

Investigating Humor Integration in Tunisian Tertiary English Classes: A Comparative Study of Teachers' and Learners' Perceptions

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ABSTRACT

This study examines lecturers' and learners' perceptions on humor use in Tunisian tertiary classrooms, focusing specifically on the English major. The ultimate aim is to explore the types and frequency of humor use on the one hand and whether teachers regard humor in the same light as their students on the other. To this purpose, a mixed-methods approach consisting of questionnaires and semi-structured interviews is adopted to collect quantitative and qualitative data for analysis. The findings revealed that, in terms of frequency, humor is used by all interviewed teachers irrespective of their gender. Yet, the general percentage of humor use remains moderate and limited to specific oral subjects as confirmed by the students. The results also indicated the participants' agreement on the efficiency and preference of verbal, spontaneous and relevant humor types. However, it has been shown that the lecturers use a very limited repertoire of humor forms, neglecting jokes which are more appreciated by their students. Inconsistencies between the participants' responses are further traced at the level of their attitude towards humor use in class. While most of the teachers believe that the merits of humor are undeniable, they expressed skepticism and discomfort in dealing with this tool in class. To overcome these lacunas, this study builds on the students' recommendations to improve their teachers' practices and can therefore be a starting point for EFL curriculum designers in Tunisia to revise current materials for a better humor integration in higher education.

INTRODUCTION

Research into second and foreign language teaching has for long taken a one-directional path, focusing mostly on education as "a wholly serious matter" (Askildson, 2005, p. 46). Classic models of language teaching have, for decades, confined educators to standardize their classrooms into fun-free environments where syllabus and systematic testing are the primary foci (Chaniotakis, 2010; Nasiri & Mafakheri, 2015, Bell & Pomerantz, 2016). In recent years, however, there has been a tremendous shift in language education research to give more prominence to learner-centered teaching methods which fit more the diversity brought about by globalization (Benson, 2012). Endeavors in this regard have been increasingly zealous about exploring and recognizing the potential of language play "as a useful resource for offering opportunities for creativity, unstructured communication, enjoyment in the language process and increasing student confidence and motivation" (Petraki & Nguyen, 2016, p. 98). Precisely, there has been a growing body of research on humor as one pervasive aspect of language play and the affective and cognitive benefits it can bring to language classes (Berk,

1996; Hellman, 2007; Chabeli, 2008; Al-Duleimi & Aziz, 2016; Kovar, 2017).

Despite the established evidence of the effectiveness of humor and its attested empirical usefulness in language acquisition, the literature reveals that educators often hold a skeptical and nuanced stance which reflects their doubts about it as a pedagogical tool of instruction (Askildson, 2005; Petraki & Nguyen, 2016; Legény & Špaček, 2019). Instead of finding answers to why "many instructors choose to actively avoid the inclusion of humor within the classroom" (Kovar, 2017, p. 3), the bulk of research focused rather on the learners' perspectives with scant attention to the teachers' stance (Nasiri & Mafakheri, 2015). Equally overlooked is the contribution of humor to university pedagogy in comparison to the extensive work done on classroom humor in elementary and secondary education (Jansson, 2016, p. 45).

In the Tunisian context, not only are these angles under-explored but there is also a general dearth of research on humor in the field of education irrespective of the level or the targeted participants. In fact, humor does not seem to occupy a high position in the Tunisian educational system as

there are hardly any studies, to the researcher's knowledge, that have been done on it except for some attempts to look at its use in social media (Moalla, 2013) or its relation to cultural identity (Muhawi, 2013).

To address these multiple gaps, this paper purports to investigate the use, frequency and types of humor in tertiary education in the Tunisian context. The main aim is to extend and add to current research on learners' and lecturers' perspectives on humor integration in higher education. Understanding the educators' beliefs and whether they are in tune with their students' needs and opinions is likely to enhance the tradition of teaching and learning English as a major in Tunisian universities. To reach this goal, this study seeks to answer the following research questions:

- RQ1: How much is humor used in Tunisian tertiary English classes?
 RQ2: What are the preferred types of humor for Tunisian tertiary students and teachers?
 RQ3: What are Tunisian EFL teachers' and students' perceptions of humor use?
 RQ4: How can Tunisian EFL teachers improve their practices in dealing with humor?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Humor Defined

Acknowledged to be a complex universal concept with fuzzy breadth and scope, humor has nonetheless lured researchers to come up with a defined understanding of its pervasiveness in human interactions (Askildson, 2005; Cruz, 2019). Attempts in this vein include those that associate humor with amusement. Unanimously linking humor to this emotional experience of having fun in most of the literature (Germanier-Manvell, 2012; Ocon, 2015; Andarab and Mutlu, 2019) has led to the recurrence of this concrete definition of humor as "something that makes a person laugh or smile". The element of laughter in this sense constitutes the physical and expressive component of humor. Yet, though important, laughing should not be taken to be a sufficient condition for humor to exist (Ross, 1998).

Building on these endeavors to further define humor and dissect its other facets, many researchers have focalized the cognitive dimension in this social phenomenon to add another crucial component of humor: incongruity (Goodboy et al., 2015; Bell & Pomerantz, 2016; Huss & Eastep, 2016; Bakar & Kumar, 2019). In this regard, Legény and Špaček (2019, p. 6) opine that incongruity is "the most basic structure of humor" as it is framed around two elements: the "expected content" of serious talk on the one hand as opposed to the "unexpected twist" of the delivered humorous instance on the other. For this reason, it is not enough that incongruity is present but it should be recognized and resolved for humor to succeed (Martin, 2007).

In the context of teaching and learning, the above-discussed dimensions of humor are relevant. In fact, for the learners to experience the emotional, expressive and cognitive aspects of classroom humor, they "need to perceive and then resolve the incongruous or bizarre elements in

humorous instructional materials so that humour can facilitate learning" (Gonulal, 2018, p. 142). Accordingly, added to these general and fixed aspects, researchers have emphasized the need to consider humor as "a specific pedagogical tool" and "an important instrument for the improvement of educational contexts" (Askildson, 2005, p. 45/49). More than confining it within the walls of fun and amusement, then, language practitioners are urged to adopt humor as a teaching strategy which is part and parcel of the curriculum rather than an occasional detour done after accomplishing serious tasks (Chabeli, 2008; Nasiri & Mafakheri, 2015; Margoob, 2017).

