The use of humour in EFL teaching: A case study of Vietnamese university teachers’ and students’ perceptions and practices

Hoang Nguyen Huy Pham
B.A. in English Teaching (Vietnam), M.A. in TESOL (University of Canberra, Australia)

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Faculty of Arts and Design
University of Canberra, Australia

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Abstract

With the advent of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and language acquisition theories, it has been suggested that lowering the affective filter and providing a relaxing learning environment assist learners in their concentration, absorption of information and language acquisition (Brandl, 2008; Krashen, 2004). While it has been indicated in the literature that humour has beneficial effects in making learners relaxed and/or helping them acquire knowledge more efficiently (Askildson, 2005; Kaplan & Pascoe, 1977; Maurice, 1988), empirical studies on humour in education, especially in language teaching, are limited. What is more, there is negligible research of the roles of humour in the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language (EFL). EFL teachers wishing to employ humour in their teaching need a stronger body of research regarding humour upon which to base their decisions, while empirical findings would help to establish the rightful position of humour in teaching/learning in general and in language teaching/learning in particular.

This doctoral thesis is one of the few empirical studies which investigated systematically the role of humour in the EFL classroom. Specifically, it examined university teachers’ and students’ perceptions of the roles of humour in EFL teaching, teachers’ practices of humour use, the reasons behind their use (or not use) of humour, teachers’ preferences regarding humour types, and students’ response to teachers’ use of humour. It investigated humour in English teaching/learning in the context of Vietnam – a developing country in Asia where English had a prestigious position and the mastery of English was an advantage for success in many fields and professions.
A concurrent mixed methods design (Cresswell, 2008b; Punch, 2009) was used in this study. Data was collected from 30 classroom observations of teachers, 30 teacher interviews, 162 student surveys, and 11 student interviews. The results from the three data collection instruments were triangulated to arrive at the findings.

The findings revealed that the majority of university EFL teachers and students in this study held positive views of and are in agreement about the roles of humour in EFL teaching. They believed that humour has affective and cognitive benefits for students, their learning, and the teacher-student relationship. All teachers used humour in their teaching, or claimed that they do so. The three most frequently used types of humour were humorous comments, jokes, and funny stories. Humour was used most often at the beginning and towards the end of a class meeting. The majority of the students welcome teachers’ use of humour – especially humour in English, believed that humour helps to increase their interest and motivation in learning English, and preferred a humorous teacher to a non-humorous one. Teachers and students also shared their experiences and opinions on how to use humour appropriately and effectively.

The insights from this study confirm the potential of humour in EFL teaching, and provide empirical evidence for the recommendations concerning the appropriate use of humour in EFL teaching as well as the inclusion of humour use in teacher training syllabi.
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ELT</td>
<td>English Language Teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EFL</td>
<td>English as a Foreign Language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CLT</td>
<td>Communicative Language Teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L1</td>
<td>Mother tongue/ First language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L2</td>
<td>Second language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MOET</td>
<td>The Ministry of Education and Training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESL</td>
<td>English as a Second Language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FL</td>
<td>Foreign Language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
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<tr>
<td>S</td>
<td>Student</td>
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</tbody>
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

This chapter introduces the study by outlining the context in which the research was conducted, the background of and justification for the study, the significance and contribution of the study, the research questions and purposes, the methodology adopted, and the structure of the thesis.

1.1. The context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Vietnam

Recent years have witnessed the increasing integration of many Asian countries into the global economy. In this process of globalisation, a communicative competence of English in the work force has been identified as the key to success, and has led educational policy makers to shift the way English is taught and learnt towards Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) (Liao, 2004; Luchini, 2004; Nunan, 2003; Wang, 2002). In Vietnam, these changes are reflected in the new English syllabus and textbooks used in high schools, and in teacher training colleges and universities' curricula (Department of English, HCMC University of Pedagogy, 2008) which are now designed ‘in the Communicative Approach and the learner-centered approach’ (Van, 2007; Chien, 2006). The increasing importance of English can also be seen through the recent decision of the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) to experimentally introduce English using a CLT approach to pupils as early as the age of 8, in an...
effort to lower the age of compulsory instruction (from the current one of 11) (Ministry of Education and Training, 2010).

However, in countries with a long-standing Confucian influence, a conflict arises between some of the principles of CLT, including the recognition of affective factors of learning as well as the role of the teacher as a facilitator rather than a controller (Brandl, 2008), and the hierarchical structure of society, in which individuals’ position, role, power, and expected behaviour are clearly defined. In such a society, the teacher is considered ‘the fount of knowledge’ (Holliday, 1994) and a figure of power to be respected and obeyed. In addition, the majority of classes are crowded (Hubbell, 2002; Liu, 1998), resources for foreign language teaching and learning are limited and/or vary greatly between urban and rural areas (Gorsuch, 2007; Nunan, 2003), teachers are not adequately trained in CLT (De Segovia and Hardison, 2009), tests are still structure-based (Liu, 1998; Luchini, 2004), and there are virtually no immediate needs or even chances to use English communicatively in this monolingual setting (Doyon, 2003; Ellis, 1996; S.J. Kim, 2004). These difficulties easily create a ‘CLT environment’ in policies and documents, but not in practice (Hubbell, 2002; Nunan, 2003; Sato, 2002). The result is that the teacher remains the authoritarian transmitter of knowledge (Lewis & McCook, 2002), and English teaching in Asia continues to be dominantly didactic, product-oriented, and teacher-centred (Liu, 1998; Liyanage, 2009).

However, some researchers have noted that things are changing in regards to CLT implementation in Asia. Liao (2004, p.272) holds that teachers in China ‘like to use CLT’, while in studies by Ha (2004) and Hiep (2007), it is noted that Vietnamese teachers are ‘emerging as facilitators, friends, instructors, and teachers’ (Ha, 2004, p.56). These Vietnamese teachers, even when teaching Grammar or English Literature, employ ‘a communicative orientation’ (Ha, 2004, p.54) or do not try to impose their ideas on students. They ‘espouse firmly the
primary goal of CLT’ and have a ‘desire to implement CLT […] through efforts to promote common Western CLT practices such as pair work and group work’ (Hiep, 2007, p.200). In considering the student perspective, Littlewood (2000) questioned the stereotype of ‘passive Asian students’ and found that they do not really want to listen and obey all the time. In contrast, ‘they want to explore knowledge themselves’ and ‘want to do this together with their fellow students in an atmosphere which is friendly and supportive’ (Littlewood, 2000, p.34). Such student wants seem to be positive conditions for the application of CLT practices.

The research suggests, then, that many Asian EFL teachers want to use CLT and actually try to employ CLT practices in their teaching. However, not all their efforts are successful since they are faced with many difficulties in the educational contexts. These difficulties, according to Hiep (2007), include systemic constraints such as traditional examinations and large class sizes, cultural constraints such as beliefs about teacher and student roles and classroom relationships, personal constraints such as low student motivation and the genuine need to use English, and teachers’ limited expertise in creating and managing communicative activities (p.200).

Another feature of countries with a powerful presence of the Confucian influence, and one which is a challenge in applying CLT, is the concept of ‘face’; face matters more here than in Western cultures: it may be considered synonymous with ‘pride’ or ‘honour’ (J.P. Kim, 2002). No one wants to appear incompetent, especially in such a highly competitive setting as a classroom. This explains why many Asian students tend to be silent, to avoid contributing significantly to the lessons, and to not challenging ideas of teachers or classmates (S.J. Kim, 2004). It is even worse in a foreign language class than in the normal classroom: since here students have to perform in a language other than their familiar and fluent mother tongue, their chances of ‘losing face’ (by making mistakes or providing
incorrect answers) are higher. The students, then, will tend to be quieter and more anxious than when they study other subjects.

As an Asian developing country, Vietnam shares many characteristics with other Asian countries, while at the same time having socially, economically, and culturally distinctive features which may affect the application of CLT principles. The English classroom in Vietnam has a dual nature – it is a place to learn a subject in the broader educational curriculum, while the conventional expectations and constraints of a normal Vietnamese classroom (Ha, 2004; Sakui, 2004). It is at the same time a place to learn a foreign language with the prospect of using that language in a global context and learn about a culture that is quite different from the present, immediate one. This dual nature of the classroom can offer fruitful insights into the questions of whether research findings from elsewhere hold true or are applicable in the context of Vietnam.

The high stakes attached to education in Vietnam, together with the various challenges and constraints discussed above, may particularly hinder one of the basic principles of CLT, namely to ‘recognise and respect affective factors of learning’ (Brandl, 2008, p.21). This principle holds that learners’ attitudes, motivations, anxieties, and achievements may affect their use of cognitive powers in second language learning. This matter of the affective dimension in learning has been gaining attention alongside the cognitive one (Wright, 2005) in much current research. Rogers (1983) discusses it in the concept of ‘humanistic education’; Goleman (1995) introduces the notion of ‘emotional intelligence’; and Krashen (1981, 2004) puts forward the Natural Approach that includes the Affective Filter Hypothesis. This hypothesis states that only when learners' affective filters are down, motivation and self-confidence are high, and anxiety is low, can language acquisition occur. High anxiety seems to have gained a great deal of attention, with many researchers asserting that high anxiety levels in students need to be avoided. Notable, however, learners may encounter higher
levels of anxiety in a language class compared to other subjects, because they have to perform in a second or foreign language and have a low likelihood of showing all their competence and a high likelihood of harmfully affecting their self-image (Arnold & Douglas Brown, 1999; Brandl, 2008). A classroom atmosphere which is relaxed and psychologically safe, which encourages risk-taking, and provides the most teacher- and peer-support is desirable for raising learners’ motivation and self-confidence while reducing learner anxiety (Oxford, 1999). This suggests that a desirable environment in an EFL classroom is one that promotes low learner anxiety.

To achieve this supportive environment and so maximise student learning, researchers have proposed several strategies. These strategies include language play (Cook, 2000; Harmer, 2007), communicative activities and language games (Hadfield, 2001; Harmer, 2007; Rinvolucri, 1984), small-group and pair instead of whole-class activities (Horwitz, 2007), fair and unambiguous tests (Oxford, 1999; Young, 1991) and the use of humour. Plenty of research has been done on these strategies, resulting in advice, techniques, articles, and resource books for teachers.

Based on the literature discussed, humour plays an important role in maximising learning. However, research on humour and its benefits has been negligible. The next section will provide an overview of how humour is discussed and researched in the relevant literature, and highlight the need for research into humour.
1.2. **Background of the study – overview of literature about humour**

In the limited number of studies on humour in language teaching and learning, authors have indicated the useful potential of humour. It has a role in positively affecting students’ attitudes towards the communicative teaching and learning of English by ‘encourag[ing] moderate risk-taking and tolerance of ambiguity in a comfortable, non-threatening environment’ and ‘reduc[ing] the competition present in the classroom’ (Oxford, 1999, p.67). Among the important factors identified as leading to teacher effectiveness, ‘teachers’ use of humour has consistently emerged in the “top 10” list of items generated by students’ (Bryant, Comisky, Crane & Zillman, 1980, p.512). The teachers ‘employing humour in the classroom receive higher teacher evaluations, are seen as more approachable by students, and develop a positive rapport with students’ (Neuliep, 1991, p.343). Therefore, it is no surprise that “very humorous” or “somewhat humorous” teachers are most favoured by colleagues and students, while “serious” ones are least favoured (Torok, McMorris & Lin, 2004). It seems, then, there is no denying that a teacher armed with humour – and their classrooms – stand a better chance of appearing attractive and enjoyable in the learners’ mind. As Berk (2007, p.102) asserts, humour can ‘improve [a teacher’s] connection with [their] students’ and ‘bring dead, boring content to life’.

Nevertheless, humour is still an understudied phenomenon, perhaps due to the conventional view contrasting learning with laughter or ‘having fun’ (features often associated with humour) (Morrison, 2008). In the literature there has been some passing mention of the role of humour in lowering language anxiety (e.g. Young, 1991) and many suggestions from theoreticians, but there is very little research on the benefits of humour in ELT. This body of research is much smaller than the research that has been done on, and the attention that has been
paid to other strategies that lower students’ affective filter, such as games or communicative activities.

Most previous research into the use of humour in teaching tends to focus on education in general, with some limited attention to English as a Second Language (ESL). This is understandable, since most of the studies have been carried out in English-speaking countries, where English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is not a matter to be considered. Although ESL and EFL share a number of common features, there are still important differences (Liu, 1998), probably the most notable is that the opportunities (and the need) for ESL learners to use English to communicate with native speakers of English outside the classroom are often greater than they are for EFL learners (Ellis, 1996). This fact should lead a teacher of English to employ different considerations a teacher of English when dealing with EFL learners, in terms of motivation and classroom atmosphere. Previous research has shown that the use of humour may affect learner motivation and classroom atmosphere.

Of the very limited number of studies looking into the use of humour in EFL teaching and learning (Ageli, n.d.; Chan, 2007; Fox, n.d.), there has been virtually none conducted in the Asian EFL context. There has been even less such research conducted in Vietnam, the context of this study. While there has been considerable research on games and communicative activities in Vietnam, there has been no research on humour. It will be illuminating to see whether something that is often considered a sign of originality and flexibility in Western cultures (Tamblyn, 2003) can fit in a system (both social and educational) that values compliance and conformity more than the Western cultures do. Moreover, this study provides insights and potential applications regarding humour in other Asian countries with similar situations.
Since English has such a prestigious position in Vietnam, a satisfactory mastery of English is an advantage, or even a prerequisite, for success in many fields (‘Fluent English’, 2009). Therefore, the teaching and learning of English in Vietnam is a serious business, where the results to achieve sometimes become more important than the knowledge and skills to gain, thanks to many high-stakes tests (Phuc Dien, 2009). A combination of the society’s traditional view of a class as a venue for serious learning, the still frequent application of the mechanical ways of teaching English, and the pressure that comes from having an abundance of materials to cover and acceptable results to achieve, has caused many a teacher or an administrator to shun the idea of using humour in teaching and learning. Therefore, it is not surprising to find a common view among educational administrators and teachers that humour (and play in general) is a waste of precious learning time and a detraction from the required quality and nature of the classroom (S.J. Kim, 2004; Sakui, 2004). However, there are teachers who want to ‘lighten’ English learning and bring fun back into the EFL class. The introduction of CLT practices and teachers’ interest in creating an interactive and comfortable atmosphere make the EFL classroom an appropriate environment for a study of the use of humour.

While humour, then, is among the many strategies that may be used in EFL classroom activities, it is still employed only dispersedly and intuitively. A better understanding of humour, its role in teaching and students’ response to it, will, therefore, be useful in helping the educational management to have a more tolerant view of humour, and in encouraging teachers who wish to use it to carry on with their ideas on a well-informed basis.
1.3. **Aims of the research and the research questions**

The main aims of this study are to:

- Identify the use of humour by Vietnamese university teachers of English.
- Assess students’ responses to Vietnamese university teachers’ use of humour in class.

The main objectives of this study are to:

- Identify how and to what extent Vietnamese university teachers use humour in English language teaching.
- Provide a comparison between Vietnamese university teachers’ perceptions of humour and their actual use of humour in class.
- Examine how students respond to Vietnamese university teachers’ use of humour in class.
- Investigate Vietnamese university teachers’ and students’ perceptions about the roles of humour in foreign language teaching.
- Provide research-based suggestions about the benefits of the use of humour in class and the types of humour that teachers and students find effective.

With these objectives in mind, the researcher conducted the study to answer these research questions:

1. To what extent do Vietnamese university EFL teachers use humour in classroom teaching?
2. What are Vietnamese university EFL teachers’ and students’ perceptions of the role(s) of humour in classroom teaching?
3. What types of humour do Vietnamese university EFL teachers use and in which contexts?

4. How effective do Vietnamese university EFL teachers find their use of humour in class?

5. How do students respond to Vietnamese university EFL teachers’ use of humour in class?

1.4. **The significance and contribution of the present study**

With English becoming more and more important globally, a wide spectrum of strategies that maximise students’ English learning have been researched and tried. However, the use of humour in the classroom is still more or less unexplored territory. Exploiting humour to its full potential offers a new direction in improving English teaching and learning. This study will contribute to and expand research on the benefits of humour in EFL teaching.

This study is significant for a number of reasons. Firstly, it contributes to the understanding of the use of humour in foreign language teaching and learning. Secondly, it reveals the applicability of humour in English teaching and learning in the Vietnamese EFL context. Finally, it adds to the basis for well-informed decisions regarding the inclusion of humour, and what is appropriate and beneficial for classroom teaching and learning.

As an affective factor, humour can greatly affect both the classroom atmosphere and student motivation, which, in turn, helps decide how much learning, if any, may occur. The right ‘dose’ of humour, then, will be of great value in lowering students’ affective filters and opening their minds for learning. This consideration is even more important in a foreign language class, where teaching and learning
are to do with and are conducted in a language other than the students’ mother
tongue. This study will be the first study in Vietnam to examine teachers’ and
students’ perceptions on the appropriate use of humour.

At present, teachers’ use of humour is mostly intuitive and without a firm scientific
basis since research on the roles and effects of humour in education, especially
EFL teaching, is lacking. Therefore, ‘humour users’ still have to endure doubtful
looks from those who contend that humour has nothing to do with learning. This
study contributes to the body of knowledge about humour in EFL teaching, by
providing another stepping-stone on the road to humour being admitted to its
worthy and well-deserved position beside other affective factors that can aid EFL
learning.

As this study focuses on EFL teaching at Vietnamese universities, its findings are
firstly relevant to and can be applied in the Vietnamese context. However, the
findings may also be useful and applicable to other educational contexts,
especially Asian contexts with similar circumstances of Confucian influence
and/or cultural heritage.

1.5. **Methodology**

The study was conducted at three universities in a large city in Vietnam. Data
were obtained from EFL teachers (n = 30) and students (n = 162). All teacher
participants had a BA degree in English teaching from a Vietnamese university,
and most of them had an MA in TESOL degree from either a Vietnamese or a
foreign (mainly Australian, American, or British) university. The teachers were
both male and female, with ages ranging from early twenties to early fifties, and
years of teaching experience ranging from two to twenty-five. The student
participants were from eighteen to twenty-four years of age, of both genders, and
varied background and English proficiency. They included both English majors and non-English majors.

The 30 teachers were each observed during one class, and then all of them were interviewed individually by the researcher. The 162 students completed a questionnaire, and then a sample of 11 students participated in either individual or group interviews with the researcher. The data collection processes yielded both quantitative and qualitative data.

In this study, the quantitative and qualitative data were collected at the same time, with more weighting given to qualitative data than quantitative data. The purpose was to compare results in order to paint a more detailed picture, making this research format one of the concurrent triangulation design (Creswell et al., 2003; Creswell, 2008b; Punch, 2009). This is the most common type of mixed methods research design, enabling the researcher to compare the findings from two or more methods and analyse the similarities or discrepancies among them (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011; Creswell, 2008b; Thurmond, 2001).

The quantitative data were analysed using SPSS and the qualitative results analysed with the aid of NVivo to develop themes and codes. The analysis of quantitative data and qualitative themes resulted in the findings presented as part of this study. The findings provide interesting insights into teachers’ and students’ perceptions of the roles of humour in EFL teaching and learning, their preferences in terms of types of humour, the timing of humour, what are effective ways to use humour, and the requirements of appropriate uses of humour.

1.6. **Structure of the thesis**

The thesis consists of seven chapters including this introduction. Chapter 2 provides the literature review regarding humour and its effects, especially on
education in general and language teaching and learning in particular. This chapter also identifies the gaps in the current literature on humour, followed by a justification of the present study. Chapter 3 outlines the research design and data collection and analysis instruments. Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 present key findings from students’ and teachers’ data respectively. Findings are presented according to each data collection instrument. In Chapter 6, a detailed discussion of the findings is provided in answer to the research questions. Finally, the recommendations from the present study, the limitations of the study, and the implications for further research are discussed in Chapter 7.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Humour is abundantly present in modern society. The numerous sitcoms on TV, cartoons in newspapers and magazines, and stand-up comedians making top dollars show clearly that today we are never short of opportunities to find and enjoy humour and its most frequent companion, laughter. However, humour is certainly not a recent phenomenon. As early as ancient Greek times philosophers discussed humour and its impact on human character. With such a long history it should come as no surprise that humour has undergone different, often contradictory, treatments. According to Morrison (2008), during the Renaissance period the term “humorous” referred to demented people, and it was not until the 1700s that humour was considered normal behaviour. The Puritans actually forbade the use of most comedy, play, and fun (Morrison, 2008). Given the contradictory attitudes towards humour through time and among people, it is surprising that humour receives very little attention from researchers, but especially so considering its almost omnipresence in our lives today.

This chapter reviews the various definitions of humour and the attempts at explaining the mechanisms behind humour, and this presents the basis for the choice of definitions and categories used in this study. The chapter also discusses the existent literature on humour in terms of its roles and effects of humour in different aspects of our lives in general, and in education in particular. This discussion reveals gaps in research on humour, some of which this study
has tried to fill. Specifically, the discussion shows that there has been a scarcity of research on humour use in foreign language teaching even though, according to some authors, the foreign language classroom could be, and should be, a fertile ground for humour to thrive.

2.1. **What is humour?**

Humour originally is a Latin word referring to one of the four fluids of the body (blood, phlegm, choler, and black bile), a balance of which was thought to determine one’s health. A person with a good balance, i.e. in good health, was said to be “in good humour.” Then, during the Renaissance period humour became a term for one’s insanity. It was not until the 18th century that there was a shift in the meaning of humour to refer to normal human behaviour (Morrison, 2008) and, later, to the modern sense of ‘a personality characteristic’ (Billig, 2005, p.12). In this quite modern sense, standard dictionaries seem to consider humour synonymous with fun, laughter or amusements or, with the ability to induce, perceive, or enjoy fun, laughter or amusements. Table 2.1 shows some definitions of humour from different dictionaries. From this list it can be seen that there is some agreement between these definitions: humour is either something we humans enjoy because it is funny or amusing, with the most easily detectable indicator being laughter; or the human ability to create such things.

**Table 2.1 Dictionary definitions of humour**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dictionary</th>
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<tr>
<td>The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language (Humor, 2014)</td>
<td>1. The quality that makes something laughable or amusing; funniness. 2. That which is intended to induce laughter or amusement. 3. The ability to perceive, enjoy, or express what is amusing, comical, incongruous, or absurd.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dictionary/Source</td>
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| Oxford English Dictionary (Humour, 2014)              | 1. That quality of action, speech, or writing, which excites amusement; oddity, jocularity, facetiousness, comicality, fun.  
2. The faculty of perceiving what is ludicrous or amusing, or of expressing it in speech, writing, or other composition; jocose  
imagination or treatment of a subject.                                                                 |
| Merriam-Webster Dictionary (Humor, 2014)              | 1. A message whose ingenuity or verbal skill or incongruity has the power to evoke laughter.  
2. The quality of being funny.  
3. The trait of appreciating (and being able to express) the humorous.                                                                 |
| The Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary (Humour, 2014) | [U] the ability to find things funny, the way in which people see that some things are funny or the quality of being funny |
| Wikipedia (Humour, n.d.)                               | the tendency of particular cognitive experiences to provoke laughter and provide amusement |

Among researchers, however, there is a greater level of variation in the ways they define humour in their studies. Wanzer, Frymier, Wojtaszczyk & Smith (2006) defined humour as ‘anything that the teacher and/or students find funny or amusing’ (p.182). This definition is in line with dictionary definitions in terms of ‘funny’ and ‘amusing’. However, it could be difficult to detect whether something is perceived as ‘funny or amusing’ since there is no mention of the indicators, e.g. laughter. This definition also suggests that humour could come from either the teacher or the students, or even another source, and might be acknowledged or enjoyed by one party only. In an effort to develop an Objective Humour Appreciation Measure, Leung (2004) understandably chose as the definition of humour ‘the ability to understand, enjoy, and express what is amusing’ (p.1). This definition focuses on the ‘reception’, not the ‘creation’ end of the humour.
continuum, and thus, unlike Wanzer et al.’s (2006) definition, has more to do with ‘humans’ than ‘things’. From the viewpoint of a foreign language teacher, Tuncay (2007) provides the meaning of humour as ‘understanding not only the language and words but their use, meaning, subtle nuances, the underlying culture, implications and unwritten messages’ (p.2). While most of this ‘understanding’ is required for success in other aspects of language learning as well, the ‘underlying culture’ clearly adds another level of complication to humour, especially when a language other than one’s mother tongue is involved. This aspect is what most other authors tend to overlook, maybe because of the monolingual and monocultural settings in their studies.

Instead of giving their own definitions, some authors have included definitions from dictionaries (Bruner, 2002; Garner, 2006). This may be considered a ‘safe option’. However, as some authors (Bell, 2009; Medgyes, 2002; Schmitz, 2002) indicate, there is much variation in the creation and appreciation of humour, since humour can be universal, culture-bound, or idiosyncratic. What is humorous to one in a particular time and setting may turn out to be incomprehensible, inappropriate, or even offensive to another in a different context. Therefore, a dictionary definition may not account for all instances of humour in a certain study, considering the highly varied settings and purposes of different research, not to mention instances when humour is transported across languages and cultures. This fact may account for the limited agreement among researchers as to what humour is, and/or the absence of definitions of humour in many studies. This absence itself is really surprising since we have seen that humour is certainly not something to be taken for granted, and it can vary greatly depending on the settings and people involved. Humour, then, seems to share some common features with love – people may recognize when encountering or experiencing it, though they are unable to explain clearly and thoroughly what it is. This lack of agreement leads to various definitions and/or implications of
definitions of humour in different studies which, in turn, make it difficult to reach a consensus or to compare humour research. Instead of trying to define humour, a number of philosophers and psychologists have turned to accounting for the mechanism behind it.

2.2. Mechanisms of humour – The three plus one theories

In order to explain why we find something humorous, there are at least three widely known and long-standing theories: the superiority theory, the incongruity theory, and the relief/release theory (Billig, 2005; Morreall, 1983). To these theories, Morreall (1983) added a fourth one, with the aim to incorporate the previous three.

2.2.1. The superiority theory

Morreall (1997) reviewed the three existent theories of the mechanism of humour, starting with the superiority theory. Originating in ancient Greece in the thoughts of such philosophers as Pluto and Aristotle and dominant until the 17th century in the works of such as Hobbes, this longest-standing theory maintains that we find something (a person, a situation, an act, etc.) humorous when we feel superior, at least in some aspects, to the person(s) or thing(s) involved. We laugh at another person’s folly because we feel more intelligent than him. We laugh at another person’s misfortunes because we are luckier because we do not suffer from those. Even when we laugh at ourselves, it is the past, inferior self we are laughing at (Billig, 2005, p.50-52). In this sense, laughter is basically scorn. Therefore, humour and enjoying humour is a malicious act. This may explain “the traditional opposition to laughter and humour” (Morreall, 1997, p.25).
However, not all laughter and humour can be explained by the superiority theory. Humans may laugh out of surprise, amazement, or enjoyment (Morreall, 1997, p.25). To explain laughter and humour more thoroughly, a more recent theory came into existence: the incongruity theory.

2.2.2. The incongruity theory

Being the current dominant theory in the psychological study of humour (Morreall, 1997; Billig, 2005), this theory states that it is the incongruous juxtaposition of two (or more) people, objects, ideas, or expectations that makes something humorous. In other words, what does not fit into our vision of how the world should be is possibly humorous to us (Morreall, 1983). This explains why we find a clown’s face funny (since it is not an ordinary face as we know), why it is humorous to see a Braille sign at a drive-thru ATM, and why we laugh on hearing the punch line of a joke or a clever one-liner, e.g. this one from Mark Twain: “I have never let my schooling interfere with my education.”

There are conditions for the enjoyment of incongruities, though. These incongruities should come in a pleasant way, i.e. we do not feel threatened or challenged (Morreall, 1997). Opening the door of your room and walking into a band of friends shouting “Happy Birthday!” is incongruous with our expectations and is funny, but walking into a band of armed robbers is certainly not. Another condition is that a person should enjoy the incongruities (rather than viewing them as puzzles to be solved, or flaws or disorders to be corrected) to find humour in them (Morreall, 1997). As an example for this condition, Morreall presented the case of a cartoon in a magazine which, instead of providing fun, triggered some readers to find solutions for the improbable situation it described.
2.2.3. The relief theory

Although the incongruity theory is currently dominant, it still cannot account for all incidents of laughter and humour. An example is a person’s laughter after solving a puzzle. There is no incongruity in such a situation. To explain such cases, theorists like Freud and Spencer suggest the relief/release theory (Billig, 2005). This theory holds that laughter comes as built-up nervous energy in a situation: when it is released, we find humour in such a situation. The built-up energy may come from repressed sexual and hostile feelings (which explains the jokes with sex or aggression hints), an intellectual challenge (which explains the puzzle case mentioned above), or emotional energy (which explains why we may laugh after regaining balance from a near-fall, or on learning that a beloved one is safe from a certain danger).

A notable feature of the relief theory is that it views humour as an outlet for restraints put on us by society or ourselves. In other words, we may mention or enjoy things in the name of humour we would never say in polite conversations, especially repressed sexual and aggressive feelings (Billig, 2005; Morreall, 1983). If this view of humour is true, then those with more stress or anger will have more of a need for an outlet like humour, and consequently will laugh more. Quite evidently this is not the case. In fact, the people who create or enjoy humour the most are often cheerful and optimistic. Moreover, as we shall see in the following section on Morreall’s theory, laughter more often than not is associated with a pleasant psychological shift, which certainly stress or anger is not about. Therefore, the relief theory also cannot explain all cases of laughter and humour.
2.2.4. Morreall’s Theory

Morreall admitted that each of the three previous theories can explain some cases of humour; however, they fail to account for all instances of humour (Morreall, 1983). Morreall (1983) himself put forward a new theory in which he tried to incorporate all three previous theories. The essence of this new theory is presented in the formula: “Laughter Results from a Pleasant Psychological Shift” (Morreall, 1983, p.39).

This theory identifies three general features of laughter situations: the person who laughs undergoes a change of psychological state: this change is sudden, and it is pleasant. The psychological shift may be cognitive (as in the cases of incongruities), affective (as in the cases explained by the superiority and relief theories), or both (as in the cases of hostile humour). In so reasoning, Morreall tries to take all humour instances that could be explained by each single previous theory into account. The second feature, the suddenness in a psychological change, is explained by Morreall (1983) as related to the amount of change and the time over which the change takes place. For a change to be sudden, the amount is relatively large and the time is relatively short; as well, the person at the receptive end of the change does not know about the change in advance. This feature, according to Morreall, explains why we cannot tickle ourselves to laugh, why the “punch line” of jokes has such a name, why explaining a piece of humour to someone will hardly make them laugh, and why most pieces of humour will appear most funny to us the first time we come across them. The last feature of laughter situations, as suggested by Morreall (1983), is the pleasure in laughter. Morreall mentions the example of finding out that one has won a lottery
as a pleasant psychological shift, while discovering that a friend has been killed is not. A psychological shift can be unpleasant if it evokes such negative emotions as fear, pity, anger, disgust, or an attitude of puzzlement, wonder, or problem solving. Morreall went on to indicate that for a psychological shift to be perceived as pleasant, we should feel relatively secure at the time. This element of security implies that even though we experience a psychological shift, we still feel in control of the situation, e.g. watching someone fall out of an airplane in a slapstick movie, because we know that it is not real. Morreall (1983, p.54) argues that we ‘often try to get children, and adults too, to regain their feeling of security [...] by making them laugh’ and, therefore, there is a two-way causal relation between our feelings and the behaviour expressing those feelings. In this case, ‘laughing is a behaviour that expresses pleasant feelings. But this behaviour is itself pleasant, and so tends to increase pleasant feelings’ (p.55).

Morreall’s argument of laughter and security may be of great value for educational settings where the presence of laughter could mean the introduction of not only pleasure, but also a sense of security to learners. Both pleasure and security, as we shall see in the discussion of humour in education (see 2.5), are among the factors facilitating successful learning. Also, the pleasant psychological shift that humour brings about can be an effective antidote for learning anxiety, especially language learning anxiety (see 1.1), as we shall see discussed in 2.5.

2.3. **Definitions and classification**

2.3.1. **Definitions**

After reviewing the definitions of humour, for the purposes of the thesis the following definition was used in this research.
**Humour**: teacher-initiated attempts to stimulate laughter or amusement. These attempts may come from the materials, the lesson content, or classroom interactions (e.g. students’ actions, or students’ responses to teachers’ questions), and will typically result in laughter or smiling.

This study investigated the use of humour in class by teachers. Therefore, only teacher-initiated attempts at humour were taken into account. These attempts included instances where the teachers either had prepared the humour in advance, with the intention of employing certain pieces of humour at certain moments during the lessons, or impromptu reactions to what happened in class but with the intention of being humorous. In other words, both prepared and spontaneous instances of teachers’ humour were considered. However, circumstantial occurrences of humour, such as when a teacher sat on his/her chair, and it broke, so he/she fell on the floor; and the students laughed, did not count as an instance of humour, although the students did in fact laugh. But if that teacher got up and said, ‘I always knew I would put on some weight after last night’s big party,’ this would be considered a spontaneous attempt at humour, no matter whether the students laughed at the remark or not. Student-initiated humour or humour from other sources (e.g. from the environment, like when a bird flying into class and trying to land on the teacher’s head) were not counted, and might be potential subjects for other studies.

It is notable that all four theories of the mechanisms of humour used laughter as the most obvious indicator of the presence of humour when discussing humour. This study followed the same vein in considering laughter (mainly among students but also laughter from the teachers themselves) to be the sign of an (usually successful) attempt by the teachers to use humour. However, laughter does not always accompany the appreciation of humour. Therefore, the element of ‘amusement’ was included in the definition. This element might take the form of laughter, smile, eye contact, bodily gestures and/or movement, or even the
students’ heightened attention to or interest in the teacher. Amusement is more difficult to recognise and quantify than laughter. Moreover, teachers and students may have different perceptions of amusement. Whether humour occurred during a lesson and in which form, and how it was perceived by teachers and students were the focus of research questions 4 (How effective do university teachers of English find their use of humour in class?) and 5 (How do students respond to university teachers of English’s use of humour in class?). In this study, the teachers’ and students’ perceptions formed the basis for defining effectiveness.

The teacher might intentionally choose materials likely to generate humour in class. Examples of this included funny stories for a reading task, a recording of an extract from a sitcom for a listening task, or a short comedy script for a role-playing speaking task. Humour could also be integrated into the teaching content, like the humorous examples to illustrate a grammar point. Last, but maybe most abundantly, humour might arise from classroom interactions, where teachers and students exchanged numerous questions, answers, comments, remarks, explanations, and such like during a lesson, and the opportunities to use humour abounded. These are discussed in detail in the following section.

2.3.2. Classification of humour types

Different researchers have classified humour in a number of ways. These are mainly based on one or more of the following features of humour instances: types (the forms humour takes, e.g. jokes or comments), subjects (who/which humour is directed at, e.g. the teacher himself/herself, the students, or the topic, the lesson), relevance (to the lesson or the presentation involved in the studies), and the levels of preparation (whether the humour is prepared or spontaneous). Another parameter related to the classification process is that some researchers
identified the humour categories before conducting research and collecting data, while others came up with the categories after the content analysis of the data.

