Cross-cultural Study of Perception of Humor by English Native Speakers and Iranian EFL Learners

Maryam Farnia1*, Atena Farhangi2, Masoud Saeedi3

1Department of English Language and Literature, Payame Noor University, Iran
mfarniair@gmail.com
2Department of English Language and Literature, Payame Noor University, Iran
farhangi.atena@gmail.com
3Department of English Language and Literature, Payame Noor University, Iran
saeedi.tefl@gmail.com
*Corresponding Author

Abstract: As an instance of foreign language comprehension, L2 humor perception is proved to be challenging for the foreign language learners. However, the body of literature is heavier on the side of humor production than humor perception. The current study explores the extent to which Iranian English as foreign language (EFL) learners perceive different types of English humor in comparison with the English native speakers. The participants were 153 Iranian EFL learners at intermediate level of language proficiency who were randomly selected from English language learners from several English language institutes in Shiraz, Iran, and 30 American English native speakers who voluntarily participated in this study. A questionnaire consisting of six contextualized jokes of three major types of universal, cultural, and linguistic (with morphological, phonological, lexical, and syntactic subcategories) was developed based on Schmitz's (2002) classification of verbal humor to obtain the quantitative data. Moreover, a semi-structured interview was conducted to elicit the perception of those participants who did not find the jokes humorous. The results showed that the majority of Iranian EFL participants did not realize the humor in the jokes. Additionally, the findings revealed that generally speaking, Iranian EFL learners' perception of humor is significantly lower in all types of jokes examined. The best perceived type of humor was found to be the linguistic humor of morphological type for the Iranian EFL learners and the lexical type for English native speakers. It was also discovered that the phonological humor was the least perceived type of humor for both Iranian EFL learners and English native speakers.

Keywords: EFL learners, Humor perception, Humor types, Linguistic jokes, Verbal humor

1. Introduction

We live in the world of communication and communication does not solely involve not the transmission of messages without recognizing "the interpretive and interpersonal work that goes on in interaction" (Bell &Pomerantz, 2014, p. 32). There is a growing body of literature that recognizes the importance of humor in communication (see e.g., Reece, 2014; Wilson, 2018). Humor is a frequently used source for interaction (Bell &Pmerantz, 2014) which serves diverse functions in communication

other than supplying amusement and eliciting laughter (Banas, Dunbar, Rodriguez, & Liu, 2011), such as affinity seeking (Bell & Dally, 1984) and coping with face threatening situations (Booth_Butterfield & Booth_Butterfield, 1991). Besides, as communication is the general goal of learning a language, it may seem plausible for the researchers in the area of foreign language teaching to study how the use of humor in the classroom can facilitate language learning and enhance students' second language pragmatic competence. Moreover, the use of humor in the classroom can create a positive relationship between teachers and students, reduce students' stress and tension, help students better retain the materials learned, and increase their motivation (Cornett, 1986; Herbert, 1991; Savage et al., 2017; Wagner &Urios-Aparisi, 2011).

Many studies have examined the pedagogical implications of humor in foreign language classroom (e.g., Askildson, 2005; Bilokcuoglu & Debreli, 2018; Bolkan, Griffin, & Goodboy, 2018; Heidari-Shahreza, 2018a, 2018b; Makewa, 2011; Schmitz, 2002; Stroud, 2013; Wagner & Urios-Aparisi, 2011), mainly focusing on the production and use of humor in the classroom. While some studies have investigated language learners' attitude towards humor use in classroom(e.g. , Hişmanoğlu, Ersan &Turan, 2018; Gonulal, 2018; Zhang & Xu, 2011), few have examined whether and to what extent L2 learners can perceive L2 humor (e.g., Ayçiçeği-Dinn, Şişman-Bal & Caldwell-Harris, 2018; Hodson, 2008; Hsin, 2006; Jaroenkitboworn, 2015; Li & Chen, 2006; Shultz &Pilon,1973; Semiz, 2014).

Learning the culture is an integral part of learning a language, and humor as a culture-specific element is not an exception. Despite the plethora of research on the use of humor and its significance in the classroom, as reviewed above, few studies have been conducted to demonstrate to what extent language learners are actually able to realize the humor in the second /foreign language. This is a worthwhile undertaking as L2 humor perception has proved problematic for L2 learners (Bell & Pomerantz, 2016); nevertheless, due to the ease of documentation, analyzing the production of humor has been more popular among scholars (Bell, 2007a). Moreover, being linguistically competent does not necessarily suggest being pragmatically competent (Bardovi-Harlig, 2001) as research findings have documented that even linguistically competent nonnative speakers failed to perceive humor as an aspect of pragmatic competence (Bell, 2013; Bell & Attardo, 2010). Therefore, this study attempted to establish whether Iranian EFL learners are able to perceive and understand English humor. Thus, the study sought answers to the following research questions:

1. How are English universal, linguistic and cultural jokes perceived by Iranian EFL learners and American English native speakers?
2. Is there any significant difference between English native speakers' and Iranian EFL learners' perceptions of English humor?

2. Review of the Literature

The word humor is derived from the Latin word (h)umor which comes from medicine in ancient Greek and is used to mean the body fluid at that time, the balance of which was thought to be responsible for controlling human health and emotion(Martin, 2007).