Humor Classified

Just as it is multifaceted in character, humor also displays manifold realizations. The form that humor can take is one general and uncomplicated way of categorizing it. Relying on this criterion broadens the typology to include a very rich list of humor types such as jokes, puns, retorts, riddles and one-liners (Schmitz, 2002). Bell and Pomerantz, (2016) add to this set several other forms like anecdotes, satire, irony, banter, hyperbole, parody, mockery and teases. Other researchers include funny stories/examples (Al-Duleimi and Aziz, 2016), memes (Baysac, 2017) & puzzles and cartoons (Chaniotakis, 2010).

While these taxonomies provide a huge repertoire of items, the nuances they generate are not easy to differentiate and they can sometimes overlap, resulting in confusion (Pomerantz & Bell, 2011). Moreover, in the realm of second and foreign language instruction, some of these forms are found to be inappropriate for the classroom and "certain forms might be easier for L2 users to participate in and create" (Kim & Park, 2017). Accordingly, there has been an inclination to group these numerous humor forms into dichotomies based on clear-cut criteria that can be useful in a classroom context. Perhaps the simplest and broadest of these is the mode of communication. This criterion distinguishes verbal (jocular teasing, puns) from non-verbal (comics, memes) types of humor (Cruz, 2019).

Research specifically done in higher education classrooms adds to these typologies two basic related aspects (Petraiki and Nguyen, 2016; Kim and Park, 2017; Bakar, 2019). The first aspect relates to the relevancy of humor to course content and it distinguishes 'related' or 'relevant' humor from 'unrelated' or 'irrelevant' humor (Wanzer et al., 2006; Kim & Park, 2017). The second aspect is the degree to which humor is spontaneous or planned (Banas et al., 2011; Nadeem, 2012). Lewis (1993) explains planned humor as an act that the teacher already prepares for to use at a defined time during the lesson. Unplanned or spontaneous humor, on the other hand, can happen unintentionally at any point of time during the course (Lewis, 1993).

To sum up, the instances of humor used in a classroom context "may belong to any of these categories or may even emanate from a careful blending of [them]" (Khan, 2012, p. 46). What matters most is that instructional humor should be appropriate or "positive" (Banas et al., 2010; Kim & Park, 2017; Bakar, 2019). In this study, the participants' choices of

humor types will enlighten the researcher about the extent to which humor is appropriately employed in Tunisian universities and whether its rewards are explored to the full.

Humor between Rewards and Risks

It is well-documented in the literature that humor has myriad positive effects in the field of language learning. Recurrent affective advantages of humor in previous research include establishing a strong rapport between learners and instructors (Kovar, 2017), alleviating classroom tension and reducing anxiety (Petraki & Nguyen, 2016; Cruz, 2019), and fostering group cohesion and learners' sense of belonging (Bolkan & Goodboy, 2015). These emotional effects can be "conductive to long-term learning" which ultimately leads to a "high level of second language performance" (Tocali-Beller & Swain's, 2007, p. 165/166). Indeed, among the attested cognitive gains of instructional humor are nurturing students' creativity and motivating them to "think out of the box" (Margoob, 2017, p. 9), increasing "mental sharpness" (Garner, 2006, p. 177) and helping learners to "deconstruct and construct their own knowledge" (Chabeli, 2008, p. 52).

Rewarding as it is though, humor might turn to be tangential to the learning process and even harmful if not used properly. Indeed, too much humor in class can lead to increased tension and therefore discomfort on the part of the learners (Askildson, 2005). Another commonly reported situation where humor turns into an impediment to learning is when it is 'dark', 'cruel', 'aggressive' or 'sarcastic' (Khan, 2012; Bell & Pomerantz, 2016; Kim & Park, 2017). These negative and 'disparaging' types of humor make the learners feel harmed, offended, disrespected, demeaned, excluded and harassed under the pretext of joking (Wanzer et al., 2006; Kim & Park, 2017).

Humor at the University Setting: Learners' and Teachers' Perceptions

Though humor is theoretically established as an effective learning strategy, applying it in the university setting is much challenging for instructors. This is mainly due to the pervasiveness of the genre of lecturing "as the most practiced learning approach" at university, which clashes with the less serious nature of humor (Nasiri & Mafekhiri, 2015, p. 26). Indeed, when asked about which activities they frequently did during their past year at university, American students picked 'bored in class', 'been late to class', 'skipped class' and 'fallen asleep in class' (Stolzenberg et al., 2020). Modern lecturers are, thus, left with the pressure to engage students amidst the escalating technology hype, among other distractions. This can be possible by making humor instructional; hence the need for a new kind of lecturing that mixes up education with entertainment: 'edutainment' (Tait et al., 2015). This kind of lecturing is proven to be easier to incorporate when teaching languages, English specifically (Medgyes, 2002). Student surveys in language learning environments reveal that 'sense of humor' is rated high as a criterion for a good lecturer (Nadeem, 2012; Nasiri & Mafekhiri, 2015). On the other hand, whether teachers perceive humor in

higher education language classes in the same light as their students is rarely reported. This makes it hard to sketch a comprehensive idea about humor use as a pedagogical tool for learning, especially considering that "teachers' beliefs have an impact on their classroom instructions and students' learning experience" (Petraki & Nguyen, 2016, p. 100).

METHOD

Research Setting and Participants

This study samples 122 teacher and student participants. The 100 (15 males and 85 females) students have an age range of 20 to 35. They are all enrolled in their final year in the English major and they belong to 10 distinct institutions located in different cities in Tunisia but they study the same subjects and curriculum. The 22 teachers, on the other hand, include 15 females and 7 males. All of them hold PhDs in English Language, Literature and Civilization and they are aged between 30 and 50. Their teaching experience varies from a minimum of 5 years to a maximum of 20 years. The researcher made sure to sample teachers who give lectures and tutorials on a variety of English subjects and who teach or taught the target population of students most of the subjects in the curriculum. This diversity in the choice of the learning setting and the subjects taught is meant to ensure a representative range of perceptions on humor use.

