another definition is provided by the Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor as the capacity to perceive, appreciate, or express what is funny, amusing, incongruous, and ludicrous.

The language of humour is the result of conscious and deliberate planning and design; it relies heavily on puns and ambiguity whether spoken or written to produce a dramatic effect on the reader or hearer.

Besides, humour is a social collaborative act in which the teller/writer, the listener/ reader and the humorous utterance simultaneously engage in a socio-cultural function, (Farghal 2006:1). For this reason it has been discussed by psychologists, sociologists, and linguists among others. This, as Attardo (1994:1) puts it, has

often resulted, in epistemological hairsplitting. Yet, he concludes that what humour ultimately is depends on the purpose for which it is used (Attardo 1994:4). In this sense linguists would define humour as that whose intended effect is evoking laughter and which has an effect on the target audience.

Humour refers to "a variety of texts but often with subtle differences: jokes, jests, witticisms, quips, sallies, cracks, gags, puns, retorts, riddles, one-liners and conundrums" (Schmitz, 2002). Meaning in humour is not made clear but it has to be worked out through cooperation between by the listener/ reader and humour producer.

Humour can be intentional or accidental (spontaneous). In intentional humour communication is non-bonafide and one or more of Grice's (1975) maxims of the Cooperative Principle are flouted to create the humorous effect.

Accidental humour, on the other hand, is bonafide communication (earnest, serious and information conveying) in which the infringement of the maxims of the Cooperative Principle is spontaneous and unintentional. It results from the producer's inability to observe overlapping in the meaning of semantically related words. The following examples are cited in Farghal (2006)

- (In a Bangkok dry cleaners) Drop your *trousers* here for best results.
- (In a Rome laundry) Ladies leave your *clothes* here and spend the afternoon having a good time.

In the first example the confusion arises from the sense relations in the set: trousers – clothes – laundry. While trousers are a hyponym of clothes (i.e. a kind of clothes), trousers and clothes are potential items of laundry. Neither of them can replace the common noun 'laundry'. The verb 'drop' may collocate with 'laundry' to mean 'leave your laundry'; however, it is not supposed to collocate with 'trousers' which means "take off your trousers", thereby creating the humour. Similarly, in the second example the humor created by the collocation 'leave your clothes' at the Rome public laundry and is then heightened by wishing the then 'nude customer' to have a good time on that afternoon, which represents the punch line.

2. Linguistic Humour

You Can't Be Serious

Linguistic humour may be divided into three kinds: phonological, morphological and semantic and pragmatic.

2.1 Phonological

Phonological humour ambiguity is created by playing on language sounds, stress, intonation and pronunciation. An example would be the following:

- (1) A: How do you make a cat drink?
B: Easy, put it in the liquidizer.
(Nash, 1985)

English stress and intonation in "cat drink" above cause the ambiguity, and semantically give it two possible interpretations i.e. a drink for a cat or the way to make a cat drink.

Another example of phonological humour is illustrated in the following joke:

- (2) An American asks a Britisher what he does. The Britisher in his r-less vowel dialect responds "I'm a clerk". The American assumes on the basis of this answer that the Britisher sits round all day going "tick, tock, tick, tock".
(Nash, 1985)

The ambiguity creating humour here comes from the British pronunciation of the word "clerk" which is understood by the American as "clock".

In the next example the play is on the near homophones "soot" /sut/ and "suit" (to be convenient):

- (3) Why does Santa Claus go down the chimney on Christmas Eve? Because it soots him.
(www.jokes.com)

In the one-liner above the word "soot" is a noun deliberately changed into a verb to make it sound like "suit"). Arab learners are now well familiar with the imaginary old man with red clothes and a long white beard.