2.1 The Definition of Humor

Humor is a cognitive process involving making fun of something or perceiving the funniness of something. It is also regarded as a social and emotional response to happiness in perceiving incongruity shown by laughter or even just a smile (Martin, 2007). These factors are assumed by Martin (2007) to be shared by all examples of humor; however, the situations and conditions which lead to humor vary considerably.

As Carrell (2008) stated, "For some, humor is its physical manifestation, laughter; for others, humor is the comic, the funny, or the ludicrous. For still others, humor is synonymous with wit or comedy and so the terminological fog abounds" (p. 306).In classroom context, however, humor is defined as "an act performed through linguistic or nonlinguistic means by any of the participants (i.e., student(s) or teacher)" (Wagner & Urios-Aparisi, 2011, p.400).

For the sake of this study, humor is the incongruity woven in and mixed in a verbal or written expression which extracts a laughter or even a smile when recognized by the reader or hearer which is more in line with the Incongruity Resolution Theory.

2.2 Theories of Humor

Although there is no consensus as to the universal theory of humor, there are three theories which researchers agree to be dominant in humor studies: the Relief Theory, the Superiority Theory, and the Incongruity Resolution theory (Nilsen & Nilsen, 2019). The core idea of the Relief Theory proposed by Freud, as a popular concept in psychology and linguistics, considers humor as a relief to the human internal tensions (Aagard, 2014; Nilsen & Nilsen, 2019). In this theory humor is regarded as a relief to language classroom when "it explains how the frustration and anxiety produced due to unfamiliarity of the learners with L2 rules can be released through the use of instructor humor" (Ziyaeemehr, Kumar & Abdullah, 2011, p. 112).

Superiority theory of humor dates back to Plato and Aristotle in ancient time and to Thomas Hobbes as a pioneer of superiority theory in modern era. According to the Superiority theory, people laugh at others' misfortune. As stated by Jeder (2015, p. 829), "the pleasure to call to humor comes from the feeling of superiority of the one who laughs."

The incongruity-resolution theory of humor, originated in psychology, considers incongruity as something unavoidable in the occurrence of humor. Dynel (2012) states that the incongruity is not always recognized or expected; therefore, it cannot be the only reason for the funniness of the jokes to the hearers. Raskin (1985) quotes Beattie (1776) who formulated Incongruity Resolution Theory, stating that:

> Laughter arises from the view of two or more inconsistent, unsuitable, or incongruous parts or circumstances, considered as united in one complex object or assemblage, or as acquiring a sort of mutual relation from the peculiar manner in which the mind takes notice of them. (p. 155)

Moreover, according to Schopenhauer (1883, p.76), "The cause of laughter in every case is simply the sudden perception of the incongruity between a concept and the real objects which have been thought through it in some relation, and laughter itself is just the expression of this incongruity." Raskin (1979) referred to humor as the competence of a speaker who first is able to realize a sentence as grammatical, and then, he/she can realize whether it is funny or not (Attardo, 1994). Raskin (1985) explained that a humorous text should have the following features:

a) The text is matched with two different interpretations, fully or just partly.
b) The two interpretations are in contrast.
c) Both interpretations are applicable to the text.

In the case of humor in second language (L2) context, it has been observed that sometimes even highly proficient non-native speakers of English may not be able to perceive humor in the input they receive (Bell, 2002). This fact has led to the conviction that high L2 linguistic competence does not necessarily guarantee developing a comparable level of L2 pragmatic competence in general (Bardovi-Harlig, 2001) and humor perception in particular (Bell &Attardo, 2010). The language learners' inability to perceive humor has been ascribed to "a hearer's inability to process the language, understand certain words, understand the pragmatic force of the utterance, organize the humorous frame, grasp incongruity in a joke, or appreciate the humor" (Bell, 2013, p.177).

2.3 Research on Humor Perception

There is a wealth of research on language learners' perception and understanding of L2 humor in foreign language context. In an early study, Shultz and Pilon (1973) conducted an experiment to explore the ability of incongruity detection and humor perception in English speaking children. The findings of their study indicated phonological ambiguity appreciation occurs before lexical ambiguity appreciation in children and both will increase as they grow up. More recently, Hsin (2006) investigated

Chinese EFL learners' comprehension of English jokes through a questionnaire which asked the participants to judge whether the texts they were presented with were humorous or not, and in case of positive response, to outline the punch line. The jokes were classified into three categories of universal, linguistic, and cultural jokes. The linguistic jokes were further divided into syntactic, lexical, phonological, and morphological types. The results suggested the easiest type of joke understood by Chinese EFL learners was universal joke; the phonological jokes were reported to be the most difficult linguistic jokes to perceive; and cultural English jokes were revealed to be the most difficult for the Chinese EFL learners.

Hodson (2008) examined the challenge of advanced EFL learners in understanding textual humor. The participants were 19 adult Japanese EFL teachers with a high level of proficiency in English who were asked to read five English jokes of different types in a questionnaire. After each joke, they were asked about their understanding and ratings of the funniness of the joke. The results suggested that shorter jokes were rated as funnier than the longer ones.

