

## **‘Butter Balla Here!’: The Functions of Humor in Primary English Classrooms in Korea**

Sol Kim\*

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The use of humor has been a controversial research topic in language classrooms. Humor is pervasive; however, the functions of humor in primary English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) classrooms is under-investigated. To analyze the distinct features of humor, this study explores the specific functions of humor in primary English teaching classrooms in South Korea. The data set included thirty 40-minute English lessons videotaped in 2019 and semi-structured interviews with three teachers. Data were analyzed by identifying humor sequences, transcribing these classroom sessions and interviews, coding recurrent themes, and sorting representative excerpts. As a result, psychological, social, and behavioral functions of humor were conceptualized. The findings showed that humor (i) mitigated learners’ anxiety and aroused interest in language learning, (ii) reinforced constructive teacher-learner relationships and enabled camaraderie between learners, and (iii) regulated student behavior or rationalized learners’ listening incomprehension. Pedagogical implications are also discussed regarding ways to use and respond to humor in language classrooms.

**Key words:** humor, relieving stress, establishing relationships, exerting influence without losing face, function, classroom discourse, EFL

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\*Author: Sol Kim, Teacher, Hyohaeng Elementary School; 16, Wau-ro, Bongdam-eup, Hwaseong-si, Gyeonggi-do 18320, Korea; Email: [solwithu@gmail.com](mailto:solwithu@gmail.com)

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The use of humor has been a controversial topic in research on language classrooms (Bolka, Griffin, & Goodboy, 2018; Waring, 2013). Ever since Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) proposed ways to overcome foreign language anxiety, the use of humor has been considered a positive approach. However, humor can have different consequences (Wanzer, Frymier, & Irwin, 2010). Wagner and Urios-Aparisi (2011) cited Sigmund Freud's pioneering study, which made a clear distinction between tendentious and non-tendentious humor, where the first type is destructive and the second form is constructive (Schmitz, 2002). Constructive humor can motivate learners to engage in language learning and enable teachers and learners to build rapport (Petraki & Nguyen, 2016). Furthermore, appropriate humor has a mnemonic effect, contributes to increasing learners' retention (Cook, 2001; Neff & Rucynski, 2017). On the contrary, inappropriate humor can distract or even intimidate students, hence disturb language learning. Teachers' fear of losing control also reflects humor's undesirable features (Mingzheng, 2012). Responding to such a negative view, some researchers contend that teachers must use humor that is not only cognitive but pedagogically adequate and neutral (Forman, 2011; Neuliep, 1991). Regardless of its impact, spontaneous verbal humor is pervasive in language classrooms (Kim & Park, 2020).

As humor is a natural occurrence in daily conversations, the functions of humor have been identified in various settings. Revising Bell and Pomerantz's (2016) criterion, functions are categorized on psychological, social, and behavioral aspects. A well-known function of humor is its psychological effect on defusing tension. Humor can lower anxiety and help learners acquire a target language (Wang, 2009). Meanwhile, humor can either socially bind or alienate people. A few conversational jokes or hilarious narratives can build camaraderie and strengthen bonding among speakers (Bell, 2007; Hay, 2000; Norrick, 2003), whereas some mere quips can express hostility, aggression, or rejection of an outgroup (Bell, 2011; Long & Graesser, 1988). Some researchers posit that humor acts as a pedagogical *safe house*, enabling learners to negotiate explicit classroom authoritarianism (Pomerantz & Bell, 2011). By contrast, Holmes (2000) argues that humor is used as a strategy for "doing power less explicitly," (p. 165) which means, the upper status can attack a certain person or group without losing face (Baxter, 2002; Cekaite & Aronsson, 2005). These studies indicate that the functions of humor are contextual.

The specific functions of humor in language classrooms remain under-researched, albeit its pervasive appearance. Despite the limited literature, Kang (2017) showed that a humorous language play helped to improve Korean primary students' English production. This fact also points to the need for empirical studies to investigate the potential of humor in primary English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) classrooms. The various functions and outcomes of humor may have distinct features in Korea's primary English classrooms, where both

teachers and learners are usually non-native English speakers. This study aims to address the gap by exploring the diverse functions of humor unfolding in classroom contexts through multiple data sources, including thirty 40-minute English lessons and interviews with three primary school English teachers. By examining how humor influences English teaching and learning, instructors will be empowered to use humor in assisting learners' language development and respond to it.

The following are specific research questions to guide this study:

1. What are the psychological effects of humor on primary English teachers and learners?
2. What are the social functions of humor on teacher-learner and learner-learner relationships?
3. What are the behavioral effects of humor on primary English teachers and learners?

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

Research has identified that the functions of humor are categorized differently (Bell & Pomerantz, 2016; Norrick, 2003; Pomerantz & Bell, 2011; Wagner & Urios-Aparisi, 2011). This study follows Martin's (2007) classification to apply the role of humor in the English classroom context in Korea, that is, relieving and coping with stress, establishing and maintaining social bonds, and influencing others.