Tamborini & Zillmann (1981) preset the categories of humour before presenting a lecture in their study: they used sexual, self-disparaging, and other-disparaging. Both Desberg, Henschel & Marshall (1981) and Kaplan & Pascoe (1977) also predetermined the categories of humour, but based their classification on whether the humour employed was related to the concepts presented during a lecture or not. Also, looking at the relevance of humour to the course in their study, Downs, Javidi & Nussbaum (1988), however, only determined the classification of humour after analysing their data. Moreover, they coded the humorous comments used by teachers based on whether they were directed toward self, students, others not in the class, course material, or an object or thing. Working in the same way and expanding the categories of humour to include not only comments but also story, joke, and physical or vocal comedy, Gorham & Christophel (1990) came up with 13 categories of humour, ranging from brief tendentious comments (directed at self, an individual student, the class as a whole, the university, national or world events, or the topic or class procedures) to anecdotes or stories (personal or general, related to the topic or not) to jokes, physical comedy, and other. Maybe the most thorough inductive classification came from the content analysis of humour in Bryant, Comisky, Crane & Zillmann’s (1980) study. They reported 6 formats (types) of humour (joke, riddle, pun, funny story, humorous comment, and other), prepared vs. spontaneous humour, sexual and hostile themes in the humour (the presence, combination, or absence of these themes generated 5 categories altogether), the characters involved (the teacher, a student, other characters, or none), the ‘victims’ of the humour (self, student, or other disparagement), whether the humour distracted from or contributed to the educational point, and whether it was related to the course material. Detailed and even overwhelming-looking as
they were, these categories seemed still not to be able to cover all the abundant types of humour employed by teachers. Neuliep (1991) pointed out that of the 234 humorous events observed in Bryant et al.’s (1980) study, 16% (38 events) were coded as ‘other’ regarding their types.

In this study, to facilitate the observation and classification of humorous instances, a list of humour types in existence prior to data collection was deemed necessary. In an effort to improve on Bryant et al.’s (1980) taxonomy in terms of types and simplify it in terms of other parameters, only the categorisation of humour types was kept, and these then complemented with several additional types suggested by other researchers. Other categories (e.g. whether the humour was sexual hostile or not, and who was/were the victim of hostile humour) were discarded since their use would widen the scope of the study, and complicate the matters to be studied. The analysis, however, did take into account other types of humour that emerged from this research, allowing a bottom-up plus top-down approach to the categorisation of humour. The categories of humour were coded during the viewing of class video recordings and the analysis of the interview transcripts.

Thus, this research adopted the following list of humour types as a starting point for this study:

- Types of humour used: (adapted from Bryant, Comisky, Crane & Zillmann, 1980)
  - Joke: a relatively short prose build-up followed by a punch line.
  - Riddle: a message presented in the form of an information question with an answer provided in a humorous punch line.
• Pun: an instance in which structurally or phonoetically similar words or phrases having two or more meanings are used in such a way as to simultaneously play on their multiple meanings.

• Funny story: an instance in which the teacher relates a series of connected events or the activities of a single incident as a tale.

• Humorous comment: a brief statement containing a humorous element.

• Visual humour: pictures, cartoons, comic strips, etc. containing humorous messages.

• Physical humour: exaggerated or distorted tone or pronunciation, facial expressions, gestures, impersonation, etc. aiming at being amusing.

• Others: the remaining humorous items.

This list was used as a guide for the researcher-observer during classroom observations; it was expected that it would be complemented during content analysis of the data, and it was in fact the case. In addition, prepared versus spontaneous humour on the part of teachers was distinguished and is reported in Chapter 5.

2.4. **Benefits of humour**

There is much evidence in the literature that humour brings many benefits to human beings, including physiological, psychological, and social ones.

**2.4.1. Physiological benefits of humour**

The positive effects of humour, and its most obvious outward indicator – laughter, have been documented as: relaxing muscles (Fry, 1992), improving the body's
immune system (Martin & Dobbin, 1988), stimulating circulation and improving respiration (Fry & Rader, 1977; Fry & Savin, 1988), increasing the level of endorphins that help in pain tolerance (Berk et al., 1989), and lowering blood pressure (Fry & Savin, 1988). Less directly, humour can help in dealing with illness (Cousins, 1979). Cousins even called laughter “internal jogging.” In short, in addition to being folk wisdom, the saying “Laughter is the best medicine” seems to be backed with scientific evidence as well.

2.4.2. Psychological benefits of humour

Among health practitioners and professionals, it is believed that humour can be used as a means of coping with pain, illness and/or stress (Alston, 2007; Boyle & Joss-Reid, 2004; Cousins, 1979). In this sense, humour is valuable not only to patients but also to carers and/or patients’ family members. When used for the constructive and benevolent purposes of amusing or seeking solidarity (rather than dividing or showing sarcasm), humour has been proven able to decrease anxiety and stress (Cann, Holt & Calhoun, 1999; Lehman, Burke, Martin, Sultan & Czech, 2001), reduce tension and depression (Wooten, 1996; Deaner & McConatha, 1993), improve self-esteem (Frecknall, 1994), and increase motivation (Cornett, 1986). These effects are obviously of great value to people facing much pressure and wishing to keep a mental balance (e.g. teachers), as well as to the learning process of students in general. It is obvious that learning activities always cause a certain level of tension and anxiety in learners. After all, learners are taking in new knowledge or practising new skills, which might be difficult to them, and hence the chance of failure. To learn effectively in such circumstances, motivation is needed. Humour may provide motivation in that learners find the learning process fun and enjoyable, rather than a dead boring business (Berk, 1996; Kher, Molstad & Donahue, 1999). Even when failure does occur during the learning process, the employment of humour will lessen the
seriousness of its impact, help learners to regain a sense of security and control over the situation and provide the “mental distance” (Morreall, 1997) needed for learners to accept the failure and reduce the stress it may cause.

### 2.4.3. Social benefits of humour

It is a widely known fact that humorous people are often perceived to be more cheerful and more popular (Billig, 2005; Morrison, 2008). As Victor Borge put it, “A smile is the shortest distance between two people”, humorous individuals project a friendly, benign and cooperative image of themselves. A smile or laugh is normally the first sign of acceptance we may give to another person in our first meeting. When humour is shared among a group, the group cohesion is more likely to improve (Senior, 2001) and group members may be more tolerant and open to others’ ideas (Morreall, 1997; Tamblyn, 2003). Laughing together is an enjoyable experience; and since emotions are often associated with human experiences, sharing humour will leave members of a group with positive emotions towards fellow members and towards the group itself. People with a sense of humour are also imaginative and flexible in their outlook, which makes them more open to different views and suggestions. Humour can also diffuse tense situations or help express criticism in a less serious and threatening way (Axtell, 1998; Morreall, 1997). Morreall (1997) also listed various situations in which humour may provide a helping hand: announcing bad news, apologising, handling unreasonable complaints, commanding and warning, evaluating and criticising, handling conflicts, and much more.

In summary, research across different disciplines has shown humour to benefit one’s body, mind, and relationships. The above discussion highlights the physiological, psychological and social benefits of humour, and provides a good rationale for the study of humour in the classroom.
2.5. **Humour in education**

The research on humour and its use as a tool in the teaching-learning process is more limited than what has been done in the physiological and psychological fields, probably due to what Morrison (2008) calls ‘the humour paradox’: we ‘claim to place a high value on humour, but the reality is that our fears keep us from initiating and sustaining humour practice’ (p.73). These fears, well-founded or not, come from the conventional division of human activities into work and play, with learning seen as formal and serious, while humour – as a form of play – labelled childish and frivolous (Hill, 1993; Morreall, 1983; Zillmann & Bryant, 1983). Combining this with the common (mis)belief that certain people are born humorous and only comedians can use humour effectively provides an explanation for educators’ reluctance in, even resistance to, using or accepting humour in an educational setting. There are fears of: inadequacy, looking silly or unprofessional, being made fun of, loss of control, and loss of study time (Morrison, 2008; Tamblyn, 2003). Given that creating and enjoying humour often requires a multidimensional, sometimes even unconventional, view of the world and of people, Morreall (1983) is reasonable to note that ‘a teacher who integrates humour into the learning experience...will have to put more effort into teaching.’ (p.98) Teaching, to such a teacher, will no longer merely be the transmission of information and skills in a predefined and predictable manner. A lesson incorporating flexibility, and to some extent unpredictability, is quite unacceptable, or even threatening to many a teacher.

Despite this unfriendly view of humour, a number of researchers have looked into the potential of humour in education and reported positive results. Some of these results come from speculations, anecdotes, or personal experience (Bell, 2009; Bruner, 2002; Garner, 2005; Kher, Molstad & Donahue, 1999; Minchew, 2001; Minchew & Hopper, 2008; Powell & Andresen, 1985; Wang & Wang, 2006).
From the findings of empirical studies, the benefits humour may bring about in an educational context can be grouped into either (a) direct, i.e. humour helps increase students’ comprehension or retention of information, or (b) indirect, i.e. humour contributes to the formation of an environment conducive to learning.

2.5.1. **Direct benefits of humour in education**

There has been some discussion in the literature on the benefits of humour to classroom learning. The direct benefits of humour include: improved retention of information (Garner, 2006; Kaplan & Pascoe, 1977), better understanding of materials (Lucas, 2005) and increased student performance (Berk, 1996; Ziv, 1988).

Garner (2006) studied two groups of undergraduate students, randomly assigned into a humour condition group and a control condition group (42 and 52 participants respectively). Both groups watched a video on the topic of research methods and statistics presented by the same instructor. However, the humour group watched a version of the lecture in which a humorous story, example, or metaphor was inserted at the beginning and at certain points during the lecture. The results showed that the humour group had higher ratings for the item on their overall opinion of the lesson and could recall and retain more information regarding the topic.

In Kaplan & Pascoe’s (1977) study, 508 undergraduate students viewed one of four versions of video lectures (serious, concept humour, non-concept humour, or mixed humour). After viewing, they were asked to rate the speaker and the lecture on the impression left on the participants. The students were also tested on the concepts presented in the lecture, immediately after viewing and again six weeks later. The immediate following test showed no difference in student performance on humour items. By comparison, there were differences in
performance on non-humour items in the same test. However, the post-test saw better performance on humour items, suggesting significantly greater retention of concept humour information among subjects who had been exposed to humorous examples. This indicated the impact of humour on the retention of information presented in a humorous way, especially when the concept information is reviewed and consolidated in preparing for a test.

Desberg et al. (1981), using the same tool of video lectures in four formats (humour related to items to be tested, humour unrelated to items to be tested, no humour/nonrepetition, and repetition of the concepts) with 100 undergraduate students, found similar results, namely that under some conditions, retention of information was facilitated by the use of humour. The conditions in their study referred to the joke questions in the tests given to students (in contrast to the non-joke questions in the same tests). The results from these joke questions showed that the related humour lecture facilitated retention information significantly more than both the unrelated humour and the nonrepetition control lectures.

In another study, Lucas (2005) used puns to ignite dialogues among ESL learners. It was found that in trying to understand the puns, the learners focused on language forms and their understanding of the puns was improved both at the end of the dialogues compared with at the beginning, and one day later compared to immediately after the dialogues. Ziv (1988) compared test results from two groups of undergraduate students in a one-semester course taught by either a teacher using relevant humour in a well-planned and well-trained manner or, one not using humour. It was found that the group learning with humour achieved higher test results. Berk (1996) had a more indirect way to assess the effects of humour: using students’ responses to questionnaires. After attending a statistics course in which various strategies for using humour were employed, undergraduate and graduate students were asked to rate the effectiveness of the
strategies. Among other positive results, the “Perform Your Best” subscale received consistently high ratings of “Very Effective” to “Extremely Effective” during the three years of the study, in both levels of students. This finding suggests that students exposed to the use of humour during their learning achieved better performance.

However, not all studies point to the positive effects of humour in teaching and learning. Fisher (1997), for example, showed two versions of a 15-minute taped general astronomy show containing 20 concepts to two groups of visitors at a planetarium. The humorous version presented 10 out of the 20 concepts with humorous inserts. The test afterwards showed that the visitors who saw the humorous version had less retention of the material and scored lower on the test than those who saw the nonhumorous version. This finding may act as a warning for educators wishing to use humour, that there are limitations to the dose of humour to be used or the humour may turn into a distraction. Fisher (1997) himself admitted that ‘the pacing of humour in the present project was even faster than 100 seconds. This pace could have been too fast, the visitors exposed to humour too often’ (p.711). To avoid this ‘too often’ occurrence of humour, one may consider following the recommendation from Ziv’s (1988) study. Ziv suggests that the “optimal dose” of humour (p.13) is three to four instances per hour which, interestingly, is similar to the mean number of jokes per lecture of the teachers in Bryant et al.’s (1980) study. This figure is compared with the findings in this research (see Chapter 6).

In summary, most studies advocate the direct benefits of humour in education, except one that warns of the need to calculate the amount and frequency of humour incorporated into teaching. The next section reviews research which has discussed the indirect benefits of humour in education.
2.5.2. **Indirect benefits of humour in education**

The greater part of research into humour in education concerns its indirect benefits. Researchers following this direction have found that humour can: increase teacher immediacy and lessen psychological distance between teachers and students (Gorham, 1988; Gorham & Christophel, 1990), lower students’ affective filters (Ageli, n.d.; Maurice, 1988), create a safer, more open classroom environment (Askildson, 2005; MacAulay, 2009; Neuliep, 1991; Senior, 2001; White, 2001; Ziv, 1979), and lead to better ratings of teachers or teaching (Bryant, Crane, Comisky & Zillmann, 1980; Brown, Tomlin & Fortson, 1996; Garner, 2006; Lowman, 1994; Tamborini & Zillmann, 1981; Ziv, 1979). These studies have mainly used rating or frequency scales and questionnaires completed by students to assess the effects of humour in classroom settings.

White (2001) studied how university teachers used humour and how students perceived such use of humour by mailing questionnaires to 128 university teachers and 206 university students. Teachers were asked to indicate their levels of agreement to statements about the purposes of a teacher’s use of humour in class. Students were asked to do the same, plus to give one example of how a teacher used humour effectively. The results showed that most teachers employed humour to relieve stress, to gain attention, and to create a healthy learning environment. Students also agreed that these were the most frequent purposes of humour used by their teachers. Less agreement was reported between teachers and students on the uses of humour to motivate, provoke thinking or reinforce knowledge. These uses were perceived or widely intended by teachers, but the percentage of students who had the same perceptions was significantly lower than that of teachers. The out-of-bound uses of humour, indicated by both teachers and students, were to embarrass or intimidate students, and to retaliate against students. This is one of the few
studies which combined teachers’ and students’ perceptions on humour, but the context was mainstream education.

Also considering the effects of teachers’ use of humour in the classroom, Gorham (1988) and Gorham & Christophel (1990) found that a number of teachers’ immediacy behaviours (with the use of humour being a verbal one) could significantly lessen the teacher-student psychological distance, making teachers appear more approachable and “human” to students, and thus leading to conditions more conducive to learning. Gorham (1988) asked 387 undergraduate students to complete a questionnaire to describe the frequency of their teacher’s behaviours. These were called ‘immediacy behaviour items’ and included both verbal items (e.g. ‘addresses students by name’ or ‘criticises or points out faults in students’ work, action or comments’) and nonverbal items (e.g. ‘sits behind desk while teaching’ or ‘has a very relaxed body position while talking to the class’). These items were considered to be either immediate, i.e. making teachers appear closer to students, or nonimmediate, i.e. broadening the gap between teachers and students. The results indicated substantial relationships between immediacy and learning (both affective learning and perceptions of cognitive learning). Gorham (1988) reported that ‘the teacher’s use of humour in class appears to be of particular importance’ (p.47), since humour acts as a way of ‘enhancing their “humanness”’ (p.52). Gorham & Christophel’s (1990) study expanded on the results of the previous study by asking ‘Does the relationship between amount and/ or type of humour and student learning vary depending on the overall immediacy of the teacher?’ The first phase of this study was similar to the 1988 study in that 206 students were asked to complete a questionnaire to report their teacher’s immediacy behaviour. In the second phase, the students observed the teacher they had reported on and recorded the teacher’s use of humour over five class meetings. The results showed that the more immediate teachers did use more humour and did
engender more learning, and the most desirable learning outcomes were associated with the quality as much as the quantity of humour used in conjunction with other immediacy behaviours. Gorham & Christophel (1990) also noted that their measure of humour use was that of students’ perceptions of teachers’ humour, and suspected that these students ‘expended less effort looking for humour than do trained coders who are specifically aware of what kinds of incidents they are looking for’ (p.58): this was thought to lead to ‘the number of humorous incidents per class [being] lower than has been indicated in previous research’ (p.58). In the present study, there was a chance to test this suspicion, as students’ perceptions of teachers’ use of humour were complemented with teachers’ views of their own humour use and the researcher-observer’s recording through classroom observations.

Gorham & Christophel’s findings are in agreement with those of Askildson’s (2005) study, which included teachers’ perceptions of humour usage and its effects as well, and those of Senior (2001) in which teachers considered humour and its responsiveness not only to be an indicator of class cohesion, but also of “the very teachability” (p.47) of their classes. Senior found in her study that all eight teachers of English ‘used a range of humorous techniques to create friendly, accepting classroom atmospheres which paved the way for the development of class cohesion’ (p.49) from the beginning of their classes. Not only this, these teachers went on to encourage students to join in and create laughter on their own and facilitate the development of a common class culture through shared jokes and understandings. In this way, the class solidarity was affirmed through group laughter, and there was an understanding that the teachers valued laughter and welcomed its presence in class. Considering that in Senior’s study all teachers were native speakers of English, while all students were non-native speakers of English with the proficiency ranging from beginners
to advanced, it is clear that humour can be employed effectively even across cultures, languages and levels of language competency.

Neuliep’s (1991) study also advocated the benefits of humour in creating a safer, more open classroom environment. Responding to a questionnaire mailed to them by Neuliep, 388 high school teachers believed the most frequent reasons for using humour in class were: a way of putting students at ease, an attention-getter, a way of showing that the teacher is human, a way to keep the class less formal, and a way to make learning more fun (p.354). In short, these teachers viewed humour as a strategy to facilitate learning.

Investigating both teachers’ and students’ perceptions of teachers’ sense of humour, Ziv (1979) asked 46 junior high school teachers to comment on their teacher participants’ sense of humour, and complete a questionnaire in order to show their attitudes towards students. Finally, the students of these 46 teachers were asked to complete a questionnaire on classroom social climate, with items related to teachers’ behaviour and students’ feelings towards the classes. The results showed that a teacher’s sense of humour was positively and significantly related to positive teachers’ characteristics and attitudes, as well as a ‘positive’ classroom atmosphere as perceived by their students. Dornyei & Murphey (2003) considered this positive classroom atmosphere an essential factor for a class to function effectively as a group, rather than just a collection of separated individuals. In this sense, a positive teacher-student rapport is certainly of great value, not only to the teacher but also to the class as a group. In Goodman’s (1983) words, ‘laughter and learning can go hand-in-hand, and in many cases, laughter can liberate learning’ (p.4). When the class as a group is motivated by the laughter caused as a result of the teacher’s humour, it is more likely that learning will occur more easily and smoothly than it would have otherwise.
The effects of humour on students’ evaluation of teachers’ characteristics were also revealed in Bryant et al.’s (1980) and Tamborini & Zillmann’s (1981) studies. In Bryant et al.’s (1980) study, 70 undergraduate students tape-recorded one day’s presentation in 70 undergraduate courses, taught by 70 teachers. The students then listened to their recording and transcribed the segments of the presentation that appeared to have been intended to be funny. At the end of the recorded presentation the students also completed a questionnaire in which they evaluated the teachers in terms of 14 rating scales. After that, the humour instances were subjected to content analysis by the researchers. The detailed description of this analysis has been mentioned in 2.3.2. The analysis of teacher evaluation items by students came up with three independent factors: appeal, competence, and delivery. The appeal factor was comprised of the items “entertaining”, “witty”, “appealing”, and “dynamism.” The competence factor included the items “informative”, “informed”, and “intelligence.” The delivery factor included “voice quality”, “speaking ability”, and “personable.” The results showed significant positive correlations between teachers’ uses of humour and students’ evaluations of their teachers. Regarding the types of humour used, it is interesting to note that in Tamborini & Zillmann’s (1981) study, the use of self-disparaging humour led to higher ratings of appeal when teachers and students were of the same sex, while the use of sexual humour led to higher ratings of appeal when teachers and students were of opposite sex. In this study, 100 undergraduate students listened to a taped lecture in one of four formats (no humour, sexual humour, other-disparaging humour, and self-disparaging humour). They then indicated their perceptions of the lecturer on the tape by filling in a form containing 23 bipolar adjectival scales. The findings showed the correlations between the use of certain humour types and teachers’ appeal, but there were no differences in students’ evaluations of teachers’ intelligence (similar to the factor of ‘competence’ in Bryant et al.’s (1980) study) regardless of lecture format.
The enhanced perception of teachers’ competence, appeal, delivery or effectiveness, in turn resulted in higher student ratings of: the lessons, the courses and/or the teachers (Garner, 2006; Wanzer & Frymier, 1999); students’ choices of their ‘best’ and ‘worst’ teachers (Brown, Tomlin & Fortson, 1996); or, even became one of the descriptors for excellence in teaching (Lowman, 1994). Wanzer & Frymier (1999) asked 314 university students to report on 313 teachers by completing a questionnaire about the teachers’ Humour Orientation (HO), Nonverbal Immediacy, Socio-Communicative Style and the students’ level of learning with these teachers. They found that teacher HO was positively associated with affective learning and with learning indicators. Students also noted that they had greater affect for the teacher and course, and learned more from teachers perceived as high HO’s. Also, Gorham & Christophel's (1990) findings reported previously (see p.35) were confirmed when students viewed high HO teachers as being more immediate than their low HO counterparts. In Brown et al.’s (1996) study of 133 undergraduate education students, besides the “instructor’s variety of teaching methods”, the variable of “instructor’s sense of humour and the class was enjoyable” were at the top of students’ choices when describing their ‘best’ teachers. Each of these variables accounted for one-third of the responses. Although not as prevalent as the presence of teachers’ sense of humour in variables for the ‘best’ teachers, the lack of teachers’ sense of humour also featured in students’ description of their ‘worst’ teachers. Employing a different method, Lowman (1994) studied over 500 nomination letters for the undergraduate teaching awards at a university in order to identify the descriptors frequently used to describe excellence in teaching. It was found that 39 descriptors appeared at least 10 times. These were then subjected to analysis so that Lowman suggested two dimensions of teaching effectiveness: the intellectual excitement dimension and the interpersonal dimension, which was actually comprised of interpersonal rapport and motivational skills. He reported that in the intellectual excitement dimension, there appeared descriptors
such as ‘humorous’ and ‘fun’, in which ‘humorous’ was the fourth most frequently occurring descriptor, behind ‘enthusiastic’, ‘knowledgeable’, and ‘inspiring’. Within the interpersonal dimension, the descriptors ‘friendly’, ‘accessible’, and ‘approachable’ (at positions 4, 5, and 6 respectively) were reminiscent of the ‘immediate teachers’ in other studies (Gorham, 1988; Gorham & Christophel, 1990) who could lessen the psychological distance between them and the students. Lowman’s (1994) findings suggest that teachers’ use of humour and its effects could play a major role in a student’s appreciation of a teacher, even in the long term.

However, it was noted by Bryant et al. (1980) that gender differences might exist in the way students perceive a teacher using humour. Their research showed that male teachers using humour received higher evaluations from students, while their female colleagues generally received lower evaluation scores. Bryant et al. (1980) suggested this phenomenon might be due to females’ lack of experience in the use of humour, females’ perception of humour as an element of the “masculine world”, or sex stereotyping by the students. This finding was contrary to that of Gorham & Christophel (1990), who found that female teachers’ uses of humour did not appear to have a negative effect. Gender differences in teachers’ use of humour may be a topic of interest for further research on humour in education. The inclusion of the gender factor was not possible as part of this research as doing so would widen the scope of this study, making it impractical for the time and budget frame of a PhD study.

Attractive as it may be, humour is not to be used without moderation and consideration. Although empirical studies on negative effects of humour seem to be lacking, there are opinions provided by several authors on the downside of humour. Downs, Javidi, & Nussbaum (1988) warned that ‘too much humour or self-disclosure is inappropriate and moderate amounts are usually preferred’ (p.139). Certain types of humour and content are also to be avoided in an
educational setting. These include sarcastic, aggressive or offensive humour (Berk, 1996; Wallinger, 1997); the deliberate use of humour to humiliate, belittle, or put-down others (Berk, 2007; Moran, 2007; Powell & Andresen, 1985); ridicule, satire, cynicism, sexual, ethnic, racial, or religious humour (Korobkin, 1988). Humour works best when it is related to the content being taught, as advised by Berk (1996), Bryant, Comisky & Zillmann (1979), Wanzer et al. (2006), White (2001) and Ziv (1988).

The review of research in this section has revealed that there are positive effects of humour in education. The direct benefits of humour include improved retention of information, better understanding of materials, and increased student performance. The indirect benefits of humour include lessened distance between teachers and students, a more open classroom environment, lowered students’ affective filters, and better students’ ratings of teachers and/or teaching. Although some authors have warned against the possible negative effects of humour, such as its dividing, rather than uniting, social function (e.g. in put-downs or ethnic humour) (Meyer, 2000), or the distraction of content-irrelevant humour in a classroom setting (Steele, 1998; Sudol, 1981), it is evident that, when used judiciously and appropriately, humour can contribute much to learning itself, or to an environment conducive to learning.

2.6. **The (virtually) missing link in a chain – humour in EFL classes**

The vast majority of research that has been done so far on humour in education focuses on mainstream education. There is an astonishing paucity of studies dealing with the language class, despite Medgyes’s (2001, p.111) assertion that ‘the English lesson is an ideal arena to trigger laughter...Far more so than any other lesson.’ This paucity may be attributed to the unique nature of a language
class: whereas such subjects as history, statistics or research methods have their subject matter as the content for which language is the transportation means, language itself is both the content and the means in a language class. Moreover, though language classes touch matters from other subjects (e.g. a reading text on World War II, or a lecture on how the brain works), these matters are but ‘an excuse to illustrate grammar and provide practice in its use’ (Medgyes, 2001, p.111). Therefore, the issue of content-relevant versus content-irrelevant humour seems not to exist in language classes, since what students need to absorb and retain is not the content of a reading text or a conversation, but the language knowledge and skills within such materials.

The lack of research on humour in language classes may contribute to the void of humorous materials for language courses. Although Harmer (2007) and Cook (2000) acknowledge that play is an important factor in language learning, the fact remains that, compared with 40 or 50 years ago, the fun element is virtually absent from English coursebooks today (Medgyes, 2001).

One may point to the much-advised and popular communicative activities and games in Communicative Language Teaching to argue that it is not necessary to include humour to have fun in a language class. However, it is worth noting Medgyes’s (2001, p.112) observation that when learning a language, interactions, messages, and communication needs that teachers and students share are not real, but ‘fake’. This kind of language, as Medgyes noted, is ‘especially false when teachers and learners share the same native language’. Then, there is the danger of communicative activities turning into what Rinvolucri (1999, p.195) has warned are ‘semi-communicative exercises’. Nonetheless, humour, especially spontaneous humour, is not simulated, but constitutes genuine communicative instances in which teachers and students really use a language. These humorous instances are exactly what Cook (1997) calls ‘language for enjoyment, for the self, for its own sake’ (p. 230) and Trachtenberg
(1979) calls ‘a real speech event’ which ‘is created, and not simulated’ (p.93). Then, humour serves as the medium for encountering and using a foreign language in a most authentic way. Moreover, while competitive games may divide students (Young, 1991) and the enjoyment may lie with winners only, humour can unite people in sharing enjoyable experiences (Morrison, 2008; Tamblyn, 2003), shortening the distance among them with a sense of closeness.

Therefore, a teacher’s use of humour in an EFL class may include forms, content, and strategies different from those in a mainstream education one, and may serve different purposes. Unlike ‘subject teachers’, who nearly always share the mother tongue, the cultural background, and the social knowledge with their students, an EFL teacher employing humour must consider not only its relevance or appropriateness, but also whether it suits their students’ level of English proficiency so that they can enjoy it. This ‘double requirement’ of EFL humour promises worthwhile investigation. Moreover, a non-native EFL teacher, whose mother tongue is not English and who does not come from a Western culture, may find this note from Forman (2011) worthy of consideration: ‘there is in some ways a greater freedom of role available to expatriate native speakers [regarding their use of humour in EFL classes]’ (p.560). Forman was observing an Anglo-Australian teacher of English named “Ajarn Murray” in a Thai EFL classroom, who ‘signalled through his discursive positioning that fun could be made both of the students and of the educational topic/ task’ and ‘initiated play, or encouraged students to play further and […] determined when play should revert to ‘work’’ (p.560). The activities of this teacher would be very common in a Western context, like in Senior’s (2001) study of eight teachers of English in Australia, but in an Asian context, they may face quite different views, as Forman himself admitted, ‘Ajarn Murray’s classroom was unusual’. Bearing in mind that there is generally less tolerance towards humour in teaching in Asian countries and that even a native teacher’s humorous language play in an EFL classroom was
unusual, a non-native EFL teacher may find it challenging to employ humour in their teaching.

From the quite limited number of studies on the use of humour in language learning it can be seen that, besides the benefits mentioned in research in other fields of education, there have been few studies on the use of humour in ESL/EFL contexts. From these few it has been found that humour helps in breaking down the affective barriers in students (Maurice, 1988) and thus increasing motivation, and reducing social distance between teacher and student (Forman, 2011). Forman (2011) observed one EFL class of 31 students in Thailand taught by an Anglo-Australian who was also an expert speaker of Thai and had been living in Thailand for over ten years. The teacher’s use of humorous language play was reported to have created ‘a warm, responsive atmosphere in this lesson, with considerable smiling and laughter in evidence’ (p.560). The students’ desire and effort to participate was reported to be high, ‘quite different from the verbal reticence [...] often commented upon in EFL contexts’ (p.561), although their L2 production ability was limited. The humour used was found to have the effect of reducing the particular anxiety typical of foreign language learning, and increasing students’ engagement in the learning process including, but not limited to, ‘a change in teacher and student roles; a reducing of social distance; a freeing-up of who could speak, and in what ways’ (p.561).

More importantly for language learning, it has been shown that humour is able to provide cognitive stimulus (Forman, 2011), raise students’ awareness of language forms (Lucas, 2005), and/or encourage the use of linguistic skills in a creative manner (Powell & Andresen, 1985). When discussing their opinions on the more specific effects of humour on language teaching and learning, writers such as Berwald (1992), Deneire (1995) and Trachtenberg (1979) suggest that humour might be of value in developing vocabulary, fluency, and understanding
of sociolinguistic rules and L2 cultural values. However, it should be noted here that these opinions are not based on empirical research.

In a rare empirical study about the effects of humour on language learning in an EFL context, Blyth & Ohyama (2011) used a list of 60 riddles with 148 university students of English. A pre-test and a post-test in the forms of Yes/ No and Multiple choice questions containing vocabulary items from the glossaries for the riddles were given to the students to judge their vocabulary acquisition. After the pre-test, students participated in the riddle-telling activity, which was a question-and-answer speaking task undertaken in pairs. One student showed his/her partner the glossary for a riddle, and after the partner was familiar with the vocabulary, told him/her the riddle. After a riddle had been told and understood, the two students switched roles. Results of the post-test showed improved vocabulary knowledge, improved vocabulary confidence and increased appreciation of humour among students.

While humour is one of the strategies to lower learner anxiety, which has been identified as one facilitating condition for learning to occur and to be successful, the study reported here was an empirical one, conducted in a non-Western context where English was neither L1 nor L2, but a foreign language. Such a context for the use of humour also is not one well informed by research findings. It is clear that for language teachers to have a more established theoretical ground base to their use of humour in the classroom and to justify that use, more empirical studies into teachers’ use of humour in foreign language classes are needed.
2.7. **Chapter summary**

This chapter reviewed the existing literature regarding humour: it covered definitions, theories of humour mechanisms, and the benefits of humour in various fields and aspects of life. The previous research on humour in education, and especially in foreign language teaching, which is the topic in question for the present study, was also reviewed and discussed.

In this thesis, humour is defined as conscious teacher-initiated attempts to stimulate laughter or amusement. These attempts may come from the materials, the lesson content or classroom interactions and, would typically result in laughter or a smile. Humour is classified according to its types (joke, riddle, pun, funny story, humorous comment, visual humour, physical humour, and others) and whether it is prepared or spontaneous.

The review of the literature reveals that humour has physiological, psychological, and social benefits. In education in particular, the research literature as well as the opinions of writers suggest that humour has direct and indirect benefits to learning. The direct benefits include better understanding and information recall, and increased student performance. The indirect benefits include a safer and more open classroom environment, lowered students’ affective filters, closer teacher-student relationship, and better students’ ratings of teacher/teaching.

It was noted that research into the effects of humour in EFL contexts is lacking, although it has been confirmed by research that humorous instances can provide a language class with genuine opportunities to use a language in a fear-free manner. The few studies on humour in an EFL context show that there was one more factor for language teachers to consider when using humour, namely the suitability of humour to students’ levels of English. Nevertheless, considering that language learners may encounter high levels of anxiety, the benefits of humour
in language learning contexts as reported in the literature – providing cognitive stimulus, raising students’ awareness of language forms, encouraging the use of linguistic skills in a creative manner, etc. – suggest that humour is a useful strategy to aid language learning and teaching.

This study adds to the limited number of studies on humour in EFL contexts both by following and improving on the ways research has been conducted previously. Previous research has mostly investigated either teachers’ reasons for using humour or students’ perceptions of specific teacher’s use of humour in the classroom. In a few previous studies, in both mainstream education and ESL/EFL contexts, it has been shown that teachers’ self-report on the purposes of their humour use, the frequency of it, and/or the effects of that use may differ from the purposes, frequency and effects perceived by students or an outsider (e.g. a researcher). To gain a broad perspective, this study explores both teachers’ and students’ perception of the roles of classroom humour in general; it does not only focus on a specific teacher’s use of humour. The effectiveness of humour use, as seen by teachers, is also compared with how students respond to that use, thus offering an insight into the possible consensus or mismatch between the two.

In terms of research tools, most previous research has employed questionnaires and rating scales to calculate the level of agreement among participants in regards to certain statements or, to obtain the participants’ perceptions and/or impressions of other subjects. Although this is an economical way to collect data from a large sample, and the results calculated exactly and presented clearly in the quantitative fashion, the use of questionnaires and rating scales only risks missing out on the depth of the options and the varied aspects of life embodied in participants’ responses. To complement this, and to ‘get the story behind the numbers’, this study, besides using a questionnaire with student participants,
employed interviews in an effort to hear more detailed stories from participants regarding the topic of humour, which are very likely to be diverse and personal.

Some previous studies used recordings of classroom presentations as a source of data on humour. This study follows the same practice to make sure that the researcher-observer’s field notes taken during classroom observations had both a back-up and a source of reference when needed. However, virtually all studies that have used recordings employed only tape-recording. Since humour in this study includes physical and visual humour as well as spoken, and the indicators of amusement will likely be nonverbal and/or inaudible (e.g. bodily gestures or movement) as well as laughter, video recording was deemed necessary to capture all instances and aspects of humour and reactions to it in class.

The next chapter presents the research design, the data collection methods and also the analysis instruments used in this study.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

3.1. Introduction

Chapter 2 reviews the literature related to humour and its use in education. From the review, it is obvious that the use of humour in education, especially in foreign language teaching, is still relatively unexplored territory. Because it is under-researched, there is little help available for any doubts about the use of humour in education, and the efforts of teachers wishing to use it are hindered, due to the lack of a firm theoretical foundation. This situation calls for more research to be undertaken into humour and its use in education in general, and in foreign language teaching in particular. Such, then, is the inspiration for this research.

This chapter presents the theoretical framework and the ‘mixed methods’ nature of the research reported here. It continues with the rationale and description of data collection methods used in the research, and then a discussion of the issues relating to these methods, including the matters of validity and reliability. The chapter ends with a description of research participants and the process of data analysis and management.
3.2. **Quantitative and qualitative aspects – the mixed methods nature of the research**

In previous studies of students’ attitudes towards teachers’ humour in education and also specifically in ESL/EFL contexts, the most commonly used method was the questionnaire. The study reported here followed that practice, since it was an economical way to obtain opinions from a large number of respondents (Fowler, 2009). In this study, to generate a general picture of students’ attitudes towards their teachers’ use of humour in the classroom, a sufficiently large number of students were needed. Moreover, these participants needed to include both male and female students of different years, in different institutions, faculties, programs and classes. Including respondents with such heterogeneous backgrounds meant respondents were able to provide views of the phenomenon of interest from different angles. Since their opinions could be quantified, and the number of participants made it impractical to carry out individual interviews, this part of the data was obtained through a questionnaire.