2.2 Morphological

Humour can sometimes be created by playing on morphemes as in the following:

- (4) A: What's a baby pig called?
 B: A piglet.
 A: So what's a baby toy called?
 B: A toilet.
 (Nash,1985)

In the above joke '-let' is a 'bound morpheme' suffix meaning 'small' as in a 'flatlet' meaning a small flat. For the purpose of humour, it is used creatively to make a new word in which the final syllable of 'toilet' is interpreted as the bound morpheme-let, hence, creating a new word meaning a small toy. This manipulation of the morphological rule is done on purpose to create this special effect. Another example is the following:

- (5) Marriage is a three ring circus:
 engagement ring, wedding ring, and
 suffering
 (www.ahajokes.com)

Humour here lies in the combination of "suffer" and "ring" which creates the ambiguity. "Ring" may be interpreted as a circular piece of jewellery worn on one's finger for engagement and wedding and it may also be interpreted as a large circular area surrounded by seats in a circus; "suffering" may be seen as a compound word in which "ring" is a free morpheme and is interpreted as a stage that follows engagement and wedding in the three stage marriage process. "suffering" , as one word, with "ing as a bound morpheme, insinuates that marriage ends in physical and mental pain and difficulties . Another example is the following:

- (6) Q: Where do you find a birthday
 present for a cat?
 A: In a cat-atalogue!
 (www.jokes.net)

In the above joke , and for the sake of humour, the word "catalogue" is morphologically divided into two morphemes, "cat", a

free morpheme, and (-alogue), a bound morpheme, thereby creating another interpretation i.e., a book with a list of cat goods you can buy from a shop.

3.2 Semantic and pragmatic

Humour can be found in polysemous verbs. The following is an example:

- (7) A: When is a car not a car?
B: When it *turns into* a garage.
(Nash, 1985)
- (8) The first thing which *strikes* a stranger in New York is a big car.
(Esar, 1952: 77, Raskin 1985: 26).

The source of humour in the above examples is the ambiguity which in example (7) lies in our interpretation of the verb 'turn into' either as 'to move in the direction of' or 'to change into' and in example (8) of the verb 'strike' which means either "to hit" or 'to cause someone to have a feeling or idea about something'.

Also look at the following examples:

- (9) An elevator operator kept calling every boy as 'Son'. Once a rude teenager tried to talk him back and said, "Do remember that I am NOT your son and YOU are NOT my father." The operator calmly said, "I brought you up, didn't I?"
(<http://www.thefoolsday.com/funny-puns.html>)
- (10) Marriage is not a word. It is a sentence—a life sentence.
(www.humor.about.com)

In example (9) the homograph "brought up" can be interpreted as meaning either to care for a child until it is an adult or to take somebody up as in the lift. In example

- (10) it is the word "sentence" that is played upon to create humour. It has two meanings i.e., a grammatical group of words and the punishment that a judge

gives to someone who has been declared guilty of a crime.

- (11) If your wife wants to learn how to drive, don't stand in her way.
(www.ahajokes.com)
- (12) An archaeologist is the best husband a woman can have; the older she gets, the more interested he is in her.
(Agatha Christie quoted in www.ahajokes.com)
- (13) There was a man who said, "I never knew what happiness was until I got married...and then it was too late!".
(www.ahajokes.com)
- (14) They say when a man holds a woman's hand before marriage, it is love; after marriage, it is self-defense.
(www.ahajokes.com)

The examples above are fairly straightforward. In (11) the ambiguity in "stand in her way" that creates humour is that you do not stand in front of your wife's car when she is driving to avoid being run over. In (12) the wife of an archaeologist is compared to something from ancient time which becomes more valuable as it gets older. In (13) "then it was too late", humour is implied in realizing that happiness was lost with marriage and it was too late to do any thing about it. In (14) it is the connotation that after marriage a man holds the woman's hands, not out of love and affection but to avoid being attacked and hit by his wife.

Pragmatic humour occurs when people concentrate on the sense of the utterance rather than its force. The speaker deliberately intending to create humour by becoming ambiguous through violating (flouting) one or more of the Gricean maxims of the cooperative principle thereby leading the hearer (or reader in written humour), into drawing certain conclusions, i.e. implicature and replying or reacting accordingly (See Grice H.P. 1975, the cooperative principle, pp.45-6).

- (15) A: Does your dog bite?
B: No
(A – bends down to stroke the dog and gets bitten)

A: I thought you said your dog didn't bite?

B: It's not my dog.