Li and Chen (2006) also investigated linguistic and cultural humor in terms of their learnability, apprehensibility, and length. They looked into the effect of English humor in Thai EFL classrooms across gender. The results indicated that linguistic jokes were more perceivable for Thai learners than the cultural jokes and that female learners showed better understanding of all subcategories of linguistic jokes (phonological, morphological, lexical, and syntactic). Except for the phonological jokes, all learners understood longer jokes better than all other types.

In another study, Jaroenkitboworn (2015) studied 16 EFL Thai learners' English joke comprehension and appreciation. The participants were asked to report their comprehension and perception of 22 English jokes, fill out a questionnaire, and present their idea of the jokes in an interview. The results disclosed three classes of relation between jokes comprehension and appreciation: 1) no comprehension and no appreciation, 2) imperfect comprehension but appreciation, 3) perfect comprehension but no appreciation. The researcher also classified humor failures into different types: not understanding the linguistic ambiguity, not understanding socioculture, not processing the joke text like native speakers and not joining the non-bona fide mode.

Elsewhere, Semiz (2014) conducted a survey to probe into the linguistic humor perception among 70 Turkish EFL learners who were all university students. For this purpose, 12 English linguistic jokes were selected and presented in the form of a questionnaire. The questionnaire featured three types of jokes: lexical jokes, syntactic jokes, and phonological jokes. The participants were asked to indicate if they perceived the joke. To make sure that the punch line was detected by the participants, an explanation was required for the perceived humor. The results suggested that linguistic humor was moderately perceived and that lexical jokes were the easiest type to understand for Turkish EFL learners.

With regard to the perception of humor in an L2, Ayçiçeği-Dinn, Şişman-Bal, and Caldwell-Harris (2018) argue that, in comparison with native language jokes, L2 jokes are perceived as less humorous by L2 learners. They attribute this to the fact that L2 comprehension is more demanding. To get to the whole picture, they selected some jokes from Turkish and English websites to be presented to a number of Turkish university students. The results suggested that those jokes which were easier to comprehend elicited higher ratings of humor. Moreover, as the participants' level of L2 proficiency increased, so did their ratings of foreign language jokes. Interestingly, it was observed that the more proficient learners rated L2 jokes as funnier than their native language jokes.

Lastly, Hess-Zimmermann (2016) investigated metalinguistic reflections of children and adolescents to different kinds of verbal jokes. The participants of the study were 42 students of different ages who were shown two lexical and two syntactic jokes. They were asked to decide if each text was a joke or not and to explain the reason for their answers. It was reported that School grades were a significant effective factor and that for younger students the syntactic jokes were more apprehensible.

Chen and Dewael (2019) conducted a study on the relationship between English proficiency and humor appreciation among English L1 users and Chinese L2 users of English". The study used audiovisual-based, multimodal humorous stimuli to evaluate and compare L1 and L2 English users' ability in understanding humor. The findings revealed that L2 users need to reach a certain threshold in L2 linguistic, pragmatic, and sociocultural knowledge before a positive linear relationship emerges

between proficiency and appreciation of multimodal humorous stimuli. The results also indicated that advanced L2 users demonstrated similarities with English L1 users in humor processing.

Finally, Alnamer, Altakhaineh, and Alnamer (2019) investigated the extent to which Arabic-speaking EFL learners appreciate English punny jokes. The participants were 60 Arabic-speaking EFL learners who answered a test of 16 punny jokes prepared by the researchers. The results showed that Arabic-speaking EFL learners have little appreciation of English punny jokes.

As the above review suggests, the perception and production of humor has been studied with different foci across diverse contexts. Yet, to date no published cross-cultural work has attempted to specifically address Iranian EFL learners' and native speakers' perception of this issue. Thus, this research was carried out to provide further insight into and better understand cross-cultural variation with regard to speakers' perception of humor as an important component of pragmatic competence.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

To make sure participants were able to read and comprehend the questionnaire texts, 153 Iranian EFL learners at the intermediate level of proficiency from five private language institutes in Shiraz were chosen. It should be pointed out that some jokes are not understood by children even in their own native language. Thus, to preclude them from providing fake data for the reason of not having enough experience of real life, the participants were selected from among adults (≥18 years old). Since gender is not a variable in this study, the number of male and female subjects was comparable (75 female, 72 male and six did not mention their gender in the questionnaire). They accepted voluntarily to take part in the study. Also, 30 American English native speakers participated in the study. They were all adult (≥18 years old) as well and participated voluntarily in this study. It needs to be pointed out that for reasons of practicality and availability it was not possible for the researchers to involve an equal number of Iranian EFL learners and American native English speakers. As a result, the sample of Iranian EFL learners is substantially larger in comparison with American native English speakers.

3.2 Instruments

Two instruments were used for this study: a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview.

3.2.1 Questionnaire

The questionnaire composed of six jokes from variable sources which were produced and used as a form of reading test. Each joke was selected as a representative of a verbal humor type based on Schmitz's (2002) classification of verbal humor in the pedagogical setting of EFL. The first question sought to determine Iranian EFL learners' ability to perceive humor with regard to the verbal humor classification proposed by Schmitz (2002) for the sake of educational purposes in the field of EFL teaching. As was mentioned above, his taxonomy divided humor into three classes of universal, linguistic, and cultural. To be more precise, following previous studies (e.g., Green & Pepicello, 1978; Ross, 1998), this study chose to divide the broad class of linguistic humor into four subcategories of phonological, morphological, lexical and syntactic.