### **2.1. Relieving Stress**

A characteristic strength and basic function of humor is to make people laugh. Holmes (2000) contends that this tension-relieving function is included in almost all forms of humor. Tarone (2000) was the first to claim that humorous language play can reduce learners' tension and lower their affective filters. As this function can make learning more enjoyable (Bell, 2009; Wagner & Urios-Aparisi, 2011), instructors reportedly attempted to use humor when teaching (Forman, 2011; Petraki & Nguyen, 2016). For example, Lems (2011) asserted humor-embedded teaching can motivate learners and make them attentive. Empirical evidence supports this claim. Bushnell (2008) analyzed a collaborative learning situation where two undergraduate learners present a humorous role-play while focusing on the target language. This aspect is further backed by Bell's (2012) quantitative research, where adult second language (L2) learners' retention was better when language learning includes playful language-related episodes. Analyzing surveys of undergraduate Chinese students,

Mingzheng (2012) also reported that learners preferred to learn English in a comfortable and familiar atmosphere, where there is humor. Overall, these studies demonstrate that markers of humor such as laughter can make language learning more pleasurable.

Studies show that humor mitigated not only learners' but also teachers' anxiety. According to Swanson (2013), teachers were able to reduce stressful teaching conditions and maintain a positive perspective on their vocation by appreciating and using humor. Similarly, Bell and Pomerantz (2016) argued that humor's stress-relieving function is vital for the challenging working conditions of language teachers. However, if interlocutors fail to understand humor, it can become intrinsically stressful (Wanzer et al., 2010).

## 2.2. Establishing and Maintaining Social Bonds

Scholars readily acknowledged that humor could assist speakers in forming positive relationships and affiliations and distinguishing in-group and out-group identities. Studies have focused on how humor reinforces solidarity and expresses affinity in general social situations (Bell, 2007; Norrick, 2003). Meanwhile, shared laughter also denotes explicit boundaries of acceptability. Long and Graesser (1988) argued that when humor is directed at people whom the speaker dislikes, it may result in pleasure or relief. In contrast, joy is diminished when hostile humor is targeted at people a person likes. Hay (2000) contended that humor excludes the out-group and binds the in-group at the same time. In the same vein, Holmes (2000) examined workplace humor and contended that humor directed at outsiders strengthened group solidarity and is a mechanism for distinguishing between in-group and out-group affiliation.

Compared with studies that focus on humor creating social bonds, there is a paucity of research investigating its function of building positive relationships in schools (Neff & Rucynski, 2017; Webb & Barrett, 2014), particularly in Korea. Among the few, Webb and Barrett (2014) surveyed college instructors' behavior to build rapport with their students. The study findings showed that humor was the second most mentioned behavioral characteristic of instructors favored by students after courteous behavior. Another recent study by Neff and Rucynski (2017) explored Japanese college students' perception of humor in their English language classes. In the survey, 270 out of 918 respondents answered that humor helps to improve relationships among students and with the instructor.

## 2.3. Influencing Others

The influencing characteristic of humor has been researched in the workplace and school, where an unequal power relation exists. By using humor as a shield, the speaker can wield influence while mitigating face-threatening behaviors or avoiding humiliation (Bell &

Pomerantz, 2016; Holmes, 2006). In this study, the influencing function of humor is split into two sub-functions: (i) controlling others or having them behave as one would want (Hay, 2000; Holmes, 2000), and (ii) justifying one's illegitimate behavior and mischief (Cekaite & Aronsson, 2005). On the one hand, controlling humor can be found between people of different status (Hay, 2000). While a powerful person may use humor to maintain control, the less powerful can also use humor to subvert authority in a socially acceptable way (Kotthoff, 2006; Van Praag, Stevens, & Van Houtte, 2017). Direct criticism can cause discomfort; therefore, the speaker uses humor to make the message less offensive and avoid disparagement (Bell & Pomerantz, 2016). According to Baxter (2002), secondary school boys used humor to gain attention and deride female students' legitimate opinions. Similarly, Pomerantz and Bell (2011) showed that a male learner pushed an earnest student to speak nonsensical Spanish while behaving as if he was only joking. These studies indicate that humor can be disguised as light mockery, but underlying it is the fact that it can control social situations in favor of the speaker.

On the other hand, humor was used to legitimate one's misbehaviors. Comparing workplace discourse with friendship discourse, Holmes and Marra (2002) claimed that subversive humor is more prevalent in workplace meetings. Empirical research also shows learners using inappropriate humor against their teachers. In a Swedish immersion classroom, Cekaite and Aronsson (2004, 2005) reported that young learners overturned the classroom hierarchy with jokes. Waring (2013) also identified a group of adult ESL learners who poked fun at the instructor's lack of knowledge while sarcastically commenting that the task was too easy, as if they were only joking. In these studies, though teachers felt uncomfortable with learners' subversive humor, they could not scold them openly because students posed as if they were merely being funny.

In sum, research on the functions of humor highlighted the multiple aspects of humor. Despite the significant contributions, however, these studies presented findings in the context of a workplace, immersion, and ESL classrooms; thus, there still remains the question of the unique features of humor in Korean primary English classrooms. Considering that Korean teachers and learners study English as a foreign language, it is necessary to scrutinize the idiosyncratic characteristics of humor in Korean English classrooms. This study is in response to such a call.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1. Participants**

This study examined three Korean English teachers and their students as participants.

These teachers taught at different primary schools located across Gyeonggi province in South Korea. Teacher A was a 45-year-old female head teacher who had more than 22 years of teaching experience, with the last 10 being spent in teaching English. She was willing to teach fourth grade because of her personal belief that grades three and four were vital for acquiring primary English language knowledge. She mainly used Korean during class and explained the contexts of key expressions in detail. She usually focused on attaining the learning objectives; thus, she planned structured activities that require students to collaborate. She gave ample opportunities to her students to take turns to speak. She declared that she had no sense of humor. Her students were fourth graders (10-years-old), who are active and engaging.