(Nash,1985)

(16)

A blonde is terribly overweight, so her doctor puts her on a diet. "I want you to eat regularly for 2 days, then *skip* a day, and repeat this procedure for 2 weeks. The next time I see you, you'll have lost at least 5 pounds." When the blonde returned, she shocked the doctor by losing nearly 20 pounds. "Why, that's amazing!" the doctor said, "Did you follow my instructions?" The blonde nodded, "I'll tell you though, I thought I was going to drop dead that 3rd day." "From hunger, you mean?", asked the doctor. "No, from all that skipping."

(17)

<http://www.comedy-zone.net/zones/jokes.htm>

Mrs. Newcomer wrote a disgusted note of complaint to the teacher of her son's class at his new school. She ended the letter with: "If all our Benjamin learns from you is how to swear, I will keep him at home and teach him myself!"

(María T. S. Roura 1995)

In the examples above, pragmatic humour in (15) results from A's conclusion that the dog belongs to B and that it does not bite; in (16) it is a result of the blonde's belief that the doctor asked her to jump over a rope to lose weight and in (17) results from the interpretation that the mother herself will teach him swearing at home.

3. Humour in English language teaching

The question of the use of humour in English language teaching has been dealt with by many studies, which can be divided into two categories:

First, the studies that deal with humour as an attention getter and tension reducer in the class: Marklin (in Walker 2002) says that " students enjoy humor in the form of funny anecdotes" Claire (1984:v) claims that humour ensures student involvement in class conversations. Maurice (1988:20) says that "humour can easily be seen as a way of activating motivation and directing attention.

Neuliep (1991) in a study on 388 high school teachers found among the stated reasons for employing humour that its effect was relaxing, comforting and tension reducing, it had a humanizing effect on teacher image and it maintained increasing student interest and enjoyment. These studies seem, in fact, to have echoed the affective filter hypothesis which was first introduced by Dulay & Burt (1977) and later by Krashen (1982:32) cited in Vadillo (1998) who noted that a low affective filter corresponded to high motivation, self-confidence, and a lack of anxiety. Krashen added that our pedagogical goals should not only include supplying comprehensible input, but also creating a situation that encourages a low filter. In this respect, humor can help lowering that affective filter, reducing anxiety in the class, and encouraging students' desire to take part in what is being said in the class.

Second, the studies that deal with humour as part of the material used for teaching English language features or skills, (Shmitz,2002), (Hatch & Brown, 1995), (Laufer, 1997). The latter studies argue for using humour particularly in vocabulary learning. Laufer (ibid) states that the main problems in reading the learner faces is " the insufficient number of words in the learner's lexicon". Berwald (1992) stresses the importance of using humour for explaining and practicing syntactic, semantic and phonetic and structural components. Trachten (1979) claims that joke telling in ESL context provide ideal opportunities for mini grammar or semantic lessons. Poljaveric (1992), quoted in Vadillo 1998, summarizes her whole experience with jokes as teaching materials in her English classes: "The pupils learned without being aware of it. They had to think and react quickly, which is not easy. In a very few minutes they had to select what was important to include and to discard what was not. They had to concentrate on the vocabulary, grammar, etc., and they did it without tension or fear. Rubin (1982),quoted in Shmitz ,2002, says that one benefit of humour at the advanced level is that students who plan to deal with literary criticism in their university studies will benefit a great deal from contact with humour in the foreign language courses for the comic is a basic element in literature.

4. THE PRESENT STUDY

The purpose of this paper is to investigate some aspects of English humour and its perception and use in college classroom by EFL instructors in the English department and in the English language

centre at the University of Bahrain . In order to achieve this task, the author conducted a survey (appendix A) on thirty English language instructors during the first semester of the academic year 2007/2008. The Likert scaled survey is based on that of Tuncay's (2007), however, some modifications were made to the original survey.

4.1 INSTRUMENT

The study participants were surveyed on their perception and use of humour in college classroom through a voluntary and anonymous survey. The survey comprised 12 items with five possible Likert scaled responses. Each question required the participants to select one alternative. For instance question one asked the participants to say if humour can be used as a supplementary material in English language college classes. They should select one of the following choices: strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, strongly disagree, disagree. The survey seeks to answer the following three thematic questions:

1. Can humour be used in the college classroom as apedagogical tool?
2. Does humour play a role in activating students' motivation and interest and reducing anxiety when learning English in college classrooms?
3. To what extent instructors use humour in their teaching of English in college classroom at the University of Bahrain?