Because of the complex nature of the phenomenon of humour, it would have been virtually impossible to record people’s experiences with it and feelings towards it using figures, tables or scales only. Actual behaviour responses and personal accounts can be expected to yield more of the type of information needed, especially the unique nuances from each participant that no questionnaire could have captured (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). The research also employed the qualitative approach to obtain deep insights into what the participants had to say.

The use of both quantitative and qualitative methods assisted the researcher to see the research matters from different angles, so that a deeper understanding of the topic could be obtained. The triangulation of data that were obtained through
different methods also increased the reliability of the findings (Allwright & Bailey, 1991; McDonough & McDonough, 1997; Silverman & Marvasti, 2008).

Since the ultimate purpose of the study was to investigate the usefulness of humour for teaching in EFL contexts, the research adopted Feilzer’s (2010) view that research should no longer aim to most accurately represent reality but, rather to be useful, to ‘aim at utility for us’ (Feilzer, 2010, p.8). In other words, the research design was consistent with beliefs held by pragmatists, who ‘do not ‘care’ which methods they use as long as the methods chosen have the potential of answering what it is one wants to know’ (Feilzer, 2010, p.14). Such a view allows the researcher to be free of mental and practical constraints imposed by the ‘forced choice dichotomy between postpositivism and constructivism’ (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007, p.27).

Based on these considerations, the research had a mixed methods design (Bryman, 2008; Creswell, 2008a, 2008b; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2003). According to Creswell and Plano Clark (2011, p.5), mixed methods research ‘involves philosophical assumptions that guide the direction of the collection and analysis and the mixture of qualitative and quantitative approaches in many phases of the research process’ and ‘focuses on collecting, analysing, and mixing both quantitative and qualitative data in a single study.’ Research employing mixed methods is becoming more and more popular (Allwright & Bailey, 1991; Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011, Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2003), since different methods may complement one another, bringing more rigour to the research (Morse, 2003; Punch, 2009; Silverman & Marvasti, 2008; Wiersma & Jurs, 2008).

There are many mixed methods research designs: they differ on whether quantitative and qualitative data collection methods are employed at the same time or sequentially, and on whether one method is dominant or there is an equal importance between quantitative and qualitative aspects of the research.
(Creswell, 2008b). Figure 3.1 on the next page shows a visual model of the research design employed in this study.
In this research, the quantitative and qualitative data were collected at the same time, with the purposes of comparing results and thus painting a more detailed picture. More weighting was given to the qualitative data than the quantitative data in order to explore as fully as possible the depth of participants’ perceptions and practices. Together these features made this research belong to the
category of concurrent triangulation design (Creswell et al., 2003; Creswell, 2008b; Punch, 2009). This is the most common type of mixed methods research design: it enables the researcher to compare the findings obtained from two or more methods, and analyse the similarities or discrepancies between them (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011; Creswell, 2008b; Thurmond, 2001).

The quantitative part of this research comprised a cross-sectional survey design (Bryman, 2008; Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011; Creswell, 2008b, Wiersma & Jurs, 2008): data were collected once from many participants. This design was appropriate because the researcher had only limited time in the field to collect data. It was also the appropriate design to use for identifying the opinions among a large number of respondents at the time the research was conducted. This was part of the answer to one research question.

To investigate participants’ behaviour and beliefs, the qualitative part of this research employed the methods of observation and interview. These methods were expected to help the researcher to ‘better understand human behaviour and experience’ (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p.43). Using these two methods together, the researcher could compare data from each of them, for example how different teachers’ beliefs were reflected or not in their classroom practices.

3.3. Data collection methods

3.3.1. Questionnaires

Using the questionnaire is a popular practice nowadays to obtain opinions from a large number of respondents about a certain topic (Fowler, 2009; McDonough & McDonough, 1997). The main advantages of this method include its practicality,
the scale on which it can be used, and the high levels of confidentiality and anonymity that are possible.

Questionnaires can be distributed in large numbers, over large areas, and to varied groups of respondents. It is more economical to use questionnaires, compared with doing interviews, when the number of subjects is large for instance (Bryman, 2008; Walliman, 2011). Moreover, the respondents usually have an option about whether to reveal their personal information or not, thus avoiding the risk of exposing their identities. Responses in a questionnaire are also easier to quantify and process with the aid of certain software, making it possible for the researcher(s) to see and present results in a quick and conspicuous way.

A variety of items may appear in a questionnaire, ranging from closed questions to open questions, from dichotomous to multi-option selection items, and Likert-scale items with various numbers of points along the continuum (Brown, 2000; Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). The closed questions or selection items yield data that are easier to quantify, compare, and classify, since the number of choices is limited and predetermined (Creswell, 2008a, Wiersma & Jurs, 2008), whereas the open questions reserve more space for respondents to express themselves ‘in their own terms’ (Brown, 2000; Punch, 2009). The advantage of using open questions, then, is that the researcher may obtain depth in responses, and the responses may include the ideas or categories that predetermined classifications may have overlooked. However, it is also possible that the responses obtained are not as detailed as expected by the researcher. When the responses are detailed, they are more difficult to quantify, compare, and classify. To balance the advantages and disadvantages of the two kinds of questions, an “Other – Please specify” option was added to closed questions or selection items with a certain number of predetermined options (Brown, 2000).
A caution for researchers using questionnaires for data collection to note is that the questions must be clear, consistent, and genuine (Creswell, 2008a; Walliman, 2011). The respondents must be able to understand the questions as they are intended by the question writer; moreover, the questions should mean the same to different respondents, and the questions should not lead or invite the respondents into a certain response or option (Brown, 2000; Fowler, 2009), otherwise the responses obtained will not be an accurate representation of the respondents’ opinions. Researchers are also warned against using “double-barrelled” questions, i.e. questions containing more than one idea, which can confuse the respondents (Brown, 2000; Fowler, 2009).

Scale items, where respondents mark their choices along a continuum, may produce many responses around the middle of the scale. Moreover, some people are more likely to agree than disagree when responding to agree-disagree items (Fowler, 2009, p.104). In this research, the questionnaire contained no open-ended questions, the researcher was present while students filled in the questionnaire to provide explanations and clarifications should they be required, and the items were in the form of statements, rather than questions such as ‘Do you agree that...?’ or ‘Do you disagree that...?’ All these features helped to minimize the possible problems associated with using questionnaires in research.

The actual questionnaire used in this research (see Appendix 3) was adapted from Morrison (2008) and Askildson (2005). Morrison (2008) suggested the Humor Belief Inventory for teachers to identify their own belief of humour and its effects in classroom teaching, while Askildson’s (2005) study employed two versions of a questionnaire (for teachers and students) regarding their perceptions of humour usage and effects in L2 classrooms. Both the instruments aim at identifying the respondents’ perceptions of humour and its effects in education, but L2 teaching specifically. This study used the adapted
questionnaire from these two sources to seek the answer for the research question No.2 (What are university EFL teachers' and students' perceptions of the role(s) of humour in classroom teaching?). The use of a questionnaire already employed in previous studies increased the validity of the findings of this study.

For this research, teachers’ perceptions of humour and its roles were sought during interviews with the researcher. Therefore, the Humor Belief Inventory was reworded to be used with students, and the questions from the questionnaire (student version) used by Askildson were turned into statements that were incorporated into the Inventory (excluding the overlapping questions/statements). The result was a questionnaire containing 19 statements about humour and teachers’ use of humour in class, seeking students’ responses in the form of a 5-point Likert scale (Vanderstoep & Johnston, 2009). The respondents expressed whether they agree or disagree with a statement by choosing a point on this scale. This was what Creswell (2008a) called ‘attitudinal measure’ (p.161). No personal information was sought; however, at the end of the questionnaire students who consented to participate in follow-up interviews with the researcher could leave their telephone numbers and/or email addresses.

Questionnaires were distributed to students in classes where teachers had agreed to let the researcher observe the lessons. At the beginning or the end of the lessons, 10-15 minutes was reserved for students to complete the questionnaires. This practice guaranteed a high response rate, and since the researcher was present while students completed questionnaires, queries could be answered and explanations could be provided immediately when needed (Walliman, 2011). The explanations most frequently needed were related to the concept of humour and its types, even though the questionnaire contained a brief definition of humour and a classification of several types of humour. It was ensured the researcher did not influence responses in anyway. The researcher
collected the questionnaires after students completed them. In total 162 questionnaires were collected.

3.3.2. Observations

Since the use of humour is a phenomenon occurring in class during the process of teaching and learning, the best way to investigate it is by direct observation, compared to retrospective accounts which are more likely about what the participants think about the use of humour in class. Observations also help to capture the “natural” or “unintentional” use of humour by teachers which they may not always remember, and the instant reactions from students which teachers may not always notice. Field notes and/or recordings of observation sessions can serve as the basis for stimulated recalls during interviews that follow observations. This basis will help the interviewees have a clearer and more accurate view of what actually happened during a session. This practice follows the five stages in an observational study suggested by Silverman (2006).

Observation is a commonly used method to collect data in social sciences (Lichtman, 2010), especially in ethnographic studies. The observer’s role may range from a pure observer, through an observer-participant, to a participant-observer (Angrosino, 2008; Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011; Creswell, 2007 and 2008a). These roles suggest different levels of participation an observer can assume within the community they are observing. Since this research was concerned with what naturally happened within a class, the observer did not participate in classroom activities and interactions, thus assuming the role of a pure observer.

Observations may reveal a lot of what happens in a context. However, there is the concern of reliability, since different observers of the same incident may produce different interpretations (Liamputtong, 2009, p.107). Another possible
problem with observations is the “observer effect”, i.e. when they are aware that they are being observed, participants in a certain context may act differently from what they normally do (Allwright & Bailey, 1991; Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Vanderstoep & Johnston, 2009). In this research, there was only one observer-researcher. However, the researcher’s interpretations of what happened during the observed sessions were verified during the interviews with teachers and students afterwards. The “observer effect” was lessened by the fact that the researcher had already been present in the classes before the “official” observed and recorded session. This practice helped students consider the researcher more like a member of the class than a stranger observing. The explanations and encouragement given by the researcher, and by the teachers, also contributed to making students more comfortable and behave normally during the observed sessions, since they knew that the main focus was their teachers and there would not be any kinds of judgements or assessment of them resulting from the observations.

The researcher contacted teachers from institutions that were to be research sites via email or telephone for their consent to participate in the research, and arrange for observation sessions. It was agreed that 27 out of 30 teacher participants would have their lessons video-recorded; the remaining 3 asked that the researcher use field notes only. With each teacher, there were two separate observation sessions: a “pilot” session and an “official” session one week later. Only the official session was video-recorded. Video recording – which ‘can capture individuals, their voices, movements and mannerisms’ (Basit, 2010, p.134) – was deemed necessary to capture all instances and aspects of humour and reactions to it in class, since humour in this study included physical and visual humour as well as verbal humour, and the indicators of amusement could include nonverbal and/or inaudible ones such as bodily gestures or movement besides laughter.
At the beginning of each observation session, the teacher introduced the researcher to the class. The researcher greeted the class, explained the purposes and focus of the research, and encouraged students to behave as they normally did in an ordinary lesson. The researcher then chose a seat among students so that his recording equipment did not block the view or movement of students, but he, and his camera, could have a good view of the teacher as well. During the lesson, the researcher took notes and controlled the camera to follow the teacher’s actions and movement around the class, or to focus on reactions or activities of certain students or groups of students, without trying to be intrusive.

An observation sheet (see Appendix 4) was used to note the incidents of teachers’ humour and students’ apparent reactions to these incidents. The incidents were grouped into categories of humour. The observation sheet acted as a cue during interviews with teachers and students afterwards. Based on the observation sheet notes, the researcher replayed sections of the recordings to teachers to assist their stimulated recall (McDonough & McDonough, 1997), and to use the incidents as a springboard for discussion of their humour use and students’ reactions to it.

3.3.3. Interviews

3.3.3.1. Interviews as a data collection instrument

The interview is a good way to obtain subjects’ opinions and/or feelings about a certain topic, event or action in a highly personal and detailed level (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009; McDonough & McDonough, 1997; Punch, 2009). The conversational nature of an interview enables the interviewer to adjust the questions, shift the order of questions, omit some questions, or probe more after certain questions right on the spot according to the flow of the interview and the interviewee’s responses, especially in the less structured forms of interviews.
The interviewee can also clarify their points and express themselves more extensively than when completing a questionnaire. Moreover, a face-to-face interview provides the interviewer with valuable opportunities to “read between and beyond an interviewee’s words”: not just what they say, but how they say it, their intonations, facial expressions, or their gestures (Walliman, 2011). By paying proper attention to these signals an interviewer may learn more than simply what an interviewee is telling them; they may also help determine whether to probe more into certain parts of the interview to see what the interviewee truly means or actually wants to say. In this sense, interviews provide richer and more profound responses than any kinds of questionnaires.

An interview can be very structured (mainly used in quantitative studies) or totally unstructured, more often employed in ethnographic studies, or anywhere in between these two extremes (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Lichtman, 2010; Punch, 2009; Roulston, 2010). Like a questionnaire with close questions only, a structured interview uses standardized rubrics across different interviewers and interviewees, ensuring the same questions are asked in the same order, with the minimum explanation and elaboration provided by the interviewer(s) (Fontana & Frey, 2008). This kind of interviews is often accompanied by options for responses. In other words, they can be considered the spoken form of questionnaires that are frequently used in quantitative studies. Therefore, data obtained from these interviews are also easier to classified and compared to data obtained from questionnaires.

Totally different from a structured interview, an unstructured interview contains no predetermined questions or options for responses. It is nearly an open conversation in real life, where participants may talk about anything of their interest (Fontana & Frey, 2008). This kind of interviews is popular in ethnography, where the researcher may engage in a conversation with a community member quite accidentally. The topic of the conversation, then, will
come from the researcher's immersion in the community and the interest of the 'interviewee'. Such an interview may yield surprising insights into a person's identity, experience, or, in general, their life. It can provide good descriptions, but it may be very difficult to compare different interviews and categorize the obtained data, since the number of questions, the order of questions, and the questions themselves are specific for each interview.

To balance these two kinds of interviews, a semi-structured type of interviews is suggested (Bryman, 2008; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). In these interviews, the interviewer does not have to follow suit a number of set questions in a rigid order. Instead, a number of core questions or themes are suggested, and are to be covered during the interviews. However, the interviewer may provide explanation, elaborate on a specific question, or ask additional questions to help the interviewee to understand fully and answer the questions adequately. Based on the response to a certain question, the interviewer may decide to investigate deeper into a matter by asking probe questions (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007), seeking more information or more detailed response from the interviewee on a point of interest. The order of the core questions is also not predetermined, but it depends on the flow of the interview. This kind of interviews guarantees the coverage of the main questions the interviewer is seeking answers for, thus ensuring that the data needed are collected, and can be used for comparison and categorization. At the same time, these interviews have a certain amount of built-in flexibility, enabling the interviewer to assist the interviewee when necessary, and to follow interesting responses, which no predetermined questions could have anticipated (McDonough & McDonough, 1997). This is the reason why semi-structured interviews are popularly used in qualitative studies.

Interviews can capture personal views and accounts in more details than questionnaires, and researchers using interviews are more flexible to change the stress of the investigation according to each interviewee. However, responses in
an interview may show only what people say they do, or what they think they do, not what they actually do (Roulston, 2010). This may be a result of the social desirability (Fowler, 2009), the wish to reveal or maintain a positive personal image, or the belief of the “norm” in certain situations. To obtain the most accurate responses possible, it is advised that the interviewer should build trust and rapport with the interviewees through non-judgemental questions, appropriate probing techniques, and suitable wording of questions (Fowler, 2009). In this research, the responses obtained in interviews were collated with the data of what actually happened in class, which was collected through observations.

3.3.3.2. The interviews in this research

In this research, the semi-structured form of interview was used. The interview questions for teachers and students can be seen in Appendix 5. A number of core questions were set to ensure that all major issues were mentioned while space was reserved for adjustments to be made. The order of questions was not fixed; this meant that if the interviewee mentioned a certain point, the researcher could ask follow up questions, rather than having to return to that point later. Each interview was a little different from the previous one(s), and influenced by the researcher’s initial analysis of the previous interviews, in terms of when to bring up a question, and the direction and timing of probe questions. The relationship between the interviewer (the researcher) and the teacher interviewees was one between colleagues, while there was virtually no prior existing relationship between the interviewer and the student interviewees (Mann, 2011). Neither of these relationships put the interviewees under pressure to satisfy the interviewer by giving “expected” answers. Therefore, responses from the interviewees were honest ones.
In the interviews and the discussion (Chapter 6), the terms “roles”, “effects”, and “purposes” of humour were used. Although there was some overlap between these terms, in this study they were in fact used in different senses. “Roles” of humour referred to the overall position of humour in EFL teaching: whether it was a beneficial additive/catalyst to the processes of teaching and learning or not, and whether it was desirable to employ humour while teaching. “Effects” of humour referred to the cognitive and affective influence that humour could have on students – the receiving party of humour in this study. These included all effects as perceived by teachers and students, no matter whether teachers’ humour actually produced those effects in the observed lessons. The term “purposes” referred to teachers’ intention associated with a specific effort at humour during a lesson, not necessarily an incident creating the intended effect(s) on students. A teacher, for example, could perceive humour as having the role of a positive additive to teaching and five possible effects, and employ humour with the purpose of creating two out of these effects during a certain lesson.

The interviews with teachers were conducted after the observations, from immediately after the lesson to one week later. In the cases with a time gap, the field notes and video recordings proved useful in helping teachers to relive the lessons. Since all these interviewees were teachers of English, the interviews were conducted in English. The teachers were comfortable expressing themselves in English, so there was no loss of meaning during the process of translating interviews from Vietnamese to English. The interviews were audio-recorded for later transcription and analysis. The interviews with teachers were conducted in the faculty offices or vacant classrooms to ensure privacy, quietness and good sound quality of the recordings.

The student interviewees were selected from those who provided their contact information in the questionnaire. There were both males and females from
different years and different institutions, and they were enrolled in different programs. The most important criterion for selection was whether they were in a class with a teacher using humour or a class with a teacher not using or using very little humour. At the beginning of an interview the researcher asked students whether they wanted to use English or Vietnamese. Most chose English; however, the researcher encouraged them to switch between the two languages whenever they felt one of those could express their points more clearly and accurately. This was important considering that some students were at only intermediate or lower-intermediate levels of English proficiency. These students did not major in English, thus might find it difficult to express themselves adequately using English only.

Some of the interviews with students were one-on-one, while others were conducted with a group of students. The reason was that the interview time had to match with students’ schedules: it was most convenient to convene a group of students when they all had a class together. These were not proper focus groups as defined by some authors (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Lichtman, 2010): the number of participants was only two or three, not six or seven to ten or twelve; and the interviewer did not act as a facilitator building group dynamics and letting the group to take the discussion in its own hands. Instead of an issue being proposed for the group to discuss, questions were asked by the interviewer. However, the fact that there was more than one student in these interviews was beneficial in that the students could complement one another when asked about their experience of teachers’ use of humour, while expressing their agreement or disagreement to other students’ responses. They also gave more detailed responses or accounts themselves. These features were similar to the advantages of group interviews suggested by Cohen, Manion & Morrison (2011).
The interviews with students were audio-recorded. The interviews, or the parts of the interviews, in Vietnamese were translated into English before analysis. The researcher transcribed all the interviews verbatim.

### 3.4. Confidentiality and anonymity

This research was reviewed and granted approval by The University of Canberra Committee for Ethics in Human Research (EC00108). Understanding that this research was conducted at the workplace and on some work practices of a group of participants (the teachers), the researcher made every possible effort to guarantee that the participation and/or the data obtained from the participants did not create unwanted consequences for them, either psychologically or professionally.

All participants expressed their willingness to participate in the research by being presented with the purposes of the research and signing the informed consent form. They were also presented with information such as how they could refuse to participate in the research as a whole, refuse to answer certain questions put in the questionnaire or by the researcher, or decide to withdraw at any stage of the research without the risk of any harms or consequences. The participants were also provided with information on how to seek more information about the research and how to raise a concern or make a complaint. In addition, they could choose whether they wanted a summary of the results sent to them. Then, the participants were offered a chance to check if their ideas and opinions were presented accurately by the researcher. This is also a form of respondent validation or member checking (Creswell, 2008b) – one of the ways to increase the validity of qualitative research. The information sheet and consent form can be found in Appendix 2.
The conduct of this research met the requirements at the local research sites, and received 'gatekeepers’ support (Creswell, 2008b, p.178) – in this case, the heads of faculty. This meant that participation in this research was known and well-supported by the universities’ management. However, teachers themselves volunteered to participate. More than that, data obtained from these teachers were not made known to the heads of faculty.

The anonymity of the respondents of the questionnaire was guaranteed since they did not have to provide any personal information, including which classes they were enrolled in. Each class was given a code for reference in the discussion of results. Teachers and students who appeared in observation recordings and interviews would be referred to as numbers (T1, T2, S1, S2, etc.) in the discussion of results.

The confidentiality of the data was guaranteed in that only the researcher had access to questionnaire responses given by students, recordings of observations, and responses given by teachers and students in interviews. These data were coded and kept securely at The University of Canberra until 5 years after the research was completed (2019), and then will be destroyed.

3.5. **Piloting instruments**

Before the research was formally conducted at the research sites, the researcher conducted a pilot study of the data collection instruments. The questionnaire was given to five EFL teachers, who were not included as participants of the study. The researcher also conducted pilot interviews and pilot observations to familiarise himself with the use of the interview questions and the observation sheet. The pilot stage revealed no problems with the data collection instruments, especially the comprehension of questions in the questionnaire and the
interviews. It also assisted in improving the validation of the methods and findings in this study (Creswell, 2008a; Ezzy, 2010).
3.6. **Research sites and participants**

The participants in this research were teachers of English and students at three universities in Ho Chi Minh City, including Ho Chi Minh City University of Pedagogy (U1). This university is one of Vietnam’s two major universities of pedagogy, based in the largest, most dynamic and most economically important city of this country. Therefore, innovations in English teaching are most likely to be embraced here first, to be applied in high schools later. MOET’s policy of adopting CLT or the use of technology in English teaching and learning is realized most clearly in the university’s English curricula. Teachers of English in the university are familiar with CLT through their undergraduate and/or postgraduate training. They often attend conferences and workshops on new ideas and techniques of English Language Teaching (ELT), and are encouraged to use CLT in teaching and update their knowledge and skills continuously. The university’s students come from different areas with different backgrounds. However, since they are studying in Ho Chi Minh City and many of them want to find a job there, the opportunities and practical needs for the use of English are high. Learning English is important for them, no matter whether they are trained to become teachers of English or of other subjects. HCMC University of Pedagogy was chosen as one research site also because of the accessibility of data and the familiarity of the researcher with this university (where the researcher is employed).

The other two institutions (U2 and U3) differ from U1 in that they are not teacher-training universities. They represent the more common kind of universities in Vietnam, organised in multiple disciplines including foreign languages. Graduates from these two universities could work as interpreters or in various fields, for example business, tourism, banking, or hospitality. Teachers of English in these universities also have degrees in English teaching from different universities of
pedagogy, including but not limited to HCMC University of Pedagogy. Students in these universities also come from different areas, and they share common awareness of the importance of English.

The teacher participants (n = 30) consisted of teachers from the three universities. The teachers from HCMC University of Pedagogy included both teachers of the Department of English, who taught students majoring in English and being trained to work as EFL teachers at high schools and other educational institutions (e.g. private schools, foreign language centres, universities), and other teachers of English of the university, who taught English to students majoring in other subjects (e.g. Maths or History). The Department of English teachers taught courses of English skills and aspects (e.g. Speaking, Writing, Grammar, or Morphology), ELT Methodology, or cultures of English-speaking countries (e.g. English Literature or American Studies). The other teachers taught General English or English for Specific Purposes, according to their students’ major. The teachers of the other two universities came from the Faculties of Foreign Languages. They taught both students majoring in English and students of other disciplines. The courses were mainly the same as those taught at HCMC University of Pedagogy, with the absence of ELT Methodology courses, since students of these universities were not training to become teachers. All the teacher participants had a BA in English teaching degree from a Vietnamese university, and most of them had an MA in TESOL degree from either a Vietnamese or a foreign (mainly Australian, American, or British) university. The teachers were both male and female ones, with ages ranging from early twenties to early fifties, and years of teaching experience ranging from two to twenty-five. Table 3.1 presents the characteristics of teacher participants to provide the context for reading the data analysis chapters (chapters 4 and 5).
### Table 3.1 Teachers’ features

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Teaching experience (years)</th>
<th>University</th>
<th>Class</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>T1</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>25</td>
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<td>U1</td>
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<td>27</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>U1</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>29</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>U2</td>
<td>Reading</td>
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<td>28</td>
<td>6</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>U1</td>
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<td>U1</td>
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<td>3</td>
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<td>19</td>
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<td>11</td>
<td>U1</td>
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</tr>
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<td>12</td>
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<td>10</td>
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<td>Reading</td>
</tr>
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<td>2</td>
<td>U1</td>
<td>Listening</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>2</td>
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<td>32</td>
<td>U1</td>
<td>Sociolinguistics</td>
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</table>

There were 162 students from the three universities participating by completing a survey. These students were from eighteen to twenty-four years of age, in all years at the university from the first to the fourth, of both genders, and varied in
background and English proficiency. Some are from urban areas, even from high schools specializing in English (especially students of the Department of English of U1), and are familiar with being taught with CLT; while some others come from rural areas, where CLT has not been adopted thoroughly and the authentic use of English is an unheard-of luxury. The students of the other two universities came from Faculties of Foreign Languages and other faculties. They had almost the same characteristics as the students of U1, although notably higher levels of English proficiency among students from the Faculties of Foreign Languages, compared to students from other faculties.

Most of the 162 students (90%) were in Faculties of English or Foreign Languages of the three universities, which meant that most of their lessons were taught in English and were about English. These students were at the intermediate level of English proficiency when they started university. Their study involved much use of English, from listening to and communicating with teachers to reading learning materials and doing assignments in English.

The remaining 10% were from other faculties of the three universities, which meant that most of their lessons were taught in Vietnamese – their mother tongue – and English was considered a foreign language subject. These students’ English proficiency was lower than that of the first group of students: most of them were at the lower-intermediate or beginner levels when starting university. Their exposure to and production of English was also more limited than that of the first student group, being mainly limited to their English classes.

Table 3.2 presents the characteristics of student participants to provide the context for reading the data analysis chapters (chapters 4 and 5).
Table 3.2 Students' features

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>University</th>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>English major</th>
<th>Non-English major</th>
<th>Individual interview</th>
<th>Group interview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>S1</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>U1</td>
<td>T26</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S2</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>U1</td>
<td>T15</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S3</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>U3</td>
<td>T19</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S4</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>U2</td>
<td>T3</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Group 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S5</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>U2</td>
<td>T3</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Group 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S6</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>U2</td>
<td>T3</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Group 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S7</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>U1</td>
<td>T4</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Group 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S8</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>U1</td>
<td>T4</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>S9</td>
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<td>T1</td>
<td>X</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>S10</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Group 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S11</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>U1</td>
<td>T1</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Group 3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From the 162 students who completed the survey, the researcher randomly chose 11 students who volunteered to take part in an interview by providing their contact information at the end of the survey. Some of the interviews were one-on-one, while others were conducted with groups of 2 or 3 students, due to the availability or preference of the students to be interviewed. The interviewees represented all three universities, both genders, and both students groups (from Faculties of English and from other faculties). However, the representation was not equal across universities, genders, or groups but, rather, was dependent on the number of volunteers.

The reason for the inclusion of three universities in this research and mixed gender/background in both groups of participants (teachers and students) was to explore the differences, if any, in perceptions and practices regarding humour in different contexts, from different users (teachers), and with different audience (students). The differences helped paint a more detailed picture of humour in an EFL context, and led to more thorough answers for the research questions.
3.7. **Data analysis and management**

3.7.1. **Data management**

The questionnaires were in the form of hard copies. These copies, after being collected, were kept in a locker for analysis and reference during the discussion of results. Only the researcher had access to these copies. After the thesis completion, these copies are to be stored at The University of Canberra for five years before being destroyed.

The recordings of observations and interviews and the interview transcriptions were backed up and encrypted so that only the researcher could access the files. Like the questionnaires, these files were used for analysis and discussion and stored at University of Canberra for five years after the thesis was completed.

3.7.2. **Data analysis**

As it had the concurrent triangulation design (see 3.2), the study included a concurrent form of analysis (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007; Guest, 2013), starting with a separate initial data analysis for each of the qualitative and the quantitative databases. In a subsequent stage, the researcher merged the two datasets so that ‘a complete picture is developed from both datasets’ (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007, p.136).

The results from questionnaires were entered and calculated with SPSS (Connolly, 2007) to yield the distribution of students’ responses for each questionnaire item in the form of percentages. In this sense, the quantitative data analysis was a descriptive analysis (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). The percentages of students who agreed or disagreed with the statements formed
some of the basis for the discussion of their attitudes towards teachers’ use of humour in class. The remainder came from the analysis of interviews with students.

The observations were analysed both quantitatively and qualitatively, focusing on incidents of humour used by teachers. These incidents were identified, counted and categorised. Students’ reactions to these incidents were also noted in the researcher’s field notes, and used later during interviews with students and the discussion of results. Field notes of thirty observations are presented in Chapter 5.

The interviews were transcribed by the researcher – a practice encouraged by Kvale & Brinkmann (2009). A transcript of a teacher interview can be seen in Appendix 6. All the student and teacher interview transcripts were subjected to thematic analysis, with the assistance of NVivo queries. Since the transcripts were in form of electronic files, they were imported into NVivo to make the processes of coding and identifying the relationships among themes more convenient.

First, thematic analysis was used to look for themes and categories that the interviewees employed (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Talmy, 2011). The analysis started with identifying text segments (Creswell, 2008a) and labelling them with codes. To do this, the researcher read through the transcripts and marked the text segments related to humour with codes. During this process, both “prefigured” codes and “emergent” codes (Crabtree & Miller, 1992) were employed to reflect the varied nature of themes related to humour. An example of an “emergent” code was a new type of humour not included in the list before the study, but expected to appear during it (see 2.3.2). Then, the number of codes was reduced by identifying overlapping and redundant codes. Finally, codes were collapsed into themes. The themes were also counted and presented based on their frequency of occurrence (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The use of
NVivo’s Text Search Queries enabled the researcher to identify the coded text segments in their context, i.e. with surrounding words, thus assisting the task of meaning interpretation (Kvale, 1996).

The researcher also used NVivo to identify the interrelations between themes arising from interviews. Coding and Word Frequency Queries yielded the information of how the participants perceived humour and its roles in foreign language teaching, for example how many times a particular participant mentioned beneficial effects of humour, or how frequent a certain type of humour was featured in all participants’ responses. From these themes (categories) and their relations, a core category was selected as the basis for the discussion (Creswell, 2008a). The themes from student interviews are presented in Chapter 4, and themes from teacher interviews are presented in Chapter 5. For the convenience of comparison between responses within each group of students/teachers and between responses from students and those from teachers, the researcher decided to present the themes found in the interviews under the interview questions, rather than separately.

After being analysed separately, the quantitative and qualitative results were compared to verify students’ attitudes towards teachers’ use of humour in class, a practice that Creswell & Plano Clark (2011, p.221) called ‘merg[ing] the two databases’ and typically done in the concurrent mixed methods design. The research thus aimed to investigate whether the data obtained during interviews with students confirmed the trend among students evident in survey results; it also aimed to explore the deeper meanings behind their agreement or disagreement with statement items in the questionnaires. Finally, teachers’ views were compared with students’ views in each of the chapters to provide a response to the research questions. The discussion in Chapter 6 discussed the findings of this study by integrating teachers’ and students’ responses.
3.8. **Chapter summary**

This chapter presented the approach to the research, described the methods employed and the procedures of data collection: it also provided the relevant characteristics of the research sites and research participants, as well as the process of data analysis and management.

The approach to inquiry in this study was that of pragmatism. The concurrent mixed methods design was used to collect data. A questionnaire was used to obtained opinions from a large number of students, observations were conducted to identify the actual practices regarding humour use in class, while interviews were employed to explore the deep meanings behind participants' responses in the questionnaire as well as their practices related to the use of humour.

Three universities were included in the study as research sites. The differences among these universities, and among participants, provided the researcher with an acceptable variation of views on the research problem.

Data analysis was conducted with each set of data (quantitative and qualitative) separately, before the results were merged to form the basis for discussion. Descriptive analysis was applied to the quantitative data, revealing the percentages of students who agreed/disagreed with questionnaire items and showing their attitudes towards teachers’ use of humour in class. Thematic analysis was applied to the qualitative data to identify how the participants employed humour and to explore their attitudes towards humour. A summary of the results was sent to interested participants for respondent validation before these results were discussed.

The next chapter presents the results obtained from students through questionnaires and interviews.
CHAPTER 4: RESULTS FROM STUDENTS

4.1. Introduction

This chapter presents the results obtained from participating students through the survey and interviews. The first part of the chapter contains the results from nineteen statements made in the surveys, divided into four themes: (1) the relationship between humour and learning, (2) students’ perceptions of teachers’ humour, (3) the role of humour in foreign language learning, and (4) L1 and L2 humour. The number and percentage of students who agree or disagree with each statement are reported. The second part of the chapter presents students’ responses to the eight core questions in the interviews, together with other beliefs and experiences that students share in their responses.

4.2. Results from surveys

4.3.1. The relationship between humour and learning

This section contains the results relating to statements asking students for their opinions about the relationship between humour and learning in general.

"Dear Parents: If you promise not to believe everything your child says happens at school, I'll promise not to believe everything he says happens at home."

A wise teacher (Unique Teaching Resources, n.d.)
Table 4.1 Learning requires a serious work environment with little time for humour

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No response</th>
<th>Totally disagree</th>
<th>Partly disagree</th>
<th>Neither agree nor disagree</th>
<th>Partly agree</th>
<th>Totally agree</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>17.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.1 shows that the majority of the students agreed with the statement, ‘Learning requires a serious work environment with little time for humour.’ ‘Partly agree’ was chosen by 58 students and ‘Totally agree’ by 40: the two combined made up 62% of the respondents. There were 17.1%, or 27 students, undecided (neither agree nor disagree), while only 20.9% (33 students) disagreed with the statement, either partly or totally.

Table 4.2 In Vietnamese education, a student initiating humour in class is a disruption to learning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No response</th>
<th>Totally disagree</th>
<th>Partly disagree</th>
<th>Neither agree nor disagree</th>
<th>Partly agree</th>
<th>Totally agree</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
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<td>12</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>24.1</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>36.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.2 shows students’ opinions towards the statement, ‘In Vietnamese education, a student initiating humour in class is a disruption to learning.’ This statement was included with the intention of an exploration of students’ perceptions of humour in their own learning context in Vietnam. The neutral
opinion was held by the largest percentage at 36.7%: the option was chosen by 58 students. The distribution of opinions in the other groups was comparatively similar: 24.1% (38 students) partly disagreed with the statement while 22.8% (36 students) partly agreed, and 7.6% (12 students) who totally disagreed compared with 8.9% (14 students) totally agreed. Altogether, the opinions towards this statement were quite evenly distributed into disagree, neutral, and agree, with about one third of the students spread between each.