To examine the variation of the jokes in a more detailed manner, the language-based humor was divided into four subcategories of phonological, morphological, lexical and syntactic verbal humor. This categorization has been used in related studies too (see Green & Pepicello, 1978; Hsin, 2006; Lew, 1997; Shultz & Pilon, 1973). The questionnaire with six contextualized jokes was provided to each participant, asking him/her to identify whether they found the jokes humorous, and if not, explain the reason. The respondents were asked to answer the following questions for each joke:

●Did you discover any humorous sign in the text? Yes/ No
●Explain your answer: (which part is humorous and in what way?)

3.2.2   Semi-structured Interview

The semi-structured interview with open-ended questions was conducted to shed light on the reason behind "No" answers in the questionnaire. Some of the learners who answered "No" to the questions (around 25 for each question) were asked to paraphrase the text they were not able to discover the humor in. The rationale behind conducting the semi-structured interview was to specify whether not perceiving the humor is due to lack of competence to comprehend the joke text or discover the humor in it despite comprehending. Due to participants' availability, the interview was only collected from EFL learners.

3.3   Procedure

To develop the questionnaire, 12 jokes were chosen by the researchers from different sources such as books, web pages, and popular humor pages. There were two representatives for each joke type (i.e., universal, cultural and phonological, morphological, lexical and syntactic linguistic humor). To ensure the jokes matched the category they were selected for and were considered humorous in English by American native speakers, six American native speakers of English were asked to categorize the jokes into six groups of joke types and evaluate their level of humor by using the guidelines the researchers provided. The six finally chosen jokes were those with broad consensus on their types.

To assess the internal consistency and reliability of the questionnaire, English native speakers' answers to the questionnaire were analyzed using Kuder Richardson (KR20). The results yielded a reliability value of 0.727, which indicates an acceptable coefficient.

The data collection procedure took around 6 months. The data from native speakers were collected through the researchers' connections in the United States, and the data from Iranian EFL learners were collected from English language institutes in Shiraz, Iran.

3.4   Data Analysis

After gathering the data, the questionnaires were examined to check the frequencies of "Yes" or "No" answers. The "Yes" answers with no correct explanations were considered as "No". Afterwards, the percentages were calculated for the answers to each type of jokes for the purpose of comparison. The chi-square test was subsequently run to determine if there were any significant differences between native and non-native speakers in terms of perceiving humor of any type.

4.   Findings

In what follows, the results are presented according to the organization of the questionnaire.

4.1   Results of the Questionnaire

4.1.1   Question Number One

The first joke in the questionnaire was a universal or reality-based humor. The joke is as follows:

> *A family of mice was surprised by a big cat. Father Mouse jumped and said, "Bow-wow!" The cat ran away. "What was that, Father?" asked Baby Mouse. "Well, son, that's why it's important to learn a second language."*

The results obtained from the analysis of universal humor perception by both Iranian EFL learners and English native speakers are presented in Table 1. As shown in the table, the Iranian EFL learners' overall correct responses to question 1 were surprisingly rare. Only 12 learners from 153 Iranian EFL learners were able to catch the humor in the text of question number one which constitutes

7.85% of all participants. In addition, 141 Iranian EFL learners did not find the text humorous which constituted 92.15% of this group of participants.

Table1. Universal Humor Perception by Iranian EFL Learners and English Native Speakers

Participants	Perceived		Not Perceived		Total		$\chi 2$	Sig.
	F	P	F	P	F	P		
Iranian EFL learners	12	7.85	141	92.15	153	100.0	94.716	<.001
English Native Speakers	26	86.65	4	13.35	30	100.0		

Note: *F* Frequency; *P* Percentage

With regard to native speakers' responses, the findings showed that 86.65% of English native speakers and only 7.85% of Iranian EFL learners perceived universal humor in the questionnaire. The result of chi-square test showed this difference to be of statistical significance. In other words, native English speakers realized the humor in the joke significantly more than Iranian EFL learners (sig. = 0.00, *P<0.05*).

4.1.2 Question Number Two

The second joke in the questionnaire was a morphological one which is a subcategory of linguistic or language-based humor. The joke is as follows:

> *A: What's a baby pig called?*
> *B: A piglet.*
> *A: So what's a baby toy called?*
> *B: A toilet.*

Table 2 presents an overview of the morphological humor perception elicited from Iranian EFL learners and English native speakers. The findings showed that Iranian EFL learners appreciated the morphological joke more than any other type of jokes in the questionnaire. More precisely, while71 participants (46.40%) perceived the joke correctly, 82 participants (53.60%) did not perceive any humor in the question.

Table 2. Morphological Humor Perception of Iranian EFL Learners and English Native Speakers

Participants	Perceived		Not Perceived		Total		$\chi 2$	Sig.
	F	P	F	P	F	P		
Iranian EFL learners	71	46.40	82	53.60	153	100.0	11.340	<.001
English Native Speakers	24	80.0	6	20.0	30	100.0		

Note: *F* Frequency; *P* Percentage

Also, the findings showed that 80% of English native speakers and 46.40% of Iranian EFL learners perceived the humor in this question. The result of chi-square test confirmed the statistical significance of the difference in the perception of morphological humor between English native speakers and Iranian EFL learners. In other words, native English speakers realized the humor in the joke significantly more than Iranian EFL learners did (sig. = 0.00, *P<0.05*).

