

To Use or Not to Use humor? A Case Study on Chinese Secondary School EFL Teachers

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Abstract

While there is no lack of studies on the benefits of using humor in English class, why Chinese EFL teachers choose to use humor or not use it remains unclear. Previous studies examined the benefits of the use of humor in language classrooms, but none of them has queried a deep understanding of the role of humor from teachers' perspectives. It comprised a case study focusing on three English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers from a secondary school in China. The data were collected over a period of six months using semi-structured interviews, observations and stimulated recall interviews. This qualitative case study found five reasons for the Chinese EFL teachers' use of humor, which are teaching strategy, students' benefits, atmosphere & relationship, teachers' benefits and teachers' ability. The potential explanations behind each reason were also discussed in the study.

Keywords: reasons, the use of humor, Chinese EFL teachers

1. Introduction

Educational research generally has not prioritized the study of humor because they usually see classrooms as sites where serious work is taking place (Bell, 2017). Many language instructors may consider humor a teaching tool but not regard it as the core of teaching. However, although humor is not mandatory for language learning or teaching, its potential for facilitating L2 development and its importance in the lives of L2 users is steadily gaining recognition (Bell, 2017). L2 teachers may be encouraged to produce more humor after recognizing the benefits of humor in students' learning, although it also can serve negative social functions (Banas et al., 2011). For the above reasons, it would be worthwhile and necessary to explore how L2 teachers use humor, especially in different cultures. As one of the core subjects in Chinese primary school and secondary school, English was predominantly taught by native Chinese teachers. Given the benefits of English teaching in a vivid, interactive and playful way that teachers appeal to, there is a compelling need for researchers and practitioners to understand how and why teachers use humor in their classes. While there is no lack of studies on the benefits of using humor in English class, it remains unclear how Chinese EFL teachers perceive humor usage. Previous studies examined the benefits of the use of humor in the language classroom, but none of them has queried a deep understanding of the role of humor from teachers' point of view. This qualitative case study explores the use of instructional humor in Chinese EFL classes and thus hopes to offer inspiration on the implications of using humor in teaching English.

Humor is a multifaceted and exceedingly complicated phenomenon. Some researchers tried to explain humor in the language classroom empirically. Bell (2005) applied a case study methodology to record how L2 verbal humor was negotiated and fabricated by three advanced NNSs of English with NSs of English. The study suggested that language play can be a marker of language proficiency because high-level participants used L2 linguistic materials in more creative ways. Bell also argued that language play might yield deeper processing of lexical items. Pomerantz and Bell (2007) collected the data from a 15-week semester in an advanced Spanish conversation course. They analyzed the corpus of ethnographic observations, tape recordings, and interviews and proposed that humorous language play allows for new and more different forms of interaction and language use. Bell (2012) collected and analyzed the documents of 16 adult learners in an intensive English program. The study discovered that the word items and word meanings were recalled in a significant way when they were the focus of playful attention. Waring (2013) examined 16 hours of videotaped interactions from 8 different adult ESL classrooms. Waring proposed three types of identities in playful interaction: situational, relational, and personal, and he argued that the learners performed extent subversive acts and experienced equality beneath the mask of language play. Reddington and Waring (2015) analyzed a corpus of 15 videotaped adult ESL classes at a community English program. They proposed disaligning extensions, sequence pivots, and sequence misfits as three candidate practices for doing humor in the L2 classroom.

Some researchers from different backgrounds investigated humor in the language classroom in their context. In the Asian context, the previously cited studies on EFL and language play

were undertaken in Thailand and Vietnam (Forman, 2011; Petraki & Pham Nguyen, 2016). There are many studies on the differences in humor in the Chinese context (Jiang et al., 2011; Qian, 2007; Yue, 2010, 2011; Zhang, 2005), but none of them specifically focused on humor in the Chinese EFL classroom. Forman (2011) examined the transcripts of humorous language play between a bilingual EFL teacher and his students in a Thai university. He argued that there are affective, socio-cultural and linguistic benefits for students and suggested that teachers handle instructional humor carefully. Vietnamese scholars examined Vietnamese university teachers' perceptions of the role of humor in EFL teaching, teachers' practices of humor use, and teachers' preferences regarding humor types (Petraki & Pham Nguyen, 2016).