Research Instruments and Procedure

The present study adopts two methods of data collection corresponding to the duality of the chosen participants: questionnaires for students and interviews for teachers. This mixed-methods research of both qualitative and quantitative tools fits the orientation of the present study. In fact, the quantitative nature of the questionnaire whereby "numbered data can be analyzed using statistical procedures" will help answer RQ1 and RQ2 (Creswell, 2009, p. 4). On the other hand, the interview is likely to elicit people's attitudes and perceptions and therefore "answer the whys and hows" of the investigated phenomenon, which is the focus of RQ3 and RQ4 (Guest, Namey & Mitchell, 2013, p. 1). A detailed description of how these methods are applied in the current study is provided in the following sub-sections.

Students' questionnaire

To survey the students' opinions about the kind of humor they receive in their tertiary English classes, a questionnaire containing 14 items was developed by the researcher. Drafting the questionnaire relied on previously-validated models from the literature and a pool of recurrent themes from previous studies (Askilson, 2005; Wanzer et al., 2006) which were fine-tuned to fit the objectives of this research (see Appendix 1). The questionnaire consists of 3 main sections addressing different themes and variables. Section one (Questions 1 to 3) gathers demographic information about the participants' age, affiliation and gender. Section two (Questions 4 to 10) comprises 7 items to collect statistical

data about the frequency and types of humor used in class. The last section (Questions 11 to 14) focuses on the attitude of the students towards their teachers' humor in class. This perception is measured quantitatively through question 12, which in turn comprises 14 items with 5 point Likert-scaled responses, and qualitatively with 2 open-ended questions to elicit in-depth explanations from the participants.

The questionnaire was diffused online via email and social media platforms. It was anonymous and voluntary with an administration time approximate to 10 minutes. Collecting responses took one month and all answered questionnaires were kept in data analysis as they were fully filled and no missing items were identified. Analyzing the questionnaire is based on descriptive statistics to measure the frequency of the responses. The open-ended questions are analyzed with reference to previous research.

Teachers' interview

The questionnaire was supported by data collected from a self-constructed interview (see Appendix 2) conducted with the teacher participants. The researcher opted for the semi-structured format as it is "the most frequently used interview technique in qualitative research" and it allows for much flexibility and interactivity between the interviewees and the researcher (Kallio et al., 2016, p. 2954). The interview used in this study contains 14 open-ended questions focused on the same themes developed in the students' questionnaire so that a comparative analysis between learners' and lecturers' answers can be conducted while dealing with the results.

All of the teacher participants were interviewed face-to-face during a period ranging from 15 to 20 minutes. Communicating with the participants was strictly conducted in the English language. The interviews were recorded using audio-tapes after taking the respondents' permission. The recordings were later transcribed in orthographic form and organized in themes to be ready for analysis. Teachers' and students' responses are coded as the capital letters T or S plus an Arabic number to facilitate reference to them in the results section.

RESULTS

Frequency of Humor Use

In the aim of answering RQ1, both teachers' and students' responses are checked. The statistics indicate that humor is used by all interviewed teachers who answered "yes" to the question "Do you use humor in your class?" When asked to

specify the frequency of humor in their lessons, the instructors provided the answers reported in Table 1.

According to Table 1, none of the teachers indicated that they do not use humor in their sessions and it was noticed that the adverbs of frequency "never" and "rarely" were not used by any teacher to describe how often they employ humor in class. 15 out of 22 teachers clarified that they "sometimes" use humor in class but many of them added the phrases "not very often" and "only occasionally" to stress the fact that it is not a frequent habit, hence the low percentage for the option "often". Only 4 of the respondents said that they always use humor. T10 emphasized this frequency by saying "I use humor repeatedly in my class" while T21 insisted "I use it all of the time". These replies are confirmed by the majority of the student participants (99%) as shown in Table 2.

Except for one student who claimed that humor is not present in class, all of the remaining 99 surveyed students affirm that their teachers incorporate humorous instances in their lessons. This finding – reflecting an almost full compatibility of answers between the 2 poles of participants – can be explained by one crucial condition in the delivery of humor: incongruity resolution (see 2.1). Indeed, the fact that the student participants are aware of humor presence in class might indicate that they actually resolve incongruity successfully. What supports this reasoning is the consonance in the frequencies reported by the learners, more than half of whom opted for the "sometimes" option just like their teachers.

Frequency according to gender

Checking back Table 1, it can be noticed that both male and female teachers report using humor in their classes. There are, however, slight differences between genders concerning the frequency of use since double of the male teachers affirm to use it "always" compared to females who are more inclined to use it only "sometimes". This finding is also reflected in the students' questionnaire as Table 3 makes clear.

Although more than half of the students reported that humor is used with equal recurrence by both male and female teachers, the number of students who picked male teachers as having a greater tendency for humor is slightly superior to the percentage of students who noticed that the sessions delivered by females are more humor-oriented.

Frequency according to subject

While no conclusive evidence could be established concerning the effect of the gender variable on the occurrence of humor instances, the subject variable seems to influence this frequency noticeably as indicated in Figure 1.

Table 1. Frequency of humor use according to the teachers

| Frequency | Male | | Female | | Total | |
|-----------|--------|------------|--------|------------|--------|------------|
| | Number | Percentage | Number | Percentage | Number | Percentage |
| Always | 2 | 28% | 2 | 13% | 4 | 18% |
| Often | 1 | 14% | 2 | 13% | 3 | 14% |
| Sometimes | 4 | 57% | 11 | 73% | 15 | 68% |

Table 2. Frequency of humor use according to the students

| Frequency | Percent |
|-----------|---------|
| Always | 11% |
| Often | 14% |
| Sometimes | 61% |
| Rarely | 12% |
| Never | 1% |

Table 3. Frequency of humor use according to gender

| | Percent | Number |
|-------------------------|---------|--------|
| Male teachers | 26.26% | 26 |
| Female teachers | 18.18% | 18 |
| Same frequency for both | 55.56% | 55 |

The most remarkable discrepancy generated by the students' choices in relation to humor frequency per subject is noted between the "oral" module and the other "written" subjects. While more than two thirds of the students (69%) find the Oral expression session the most humor-filled, less than one quarter of them consider the rest of the written subjects as fun. Except for the Linguistics module which garnered more than 50% of the answers confirming its fun side, Literature, Civilization, ESP and other subjects such as Translation, Research Methodology and Optional modules are noted by very few students (around 20%) as including hardly any humorous episodes.