**Table 4.3 Humour is a waste of precious learning time**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No response</th>
<th>Totally disagree</th>
<th>Partly disagree</th>
<th>Neither agree nor disagree</th>
<th>Partly agree</th>
<th>Totally agree</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>N</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>40.7</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>28</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>162</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although the majority of the students agreed that there was little time for humour in a serious learning environment (Table 4.1) and they were quite divided in about whether humour from a student was a disruption to learning (Table 4.2), the students expressed strong disagreement with the statement ‘Humour is a waste of precious learning time.’ These results are shown in Table 4.3. A total of 126 students disagreed with the statement, either partly or totally, making up 77.7% of the total. These students did not think that learning time was wasted with the use of humour, which suggests that they believed humour may have some value in learning. Only 5% (8 students) expressed agreement with the statement (to some extent plus totally), while 17.3% (28 students) were undecided.
Table 4.4 If my class is laughing and joking, we are not learning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No response</th>
<th>Totally disagree N</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Partly disagree N</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Neither agree nor disagree N</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Partly agree N</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Totally agree N</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Total N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>37.7</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>19.8</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>162</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When asked about their opinion of the statement ‘If my class is laughing and joking, we are not learning,’ 21% (34 students) chose ‘Totally disagree’ and 37.7% (61 students) chose ‘Partly disagree’, a total of 58.7%. The students who disagreed with this statement ‘to some extent’ did not think that laughing and joking were the indicators of the absence of learning. Only 21.6% (35 students) agreed with the statement, while the remaining 19.8% (32 students) were neutral.

Table 4.5 The use of humour during a lesson is distracting

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No response</th>
<th>Totally disagree N</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Partly disagree N</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Neither agree nor disagree N</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Partly agree N</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Totally agree N</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Total N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>20.6</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>35.6</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>26.3</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>14.4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>162</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Another aspect of the students’ perceptions of humour in relation to learning is shown in Table 4.5. More than half of the students disagreed with the statement, ‘The use of humour during a lesson is distracting’: 20.6% (33 students) totally disagreed and 35.6% (57 students) partly disagreed. Only 17.5% (28 students) agreed with this statement, and 26.3% (42 students) were neutral. This result is in line with the result shown in Table 4.4.
Table 4.6 Humour helps me to concentrate better on the lesson

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No response</th>
<th>Totally disagree</th>
<th>Partly disagree</th>
<th>Neither agree nor disagree</th>
<th>Partly agree</th>
<th>Totally agree</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
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<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>24.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.6 shows students’ opinions about the possible contribution of humour to learning through the statement ‘Humour helps me to concentrate better on the lesson.’ It is obvious that these students not only objected to the idea that the use of humour during a lesson is distracting (Table 4.5), but they also strongly agreed with a totally opposite proposal: a great majority of students, 102 or 63.4%, believed that humour helped them to concentrate better on the lesson, while only 12.4% (20 students) did not think this was so and 24.2% (39 students) were undecided. Considering the results in Tables 4.4 and 4.5, the distribution of opinions in Table 4.6 is simply a logical follow-on. These opinions will be discussed in chapter 6.

In summary, in the section on the relationship between humour and learning, students were somewhat uncertain about the position of humour in a serious work/learning environment, but still gave a positive evaluation about the benefits of humour.
4.3.2. *Students' perceptions of teachers’ humour*

This section contains the results for statements asking students their opinions about the relationship between humour and the image of teachers as perceived by students.

Table 4.7 Humour is an important characteristic in a teacher

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No response</th>
<th>Totally disagree</th>
<th>Partly disagree</th>
<th>Neither agree nor disagree</th>
<th>Partially agree</th>
<th>Totally agree</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>123</td>
<td>40.7</td>
<td>35.2</td>
<td>162</td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.7 shows students’ opinions towards the statement ‘Humour is an important characteristic in a teacher.’ A great majority of the students, a total of 123 students or 75.9%, agreed with this idea: 40.7% (66 students) partly agreed and 35.2% (57 students) totally agreed. Only 8.1% (13 students) thought in the opposite way, and 16% (26 students) were neutral. This distribution indicates how strong the preference for a humorous teacher was among the students.

Table 4.8 My teacher's use of humour makes me feel closer to him/her
To explore further students’ perceptions of the effects that humour may have on their teachers’ image, the statement ‘My teacher’s use of humour makes me feel closer to him/her’ was presented to the students. Even more students agreed with this statement, compared with the result for the previous statement in Table 4.7. A total of 84.5% (137 students) showed agreement, either partly or totally, with the remarkable percentage of ‘Totally agree’ at 62.3% (chosen by 101 students). Very few students disagreed with this statement (9.3% – 15 students) or were neutral (6.2% – 10 students).

Table 4.9 A teacher using humour a lot is not professional

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No response</th>
<th>Totally disagree</th>
<th>Partly disagree</th>
<th>Neither agree nor disagree</th>
<th>Partly agree</th>
<th>Totally agree</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>%</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>23.9</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>21.4</td>
<td>14.5</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Being funny and humorous may also mean being not professional. That is quite an unwritten fear among teachers (Morrison, 2008). Table 4.9 shows how the students actually thought, through their opinions towards the statement ‘A teacher using humour a lot is not professional.’ Only a minority of the students agreed with this idea: 14.5% (23 students) partly agreed, and 6.3% (10 students) totally agreed. By comparison, more than half of the students disagreed: 34% (54 students) partly disagreed and 23.9% (38 students) totally disagreed, making up
a combined percentage of 57.9%. The remaining 21.4% (34 students) were neutral. The results suggest that students appreciated a teacher using humour, even though they were confused about whether the humour was disruptive.

In short, it may be said that students preferred humorous teachers since they were closer to them, but this did not mean the teachers lost their professionalism.

4.3.3. **The role of humour in foreign language (FL) learning**

This section contains the results regarding the statements that sought students’ opinions about the roles and position of humour in foreign language learning. These opinions form an important part of results from students, since they partly answer Research Question 2 (*What are university EFL teachers’ and students’ perceptions of the role(s) of humour in classroom teaching?*) as well as strongly influence students’ responses to humour used by their teachers in the foreign language classroom.

**Table 4.10 Humour is important to FL learning**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No response</th>
<th>Totally disagree</th>
<th>Partly disagree</th>
<th>Neither agree nor disagree</th>
<th>Partly agree</th>
<th>Totally agree</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
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<td>1.2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>75</td>
<td>46.6</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>42.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>162</td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.10 shows students’ general opinions about humour in foreign language learning. A great majority of the students agreed that humour is important to foreign language learning: 46.6% (75 students) partly agreed and 42.9% (69
students) totally agreed, making up a total of 89.5% (144 out of 162 respondents). Only 3.1% (5 students) disagreed with the statement, and 7.5% (12 students) were undecided.

Table 4.11 Humour in FL increases my interest in learning that FL

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No response</th>
<th>Totally disagree</th>
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<td>46</td>
<td>28.9</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>57.2</td>
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Table 4.12 Humour improves my ability to learn a foreign language

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No response</th>
<th>Totally disagree</th>
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<td></td>
<td>48</td>
<td>29.8</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>53.4</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Possible reasons for students’ agreement that humour is important to foreign language learning can be seen through their opinions regarding the statements ‘Humour in FL increases my interest in learning that FL’ and ‘Humour improves my ability to learn a FL’, shown in Tables 4.11 and 4.12. Both statements received more than 50% of total agreement: 57.2% (91 students) for ‘increased interest’ and 53.4% (86 students) for ‘improved ability’. Adding a further percentage of 28.9% and 29.8% respectively for partial agreement, we have a total of 86.1% (137 students) who agreed that humour increases their interest in
learning a foreign language, and virtually the same number – 83.2% or 134 students – who agreed that humour improves their ability to learn that language. These two statements refer to the affective and cognitive factors of the learning process. Students’ opinions show that humour could positively affect both types of factors, thus motivating students to learn a foreign language, and, at the same time, equipping them with better ability to do so.
Tables 4.11 and 4.12 show students' perceptions of the effects of humour on the student learning process as a whole. Students' opinions about more specific effects of humour during their foreign language learning are expressed in Tables 4.13 and 4.14. Figures in Table 4.13 clearly indicate that students not only enjoyed humour in general, but they also welcomed the humour used by their teachers. Those who totally agreed (58.6% or 95 students) and those who partly agreed (32.1% or 52 students) thought they could learn better when FL teachers used humour. Only 2.5% (4 students) said they disagreed, while 6.8% (11 students) were neutral. More remarkably, the results shown in Table 4.14 suggest why most of these students said humour increased their interest in learning a foreign language, or they could learn better when their teachers used humour: it was because humour made them more relaxed in their language class. The statement in Table 4.14 was the item receiving the highest percentage
of total agreement in the survey: 76.5% (124 students) chose this option for their response. Another 17.3% (28 students) showed they partly agreed, while only 1.8% (3 students) disagreed and 4.3% (7 students) were neutral. The results in Table 4.14 suggest where humour’s strongest influence is: classroom atmosphere and students’ psychological state. This is an important issue which is yet to be mentioned in the literature regarding foreign language teaching, although some studies in the field of general education have reported similar effects from the use of humour. The students’ perceptions shown here should have useful implications for language teaching.

**Table 4.15 Humour is not a measurable characteristic, and has a questionable role in language learning**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>No response</th>
<th>Totally disagree</th>
<th>Partly disagree</th>
<th>Neither agree nor disagree</th>
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To confirm students’ opinions about the roles and position of humour in foreign language learning, the statement ‘Humour is not a measurable characteristic, and has a questionable role in language learning’ was included in the survey. The results show students quite divided on this matter. The most frequently chosen option was ‘Neither agree nor disagree’, with 43.9% (69 students). The ‘agree’ and ‘disagree’ groups were approximately equal: 26.7% (42 students) agreed to some extent, while 29.3% (46 students) disagreed to some extent. This distribution of opinions indicates that students might welcome humour in foreign language learning, but they were not in a position to be certain of the role of
humour. The reasons for this uncertainty among students were explored in the interviews with students and are reported later.
4.3.4. **L1 and L2 humour**

This section contains the results of responses to statements asking students of their opinions about humour in different languages: their mother tongue (Vietnamese) and the foreign language they were learning (English).

Table 4.16 I would like my teacher to use Vietnamese humour in my English class

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<tr>
<th>No response</th>
<th>Totally disagree</th>
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<td>17.4</td>
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<td>14.9</td>
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Table 4.16 shows students’ opinions regarding the statement ‘I would like my teacher to use Vietnamese humour in my English class.’ There were 14.9% (24 students) who totally agreed, and 26.7% (43 students) partly agreed with this idea, making up a total of 41.6% (67 students). The percentage of students who were undecided on this matter is 26.1% (42 students). Thus, although nearly half of the students would like to see Vietnamese humour in an English class, there was still nearly one third among the respondents who were not so welcoming of L1 humour: 17.4% (28 students) totally disagreed, and 14.9% (24 students) partly disagreed.
Table 4.17 I would like my teacher to use English humour in my English class

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<th>No response</th>
<th>Totally disagree</th>
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Unlike Vietnamese humour, English humour is evidently much more welcome in an English class, given the students’ opinions towards the statement ‘I would like my teacher to use English humour in my English class.’ A great preference for English humour was shown with 38.5% (62 students) totally agreeing with the statement, and 46% (74 students) partly agreeing – together forming a group of 84.5% (136 students). Only 6.8% (11 students) disagreed with the statement, and the remaining 8.7% (14 students) were neutral. Given the fact that the majority of the students were English language majors and their interest in English language, their preference for English humour may be what is expected.

Table 4.18 I find it difficult to understand English humour

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<th>No response</th>
<th>Totally disagree</th>
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Much as the students may welcome English humour, understanding it may still be an impediment for some. When asked whether they found it difficult to understand English humour, a little more than half of the students said no: 20.4% (33 students) totally disagreed, while 30.2% (49 students) partly disagreed. Considering that the respondents of the survey were mainly students majoring in English (see Section 4.2), this result does not seem surprising. However, more than one in four students encountered a certain amount of difficulty trying to understand English humour: 4.9% (8 students) said they totally agreed with the statement, and 23.5% (38 students) said they partly agreed. Compared with the figures in Table 4.17, this result suggests that students welcome English humour in their English class, even if they must struggle to understand it.

Table 4.19 I learn about the culture of FL by being exposed to native humour of that FL

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<tr>
<th>No response</th>
<th>Totally disagree</th>
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The reason for students’ preference for English humour despite difficulties in understanding it possibly lies in the information presented in Table 4.19, which shows students’ opinions towards the statement ‘I learn about the culture of FL by being exposed to native humour of that FL.’ A great majority of the students agreed with the statement: 44.4% (71 students) totally agreed, and 38.1% (61 students) partly agreed, making a total of 82.5% (132 students). Only 6.9% (11 students) disagreed, and 10.6% (17 students) were undecided. If it is agreed that
learning a language also involves learning about the culture(s) using that language, it is understandable why so many students would like to see English humour in their English class, even if that humour may be a challenge for them.

### 4.3. Results from interviews

Eleven students participated in interviews with the researcher. The characteristics of student interviewees can be seen in Table 3.2. These students volunteered to participate in the interviews by providing their contact information at the end of the survey. The interviewees included both male and female students, English majors and non-English majors, and students from all three universities that were in the study. However, there was not an equal distribution of interviewees across these groups, since the number of interviewees was dependent on the number of volunteers as well as the availability of students at the time of the interviews. The interviews were conducted in the faculty’s rooms. Since surveys were administered in classes where the researcher also conducted observations, the teachers of these students were observed and also interviewed. The collation between information from student interviews and teacher observations and/or interviews yielded some interesting results.

#### 4.4.1. Question 1: Students’ opinions of teachers’ use of humour

The first question in the interview asked students of their opinions of teachers’ use of humour in general, not just for the specific lesson that the researcher observed. None of these students was against the use of humour by a teacher. In fact, only student 3 (S3) said teacher’s use of humour was ‘normal’, while some other respondents said this use was ‘important’ (S1), ‘necessary’ (S2) or ‘good’ (S9). All students mentioned the possible benefits humour could bring to
the lesson or the class, ranging from general (‘support the lesson’ – S3) to more specific statements: ‘create a more comfortable environment’ (S1, S7 and S8), ‘hold students’ attention’ by making ‘students feel excited and interested in the lesson’ (S2), ‘make the class less stressful and less sleepy’ (S5), ‘make the lesson more interesting’ (S10) and ‘students feel more relaxed’ (S6, S10 and S11). The most common effect mentioned among these students was that humour made them feel relaxed in a more comfortable class environment – in other words, ‘the classroom has an atmosphere which is friendly and supportive’ (Littlewood, 2000, p.34). The students also suggested that once they were relaxed, they could study better:

‘We can learn well, and the teacher can teach in the most comfortable way.’ (S1)

‘Students feel relaxed and understand the lesson more quickly’ (S6)

'It makes it easy for us to take in knowledge’ (S4)

‘Students can study more effectively’ (S7)

‘The atmosphere can encourage students to contribute and create ideas about the lesson.’ (S8)

'It increases the comprehension in many difficult tasks.’ (S10)

This confirms the questionnaire results seen in Table 4.14.

Another mentioned benefit of teacher’s use of humour was that it could affect the relationship between teachers and students in a positive way. S4 asserted, ‘It’s certain that teachers’ sense of humour makes them closer to students.’ The responses to the first interview question confirmed the survey results that students could learn better when teachers used humour (Table 4.13) and this use of humour by teachers made them closer to students (Table 4.8).

However, some students also warned against certain ways of using humour. S3 said teachers could use ‘good things’ to support the lesson, ‘not the stories students do not like.’ Meanwhile, S9 said the use of humour must ‘be
appropriate’ and ‘fit in different situations.’ Clarifying her own opinion, S9 provided a notable idea:

‘If you use many jokes or remarks or funny stories which are not related to the lesson, it’s a waste and useless. It can distract students.’

From the responses for the first interview question, it is clear that all students supported the use of humour in class by teachers because of its beneficial effects on the class’s atmosphere, the teacher-student relationship, and students’ attention, psychological state and studying competence. The students also indicated that sometimes the use of humour might be counterproductive, if humour was not to the taste of students and/or not related to the lesson. These students’ opinions provide useful suggestions for teachers employing humour in the classroom.
4.4.2. Question 2: Students’ reactions and feelings towards teachers’ use of humour in a lesson

The next question the researcher asked was about students’ reactions and feelings towards teachers’ use of humour in the lesson the researcher observed. This was a more specific question, and students’ answers for it could be compared with the recordings of the observations. None of these students had negative reactions or feelings towards the use of humour in the observed lesson. The majority of the students confirmed what they said about humour in general by indicating that they felt ‘comfortable and more relaxed’ (S1, S2, S10), ‘the environment was not serious’ (S7), ‘feel free to contribute to the lesson’ (S8). S2 thought ‘it’s a good point to use his [the teacher’s] good sense of humour in class’, while S4, S5 and S6 said they realised the effects of humour that they mentioned in Question 1 in the observed lesson, and S10 and S11 said their reactions to their teacher’s use of humour were ‘positive.’ Only S3 said that her reactions to teachers’ use of humour were ‘neutral.’

4.4.3. Question 3: The effects of humour on a lesson

When asked about the effects of humour on the observed lesson, S1 said he felt ‘more intimate’ to the teacher and he could ‘learn better.’ The reason for this, according to S1, was that when they felt relaxed and comfortable, ‘it’s easier to focus on the lesson and the teacher.’ S7 and S8 added that teachers’ use of humour could ‘soften’ their criticism and make it easier to be accepted by students:

‘I felt that comment was not strict and serious, just a feedback to help us understand more correctly.’
(S7)
‘When the teacher criticises a student’s contribution or ideas, it makes students scared to contribute to the lesson. If you don’t use serious comments, students will feel free to contribute to the lesson.’ (S8)

Also commenting on the relaxing effects of humour on the classroom atmosphere, S3 suggested that ‘students may feel bored if the lesson is too rigid or stressful.’ This consideration was shared by S2:

‘In foreign language learning, it can be very boring. You can get bored when learning a lesson with too many new words, too many idioms, too many phrasal verbs.’

Thus, S2 put forward an interesting suggestion: ‘it’s necessary for the teacher to use the sense of humour, even if it can be distracting.’ S2 supported his view by admitting that the teacher might not focus on or get too far from the lesson when telling ‘a story about his private life’, but ‘that’s just sometimes. Most of the time, students can be excited, [...] and interested in the lesson.’

However, this view of S2 was not shared by many other students. S6 warned that too much humour ‘may lead to distraction’, which meant ‘not transmitting the lesson’s meaning.’ Adding to their friend’s ideas, S4 and S8 said that students might become ‘less focused’, ‘talk about other topics’, and ‘cannot take in the lesson.’ Moreover, S5 thought that overuse of humour might in fact reduce its positive effects: ‘playing around too much makes us not feel funny, but trite.’ S7 considered the distraction caused by too much humour from the teacher even more seriously, as ‘a waste of time.’ Thus, the majority of students warned against the overuse of humour. This was in agreement with teachers’ views of the amount of humour, as seen in 5.3.2.5.

Students also mentioned a possibility that might limit the positive effects, if any, of humour used by teachers: that it was not related to the lesson, or they simply did not understand the humour to appreciate it. These ideas reminded us of the
needs for humour to be relevant and understandable to be appreciated by the target audience (Steele, 1998):

‘Sometimes he [their teacher] uses comments that are not related to the lesson, or sometimes I don’t know much about the comment or the circumstances, and I can’t understand the comment and I can’t join in.’ (S10)

‘Sometimes he comments on something typical of someone in class, and most of us don’t know what it’s about.’ (S11)

When a student did not understand or welcome the teacher’s humour, it could also negatively affect the way the teacher and the subject he/she was teaching were perceived by that student. This was shown in S3’s saying that ‘when I don’t like a story, I don’t like the teacher either, and maybe the subject.’

Apart from the effects on the classroom atmosphere or on the teacher’s image, students also mentioned the effects humour might have on their comprehension of the lesson and their retention of information. S4, S5, and S6 told the researcher that they remembered the observed lesson more than other lessons because ‘we laughed, the lesson was fun, and we learnt a lot of vocabulary’ (S4), that lesson helped to ‘increase the vocabulary’ (S6) and ‘develop our skill of using words by playing’ (S4), and ‘that lesson was very relaxing, easier to acquire and remember more words’ (S5). Likewise, S10 shared that the atmosphere during her teacher checked previous lessons at the beginning of class was ‘quite heavy’, but when her teacher used his humorous comments, somehow she felt her memory came back to her.

In short, students’ responses to Question 3 revealed that teachers’ use of humour could have both positive and negative effects on a lesson, with the most frequently mentioned being making students relaxed and the atmosphere less
stressful. Other positive effects included making students feel closer to teachers and helping them to remember or to recall lessons better. The negative effects mentioned were that too much humour might distract students from the lesson or might lose its attraction, and irrelevant humour might not be understood and welcome as expected by teachers.

4.4.4. Question 4: The importance of humour in foreign language learning

Most of the interviewed students responded that humour was important in foreign language learning to some extent. Their opinions ranged from the idea that humour ‘supports the teaching and learning’ (S3), ‘it is necessary’ (S2) to ‘not only Vietnamese or foreign subjects, you can use humour in every topic or subject’ (S7). Explaining their responses, S2 shared his experience of a pronunciation class at a foreign language centre, where he found it very difficult to imitate the American accent. The teacher of that class used humour in examples and stories to help the learners overcome the difficulties, and S2 said that ‘we learn a lot from that.’ S3 said that humour was relaxing, and it might bring about ‘something applicable in the lesson.’ A number of other students mentioned possible effects of humour as reasons for its position in foreign language learning:

‘Beside traditional ways of teaching, we must create innovative ways to help students learn more effectively. And I think using humour in teaching is an effective way.’ (S8)

‘Using humour in foreign language learning will help students learn more effectively, and they don’t feel sleepy.’ (S7)

‘It helps the teacher to increase students’ comprehension, lightens the classroom atmosphere, helps students perceive their teacher as friendly and more approachable.’ (S9)
It is interesting to note that even when understanding humour was challenging for some students, they still thought that they could benefit from teachers’ humour, as S11 shared:

‘Sometimes the teacher may use an anecdote that we don’t understand. But later we can ask, and he/she explains it again, so we can get more from the point. We may feel distressed and annoyed at the time, but after that we can learn more.’

However, we should remember what S10 and this very student – S11 – said in their responses for Question 3 about them not being able to ‘join in’ and appreciate humour which was unfamiliar or difficult to understand. Therefore, it may be a worthwhile caution for teachers using humour: it is not always the case when students have a chance (or the willingness) to ask later, and teachers have a chance to explain again. Then, it is more likely that students’ experience of humour may stay at being ‘distressed and annoyed at the time’, and not turning into ‘learn more’ (S11) after that, which is certainly not a desirable outcome of teachers’ use of humour.

### 4.4.5. Question 5: Students’ experience of effective humour uses by teachers

All the interviewed students, when recounting an instance in which their teachers use humour effectively, mentioned the fact that the humour was more or less related to the lesson they were learning at the time. This clearly shows the need for humour used in class to be relevant or to illustrate the learning points. Another common feature in students’ stories was that they confirmed what they said previously about positive effects of humour by mentioning that humour helped them to relax, or to understand the lesson more quickly and remember the main points in the lesson more easily.
Recalling a time when a teacher’s humour made students relax, S2 shared that on learning that a class member was ill, his teacher told the class the conversation between him and a doctor when he also had the same illness, with lots of funny exchanges. Since that teacher was usually strict, according to S2, many students felt stressed when he checked previous lessons. However, S2 felt that ‘when he tells us the story, we feel relieved. The level of stress is reduced’ and ‘it is a good start of the lesson.’ S3 also liked it ‘when the class is too rigid or stressful, the teacher tells a joke’ or ‘funny stories’ about ‘situations [her] teacher or his/her colleagues face in their work.’ This made him more personal to his students. This was also what S6 and S4 said about their teachers in high school, who ‘was very humorous’ and ‘used many methods to make students relax’ (S6) or who ‘was generally strict’ but ‘when he was teaching, he also joked, laughed, and made humorous comments, making the class less tense’ (S4).

The effective use of humour by teachers not only made the classroom atmosphere more relaxing, but it could also assist students’ comprehension of the lesson. The teacher in S4’s story not only made the class less tense, but at the same time ‘the lesson was interesting, and [we had] more effective learning’ (S4). In S6’s story, ‘beside the lessons in the coursebook, she [her teacher] also gave humorous examples for students to understand more fully.’ S7 shared another interesting story about how a humorous example could help students to remember a learning point:

‘The teacher taught about the life cycle of a project or a product. He compared this to the life of a girl. At her early 20s, she could have a strategy for her life, where marriage is not the top priority but study and career. But in her late 20s, she may have other priorities than career, and so on. Likewise, a product has its lifetime and accordingly its strategies. That example drew our attention, and we felt interested in it. [...] We could understand easier, since there are similarities between a product’s life cycle and a girl’s life. [...] Students could imagine and visualise the concept easily, since a girl is something concrete and close. And then we could remember that concept longer.’ (S7)
With this story, S7 affirmed that her teacher’s humour motivated students, increased their attention and sparked their interest in the lesson.

Similar stories of teachers using humour to help students understand and remember the lesson more easily came from S9 and S10:

‘Once, a teacher taught us tenses. To make the class more interesting, she asked us to participate in a role-play task, in which she herself played 2 roles at the same time. [...] She used a lot of non-verbal language. [...] We were very interested in that activity, and the lesson was understandable.’
(S9)

‘One teacher in high school, when teaching vocabulary, compared the pronunciation of some English words with Vietnamese ones. That made us laugh, and we remembered those words very clearly.’
(S10)

From students’ responses, it is safe to say that for humour to be effective in making students relaxed and helping them understand or remember the lesson more easily, it has to be related to the lesson. After all, that is the very feature of humour that leaves an impression in students, as S8’s comment on her experience of effective humour from teachers, ‘I can’t remember clearly, but it’s something related to the subject, to the topic.’

4.4.6. Question 6: Students’ experience of ineffective humour use by teachers

Most of the students were against teachers’ making fun of an individual class member by criticising them, imitating their accent, or commenting on their appearance or incompetence. For example, according to S1, ‘the teacher’s humour is ridiculous and extravagant. [...] the humour causes discomfort or confusion.’ ‘Ridiculous’ was also the word used by S4 to describe when ‘some teachers speak ill of somebody else or criticise to make fun.’ Another example
came from S9, who said she ‘feel[s] a bit annoyed when a teacher tries to be funny by imitating somebody’s voice, for example the accent of people from the North.’ More importantly, the experience of S2 showed that when teachers used humorous comments to criticise students, there was a thin line between them being funny and being hurtful to the student(s) involved:

‘A student has a bad habit, and the teacher criticises that student. But unfortunately, he criticises in a funny way, and the student doesn’t feel comfortable with the joke, or overreacts to the joke. I had this experience in high school. A student often came to class late. One day, the teacher said to the student, ‘Did your mother teach you to wake up early?’ The student didn’t say anything, but later, talking to me, he said that he was angry.’ (S2)

It seemed that whether the criticism in the form of humorous comments were perceived as such depended much on students’ character as well as the teacher-student relationship.

Some other students found teachers’ humour ineffective when it was repetitive, or there was simply too much humour. S6 indicated that ‘some teachers have a joke or a story that they keep telling, then students have to force a smile’, and S10 shared her experience with a teacher who ‘often makes class relaxed with his humour’ but ‘that day […] maybe he was too happy, and he told funny stories all the time. The class got bored and didn’t want to study anymore.’ These are useful points for teachers trying to integrate humour in the classroom.

The remaining students did not welcome certain types of humour that they did not like: ‘the teacher […] talks about sensitive topics. For example, sex.’ (S8), ‘I don’t like stories related to sex’ (S2); or simply had no impression of the ineffective use of humour: ‘I can’t remember now, because we normally don’t pay attention to ineffective and unimpressive use of humour’ (S7). Furthermore, S5 suggested that using humour might not bode well for some teachers: ‘There are
also some teachers who do not have a sense of humour. They sort of try to make the class feel fun, but we do not feel so.’

In short, students considered teachers’ humour ineffective, or even counterproductive, when it was used to hurt somebody, when it was overused, and when it was about topics that students did not find appropriate.

4.4.7. Question 7: Students’ preferred types of humour

Question 7 was one of the novel questions that were examined empirically for the first time in the EFL context. Students’ responses to this question were quite varied, which could be expected. Funny stories and humorous comments were the two most popular types of humour among the interviewed students.

S1’s and S2’s choices included jokes, funny stories, funny gestures, and humorous comments. S2 added that with ‘quite complicated stories’, teachers may use Vietnamese, and in other cases, ‘like with synonyms and antonyms, the teacher can tell us in English.’ S3, S4 and S5 chose funny stories and humorous comments. S3 preferred English humour ‘if [she] can understand it all.’ A notable point about S3 was that she said even when she did not understand English humour fully, she might gradually understand it if the teacher explained more. These students preferred humour related to the lesson, because ‘when we think of the story, we’ll also think of the lesson’ (S5).

Examples or stories related to the topic she was studying were also the choices of S7. She added that ‘most important is the teacher’s words and intonation, how he/she conveys humour’ because ‘some people are simply lacking the ability to
draw others into a story.’ In contrast, S8 thought ‘it isn’t necessarily a story. A teacher can ad-lib at some points during the lesson, with a comment for example.’ Explaining her choice, S8 said, ‘that can catch students off-guard and make them feel fun.’

Other preferred types of humour included puns (S9), body language (S10) and metaphors (S11):

‘I myself love puns. I think they’re intellectual and smart. You must have a wide knowledge, and you must be quick-minded to think of the implications. Moreover, puns provide useful connections to the culture and language we’re studying.’ (S9)

‘I like metaphors. Maybe because I like to think deeply. Sometimes my teacher says something that I just understand the surface, and my classmates laugh, but I can’t understand why. That makes me curious to know more about why people laugh, about metaphors.’ (S11)

These students’ explanations showed that challenges in appreciating certain types of humour could in fact increase the attraction of those types. However, teachers should be cautious, since obviously this did not apply to all kinds of students.

A final remarkable note about students’ preferences regarding humour came from S6, when she said, ‘I think teachers should also create the condition for students’ interactions, like when a student makes the class laugh.’ Her idea showed that some students would want to be involved in humour making and using, and they should ‘be encouraged to create humour for themselves.’

4.4.8. Question 8: Inappropriate types or content of humour

Students’ responses to this question confirmed their views of ineffective use of humour in 4.4.6. For example, a number of students said that humour related to
politics and religion is not appropriate to be used in class (S1, S4, S5, and S6), ‘because they are personal matters’ (S4).

Students’ viewpoints on humour related to sex were more divided. While S3 and S8 straightforwardly said they disapproved of sex-related stories and S6 said a teacher should not use funny stories related to sex, S5 said it was OK to mention sex because ‘students have learnt about it’, and S4 said ‘sex can be used with students, because we are mature, we can hear that, and it creates much fun.’ Swear words were another off-limits content, in other students’ opinion.

Beside certain content of humour, students also warned against the use of some humour types, or the specific manners when a teacher employed humour in class. These included funny comments that might turn out to be offensive (S2), and making fun of a student on their personal information (S1) or appearance and incompetence (S4, S5, S6). Explaining their opinion, S5 said ‘that person may feel embarrassed, and psychologically hurt, and they don’t want to study anymore.’ Showing her agreement, S6 added that ‘the person commented on will feel isolated from others. They feel distant and lonely.’ However, S6 said that whether to use such comments ‘depends on the person’s character’: it was inadvisable to do so with sensitive students, but maybe acceptable with ‘not so sensitive people’ who ‘want to receive such comments to improve.’ Overuse of humour was also considered inappropriate:

‘Sometimes the teacher spends too much time on funny stories, like 15-20 minutes, then students may feel that the teacher is not serious about the lesson.’ (S2)

‘Teachers telling stories in Vietnamese too much, or wandering from the English issue or topic at that time.’ (S4)
'If humour is used all the time, maybe students will no longer respect the teacher. It can also affect students’ attitude towards that subject. They may think the teacher is easy, and then don’t take the subject seriously.' (S8)

The complication level of humour and the timing of when to use humour were other concerns when students commented on the appropriateness of humour in class:

'Sometimes teachers’ humour can be quite complicated, or it’s something the teacher is knowledgeable about, but students can’t grasp the ideas and don't find it funny. And humour should not be used when students are concentrated on the lesson, or are interested in the lesson. It can ruin that atmosphere or momentum.' (S7)

This means that teachers’ humour should be adjusted to students’ level and the class atmosphere. Students also cautioned against humour on sensitive topics and the excessive use of humour, while humour on sex received mixed responses.

4.4.9. Extras: What teachers should do to ensure the effective use of humour

During the interviews, students offered suggestions about what they think teachers should do to ensure their use of humour is effective, not inappropriate. These suggestions were useful tips for teachers when introducing humour appropriately. The first step was to ‘choose the suitable audience’ (S3), which she clarified as ‘understand the audience.’ S9 shared this idea, saying that ‘the teacher should pay attention to the kinds of students in class.’ This was also S4’s idea, when he said that ‘a teacher should use humour appropriate for each type of students.’
The next step was to choose what to present, as S3 put it, ‘maybe this story for this class, and another for another class.’ The humour ‘should be relevant to the topic’ (S10), and the content ‘should be something close to students, and they’re interested in it. That can be current trends or hot topics. Students will pay more attention then.’ (S7). S8 showed her agreement with S7 when adding that ‘the topics [...] are close to students and meet the needs of students.’ In other words, students would like teachers to conduct needs analysis before using humour.

An interesting point about what teachers could do with their humour arose when S1 asserted, ‘a sense of humour is very important, but we can also improve on humour.’ To support his quite particular idea, S1 said he did not think a sense of humour was inborn and could not be trained or learnt, and ‘we can improve by watching funny videos or comedies, reading funny stories, and trying to make ourselves funnier.’ Since some authors advocated the training of a sense of humour (Morrison, 2008; Tamblyn, 2005) and the issue of whether a sense of humour could be trained or learnt also came up in interviews with teachers, it is worthwhile making a note here of this student’s opinion and making comparisons with teachers’ opinions later.

In short, students suggested that teachers should try to understand their students, to know what students were interested in, and to sharpen their own sense of humour through regular exposure to humorous content.

4.4. Chapter summary

This chapter presents results from students’ responses in the questionnaire and in the interviews, showing their perceptions of the role(s) and position of humour in learning in general and foreign language learning in particular, their feelings
and reactions towards teachers’ use of humour in a lesson, their experiences with teachers’ humour, and their preferences regarding the use of humour by teachers. The interviews elaborated questionnaire responses, and results from the two data collection instruments were consistent.

The results show that the majority of students welcome teachers’ use of humour in class, which can help students to be more relaxed and/or to understand and remember the lessons more easily. The use of humour in the foreign language classroom was considered to increase students’ interest in and motivation to learn the foreign language. A teacher using humour is perceived by these students as more personal and more approachable, while still professional. The conditions for teachers’ humour to be effective are that it should be related to the lesson, should match with students’ interests and level of English, should be of a moderate amount, and should not offend anyone, especially students present at the time. Some students also suggested students’ engagement in humour in the classroom. This could be a direction for studies in future on humour and students’ involvement in creating a relaxing and conducive classroom environment.

In both the questionnaire and the interviews, students revealed their preferred types of humour, which was one of the new findings in this study. Although many of them found English humour challenging, the majority of the students still preferred English humour to Vietnamese humour to be used in an English class. Funny stories and humorous comments were the two most popular types of humour with students. There was a match between students’ preferences and teachers’ use of humour: humorous comments were the most commonly used type of humour among participating teachers, while funny stories also featured high on the ranking of teachers’ preferred types.
The next chapter presents teachers’ perspectives on the issue of humour in foreign language teaching, and reports on their actual use of humour in their teaching.
CHAPTER 5: RESULTS FROM TEACHERS

5.1. Introduction

In this chapter, the results from participating teachers are presented. First, there are the reports of teachers’ use of humour in the observed lessons. The number of times a teacher attempted to use humour, the types of humour attempted, and the effects of that teacher’s humour as perceived by the researcher/observer are described. In the next part of the chapter (5.3), the results from interviews with the teachers are presented. The responses are divided into two categories: responses from (a) teachers that used and (b) teachers that did not use humour in the observed lessons. There are 23 teachers in the group that used humour, and 7 teachers that did not. For each group, teachers’ responses to the interview questions are synthesised and analysed in order to show the common patterns that are present among teachers’ opinions regarding the themes covered in the interview.