Teacher B was a 29-year-old male novice teacher with four years of teaching experience and only one year in teaching English. Though he wished to take on the role of a homeroom teacher, he had to teach fourth grade students in 2019. However, he was satisfied with teaching these students as he felt they were much more innocent and friendly than senior students. Instead of speaking English, he mainly used Korean during class. Teacher B's class was casual and comfortable that anyone can speak to him in a friendly manner. He allowed students to call him Mr. Kang, which is a very unusual appellation between a Korean teacher and students. He used kinesthetic games and enjoyed exchanging jokes with students. His students were fourth graders who often tended to initiate jokes.

Teacher C was a 35-year-old female teacher with 11 years of teaching experience and seven years of English teaching expertise. The head teacher (Teacher A) introduced teacher C to the researcher. They had met at an advanced overseas training program for English teachers in Canada in 2018. She was well acquainted with her students as she had taught them for almost a year. Among the three teachers, teacher C used maximum English during her interactions. More than half of her remarks were in English, and she translated them into Korean for underachievers. She had high expectations of her students, and very often made learners remain in class until they completed the task at hand. Although kind and earnest, teacher C sometimes teased students based on the level of rapport they shared with her. She also taught fifth grade students (11-years-old). They were usually polite and attentive but sometimes seemed tired and drowsy.

### 3.2. Data Collection

The primary source of data for this study were video-taped recordings and the secondary source were interviews. Data were collected from the first semester of 2019 in Korean primary EFL classrooms. Prior to data collection, all the participants signed an informed consent document. Thirty 40-minute videotaped English lessons were collected from three teachers with class sizes ranging from 25 to 30 students. The teachers had autonomy to

choose the lessons to record. Teachers conducted these video recordings. Tripods were placed in front of the classrooms to clearly observe learners' gestures and facial expressions. To prevent teachers or learners from intentionally using or not using humor, the researcher explained at the beginning of the study that the purpose was to analyze classroom interaction. After the recording was completed, the participants were informed that the specific topic of the study was to examine humor in classroom interactions. On hearing this statement, the two female teachers (teachers A and C) expressed skepticism that humor would appear in their videos.

In this study, one-on-one semi-structured interviews were collected to provide corroborating evidence for the results. Each teacher was interviewed thrice for one to two hours per session. In the first interview, the interviewees were asked about their general teaching style or relationship with students (see Appendix). In the post-observation interviews, the researcher inquired about specific classroom contexts to understand the context and asked follow-up questions when necessary. Prior to the meeting, the interviewees read transcriptions of the classroom session so that they could retrieve their memory of the situation. During the interview, the researcher and the teachers used Korean language. On receiving consent from the teachers, all the interviews were recorded.

### 3.3. Data Analysis

The data were meticulously examined. First, hilarious sequences were identified from the video recordings. Segments where verbal utterances were produced either humorously (e.g., emphasis on specific wording, repetition, exaggerated tone) (Cook, 2000) or treated as such (e.g., smiles, laughter) were examined. Nonverbal features such as ridiculous facial expressions or gestures were also acknowledged as humor (Bell, Skalicky, & Salsbury, 2014). Second, instances of humor were transcribed. Using an interactional sociolinguistic approach (Gumperz, 2008), contextualization cues (e.g., facial expressions, gestures, and tone of the voice) were considered important. The data were transcribed using Jefferson's (1979) notation with some modifications (see Appendix). After the transcription, teacher participants conducted member checks. Third, a coding collection was built after comparing the classroom data in conjunction with the interview data. Placing pertinent functions together, the researcher gathered recurrent codes. Lastly, excerpts most representative of each function were chosen. By identifying, transcribing, coding, and sorting data, various functions of humor were established (Creswell, 2007).

## 4. RESULTS

### 4.1. Relieving Stress

Humor motivated learners psychologically and mitigated tension in English classrooms. This function was evident in every teacher's lessons. Specifically, head teacher A was concerned that there would rarely be humor in her classroom. However, there was abundant humor in her classroom, and it played a positive role.

#### 4.1.1. Arousing learners' interest

Excerpt 1 shows part of a teacher-learner interaction where head teacher A spontaneously used a successful joke that aroused learners' interests. Using prepositions, the students were checking where Lisa's cap was located. Though two students were occasionally yawning or cupping their chin, most were looking at the teacher and answering loudly. To assist recall of positional prepositions, the teacher asked the learners to copy her hand movements while articulating the target expressions aloud. From line 1, she reviewed the prepositions by saying two words together: the meaning in Korean first and the English term next. This practice became a rhythmic chant until line 8.

Excerpt 1: By, no idea!