In order to understand this disproportion in the use of humor in different English subjects, the teachers were asked this question: "Does the subject that you teach affect your use of humor?" In response to this, 14 out of 22 interviewed lecturers (64%) indicated that using humor in their sessions is definitely subject-dependent. Some of them explained that the "heavier" the subject, the less room there is for integrating humor. In this regard, T6 admits: "my humour frequency increases in 'light' subjects". Some teachers provided precise examples such as T21 who argued that "oral communication or public speaking is more practical to use humor in than research methodology or more academic subjects". In the same vein, T12 commented that "the use of humor in my teaching of drama is less than that in my teaching of general English where students are constantly encouraged to interact, to listen and talk, and to perform". Additionally, T7 explained that the nature of Linguistics subjects such as TEYL, TEFL and pragmatics encourages the use of funny examples.

In defense of why their sessions are hardly humor-filled, some other teachers voiced the argument that subjects such as Literature and Civilization need concentration and using humor while teaching them might be a distraction for the students. T3, for instance, admitted that "in tough literary issues, I am reluctant to use humor in order not to digress the content, it needs to be serious and they need to concentrate". Contrary to this perception, only 3 teachers believe that "the heavier the subject, the more humor is needed to simplify the content and contextualize it" (T10).

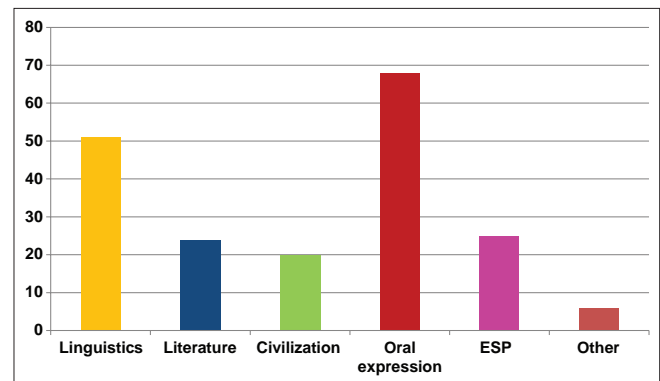


Figure 1. Humor frequency according to subject

The opposite view comes from the minority as only 8 teachers (36%) negated any relationship between humor frequency and the nature of the subject taught. While most of these teachers stopped at the level of stating that they can use humor independently of the subject and that they "can create humor from a serious matter" (T14), a few of them have given other factors that can influence the frequency of their humor use in class. T18 talked about how she uses humor to alleviate the seriousness of lectures while she does so less in tutorials. T17, on the other hand, evoked the effect of "the topic you are teaching which can give floor to the use of funny examples, situations, comments or not".

Types of Humor in Tunisian EFL Tertiary Classes

This section exposes the results which answer RQ2 in relation to the types of humor used in EFL Tunisian tertiary classes. Starting with the general classification according to the form of humor as discussed in (2.1), both teachers' and students' answers reveal an inclination towards specific forms over others as displayed in Figure 2.

Humorous comments, funny stories and jokes are the most preferred humor forms among all participants. The teachers particularly favor comments (68%) which are closely followed by anecdotes (63%). Justifying this preference, T6 states that "the funny stories are easily remembered by students as they combine examples with humor". Other lecturers explained their frequent use of these two forms as a way of avoiding negative humor which can be transmitted through sarcasm, puns or memes. The latter forms are in fact chosen by only 4% of the teachers. In this regard, T21 specifies: "I tell funny stories about myself and use only self-deprecating comments so that I don't offend anyone".

While occupying the third place, jokes are chosen by only 32% of the teachers. This avoidance of using jokes compared to stories and comments might be rendered to the nature of jokes per se as one of the hardest forms of humor. As Cruz (2019, p. 12) points out, joke-comprehension/production "is an extremely complex and highly demanding process that very often challenges and puzzles" foreign language learners and instructors. In this study, the aforementioned challenges seem to be at the heart of jokes dearth in Tunisian EFL classes, added to the personality variable which has been mentioned by a couple of teachers. T2, for example,

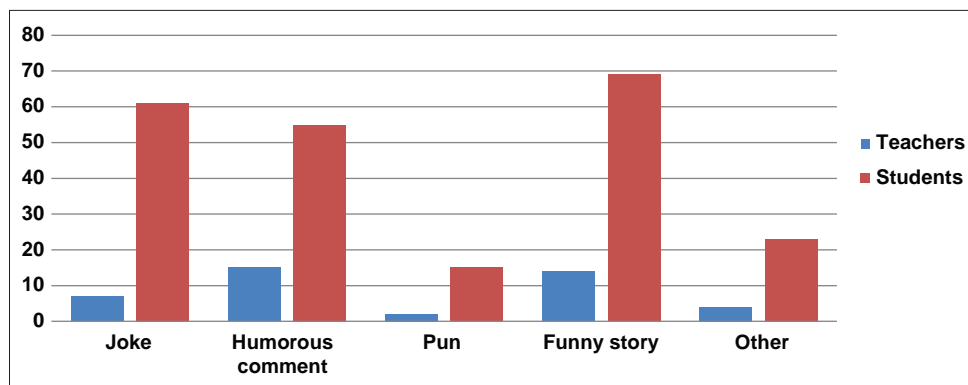


Figure 2. Teachers' and students' preferred forms of humor

argued: *"because I am not someone who feels comfortable telling jokes, I try as much as possible to avoid them"*. Likewise, T20 admitted, *"to be frank, I have made no attempts to make jokes in class; it is attributed to my serious character"*.