Building on the literature and the educational context of China, we conducted this research study, which aims to explore why Chinese secondary school EFL teachers use humor or do not use it. To achieve this aim, the study addresses the following research question:

What are the reasons that Chinese secondary school teachers use humor or do not use humor?

2. Data Collection and Analysis

2.1 The Participants

For this study to proceed smoothly, the researcher applied for an English teacher and eventually taught at this private secondary school from July 2021 to March 2022. In this study, three teachers were selected. They are a novice teacher, Mr. Zhong, 29 years old, 3 years of teaching; two experienced teachers, Ms. Jin, 33 years old, 10 years of teaching, and Mr. Tao, 45 years old, 16 years of teaching.

Table 1. Demographic information of three participants

Name	Gender	Age	Highest qualification	Years of teaching
Mr. Tao	Male	45	BA	16
Ms. Jin	Female	33	BA	10
Mr. Zhong	Male	29	MA	3

2.2 Data Collection

Referring to previous studies and research questions, two main research instruments, Humor Observation Protocol and Humor Use Interview, were developed in formal observations and interviews. Informal observations and casual conversations are also used in the study, which are important components of qualitative research (Bazeley, 2013; Maxwell, 2013). The researcher bought a Keda Xunfei recording pen (M1) for recording the three teachers' classes and interviews. The recording pen offers the audio-to-text function for free through its software, which also supports transcribing in Chinese and English. The transcription accuracy is relatively high, except for some inaudible sounds, and each transcription maintains a good accuracy. Moreover, this study's transcription is not aimed to make verbatim transcription but

denaturalized transcription (Mero-Jaffe, 2011), which is easy to read and feasible for data analysis under the research aims. To ensure the credibility of the transcripts, observational class and interview transcripts will be checked by participants.

2.3 Data Analysis

To ensure the teachers respond to the interview conscientiously, the researcher spent much time with the teachers who were selected as subjects in the study. Moreover, permission from the administration of the selected schools and communication and cooperation with teachers are vital in the research. China as an autocratic educational system, the principal and other administrators have many rights and much more power than teachers in the school. It does not mean Chinese teachers' rights are limited but means that teachers can cooperate without any concerns after administrators' authorization. Before doing the formal survey, the researcher tells the administrators and teachers that neither the content of the research nor the research itself, including the interview, or observation, would affect the teachers' working in the school. Besides the formal observation protocol and semi-structured interview, research instruments are not only limited to formal observation and interview (Tsui, 2013), but also engaged in "watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions through informal and formal interviews, collecting documents and artefacts—in fact, gathering whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the emerging focus of inquiry" (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, as cited in Tsui, 2013).

Participant 1: Mr. Tao (pseudonym)

Mr. Tao has been teaching English for sixteen years, which is longer than the other two teachers. After graduating from university, he worked in a company, engaged in marketing and sales, and had fewer opportunities to use English. Later, he went to Australia to study for a bachelor's degree because he liked English. After finishing his master's degree, he returned to his hometown, Guangxi, and began to teach English. He was teaching grades one and two and was the first teacher I contacted. After getting acquainted, I asked him if he could participate in the research. He accepted after consideration. The language he used in class was a mixture of Chinese and English, but he answered the interview in English.

Participant 2: Ms. Jin (pseudonym)

Ms. Jin is the only female among the three participants. The researcher asked four female teachers, but the other three refused to participate in the study. One day during a break between classes, I walked down the stairs after class and met her and we chatted. I asked her if she would participate in my research. Unexpectedly, she readily agreed. She said her class was welcome to come and listen anytime. She is teaching grade two and grade three. She is a hard-working teacher and mainly uses English in class and explains many language points to students, mainly vocabulary and grammar.

Participant 3: Mr. Zhong (pseudonym)

Mr. Zhong is the youngest and only one with a master's degree among the three teachers. Not many teachers in this private secondary school have a master's degree, and he is one of them.

He lives next door to me, and we have a lot of contacts. After getting acquainted, I asked him if he wanted to participate in the research, and he did not hesitate to agree. Mr. Zhong is a headteacher, which means he is responsible for many student affairs, such as morning reading and school activities. Therefore, he is also the busiest teacher among the three participants. In his interviews, he was more interested in research topics than the other two teachers. However, like other participants, the use of humor is a familiar but not deeply researched topic for them.