5.2. Results from observations

In total there were 30 teachers observed. For teachers’ features, see Table 3.1. The reports below summarise the field notes from the observed lessons.
5.2.1. **Teacher 1 (T1)**

The researcher observed T1 teaching the lesson of learning and acquisition to sophomores studying a four-year bachelor degree in English teaching in the course of English Language Teaching (ELT) theories and approaches. T1 used a great deal of humour during the class: most was humorous comments (ten times), but there was also physical humour (two times) and a funny sound (one time). In the case of humorous comments, five were on classroom interactions with students, two were on the class environment, two were on the lesson content, and one was on the material. T1 had an easy-going style of teaching, although he was quite demanding while checking students’ comprehension of the previous lesson and when students answered his questions in class. His use of humour was distributed throughout the lesson, not on any one specific portion. This use of humour was welcomed by students: the researcher noted six times in which there was collective laughter, considered indicative of positive reactions from students.

T1’s humorous comments, as was confirmed later in the interview, were often disguised in the form of ‘mock threats’, such as ‘That is why so many have failed this course’ or ‘You had better perform well, or you will suffer severely.’ It seemed that there was an unspoken understanding between T1 and his students with regard to these ‘threats’, so that students did not take the comments too seriously. Instead, the threats acted as short breaks during the lesson, when students heard them and laughed heartily.

5.2.2. **Teacher 2 (T2)**

The researcher observed T2’s speaking lesson with freshmen studying for a four-year bachelor degree in Business English. This was a lively lesson, in which students were engaged in various pair-work and group-work activities. The students were ready to contribute ideas when T2 elicited, and they were willing to participate in conversations and role-playing tasks. This might result from T2’s
use of humour: once she made a funny sound during an interaction with students, once she used physical humour when explaining a point in the lesson content, and seven times she made humorous comments on the lesson content, the interactions in class, or the equipment in the classroom. The researcher’s overall impression of the lesson was that students were comfortable speaking, which was not a very common feature of English classes in Vietnam.

The insertion of humorous comments into Business English tasks which were prone to be serious and formal seemed to help students view the tasks as more light-hearted and manageable. Five times during the lesson students showed their positive reactions to T2’s humour through collective laughter. However, there were also three times when they showed neutral or no reactions to their teacher’s attempts at humour. Since the pace of the lesson in general, and the pace at which T2 produced her humorous comments on these occasions in particular was quite quick, it was possible that some, if not most, students failed to catch the comments and/or grasp their implications, hence their neutral or no reactions.

5.2.3. **Teacher 3 (T3)**

The lesson of T3 was a reading one with students in their second year of a two-year college degree in Business English. This lesson was the second part of a unit on protecting wildlife. In the first part, students had known the names of many animals. These were the focus of a game that T3 invited her students to play at the beginning of the lesson: students were to look at an animal’s picture and describe it, without saying the animal’s name to their partner; the partner would then try to guess the name. In the interview after the lesson, T3 indicated that she intended to give the conventional previous lesson checking a twist by employing an activity that was likely to generate a lot of laughter. It actually did. Students had a lot of fun during this activity, as they thought of creative ways to describe an animal using both language and gestures. This was a useful
pragmatic experience, where students strived for alternative means to make
themselves understood. It was also an enlightening example for the researcher
of how students could be involved in making their own learning experience a
more enjoyable one. Students certainly walked out of this activity and into the
new lesson with a lifted spirit and an easygoing classroom atmosphere.

During the lesson itself, the occasions on which T3 used humour were rare.
Three times she made humorous comments on the lesson content (once) and
classroom interactions (two times). Once she repeated a student’s
mispronunciation, apparently as a ‘recast’ technique to correct that student’s
mistake, but also triggering collective laughter around the class. It was not certain
whether T3 intended to make fun of the student in that incident. However,
considering the seeming goodwill in the relationship between T3 and her class, it
was likely that, even if she did intend to do so, her repetition was not taken too
seriously and did not negatively affect the way she appeared in students’ eyes.
The researcher’s interview with some of the students of T3’s class after the
lesson confirmed this point; none of them mentioned her making fun of an
individual class member. In total, T3’s attempts at humour received students’
positive reactions three times, and there was one neutral reaction.

5.2.4. **Teacher 4 (T4)**

T4 taught a translation class of juniors in a four-year bachelor degree in Business
English. This class required students to translate texts both ways between
English and Vietnamese. Usually, students did their translation at home and then
received feedback from T4 in class; there were also occasional quick in-class
translation tasks. This learning and teaching style rendered it natural for the
teacher to make a lot of comments during a lesson – a feature that was reflected
in T4’s heavy use of humorous comments among her attempts at humour.
Another notable feature of this class was that T4 had taught them in their
previous years in courses other than Translation. This fact had helped to build a
mutual trust and understanding of learning and teaching style between T4 and her students, and to make her appear more approachable to these students. All these factors facilitated T4’s use of humour with this class and the students’ appreciation of her humour.

T4 gave feedback by showing a student’s translation on the screen and reading out a sentence; she then invited students to comment on the translation and to offer their own version. After a quick discussion, T4 and her students reached an agreement as to which was the best way to translate the sentence, and then they moved on to another one. During the whole lesson, T4 made eleven humorous comments, the majority of which were on lesson content (eight times), followed by comments on classroom interactions (two times) and on the broader context of Vietnam (once). T4’s comments were mainly on incidents of students’ translations sounding awkward or unnatural in either English or Vietnamese. These awkward translations were themselves likely to appear funny. Therefore, when T4 drew students’ attention to them or highlighted the possible misunderstanding that might arise from them, it was natural for students to laugh, including the authors of those translations. This may be seen as incidents of laughing at one’s own mistakes after distancing oneself from those mistakes. There was also one time when T4 used a Vietnamese sound to trigger laughter. In total, students reacted positively to ten of her attempts at humour, and neutrally to the remaining two.

5.2.5. **Teacher 5 (T5)**

The researcher observed T5 during her lesson of Introduction to Discourse Analysis (DA), within the course of Discourse Analysis for juniors in a four-year bachelor degree in English Teaching. Unlike T4, this was the first semester that T5 had worked with this class. Moreover, the lesson was taught in English only. In this lesson, T5 introduced key concepts in DA to students, accompanied by examples. Although the majority of her attempts at humour came under the form
of humorous comments (nine out of the total of ten), in a similar manner to T4, this teacher did use a funny story at the beginning of the lesson to illustrate a point. In the interview with the researcher afterwards, T5 admitted that she had deliberately chosen to include the funny story in her teaching materials with the intention of creating interest and motivating her students (besides its function as an example). As noted by the researcher, the funny story went down well with T5’s students, thus it was a successful incident of humour. Among the nine humorous comments T5 used during the lesson, seven were on lesson content and two on classroom interactions. Students generally reacted positively to T5’s humour: seven times there was collective laughter around the class; and, students actively contributed their ideas to the lesson and answered T5’s questions with enthusiasm. The researcher’s overall impression was that there was a relaxed atmosphere in class. Students were comfortable and accepting.

5.2.6. Teacher 6 (T6)

T6 taught a writing course for sophomores in a four-year bachelor degree in English Teaching. In this course, students learned to organise and write short essays of various types, such as descriptive, narrative, expository or argumentative. T6 had also taken this class for another writing course in the previous semester. Notably, there were no attempts at humour made during the observed lesson. The researcher’s overall impression was that students were not particularly bored with the lesson, but they were not very interested either. The fact that the lesson focus was on ‘technical’ matters, such as writing the topic sentence of a paragraph or the transitional sentence between paragraphs, seemed to limit the opportunities to use humour.

In the interview, T6 stated that she did not think the nature of her writing course was appropriate for humour to be incorporated; but she acknowledged she was not a humorous person herself, and she hardly ever used humour in other
courses she taught. This teacher’s viewpoint might explain the absence of humour in the observed lesson.

5.2.7. **Teacher 7 (T7)**

T7’s class was a History of English Literature one for sophomores in a four-year bachelor degree in Business English. The observed lesson was on poems and dramas with the topic of modern times. Learning about literature in another language is always challenging for students, and it was even more so for these students due to a perceived mismatch between the course and the focus of their training in Business English. Thus, as stated by T7 in the interview, it was essential to somehow motivate students and to keep their attention during the lessons. T7 used humour several times during the lesson for this purpose. Three times she used teaching materials that were likely to generate laughter: 2 poems containing funny sounds and an extract from the movie “Pygmalion: My fair lady.” At three other times, T7’s humour was on the lesson content: once she used a creative stanza composed by students to illustrate a point about the structure of a poem, once she presented the Cockney dialect’s differences from the Queen’s English and asked students to find some equivalent differences among Vietnamese dialects, and once she used a pun, which was well-suited for a literature lesson. There were no recorded incidents of humour about classroom interactions, maybe due to the fact that T7 virtually always directed her questions to the whole class, rather than individual students.

T7’s humour was mainly present at the beginning and the end of the lesson. It seemed that she wanted to arouse students’ interest first, and then tried to keep them alert or wake them up towards the end of a demanding lesson. Her efforts were appreciated: 5 times students showed positive reactions, compared to the one occasion generating only a neutral reaction.
5.2.8. **Teacher 8 (T8)**

T8 taught an Interpretation class for juniors in a four-year bachelor degree in Business English. Students learned how to act as interpreters in conversation situations. To create materials for this purpose, T8 asked students to form groups and make video clips in various contexts. The characters in these clips, played by students themselves, engaged in conversations about different topics. Subsequently these clips would be played in class, and the conversations in them interpreted by students from other groups. Normally, students would try to make their clips as surprising and humorous as possible. These instances could be seen as a case of visual humour initiated by students and encouraged by the teacher.

The observed lesson was particularly lively and one full of laughter. T8 had taught this class in the previous semester, and successfully built a mutual trust and understanding with students regarding his teaching style and also his humour style. The lesson, then, was sprinkled with T8’s attempts at humour used mainly to keep students’ attention and interest. The main type of these was humorous comments: three times comments were made on the materials, and seven times on classroom interactions. T8 also used physical humour once, involving an exaggerated beckoning gesture towards a student and a declaration of mock punishment (three times). These “punishments”, either in the form of subtraction from a group’s score or ‘compulsory tasks’, that a student must do at the end of the course, were collectively understood as T8’s attempts at humour rather than as genuine punishment. Therefore, students appeared to be very relaxed during the lesson, and they responded to T8’s questions or requests with enthusiasm. There were even occasions when students initiated humour directed at either T8 or the lesson content – a sign of positive class dynamics among this cohort of students. Students also showed that they welcomed and enjoyed T8’s humour by laughing collectively and by following T8’s comments with their own
responses. In fact, there was only one occasion when T8’s attempt at humour was met with virtually no reaction from his students. However, it was noticeable to the researcher that, although T8 appeared so friendly and funny to students, the class discipline was still maintained and students still focused on the tasks at hand when signalled to do so; they did not drift away in their own enjoyment of the fun.

5.2.9. **Teacher 9 (T9)**

T9’s class was a British Culture one for students in their final year in a two-year college degree in Business English. The observed lesson was on social customs in the UK. Lessons on culture are especially fertile grounds for humour, considering the differences between cultures and the misunderstandings and/or embarrassment such differences entail. T9’s lesson was a typical example of employing culture-related humour. Although T9 mainly lectured throughout the lesson, her lecture was interspersed with attempts at humour in various forms. The most common type of humour was humorous comment. T9 made eight comments during the lesson, seven of which were on classroom interactions and one on the lesson content. The lesson content itself received eight attempts of humour. Besides humorous comment, there were physical humour (two times T9 manipulated her voice to create an exaggerated intonation), jokes (one in English and one in Vietnamese), and funny stories (three times – T9 told students stories about her own experiences twice and a popular funny story once). A noticeable feature in T9’s use of humour was her recovery strategy after one of her jokes was not well received by students. Having noticed that her students did not laugh after a joke, T9 asked them, ‘Do you understand?’ to which students said yes; then she asked, ‘So why don’t you laugh?’ This half-appeal half-threat itself said in a mock serious manner made student burst into laughter. This incident demonstrated how it may be better for a teacher to look into the matter
immediately and try to rectify it should an attempt at humour be not very successful, rather than simply ignore it.

Except for this occasion, students reacted positively towards T9’s humour thirteen times, and neutrally on only two occasions. On one occasion students actually followed up T9’s humorous comments and added their own funny ideas. In general, students seemed to welcome T9’s humour and enjoy the lesson, and the classroom atmosphere was relaxing.

5.2.10. Teacher 10 (T10)

T10 taught a class of British and American Literature to juniors in a four-year bachelor degree in Business English. The observed lesson was about the short story ‘In Another Country’, by Hemingway. As noted above, literature in another language is always challenging for students, and this class was not an exception. However, unlike T7, T10 did not employ much humour in their lesson. She explained the reason, in the interview afterwards, that the theme of the story (war) was grave and serious, thus she did not want students to be put in a mood that she deemed inappropriate for the solemnity in the story. Nonetheless, there were still seven humorous comments made on the lesson content (three times) and on classroom interactions (four times). These comments were made during two sections of the lesson: at the beginning, when T10 presented the background of the author and the story; and at the end, when she asked students to answer comprehension questions about the story. There was no humour involved when T10 and the class analysed the plot, the characters, and the events in the story.

In general, students reacted positively to T10’s humorous comments on four occasions, and neutrally in the remaining three. However, laughter from students was scattered and not too hearty. It is doubtful, then, that the story to be learnt and/or the serious mode with which T10 chose to employ to analyse it affected the students’ capacity to enjoy humour, since it might be difficult for them to switch between quite contradictory moods.
5.2.11. **Teacher 11 (T11)**

T11’s class was an Intercultural Communication one for sophomores in a four-year bachelor degree in English Teaching. T11’s teaching style was easygoing and relaxing, and she did not put much pressure on students during her lesson. However, as she admitted in the interview afterwards, she considered herself to be not a humorous person, and she felt she did not have the gift of making others laugh, even though she herself enjoyed humour very much. This was reflected in her limited use of humour during the observed lesson, even though communication across different cultures could give rise to much humour. T11 used three humorous comments: two on the lesson content and one on classroom interactions. She also used visual humour (a funny photo) and a joke. Unfortunately, T11’s attempts at humour were not met with very welcoming reactions from students. Only twice did they show positive reactions through collective laughter. In the remaining cases there seemed to be neutral reactions only. It was possible either that T11 was right about her ability with humour or, that her students simply did not catch the point in her humour. It also seemed to the researcher that T11 somehow stretched herself into using humour during the lesson; it was not natural to her and therefore, was not successful.

5.2.12. **Teacher 12 (T12)**

T12 taught a class of Reading for freshmen in a four-year bachelor degree in Business English. This was the first time she had worked with this class. In the observed lesson students read a text in the coursebook and did the activities that followed. The lesson started with T12 introducing the topic of the text and presenting some vocabulary items; then, students skimmed through the text to find the main ideas and answer questions related to the main ideas. After that, they read the text more thoroughly and answered the comprehension questions in the book. When students found it difficult to answer a question, T12 asked
some additional questions to assist them. No attempts at humour were made during the lesson.

5.2.13. **Teacher 13 (T13)**

T13 taught Writing to the same class as T12. She had also taught them Writing in the previous semester. In the observed lesson the students learned how to write an expository paragraph. First, they looked at some examples and tried to work out the structure of an expository paragraph. Then, they did some sentence rearrangement and sentence insertion tasks before practicing writing a paragraph of their own.

T13 included visual humour in her materials: once she showed a funny picture, and once she used a humorous paragraph as an example. In addition, she made five humorous comments: one on the lesson content, and four on classroom interactions. Students showed positive reactions to T13’s humour on five occasions, and neutral reactions on the remaining ones. However, they seemed to be more interested in the visual humour because they laughed more audibly at the picture and the humorous example than they did in response to T13’s comments. A notable point about this lesson is that, in the interview afterwards, T13 told the researcher that normally the class was more lively and relaxed, and it was probably the presence of the researcher that made them appear to be lacking in enthusiasm during the lesson observed.

5.2.14. **Teacher 14 (T14)**

The class of T14 was a General English one for freshmen in a four-year bachelor degree in Japanese. In these students’ training, English was the second foreign language, and thus not the course of highest priority. The observed lesson was at elementary level, and covered students learning how to talk about their personal details or activities using the Present Simple or Present Continuous tense. This explained the presence of the Vietnamese language in more than half
of T14’s attempts at humour. Four times T14 made humorous comments during the lesson, and all of them were on classroom interactions. Once he distorted the sound of a Vietnamese word to make it funny, which went down well with the students. In total, students showed positive reactions to T14’s humour three times, and neutral reactions two times. Students’ reactions seemed not to be very enthusiastic, possibly due to the fact that the students really were not familiar with T14’s style of humour (since this was the first time he taught them) or that they simply were not able to catch his point in the comments that were made in English.

5.2.15. *Teacher 15 (T15)*

T15 taught a class of Intercultural Communication for sophomores in a four-year bachelor degree in Translation-Interpretation. He had taught these students once in a previous semester with another course. In the observed lesson, students learnt about different ways of communicating across cultures and the influence of context on the actual forms chosen. They also participated in some role-playing tasks, starting with scripts for various communicative situations and then moving onto acting out without scripts. There seemed to be a good rapport between T15 and these students. In fact, all his attempts at humour were well received with collective laughter coming from students. The most common type of these attempts was the humorous comment, ranging from a comment made before class about the researcher and his recording equipment, a comment about the projector in the classroom, a comment on a student’s suggestion, to two comments on the lesson content. Exploiting the potential of the course, T15 also used a funny story about misunderstandings between people from different cultures to illustrate a point in the lesson, and incorporated some funny exchanges into his teaching materials. In the interview afterwards T15 said he had deliberately chosen to include these humorous materials because he thought they would ‘attract students’ attention more.’ The last type of humour T15 used in
this lesson was physical humour: twice he made funny gestures during classroom interactions. His students were willing to follow these examples when they had a chance to act out role-playing tasks, triggering a lot of laughter and indicating they were effective.

5.2.16. **Teacher 16 (T16)**

T16’s class was a Listening one for juniors in a four-year bachelor degree in English Teaching. The class observed was when students were listening to the listening section in the TOEFL Paper-based test. T16 was a well-respected teacher in the department both for his knowledge and teaching abilities, and he was also well-liked among students for his easygoing but effective teaching style although he was demanding in academic matters. He had taught this class twice in previous semesters, once also for listening and once for another course, so these students were familiar with T16’s style and had a good rapport with him.

A listening lesson could be quite passive if the teacher just played the recording: the students just listen and record answers, and then they check the answers together. However, T16 included a lot of humorous comments in the lesson, making students quite interested and attentive. Ten times he made comments on the lesson content, six times he made comments on classroom interactions, and two times he made comments on teaching materials. Like T15, at the beginning of the lesson T16 made a comment on the researcher’s observation and recording, explaining that the students would find themselves on TV in a documentary in the near future. This comment appeared to put students at ease about being observed, and helped them to behave normally during the lesson. Altogether, T16’s comments were like short breaks from the periods when students paid focused attention to the classroom recordings, making them refreshed to enter another listening task. T16’s attempts at humour were well received: only two times students showed neutral reactions to his humour, while they laughed a lot for the majority of times.
5.2.17. **Teacher 17 (T17)**

T17 taught a class of Phonetics and Phonology for students in their final year of a two-year college degree in Business English. This was generally considered a hard course for Vietnamese students, since they had to deal with many phonetic terms in what is possibly the most abstract branch of linguistics. The observed lesson was on nasals and other consonants. Although this was the first time T17 had taught this class, she tried to make this difficult course interesting to students. The lesson began with a creative procedure to check the previous lessons. In this activity, students were divided into two groups. Then, they listened to a vowel sound from a recording and rushed to the board to stick the sound’s symbol to its correct articulation position. After the students had finished, T17 asked them to take turns in pronouncing the sounds at the position shown on the board, while others judged whether they sounded like the original sounds in the recording. This part generated a lot of laughter, especially in cases where students misplaced the symbols, and thus made a totally different sound.

During the lesson, T17 made four humorous comments: three on the lesson content, and one on classroom interactions. Although not many compared to some other classes, her attempts at humour were well received by the students given the audible laughter. It seemed they wanted to show their appreciation for T17’s efforts to enliven an otherwise ‘dry’ course – T17’s term to describe her course in the interview after the lesson.

5.2.18. **Teacher 18 (T18)**

T18 taught a class of Writing for freshmen in a four-year bachelor degree in Translation-Interpretation. In this class, students learned to write a paragraph to describe a concept. T18 used a number of pictures and photos as examples during his presentation of a paragraph’s structure. One of the pictures and one other example in particular were perceived by students as funny, and they laughed heartily on seeing them. Besides these, T18 used five humorous
comments during the lesson: two on the lesson content and three on classroom interactions. In total, students showed positive reactions to T18’s humour on six occasions, and neutral reactions twice. In fact, students seemed willing to join in T18’s humour. In one task, students were asked to talk about their ideas for certain topics in front of the class. A student, being a Buddhist monk, volunteered to come forward to talk about love. This incident, together with T18’s comment on it, generated a lot of laughter around the class.

5.2.19. Teacher 19 (T19)
T19’s class was a Speaking/Listening one for freshmen in a four-year bachelor degree in Chinese-English. These students studied both Chinese and English, and on finishing their training, they would have a bachelor degree in Chinese together with a college degree in English, which they could use to enrol in the latter half of a four-year bachelor degree in English. These students’ English competence was noticeably lower than that of students majoring in English only at the same university. They were also quite passive in the observed lesson, although it was supposed to be one where they would listen and speak equally. T19 made some attempts at being humorous: three times she made comments on classroom interactions (e.g. on students’ actions, or students’ responses to her questions). However, it seemed that there was a lack of cooperation on the part of the students, and her attempts only received scattered smiles around the class. The overall impression was that the students were not to be very enthusiastic about the lesson as a whole; it was not just T19’s attempts at humour.

5.2.20. Teacher 20 (T20)
T20 taught a class of Technology in Language Teaching for juniors in a four-year bachelor degree in English Teaching. In this course students learned to use various forms of technology to enhance their teaching of English. The observed lesson was on web design. T20 had taught these students twice in previous
semesters with other courses. During the lesson, T20 made two humorous comments on the lesson content, and one on classroom interactions. In addition, he told a funny story related to the lesson. Unfortunately, his attempts at humour were not very well received: only once students produced some audible laughter after his comment, and it seemed that only T20 himself laughed after he told his funny story. It could be said that T20’s attempts at humour were generally a failure: they did not make the classroom atmosphere any more relaxing.

5.2.21. **Teacher 21 (T21)**

T21’s class was a Listening one for freshmen in a four-year bachelor degree in English Teaching. In the presentation of vocabulary before students listened to the recording T21 directed humour at himself, making students laugh by drawing two persons on the board: one thin (like him) and one muscular. He used the drawings to elicit words to describe one’s appearance, asking students which person looked like him. When a student suggested the word ‘skinny’, T21 feigned disappointment and rejection of the suggestion, which made his students laugh once more. This was an example of the combination between visual and verbal humour.

During the observed lesson, T21 also made five humorous comments: on the materials (once), the lesson content (twice), and classroom interactions (twice). These comments included the expansion of a tip mentioned in the recording in an unexpected way, the deliberate misunderstanding or interpretation of a point in the lesson, and the mock threat directed at students regarding their much-feared midterm test. In general, students reacted positively towards T21’s attempts at humour. Only once did they show neutral reactions to his comments. The overall classroom atmosphere was relaxing and comfortable.
5.2.22. **Teacher 22 (T22)**

T22 taught a class of Business English Reading for freshmen in a four-year bachelor degree in Business English. In the observed lesson students read a text in their coursebook and did the comprehension activities that followed. The lesson started with some guiding questions. Then, T22 introduced the topic of the text and presented some key vocabulary items. After students had read the text and done the exercises, T22 checked the answers either with individual students or with the whole class. There were no additional exercises/activities prepared or used by T22 in this lesson. There were also no attempts at humour made. In the interview afterwards, T22 stated that she found the topics of Business English not very suitable for using humour, and that she had tried to incorporate humour in her lessons once or twice before, but those attempts had not met with students’ cooperation and/or enthusiasm. Thus, she chose to drop humour out of her Business Reading class.

5.2.23. **Teacher 23 (T23)**

T23’s students were sophomores in a four-year bachelor degree in Accounting. English, to these students, was a ‘conditional’ foreign language unit, i.e. they had to study and pass this unit in order to graduate at the end of their training, but the grade of English would not count towards their overall grade. It was understandable, then, that these students’ competence in English was lower than that of students majoring in English, and their motivation in learning English was not high. The coursebook used in this class was ‘Developing Skills for the TOEIC Test’, which mainly covered the language points and skills (including test-taking techniques) for that test, rather than those required for everyday communication. T23 did not try to use humour in the observed lesson. She simply followed the order of exercises and activities in the book. Students seemed to know what they were to do, and did the exercises diligently, but without much, if any, enthusiasm. T23 said in the interview that it was always hard for her to use humour, since she
was not humorous and the business English nature of the activities in the coursebook did not facilitate the use of humour.

5.2.24. **Teacher 24 (T24)**

T24’s class was a Reading one for freshmen in a four-year bachelor degree in English Teaching. This was also the class that learned Listening with T21. In the observed lesson, a group of students prepared a chapter in the coursebook and presented it to the class. At the end of the group’s presentation, T24 would give feedback on their presentation and consolidate some key points in the chapter to the whole class. This practice of student presentations was intended by T24 as a form of ongoing assessment, which would be taken into account together with their term-end test results to decide their grade in the unit. However, this practice also minimised T24’s performance time in front of the class. The researcher only noted one attempt at physical humour, in the form of imitating animals’ sounds, and this during T24’s feedback time at the end of the lesson. The students showed positive reactions to this solitary incident of humour, though.

5.2.25. **Teacher 25 (T25)**

T25 taught a class of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) to sophomores in a four-year bachelor degree in Geography Teaching. The coursebook was ‘English for Geography’, an in-house compilation by the university. These students were like those studying with T23 in that English was just a ‘conditional’ foreign language unit for them. However, it was expected that since the materials were within their field of knowledge, they would have more motivation in learning English and would find learning English easier and more useful than when using materials for general English.

The observed lesson was a reading one. T25 followed a standard procedure of teaching a skill, with pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading stages. The students were not as active and willing to contribute ideas to the lesson as
students majoring in English. They often waited to be called upon to give an answer, rather than volunteering to do so. T25 tried to make the atmosphere more interesting by inserting three humorous comments on classroom interactions. These attempts were well received by students. However, the positive reactions seemed not to be as classroom-wide as in some other observed lessons, and some students seemed not to be able to catch the point in T25’s humour.

5.2.26. **Teacher 26 (T26)**

T26’s class was a Listening one for freshmen in a four-year bachelor degree in English Teaching. In the observed lesson, students listened to the recording and did the exercises in their coursebook. T26’s attempts at humour were mainly during the pre-listening stage, when she presented a number of vocabulary items that students would encounter in the recording. To do this, T26 used numerous photos and an exciting game in which students looked at a photo of an object and made gestures to help another student who did not see the photo to guess which object it was. This activity was an example of physical humour, and it actually triggered a lot of laughter among students. Although this was not humour produced by the teacher, it was intended humour that was facilitated and encouraged by T26 herself. As T26 told students during the observed lesson, this activity was a twist on another activity they were already familiar with in which students used spoken cues to assist their classmate’s guesses. This detail showed that T26 can switch between verbal and physical humour in her class.

During the guessing activity, the checking of students’ answers and the post-listening stage activities, T26 also made five humorous comments: three on classroom interactions and two on the lesson content. These attempts at humour were all welcomed by students with collective laughter.
5.2.27. **Teacher 27 (T27)**

T27’s class was a Business English Listening one for sophomores in a four-year bachelor degree in Business English. In the observed lesson, students listened to some recordings in a unit called ‘Takeovers and Mergers.’ During the pre-listening stage, T27 asked students to form groups and discuss some guiding questions. After that, the whole class listened to the recordings and did the exercises in the coursebook. During the lesson, there was only one time when T27 made a humorous comment on classroom interactions. However, this comment seemed to have no effect on students. Talking to the researcher after the lesson, T27 claimed that his students were mentally exhausted that day because they had sat a challenging midterm test in another class right before his class, making them unable to appreciate or join in any attempts at humour.

5.2.28. **Teacher 28 (T28)**

Like T25, T28 taught a class of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), but hers was a class of freshmen in a four-year bachelor degree in Physics Teaching. The coursebook was ‘English for Physics’, also an in-house compilation by the university. During the observed lesson, T28 made a number of attempts to enliven the classroom atmosphere. She used physical humour, in the form of her own funny gestures, three times: once when a student came into class late, once to help students visualise two electrodes, and once she pretended to be throwing a piece of chalk towards a student who gave a wrong answer to an easy question. T28 also made four humorous comments, all on classroom interactions, which acted mainly as reminders for students when they mixed English with Vietnamese, or when they used terms not appropriate for their field. These reminders were well received and, after laughing, students realised their mistakes and provided the correct answers without showing signs of being hurt by T28’s comments. The classroom atmosphere, therefore, was quite comfortable, and it seemed T28 had built a good rapport with these students.
5.2.29. **Teacher 29 (T29)**

T29’s class was a Business English Reading one for sophomores in a four-year bachelor degree in Business English. In the observed lesson, students read texts about management styles. T29 conducted the lesson in a standard way with pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading activities. She sought students’ ideas or comments in various activities throughout the lesson. However, there was only one humorous comment on the lesson content that showed T29’s attempt at using humour. This attempt received positive reactions from students, although the laughter was quite scattered. In general, the lesson was smooth and the students seemed to be in a neutral mood.

5.2.30. **Teacher 30 (T30)**

T30’s class was a Sociolinguistics one for juniors in a four-year bachelor degree in English Teaching. The nature of this unit made it a contender for real-life funny situations embedded in the lessons. The observed lesson was on a chapter called ‘Sex, politeness and stereotypes.’ During this lesson, T30’s performance time was not much, since a group of students took the stage to present about the topic, and she just gave comments on their presentation. Students’ efforts at using humour were obvious, though. They included some funny pictures, and a lot of humorous examples in their presentation, to the great enjoyment of their classmates. The atmosphere of the class was comfortable and relaxing.

In her comments, T30 inserted some humorous ones as well, either on the content of students’ presentation or on their presenting styles. These comments were received positively, and students seemed not to be hurt by T30’s comments. In the interview after the lesson, T30 said that when she lectured, she used humorous comments a lot, alongside jokes and funny stories/examples. This was quite believable, given the tolerance and welcoming attitude for humour that both T30 and her students showed in the observed lesson. It seems to the
researcher that T30’s tolerance for and tendency towards humour had encouraged her students to insert humour in their own presentation.

5.2.31. Summary of observations

The observations reported here reveal that the majority of the teachers in this study made efforts to use humour during their lessons. Humour was used throughout the class time, but most frequently at the beginning as ‘icebreakers’ to set an easygoing mood for the lesson, and at the end of the lesson to rejuvenate students after they might have been worn out with their study. The most commonly used type of humour in the observed lessons was humorous comment. The comments could be on anything related to the lesson, the class, and/or the classroom: lesson content, students, teachers, students’ actions, students’ responses, classroom equipment, and such like. Other common types of humour included funny stories, funny examples, jokes, and funny pictures.

Teachers’ gender and teaching experience seems not to have affected their use of humour in class. In both groups of teachers, those that used and those did not use humour in the observed lessons, there were male and female teachers, as well as veteran and new teachers. However, a teacher’s personality and the lesson topic did affect the amount of humour used in the lessons, if any. There were teachers with an easygoing personality, who liked to smile and joke with students. Much more humour was used in these teachers’ lessons, compared to the lessons taught by the more serious type teachers. The effect of personality on a teacher’s humour was confirmed in their responses in the interviews with the researcher (see 5.3 below). More importantly, a lesson’s topic or the course itself could have a great impact on the employment of humour. ‘Dry’ courses (T17’s term) like Business Translation, Phonetics and Phonology, or Literature generally seemed to reserve very little space for humour, compared to such courses as Speaking or British and American Culture, where more light-hearted content and activities may be present. Even within a course, for example
Literature, a specific lesson, for example on a tragedy or a story with a solemn theme, may not naturally lend itself to the use of humour as much as a lesson on a comedy might.

The next section reports results from interviews, in which teachers explained their decisions regarding their use of humour both within and beyond the observed lessons (e.g. selecting and employing humour, preferred types of humour, and how to expand their humour repertoire), as well as shared their views on the roles of humour in foreign language teaching and on how to use humour effectively.

5.3. **Results from interviews**

In this section, teachers are divided into two groups: those who used humour and those who did not use humour in the observed lesson. Responses from teachers not using humour are presented first, followed by responses from the other group. Within each group, teachers’ responses are analysed in order to show the common patterns present in their opinions regarding the themes mentioned in the interview.

5.3.1. **Teachers who did not use humour**

There were 7 teachers who used none or virtually no humour during the observed lessons: 2 male teachers (T24 and T27) and 5 female teachers (T6, T12, T22, T23 and T29). These teachers taught a variety of students in English Teaching, Business English, or Accounting degrees. Their teaching experience ranged from two (T22 and T24) to fifteen years (T6). No relationship was found between teaching experience and teachers’ use of humour.
5.3.1.1. **The use of humour in their teaching:**

A notable common feature among these teachers was that when asked if they used humour in their teaching, all of them claimed that they did, at least sometimes, and that they usually received positive reactions towards their humour from students. T24 even said that he ‘usually’ used humour in his teaching, while T12 stated, ‘I try to include [humour] in my classes anytime I have an opportunity.’ The fact that no teachers said they never used humour may suggest that these teachers also realised some benefits of humour, and the observed lessons were simply occasions in which they had little chance to employ humour. Explaining this, T24 said that the observed lesson was for student presentations, and he only had little time at the end to make comments, hence the virtually non-existent teacher-initiated humour. Had he presented the lesson himself, T24 said, he would certainly have used humour. T27, also pointing to the specific context of the observed lesson, claimed that his students had just had a difficult midterm test before his class, and therefore were too tired to enjoy humour. In addition, T27 was also ‘tired and tense, because they were a bit late.’

Both T22 and T29 believed that the main obstacle for their use of humour during the observed lesson lay in the nature of the unit they taught, Business English Reading. Both said that the content of the reading texts was ‘dry and serious’, while students lacked the background in business to decode and appreciate the texts. Consequently, the learning task at hand might be too hard a mission for the students to think of, or enjoy, anything else. T22 added that the class she taught was ‘usually quiet, and […] not very active’, which suggested that it was not common for them to cooperate with T22 for an interesting classroom atmosphere.
In short, these teachers were not against using humour in teaching. On the contrary, they said they actually used humour, maybe on other occasions, just not in the observed lesson. According to these teachers, humour might be absent from a specific lesson due to the nature of that lesson, the preferred learning style of a certain class, or the environment in which the lesson was carried out. These comments confirmed the researcher’s observations of the lessons.

5.3.1.2. *The purposes of these teachers’ use of humour:*
Most of these teachers mentioned that when they used humour, it was to make students feel more relaxed, more interested in the lesson, more motivated and more encouraged to participate in the lessons. One teacher added that she used humour to help students remember the lesson more easily, while two other teachers stated that humour, especially humorous examples, was useful for them to help students understand difficult points in the lessons.

All the teachers believed that students wanted their teachers to use humour while teaching. Explaining this belief, T24 said, ‘because if a teacher doesn’t use humour, the class will be very boring and they [students] don’t want to study.’ According to T27, ‘most of the time students have to work under pressure’ and during a morning or an afternoon studying for as long as four and a half hours, ‘after the first lesson, they feel very tired. They expected the teacher to teach the last three periods more actively and humorously.’ Most of the teachers also said they could detect students’ reactions towards their humour and gauge whether they wanted humour through students’ laughter, facial expressions, or even explicit exclamations from more straightforward students.