- |    |    |   |
|----|----|---|
| 1  | T  | 자, 손과 같이! ((with one hand on the other's back)) 위에 on!<br><i>With hands, please!</i> <i>On, on!</i> |
| 2  | Ss | =((imitating teacher's hand movements)) 위에 on!<br><i>On, on!</i>                                    |
| 3  | T  | ((putting one hand in the other)) 안에 in!<br><i>In, in!</i>  |
| 4  | Ss | =((imitating teacher's hand movements)) 안에 in!<br><i>In, in!</i>                                    |
| 5  | T  | ((putting one hand under the other hand)) 아래, under!<br><i>Under, under!</i>                        |
| 6  | Ss | =((imitating teacher's hand movements)) 아래, under!<br><i>Under, under!</i>                          |
| 7→ | T  | 옆에, 몰라!<br><i>By, no idea!</i>  |
| 8  | Ss | =((repeating what teacher said)) ⊙ 옆에 몰라! ⊙<br><i>By, no idea!</i>                                  |
| 9  | T  | 옆에 우리 아직 모르잖아.  |



- We don't know yet what "by" is in English.*
- 10 Ss    HAHAHA!
- 11 T    ☺ 이제 곧 알게 될 거야! ☺
- We are going to find out very soon.*
- 12→G2    ☺ ‘옆’에가 영어로 ‘몰라’라고 알고 있겠습니다. ☺
- I will think of "by" as "no idea" in English.*

In line 7, teacher A created a transition to a new preposition by improvising a ridiculous expression. She abruptly said, “옆에 (by), 몰라 (no idea)” which meant she had no idea what “by” is called in English. The learners precisely followed what the teacher said while laughing heartily. In order to explain herself, she continued by noting that they hadn’t learnt it yet, but they were going to learn it very soon. Teacher A succeeded in attracting the learners’ attention to the lesson contents. In the interview, the teacher described that the students were currently struggling with prepositions. She tried to slow down the pace of teaching so that they would not feel burdened. As learners found this quip entertaining, the overall atmosphere eased. This fact is illustrated in line 12. Usually, the teacher tended to embrace learners’ spontaneous initiation. With a smile, G2 initiated verbal humor that she would believe “옆에 (by)” is called “몰라 (no idea)” in English. Extracting another bit of humor, the teacher encouraged students to learn new English vocabulary. This feat was possible as the teacher tried to have a good understanding of her learners’ needs. In the end, the teacher’s humor provided a comfortable milieu, and elicited more interaction from her learners.

#### 4.1.2. Flouting teacher instruction

Among the 10 periods of lessons collected by teacher A, in only two instances did her students show disobedience disguised as humor. Except for two learners, most followed the teacher’s instructions without any complaints. Teacher A generally treated learners courteously, and there was no indication of offensive behavior. Some learners displayed slight aberrant behavior and violated classroom rules using humor as a shield. However, these instances were not interpreted as subversion of authority because the degree of rebellion was not serious, and it seemed more like the learner’s attention seeking behavior to reduce anxiety. Watching this type of humor, the other learners experienced catharsis, probably because such humor was unusual. In excerpt 2, teacher A practiced the statement, “Is this your phone?” with learners. After drilling several times, the teacher pulled out her cell phone. She suggested the learners question whether that phone was hers or not. However, one boy (B1) refused to pose the expected question. Instead, he queried if the phone was his, producing a totally different meaning (line 5).

## Excerpt 2: Is this my phone?

- 1 T 자, 애들아. 선생님한테, 이거 폰을 가지고.  
 2 선생님, 이거 선생님 폰이에요? 당신 폰이에요?  
 3 Your phone? Is this your phone? 해보세요. 시작!  
*All right, everyone. Please ask me, "Ma'am, is this your phone?" Go!*
- 4 Ss Is this your phone?  
 5→ B1 Is this my phone?  
 6→ T Is this MY PHONE??  
 7 B1 네.  
*Yes.*
- 8 Ss Hahahahaha!  
 9→ T Your phone 해보세요, 시작!  
*Try again saying "your phone." Go!*
- 10 Ss Is this your phone?  
 11 T Yes, it's mine.

B1 provoked laughter by asking if the phone belonged to him. In line 6, teacher A checked what B1 had just spoken. B1 reconfirmed that he had asked "Is this my phone?" B1's mischief drew attention, but he stayed safe by using humor as a shield. Even with such recalcitrant behavior, the teacher did not feel embarrassed because she understood that B1 was just being mischievous because he usually did not show any hostility toward the teacher. She simply suggested speaking again, this time accurately (line 9). Subsequently, B1 complied with her request, and the class returned to normal. Without planning to, teacher A employed joke as in excerpt 1 and easily dealt with the learner's humor as in excerpt 2, reinforcing classroom stability and relieving stress.

## 4.2. Establishing Relationships

In this study, humor's function of building relationships frequently appeared alongside its stress-relieving function. In this section, this function is categorized into two sub-functions: building rapport and creating learner fellowship.

### 4.2.1. Building rapport

Interlocutors built rapport by constructing humor as they can develop a feeling of familiarity. Excerpt 3 shows that female teacher C and learners jointly constructed humor, forming positive associations. Teacher C provided learners with information about intonation. She explained to her learners that she colored blue on some letters to mark the

accent of the word. In line 4, she deliberately emphasized the wrong part, implying the need to enunciate a word precisely, and this error drew attention from the students. In response, B1 repeated the teacher's phonological play in a sing-song voice (line 5). As the analytical focus is on accented English words, a phonetic transcription is provided for words that were the focus of instruction (e.g., /kə'ri:ən/, /ɑ : rt/, /mæ θ/, /'saiəns/, /'fizɪkl/)