3. Findings

This thematic analysis was used in this qualitative research question, the three formal interview data were collected, and three casual conversations were also noted. Themes are answers to this research question, which is the primary focus of this study. The themes were generated and analyzed from the data of interviews and casual conversations. The process of thematic analysis was proposed by Braun and Clarke (2012). As Braun and Clarke (2012) proposed that the researcher cannot assure how much data will be needed, so the arrangements for interviews or conversations should be flexible. This means it is likely to conduct many rounds of data collection before the “themes” are completed. Firstly, the researcher selected the relevant sentences in the transcripts according to this research question and then did the first coding of each participant’s transcript. After the initial codes were generated, the researcher reviewed the coded data to identify areas of similarity and overlap between codes to search for themes. Finally, define the main themes and the relationships according to the logic and rate of recurrence of codes.

There are five reasons generated from the thematic analysis. According to the frequency of being raptured, the order from largest to smallest is teaching strategy, students’ benefits, atmosphere & relationship, teachers’ benefits and teachers’ ability.

Table 2. The summary of reasons that Chinese EFL teachers use humor or not

Reasons	Descriptions
Teaching strategy	Teaching strategy involves using humor as a teaching strategy or method in the class, including teaching content and teaching plan.
Students’ benefits	Students’ benefits refer to whether humor is beneficial for students’ learning and psychology or not.
Atmosphere & relationship	Atmosphere & relationship means if humor can make the teacher-student relationship good or class relaxing and interesting.
Teachers’ benefits	Teachers’ benefits include making teachers popular and approachable.
Teachers’ ability	Teachers’ ability includes teachers’ English proficiency and confidence to use humor.

a The first reason: Teaching strategy

Teaching strategy refers to teachers using humor as a teaching method. When they want

students to remember the words easily or use humor as a warm-up at the beginning of the class, this is the first and foremost factor that teachers consider using humor or not. They probably will not use humor when the humor is not related to teaching or will affect the teaching plan. The biggest reason teachers use humor is whether humor is related to or beneficial to teaching. The summary of the three teachers' responses to using humor concerning the teaching strategy reason is presented below.

The three teachers had rarely given any serious thought to the use of humor before being accepted for the study. They use humor almost instinctively, and as Mr. Tao puts it, "*humor is telling a joke*". They believed that using humor is not hard because "making fun" or "telling jokes" is something almost everyone is capable of doing. They all have confidence in using humor in their class. Mr. Tao always spends about two minutes chatting with the students before class. He greeted students in English, complimenting a girl's outfit or a boy's hairstyle. Sometimes the students laugh, and sometimes the students do not respond to his joke. Nevertheless, he did not care, and he would "throws" his prepared jokes or anecdotes during the lecture. "*I'm an introvert in my life, but I'm very active in class. I'm talking out loud or making jokes.*" he says. It can be concluded that he performs a different personality because he regarded humor as a means of teaching. Ms. Jin gave details about how she used humor in the interview, such as using English riddles or explaining words in hilarious ways. However, in the class observation, she did not use much humor. Unlike Mr. Tao, her reasons for using humor are more specific and purposeful. She will deliberately use humor to let students master English knowledge. Her humor is more closely tied to the teaching content. Mr. Zhong was the only one who mentioned using humor to "kill boredom". Even if students do not get bored in two English lessons a day, teachers get bored in four English lessons a day. There are many reasons students feel bored, such as not being interested in English, not understanding the class content, feeling that the content of the teacher's teaching is too simple. There may be only one reason why teachers feel bored, and that is repetition. It is hard to imagine that the teachers are still full of interest and passion for the English content that has been spoken many times. Humor in the classroom could not only "kill" students' boredom but also "kill" the boredom of teachers.

As an English teacher, completing teaching tasks or improving students' English is a matter of their important goals. They used humor because it is considered a teaching strategy, but they worried that using humor could affect teaching. Their worried came from their learning and teaching experiences. For Mr. Tao, he said, "*...all the humorous stuff you use must be related to what you're going to teach ...if it's not related, I prefer not to use too much humor.*" Why did he have such an idea that using too much humor could influence teaching? He elaborated, "*...when I was teaching in Australia, my mentor...she was not happy...I talked too much...not related to the class.*" These findings indicate that teachers use humor as one of their teaching strategies, but they do not use humor because they are worried about affecting teaching.