5.3.1.3. *The perceived effects of these teachers’ humour:*
When asked if they thought the observed lesson would have been more enjoyable and effective had there been humour (or more humour) involved, all
these teachers said yes. All of them mentioned the effect of making students relaxed and the atmosphere comfortable. In a relaxed and comfortable class, students would ‘learn more effectively’ (T6) because ‘definitely using humour can help them understand the lesson’ (T22). Besides, when students are relaxed, ‘they can contribute to the lesson effectively and positively’ (T24), ‘they’ll forget their shyness’ and ‘they’ll involve more in the lesson’ (T27). Moreover, one teacher (T23) mentioned that the use of humour also made the teacher relaxed herself.

Five teachers mentioned another effect of humour: helping students to remember study points better. T12 said, ‘if you can make good use of that humour on the knowledge, students can remember that longer.’ Two other teachers gave more specific examples to illustrate the point made by T12:

‘When I give them humour in vocabulary, they enjoy it, they feel very interested […] they can remember the vocabulary faster and longer’ (T23)

‘It seems that students remember the jokes, remember some mini stories better than what you write on the board or what you say. So if you can combine, you teach something through a joke, it will help them memorize the most’ (T22)

Apart from the benefits of humour on academic matters, most teachers also mentioned the effect of humour on the teacher-student relationship. They asserted that using humour could improve this relationship by making the teacher appear closer and friendlier to students. Students will ‘feel it easy to talk to the teacher’ (T29), and ‘they can express themselves freely’ (T6).

However, some teachers warned against the excessive or inappropriate use of humour: ‘if they use too much, it [humour] can be negative’ (T12). These uses may make students bored, distract them from the lesson, hurt their feelings, or
even damage the teacher’s professionalism in students’ eyes. As some teachers put it:

‘Once a provincial student told me that a teacher usually told jokes, and they didn’t like it, because they saw it as a waste of time. That teacher used jokes to kill time.’ (T6)

‘Some ways of joking may be appropriate for a certain part of students, but some are not. For example, some students may think that the teacher’s joke is kind of childish, and it’s like some stupid jokes that some comedians play in some comedies.’ (T22)

In general, all these teachers believed that humour has an important position in foreign language teaching. Humour could be useful in relaxing students, creating a comfortable classroom atmosphere, assisting students’ comprehension and retention of knowledge, and bridging the gap between teachers and students. However, too much humour might prove to be counterproductive, which echoed students’ responses in the interviews.

5.3.1.4. Teachers’ thoughts on how to use humour effectively:

Only two teachers out of seven said they preferred to prepare humour in advance. The reasons for this preference were that ‘you’ll have less trouble in your teaching’ (T23) and ‘I want to be well-prepared to present humour. It’s very difficult for me to think of humour immediately in class’ (T24). The majority of these teachers said they used spontaneous humour more often, usually in the form of humorous comments. However, some of these teachers said sometimes they also prepared humour in advance, especially when the form of humour was a joke or a funny story to serve a specific function in their lessons, e.g. leading into the new lesson or illustrating a concept or a term. One teacher (T12) explained her preference for spontaneous humour as ‘it’s not easy [to prepare humour in advance], because it takes time, a long time to do it.’ Interestingly, together with T29, T12 also thought that a good sense of humour, or the good
use of humour, can be trained, which was contradictory to the common belief that a sense of humour was something innate:

'I think it can be trained, but in any educational classes for teacher training, I don’t think that we have that kind of lessons.' (T12)

'[Using humour] can be trained. I think it’s a skill, and a skill can be learnt.' (T29)

Talking about how to exploit humour in the best ways possible, all teachers shared the idea that humour should be related to the lesson at hand. As T27 put it, ‘we have to think of something humorous but has something to do with the lesson, not outside.’ This is reasonable, since these teachers wanted to employ humour to enhance students’ learning experience, not just humour for its own sake. Another point that received the agreement among these teachers was humour content, which they said should be suitable for students’ level and age. This requirement naturally led to the need of understanding one’s audience when one tried to use humour. Most teachers mentioned getting to know students’ tastes and preferences in order to choose suitable content. T29 even emphasised the need for teachers to ‘make a close relationship with students in class to have the trust’, suggesting that it would be more likely for teachers’ humour to be accepted if there was a mutual trust between teachers and students. Some teachers recalled incidents of their failure in using humour, highlighting the need for humour content to be suitable for students: T24 and T27 both mentioned occasions when students did not understand their humour because the words they used seemed to be beyond students’ understanding, while T29 described how students from the North of Vietnam did not understand her humour because their culture was different from that in the South.

Commenting on humour content and relatedness to the lessons, all these teachers agreed that there were certain taboos concerning humour in class. The
most frequently mentioned were humour on religions and politics. Other off-limits topics included humour on parent-child or teacher-student relationships, sex, and ghost stories.

Regarding materials, most of these teachers said when they were allowed to choose or to supplement their teaching materials, they would try to include humorous materials of various forms from jokes, funny stories to visual humour, especially when they wanted to illustrate some points in their lessons. Sources of humorous materials included books (T12), the Internet (T24), or personal repertoire of jokes (T6).

Except for the most frequently used humorous comments, these teachers’ preferences as to forms of humour were quite varied. The more frequently mentioned ones were jokes, funny stories, and visual humour (pictures or video clips). Physical humour (e.g. funny gestures, facial expressions, or exaggerated intonations) received preference from some teachers, while some others disliked and were against this form of humour in class. These preferences were consistent with what was shown in the observations.

5.3.1.5. **Section summary:**

Even though teachers in this group were not observed to use humour in their lessons, they all claimed that they used humour in their teaching in general. In addition, all of them supported the use of humour in foreign language teaching, asserting that humour was important in creating a relaxing, comfortable atmosphere and in helping students to understand and to remember points in the lessons. These teachers thought that for humour to be effective, it should be suitable for students and be related to the lesson being learnt. Their preferred
types of humour included humorous comments, jokes, funny stories, and visual humour (funny pictures and/or video clips).

5.3.2. Teachers who used humour
The group of teachers using humour during the observed lesson consisted of 23 teachers: 8 males and 15 females. These teachers taught a variety of students in English Teaching or Business English degrees, and General English or English for Specific Purposes (ESP) for students not majoring in English. Their teaching experience ranged from two to twenty-five years.

5.3.2.1. The perceived effectiveness of the lessons and teachers’ humour:
Twenty-two of these teachers (96%) considered the observed lessons effective in terms of students getting the key points or successfully demonstrating certain skills. Only one teacher (T14) said that the observed lesson was ‘not quite as effective as usual, because sometimes they [students] seemed to be inactive.’ This, according to T14, was due to the presence of the researcher in class. The agreement among teachers as to the effectiveness of the lessons suggested that the use of humour, if not adding to a lesson’s success, at least did not detract from its results.

Regarding their use of humour during the observed lessons, most teachers believed it was effective. They based their judgement on students’ laughter (e.g. T1, T5, T7, T21), their faces, eye contact and humorous responses (e.g. T8, T9, T16), or the overall relaxing atmosphere in class (e.g. T26, T28). Some teachers also mentioned students’ coming to class frequently and staying until the end of lessons, participating more enthusiastically in activities and expressing themselves more freely as indicators of the effectiveness of their humour. T4 even mentioned occasions when her students told her explicitly that they liked
her class because it was so relaxing. Teachers’ judgement of their humour coincided with the researcher’s overall impression of the observed lessons: where the teacher used humour, especially varied forms of humour, the classroom atmosphere was relaxing and students seemed to enjoy the lesson a lot. However, four teachers expressed their concern as to their humour not being as effective as expected: ‘sometimes the humour was in English and students could not get it in the first place’ (T19), stated that their humour was unintentional: ‘I want the students to be profound in thinking and quiet in mind. However, I may unconsciously use some kinds of humour to encourage them to take part in activities’ (T10), explained why they did not use more humour: ‘humour is not really relevant in that context […] it may not make sense and may make the class go off track’ (T20), or simply said that they were not really aware of their humour (T14).

Understandably, once teachers considered their use of humour more or less effective, students’ reactions to their humour as perceived by them ranged from neutral to positive. Not one teacher mentioned negative reactions from students. This may seem to be an overconfident judgement from teachers. However, it would be worthwhile to recall here that no interviewed students expressed negative feelings towards their teachers’ use of humour in the respective observed lessons. This consensus in teachers’ and students’ responses suggests that it is very likely that students actually appreciated their teachers’ efforts at making their learning a more pleasant experience.

5.3.2.2. **Teachers’ specific purposes in using humour:**
The specific purposes with which teachers used certain pieces of humour varied greatly. These teachers’ responses were more elaborate than those from teachers who did not use humour in the observed lessons. At the beginning of
the lesson, the purpose could be to draw students’ attention and lead into the lesson in an exciting way:

‘At the very beginning of the class, students looked tired and sleepy, and I wanted to create a comfortable and cheerful environment.’ (T3)

‘I’d like to warm up my class. I’d like to excite them at the beginning of the lesson, so that they will gain more knowledge.’ (T13)

‘Subconsciously I always want to make my lessons more interesting.’ (T15)

‘I can say that it inspires their curiosity, they’d want to find out what it is in the lesson, what concern it has with the picture.’ (T21)

During the lesson, the purposes of teachers’ humour could be to regain students’ attention, to explain a point, to encourage students to answer more confidently or participate more actively, or to make the atmosphere more relaxing:

‘Sometimes when you talk about business content all the time, it’s so boring. Then I use a joke, and they pay attention.’ (T2)

‘If I can give them some funny examples, it’ll be easier for them to understand the lesson and also to enjoy the lesson. So they’d be more interested in the lesson.’ (T5)

‘I can explain some technical terms humorously so that students remember them longer. When they think of that situation, they’ll remember.’ (T17)

‘By telling them some common jokes about the relationship between men and women, students found it interesting and they were more motivated to learn the poem.’ (T7)

‘When I ask them a question and I look in their eyes, I see they’re a bit worried […] they’re worried to answer, and I use my sense of humour to encourage them.’ (T10)

‘All teachers want to create a friendly atmosphere, because that means students will be more involved in the class […] if you create an atmosphere very casual, informal, friendly, like in a family, then they’d be more willing to talk, to share their ideas.’ (T4)

Talking about the overall purposes of their humour, most teachers mentioned these two: to make students relaxed, to increase students’ concentration, and to
help them learn more efficiently. Many teachers believed that these two purposes were interrelated, i.e. when students were relaxed, they could learn better:

'It made the lesson less tense [...] it's a bit exaggerated, but somehow again, it caused the students to laugh and made them remember this point.’ (T1)

'I can motivate my students. I give them a feeling of ease when they study with me. [...] I want my students to remember my lessons in a very comfortable, relaxing way.’ (T9)

'It's my style to use some kinds of humour during my teaching, because I think that it will help students to get the points in a very comfortable way, in order to get rid of the tiredness and stress they often have during long hours of their study.’ (T16)

'This is a better way to involve them [...] And I also want them to have a more enjoyable atmosphere.' (T17)

'My intention is to help students to relax because a writing lesson sometimes can be very serious, and the atmosphere is not very relaxing. So I try to use funny comments or other things to help them feel relaxed, so that they can open their minds, they can learn the lesson better.’ (T18)

'It makes the atmosphere quite friendly and relaxing and then somehow they can understand the key points of the lesson.’ (T28)

5.3.2.3. *Prepared or spontaneous humour, and humorous materials:*

Sixteen teachers (70%) said they preferred spontaneous humour, four (17%) liked both, and three (13%) preferred prepared humour. The teachers who preferred spontaneous humour believed that it was more natural to 'pick up' the fun on the spot, it was ‘difficult to prepare a joke’ (T3), or they were confident of their ability to use humour:

‘You can prepare for everything but the mood of the class. You may look at the class and realize that you can't use the prepared ones.’ (T2)

'We cannot plan the situations in class.’ (T4)

'Without preparations, I still can make students laugh.’ (T14)

'Mostly spontaneous, as prepared jokes often seem unnatural.’ (T19)

'I don’t often mean to do that, to say something humorously; I just do it naturally.’ (T28)
On the other hand, teachers who preferred prepared humour thought that it would be safer to have something ‘up their sleeves’ (T18) and it gave them more control over what happened in class, or it was simply their character that called for preparation. This confirmed responses from teachers observed not using humour:

‘Because I can’t know for sure if there are chances for me to use spontaneous humour, I must prepare some. It’s better to be prepared.’ (T5)

‘You have to prepare a lot at home [...] I’m a very quiet person in Vietnamese, not talkative and humorous. But in English, I can do it more easily. [...] I read through a lesson, and think at this part I can use humour.’ (T8)

‘When you prepare some humour in advance, you may be sure that the lesson will be interesting. Whether or not the spontaneous humour occurs doesn’t matter so much.’ (T18)

The last group of teachers said that their use of humour depended on the types: it was just natural to produce humorous comments spontaneously, but they would prepare for other types of humour, such as funny stories or visual humour. However, within this group, there were still teachers who said they found spontaneous humour more interesting because it was unexpected and surprising.

When sharing their preferences, some teachers brought up a notable point about spontaneous versus prepared humour: what started as spontaneous humour and went down well with students could be re-used and eventually became prepared humour, or what seemed to be spontaneous humour might in fact be the result of years of teaching experience – a clear case of ‘practice makes perfect’:

‘The thing is, if you do something again and again, it’ll be on your mind [...] When I said it [a joke] for the first time, it was spontaneous. However, I noticed the effectiveness of this joke, and after that, whenever I teach [that point] again, it becomes prepared.’ (T1)
‘If I have taught a class, and then I come to another class with the same lesson, I can expect certain moments when students make certain mistakes, then I can make humorous notes on them so that they don’t feel too embarrassed with their mistakes.’ (T4)

‘If you believe in using humour in teaching, although you say you’re unprepared for that, you do not plan for your humour very carefully, but it’s the result of your long experience in teaching. [...] So in a way, it’s prepared.’ (T16)

This point has important implications for language teaching, and will be discussed in the next chapter.

When asked whether they purposefully chose humorous materials to include in their lessons, fourteen teachers (61%) said yes, four (17%) said no, and five (22%) said both yes and no. It is worth noting here that the specific units and/or teaching places greatly affected teachers’ practice of including humorous materials in their lessons. While teachers in the first group taught in the departments that allowed them to choose their own materials or the units where there were no set coursebooks, the responses of the last group were explained by the fact that for some units, there were compulsory materials set by the department, but some teachers could choose supplementary materials or design their own activities which they thought would create fun. For some other teachers, they said both because when they taught more than one unit, it might be possible or appropriate for them to choose their own materials in this unit, but not in the others:

‘Humorous texts are applicable if I teach Translation to students of General English. But I’m teaching students of Business English, that means I have to deal with business texts all the time. It’s very difficult to choose something humorous, because if it’s humorous, it’s not very related to the field I’m teaching.’ (T4)

The teachers who did not choose humorous materials relied more on spontaneous humour, especially humorous comments on lesson content or
classroom interactions. Two of these teachers mentioned interesting reflections on their preparation for a class:

'I didn’t think a lot about humour. It’s just something I do naturally. [...] Maybe I don’t do so [choose humorous materials] consciously but subconsciously. Because I try to make my lessons diverse, I choose something I think my students might like very much, and that can be something funny.' (T15)

'I don’t do it purposefully.' (T28)

Among teachers who chose humorous materials, a common strategy was that they anticipated ‘strategic points’ to use humour while preparing for their lessons, and then looked for materials that could exploit those opportunities, while imagining students’ reactions to those materials (T14):

‘When we look at the materials at home before we actually carry out the teaching, we often see the potential of using humour in some sections of the lesson. [...] I see that at some points in the lesson, there’s a good chance of using humour. I would not ignore the opportunity.’ (T16)

However, four teachers warned that ‘the procedure to find humorous stories or materials for the suitable classes takes long time’ (T13). To overcome this, a piece of advice from T8 was:

‘You can use a good book, like “Laugh with Your Lessons”, which contains jokes and funny questions. We have to read and choose carefully the suitable ones or we should adapt.’

A seemingly more innovative solution if teachers had difficulty finding suitable humorous materials came from T1:

‘There’s one thing you can do with multiple choice: bring some names of students in class into those items. Students will find it funny reading those items. In this case, you don’t actually choose materials, but create humour of your own.’

In short, although more teachers preferred spontaneous to prepared humour, the number of teachers purposefully choosing humorous materials to include in their lessons was still higher. This was, however, not a contradiction. It only showed that while many teachers loved the unexpected and surprising features of
spontaneous humour, they still wanted to be prepared to some extent whenever possible. After all, selecting materials is an integral part of a teaching job; so if one is inclined to using humour in one’s teaching, incorporating humour into materials is not only natural, but also advisable. Another interesting point is that, just like other teaching techniques, humour – if used and reflected upon many times – can become better and better a tool in a teacher’s repertoire.

5.3.2.4. **Instances of effective/ineffective uses of humour and the experience from them – the do’s and don’ts in using humour:**

When asked about instances of effective or ineffective uses of humour they had in the past, some teachers could recall more than one instance, while others could recall one or none. In total, teachers mentioned their effective uses 13 times and ineffective uses 18 times. Ten times teachers told the researcher that they did have effective uses of humour, but they failed to remember them during the interview. The number of instances of ineffective uses of humour not remembered was only two. These numbers seemed to suggest that the failure, if any, while using humour made a deeper impression in teachers’ mind, and teachers were more concerned over their failure than their success regarding the use of humour. If this was the case, it was a good thing for these teachers to reflect upon what could be improved in their teaching, which would eventually benefit their students. It would also echo the recommendation that some teachers mentioned in 5.3.2.3: ‘practice makes perfect’, even in the field of using humour while teaching.

The successful experiences of teachers were varied, ranging from checking students’ comprehension of previous lessons (T8), briefing students on the whole point of a new lesson (T7), introducing vocabulary items (T1, T21, T26), positively commenting on students’ appearance in a humorous way (T4, T14), encouraging students to answer questions, to participate in activities or to look at
the lesson from another angle (T18, T19, T26) to teacher and students acting out the roles of the characters in a story together (T10, T13). The successful use of humour could be seen at various stages throughout a lesson, with different levels of student involvement. However, a common point in all these memories of successful use of humour was that after these moments of humour, students laughed, the classroom atmosphere became ‘less tense and more intimate’ (T1), and ‘the kind of friendly atmosphere so that students can study at ease’ (T16) was created. In fact, these effects were crucial in teachers deeming those instances effective.

Not surprisingly, the absence of these effects was mentioned each time teachers recalled an ineffective instance of humour. The most frequently mentioned signal was that ‘students did not laugh.’ In T16’s words, ‘a moment of embarrassment to both teachers and students’ occurred. Students might ‘look very serious and nervous’ (T8), or simply there was ‘no reaction from class’ (T13, T19), making the teacher feel ‘awkward’ (T18), ‘confused and embarrassed’ (T21, T24). More straightforward students might tell the teacher explicitly that they did not like the humour (T15, T27):

‘The clip I chose [...] was about Mr. Bean welcoming the Queen, and he did some very disgusting behaviour. And some of my students felt very uncomfortable. They said it was too dirty, and they did not want to see it anymore. That was the worst experience in my attempts to create something new in class.’ (T15)

Sometimes it was not students’ reactions (or the lack of reactions) that suggested the ineffectiveness of teachers’ humour, but teachers’ own reflections on the incidents, immediately or after the class, that made it clear to them that their humour might be counterproductive:
‘When I said that [comments about some low-ranked universities], I just did not know if some of them were from those universities. If I said so, I had hurt them. […] At that time, I realized that sometimes, if we go too far without thinking, we may hurt the students.’ (T1)

‘I made a joke, like “If you don’t do your homework, I’ll kick you out of my class.” I think it’s a joke because of the way I say it, and my students don’t have any real reactions. But then I suddenly realize that in my class, there are several people a little bit older than me […] That kind of jokes would be very sensitive in Vietnamese culture; people may mistake it for something insulting.’ (T4)

Not unlike T1’s and T4’s stories, T10’s experience showed that the accidental effect of humour could occur in a singularly unexpected way involving not some, but only one student:

‘Sometimes I say something when I don’t understand all my students’ situation, and it hurts them. For example, […] I said that not many of us said thanks. That hurt a student who just asked me to do something for her and forgot to say thanks. After class, she went to me and said ‘Sorry, teacher.’ She thought I meant her.’

The most frequently mentioned reasons for ineffective uses of humour were teachers’ not adequately understanding the students, the situation, or both (e.g. cases of T1, T4, and T10); and students’ inadequate command of English and/or cultural knowledge.

‘Sometimes I’m not aware that the student is sad, for example, then the comment and the laugh are not suitable.’ (T14)

‘One time I let students play a kind of domino game, in which they had to find funny answers to questions. In preparation, I think it would be interesting, but students don’t understand. They understand the questions, but they don’t know the deep meanings. They do it, but they don’t enjoy that.’ (T3)

‘I make a comment […] but I don’t think all students understand that comment. It’s related to culture, I think, or stereotypes.’ (T28)

‘Because of students’ level. Maybe I used some words that were too difficult for them.’ (T24)
Other reasons that were mentioned included lack of time (T26), boring humour (T5), and students too bored or tired with their study to enjoy humour (T19).

Out of ten times teachers said they could not remember an instance of effective humour, seven times they mentioned that their humour was mainly spontaneous or ‘natural’, therefore they paid little attention to them and did not make it a point to remember moments of humour:

‘Before this interview, before I heard about your project about humour in the classroom, I didn’t think a lot about humour. It’s just something I do naturally.’ (T15)

In the remaining 3 cases, teachers simply said that they could not recall any specific instance right during the interview.

Interestingly, besides two teachers who said they failed to recall an instance of ineffective humour, six teachers confidently asserted that they never had such instances. Four teachers among these attributed this absence to their good preparation before class:

‘I have a purpose for whatever I do, even when I tell a funny story, or I have some jokes, I’m well prepared.’ (T9)

‘I’m also kind of considerate, I’m very cautious about what I’m saying.’ (T22)

‘I don’t want to have a failure in my teaching. So I should prepare well before I go to the class.’ (T23)

‘We have to plan in advance everything.’ (T30)

One teacher, T25, thought that she had many things in common with her students, hence her not having ineffective use of humour: ‘I understand what they want, what they think. Maybe because of the age, not very much different.’

Meanwhile, the last teacher in this group, T6, said her usual teaching style made her attempts at humour a much welcome change for students:
'Because I’m often strict and serious in class, when they see me telling jokes, they’re very happy.’

From their own experiences of effective and ineffective uses of humour, the interviewed teachers shared the do’s and don’ts in using humour. The most frequently mentioned piece of advice was to get to understand well the audience, i.e. one’s students, and the teaching context before deciding on whether to use humour and/or which items to use. Information teachers may seek from students includes ‘their belief, their age’ (T4), ‘students’ hobbies, age, background, personalities’ (T18), ‘students’ English level’ (T5), or more detailed as suggested by T1 and T16:

‘It’s to always know the background of the students you’re teaching. You should also know the purpose, the objective. It’d help to decide the frequency, how many jokes you should make in class. [...] If you’re teaching adult learners preparing for TOEFL or IELTS tests, there should be fewer jokes than when you teach preschoolers.’ (T1)

‘You should know quite well the environment in which you do the teaching, you must know quite well your students, who they are, and you must be familiar with them for a while.’ (T16)

Understanding students was also mentioned by about 30% of the teachers (7 teachers out of 23).

Talking about the teaching context, T2 mentioned ‘the atmosphere of the class’ and T14 emphasised the ‘mood of the class’:

‘You have to pay attention to your audience. The level, background knowledge, the atmosphere of the class. If it’s so boring, you can’t use a joke, you have to lift them up gradually to the joke. You cannot just impose the joke; they won’t respond.’ (T2)

‘The first factor is the awareness of the teacher, and also the mood of the students at the time. I think I didn’t get the mood of the students, that’s why. It’ll be better if I understand their mood, whether they feel like laughing.’ (T14)

Meanwhile, T20 mentioned the relationship between the teacher and students as a factor of the teaching context – a view that was shared by T29:
‘The first thing to consider is the level of intimacy between the teacher and students. If they do not know each other very well, or they have not worked together for a long time, then it may not be appropriate to make jokes about taboo or sensitive topics.’ (T20)

Beside the two most common pieces of advice, teachers also recommended preparing a lot at home, including having a clear purpose for humour (T8, T22 and T23), having a limit on the amount of humour (T15 and T16), using visual aids and body language to assist students’ comprehension and appreciation of humour (T13), choosing good timing for humour during a lesson (T15), and reading humorous materials or watching comedies as a form of humour training and a source for humorous ideas (T28).

Regarding the don’ts in using humour, all teachers advised against humour not related to the lesson, calling it a waste of time (e.g. T6 or T16) or a distraction (e.g. T15). There was a matching opinion in this matter between teacher and student participants. Besides, T1 mentioned telling jokes about other people, T15 mentioned using clips that he was doubtful about, and T27 warned against aiming humour at serious students in class:

‘Do not tell jokes about someone else, just yourself. You can make fun of yourself. There'd be no problems. It’d be safe.’ (T1)

‘If I doubt something about the clip, I don’t use it anymore, to make sure that it’s safe. I only choose clips that I’m sure can be funny to everybody in my classes.’ (T15)

‘Make sure that your humour doesn’t aim directly at someone serious and don’t like humour. Try to avoid these groups of students. Try to recognise students who have humorous behaviour, and focus on them.’ (T27)

Finally, a number of teachers also shared their ways to detect whether their humour was effective or not so that they could continue, stop, or adjust their humour at the time, or learn to improve the next time. The signs could be seen
through students’ eyes, eye contact, or facial expressions (e.g. T17 and T27), students’ appearance and the classroom atmosphere (T14), or students looking away or hiding their faces while laughing (T15).

In summary, teachers had a good awareness of when their humour was effective or not, relying on non-verbal features such as students’ eyes contact, facial expressions, or the classroom atmosphere in general. They also offered advice on appropriate and inappropriate uses of humour. These pieces of advice were actually reflected in these teachers’ practices regarding humour in the observed lessons. They also matched the thoughts on how to use humour effectively offered by teachers who did not use humour in the observed lessons. This agreement among teachers in both groups suggests a strong support for humour use in foreign language teaching.

5.3.2.5. Teachers’ thoughts on the roles and effects of humour in foreign language teaching:

All teachers were of the view that humour was likely to be more beneficial than harmful to foreign language teaching and learning. This view is consistent with that from teachers not using humour in the observed lessons. In fact, three teachers even declared that there was no harm in using humour while teaching, while one teacher said using humour was a must:

‘I don’t think it has any negative effects. If you can do it well, I think it’s good, nothing bad here.’ (T12)

‘I think there’s no harm.’ (T17)

‘It’s hard to think of negative effects’ (T30)

‘In foreign language teaching, you must use humour because the class will be more interested and enthusiastic. They can contribute to the lesson effectively and positively.’ (T24)
Among the remaining teachers, the roles and effects of humour in foreign language teaching were divided into two categories: on the learning environment (affective ones) and on students’ comprehension (cognitive ones).

The most common positive effect of teachers’ humour on the learning environment was that it could make students more comfortable and the classroom atmosphere more relaxing. Twenty one teachers (91%) mentioned this effect in their responses:

‘It makes students feel comfortable, and they learn better.’ (T2)

‘The class is not tense; there’s no worry in class. They feel relaxed in class; they see the teacher as someone they can talk easily with.’ (T15)

‘I really think that in teaching foreign languages, humour can have a very important role, because the ultimate aim is that we should try to create a friendly atmosphere, and when students feel comfortable, they’re more likely to interact with you, they’re more open to you.’ (T16)

When the atmosphere is relaxing, students may also feel that the teacher, as well as themselves, is more tolerant of mistakes – an unavoidable part of the learning process:

‘Its role is making the class more friendly [...] And then they feel free to talk, to discuss, to express themselves. If the atmosphere is serious, they don’t want to make any conversations [...] it makes students feel that making mistakes is not so serious. So they feel free to make mistakes or sometimes make fun of their mistakes.’ (T28)

Shortening the distance between teachers and students is the second most frequently mentioned positive effect of humour on the learning environment. Ten teachers (43%) mentioned this effect:

‘It can bridge the distance between the teacher and the learners.’ (T1)

‘The teacher now acts like a friend or a helper.’ (T21)
‘If the teacher uses humour in class, tries to smile, there will be a close relationship between teachers and students. We are like partners in the class.’ (T26)

Five teachers (22%) also mentioned motivating students as a possible effect of humour:

‘So humour, if used wisely and appropriately, may motivate students greatly.’ (T1)

‘Humorous stories or examples in class are interesting, so I think you should use humour to stimulate students’ attention and motivation in class.’ (T11)

Other effects included students being more interested in the teacher, wanting to see the teacher more and not skipping the class (T2 and T8) and, notably, teachers themselves feeling more involved to the class and/or the lesson:

‘Sometimes I want to motivate myself [...] Even you feel tired and looking at those sleepy faces, you may want to tell a story or play a game to make them awake and also to motivate yourself.’ (T1)

‘It can facilitate involvement, understanding of the students and also the teacher for the class. I myself, not just my students, will feel more involved to my class if I can be humorous, if I can be myself in class, and myself is humorous.’ (T4)

The positive effects of humour on students’ learning, according to teachers, were closely related to and virtually a result of the affective ones, especially of students feeling more comfortable in a relaxing classroom atmosphere. Eighteen teachers (78%) said that students could learn better or understand the lesson more easily, and thirteen teachers (57%) said students could remember the lesson longer. More than that, in nearly all of these instances, teachers indicated a causal relationship between students feeling relaxed and learning better:

‘If they feel relaxed, they can take in the knowledge more effectively [...] if I tell something funny, and it makes good impression on students, they’ll remember that for longer.’ (T4)

‘Humour can help you to acquire knowledge more easily. Why? Because you tend to remember anything that is interesting or impressive to you, right?’ (T11)
‘Humorous stories or pictures can help the teacher to create a relaxing atmosphere in class. In that atmosphere, the students will understand the lesson better.’ (T13)

‘I do think that if you can create some association between the points you’re teaching and something memorable and fun, students can memorize, can remember that lesson better.’ (T16)

‘It seems that students remember the jokes, remember some mini stories better than what you write on the board or what you say. So if you can combine, you teach something through a joke, it will help them memorize the most.’ (T22)

It is worth noting here that there was a great level of agreement between teachers who used or did not use humour during the observed lesson as to the effects of humour on students’ comprehension and retention of information.

Beside these two most common effects, making students participate more in the lesson was also mentioned by five teachers (22%):

‘If you can engage humour in the classroom, especially with teenage students, they can participate actively in the lesson.’ (T21)

‘Students, especially Asian students, tend to be shy. So, if you have humour, maybe they’ll feel more relaxed and they’ll involve more in the lesson. They’ll forget their shyness.’ (T27)

Regarding the negative effects of humour, teachers mentioned two types of negative effects: on the learning environment and on students’ learning. For the first type, teachers were most concerned about the possibility of sounding offensive and hurting students, sometimes accidentally. Four teachers (17%) mentioned this effect:

‘Some kinds of humour may cause offense for students. People make all kinds of jokes [...] So sometimes it can be quite offensive to some students.’ (T20)

‘With humour, maybe we don’t say it seriously, but they may think you’re serious, and they get hurt.’ (T27)

‘Sometimes it’s like insulting students. Sometimes I didn’t mean to but the students got hurt.’ (T28)
As frequently mentioned as the effect of hurting students was the possibility that the teacher’s image in students’ eyes could be harmed:

‘It may make the image of the teacher in students’ eyes like [that of] an entertainer, not a teacher. If you keep the frequency of humour for, say, high schoolers in a class of adults, they may think that you’re not teaching seriously.’ (T1)

‘If you’re not confident enough, don’t tell jokes or anything humorous, because at that time, you could become very awkward or clumsy or embarrassing, you may create some embarrassing situations.’ (T11)

‘Some students may think that the teacher’s joke is kind of childish, and it’s like some stupid jokes that some comedians play in some comedies. They really don’t like that.’ (T22)

This seems to be an important point for teachers to consider when deciding to use humour and/or selecting humour to use.

Other possible negative effects of humour on the learning environment that teachers mentioned included creating misunderstandings between teachers and students (T1 and T29) and making students bored (T24).

The number of teachers who mentioned a possible negative effect of humour on students’ learning (nine teachers – 39%) was greater than that of teachers who mentioned any negative effects on the environment, showing that the ultimate concern of teachers when using humour was still how to benefit students’ learning. Moreover, it was remarkable that all these nine teachers were concerned about just one effect: distracting students from the lesson, and consequently wasting their time:

‘If used a lot, it will distract students from the lesson. They may keep thinking about the joke, especially when it’s not related to the content of the lesson.’ (T2)
‘Sometimes, especially with jokes about sensitive topics, about taboos, it can go too far. Students can giggle or whisper for a long time after the joke.’ (T5)

‘Once a provincial student told me that a teacher usually told jokes, and they didn’t like it, because they saw it as a waste of time. That teacher used jokes to kill time, and some jokes weren’t suitable for class.’ (T6)

One common note accompanying each time teachers mentioned this negative effect, however, was that this would only be a problem if teachers overused humour or employed humour without a clear purpose to assist the lesson or humour not related to what they were teaching (see 5.3.2.4). As T15 put it, ‘humour is a kind of seasoning only; it’s not the main food of the meal. If we abuse humour too much, it is counterproductive.’ Teachers seemed to think that a moderate amount of humour related to the content of the lesson, together with adequate preparation, would suffice to minimise any possible negative effects of teachers’ use of humour in class. This echoed students’ responses in the interviews.

5.3.2.6. **Types of humour – what’s hot and what’s not:**

Not surprisingly, there were great variations among teachers’ preferred types of humour, as well as types/content they considered not appropriate to use in class. However, except for the case of pun/riddle, no other types of humour featured in both categories. It was also remarkable that teachers’ preferences were mainly about the forms of humour, while certain humour content made up the majority among inappropriate humour in class.

The most preferred type of humour was humorous comments, which was chosen by fifteen teachers (65%). Considering the fact that this was also the most spontaneous type of humour, this result reflected the majority of teachers who preferred spontaneous to prepared humour (see 5.3.2.3). Humorous comments
were closely followed by jokes – chosen by thirteen teachers (57%). This was understandable, given the popularity of jokes in human life, the vast availability of books, collections, or any other kinds of resources dedicated to jokes, and the greatly varied topics of jokes, which made them a natural candidate to be relevant to the themes of various lessons. At the third place was funny stories – chosen by twelve teachers (52%). These might be a story taken from some sources, or one about the teacher themselves:

‘Something happened to me. Even something happened to my friends or my family members, but I said it happened to me, for the purpose of making it safe.’ (T1)

According to the teachers, a funny story was typically longer than a joke, and did not require a ‘punch line’ at the end – which probably made it easier for students to follow and to enjoy than a joke.

Other types of humour that were mentioned in teachers’ responses included physical humour (43%), visual humour (35%), pun/riddle (17%), and funny examples, ‘non-threatening threat’ and the general ‘related humour’ (4% each).

Among the inappropriate humour content, politics was the most common (35%), followed by sex, religion, and obscene/taboo topics (30% each). The most frequently mentioned reason against these four types of humour content, according to teachers, was that there was no place for them in the class in specific and in education in general. Teachers were also against the personal tease placed upon an individual student, especially about their appearance or English competence, and humour that was not related to the lesson or was too long (22% each). Another type of content was not mentioned too often (9%), but worth noting: humour about regional differences (e.g. accent or customs). It was suggested that it could lead to conflicts (T9). The last type of inappropriate humour that was mentioned more than once in teachers’ responses was pun/riddle (9%), with the note that they were only not appropriate for young or
beginning learners, whose English might not be sufficient to understand them. Most of these inappropriate types of humour matched the ones mentioned by students in their interviews, except politics humour, regional differences humour and pun/riddle.