4.1.3 Question Number Three

The third joke in the questionnaire was lexical humor. It is considered a word-based joke or a linguistic humor:

> *"I have changed my mind."*
> *"Thank Heavens! Does it work any better now?"*

Table 3 displays an overview of the lexical humor perception of all participants. As set out in the table, 23 participants (15%) could perceive the lexical humor while130 participants (85%) did not perceive the lexical joke.

Table3. Lexical Humor Perception of Iranian EFL Learners and English Native Speakers

Participants	Perceived		Not Perceived		Total		χ2	Sig.
	F	P	F	P	F	P		
Iranian EFL learners	23	15.0	130	85.0	153	100.0	70.988	<.001
English Native Speakers	27	90.0	3	10.0	30	100.0		

Note: *F* Frequency; *P* Percentage

Moreover, it was found out that 90% of English native speakers and only 15% of Iranian EFL learners perceived the lexical humor in the questionnaire. The result of chi-square test established the significance of the difference in the perception of this category of humor between English native speakers and Iranian EFL learners. In other words, native English speakers realized the humor in the joke significantly more than Iranian EFL learners (sig. = 0.00, *P*<0.05).

4.1.4 Question Number Four

The fourth joke in the questionnaire was phonological humor, which is a subcategory of linguistic or language-based type of humor:

Man: "I'd like to buy a pair of nylon stockings for my wife."
Clerk: "Sheer?"
Man: "No, she is at home."

Table 4reports an overview of the phonological humor perception of the Iranian EFL learners and English native speakers. The findings illustrated that whilst 15 EFL learners (9.8%) perceived the phonological humor, 138 EFL learners (90.2%) did not perceive the lexical joke.

Table 4. Phonological Humor Perception of Iranian EFL Learners and English Native Speakers

Participants	Perceived		Not Perceived		Total		χ2	Sig.
	F	P	F	P	F	P		
Iranian EFL learners	15	9.8	138	90.2	153	100.0	57.515	<.001
English Native Speakers	21	70.0	9	30.0	30	100.0		

Note: *F* Frequency; *P* Percentage

In addition, whereas 70% of the native speakers (n=21) perceived the phonological humor, 30% (n=9) of them did not perceive it. The result of chi-square test showed a significant difference in this regard. Differently put, native English speakers realized the humor in the joke significantly more than Iranian EFL learners (sig. = 0.00, *P*<0.05).

4.1.5 Question Number Five

The fifth joke in the questionnaire was cultural humor or culture specific humor:

One turkey asks another, "Do you believe in life after Christmas?"

Table 5 presents an overview of the cultural humor perception of the Iranian EFL learners and English native speakers. Of 153 Iranian EFL learners, 45 participants (29.40%) were capable of perceiving the cultural humor, while 108 participants (70.60%) did not understand the cultural joke in the question.

Table 5. Cultural Humor Perception of Iranian EFL Learners and English Native Speakers

Participants	Perceived		Not Perceived		Total		χ2	Sig.
	F	P	F	P	F	P		
Iranian EFL learners	45	29.40	108	70.60	153	100.0		
English Native Speakers	22	73.35	8	26.65	30	100.0	20.849	<.001

Note: *F* Frequency; *P* Percentage

The findings showed that 73.35% of English native speakers (n=22) perceived the cultural humor in the question while only 26.65% of the native speakers (n=8) did not perceive this type of humor. Statistically, the result of chi-square test showed a significant difference in the perception of cultural humor between English native speakers and Iranian EFL learners. Thus, it can be concluded that native English speakers realized humor in the joke significantly more than Iranian EFL learners (sig. = 0.00, *P*<0.05).

4.1.6   Question Number Six

The sixth joke in the questionnaire was a syntactic joke which is a subcategory of linguistic or language-based type of humor:

Have your eyes ever been checked?
No, they've always been blue.

An overview of the results pertaining to participants' perception of this joke is displayed in Table 6.As can be seen, of the 153 Iranian EFL learners, 17 participants (11.10%) perceived the humor in the question, while 136 participants (88.90%) did not.

Table 6. Syntactic Humor Perception of Iranian EFL Learners and English Native speakers

Participants	Perceived		Not Perceived		Total		χ2	Sig.
	F	P	F	P	F	P		
Iranian EFL learners	17	11.10	136	88.90	153	100.0		
English Native Speakers	26	86.65	4	13.35	30	100.0	79.653	<.001

Note: *F* Frequency; *P* Percentage

Moreover, 86.65% of English native speakers (n=26) perceived the syntactic humor while 13.35% (n=4) did not. To make sure of the statistical significance of observed difference, again chi-square test was run the results of which confirmed the significance of the difference in the perception of syntactic humor between English native speakers and Iranian EFL learners. In brief, native English speakers realized the humor in the joke significantly more than Iranian EFL learners (sig. = 0.00, *P*<0.05).