b The second reason: Students' benefits

Students' benefits, refers to whether humor is beneficial for students' learning and

psychology or not. Teachers use humor because their students can learn English better with its help. Humor may have direct effects on memorizing words or indirect outcomes that make students relaxed. If English humor is difficult for beginners, teachers will not consider using it, or they might choose Chinese humor. If the main reason for using humor is teaching strategy, then the most direct reason is to bring benefits to students. Unlike math classes, which pursue rigor and logic, English classes with language as their teaching content could produce more humor. Teachers sometimes use language, non-language or other media to create vivid situations in teaching, which will greatly arouse students' interest and enthusiasm in learning and can significantly improve the effect of English learning. It can be inferred that moderate humor in teaching will stimulate students' interest in learning. Teachers have noticed this too. The English class will be different with a little effort from the teachers. Mr. Tao said he used it mainly because it can reduce students' stress and improve their interest in learning. He also said, "*Humor may give students a sense of urgency.*" He believes that this sense of urgency is good for students' learning. For example, some students may not understand the humor in class, which may motivate them to study hard. Ms. Jin uses different humorous techniques for specific knowledge of English so that students can learn that knowledge. Mr. Zhong believes that humor allows students to participate in classroom activities actively. They all agree that humor can bring certain benefits to students. Mr. Tao and Mr. Zhong focus on the psychological benefits of humor, such as relaxation, interest, and positivity. Ms. Jin emphasizes the learning benefits of humor, such as memorizing some words and understanding some grammar.

If the students cannot understand humor and it is not good for students, humor may not be used. Ms. Jin talks about the humor that makes it difficult for beginners to understand English. She said, "*...for beginners, there is no special consideration of using humor, which is difficult to them.*" She believes that only a very small number of students in a class can understand English humor. Most students do not have a high level of English and are temporarily unable to understand humor. It can be inferred that she does not use humor because she believes that most students cannot understand English humor and that humor does not benefit students.

c The third reason: Atmosphere & relationship

Atmosphere & relationship means if humor can make the teacher-student relationship good or class relaxing and interesting. None of the teachers want to teach in a dull class, nor do students. So they use humor to kill boredom and make the class vivid. However, as Ms. Jin said, "*for some students who are serious, for some students who are not very highly active and don't want to cooperate, it is hard for me to use humor.*" All three teachers discussed the benefits of using humor for classroom atmosphere and teacher-student relationships. English teachers realize that teachers are not just people who teach knowledge but also individuals who can have a good relationship with students. Mr. Tao said, "*In China, you have to create a good atmosphere for students.*" Because, in secondary school, teachers and students meet every day. Students have English lessons every day. If students do not like the teacher, they probably do not like English too. Using humor "*could bring teachers and students closer*" and "*build a good teacher-student relationship*". Many times, three teachers naturally use

humor to liven up the atmosphere without thinking about too many strategies. As Ms. Jin said, “...*I didn't think too much, I naturally wanted to enliven the atmosphere.*” It can be inferred that teachers use humor because they do not want the classroom to be “dead” and no one to engage in the teacher’s questions or activities. Understandably, students feel tired from staying in school all day. At this time, the teacher will use humor to wake up the sleepy students. Mr. Zhong was once in an embarrassing situation when he accidentally sprayed water on his face. Then he had an idea, using humor to defuse the awkward atmosphere perfectly, although the student’s laughter came from his accidental behavior instead of his spontaneous humor.

Unlike Mr. Tao, who used canned jokes without caring about students’ responses, Ms. Jin does not use humor when the students seem serious. She said, “...*for some students who are like serious and also may be upset, I would like to choose not to use humor.*” She was very concerned about the state and mood of her students. In addition, if the student refuses to cooperate, it will also affect her use of humor. For example, she said, “...*for if they're not very highly active, it's a little difficult to use humor in the class because they don't really cooperate.*” Unlike the other two male teachers, who are not sensitive to the students’ emotions or feelings, Ms. Jin is not going to use humor because of students’ low moods and uncooperative attitudes.

d The fourth reason: Teachers’ benefits

Teachers’ benefits, includes making teachers popular and approachable. All participants mentioned that using humor could make them popular. As Mr. Tao said, “*students like to stay with teachers who are creative and humorous.*” Using humor is good for teachers themselves; otherwise, teachers probably would not do it. Since people have a natural tendency to seek advantages and avoid disadvantages, the use of humor in the classroom is also a reward for teachers. All three teachers mentioned that humor could make them more approachable and make students not afraid of teachers. In China, teachers are authoritative, and students usually play the role of obedience. Both Mr. Tao and Ms. Jin said that humor could make them popular, which shows that humorous teachers are very welcome among students. Only Mr. Zhong speaks of a unique point: when he is in a good mood, he is more inclined to use humor. Conversely, his mood is likely to improve when he uses humor. Because when teachers use humor to make students laugh, teachers are also happy. It can indicate that using humor in the classroom generally results in positive feedback for teachers through their responses and classroom observations.