Excerpt 3: You should not speak like that

- 1 T 선생님이 단어가 복잡해지면 파란색 글씨로 강세를 표현해 줄게요.  
*If the words get complicated, I will mark blue on the accent.*
- 2 따라합니다. [kə'ri:ən]  
*Repeat after me. [kə'ri:ən]*
- 3 Ss [kə'ri:ən].
- 4→ T [kə:riən]이 나 [kəri:ən]이 아니라  
*It's neither [kə:riən] nor [kəri:ən]*
- 5→ B1 ((chuckling, prolonging the last vowel sound)) [kəri:ən]
- 6 T 따라하세요. [kə'ri:ən]!  
*Please repeat after me. [kə'ri:ən]!*
- 7 Ss [kə'ri:ən].
- 8 T ['ɪŋɡlɪʃ]!
- 9 Ss ['ɪŋɡlɪʃ].
- 10 T [ɑ : rt].
- 11 Ss [ɑ : rt].
- 12 T [mæ θ].
- 13 Ss [mæ θ].
- 14→T [soʊ'ʃl stɑd'i : z].
- 15 Ss ((laughter grew louder and louder)) ☺ [soʊ'ʃl stɑd'i : z]. ☺
- 16 hehehehe. HAHAHHA!
- 17 T ☺가 아니라, 그러면 안 돼요. ☺  
*is not right. You should not speak like that.*
- 18 Ss HAHHAHA!
- 19 T 자, 따라하세요. ['soʊʃl 'stɑdiz].  
*Please repeat after me.*
- 20 Ss ['soʊʃl 'stɑdiz].
- 21→T 이것도 해볼까? ☺ [sarə' : ns] ☺ ~가 아니라  
*Shall we try this one, too? [sarə' : ns] is wrong*
- 22 B2 ☺ [sarə' : ns] ☺  
Ss ((most of them smile or burst into laughter))

- Ellipsis -----
- 30 T [fɪzɪkɑː'ɪ]이 아니라 ['fɪzɪkl]!  
*It's not [fɪzɪkɑː'ɪ], but ['fɪzɪkl]!*
- 31→Ss ☺ [fɪzɪkɑː'ɪ]이 아니라 ['fɪzɪkl]! ☺  
*It's not [fɪzɪkɑː'ɪ], but ['fɪzɪkl]!*
- 32 Huh huh huh. Hehehehehe. ((combination of various laughter))
- 33 T 그치. 그리고 에듀우우케이션이 아니라  
*Yes. And it's not [ˌedʒuː'keɪʃn]*
- 34 [ˌedʒu'keɪʃn]! [ˌedʒu'keɪʃn]!
- 35 Ss [ˌedʒu'keɪʃn]!
- 36→B3 ((emphasizing vowel and accent while shaking his head up and down))
- 37 ☺ [fɪzɪkɑː'ɪ] [ˌedʒuː'keɪʃn]! ☺

Teacher C expanded the humorous interchange by accentuating the wrong part repetitively to display how ridiculous it was (lines 4, 14, and 21). The repetition was shifted to humorous ends and evolved to extended laughter. Ever since B1 imitated the teacher's wrong accent in line 5, more and more learners subsequently joined mimicking ludicrous pronunciation. Although the teacher emphasized the importance of accurate pronunciation again in line 21, she looked as if she were inducing a humorous interaction. Laughter peaked in line 31 when most learners followed the teacher's complete set of remarks including the last part, “가 아니라 (is not right),” a code switching into Korean, explaining the previous remark was incorrect. This collaboratively constructed humor triggered widespread laughter. Additionally, in line 36, B3 exaggerated humorous language play with nonverbal behavior by shaking his head up and down. This absurd performance showed that B3 reckoned the teacher's pronunciation was funny and worthy of imitation. At the beginning of the conversation, 14 out of 29 students were watching the teacher and listening attentively. Others were either looking down at the desk or lowering their heads. However, while this jovial repetition was happening, 27 students focused on the teacher, either smiling or laughing. Students enjoyed this ludicrous pronunciation by repeating with their teacher loudly, perhaps because they all share a non-native English speaker identity that accepts that accented English words are rather unfamiliar to Koreans. Consequently, the teacher's intentional mispronunciation built a feeling of camaraderie.

#### 4.2.2. Enhancing learner affiliation

Some instances of humor created solidarity among speakers. This analysis argues that humor functions to develop learner companionship and contains a subversive feature.

Learners in teacher B's English classroom used competitive humor, reported as male characteristics of humor in many studies (Baxter, 2002; Holmes, 2006; Lampert & Ervin-Tripp, 2006). However, in excerpt 4, male students showed unified humor as a team. Sometimes asking alone, other times chanting together, boys repeatedly ignored teacher B's instructions and challenged the teacher's authority. Behaving rather discourteously, they pretended that they were being humorous.

Excerpt 4: It's not "water glue," just "glue."