4.1.7   Comparison across the Questionnaire

Table 7presents the overall comparison in humor perception across the questionnaire between the American native speakers and Iranian EFL learners. The findings show that 96.7% of the American native English speakers and 52.30% of Iranian EFL learners perceived the humor in the texts. The result of the chi-square test showed this difference to be significant. In other words, English native speakers perceived the humor in the questionnaire significantly more than Iranian EFL learners (Sig. = 0<001, *p*<0.05).

Table 7. Humor Perception Capability of Iranian EFL Learners and English Native speakers

Participants	Capable of Perceiving		Not capable of Perceiving		Total		χ2	Sig.
	F	P	F	P	F	P		
Iranian EFL learners	80	52.30	73	47.70	153	100.0	20.51	<.001
English Native Speakers	29	96.70	1	3.30	30	100.0		

Note: *F* Frequency; *P* Percentage

4.2 Interview

In order to find out the reason why Iranian EFL learners fail to perceive humor, a semi-structured interview with 25 participants who did not perceive the humor in each question of the questionnaire was conducted. The participants were asked to paraphrase the texts in the questionnaire putting their words in English as much as they could, although they were allowed to use their own language, i.e., Persian. The results were actually utilized to figure out whether being unable to perceive humor is the consequence of not comprehending the jokes or not. Of course, as stated by Bell (2007), humor perception might take place without complete comprehension. For the purpose of anonymity, pseudonyms were used instead of the participants' real names.

4.2.1 Question Number One

Of the participants who were shown not to be able to apprehend the universal humor in the text of question number one, 25 were randomly selected to join the semi-structured interview where they were asked to paraphrase the text in English or Persian.

Out of 25 participants, 20 did not know the meaning of the word "bow-wow" although they were able to comprehend the whole meaning of the text. They tried to use guessing strategy to get the gist of the text. For example, Sara, a 22-year-old student of university, mentioned in her interview:

"... The father mouse thought that bow-wow was the cat language. ..."

Or in another example, Shahrzad despite getting the gist of the text stated in her interview that:

"... the father mouse was so scared that he wasn't able to speak well so he said bow-wow instead of a word he wanted to say...."

The results showed that five out of 25 participants did not get the meaning of the text and it was not comprehensible to them. Afshin, 35, one of the interviewees paraphrased the text as follows:

"The mouse jumped and because of that the cat was scared and because the cat didn't know the language of mice but his father told him: you need to learn a second language."

In another example, Venus, a 33-year-old computer engineer, puts her interpretation of the text as follows:

"A family of mice saw a cat. The cat said bow-wow and the baby mouse said I learned a new language."

In general, not all 25 participants of the interview had complete comprehension of the text.

4.2.2   Question Number Two

Of the learners who did not comprehend the second humorous text, 25 respondents were randomly selected to be interviewed. The text in the second question is a morphological joke and is the best- perceived one by the Iranian EFL learners who completed the questionnaire. Only two interviewees were not able to get the meaning and 24 interviewed participants indicated to have fully comprehended the text but did not find any humor in it.

Saman, 18, paraphrased the text as follows:

"Nothing is funny about it. It was just an instruction."

One of the interviewees mentioned in his interview:

"I know what is the meaning… errr… and I know baby toy is not toilet but errr… not funny."

4.2.3   Question Number Three

The third question in the questionnaire consisted of a lexical joke. Of Iranian EFL learners, 25 participants who did not perceive the joke were randomly chosen to attend the interview. Out of 25 interviewees, 17 did not have an acceptable comprehension and were not able to get the meaning. Shabnam, 27,interpreted the joke as follows:

"The joke says I changed my opinion. The other person says thanks god you changed it. It is better now. Maybe the first person's idea was a bad one."

Of all interviewees, eight were able to get the meaning; however, they did not find it humorous.

4.2.4   Question Number Four

Question number four contains a phonological joke. Again, 25 Iranian EFL learners who did not perceive the humor in the text were randomly selected to take part in the semi-structured interview and they all were asked to paraphrase the text. All the interviewees had full comprehension of the text but they did not detect the humorous point of it. They all insisted on the interpretation that the text is a normal conversation between a salesman and a customer and nothing is humorous in the text.

4.2.5   Question Number Five

Of the Iranian participants, 25 were interviewed about the cultural text involved in question number five. They all had a good level of comprehension and got the "having turkey for the Christmas Eve dinner" meaning of the text. Seven participants revealed not to know the culture of having turkey for the Christmas Eve dinner. Reza, 23, was among those who were not aware of this aspect of the target culture. He said that:

"I know the meaning and I know that turkey is served for the Thanks giving meal but I don't understand what the relation of the turkey and the Christmas is."

Around 18 participants did not find the text humorous in spite of the fact that they were cognizant of American special occasion of having turkey for the Christmas Eve dinner. Masoud, a thirty-year old EFL learner, stated in his interview:

"It cannot be humorous that the turkeys are killed and eaten for Christmas."

4.2.6   Question Number Six

The last question of the questionnaire was the topic of the semi-structured interview with 25 randomly selected participants who mentioned it as being not humorous in their questionnaires. All the interviewed learners had a roughly good comprehension of the text. But, none of them got the humorous point. The majority of Iranian interviewees mentioned that the answer to the question in the text is nonsense.