4.2. RESULTS

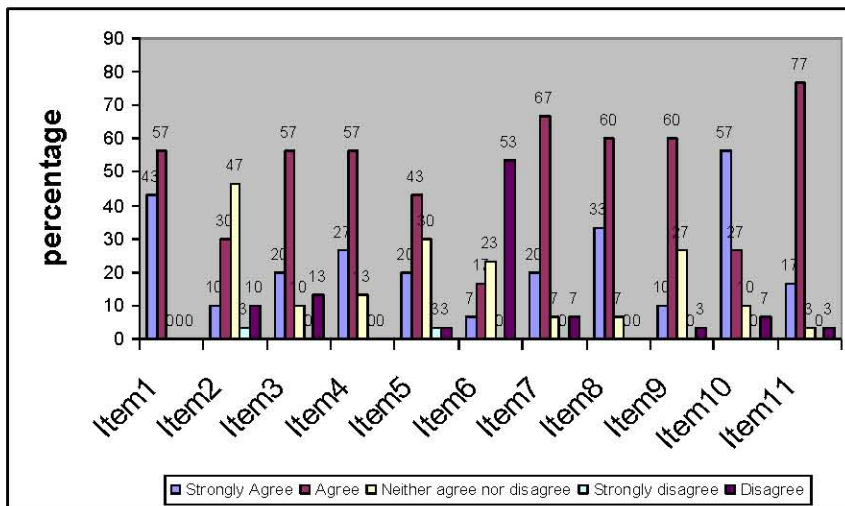
Results from the survey of this study (Figures 1,2 & 3) have shown clearly that the items related to Research question # one have been in general responded to positively. With regard to the use of humour as a supplementary teaching tool (item # 1), all the instructors (100%) have indicated their approval with (43%) selecting the "strongly agree" and a higher percentage of instructors (57%) opting for "agree" slot. In response to item # two, which addressed the question of whether humour was the easiest way of presenting new language features, the highest percentage of responses (47%) was in the " neither agree nor disagree " category , whereas (30%) of the instructors agreed to using it in teaching for presenting new language features. (57%) of the participants agreed that humour should be integrated into coursebook design (item # 3) and further (20%) selected "strongly agree", the total of which is (77%). The

responses to item # 4 which addressed the question of whether the use of humour in English language classrooms can help students improve their communication skills, (57%) of the participants and a further (27%) indicated their approval making a total of agreeing responses (84%). In response to item # 5 which dealt with whether humour increased students time in class, (20%) of the participants agreed and a further (43%) strongly agreed making the total of positive responses (63%). With regard to translating humour into the target language if students failed to fully understand it (item #6), the majority of participants (53%) disagreed while the second highest percentage (23%) was for the participants who were not sure and ,hence, selected " neither agree nor disagree". In response to item #7 concerning humour helping students interact in class, a very high percentage (67%) of the respondents opted for " agreed agree" and additional (20%) chose "strongly agree " making the total of (87%) of favourable responses .

As for the items addressing Research Question # two, the majority of participants in their response to item # 8, which addressed the question of humour helping students overcome their anxiety and shyness in English language classes, (60%) of the participants opted for "agree" and a further (33%) opted for "strongly agree" , the total of which is (93%). The majority of respondents (60%) and an additional (20%) believed that students would have difficulty in role playing humour (item # 9). On the question whether humour would be challenging due to its culture based meanings (item # 11), (77%) of the participants opted for "agree" and a further (17%) chose "strongly agree".

Regarding the items dealing with Research Question # three, most of the participants, that is, (57%) who strongly agreed and a further (27%) who agreed, believed that teachers should have sense of humour in English language classes (item # 10). For the actual use of humour in the classroom (item # 12), (Figures 2 & 3), (50%) of the participants said that they employed at least one aspect of it "sometimes" whereas (20%) " always" used it.