5.4. Chapter summary

This chapter presented the results obtained from teachers through observations and interviews. The observations showed that the frequency, the types, the timing, and the effects of teachers’ humour were greatly varied, depending to a large extent on the course, the specific lesson, the certain class, and certainly teachers’ intentions. More than 75% of the participating teachers (23 out of 30 teachers) used humour more or less in their observed lesson, suggesting the actual popularity of humour among these teachers. Humour was used the most at the beginning and at the end of a class, and generally received positive reactions from students. This suggested that students in this study welcomed teachers’ humour, and that humour use was effective. The teachers who did not use humour in the observed lessons taught courses or lessons in which there was limited opportunity to use humour; or their class mainly consisted of students’ presentations, hence the absence of teacher-initiated humour, which is the research object of this study.

The interviews following the observations revealed that no teachers, including the ones not using humour in the observed lessons, said they never used humour in their teaching. Instead, most of the participating teachers claimed that they tried to use humour whenever possible, i.e. when the course/lesson was suitable for humour, when they had appropriate humour for the lesson, and/or when the mood of the class called for humour. Teachers’ purposes in using humour could be classified into two main categories: to create a more relaxing classroom atmosphere, and to assist students in their comprehension and concentration.
Teachers asserted that humour was more beneficial than harmful to foreign language teaching, mentioning such positive effects of humour as relaxing students, shortening the distance between teachers and students, motivating students, and/or helping students to understand and remember study points. However, they also warned against the use of too much humour, hurtful humour, humour not related to the lesson, and/or taboo content. For the use of humour to be effective, teachers advised building rapport with students, understanding their needs and preferences, selecting humour carefully, and adjusting humour use according to students’ reaction. The practices regarding humour that teachers conducted and the opinions as well as experiences that they shared, together with results from surveys completed and preferences voiced by students, will form the basis for the discussion in the next chapter.
CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION

6.1. Introduction

This chapter discusses the results obtained from teachers and students during the research and presented in the previous two chapters. These results are collated against existing literature about the use of humour in teaching, especially foreign language teaching. The discussion is organised around the five research questions that were formed at the onset of the research:

1. To what extent do Vietnamese university EFL teachers use humour in classroom teaching?
2. What are Vietnamese university EFL teachers' and students' perceptions of the role(s) of humour in classroom teaching?
3. What types of humour do Vietnamese university EFL teachers use and in which contexts?
4. How effective do Vietnamese university EFL teachers find their use of humour in class?
5. How do students respond to Vietnamese university EFL teachers' use of humour in class?

The contribution of this study is significant in research on humour in language teaching. This is the first study to explore both teachers' and students' perceptions of humour in language teaching; it is also the first investigation into the types of humour that teachers use in the EFL context of Vietnam. Previous research was conducted in mainstream education in general and very limited
research was done in the ESL context. The findings of this study provide empirical evidence and validate suggestions and arguments regarding the use of humour in the limited literature available. They confirm previous findings about the desirability of humour in education, and offer valuable insights on how to use humour effectively in teaching, an aspect that has been generally lacking in the body of research about humour so far.

6.2. To what extent do Vietnamese university EFL teachers use humour in classroom teaching?

The answer to this research question is based on the results from both the classroom observations and interviews with teachers. Generally speaking, these sources of data validate the results of this question about whether a teacher used humour and how much they incorporated humour in their classes.

The results indicate that the use of humour is popular among university teachers of English: more than 76% (23 out of 30) teachers made explicit attempts to use humour during the observed lessons. The remaining seven teachers did not use humour in the observed lessons. However, all of them asserted during interviews with the researcher that they did use humour in their teaching, at least occasionally, depending on the context. The teachers who did not use humour claimed that the observed lessons were among the occasions when they decided against the use of humour due to the nature of the lesson (e.g. mainly linguistics or concerning solemn topics), the means by which the lesson was carried out, or the mood of the class at the time. It appears that humour was highly favoured among teachers in this study, since not a single one actively avoided using humour when it was considered appropriate. Combined with teachers’ perceptions on humour (see 6.3 below), this result confirms the value placed on
the role of humour in English as a foreign language (EFL) classes as explained in the literature review.

Among the teachers who used humour in the observed lessons, T16 had the highest number of attempts at humour (eighteen times), while the lowest number (one time) belonged to T29. Looking at these highest and lowest numbers within male and female teacher subgroups, there was not much difference: the highest number among female teachers was fifteen times (T9) compared to eighteen times among male teachers, while the lowest number among male teachers was three times (T20) compared to the overall low of one time. The mean number of attempts at humour from teachers using humour was 7.13 per class session, which on average lasted 90 minutes. This frequency of humour was higher than the mean number of jokes per lecture found by Bryant et al. (1980), which was 3.34, and the ‘optimal dose’ of humour suggested by Ziv (1988, p.13), which was three to four instances per hour. The higher frequency of humour found in the present study may be explained in several ways.

First, the class size in the present study was quite small, not more than thirty students per class. This is a typical feature of foreign language classes, where the interactions between teachers and students and among students, as well as the teacher’s attention to individual students, are expected to be higher than they are in classes of other subjects. Taking into account the fact that Bryant et al. (1980) and Ziv (1988) studied college classes carried out in lecture halls with many more students (up to hundreds), it is likely there were more interactions between teachers and students in the present study, thus creating more chances for humour to appear. The connection between classroom interactions and humour in the present study was evident in teachers’ preference for humorous comments (see 5.3.2.6), a type of humour most frequently originating from classroom interactions.
Second, the nature of a foreign language class is different from that of most other classes. In a foreign language class, the language is both the content to be learnt and the means of instruction, while only the latter is the role of a language in a class of another subject (see 2.6). Given that many teachers in the present study believed that humour could help students to understand and remember the lesson better (see 5.3.2.5), the use of humour in the foreign language being learnt could be seen as conscious efforts from teachers to teach the language, not just relaxing the classroom atmosphere. This dual role of humour in foreign language teaching may have accounted for its high frequency in the present study. The following examples show how teachers in this study used humour to teach English in a funny and also effective way in that it could leave a long-lasting impression:

- A teacher used this well-known joke to teach the double meanings of the verb ‘serve’:

  *Man: Do you serve crabs here?*

  *Waiter: We serve everyone, sir. Please take a seat.*

- When teaching the grammar point of Past Continuous tense, another teacher wrote this example on the board:

  *While I was explaining the tense, A and B [two students in that class] were secretly passing notes.*

It happened to be true that A and B were actually passing notes a moment before, and the teacher saw that but said nothing. On reading this example, A and B were the first to laugh, followed by the whole class. It could well be believed that, after this example, not only A and B would stop passing notes but the whole class would remember the use of Past Continuous tense more easily.

The above examples show that humour can be integrated in teaching the language itself (in this case, vocabulary and grammar) besides being used to create an environment conducive to learning.
Third, in the context of Vietnam, compared to classes of other subjects such as Maths or History, a foreign language class may suffer less from the bonds of the conventional view of learning as serious work (see 2.5). In such a class, higher noise levels can be tolerated as can apparently messy settings and actions, thanks to the realisation that learning a language is learning to interact and communicate, rather than silently working on grammar exercises, for example (Cook, 1997; Cook, 2000). Therefore, it is easier for a foreign language teacher, especially at the university level, to decide to use humour in their teaching. This explanation is supported by the fact that, in the interviews, many students expressed their expectation of and preference for a foreign language teacher to use humour while teaching (see tables 4.8, 4.11 and 4.12, and sections 4.4.1 and 4.4.3). This reflects the consistency between the teacher’s choice and students’ preference regarding humour in foreign language teaching.

Fourth, as the Communicative Approach is being encouraged in foreign language teaching in Vietnam, more and more EFL teachers are acknowledging the importance of emotional support for students in order to lower their affective filters (Maurice, 1988) and assist them to engage freely and comfortably in interactions. Employing humour could be seen as one way to provide this emotional support. Employing humour may simply show teachers’ efforts in realising the Communicative Approach.

In short, the majority of teachers in the present study did use humour, or claimed that they did, and when they used humour, they used it with a higher frequency than was reported in the literature.
6.3. **What are Vietnamese university EFL teachers’ and students’ perceptions of the role(s) of humour in classroom teaching?**

There was obvious agreement among the participating teachers regarding the roles of humour in classroom teaching: it is more beneficial than harmful to the teaching-learning process, and it is desirable for teachers to use humour, provided that they use it properly and judiciously.

The positive roles of humour mentioned by teachers in this study fall into similar categories to what is reported in the literature (see Berk, 1996; Bruner, 2002; Garner, 2006 for example): benefitting the learning environment (affective roles) and improving students’ learning (cognitive roles). The most frequently mentioned affective benefit of humour was that it helped to create a relaxing atmosphere in the classroom, thus making students more likely to be open, more motivated, more interactive with teachers and fellow students, and to learn better. Other benefits in the affective category include shortening the distance between teachers and students (see table 4.8), making students more interested in teachers and classes (see tables 4.11, 4.12 and 4.13), and helping teachers themselves to feel involved in the class and the lessons. The great level of agreement among teachers in this study regarding these roles of humour shows that they actually liked to use humour in class, and found humour to be beneficial to their actions. It also shows that Vietnamese EFL teachers agree with other teachers about the importance of humour in the classroom. These teachers supported the suggestions about the benefits of humour reported in the literature by Bryant et al. (1980), Gorham & Christophel (1990), or Powell & Andresen (1985): ‘students generally perceive that their teachers’ use of humour is an important factor in the educational process’ (Bryant et al. 1980, p.512), ‘more immediate teachers do use more humour and do engender more learning’ and ‘the most desirable learning outcomes are associated with the quality as much as
the quantity of humour used’ (Gorham & Christophel 1990, pp. 60-61), and ‘students appreciate an element of humour in their teachers and [...] humour is an aid to effective communication’ (Powell & Andresen 1985, p.87). Likewise, Delaney et al. (2009) cited humour as essential for positive impact on classroom atmosphere. Being humorous includes being positive, friendly, approachable and engaging. Teachers’ responses in this study confirm the desirability of humour in teaching-learning reflected in the findings of the authors mentioned. Thus, it is strongly recommended that teachers of foreign languages use humour in teaching to create a better learning environment as well as to build closer relationships with their students.

In the second category, namely the cognitive roles of humour, the teachers’ responses also tallied with the roles played by humour identified in the literature about humour: it can possibly help students understand the lesson more easily (Berk, 1996; Lucas, 2005), and to remember points longer (Garner, 2006; Kaplan & Pascoe, 1977). It might be worthwhile to note here that the teachers’ responses in this category largely came from their personal experience, their gut feeling or their argument, rather than from any specific and concrete data they had collected. During interviews, the teachers said they thought students would learn better when teachers used humour, or they argued that using humour would lead to a more relaxing atmosphere, thus helping students to take in the study points more easily. However, no teachers provided the researcher with further information to prove their assertion, such as students’ scores in tests or performance indexes. In other words, these cognitive roles were simply what the participants perceived humour was capable of, probably as a result of their personal experiences as learners and teachers (Borg, 2006). Even so, the results still confirm the findings of previous researchers who used tests to identify the effects of humour on participants’ comprehension and retention of information (see Garner, 2006; Kaplan & Pascoe, 1977; or Ziv, 1988, for example). Positive
perceptions of humour would also have a positive influence on classroom practice (Borg, 2006), which explains the abundance of humour in these EFL classrooms as discussed in the previous section.

Results from the other group of participants in this study, the students, showed a high consistency between teachers’ and students’ perceptions of the roles of humour in classroom teaching. This consistency suggests consensus and harmony between teachers and students, which allows for a healthy teaching and learning context and forms the basis for the creation of positive group dynamics in the language classroom (Dornyei & Murphey, 2003). During interviews by the researcher, the students largely listed the same affective and cognitive effects of humour as found in the teachers’ responses. However, the students also mentioned additional benefits of humour. A great majority of the students agreed that humour was important to foreign language learning (89%), humour in a foreign language increased their interest in learning that foreign language (86%), and humour improved their ability to learn that language (83%). These high percentages show the popularity of humour among students. It can be concluded that incorporating humour into foreign language teaching would be naturally satisfying a great student need and providing a supportive atmosphere for the promotion of language learning. More importantly, humour could be employed to teach the language, while increasing students’ interest in the language and culture(s) attached to it.

It is also interesting to consider students’ responses regarding the nature of a foreign language class, where the teacher and students share the same L1 and teach/learn an L2. The percentage of students who liked to see English humour was much higher than that of those who liked to see Vietnamese humour, even though more than a quarter of the students found it difficult to understand English humour to some extent (see tables 4.16, 4.17, and 4.18). This result suggests that students consider humour more than just relaxing moments during lessons;
rather, humour inclusion is more like providing opportunities to be exposed to the language they are learning in an authentic way, thus they are learning both the language and the culture(s) it reflects. In fact, according to the U.S. National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project (1999, cited in Wagner & Urios-Aparisi, 2011), ‘students in world language [i.e. foreign language] classes are required to understand humour in the target language when achieving advanced levels of language studies’ (pp. 406-407). Moreover, considering the fact that many humour pieces are based on the (sometimes intentional) misunderstandings of idioms in English, which themselves may be challenging for EFL learners (Grant, 2007), English humour can present learners with valuable opportunities to familiarise themselves with these idioms. Humour, thus, has become not only a means to a language, but also part of the language competence itself, the sociolinguistic competence in particular. It is particularly important for foreign language teachers, compared with teachers of other subjects, to know this, since it is one more justification for employing humour. Besides creating a relaxing atmosphere and helping students’ learning, humour can be seen as providing chances to practice the foreign language and develop an appreciation of the cultural nuances and social norms of that language use.

They saw not only the good side of humour. Teachers and students in this study also mentioned the possible negative roles humour could play in the language classroom if used inappropriately. These roles include hurting individuals or a group of students, causing misunderstandings between teachers and students, and making students bored (if humour is used too much). Examples of these negatives effects include the following instances shared by teachers and students during interviews with the researcher:

‘I told them that if they did poorly in the university entrance examination, they would have to go to not so good universities like X and Y. Only after that did I realise that some students in my class might come from X and Y, and I might have hurt them.’ (T1)
‘A student has a bad habit, and the teacher criticises that student. But unfortunately, he criticises in a funny way, and the student doesn’t feel comfortable with the joke, or overreacts to the joke.’ (S2)

‘Some teachers have a joke or a story that they keep telling, then students have to force a smile.’ (S4)

‘If humour is used all the time, maybe students will no longer respect the teacher.’ (S7)

This empirical evidence of students’ beliefs validates the suggestions in the literature about the possible negative effects of humour (see warnings against inappropriate humour in Steele, 1998 or Sudol, 1981, for example). A notably new point arising here, though, is that many teachers expressed the concern that using too much humour or using it improperly could harm the teacher’s image in the students’ eyes. While the literature mainly focused on the effects of humour on students and their learning, this concern on the part of teachers is noteworthy. It perhaps results from the cultural context of Vietnam, where each person’s roles and duties in the society are often defined quite specifically under the influence of Confucius’s theory of properness (Nguyen & Tran, 1992). This is even more true with teachers, who are expected to be respectable, and to be models for their students not only in knowledge but also in deeds. The concern raised by teachers in this study shows that they might be teachers of a foreign language, but they still have to, or want to, conform to the expectations for a teacher in the culture in which they live. Teachers wishing to employ humour in their teaching might find this point worth considering, especially when teaching in a country/culture different from their own. Thus, the use of humour needs to be examined in the context it will be used in, and further studies on beliefs about humour should be conducted.

The teachers’ and students’ perceptions of the roles of humour in classroom teaching were clearly reflected in class observations. In the researcher’s view, all the teachers who actually used humour during the observed lessons kept it at a moderate amount, rather than overusing it. Moreover, students received humour
positively with laughter and freshened facial expressions. This was confirmed in their interview responses. There was an overall easy-going atmosphere in the classes after the teachers used humour. This fits with the fact that whenever a teacher or a student mentioned negative effects of humour, it was always an instance in the past or an example of another teacher, not the observed lessons or teachers. The observations also confirm the strength of teachers’ perceptions of humour, which partly led to their high confidence in the effectiveness of their humour (see 6.5 below).

6.4. **What types of humour do Vietnamese university EFL teachers use and in which contexts?**

The types of humour that teachers in this study used were varied. These types were largely divided into two categories. The first was prepared humour, which teachers prepared before a class with the intention of inserting it into certain moments during the lesson. These instances of humour might be written down and included in teachers’ lesson plans (e.g. jokes or funny stories), added to lesson plans as attachments or embedded into PowerPoint presentations (e.g. funny pictures or video clips), or just thought of and stored in teachers’ minds to be used at the intended moments. The second category was spontaneous humour, which was not prepared in advance. Teachers thought of and used this category of humour ‘on the spot’, hence the higher risk of causing negative effects (see 6.3 above) in this case, compared to prepared humour. Typical types of humour in the spontaneous category were humorous comments, exaggerated facial expressions, and funny sounds or gestures. However, this category also included such humour types as funny stories, which something said or happening at a specific moment reminded teachers to include the humour at that point.
It should be noted here that the division of humour types into these two categories is based on teachers’ actual use of humour, i.e. whether their humour in a lesson was prepared or spontaneous, rather than on the nature of those specific humour types. Except for humorous comments, which were always spontaneous, other types of humour featured in both categories. For example, jokes tended to be prepared. However, there were teachers who could remember and tell a joke without preparation, to students at the time when something ‘came up’ in class. Another case is funny examples. The Past Continuous example (in 6.2 above) was spontaneous rather than prepared as was often so with examples. Due to this blending between categories, in the next part that discusses contexts in which humour was used, humour types are presented in the order of frequency with which they were used by teachers in this study.

Among spontaneous types of humour, humorous comments were the most frequently used. In fact, among the teachers in this study this was the most popular type of humour in both prepared and spontaneous categories. The comments were about virtually everything related to the lesson, ranging from students’ actions, students’ answers and classroom facilities to the lesson content itself. Some examples of these comments that could be used by other teachers as resources are:

(When a student came into class late, and hesitated to pass before the researcher’s camera) ‘You don’t have to duck, just stand right there in front of the camera.’ (T4)

(When a student gave an incorrect answer to the teacher’s question) ‘Yes, answer like that, and I’ll see you next year.’ (T8)

(When the projector produced a dim shade of purple instead of the normal white light) ‘It’s beautiful, huh?’ (T15)

(When mentioning that Hemingway had four wives) ‘You want to have four wives like him?’ (T10)
It should be noted here that humorous comments served several different purposes. They could be used to lighten the atmosphere and increase teachers’ immediacy by showing their ‘human’ side (Gorham & Christophel, 1990), or to soften teachers’ criticism. More importantly, such comments could also be seen as face-saving devices in such a face-threatening context as the foreign language classroom. As Dornyei (2001, p.91) points out, ‘the language classroom is an inherently face-threatening environment, with learners being expected to communicate using a severely restricted code.’ van Dam (2002, p.238) also asserts that ‘lessons at school turn out to be intrinsically face-threatening situations.’ In that context, humorous comments from teachers on students’ answers, for example, served the dual purpose of letting students know that mistakes were acceptable and a part of the learning process, and allowing them to avoid losing face before their classmates. The latter was particularly important considering the context of Vietnam – one of the Asian cultures where ‘concern for face is of utmost importance’ (Kim & Nam, 1998, p. 523) and ‘a person’s loss of face can negatively affect not only the individual but also the social encounter itself’ (Kim & Nam, 1998, p. 526).

Being spontaneous, humorous comments occurred throughout the lessons rather than during certain portions of them. However, teachers used humorous comments according to the mood of themselves and of class at the moment, the points being discussed at the time (e.g. whether a student’s answer or a lesson’s example was funny enough to make comments on), the specific student(s) involved (whether the student(s) enjoy humour in general and humorous comments made to him/her in particular). In other words, there were still many considerations around whether to make humorous comments, even though they were spontaneous. To the best of my knowledge, the literature so far has not reported much on the popularity of humorous comments in teachers’ use of humour. The fact that this possibly risky type of humour featured high in
teachers’ preferences in this study suggests that either they were quite confident with their management of humour or, the relationships between them and their students were good enough not to be afraid of possible damage caused by inappropriate comments. Anyway, humorous comments could be a worthwhile topic for further study into humour use in teaching.

Unlike the findings from such authors as Bryant et al. (1979), Korobkin (1988) and Neuliep (1991), jokes were not the most preferred or most frequently used humour types among these teachers. It was only the second most frequently used type. The reason for this could be that, there is certain required knowledge of language and/or culture to enjoy a joke, especially when the joke is in a foreign language. To understand and then to appreciate a joke, one might also need to know current affairs, which are more often than not the topics of jokes. Considering the fact that these teachers were teaching students with varied competencies in English, understanding of the cultures of English-speaking countries, and awareness of current issues, using jokes might expose the teachers to the risk of having to explain them – an action that would make humour ‘go stale’ (Morrison, 2008). However, teachers expressed the view that jokes were appropriate for certain relevant themes of lessons, provided that they were selected carefully and prepared in advance to be suitable to the English level of the class. Thus, while jokes are popular and not likely to cause much trouble in classes where teachers and students teach and learn using their L1, using this type of humour in foreign language classes or when the teacher and students do not have the same L1 requires more consideration and preparation.

Some teachers advised they opted for a funny story instead, in order to avoid the possible awkward incidents of stale jokes. Thus, funny stories were the third most frequently used type of humour in this study. The reasons, according to these teachers, were that a funny story was longer than a joke, and typically did not require the appreciation of a ‘punch line’ at the end to be funny. Therefore, it
would be easier for students to follow and to enjoy a funny story. However, a funny story should also be prepared and told with some precautions. Sharing his tips on using funny stories, T1 said he would use himself as the subject in those stories, even though they happened in fact to somebody else. This was in accordance with Tamblyn’s (2003) advice that it was safest to make fun of oneself when using humour in teaching, since that would not hurt anybody else. As for the contexts for jokes and funny stories, teachers’ responses in this study showed that they were mainly used at the beginning moments of a lesson as an icebreaker (funny stories) and when a relevant theme occurred during a lesson (jokes). In addition, both types of humour were used when teachers detected a decrease in students’ activeness and decided that they needed a morale boost.

In addition, teachers shared their experience with humour from teaching materials. 83% of the teachers said whenever possible (meaning not having to strictly follow/use compulsory materials designated by departments, or when the unit or the topic of the lesson is suitable to have fun), they would purposefully choose humorous materials to include in their lessons. Their experience was to anticipate humour at ‘strategic points’ in a lesson, and prepare humour to exploit those chances. However, they also warned that the process of selecting appropriate humour could take a long time, and claimed that humorous materials specifically for foreign language learning were too few and difficult to find – a view that was shared by Medgyes (2001). One way to overcome this difficulty, as suggested by some teachers, is to notice and reflect on the use and effects of one’s spontaneous humour, then add it to one’s humour arsenal through repeated use. Another way is to read or watch comics, cartoons, humorous clips and to memorise humour one hears from other people, then adapt it to suit one’s

“Laughing at our mistakes can lengthen our own life. Laughing at someone else’s can shorten it.”

Cullen Hightower (The Quotations Page, n.d.)
purposes during a lesson. All teachers’ experience pointed to good preparation, frequent reflection, and repeated use as factors determining the successful integration of humorous materials into foreign language lessons.

6.5. How effective do Vietnamese university EFL teachers find their use of humour in class?

Virtually all teachers who used humour indicated that their humour was effective. Their judgement was largely based on whether their use of humour achieved the purposes, which were closely related to the roles of humour as perceived by these teachers: creating a more conducive environment for learning, and helping students learn easier and more efficiently. According to these teachers, humour was effective when it made students laugh, thus feeling relaxed, or elicited humorous responses from students. More indirectly, the effectiveness of humour could be seen through students’ facial expressions, eye contact with the teacher, enthusiastic participation in and contribution to the lesson, coming to class more frequently and not leaving early. Regarding whether humour helped students’ understanding of learning points, there was no direct, explicit measurement from the teachers. Their responses showed the argument that when students were relaxed, they were more likely to take in and retain information. This result was in line with Wagner & Urios-Aparisi’s (2011) review of humour research which ‘show[s] that humour has been found to play an important role in classroom interaction although it has been difficult to determine the student outcomes directly related to humour.’ (pp. 403-404). However, teachers’ claims could be validated by the positive effects of humour as perceived by them, as well as by the researcher’s note of a relaxing atmosphere during class observations.
Among teachers who did not use humour during the observed lessons, it was notable that all of them claimed they did use humour in their teaching, and that use was often effective, in the sense that they received positive reactions from students. Thus, it could be reasoned that though now and then these teachers might not use humour, it was still a common tool in their repertoire. Together with what teachers in the other group said about their use of humour, we could see that teachers in this study were quite confident with their humour and its effectiveness. Combined with the positive evaluation of teachers’ humour from students, this match between teachers’ and students’ perceived effectiveness of humour would contribute to a productive learning atmosphere.

However, teachers’ responses in both groups also revealed that the use of humour was not always effective, and that it was like a skill to be sharpened through frequent use and reflection. Teachers’ experiences of effective and ineffective instances of humour in their teaching highlighted the requirements for humour to be successful. The following pieces of advice as offered by teachers in this study are practical suggestions not discussed or not supported with empirical evidence in the literature before.

First and foremost, humour, especially jokes or funny stories, should be related to the lesson. These two types of humour could serve as funny examples for a point in the lesson, or impressive ways to emphasise a point and carve it deeply in students' minds. Otherwise, they might be seen as a waste of precious learning time, or worse – teachers’ ways to kill time. Here, teachers provided the evidence needed to validate Steele’s (1998) and Sudol’s (1981) warnings of the possible distraction caused by content-irrelevant humour in a classroom setting.

More spontaneous types of humour, such as humorous comments, might not essentially be related to the lesson, but they should still serve the positive purpose of making the atmosphere relaxing, rather than hurting student(s) or making them embarrassed.
Secondly, humour content should be appropriate. This includes a number of considerations. The language of humour should be suitable for students' age and English level, so that they can understand and enjoy it. Some teachers shared the experience of good pieces of humour causing blank expressions in students, simply because they did not understand the language or the cultural/topical implications in those pieces. Humour content should also be to the taste of students, which entails the need for teachers to get to know their students’ likes and dislikes. Teachers’ views on this point were in agreement with Norton’s (1983) recommendation, ‘Learn how to make a class laugh. This entails audience analysis.’ (p.260) There are also limits for humour content to be used in class, according to these teachers. The most frequently mentioned ‘taboos’ include humour about sex, politics, religions, and regional differences.

Thirdly, it is advisable that teachers build good relationships and ‘mutual trust’ (T29) with students, so that their humour would be more likely to be welcome and failure, if any, would cause less damage. Many teachers attributed their success in using humour to having worked with the students for quite a time, hence the mutual understanding of teaching styles and intentions. This tip is in line with the requirement for teachers to build good rapport with students, which is encouraged by both authors studying humour like Gorham & Christophel (1990) and authors writing about language teaching in general like Hanh (2007) and Harmer (2007).

Fourthly, humour should not be used as a form of criticism, no matter whether against an individual student, a group of students, departments, schools, or society in general. Meyer (2000) warned against the dividing function of put-downs or ethnic humour. Teachers’ responses in this study confirmed the reasonableness of that warning. One way to avoid hurting someone when using humour, perhaps inadvertently, is advanced by Morrison (2008), Morreall (1997) and Tamblyn (2003): making fun of oneself instead of someone else. This advice
was reflected in some teachers’ experiences in this study, making it worth remembering and considering for teachers wishing to use humour in class.

In addition to the major tips above, teachers also shared some other ways to ensure the effectiveness of humour. These included good preparation (especially with jokes and funny stories – longer types of humour that required some amount of memory), choosing good timing for humour during a lesson, moderating the amount of humour used per lesson, using visual aids (e.g. pictures or clips) if possible, and reading or watching humorous materials for humorous ideas and as a form of training one’s faculty of humour. All these are valuable advice deserving a place in the guide on how to use humour in teaching, which seems to be lacking in the literature so far.

Some teachers believed that the sense of humour was not inborn, but could be trained – which was in line with the arguments of such advocates of humour in teaching as Medgyes (2002), Morrison (2008), and Tamblyn (2003). It should be noted here that some students shared this view of humour use being trainable (see 4.4.9). However, these teachers admitted that explicit training for humour was lacking in teacher-training syllabi in Vietnam, and that systematic training materials for teachers who wanted to use humour in their teaching were simply non-existent. Those who wanted to sharpen their humour in teaching still had to do so by trial and error. The literature suggests the situation seems to be the same elsewhere. Morrison (2008, pp. 73-76) lamented the ‘humour paradox’ in ‘a society that claims to place a high value on humour, but the reality is that our fears keep us from initiating and sustaining humour practice’ (p. 73). Among other fears, according to Morrison, was the fear of inadequacy and inexperience, when ‘humour skills as a part of teacher preparation are virtually non-existent’ (p. 75). Even when identifying five communication variables that could be used as advice for teachers, which included ‘anticipate how to catch attention. This would include the use of humour, narratives, and surprise’ and ‘learn how to make a
class laugh’ (p. 260), Norton (1983) left teachers to wonder themselves how to use humour and how to make a class laugh. It is reasonable, therefore, to argue that teachers’ humour could be more effective, should we have humour training and materials in teacher training courses or at least, a guide containing the popular scenarios for humour in class, the do’s and don’ts regarding humour use, and a collection of tried and true pieces of humour. The suggestions from teachers about trainable humour are useful and noteworthy. Given the support in the literature for the value of humour in teaching and the expectations and preferences of students in this study regarding humour, it is positive to think that teachers can, and should, be trained in the use of humour, and that humour training and/or materials should form at least an elective part in teacher training syllabi, especially for foreign language teachers.

6.6. How do students respond to Vietnamese university EFL teachers’ use of humour in class?

The results from students in this study, presented in Chapter 4, strongly confirmed the findings in previous studies by Senior (2001), Tamborini & Zillmann (1981), and White (2001) that they generally preferred humorous teachers and welcomed humour in their classes. Students found humorous teachers to be closer, but not less professional (see tables 4.8 and 4.9); and all but one of them had positive reactions and feelings towards humour used by their teachers. This is an encouraging note for teachers who want to use humour, but are afraid of its possible damage to their professionalism. In fact, the great level of agreement between teachers and students regarding the roles of humour in foreign language teaching (see 6.3 above) suggests that it is desirable to use humour (as for teachers) and to see humour being used (as for students). Students’ responses also confirmed teachers’ confidence in achieving their
purposes when using humour: they mentioned that they were more relaxed, learnt better, and felt closer to teachers. There seems to be a great match between teachers’ intentions and students’ expectations regarding humour in class. Moreover, the large amount of humour in this study could possibly be attributed to the amiable relationship between teachers and students. The students’ favourable disposition to humour led to their appreciation of humour and demand for humour in the classroom. The match between students’ and teachers’ perceptions could be seen as assisting language learning.

Teachers and students also saw eye to eye with each other in terms of the requirement for humour to be effective, most notably to be relevant to the lesson, suitable for students’ English level and interests, and not overused. Students’ responses confirmed teachers’ thoughts that criticising other people and/or institutions (e.g. students or other teachers), imitating someone’s accent, and making fun of one’s appearance or mistakes were among the types of humour that were not welcome by students. These are also the elements mentioned in warnings in the literature: ‘Ridicule, satire, cynicism, and other forms of sharp “put-down” humour can be punishing and non-productive if they are used often or in the wrong way’ (Korobkin, 1988, p.156) or ‘Ethnic humour and stereotyping can vary from playful teasing to a more hostile humour’ (Morrison, 2008, p.87). A recommendation for teachers wishing to use humour in their teaching, therefore, is to avoid these types of humour altogether. Alternatively, if they still want to use such forms of humour, they must gauge students’ potential responses to their humour by following the guidelines suggested by Morrison (2008, p.87): ‘even if the intent is not to hurt, if the impact is hurtful, it [humour] is not appropriate.’

Regarding humour content, the taboo topics of humour that students mentioned were basically the same as those mentioned by the teachers, which could possibly be attributed to their shared cultural background. However, this may not be the case in a multicultural context. Hence, it is important for teachers to get to
know their audience, i.e. students, before trying to integrate humour in their teaching – a piece of advice that came up in many students’ responses.

6.7. **Chapter summary**

Despite the uncertainty about the role of humour in the Vietnamese culture and education context, the results of this study described several contexts in which humour use was effective and appropriate in the Vietnamese university context, thus opening up possibilities for making classes more interactive, relaxing and communicative.

This chapter discusses the findings of the present study, in relation to existing literature about humour in teaching in general, and in foreign language teaching in particular. First, this research provides significant insight into teachers’ and students’ perceptions about the role and effectiveness of humour in foreign language teaching. It not only validates claims about the effects of humour with empirical evidence but also extends suggestions and recommendations in the literature. Second, it is the first research study conducted on the role and use of humour in foreign language teaching in the Asian context, and more specifically in the Vietnamese context. Third, this study reveals teachers’ and students’ preferences of use of humour in foreign language teaching and extended the limited research on humour in foreign language teaching.

The teachers in this study used humour extensively in their teaching, virtually whenever possible, and those that were not observed doing so claimed that they did. Humour could occur throughout a lesson, although the most common time for it was at the beginning of class time. The frequency of humour in a lesson was higher than that reported in the limited literature available, and this was
ascribed to the consistency found in teachers’ and students’ perceptions of the beneficial roles of humour in classroom teaching.

Both teachers and students saw the roles of humour in foreign language teaching/learning as mainly positive, explaining perhaps the popularity of humour among these teachers: they were confident that they had students’ support. The participants’ perceptions of humour’s effects confirm previous findings and proposals that humour could be beneficial to both the classroom atmosphere (including students’ improved interest and motivation) and students’ understanding of the lesson and retention of knowledge. A new point which emerges from students in this study is that they thought English humour offered both challenges and opportunities to practice their English in a light-hearted manner and to increase their sociolinguistic competence. Thus, besides its cognitive and affective roles, humour could be considered as having an educational role in the EFL classroom. However, there were certain requirements for humour to be positive: not too much, not used to hurt others, and not about certain topics. Otherwise, it would likely be counter-productive, including the effect yet to be mentioned in the literature: damaging the teacher’s image in students’ eyes.

Adding to the body of research on humour, especially in the context of foreign language classes, new findings from this study have emerged. Teachers in this study used a wide variety of humour types, showing their efforts to meet different students’ tastes and learning styles. Spontaneous humour was preferred more than prepared humour, resulting in humorous comments being the most frequently used type of humour. This contradicts some previous studies on types of humour used in teaching. In the next positions were jokes and funny stories. Teachers frequently used humour to motivate students at the beginning of a lesson, and to illustrate learning points in an impressive way. Another new point that has virtually been ignored in the literature is that humour could also come
from materials, mainly those prepared by teachers on their own as supplementary materials to the compulsory ones. These constitute useful recommendations and variety for teachers who want to employ humour in their teaching.

All teachers were confident of the effectiveness of their humour, claiming that they often received positive reactions from students. Teachers’ experience in using humour confirmed the suggestions about the appropriate inclusion of humour in the literature: humour should be related to the lesson, humour content should be appropriate for students, a good teacher-student relationship should be built, and it is safest to make fun of oneself rather than others. A new, notable point arising from this study is the constructive suggestions from some teachers that humour could be trained, and teachers’ use of humour would be more effective should there be systematic humour training and materials available. Contradictory to the popular opinion that a sense of humour is inborn and cannot be trained, this interesting recommendation is worth a trial at least, as well as further study to assess the feasibility of humour training for teachers.

Finally, virtually all students responded positively to the teachers’ use of humour in their classes. They appreciated the chances to relax and to refresh their minds during a lesson, thus appreciating humorous teachers. Students’ responses showed that their need for humour was a real one, which should be taken into consideration by teachers as well as syllabus and policy makers. The next chapter presents the recommendations from the findings in this study and the conclusion of the thesis.
CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

This chapter summarises the thesis by revisiting the research questions, research design, findings and discussion that have been presented in the previous chapters. First, the research questions and data collection instruments are reviewed. Next, the findings to the research questions are presented, along with a critical discussion of these findings. Recommendations are then made on the basis of these answers, followed by a note on the limitations of the present study and the implications for further research.