5.   Discussion

In response to the first research question "How are English universal, linguistic and cultural jokes perceived by Iranian EFL learners and American English native speakers?", the findings showed that Iranian EFL learners perceive universal humor less than other types of humor; in other words, only 7.85% of Iranian EFL learners were proved to perceive universal humor in the questionnaire. This appears to be counterevidence to the definition of universal humor by Schimitz (2002) suggesting that universal jokes are perceivable in all languages and cultures. Also, Hsin (2006) supports the definition by reporting the universal humor as the easiest type of humor to perceive for Chinese EFL learners. However, the findings need to be interpreted with caution with regard to the results obtained from the semi-structured interviews. All the participants of the semi-structured interview for the universal humor in this study indicated a lack of complete comprehension, which probably serves as a possible explanation for the lack of humor perception. This is, however, in contrast with Bell (2007a) who argued that full comprehension is not the prerequisite for the humor perception. Another explanation for this finding might be the fact that the universal joke utilized in this study is the longest joke of the questionnaire. This is in line with the results of Hodson (2008) who states longer jokes are more difficult to comprehend and perceive by the Japanese learners, although it is in contradiction with Li and Chen (2006) who assume that length is not in negative relation with the linguistic jokes perception since it is considered effective in cultural jokes perception.

Another significant finding of the study is that the second least perceived type of humor with very slight difference with the universal humor is the phonological humor (9.80% of the Iranian EFL learners perceived the phonological humor in the questionnaire.). This is in alignment with Hsin (2006) who found humor to be the most difficult type of linguistic humor to be perceived by Chinese EFL learners. The results also support the idea that perfect comprehension can be followed by no humor perception and humor failure may be caused by not understanding the linguistic ambiguity(Jaroenkitboworn,2015).With respect to the results obtained from the semi-structured interviews, all those participants who were interviewed for the phonological type of humor had complete comprehension of the text; however, they did not reveal any phonological humor perception; in other words, all the interviewees claimed that the text is simply a common conversation with no sign of humorousness.

Considering the definition of universal humor, there are grounds to conceive of the phonological humor as the most difficult type of humor for Iranian EFL learners to perceive. This is attributable to the fact that lack of universal humor perception seems to stem from lack of comprehension. This assumption also accords with the idea that the rate of humor perception for both universal humor and phonological humor among the Iranian EFL learners is quite close to each other. . This is in fact in accord with Li and Chen (2006) suggesting phonological and syntactic as the most the difficult to perceive type of humor for Thai EFL learners and Hsin (2006) reporting phonological humor as the least perceived type of linguistic humor for Chinese EFL learners.

Another key finding of the study relates to the results for cultural humor in the questionnaire. This category of humor was revealed to be the second best perceived type by Iranian EFL learners. A finding which aligns with Schmitz (2002) who postulates that cultural humor is one of the most difficult to perceive types of humor for the EFL learners. In the same manner, Hsin (2006) reports the cultural humor the most difficult type of humor for Chinese EFL learners. As with previous cases, the semi-structured interview findings helped shed more light on the finding obtained from the questionnaire. Most interviewees (18 out of 25) showed perfect comprehension of the text claiming that they knew the

culture related to the text; thus, the reason for the lack of humor perception for most of the participants seems to be not joining the non-bona fide mode as one of the reasons for humor failure (Jaroenkitboworn, 2015).

Another finding of the study is the association between humor comprehension and humor perception in Iranian EFL learners: a) complete comprehension and perception which is the successful humor relation, b) no comprehension and no perception, and c) comprehension but no perception. The last two relations are considered as the failed humor relation. This is in partial agreement with Jaroenkitboworn (2015) suggesting three kinds of relation for the failed humor. However, what is missing in the results of this study and is considered in hers is the incomplete comprehension but perception.

The last finding of the study with regard to the first research question is that the easiest type of humor for the Iranian EFL learners is shown to be the morphological type; 46.40% of the Iranian EFL learners perceived the morphological humor in the questionnaire. This finding supports the earlier evidence showing morphological humor as the easiest type of linguistic humor for the Chinese EFL learners (Hsin, 2006). They run counter to Semiz (2014) who found the lexical humor to be the easiest type to perceive by Turkish EFL learners. What semi-structured interviews revealed in relation with the morphological humor is again not joining the non-bona fide mode of the humor by most of the participants who did not perceive this type of humor.

To conclude, in response to the first research question, the easiest type of humor to perceive for the Iranian EFL learners is a category of the word-based or linguistic type of humor followed by the cultural and universal types, respectively. Linguistic humor has a hierarchy of difficulty in itself too. To start from the easiest and reach the most difficult, the findings of this study delineate the hierarchy inside the linguistic type as morphological, lexical, syntactic, and phonological. Noteworthy here is the fact that at best, less than 50% of Iranian EFL learners perceived the verbal humor and, excluding morphological humor, the rate of humor perception of all types reached an undesirable level of less than 30%.

In response to the second research question, "Is there any significant difference between English native speakers' and Iranian EFL learners' perceptions of English humor?", the findings confirmed that in all six types of humor considered in this study, English native speakers were shown to have a significantly higher level of humor perception. This is in line with the results reported by Ayçiçeği-Dinn et al. (2018) suggesting jokes are funnier in L1 due to easier comprehension.