- 1 T 자, glue stick 이라는 말이 나오는데요, 풀입니다.  
*So, you can see "glue stick" in the textbook. It means glue.*
- 2 Glue 가 원래 풀인데요. Stick 은 우리 딱풀처럼 이렇게  
*"Glue" originally means glue. When you put "stick" at the end,*
- 3 stick 으로 되어 이렇게 있는 걸 glue stick 이라고 합니다.  
*it means glue stick, like ttak-phwul in Korean.*
- 4→ B1 ☺ 선생님, 그러면은 물로 되어 있는 건 water stick 이에요? ☺  
*Sir, then what if the glue is made of water? Is it a "water stick?"*
- 5 Ss =HAHAHA!
- 6→ T =Glue 입니다. Glue.  
*=It's glue. Glue.*
- 7 물로 된 풀, 이런 건 다 glue 라고 하는데요.  
*Even if the glue is made of liquid it's still called "glue."*
- 8 딱풀을 glue stick 이라고  
*ttak-phwul is "glue stick" in English.*
- 9→ B2 =water glue!
- 10 B3 =그럼 물풀은요?  
*=Then what about mwul-phwul?*
- 11→T ((in a slightly irritated tone)) 그냥 glue 라고.  
*It's just "glue."*
- 12 Bs WATER GLUE! WATER GLUE!
- 13→T ((with explicit annoyance)) water glue 가 아니라 glue 라고.  
*It's not "water glue," just "glue."*
- 14 Bs ☺ WATER GLUE! WATER GLUE! WATER GLUE!
- 15 WATER GLUE! ☺
- 16 T 자, 외워봅시다. 한 문장씩. ((playing the video)) 조용!  
*Now, let's memorize each sentence. Quiet!*

Several things happened in this case. First, teacher B reviewed the name of school supplies in English. He introduced the new term, "glue stick" and explained that for the solid one, the

term “stick” is added to differentiate itself from common glue. In line 4, B1 then asked the teacher whether liquid glue is called a “water stick” with a smile. Subsequently, the learners responded to B1’s question with laughter, a sign that they acknowledged B1’s attempt at humor (line 5). Despite the teacher explaining why the “stick” is put behind “glue,” B2 kept asserting “water glue” (line 9). This remark imprinted on a group of boys. In subsequent interactions, the boys kept shouting “water glue” repeatedly, eventually organizing strong fellowship and making the teacher angry (lines 12 and 14).

Teacher B’s marked tone shift and identical answers in lines 6, 11, and 13 suggest that he was getting irritated by the students. Whereas learners kept smiling or laughing, the teacher seemed annoyed and tried to end this disturbance. Regardless of the teacher’s answers, the learners kept chanting, showing disagreement. This jocular abuse caused some disturbance in the classroom. In this case, the subversive function of humor was deployed as it provided an opportunity for the learners to challenge their teacher in a socially acceptable way. Finally, teacher B calmed the excited students down by using rising intonation to move on (line 16). Ultimately, the students could not only strengthen their alliance but also behave brazenly under the guise of simply being funny.

### 4.3. Exerting Influence Without Losing Face

In this study, both teachers and learners employed humor for their own benefits. Teachers tended to use it for regulating young learners and the learners in turn used it to reveal their limited English ability in a safe manner.

#### 4.3.1. Controlling learners

The controlling function of humor was easily observed in English classrooms. The teachers tended to use humor as a pedagogical tool to control learners. They targeted learners’ misbehavior as the butt of humor to advise them in a friendly manner. For example, with the experience of having taught her current learners last year, teacher C sometimes treated them as children. In fact, in one video, she explicitly expressed her mind (“It was so sweet of you to behave like that”) even though her adolescent learners seemed dissatisfied with her attitude. In the following case, teacher C teased learners about their clumsy performance.

Excerpt 5: I guess I overestimated you guys!

1 T We are going to do more faster. Are you ready?

2 B1 Yeah.

3 → T 이거 너무 유치하니까, 엄청, 엄청나게

*As this song is too childish, very, very (fast)*

- 4 B2 10 점 몇 배속 하면 좋겠어요.  
*I want it to be at least 10 times faster.*
- 5 T 네, 맞아요. ((playing a song))  
*Yes, that's right.*
- 6 [song] ((very fast speed)) what time is it now?
- 7 Ss ((Trying to sing, however, they end up failing because the pace is  
8 unbearably fast. Almost everyone is laughing out loud.))
- 9→ T ((laughing)) 😊 선생님이 너네를 너무 과대평가한 것 같아. 😊  
*I guess I grossly overestimated you.*
- 10 Ss 선생님, 이걸 너무해요!  
*Ma'am, this is ridiculous!*
- 11 T ((adjusting the speed and playing it one more time))
- 12 Ss ((This time, most of them can sing very well.))

Preceding excerpt 5, she played a clock song that the students learned in the previous year, making sure that the learners remembered the song. However, they underrated it, claiming it was too juvenile. For that reason, in line 3, the teacher suggested the learners sing it at a fast pace. In response to this idea, B2 wished the song would be at least 10 times faster. The teacher agreed with B2 and played the song at high speed. Yet, all the students failed to sing at such a rapid pace. As a result, the teacher proceeded to tease them that she had overestimated them. Countering the teacher's opinion, the learners complained that the pace was much too fast (line 10). Their dissatisfaction was manifest in their volume and tone of voice. Accordingly, the teacher adjusted the pace of the song. This time, the students could sing the song exceedingly well without complaint, in spite of their initial refusal to sing such a childish song. After being teased, almost everyone participated heartily in singing. They were even satisfied with the fact that they had successfully carried out the task. It is obvious that the teacher's mild teasing proactively influenced learners' behavior. As Drew (1987) explains, the social control function of teasing is generated by the interaction of speakers. In this excerpt, the teacher poking fun at the students reveals her power and their rapport. If any other teacher had goaded them with the same remark ("I guess I overestimated you"), the learners may not have responded or tried to prove themselves. It is one instance where the teacher can influence learners with humor.