e The fifth reason: Teachers’ ability

Teachers’ ability includes teachers’ English proficiency and confidence to use humor. None of the three teachers considered using humor to be difficult. They think “humor is joking.” Everyone jokes in life, so it would not be that hard to joke in class. However, making jokes in English is not very easy. Ms. Jin said, “...*but if I use English to tell jokes, it could be difficult for me.*” Since English humor is difficult, teachers would use Chinese even though it does not meet the school’s requirement to use English throughout the English class. According to the class observation, only Mr. Tao told many prepared jokes in Chinese in class. English

proficiency might affect those teachers who tell jokes in English but not those who tell jokes in Chinese. As Mr. Zhong said, he wants to use much humor, but he does not believe that he can do it well like other humorous teachers. He believed “...*I have a sense of humor, so I know how to use humor...*”, but he doubted that “*sometimes I really want to use humor, and I admire teachers who are humorous, but I haven’t reached that level.*” From the above, it can be indicated that they have two contradictions about their ability to use humor. One is that they think humor is not difficult, but using English humor is difficult. The second is that they want to use Chinese humor, but they are afraid of conflicting with the school’s requirement to speak only English in the classroom.

4. Discussion

a Students’ benefits and teachers’ benefits—beliefs and practices in teaching

These two themes will be discussed together for students’ and teachers’ benefits because they can be categorized into the conceptual framework: beliefs and practices in teaching. The benefits, the positive roles of humor mentioned by teachers, fall into similar categories to what is reported in the previous studies (see Bell & Pomerantz, 2016; Berk, 2000, 2001; Martin, 1998; Wilkins & Eisenbraun, 2009): benefitting the learning environment and improving students’ learning. The most frequently mentioned learning benefit of humor was that it helped create a relaxing atmosphere in the classroom, thus making students more likely to be more interactive with teachers and fellow students. Mr. Tao said, “*When the student feels tired, I will use some humor.*” “*Humor may make me become a popular teacher.*” Ms. Jin said, “*use some riddles to stimulate their interests.*” “*(humor) makes me approachable.*” Mr. Zhong said, “*(humor) helps students learn better and have an active role.*” “*When the teacher has a good mood.*” What Mr. Zhong said are two aspects that influence each other. When the teacher is in a good mood, he may use humor. When the teacher used humor, the teacher’s mood would also improve.

Kalaja and Barcelos (2003) defined beliefs as a dynamic, complex, and contradictory system of teachers’ cognition. Beliefs guide the practice, and practices, on the other hand, determine the success of teaching effectiveness and students’ studying (Borg, 2001; Lan & Lam, 2020). The beliefs that teachers have on humor will guide the practices of the use of humor in class. Teachers believe that using humor is beneficial for both students and teachers. This belief guides them to use it in teaching, and teachers feel effective after use, which strengthens their beliefs. In this research, the three teachers are convinced of the various benefits of humor, which confirms previous research. Different from previous studies, this study has noticed the benefits of using humor to teachers. Besides using humor could make teachers more popular, it can bring teachers a good mood.

b Teaching strategy—the identity as an English teacher

The root of language teacher identity can be traced to self and identity theories in social psychology (Sang, 2020). Language teacher identity encompasses an L2 teacher’s understanding of the meaning of being a language teacher and his/her professional role of working as a language teacher (Miller, 2009). Although two male teachers used this strategy

more and one female teacher used it less, the teacher identity involved the teachers' roles and navigated their philosophies or practices of using humor. Three teachers' teaching methods and methods of using humor are different, but they all emphasize the importance of completing teaching tasks. Completing the teaching task according to the syllabus is the top priority for them. Teachers hope they can improve students' grades in the end because the goal of having good scores is obvious in secondary school. Teachers always keep in mind that the core task is teaching, and any methods that could benefit teaching can become a teaching strategy, including humor. No matter whether it is to "*use humor to explain the word-formation and the rules of spelling*" or "*use humor to kill boring*", it can be explained that they constructed and defended their identity as an English teacher.