One additional finding obtained from the questionnaires completed by the English native speakers is that they perceived lexical humor more than any other type of humor (90% of the English native speakers who participated in the study apprehended the lexical joke in the questionnaire), which is not considered as a very surprising result. This is consistent with Lew (1997) who stated that the lexical jokes are the most frequent type of jokes in English.

Somewhat surprisingly, it was found out that the phonological humor is the least perceived type of humor by the English native speakers. This finding does not seem to be in line with Shultz and Pilon (1973) who postulate that the ability to perceive phonological humor comes first to English native speakers of around 6 to 9 years of age although lexical humor perception ability comes after that which is not before 12. This entails more practice on phonological humor perception than the lexical humor perception and since practice makes perfect, phonological humor is expected to stand in a higher place than the lexical humor in the author's opinion.

Another finding of the study is that English native speakers appreciate lexical humor more than syntactic humor which corroborates Hess-Zimmerman (2016) who suggests lexical jokes are easier to be analyzed for the audience than the lexical jokes. It stands to hypothesize that analyzing the words in their own places is easier than finding a relationship between them (Hess-Zimmerman, 2016).

Surprisingly, the second difficult type of joke to perceive for the English native speakers was the cultural joke, since English native speakers are mostly expected to know the cultural practices of their own language. This is not in total agreement with the definition of the cultural humor by Schmitz (2002). Although due to the limited number of English native speakers participating in the study the results need to be interpreted with caution.

Since the phonological humor is assumed to be the most difficult type of humor to perceive for Iranian EFL learners by the researchers of the study, the interesting finding here is that phonological

humor perception is the most difficult type of humor perception for both Iranian EFL learners and English native speakers. This chimes with Bell and Attardo (2010) arguing that humor appreciation failure is not different in terms of the type of humor except for the failure caused by the lack of lexical knowledge.

Succinctly put, in response to the second research question, the easiest type of humor to perceive for the English native speakers is a category of the word-based or linguistic type of humor followed by the universal and cultural types, respectively. Linguistic humor has a hierarchy of difficulty in itself, too. To start from the easiest and reach the most difficult, the findings of this study show the hierarchy inside the linguistic type as lexical, syntactic, morphological, and phonological. To conclude, there exist differences in terms of humor perception between Iranian EFL learners and English native speakers, except for the most difficult type of humor to perceive which is proved to be the phonological humor for both groups; of course, the rate of humor perception is significantly higher for English native speakers. Interestingly, the easiest type of humor and the most difficult one for both Iranian EFL learners and English native speakers is among the subcategories of linguistic humor.

The main aim of this study was to address the gap in the current literature of humor perception studies in general and particularly in Iran. The findings may provide further insight as to the actual relation of EFL learning, teaching, and humor perception. Moreover, considering the fact that humor has social and communication functions and humor perception is crucial for communication which is the main goal for studying another language for most of the learners, the outcomes have three pedagogical implications.

First, the results of this study point to the fact that many EFL students may have difficulty comprehending jokes and recognizing humorous situations as daily authentic contexts of language use .and Therefore, teachers are highly recommended to build humor into their curriculum. They are also encouraged to raise their students' awareness of English humor and its diverse forms and shades, thereby enhancing their sociocultural and communicative competence. The importance of incorporating humor in EFL classes also lies in the fact that comicality helps teachers foster a non-threatening context which lowers students' affective filter which in turn promotes learning.

The second important implication of the study is for the material developers to include more humorous materials in books and teaching instruments of the EFL teaching to make it easier for the teachers and the learners to go through the challenge of humor perception which is proved by the findings of the current study to be neglected specifically in Iran. Finally, the findings may hopefully trigger the EFL learners to find their way into the actual communication by trying to enhance their ability of humor perception and find effective strategies to cope with humor in English.

6.   Conclusion

This study set out to investigate humor perception among Iranian EFL learners and the way it differs from that of English native speakers. The most significant finding to emerge is that in terms of perception difficulty for the Iranian EFL learners among English verbal humor, the hierarchy is universal, phonological, syntactic, lexical, cultural and morphological. Also, the findings revealed that in perceiving all types of humor the English native speakers outperformed EFL learners.

This research aimed at improving humor appreciation among Iranian EFL learners by throwing light on factors that hinder their perception of humor. The outcomes of the study help advance our current knowledge of humor perception in the field of EFL teaching and offer valuable insight into how Iranian EFL learners perceive English humor.

Even so, the scope of the study is limited in that the potential effect of participants' proficiency and gender on their perception of humor was not taken into account. Furthermore, since the sample of EFL learners was limited to the population of learners in Shiraz (a city in Iran), the findings may not be generalizable to other areas of the country. Despite these limitations, however, the study certainly adds to our knowledge of humor perception in the field of EFL teaching and offers valuable insights as to how Iranian EFL learners perceive English verbal humor, an area of research which is still far from being exhausted. As such, further studies are definitely needed to explore how Iranian teachers exploit each type of humor to enrich their classes. In addition, future work may involve examining the explicit teaching of issues related to humor and its effects on learners' ability to understand it.

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