#### 4.3.2. Rationalizing listening incomprehension

The face-saving function of humor generally refers to qualifying what has been said as a joke (Wagner & Urios-Aparisi, 2011). In this study, a somewhat different side of face-saving occurred when learners used humor to rationalize their poor linguistic ability. Shifting the

attention to ridiculous aspects of English, learners effectively hid their ignorance. Moreover, unfettered by their typical roles, learners participated in interaction quite lightheartedly. Excerpt 6 shows a segment of talk where learners were trying to transform what they poorly heard into hilarious wordplay.

Excerpt 6: Butter balla here

- 1 T 잘 들으셔야 합니다. 떠들면 못 들어요.  
*You have to listen carefully. You can't listen when it's noisy.*
- 2 Ss ((very noisy))
- 3 T 조용. 조용. 끝까지 들어야 돼.  
*Quiet. Quiet. You should listen until the end.*
- 4 [audio] A: Oh, Sally. Don't do that. Put the bottle here.
- 5 B: Okay.
- 6 → Ss AHAHAHA!
- 7 [audio] B: Okay.
- 8 Ss ((giggling out loud))
- 9 → G1 Okay 밖에 안 들려요. 한 번만 도와주세요.  
*I can hear only "okay." Please help us just once.*
- 10 T 애들아. 애들아. 끝까지 들어야 해. 다시 한 번 들어봅시다.  
*Everyone, everyone. You should listen until the end. Let's listen again.*
- Ellipsis -----
- 18 T 자, 첫 번째. 뭐라고 했어? Oh, Sally?  
*All right, what was first?*
- 19 Ss Don't shown here)do that.
- 20 T 오, 이걸 들었어요.  
*Oh, you heard that.*
- 21→Bs Butter balla here.
- 22 B2 =버터 발랐어요.  
*=You spread the butter.*
- 23→T 잠깐만요. 잠깐만요. 자, 따라 합니다. Don't do that.  
*Hold on, hold on. Okay, repeat after me. Don't do that.*
- 24 Ss Don't do that.
- 25 B3 거기다가 하지 마.  
*Don't do such a thing there.*
- 26 T 그러지마. 그러지 마란 뜻입니다. (3)  
*Don't do such a thing. It means don't do that. (3)*
- 27→ 자, 이제 ((laugh)) ☺ 들은 걸 얘기해보세요. ☺  
*Now, please tell me what you heard.*



- 28 B4 ☺ Butter balla here. ☺
- 29 Ss ((a mixture of laughter and tumult)) HAHHAHA!
- 30 T 자, 이제 들은 걸 얘기해보세요.  
*Now, tell me what you heard.*
- 31 Ss ((incomprehensible noise)) Butter balla here.
- 32 T ☺ 한 명씩, 한 명씩 ☺, 뭐라고요? 자, 회장님.  
*One by one. Pardon? What did you say, class leader?*
- 33→B5 Butter. (2) billa.
- 34 T Billa? Here. Here. 자, 들었어요.  
Billa? Here. Here. *Okay, you heard something.*
- 35→B6 Butter ball here 이 맞을 것 같아요.  
Butter ball here *might be right.*

While the listening material was on, the students were noisy though teacher B constantly told them to be quiet for three times. Irrespective of what the teacher said, the learners stayed busy talking to each other. In line 6, they burst into laughter as the listening material went too fast. G1 asked the teacher for help, asserting “okay” was the only thing that she could hear (line 9). In line 18, the teacher asked the learners what the first line was. The learners answered that the first line was “Don’t do that.” However, in the following, a group of boys produced “Butter balla here” which means to spread the butter here (line 21). Because of its phonological similarity, the learners grasped “put the” as “butter” and “bottle” as “balla.” The teacher interrupted at that moment and made the learners repeat the first line after him (line 23). After that, he questioned the learners on what they had heard next, smiling as if he was expecting the learners to engage in humorous language play (line 27). As the teacher predicted, some boys competitively asserted different versions of “butter balla here” (lines 33 and 35). They seemed to gain attention rather than get the right answer. If it were not for humor, learners such as B2, B4, B5, and B6 would not have dared to expose their faulty guessing. Considering that fourth grade learners usually try to boast of their knowledge in English, demonstrating nonsensical guessing was uncommon. Humor provided the learners an opportunity to frankly express their lack of knowledge while just pretending to be funny. Notwithstanding their attempts, learners could not correctly comprehend the next line.

As the noise got louder and the learners were more distracted, the teacher offered to play the listening material again (not shown here). Nonetheless, the learners laughed for more than ten seconds since the recording was so clearly heard as “butter balla here.” They were confused because they could not fully understand the phonological flow. Finally, the teacher controlled the situation and introduced the expression as a new one. Students read what the teacher wrote on the board verbatim (i.e., put the bottle here). From the perspective of a jocular language play of an interactional sequence, learners could not only save face but also

legitimize their behaviors. Unconcerned about exposing their linguistic vulnerability, learners could enjoy comical interactions with their teacher.