As for the students' choices in relation to the most favorite humor forms, while they also like comments (55%) and funny stories (70%), they picked jokes (62%) as the second option. One possible reason for this preference is the assimilation of jokes to the process of storytelling. In fact, many students explained that telling a joke that is related to the content of the lesson can have the same effect as telling a funny story since both help *"memorize the main ideas"* (S9) and *"the information remains engraved in memory"* (S5).

These reported preferences of humor forms seem to affect the participants' choices of other humor types according to the criteria of spontaneity and mode of delivery as well as course relevancy (see 2.1).

The results in Table 4 show that the teachers prefer the verbal mode of humor delivery as they already use more verbal forms (comments, stories) than non-verbal ones (physical humor, visual humor) in their classes. This can be justified by the spontaneous nature of their humor episodes. Indeed, the overwhelming majority of the teacher respondents (19 out of 22) prefer to use unplanned humor in their sessions. Memes, pictures, videos, cartoons, opening jokes in course books and other forms of non-verbal humor require much preparation and careful planning to be appropriately incorporated into the course material but the interviewed teachers do not think of humor as a priority to plan for. Likewise, most of the students (79 out of 100) agree with their teachers on the efficacy and smoothness of unplanned humor types. S21 urged the teachers *"to continue using spontaneous humor because it helps us a lot to understand the lessons"*. Unlike the lecturers, however, although they picked verbal humor as their number one favorite, the students' second choice went to the option "both", suggesting that a balance between the two modes of humor delivery is welcomed by EFL Tunisian learners.

Another point of conversion in relation to the favored types of humor used in class comes from the course relevance classification. As the statistics in Table 4 indicate, content relevant humor is the most frequently used type by the interviewed teachers (20 out of 22) who claimed that keeping their humorous episodes closely related to the lesson

helps maintain the students' focus on the topic taught. Just to cite a few, T6 explained: *"I keep humor strictly related to the content of the lesson. This is because I see it as a pedagogical tool and because I do not want students' focus to drift away from the lesson"*, T17 reaffirmed, *"I am not interested in deviating from the lesson"* and T21 insisted that he uses *"humor to teach not just for fun"*. The students support their teachers' opinion concerning the primacy of course related humor in class as 60% of them favor this type. S97's words summarize the students' attitude well:

"Relevance and efficacy go hand in hand. If humor is relevant to the course, the learners are more positively receptive to the information communicated to them and course-objectives are more likely to be attained" (S97).

Tunisian EFL Teachers' and Students' Perceptions of Humor Use in the Classroom

The findings relevant to RQ3 are reported in this section which centers on the attitude of the participants towards humor use and its efficacy in L2 classrooms. The respondents are asked about three main angles in relation to their perception of humor use in class: (a) the degree of success of their humor episodes, (b) the degree of comfort in using and receiving humor and (c) the role of humor as a pedagogical tool. All of these angles are dealt with separately in the ensuing sub-sections.

Degree of humor success

In order to check how effective EFL Tunisian teachers' humor is in class, they were urged to answer this question *"Do you think that your attempts at humor are successful?"* The interview results show that the majority of the lecturers (68%) are confident that their humor is very successful most of the time. 23% said that they are not 100% sure that their humor is always successful but they affirmed that it can be moderately successful depending on the context and the subject taught. Only 2 teachers (9%) raised worries that they are not talented at all at humor and speculated that their attempts would be mostly unsuccessful.

The students' attitude concerning this angle yielded responses which are in disaccord with the above-reported frequencies. Indeed, when asked to scale their teachers'

Table 4. Favored humor types according to teachers and students

| | Mode of delivery | | | Course relevance | | | Spontaneity | | |
|----------|------------------|------------|------|------------------|--------------|------|-------------|-----------|------|
| | Verbal | Non verbal | Both | Relevant | Non relevant | Both | Planned | Unplanned | Both |
| Teachers | 82% | 0% | 18% | 91% | 0% | 9% | 9% | 86% | 5% |
| Students | 50% | 7% | 43% | 60% | 5% | 35% | 3% | 88% | 9% |

humorous attempts from 'very humorous' to 'not humorous at all', their answers revealed an obvious mismatch with the lecturers' attitude as displayed in Table 5.

Unlike what the majority of the teacher respondents have reported or speculated, very few of the student participants (17%) expressed appreciation and satisfaction with their teachers' humor in class. Indeed, more than half of the students think that their teachers' attempts at humor are only 'moderately humorous' and almost one third of them believe that those attempts are just 'slightly humorous'.

This contradiction in the attitude of the respondents can be justified by the criterion of judgment or measurement of humor success. To explain more, most of the interviewed teachers (11 out of 15) mentioned 'laughter', 'smiling' or facial expressions in general as their number one sign of humor appreciation by their students. Only 26% (4 out of 15) of the lecturers relied on more reliable criteria like "higher level of attention and concentration" (T17), "doing better in task performance" (T17) and "retaining things said in a humorous way better" (T18). As a matter of fact, as established in previous studies (see 2.1), "laughter is not the only indicator of humor" (Petraki & Nguyen, 2016, p. 102). Moreover, when exposed to "an attempt at humor [that] has been recognized and understood, but is not appreciated enough for it to merit full support", one of the options the receivers can do to save face is "fake laughter" (Bell & Pomerantz, 2016, p. 37). This is exactly what some student respondents in this study reported doing while commenting on their teachers' failed humor episodes. S9's statement attests to this face-threatening reaction: "I don't like attending classes in which the teacher tries to be funny over and over again but he fails and I have to fake my laughter so he doesn't feel bad about himself".