7.1. Research questions and research design

As the literature review has shown, research on the roles and effects of humour in education, especially EFL teaching, has been lacking. Therefore, teachers’ use of humour is mostly without a firm scientific basis or empirical evidence to justify it. This study tried to fill the gap in the research on humour in education by investigating teachers’ and students’ perceptions and practices regarding humour use in EFL contexts, and exploring, for the first time, the preferred types of humour among teachers and students.

As indicated in Chapter 1, there are five research questions in the present study:

1. To what extent do Vietnamese university EFL teachers use humour in classroom teaching?
2. What are Vietnamese university EFL teachers’ and students’ perceptions of the role(s) of humour in classroom teaching?
3. What types of humour do Vietnamese university EFL teachers use and in which contexts?
4. How effective do Vietnamese university EFL teachers find their use of humour in class?
5. How do students respond to Vietnamese university EFL teachers’ use of humour in class?

To seek answers to these questions, a concurrent mixed methods research design was used. Data was obtained from 162 student surveys, 11 student interviews, 30 teacher classroom observations, and 30 teacher interviews. The mixed method design was used to enable the triangulation of data from quantitative and qualitative methods (Creswell et al., 2003; Creswell, 2008b; Punch, 2009).

7.2. The extent to which Vietnamese university EFL teachers use humour in classroom teaching

Humour was popular among university teachers of English in this study: more than 76% (23 out of 30) teachers made explicit attempts at humour during the observed lessons. The remaining teachers claimed that they did use humour in other lessons or classes. In addition, the mean number of attempts at humour by teachers using humour was 7.13 per class session, which on average lasted 90 minutes. This frequency of humour was higher than the mean number of jokes per lecture found by Bryant et al. (1980), which was 3.34, and the ‘optimal dose’ of humour suggested by Ziv (1988), which was three to four instances per hour. This higher frequency was attributed to: (1) the small size of a language class, (2) the nature of language both as the means of instruction and the object of study, (3) the large number of interactions that were typical of a language class
compared to content classes, (4) the consideration of the affective factors of students under the influence of CLT principles, and possibly most importantly, (5) the mutual trust between students and teachers and the strong agreement regarding their favourable perceptions of humour. The comparison between the results from teachers and students also revealed a consistency between their views and preferences regarding humour in foreign language teaching. This consistency made humour a welcome feature in the EFL classes in this study.

7.3. Vietnamese university EFL teachers’ and students’ perceptions of the roles of humour in classroom teaching

Teachers and students in this study indicated a high level of agreement on the roles of humour in classroom teaching: it was more beneficial than harmful to the teaching-learning process, and it was desirable for teachers to use humour, provided that they used it properly and judiciously.

This study is among the few studies exploring teachers’ and students’ perceptions of humour, especially in the EFL context. Both teachers and students reached consensus about the roles and effects of humour in foreign language teaching and learning. This might be one of the explanations for the increased level of humour use in this study, compared to what was reported in few previous studies. The abundance of humour led to its effective use, which in turn enhanced participants’ appreciation and positive evaluation of humour.

The positive roles of humour, as identified by participants, affirms the suggestions in the literature: benefitting the learning environment (affective roles) (Askildson, 2005; Gorham & Christophel, 1990; Maurice, 1988) and improving students’ learning itself (cognitive roles) (Garner, 2006; Lucas, 2005). The affective roles included creating a relaxing atmosphere in class, shortening the
distance between teachers and students, making students more interested in teachers and classes, and helping teachers themselves to feel involved to the class and the lessons. The cognitive roles included helping students to understand the lesson more easily and to remember the points longer.

From the perspective of foreign language learning specifically, students indicated that humour was important to foreign language learning. Humour in a foreign language increased their interest in learning that foreign language, and humour improved their ability to learn that language. Moreover, students considered humour to be more than just relaxing moments during lessons; to be more like opportunities for exposure to the language they were learning in an authentic way, thus learning both the language and the culture(s) it reflected. Even though some of the students had uncertainty as to the position of humour in the language classroom, especially in the Vietnamese culture (see Tables 4.1 and 4.4), the majority of student participants gave positive evaluations about the benefits of humour in language learning, and expressed a desire for more humour, especially humour in the foreign language they were studying.

Teachers and students also mentioned possible negative roles of humour. These included hurting individuals or a group of students, causing misunderstandings and distance between teachers and students, and making students bored (if humour is used too much).

A novel finding emerging from this study was that many teachers expressed the concern that using too much humour or using it improperly could harm the teacher’s image in the students’ eyes. This was confirmed in students’ responses. This is a point worth considering for teachers who want to use humour in their teaching. It seems to be reasonable for teachers to start with a ‘trial’ use of a small amount of humour from different types, and to gauge students’ reactions to their humour. The certain ‘winners’ will then be added to teachers’ repertoire of humour pieces.
7.4. **Types of humour that Vietnamese university EFL teachers use and the contexts in which humour is used**

This is the first empirical study to explore the types of humour appropriate for use in the language class, based on teachers’ and students’ preferences. Hence, responses to this question constitute a major contribution of this study to understanding this matter.

The types of humour that teachers in this study used were varied but were largely divided into two categories. The first was prepared humour, which teachers prepared before a class with the intention of inserting it into certain moments during the lesson. The second category was spontaneous humour, which was not prepared in advance. This latter category was more popular with teachers in this study, possibly due to their hectic schedules.

The ranking of the most popular types of humour in this study was as follows: humorous comments, jokes, funny stories, funny examples, and humour from teaching materials. Beside these were the less popular types such as visual humour (including funny pictures, photos, or video clips) and physical humour (gestures, facial expressions, sounds). The popularity of humorous comments, together with teachers’ preference for spontaneous humour in general, reflects the interactive feature of the language class. Instead of facts or concepts, a language class is about language use and communication – a natural context for spontaneous humour to arise.

Humour was used at various times throughout the lessons. However, the two most common contexts for humour were (1) at the beginning of a lesson, when teachers needed some ‘ice-breakers’ to help students to be at ease and enter the lesson, and (2) towards the end of a lesson, when students might be tired, and
need an energy boost. These findings confirmed the value of humour in creating a relaxing atmosphere conducive to learning, which was suggested among the indirect benefits of humour in literature (e.g. Askildson, 2005; Maurice, 1988). They also showed that the benefits of humour towards the classroom atmosphere seemed to be more important to teachers than the direct benefits on students’ comprehension and retention of information.

7.5. The effectiveness of Vietnamese university EFL teachers’ humour

Virtually all teachers who used humour indicated that they thought humour was effective. Their judgement was largely based on whether their use of humour achieved its purposes, which was closely related to the roles of humour as perceived by these teachers: creating a more conducive environment for learning, and helping students learn easier and more efficiently. However, most teachers could recall ineffective uses of humour, either by themselves or by teachers they knew. From their experiences of effective and ineffective uses of humour, teachers in this study pointed out some requirements for humour to achieve its desirable effects.

First, humour, especially jokes or funny stories, should be related to the lesson. Otherwise, they might be seen as a waste of precious learning time, or worse – teachers’ ways to kill time.

Secondly, humour content should be appropriate. The language of humour should be suitable for students’ age and English level, so that they can understand and enjoy it. Humour content should also be to the taste of students, which requires that teachers get to know their students’ likes and dislikes. There are also limits for humour content to be used in class. The most frequently
mentioned ‘taboos’ include humour about sex, politics, religions, and regional differences.

Thirdly, it is advisable for teachers to build good relationships and mutual trust with students, so that their humour would be more likely to be welcomed and any failure would cause less damage.

Fourthly, humour should not be used as a form of criticism, no matter whether it is against an individual student, a group of students, departments, schools, or society in general. This might create a detrimental effect on the classroom atmosphere, and might alienate students.

Students were in agreement with teachers’ views on these four requirements, which suggests there was a harmony between the two parties in the class. This contributed to the popularity of humour use among teachers in this study (see 7.2) and perceived effectiveness of humour. Thus, teachers attempting humour should consider students’ perceptions and attitudes, as consistency can enhance the effectiveness of humour.

In addition to the major tips above, teachers also shared some other ways to ensure the effectiveness of humour. These included good preparation, choosing good timing for humour during a lesson, moderating the amount of humour used per lesson, using visual aids (e.g. pictures or clips) if possible, and reading or watching humorous materials for humorous ideas and as a form of training one’s ability with humour use.

Some teachers believed that the sense of humour was not inborn, but could be trained – which was in line with the arguments of such advocates of humour in teaching as Medgyes (2002), Morrison (2008), and Tamblyn (2003). However, these teachers admitted that explicit training for humour was lacking in teacher-training syllabi in Vietnam, and that systematic training materials for teachers who wanted to use humour in their teaching were simply non-existent. It was
interesting to note that some students expressed the same view of humour use, as a trainable skill. This consistency between teachers’ and students’ views may justify the trial of some humour use training or materials in teacher education in future.

7.6. **Students’ response to Vietnamese university EFL teachers’ humour**

Students generally preferred humorous teachers and welcomed humour in their classes. Students found humorous teachers to be closer, but not less professional; and, all but one of them had positive reactions and feelings towards humour used by their teachers. This was also the researcher’s impression from observing the lessons. The students’ responses confirmed the teachers’ confidence in achieving their purposes when using humour: they mentioned that they were more relaxed and could learn better.

Students also showed their agreement with teachers regarding the requirements for humour to be effective, most notably being relevant to the lesson, being suitable for students’ English level and interests, and not being overused. In addition, the taboo topics of humour that students mentioned were basically the same as those mentioned by teachers. The consistency between teachers’ and students’ views was shown one more time, in conformation of the popularity of humour among the participants of this study and explanations of the high frequency of humour use by teachers. Students’ responses also justified the high level of effectiveness that teachers attributed to their use of humour. It can be concluded that humour in this context is an effective strategy, and contributes to as well as emerges from the amiable relationship between teachers and students.
7.7. **Recommendations**

From the findings of this study, a number of recommendations can be made for effective integration of humour into language teaching. Based on the context of this study, these recommendations should be firstly addressed in the Vietnamese context. However, they can also be applicable in other contexts with similar circumstances, especially in EFL teaching in Asia, where there is a shift to learner-centred approaches and efforts to promote CLT (Liao, 2004; Littlewood, 2000; Nunan, 2003).

First, it is desirable for teachers to use humour in their teaching to lighten the atmosphere, to help students relax, and help them learn more easily. To prepare for this use, teachers should first get to understand their students’ interests, likes and dislikes. Then, they need to consider the appropriateness of certain humour types and/or content within the specific culture and/or context they are teaching. Teachers also need to select humour and carefully think of how and when to use certain pieces of humour in their lessons. When using humour in class it is advisable that teachers gauge students’ reactions to their humour, and adjust accordingly. It is also necessary for teachers to reflect on their use of humour after class, in order to sharpen and fine-tune effective uses and to eliminate ineffective or inappropriate ones.

Second, humour training should be seriously considered for inclusion in teacher training syllabi, especially for language teachers. This requires additional studies and work in the field of humour and its application in teaching in order to identify the components to be included in a systematic and scientific way. However, considering the popularity of humour among teachers and students in this study, and the potential benefits of humour to the processes of teaching and learning, it
is worth the effort to study and experiment more in this field. It is possible that humour is integrated with other affective and communicative principles, such as games, puzzles or role-play.

Third, it would be a good practice for teachers who have used humour in their teaching to share their experiences, tips, and resources with other teachers. A small collection of pieces of humour used by teachers in this study is included in the thesis (see Appendix 7). More collections like this would be valuable for teachers waiting for systematic humour training. The Internet offers good resources of humour. However, it would be better for these to be accompanied by teachers’ experiences and/or tried and true ways to better employ and exploit them.

This study opens the door for widening the acceptance of humour in the EFL classroom. It provides support for teachers and students who value the roles of humour in the EFL classroom and paves the way for research in the area.

7.8. Limitations of the study

Similar to any research study, the present study has some limitations. The first limitation was the fact that there was only one observation per teacher. More observations would have yielded more data on how teachers employed humour in different lessons and/or with different classes, as well as verify some teachers’ claims that they did use humour, but not during the observed lesson.

Second, the study was conducted in a large city of Vietnam, where teachers and students have more exposure to English and the Internet than most regional towns. The inclusion of research sites and participants in areas with different socio-economic conditions could have increased the level of representation of the study and may have increased the generalisability of findings. Studies in
other similar Asian countries could also have contributed to providing a wider picture of the use of humour in the classroom.

Third, the selection of students who participated in interviews was based on a voluntary factor: it was not randomly selected due to the availability of students and the researcher. Therefore, findings from the student interviews may not be representative of all students.

7.9. **Implications for further research**

To advance research on the topic of humour in language teaching, future research could be:

- A longitudinal study to explore the development of teachers’ use of humour over time, and in different educational contexts such as high schools or private schools;
- A longitudinal study to explore both affective and cognitive effects of humour on students during a long period;
- A study to investigate teachers’ and students’ perceptions on practices regarding humour in teaching, with participants coming from urban, suburban, and rural contexts in Vietnam as well as different countries;
- Given the finding that humour can be trained: an investigation of humour training and/or materials in teacher training syllabi in order to evaluate the feasibility of systematic training of humour use and possible effectiveness of such training;
- An investigation of student-initiated humour.
7.10. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study explored EFL teachers’ and students’ perceptions of the roles of humour in language teaching and learning, as well as teachers’ practices of using humour and students’ responses to teachers’ humour. The findings revealed that humour was very popular among teachers and students, teachers were largely confident in their use of humour and the effectiveness of its use. Moreover, the students generally welcomed the teachers’ humour and preferred humorous teachers. The study also identified some requirements for humour to be appropriate and effective in classroom teaching, and popular types of humour. Firmly asserting the desirability of humour by providing empirical evidence, the study strongly affirms the role of humour in ELT and encourages teachers to use humour in a well-informed manner in order to make language learning as interesting as it should be.
REFERENCES


Bruner, R. (2002). *Transforming thought: The role of humor in teaching*. University of Virginia, Darden Graduate School of Business Administration.


Senior, R. (2001). The role of humour in the development and maintenance of class cohesion. *Prospect*, 16: 2, 45-54.


APPENDIX 1: LETTER OF ETHICAL CLEARANCE

4th January 2011

COMMITTEE FOR ETHICS IN HUMAN RESEARCH - APPROVED - Project number 10-161

Mr Hoang Pham  
Faculty of Arts and Design  
University of Canberra  
BRUCE ACT 2617

Dear Hoang,

The Committee for Ethics in Human Research has considered your application to conduct research with human subjects for the project entitled The use of humour in EFL teaching.

Approval is granted until 01/02/13 the anticipated completion date stated in the application.

The following general conditions apply to your approval.

These requirements are determined by University policy and the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Research Involving Humans (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2007).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Monitoring:</th>
<th>You, in conjunction with your supervisor, must assist the Committee to monitor the conduct of approved research by completing and promptly returning project review forms, which will be sent to you at the end of your project and, in the case of extended research, at least annually during the approval period.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Discontinuation of research:         | You, in conjunction with your supervisor, must inform the Committee, giving reasons, if the research is not conducted or is discontinued before the expected date of completion.                                                                 |}
| Extension of approval:               | If your project will not be complete by the expiry date stated above, you must apply in writing for extension of approval. Application should be made before current approval expires; should specify a new completion date; should include reasons for your request. |}
| Retention and storage of data:       | University policy states that all research data must be stored securely, on University premises, for a minimum of five years. You and your supervisor must ensure that all records are transferred to the University when the project is complete. |
| Changes in contact details:          | You should advise the Committee of any change of address during or soon after the approval period including, if appropriate, email address(es).                                                                 |}

Please add the Contact Complaints form (attached) for distribution with your project.

Yours sincerely
Michaela Dalgleish

Michaela Dalgleish  
Research Ethics Officer  
Research Services Office  
University of Canberra  
ACT 2601 Australia  
Location: University Drive Bruce ACT  
www.canberra.edu.au  
Postal Address: University of Canberra ACT 2601 Australia  
Location: University Drive Bruce ACT  
Australian Government Higher Education Registered Provider Number CRICOS 00212K
APPENDIX 2: INFORMATION SHEET AND CONSENT FORM

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION FORM

*Project title*

The use of humour in EFL teaching

*Researcher*

Mr Hoang Pham

PhD in Education

*Supervisors*

1. Assistant Prof., Dr Eleni Petraki

BA/BEd (ELT), MA (Appl.Ling), PhD

Assistant Professor

TESOL and English Language

Faculty of Arts & Design

2. Dr Jeremy Jones

BA (Hons), CertTESL, M AppLing, PhD

Senior Lecturer

TESOL and Foreign Language Teaching

Faculty of Arts & Design
Project Aim

Identify the use of humour by Vietnamese university teachers of English and students' perceptions of humour use.

Assess students’ response to teachers’ use of humour in class.

Benefits of the Project

Firstly, it will contribute to the understanding of the use of humour in foreign language teaching and learning. Secondly, it will reveal the applicability of humour in English teaching and learning in the EFL context. Finally, it can add to the basis for well-informed decisions regarding the use of humour which is appropriate and beneficial to students in classroom teaching.

General Outline of the Project

The data will be collected from EFL teachers and students at HCMC University of Pedagogy and the University of Finance & Marketing. A questionnaire will be used with students (n=100) to find out their perceptions of CLT. The teachers (n=30) will be observed during their regular classes, and then be interviewed individually on their use of CLT. Some students will be interviewed on their impressions of and reactions to their teachers’ use of CLT.

A summary of the research results will be emailed to participants who state that they want to receive it.

Participant Involvement

The participation of the teachers will involve being observed and recorded (audio and video) during their regular classroom teaching, and attending an individual interview with the researcher afterwards. The participation of the students will involve completing a questionnaire, and some of them will attend an individual interview with the researcher afterwards. The interviews with teachers and students will be audio-recorded. The transcripts of the interviews will be provided to each interviewee for confirmation before the analysis is finalised.
The research will take place at HCMC University of Pedagogy and the University of Finance & Marketing. The students will be asked to complete a questionnaire once, and some of them will attend an interview which will last about 30 minutes. The teachers will be observed during 2 class meetings, which may last from 90 minutes to 180 minutes. Then they will attend an interview which will last about 30 minutes.

It is suggested that the participation in this research will expose the participants to no risks, discomforts, or hazards. The participation in this research is voluntary. The potential participants may, without any penalty, decline to take part or withdraw at any time without providing an explanation, or refuse to answer a question.

*Confidentiality*

Only the researcher and the supervisors will have access to the data collected from the participants.

*Anonymity*

The anonymity of the participants will be preserved. In the research report, only pseudonyms, letters, or numbers will be used when referring to individual participants.

*Data Storage*

During collection, analysis and preparation of results, the data will be stored in paper copies (questionnaires) and computer files on CD (questionnaire’s computed results, observations, interviews). The paper copies will be stored in a locked cabinet. The computer files will be protected with passwords. The data will be stored at University of Canberra for 5 years after the research is complete. At the end of the storage period, the paper copies will be shredded and the computer files be deleted.

*Ethics Committee Clearance*

This project is waiting to be approved by the Committee for Ethics in Human Research of University of Canberra.

*Queries and Concerns*
The participants can raise queries on the project via university email or telephone call with the researcher, the supervisors, the faculty, or University of Canberra.

Contact details of the researcher:

Email: u117781@uni.canberra.edu.au

Contact details of the supervisors:

Assistant Prof., Dr Eleni Petraki

Faculty of Arts & Design

Telephone Number: (02) 6201 5219

Facsimile Number: (02) 6201 2649

Email: Eleni.Petraki@canberra.edu.au

Dr Jeremy Jones

Faculty of Arts & Design

Telephone Number: (02) 6201 2907

Facsimile Number: (02) 6201 2649

Email: Jeremy.Jones@canberra.edu.au
Informed Consent Form

Project Title

The use of humour in EFL teaching

Consent Statement

I have read and understood the information about the research. I am not aware of any condition that would prevent my participation, and I agree to participate in this project. I have had the opportunity to ask questions about my participation in the research. All questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction.

(For teachers) I agree to being audio and video recorded during my teaching ☐

Name............................................ Signature...........................................

Date ...........................................

A summary of the research report can be forwarded to you when published. If you would like to receive a copy of the report, please include your mailing address below.

Name...........................................

Address..........................................................

.............................................................
APPENDIX 3: STUDENTS’ QUESTIONNAIRE

QUESTIONNAIRE ON HUMOUR (Adapted from: Morrison, 2008 and Askildson, 2005)

Please state whether you agree or disagree with the following statements by putting a cross (X) in the appropriate column.

[Humour in these statements includes verbal and non-verbal types of humour, and humorous materials in both English and Vietnamese.]

Types of humour: jokes, riddles, puns, funny stories, humorous comments, cartoons, pictures, facial expressions, gestures, etc.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Totally disagree (1)</th>
<th>Partly disagree (2)</th>
<th>Neither agree nor disagree (3)</th>
<th>Partly agree (4)</th>
<th>Totally agree (5)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Humour is important to foreign language learning.</td>
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<td>2. I can learn better when my foreign language teacher uses humour.</td>
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<td>3. Humour is an important characteristic in a teacher.</td>
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<td>4. While humour is important, learning requires a serious work environment with little time for</td>
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<td>5.</td>
<td>If my class is laughing and joking, we are not learning.</td>
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<td>6.</td>
<td>In Vietnamese education, a student initiating humour in class is usually perceived as being a disruption to learning.</td>
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<td>7.</td>
<td>Humour in the foreign language increases my interest in learning that language.</td>
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<td>8.</td>
<td>Humour makes me feel more relaxed (i.e. less anxious) in my language classroom.</td>
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<td>9.</td>
<td>Humour in the classroom helps me to concentrate better on the lesson.</td>
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<td>10.</td>
<td>Humour is a waste of precious learning time in the classroom.</td>
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<td>11.</td>
<td>If a teacher uses humour a lot, I will think he/she is not professional.</td>
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<td>12.</td>
<td>The use of humour during a lesson is distracting.</td>
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<td>13.</td>
<td>Humour is not a measurable characteristic and therefore has a questionable role in language learning.</td>
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<td>14.</td>
<td>I find it difficult to understand English humour in the classroom.</td>
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<td>15.</td>
<td>I would like my teacher to use Vietnamese humour in my English class.</td>
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</table>
|16. I would like my teacher to use English humour in my English class.  
   |   |   |   |   |
|17. My teacher’s use of humour makes me feel closer to him/her.  
   |   |   |   |   |
|18. I learn more about the culture of the foreign language by being exposed to native humour of that language and culture.  
   |   |   |   |   |
|19. Humour generally improves my ability to learn a foreign language by creating a more comfortable and conducive learning environment overall.  
   |   |   |   |   |
APPENDIX 4: OBSERVATION SHEET

OBSERVATION SHEET

Date:
Class:
Teacher:
Lesson:
Coursebook:

Teacher's use of humour:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Joke</th>
<th>Riddle</th>
<th>Pun</th>
<th>Funny story</th>
<th>Humorous comment</th>
<th>Visual humour</th>
<th>Physical humour</th>
<th>Others</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Materials</td>
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<td>Lesson content</td>
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<td>Classroom interactions</td>
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<td>Others</td>
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Students' reactions:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Negative</th>
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APPENDIX 5: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS – TEACHERS (Using humour)

[Humour in these statements includes verbal and non-verbal types of humour, and humorous materials in both English and Vietnamese.]

1. In general, how effective did you find this lesson?
2. Was your use of humour in this lesson effective? Why or why not?
3. What do you think of the students’ reaction to your use of humour in this lesson?
4. At this point, you used [an anecdote, a joke, a remark, etc.]. Why did you use it?
5. Please tell me about one instance in which you used humour effectively [to enhance the lesson quality, to increase student participation, to engage students more, etc.]
6. Please tell me about one instance in which you used humour not so effectively. What do you think was the reason(s) for that failure?
7. In general, is your use of humour in class prepared or spontaneous? Please explain your preference.
8. Do you purposefully choose materials that are likely to generate humour? [to be core texts or supplementary materials]
9. What do you think about the role(s) and/ or effect(s) of humour in foreign language teaching?
10. Do you think that students want teachers to use humour when teaching? Why or why not?
11. How often do you use humour? [every lesson, once in a couple of weeks, once in a couple of months, or once a year]
12. What type(s) of humour do you prefer to use in class? Please explain your choice(s).

13. Are there any types of humour you think are not appropriate in class?
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS – TEACHERS (Not using humour)

[Humour in these statements includes verbal and non-verbal types of humour, and humorous materials in both English and Vietnamese.]

1. Do you use humour in the classroom? Why or why not? If yes, how often do you use humour? [once in a couple of weeks, once in a couple of months, or once a year]

2. In general, do you think the students enjoyed this lesson?

3. Do you think that using humour could make this lesson more effective?

4. Do you think that using humour could make this lesson more enjoyable?

5. What do you think about the role(s) and/or effect(s) of humour in foreign language teaching?

6. Do you think that humour can be beneficial to your lesson and your teaching? Why or why not?

7. Do you think that students want teachers to use humour when teaching? Why or why not?

8. Do you think that you can use humour in your teaching? Why or why not?

9. What type(s) of humour do you prefer to use in class? Please explain your choice(s).

10. Are there any types of humour you think are not appropriate in class?
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS – STUDENTS

[Humour in these statements includes verbal and non-verbal types of humour, and humorous materials in both English and Vietnamese.]

1. In general, what is your opinion about your teacher’s use of humour?

2. In this lesson, when your teacher used [an anecdote, a joke, a remark, etc.], what was your reaction and how did you feel? Please explain your reaction and feeling.

3. What effect(s) do you think the use of humour had on this lesson? [E.g. increase comprehension/retention, lighten classroom atmosphere, make the teacher more approachable, etc.]

4. Do you think that humour is important in foreign language learning? Why or why not?

5. Please tell me about one instance in which your teacher used humour effectively. Why do you think your teacher’s use of humour was effective then?

6. Please tell me about one instance in which your teacher used humour not so effectively. Why do you think your teacher’s use of humour was not so effective then?

7. What type(s) of humour do you prefer your foreign language teacher to use? Please explain your choice(s).

8. Are there any types of humour you think are not appropriate in class?
APPENDIX 6: TRANSCRIPT OF A TEACHER INTERVIEW

− Hello, Mr H. Thank you for your participation. How effective did you find the lesson?
− I think the first part was more interesting than the second part. All in all, I think it’s OK. And I really like that all students can participate, and they have good cooperation with me. Sometimes I made fun with them and they could join in.
− I noticed that there were a lot of interactions and humour in your lesson. The atmosphere seemed to be easygoing and students seemed to enjoy your lesson. Do you think your use of humour in that lesson effective?
− It’s hard to say, because I’m normally not very humorous, especially when speaking Vietnamese. For English, it’s OK. I can get humour from my students, and I can make jokes with them. It also depends on students, some like it and some don’t. From their reactions, I can adjust. If they like it, I’ll continue; if they don’t like it, I’ll change to another direction.
− That brings us to an interesting point: students’ reaction to your humour...
− It’s very important. When we joke, or we have some fun, we have to pay attention, because they’re our audience.
− Could you share your experience in identifying students’ reaction? How can you know if it’s positive, negative, or neutral?
− I have to look at their faces. If I see they’re happy, smiling faces, I know what’s going on is good. If they enjoy the joke or they join in the fun, they’ll say something to me.
− So you mean they’d give you some feedback?
− Yeah. Humorous responses or humorous answers.
− You employed a lot of humorous comments. Is it your favourite type of humour, compared with jokes, riddles, or visual humour?
− Actually I like all of them, but it depends on classes and students. I really like that lesson, because some strange, new ideas happened to me. I try to catch them on my list, so that at the end of the course, they’ll have to perform in some ways, singing or dancing. To do that, I give them strange or difficult questions, oe easy questions with difficult answers.
− What’s your intention when doing so?
− I like them to study for some purpose. We may have fun, but they must get some ideas from the lesson. I take out some questions from the lesson and put them in a humorous way. If the students aren’t careful they can be trapped.
From what you say, I deduce that the lesson I observed was one successful instance of using humour.

Yeah, I think so.

Another successful instance?

With college students, whose English is weaker than these university students, I can’t check previous lessons the way in high schools, though they’re lazy, so I carry out this task in a humorous way. For example, I take out some important words from previous lessons and use them in humorous examples, then I ask them to say those sentences in English and tell me what the key word is. I tried that 2 weeks ago, and it was successful. First, they were very scared to review; but then when they could answer my questions, they were very happy. Because it was funny, not serious, they could remember the lesson easier. Another example is that sometimes I use a riddle or a tongue-twister. If I just give them an example and ask them to read, it’s very boring. I’d ask them to go slowly first with me, then I ask them to speed up and read those tongue-twisters as fast as they can.

Not successful use of humour?

In a class, the levels of English vary, so some students don’t understand a joke. They look very serious and nervous.

So you mean to enjoy humour is quite challenging?

Yeah. You have to prepare a lot at home. You see, I’m a very quiet person in Vietnamese, not talkative and humorous. But in English, I can do it more easily. Sometimes spontaneously. A simple part of the lesson, and an idea comes up, from me or from students, and I can take advantage of it to make fun.

Prepared or spontaneous humour?

Preparation is better. I read through a lesson, and think at this part I can use humour, say an anecdote. But if they laugh all the lesson, maybe they don’t remember anything. In this university, students have to study for 4 hours or more a session. If they just do the exercises or talk to the teacher in the normal way, not the humorous way, it’s very boring and tiring for us. If we are good at using humour, it’ll be useful for us.

In what specific ways can it be useful?

First, students will like my subject and they come to class more often. That’s my success, because I want all of them be trained to improve their skills. Second, they can relax.

Do you think that when you use humour, students will remember the lesson better?

I hope so. Not always, because sometimes it’s a bit far from the lesson, I try not to let it take us far from the lesson. That’s a waste of time. We can make humour related to the lesson.
– Can we use materials to generate humour?
  – I think so. You can use a good book, like “Laugh with Your Lessons”, which contains jokes and funny questions. We have to read and choose carefully the suitable ones or we should adapt.
– What are criteria for choosing humour?
  – We should find things related to the lesson we’re teaching. If the language is above students’ level, we should adapt them, make it easier and simpler for students.
– Some teachers say that they're not funny, not humorous at all, so they can’t use humour. Do you agree with their statements?
  – I think it depends on the subjects and the students, their cooperation. Sometimes with the same joke, I’m successful with this class, not another.
– Roles & effects of humour in FL teaching?
  – I think it’s very important. I used to study Russian in a normal way, and it was hard to remember anything. When I finished university, I almost forgot all about Russian. It’d be easier if we had chances to sing songs or have jokes in Russian. We could remember vocabulary and structures better. When we feel happy with our teacher and lesson, we can remember the lesson longer.
– Any other effects?
  – We can direct our humour to social knowledge so that students can learn or remember things outside the lesson, but we should have a limit.
– Students want teachers to use humour?
  – I think so, especially for university students, because they have to study difficult subjects in long sessions, sometimes in both morning and afternoon. It’s very tiring and boring if they just sit there and listen to the teacher.
– How often do you use humour?
  – I think every lesson. The amount varies depending on the lessons.
– What are your favourite types of humour?
  – I prefer comments and jokes, because they require quick reactions.
– Could you share some tips on using comments and jokes?
  – I have to get to know students well, their habits, the way they take part in the lesson, how often they come to class... If they’re absent for a session, in the next session I can make comments on them.
– Any types of humour we shouldn’t use in class?
  – We shouldn’t make jokes on students' appearance or English ability. We may hurt them.
– Thank you for your responses.
APPENDIX 7: HUMOUR COLLECTION

Part of the humour in this section came from teachers in this study; the remainder from different sources, mainly the Internet. It is suggested that teachers who want to use humour make extensive use of the Internet for ideas and resources of humour.

- A teacher used this well-known joke to teach the double meanings of the verb ‘serve’:

  Man: Do you serve crabs here?

  Waiter: We serve everyone, sir. Please take a seat.

- When teaching the grammar point of Past Continuous tense, another teacher wrote this example on the board:

  While I was explaining the tense, A and B [two students in that class] were secretly passing notes.

  It happened to be true that A and B were actually passing notes a moment before, and the teacher saw that but said nothing.

Jokes

“Waiter, there is a fly in the butter!”
“Yes sir, it's a butterfly!”

"Waiter, will my pizza be long?"
"No sir, it will be round!"

(to teach vocabulary)
“Waiter, waiter, what's wrong with these eggs?” “I don't know Sir, I only laid the table.”

(to teach two meanings of “to lay”)

source: http://www.jokes4us.com/peoplejokes/waiterjokes.html

**Panda**

A panda walks into a café. He orders a sandwich, eats it, then draws a gun and fires two shots in the air. "Why?" asks the confused waitress, as the panda makes towards the exit. The panda produces a badly punctuated wildlife manual and tosses it over his shoulder. "I'm a panda," he says at the door. "Look it up." The waitress turns to the relevant entry and, sure enough, finds an explanation. "Panda. Large black-and-white bear-like mammal, native to China. Eats, shoots and leaves."

source: http://www.jokes4us.com/peoplejokes/waiterjokes.html

(to teach punctuation)

**Innkeeper:** The room is $15 a night. It's $5 if you make your own bed.

**Guest:** I'll make my own bed.

**Innkeeper:** Good. I'll get you some nails and wood.

**Waiter:** "Tea or coffee, gentlemen?"

1st customer: "I'll have tea."

2nd customer: "Me, too. And be sure the glass is clean!"

*(Waiter exits, returns)*

**Waiter:** "Two teas. Which one had the clean glass?"
Riddles

Q: How many teachers does it take to change a light bulb?
A: Well, teachers generally don't change light bulbs, but a good teacher can make a dim one brighter!

Q: What five-letter word becomes shorter when you add two letters to it?
A: Short

Q: What word begins and ends with an ‘e’ but only has one letter?
A: Envelope

Q: What has to be broken before you can use it?
A: An egg

Q: What begins with T, ends with T and has T in it?
A: A teapot

Q: What goes up but never comes down?
A: Your age!

Q: What comes down but never goes up?
A: Rain
Q: What goes up when rain comes down?
A: An umbrella!

**Puns**

Police were called to a daycare where a three-year-old was resisting a rest.

To write with a broken pencil is pointless.

There was once a cross-eyed teacher who couldn't control his pupils.

A hole has been found in the nudist camp wall. The police are looking into it.

I couldn't quite remember how to throw a boomerang, but eventually it came back to me.

I was going to look for my missing watch, but I could never find the time.

My skiing skills are really going downhill.

Time flies like an arrow. Fruit flies like a banana.

My job at the concrete plant seems to get harder and harder.

Two hats were hanging on a hat rack in the hallway. One hat says to the other, 'You stay here, I'll go on a head.'

Source: [http://www.punoftheday.com/cgi-bin/disppuns.pl?ord=F&cat=0&sub=0&page=6](http://www.punoftheday.com/cgi-bin/disppuns.pl?ord=F&cat=0&sub=0&page=6)

**Humorous comments**

Some examples of humorous comments made by teachers:

(When a student came into class late, and hesitated to pass before the researcher's camera) 'You don't have to duck, just stand right there in front of the camera.'

(When a student gave an incorrect answer to the teacher's question) 'Yes, answer like that, and I'll see you next year.'
(When the projector produced a dim shade of purple instead of the normal white light) ‘It’s beautiful, huh?’

(When mentioning that Hemingway had four wives) ‘You want to have four wives like him?’

Resources of humour

http://www.oddee.com/item_88437.aspx

(15 Stupidest Warning Labels)

40 Seriously Funny Print Ads | Webdesigner Depot

21 Seriously Funny Exam Answers - Caveman Circus | Caveman Circus

http://www.jokes.com/

86 Funny Teacher Quotes: Download free posters and graphics for humorous quotations about teaching, education, students, kids, and learning.

http://www.gocomics.com/

(Great for some fun)