## 5. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

### 5.1. Conclusion

Broadly, the functions of humor appear to be critical for both English teachers and learners. The findings of this study articulate these functions in several ways. First, from the perspective of foreign language learning, when humor is used to subvert authority, it has the potential to lower learners' anxiety. Learners can employ humor by either violating standard English rules or flouting classroom norms (Cekaite & Aronsson, 2004, 2005; Waring, 2013). As learners' well-manuevered humor is unlikely to be reprimanded by teachers, this atmosphere enables other spectating learners to relax (Pomerantz & Bell, 2011). Second, when instructors and learners together construct humorous, imperfect, but meaningful English conversations, termed as conjoint humor by Holmes (2006), teachers can expect to build positive relationships in the classroom. In regular English classes, unintentional and spontaneous humor such as verbal slips or jokes are customary. In such cases, teachers and learners can extend each other's utterances into playful talk (Cho, 2011; Cook, 2001, Kim, 2021). This tendency results in pleasant companionship between the speakers and a more stable classroom environment (Bell & Pomerantz, 2016). However, teachers must recognize that this affirmative aspect of humor is possible only with neutral, unaggressive humor that relates to learning contents (Petraki & Nguyen, 2016; Schmitz, 2002). Finally, learners who can use humor effectively are likely to have power in the classroom, regardless of their linguistic capabilities (Kang, 2017; Kotthoff, 2006). Even learners with a low level of English proficiency can dominate a classroom discourse by initiating humor. Thus, instructors can appreciate underachievers' mistakes or humorous language play and connect them with language learning, thereby providing learners with opportunities to gain confidence. Meanwhile, having a higher status than learners, teachers can gently target students as the subject of humor, thus impacting their behavior in a positive way (Hay, 2000). However, if the teacher adopts an aggressive style of humor, it can provoke negative emotions and reduce learners' motivation (Neff & Rucynski, 2017). Thus, when teachers intend to use humor to exert control, they must calibrate it based on their rapport with learners (Bell et al., 2014; Kim & Park, 2020).

## 5.2. Implications

Based on these findings, the following implications are derived for incorporating humor into language learning. First, language teachers should be mindful about developing humor into a relevant learning resource instead of leaving it as a mere quip (Schmitz, 2002). Without much consideration, humor can distract learners when the focus is on the amusing aspect (Bolka et al., 2018). Excerpt 3 shows that even though teacher C endeavored to use silly mispronunciations to attract learners, there is a high risk of learners having a strong mnemonic effect solely with jocular instances that demonstrate incorrect language. This aspect suggests that teachers' intentional use of humor must be within limits. Additionally, teachers should associate learners' unexpected humor with language learning. In excerpt 6, teacher B did not expand the discussion on why the ludicrous expression "Butter balla here" was made. If the teacher had offered a metalinguistic explanation such as lenition or prolonged sound, the young learners could have remembered the comical interaction as a meaningful learning moment.

Second, teachers can cope with learners' humor depending on its intended application. If it is used for relieving tension or for building strong relationships, teachers can cope with ease. However, when learners use aberrant humor (i.e., showing defiance), teachers can use various techniques to regulate their behavior. For instance, Drew (1987) suggested various reactions to humor: complete seriousness, disregard, laughter, acceptance, among others. However, teachers may want to remain unruffled rather than po-faced by using humor. In such a case, self-deprecating humor can be used as a mechanism to control the disruption (Kim & Park, 2020). This way, teachers can protect the positive face needs in the classroom (Hay, 2000; Holmes, 2000). In particular, when instructors want to end humorous sequences instantly, they can transfer learners' attention by moving onto the next activity or suggesting speaking again, as demonstrated by the teachers sampled in this study. Regardless of its negative functions, teachers must adopt an indulgent view of humor (Cekaite & Aronsson, 2005). In excerpts 1, 4, and 6, learners exposed their imperfect English ability via humor while defending their self-esteem. It indicates that learners use humor as a coping strategy.

Finally, when nurturing a playful environment, instructors' responsive attitudes can play a bigger role than their personalities. It is widely known that instructors' humor can affect the classroom atmosphere (Forman, 2011). Even if teachers do not explicitly use humor, their attitude toward students can influence the occurrence of humor (Cho, 2011; Kim, 2021). In this study, teachers A and C were concerned that there would not be any instances of humor in their videos. However, humor appeared in both their classrooms as frequently as in teacher B, who claimed to be humorous. By listening attentively to learners and encouraging their attempts at participating in learning, a great deal of humor occurred. This fact indicates that instructors' responsive attitudes towards learners influence the style of

humor (Wagner & Urios-Aparisi, 2011).

In future studies, additional quantitative research to verify the impact of humor on young EFL learners must be conducted, supplementing Bell's (2012) research on adult ESL learners. If proven, this aspect could be a significant discovery for teachers, especially those who are skeptical about the pedagogical value of humor.

Applicable levels: Early childhood, elementary, secondary

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## APPENDIX

### Sample Pre-Interview Questions

1. Which factors do you consider important in your English class?
2. How is your relationship with your learners?
3. What type of atmosphere do you pursue or encourage in the classroom?
4. How are your students' overall English skills? (the teacher's English ability)
5. How much English do you use during an English class?

### Transcription Conventions

(number)	length of pause (measured in seconds and tenths of seconds)
<u>underline</u>	more emphasis
CAPS	louder than surrounding talk
↑	high pitch
:	prolonged vowel
=	latching
☺ words ☺	smiling voice
(( ))	commentary by transcriptionist
T	English teacher
B(s)	(several) male students
G(s)	(several) female students
Ss	several students