Degree of comfort

One more angle that has allowed the detection of the participants' perception towards humor use is the degree of comfort while producing or receiving humor. Starting with the teachers, only 14% (3 out of 22) expressed having high degrees of comfort with using humor in their classes, claiming that it allows them to be who they are (T8) as well as "experience a state of pleasure and re-gain energy to deliver the rest of the lesson" (T22). On the other hand, the majority of the lecturers (around 54%) reported that they feel comfortable around humor only when it is blended with seriousness, insisting that being humorous is crucial but it is not meant "to entertain a group of people feeling bored" (T12). Therefore, comfort with humor delivery happens only when the purpose is to "make the learning process smooth for the students" (T12). Another attitude is voiced by 32% of the teachers who overtly

Table 5. Students' assessment of teachers' humor

| | Percent |
|---------------------|---------|
| Very humorous | 17% |
| moderately humorous | 54% |
| slightly humorous | 29% |
| Not humorous at all | 0% |

admitted being uncomfortable whenever they were obliged to slip in some humor into their lessons. T20 for instance pointed out that she "feels more comfortable being serious and concentrating more on delivering the content of the lesson effectively" whereas T2 commented that she tries to compensate for her discomfort by "stimulating students into sharing some of their anecdotes" instead of delivering humor herself.

The students' attitudes reveal less variance as the vast majority (94%) of them said that they definitely feel more comfortable being in a humor-filled than in a humor-free learning environment. Likewise, when asked to express their opinion concerning this statement – "I enjoy learning more with a humorous teacher" – according to a 5-point Likert scale (see Appendix 1), around 87% of them agreed with it. Additionally, 64% of the surveyed learners disagreed with this statement "I prefer my teachers to be serious in class", which supports their attitude of being less comfortable around serious teachers.

Attitude towards the role of humor in EFL classrooms

Irrespective of whether they use humor in their classes or not and how much comfortable they are while delivering humor chunks, the lecturers were asked to provide their attitude concerning the role of humor in EFL teaching. The responses reflect a positive attitude as 91% of the teacher participants expressed their strong belief in the efficacy of humor in class, explaining that "certainly, humor is a fantastic pedagogical tool... It can help with several pedagogical ends" (T6). Likewise, 94% of the student participants held positive views towards humor use in tertiary classes and mentioned several advantages from their own experience.

Among the highly rated roles of humor according to both students (88%) and lecturers (50%) are retaining information better and facilitating the understanding of difficult concepts as well as being motivated and excited about the lesson (55% of teachers and 72% of students). Two more beneficial functions mentioned mostly by the students are feeling relaxed and less stressed (82%) and increasing attendance and participation in class (77%). Building strong rapport between students and teachers (14%) and having fun in class (33%) are functions proposed exclusively by the students.

Although both participants regard humor as primarily efficient when its purpose is purely pedagogical, the teachers seem to hold a different stance vis-à-vis the entertaining aspect of humor. This is clear not only in providing less affective effects of humor than their students but also in being more cautious while describing these benefits. In fact, whereas only 6% of the students pointed to how risky overusing humor in class can be, 77% of the lecturers identified more than one possible disruption that can be generated by humor use. The biggest fears raised by the teachers are losing control over their classes (23%), being ridiculed and not taken seriously (23%) and being misunderstood (18%). Most of these teachers insisted that “*humor’s aim is the process of learning and nothing more*” (T4), “*humor is just a means to an end*” (T6) and “*humor is one of the tools for teaching, but not an important one or one without which the session cannot be successful*” (T2).

Recommendations for a Better Implementation of Humor in Tunisian EFL Classrooms

To address the last research question (RQ4), an open-ended item is included in the students’ questionnaire (see Appendix 1) in the aim of gathering their suggestions about how their teachers’ use of humor can improve in class. The opinions varied from those who recommended more focus on already-existing humor tools used by their teachers to those who suggested the integration of new tools. Overall, there was a recurrent mentioning of different humor forms (30%) that are likely to turn the lesson more exciting and understandable. 20% of the students requested integrating more jokes (even silly ones) into teaching materials as they consider them to be “*always an effective remedy*” for boredom (S95). Other forms which have been found to be rarely used by teachers in class (see 4.2) are also proposed by the students. These include memes, cartoons, movies, games, videos and photographs. Furthermore, an important number of students (23%) reiterated their preference for course-related and spontaneous humor types (see 4.2) which they thought are crucial in the success of humor episodes and in showing “*how professional the teacher is*” (S57). Using facial expressions and maintaining a smile also featured in 9% of the answers. 6% of the students insisted on moderation in using humor while very few called for avoiding offensive humor (4%), being closer to the students (4%) and trying to attend conferences on humor and being up-to-date on social media (3%).

Reacting to their students’ suggestions, the teachers held varied views. 14 out of 22 lecturers (64%) expressed their willingness to take the above-mentioned recommendations into account, believing that “*the students are part of the teaching process which is dual*” (T3) and so their “*needs should be accommodated*” (T13). For these teachers, more than being careful about their students’ aspirations and expectations, considering these suggestions is an opportunity of “*varying one’s teaching strategies*” (T4) which will ultimately lead “*to achieving better academic outcomes*” (T22). A more skeptical attitude is expressed by 18% of the teachers who specified that they will take into consideration

only suggestions related to their personality and preferences. As T18 mentions, “*I am ready to change but not in the way my students want it; it should be my way*”. One last attitude is held by 18% of the teachers whose stance is rather negative and hostile towards any kind of change. This belief is better portrayed by T16:

“I am not ready to change my pedagogical profile even if it is criticized by my students because according to me humor is not a crucial ingredient in the teaching operation.” (T16)

DISCUSSION

This study investigated the use of humor in Tunisian tertiary education of the English major which has been found to be an under-explored topic in research. The work has been focused particularly on four main angles that explored in details the preferences of both students and teachers in relation to the frequency and types of humor used in class as well as their beliefs towards their practices while implementing humor and how these can be bettered.