Chinese society values the profession of teachers very seriously, and everyone has high expectations for teachers. Teachers must be able to teach knowledge and serve as moral role models for students. Among them, teaching knowledge is the top priority of teachers. Confucianism has always influenced the identity and conceptual construction of teachers' identities (Zhang & Liu, 2014). Confucius, the founder of Confucianism, is also a teacher. The famous writer Han Yu from Tang Dynasty once said that the duty of a teacher is to preach, teach, and solve puzzles. Therefore, Chinese teachers who teach English naturally put the teaching of English knowledge first. When the researcher got along with the three teachers day and night, they often told that the teacher's main task was to teach English knowledge by the syllabus. Their thoughts are inseparable from their long-term identity as a teacher; naturally, this perception also affects their use of humor.

The examination-oriented education system also deeply influences the construction of teacher identity. From elementary school to middle school, from middle school to university, Chinese students need to take competitive exams (Liu & Ren, 2021). No one wants to fall behind in the competition because this will affect their future. The exams often test less commonly used or relatively remote language knowledge, such as phonetics and grammar. Under the influence of the test, the teacher will focus on the test. Teachers will use more grammatical translation methods and ignore the training of language communication skills. Most Chinese students have done well in reading and listening but have poor oral English. Because two very important exams, the middle school exam and NCEE (Gaokao), do not test oral English. In short, whether a traditional teacher imparts knowledge or a teacher who is influenced by test orientation, it will affect his use of humor. They will use humor if they feel that humor can be incorporated into teaching strategies and have an effect, such as creating a relaxed atmosphere.

c Teachers' ability—*anxiety about my English language proficiency*

It is found that, whether in the literature or in this study, Chinese English teachers have a sense of anxiety about their English proficiency (Li, 2020). Like their students, they all grew up under this education system. Reading and listening are relatively good, and oral English has been neglected for a long time and cannot be sufficiently practiced. New teachers who just started their careers may want to change this situation, but slowly they find that nothing can be changed (Zheng, 2015). Most Chinese English teachers receive English education in

China. Many have never been abroad, and some have never spoken with foreigners in English. They understood their abilities and levels and slowly shifted their focus to grammar teaching. The use of humor requires language proficiency as well as an in-depth understanding of the cultural background. In this context, English teachers are anxious about their spoken English and afraid that they are not using authentic English. Therefore, most humor does not involve cultural aspects but is reality-based humor.

Ms. Jin said, *“if I use English to tell jokes, it could be difficult for me.”* Mr. Zhong said, *“Sometimes I really want to use humor, and I admire teachers who are humorous, but I haven’t reached that level.”* Before doing this study, it assumed that because of their personality, Chinese EFL teachers may worry about how to use humor or they do not use humor at all. However, in this study, they seemed very confident in using humor. They were eager to use it even though they claimed they were introverts. The obvious reason is that they are worried about their English proficiency, or they may fail to make students laugh because they could not crack English jokes. English teachers’ education in China has been focused on English language knowledge, rarely on intercultural competence, which makes teachers have no confidence in using culture-based humor that is more difficult to be appreciated than universal humor and linguistic humor (Schmitz, 2002).

d Atmosphere & relationship—sensitivity and awareness of interaction

Some scholars have studied the social-psychological factors of students in EFL classes, such as enjoyment, anxiety, and boredom (Pawlak et al., 2020; Shao & Parkinson, 2021). Experienced English teachers will notice the emotional reactions of students, so they think of ways to get rid of anxiety and boredom. Their anxiety and stress would rise because learners have to deal with the face of threatening and peer challenges in the EFL classroom. In this circumstance, a light atmosphere was needed. Ms. Jin said, *“I didn’t think too much, I naturally wanted to enliven the atmosphere.”* For Chinese learners who are afraid of losing face, humor can motivate them to accept challenges and participate in activities. This tension-releasing function of humor has been explored by many researchers over the years (Bell, 2009; Deiter, 2000; Petraki & Pham Nguyen, 2016; Torok et al., 2004), and some have even proposed that tension relief is a determining feature of humor. The teacher needs to be sensitive. If the teacher just blindly imparts knowledge without interacting with students, then the students’ emotions will be affected, which will affect the teaching effect. Teachers have noticed this problem in this research. However, it is worth noting that Ms. Jin mentioned that if the student is more serious or in a bad mood, she will not use humor.