Figure (1)
Survey Results
Overall Distribution of perception of humour at UOB



(Figure 2)

Distribution of the Use of Humour at UOB

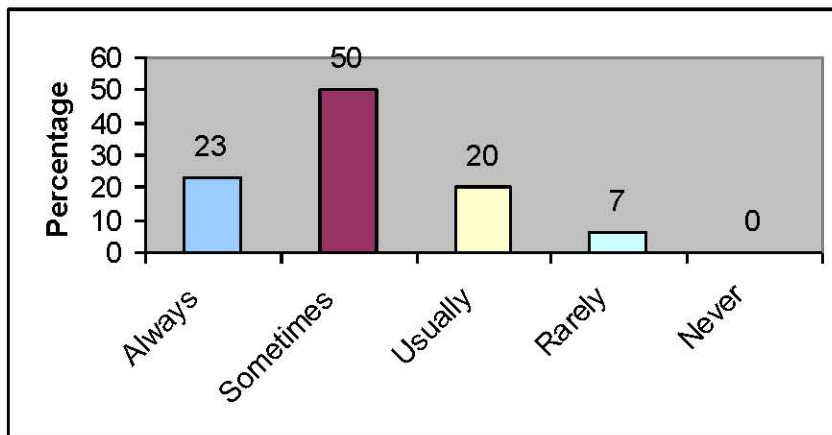
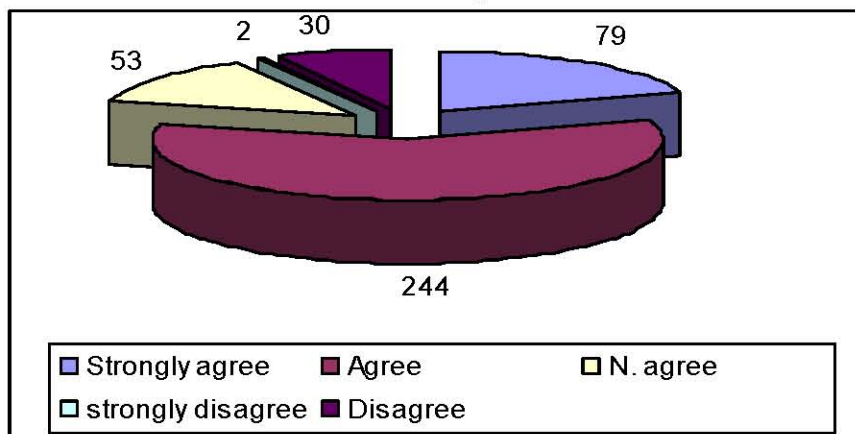


Figure (3)
The frequency of responses to all items

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Strongly disagree	Disagree
Item 1	13	17	-	-	-
Item 2	3	9	14	1	3
Item 3	6	17	3	-	4
Item 4	8	17	4	-	-
Item 5	6	13	9	1	1
Item 6	2	5	7	-	16
Item 7	6	20	2	-	2
Item 8	10	18	2	-	-
Item 9	3	18	8	-	1
Item 10	17	8	3	-	2
Item 11	5	23	1	-	1
	Always	Usually	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Item 12	7	6	15	2	-

Figure (4)
The total number of responses to all items



4.3. DISCUSSION

The results of the survey of this study seems to indicate that there is a trend to using humour as supplementary tool in teaching English and also as a means of lowering the affective filter by creating a relaxed and comfortable atmosphere conducive to better learning in college classrooms at the University of Bahrain. Yet, the participating instructors seemed to be unsure about how humour is to be implemented English language teaching. This, in fact, since is not surprising the literature on humour and as shown in the literature

You Can't Be Serious

review above have not included any empirical studies that examine the effects of using humour in presenting English language features in the classroom.

There is a general agreement among the participants that humour in the classroom improves students' communication and encourages them to speak more. This finding would be significant to course and material designers to take into consideration humour in its various forms such as jokes, one-liners, anecdotes etc. in the communicative approaches to language teaching.