Regarding the first angle, which answered RQ1, the results allowed to conclude that humor is existent in Tunisian EFL universities with moderate percentages that leave room for improvement. One interesting finding in this regard is that 100% of the teachers reported using humor in their classes, which is a percentage higher than the ones found in the Vietnamese (76%) and Czech (59%) contexts (Petraki & Nguyen, 2016; Gregar, 2016). This can be explained by what has been confirmed in the literature about the nature of English classes which represent a favorable environment for humor integration (Petraki & Nguyen, 2016). As suggested by Medgyes (2002, p.111), “*the English lesson is an ideal arena to trigger laughter*”. Additionally, the peculiarity of the studied setting can also be taken as an influencing factor for humor use by all interviewed participants. In other words, humor presence in the Tunisian educational setting can be rendered to the uniqueness of the Arab culture. As noted by Kazarian (2011, p. 330), the Arab communities “*are well-known for their sense of humor and the contribution of their scholars to humor literature ... and the practice of humor*”. On the other hand, the frequency of humor use in Tunisian EFL classes is found to be less than average, reaffirming that Tunisian teachers are no exception as they hold skeptical views towards this teaching tool just like what has been reported about other teachers in previous studies (Askildson, 2005; Petraki & Nguyen, 2016; Legény & Špaček, 2019).

The analysis has further confirmed the minor effect of the gender variable on the frequency of humor use. This result can be seen in light of the very few studies done on whether humor use is gendered in EFL classrooms. Just like what early research has established about the general tendency for males to be only slightly more humorous than females across countries (Crawford & Gressley, 1991), recent research has affirmed this gender inclination in the classroom setting (Kilic, 2016; Andarab & Mutlu, 2019). In this study, while the difference is there, it is barely noticeable and there is an inclination for humor use irrespective of gender as reported by both teachers and students. The gender effect on humor

use is, thus, not significant enough in the Tunisian setting and further research in that direction is needed with a wider scaled sample.

Unlike gender, the subject variable proved to affect enormously the occurrence of humor while teaching English majors. Most participants pointed to how oral subjects tend to be more humor-filled compared to the written ones. This finding is redundant with that of Pomerantz and Bell (2011), and Petraki & Nguyen (2016) who also detected more instances of humor in oral sessions such as Listening and Communication. Similar to these studies too, Tunisian teachers justified this disproportion in the use of humor by the dryness of subjects like Translation, Literature and Civilization compared to Speaking modules which allow for "more light-hearted activities" (Petraki & Nguyen, 2016, p. 102). However, dismissing these claims, the literature shows that the integration of humor has proved to be feasible and even successful in 'heavy' or 'dry' courses as termed by the Tunisian lecturers. Examples include Geography (Jansson, 2016), Translation (Schmitz, 2002), Architecture (Legény and Špaček, 2019) and Statistics (Berk, 1996). This finding stresses the lack of expertise and the held misconceptions of EFL Tunisian teachers who admitted their limited background knowledge on the issue of humor use.

Regarding the second research question (RQ2), it was found that Tunisian lecturers use a limited repertoire of humor forms, favoring comments and funny stories over other humor types such as jokes which are found to be highly appreciated by their students instead. This finding aligns with previous studies (Bell, 2002; Petraki & Nguyen, 2016) in which prolific instances of humorous narratives and comments have also been identified. Just like in these studies, the Tunisian teacher participants viewed these forms as beneficial, engaging and easier to deliver and understand (Kim & Park, 2017). This explains their avoidance of jokes which are regarded as challenging to encode and decode, an attitude oppositely denied by the students. This point further confirms Tunisian lecturers' inexperience in dealing with humor and their unwarranted fears from applying particular jocular forms which could have been easily "adapted from a variety of popular humor resources" (Berk, 1996, p. 87).

While disagreeing about the efficiency of jokes, the participants reported consensual views towards the unquestionable efficacy of spontaneous and related humor types compared to planned and content irrelevant ones. Regarding relevancy, the Tunisian respondents' answers show awareness that humor unrelated to the subject matter being presented has little effect on retention whereas content relatedness plays a major part in cognition as proved in previous studies (Tribble, 2001; Kim & Park, 2017). Contradictorily, while favoring spontaneous humor use by both teachers and students is similar to the findings of Petraki and Nguyen (2016) and Jansson (2016), it strays from the well-established evidence that planned humor is more efficient as a pedagogical tool (Chabeli, 2008; Kovar, 2017). This finding proves that Tunisian instructors are unconscious of the merits of planned humor and this culture is transmitted to their students who believe that non-spontaneous humor is

unlikely to yield effective results. Again, the lecturers' mis-conceived views about humor implementation resurge as they seem to be incognizant of the techniques that can be used to "give learners the impression of being spontaneous" while delivering planned humor material. The latter should be "an integral part of the course" rather than "an incidental or "by the way" activity" (Afghani & Allami, 2007, p. 6).

With regards to the third research question (RQ3), the students' and the lecturers' attitudes clashed in relation to the success of humor delivery in class. The confidence of most teachers that their humor is positively accepted by their students is rendered to the unreliable criterion they use to measure humor success. Indeed, laughter and facial expressions are proved to be helpful but insufficient in detecting incongruity resolution (Ross, 1998). The results of this study confirm this as most students find their teachers' humor as only moderately successful and some of them fake laughter to save face. Part of this failure might be attributed to the unfamiliarity of teachers with humor and their lack of knowledge of how it should be delivered, which ultimately leads to their discomfort while using it in class as most of them reported.

Notwithstanding these difficulties in humor integration in their classes, most of the respondents held positive views concerning the cognitive and affective functions of humor in teaching and learning. The reported benefits of humor in this study fall into the two categories of cognitive (Garner, 2006; Tocalli-Beller & Swain, 2007; Chabeli, 2008; Margoob, 2017) and affective (Petraki & Nguyen, 2016; Cruz, 2019) as outlined by previous research (see 2.3). What is, however, noticeable in the Tunisian teachers' responses is limiting the rewarding uses of humor to a sole function which pertains to the cognitive category: better retention of content and easier assimilation of input. This finding does not rally with previous research which mirrored firm beliefs in the affective gains of humor in learning (Askildson, 2005; Garner, 2006; Kovar, 2017). Much emphasis on these emotional functions is rather traced in the students' answers that praised the affective role of humor in motivating them (Chabeli, 2008), reducing their anxiety (Martin, 2007) and strengthening their rapport with their teachers (Margoob, 2017). This finding can be justified by the more prudent stance of the teachers who believe that humor should be kept strictly pedagogical to thwart any potential risks. Using humor to alleviate the tension or to establish rapport with the students might result in ridicule and can undermine the quality of the delivered content which should be transmitted seriously most of the time.