Mr. Tao said, *“using humor can get closer to students.”* Building rapport with humor can support an optimal learning environment and establish safe communities that reflect the relational trust for collaborative learning (Morrison, 2008). Mr. Zhong has just worked for three years, is young and passionate, and has a good relationship with students. This is also why he often makes friendly jokes to students in class. Interacting with students and having a good relationship made Mr. Zhong use more banter than other teachers. Conversely, the use of humor also makes students feel that the teacher is approachable. However, teachers must pay attention to the appropriateness of humor. In the observation of the three teachers, no

inappropriate humor was found. In short, a relaxed learning environment and a good teacher-student relationship are what every teacher desires. However, not everyone has a way to deal with it. Through the research of three teachers, it is found that Mr. Zhong, for example, is young and passionate, and teachers who interact more with students after class use more humor.

5. Conclusions

All three teachers used humor as a strategy without any previous research, so if the humor knowledge and skills were introduced and taught to teachers, they would possibly know more and use humor more skillfully. All three participants stated that humor could be taught. Mr. Tao used himself as an example. He said he speaks loudly in the classroom, but he is an introvert in private. So, humor can be acquired after hard work and a period of time. From Ms. Jin's statement, she cares very much about the audience and the surrounding environment. Even if she had already learned to use humor, it would not be suitable for everyone and on all occasions. Mr. Zhong used Chinese cross-talk as an example to show that cross-talk can be learned from childhood, so teachers can also be trained to use humor.

Berk (1996) discussed the benefits of using humor, and he also proposed that there is a need to examine if the acquirement of humor strategies can be successfully taught to teachers (Berk, 1996). From the interview, three participants had never researched humor. They knew humor by watching comedies, funny videos, or reading punchlines and anecdotes from the internet. Mr. Tao mainly used jokes or funny stories, while Mr. Zhong used friendly banter or teasing as his humorous skills, which means the teachers can use humor in the class without knowing humor knowledge. Wagner and Urios-Aparisi (2011) proposed that humor is strongly related to personality. Our general understanding is that introverts use less humor than extroverts. But in this study, based on the three participants' self-report, they used humor and wanted to use it even though all of them are introverts and seldom use humor in their daily lives. As Mr. Zhong said, "*only people who want to learn will know how to use humor.*" The main reason that they used humor is to serve the teaching goals. They use humor as a teaching method to ease tensions or build rapport. They used it because they wanted to use it. Thus, if a language teacher has the motivation to learn and use humor, humor can be taught. Ruch et al. (2018) tested the 7 Humor Habits Program as an intervention for training the sense of humor (Ruch et al., 2018). They found that people like to foster humor as a desired trait, and individuals seem to "need" humor training more likely than those who already see themselves having a good sense of humor.

In summation, it is found that teachers believe that humor can be taught, and it is strongly related to their motivation. This study indicated that in two situations, teachers would produce more humor. First, when they have well-prepared lessons, a relaxed mind or good mood can increase the use of humor. Second, when they use metacognitive strategies (e.g., determination to use humor, having prior knowledge of humor) can increase the use of humor. While teachers may use humor for different reasons, it is generally recognized that they do it to help teach. However, using it in the Chinese EFL classroom has many challenges. First, instructional humor is only a very limited part of the large repertoire of humor varieties we

use in daily life. Schools are complex entities, and classrooms are public spaces populated by different students with different values, attitudes, and views of the world. When we think of humor, we often think of sexual, ethnic jokes, and social humor, whereas intellectual humor (the kind of humor used in the classroom) is by far the least popular form in most societies (Schmitz, 2002). Many types of inappropriate humor or even negative humor should be avoided in the classroom (Decker et al., 2011; Deneire, 1995). Secondly, humor is generally admitted as a challenging form of interaction for L2 users to comprehend and use, especially for those secondary school students who are mostly at lower levels of proficiency. It is almost impossible for Chinese secondary school learners to comprehend and appreciate the humor of the target culture because it requires a fairly high level of linguistic, sociolinguistic, and discourse competence. However, it does not mean that teachers should give all culture-based humor up without introducing or using them. Lastly, teachers did not consider humor as important as teaching ability. Faculty emphasize on teaching technique, but students emphasize the student-teacher relationship (Schaeffer et al., 2003). Therefore, EFL teachers' humor use is a complicated phenomenon and whether they use depends on multiple factors.

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