The respondents seem to agree that cultural humour is challenging for students, however, the presentation of cultural humour can be used in graded material starting with culturally known and culturally globalized humour which students may be familiar with and then move into advanced levels of culture-specific humour. The latter may be introduced in advanced courses when students will then have been exposed higher levels of English language and culture.

The survey has revealed that the participating instructors prefer that a teacher should have a sense of humour for this will in handling humour in class. Nevertheless, instructors who believe they lack this characteristic can do well by preparing certain exercises and tasks that contain certain types of linguistic humour, thereby generating some humour to which students will react positively.

Another positive finding in this study is that most of English language instructors at the University of Bahrain are shown to use as a relaxing and also as a pedagogical tool. Therefore, in view of this positive result, which represents only part of the overall picture, there is a need to complete it by further research that examines humour in actual teaching and evaluate its on learning of specific language features and on English language learning as a whole.

5. CONCLUSION

This study which has investigated the perception and use of humour in English language teaching at the University of Bahrain instructors has revealed a positive response among instructors that humour has an undeniable role to play in lowering the affective filter by creating a an enjoyable and convenient atmosphere and also it can contribute positively to easier and better language learning. This finding is similar to the results arrived at by many studies such as

Deneire (1995) and Tuncay (2007), among others, which provided evidence about the benefits of the employment of pedagogical humour. Hence, the results of the present study and those of other studies make it necessary for instructors to include some form of humour in their classes and also course book and material designers must acknowledge the benefit of humour for lowering the affective filter and its pedagogical use for targeted linguistic features, hence, incorporate certain features of it into their approaches to language teaching and learning. Pedagogical training materials in the form of exercises or "humourcises" with pre-established specific goals and objectives can bring considerable benefit. Jokes, for example, can be used, among other things, for :

1. The punchline,
2. Choosing an answer from a number of alternatives
3. Recognizing wrong spelling,
4. Cloze tests,
5. Tense changing,
6. Making an end to a joke,
7. Scrambled matching

These "humourcises" are expected to give students motivation to ease their learning and also make the learning environment an enjoyable one. However, in order to verify the impact humour has on actual English learning in the classroom and the extent of benefits gained from it, further qualitative research with larger data is needed.

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You Can't Be Serious

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Appendix A Survey

Personal Details

Gender: M F

Native speaker Non-native speaker

Years of experience 1-3 4-6 7-10 11-over

Affiliation: ELC English Department

For each of the statements and questions below, please indicate the extent of your agreement or disagreement by placing a tick in the appropriate box.

1. Do you think humour can be used as a supplementary teaching tool in English language college classes ?

Strongly agree Agree Neither agree nor disagree Strongly disagree Disagree

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• If you disagree, please say why.

.....

2. Humour is the easiest way to present new language feature such as new vocabulary, structure.. etc.

Strongly agree Agree Neither agree nor disagree Strongly disagree Disagree

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3. Humour should be integrated into course book design.

Strongly agree Agree Neither agree nor disagree Strongly disagree Disagree

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4. Using humour in English language college classes may help students improve their communication skills.

Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Strongly disagree	Disagree

5. Using humour increases students speaking time in class.

Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Strongly disagree	Disagree

6. Students sometimes may not fully understand humour in English; therefore, it should be translated into their mother tongue

Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Strongly disagree	Disagree

7. Humour may not always be fully understood by the students but it helps them interact in the class.

Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Strongly disagree	Disagree

8. Humour helps students to overcome their anxiety and shyness in English language college classes.

Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Strongly disagree	Disagree

9. Do you think students have difficulty in role playing while using humour (e.g telling jokes) for communication purposes?

Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Strongly disagree	Disagree

• If you disagree, please say why.

.....

10. Do you think you need to have sense of humour to use humour in English language college classes?

You Can't Be Serious

Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Strongly disagree	Disagree

- If you disagree, please say why.

.....

11. Using humour in English language college classes is considered to be challenging due to its culture based meanings.

Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Strongly disagree	Disagree

12. Do you use any type of humour in your English language college classes?

Always	Sometimes	Usually	Rarely	Never

- If never, please say why.

.....

- If yes, please say whether you use it for explaining a language feature or for getting students attention during the class.

.....

Thank you for your time