Lastly, the findings retrieved from RQ4 allowed for some practical suggestions on how to better Tunisian tertiary teachers' practices when it comes to humor integration in class. Most students' recommendations revolved around increasing the use of jokes and experimenting with other forms such as memes and cartoons. This can happen only if teachers take part in regular trainings and workshops as already proposed in previous studies (Khan, 2012; Ageli, 2018) to learn more about how to integrate these humor forms. These trainings are likely to thwart the misconceptions that some teachers hold

about how humor is a personality trait that cannot be learned. On the contrary, teachers should be made aware that “humor competence” can be developed (Gonulal, 2018, p. 157) and thus opportunities for less confident teachers might arise.

The students additionally stressed the importance of the affective factor in humor use and recommended that their teachers work more on getting closer to their students by smiling often and using funny facial expressions. These recommendations on how to make appropriate use of humor to revive English classrooms are mostly positively welcomed by the surveyed lecturers who expressed their willingness to revise their teaching practices and fine-tune them to meet the demands of the modern educational world. Yet, a minority of teachers objected to these changes and openly stated their skeptical beliefs in the necessity of humor in teaching. This suggests that much work needs to be done by stakeholders, researchers and curriculum designers to instill the culture of humor use in EFL Tunisian tertiary education.

CONCLUSION

This study sought to unveil the perceptions of Tunisian English majors and their teachers regarding humor integration in EFL tertiary classes. The results showed that all interviewed teachers make attempts to use humor in their sessions irrespective of their gender. Yet, the frequency of this use is considerably affected by the nature of the subject taught, which makes humor episodes limited as reported by the students. The study also revealed that both students and teachers favor lesson relevant and spontaneous humor types as they believe in their efficiency in learning. However, they disagreed regarding the use of jokes which are highly appreciated by the learners but avoided by most teachers for their lack of expertise on how to integrate or deliver them.

The results of this study further pointed to the inexperience of lecturers in dealing with humor as a pedagogical tool. This has been reflected in their reported discomfort and lack of confidence in using it, which is in turn confirmed by the majority of the surveyed learners who claimed that their teachers’ humor is not always successful. Notable differences between the students and lecturers perceptions were also identified at the level of the functional potential of humor. While the learners put much emphasis on the affective functions of humor use and highlighted their role in motivating and bringing them closer to their teachers, the Tunisian lecturers showed rather firm beliefs in the cognitive merits of humor and expressed their skepticism towards the efficiency of the emotional functions.

Overall, although the findings of this paper indicate that both lecturers and learners hold a positive attitude towards humor use in the Tunisian EFL setting, they also point to weaknesses in the integration of this tool at the practical level. This study accordingly suggests some recommendations to improve the practice of humor use in Tunisian tertiary English classes based on what the surveyed students proposed. Much teacher training such as organizing regular workshops and study days on how to integrate humor effectively is needed. While this study is limited in its sample size, it serves as a starting point to raise awareness of the

countless benefits of humor in boosting learning in Tunisian language classrooms and induce further research in that direction. It is an eye-opener for curriculum designers to reflect on how to start integrating humor in teaching materials and course training books for educators.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Students' Questionnaire

1. Gender: boy girl
2. Age:.....
3. Affiliation
4. How often do your teachers use humor in the classroom?
Always often sometimes rarely never
5. In which subject(s) is humor more common?
6. Who uses humor more?
Male teachers female teachers both
7. What types of humor do your teachers use?
Joke Riddle Pun Funny story Humorous comment
Visual humor Physical humor Others (Specify what?)
8. Humor instances occur mainly in
Arabic English both languages equally
9. What types of humor do you prefer?
a) Verbal non-verbal both
b) Prepared spontaneous both
c) In Arabic In English both
10. According to you, humor in class should be
Course relevant course irrelevant both
11. How do you find your teachers' attempts of humor?
Very humorous moderately humorous slightly humorous not humorous at all
12. Indicate how much you agree with the following statements.
13. Do you prefer to be in a classroom with or without humor? Why?
14. What can you recommend to your teachers for them to use humor effectively in class?

| | Strongly Agree | Agree | Neither Agree/Disagree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
|--|----------------|-------|------------------------|----------|-------------------|
| When a subject makes me laugh a lot I want to take part more | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Laughing during class time makes me feel more relaxed about learning | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| I enjoy learning more with a humorous teacher | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| I want to work harder when the materials I have to produce are humorous compared to not humorous | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| I remember what I have learnt better when I make something humorous | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| I feel nervous when I need to make something humorous in my class | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Humor can be an important tool to explain difficult subjects | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Subjects in which I laugh a lot don't help me learn any easier | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Humor in classroom teaching is a waste of time | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| A teacher with a sense of humor discourages me from concentrating in class | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| I prefer my teachers to be serious in class | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| English instructors who use humor in the classroom are unprofessional | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| I do not miss an English class when I find it funny. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| I would rather have an instructor try to be humorous and fail rather than not try to be humorous at all. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

Appendix 2: Teachers' Interview

1. Age category?
2. What is your definition of humor?
3. Do you use humor in your class? How often?
4. What are the types of humor that you prefer?
5. Is your humor related to the content of the lesson?
6. Is your humor mostly verbal or non-verbal? Spontaneous or planned? In English or in Arabic?
7. Does the subject that you teach affect your use of humor? Explain how?
8. Do you think that your attempts at humor are successful? How can you judge that?
9. Do you feel more comfortable using humor or being serious and concentrating more on delivering the content of the lesson effectively?
10. Do you think that the use of humor can motivate the students to learn better? Can you provide some examples from your class?
11. Do you think that humor is an effective pedagogical tool?
12. Do you think that using humor can be detrimental?
13. If your students say that they want you to use more humor in your sessions and suggest ways to do that. Will you take their recommendations and opinions into consideration?
14. Are you ready to change your attitude in class in relation to the use of humor if your students show dissatisfaction?