

LISTENING WITH A SMILE: HOW HUMOR ENHANCES STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN EFL COURSES

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Abstract: The use of humor in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms has gained increasing attention due to its potential to enhance learning outcomes. Research has shown that humor can improve student motivation, engagement, and comprehension by reducing anxiety and creating a more relaxed learning atmosphere. However, little is known about the effectiveness of humor in EFL listening courses within the Indonesian context, particularly in hierarchical learning environments where teacher-centered instruction is dominant. This study aims to explore the perceptions of English Literature students at Universitas Negeri Medan (Unimed) regarding the use of humor in listening courses and to analyze its impact on motivation, engagement, and listening comprehension. The study employed a qualitative approach with a descriptive design, involving 56 students from two Intermediate Listening Comprehension classes. Data were collected through observations, questionnaires, and semi-structured interviews, and analyzed using thematic analysis. The results indicate that humor positively influences listening comprehension and enhances motivation and engagement. Students reported that humor made listening activities more enjoyable and increased their willingness to participate. However, cultural sensitivity, linguistic complexity, and the lack of structured training for lecturers were identified as challenges in implementing humor effectively. The findings suggest that incorporating contextually relevant humor into listening instruction can create a more engaging learning environment and improve student outcomes. Future research should explore the long-term effects of humor through experimental and cross-cultural studies to strengthen the understanding of humor's role in EFL education.

Keywords: *humor, EFL listening, listening comprehension, pedagogical strategy.*

INTRODUCTION

The use of humor in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms has attracted significant attention in recent years due to its potential to enhance learning outcomes. Research has consistently shown that humor can serve as a powerful pedagogical tool, capable of improving student motivation, engagement, retention, and

reducing anxiety in various educational settings (C. Li, 2024). Studies have demonstrated that humor, when appropriately integrated into instruction, can create a more relaxed learning environment and increase students' willingness to participate (Onowugbeda et al., 2024; Peng, 2025). However, it remains unclear whether humor yields similar benefits within the Indonesian EFL context,

particularly in teacher-centered learning environments where hierarchical relationships between lecturers and students are deeply rooted (Bishara, 2023).

At Universitas Negeri Medan (Unimed), English Literature students often experience listening courses as rigid and monotonous, contributing to low motivation and engagement (Bozorgia et al., 2023). The Listening course at Unimed carries a weight of 3 credits, reflecting its importance in the English Literature curriculum. However, initial findings suggest that students perceive listening exercises as unengaging, with course materials often failing to capture their interest. Given that listening comprehension is a complex cognitive process requiring the integration of linguistic and non-linguistic knowledge (Dicataldo et al., 2023; Hanak & Zboun, 2023), innovative instructional strategies such as humor may hold promise for enhancing student motivation and listening performance (Hackworth, 2024). Research has shown that humor can increase cognitive engagement and promote deeper information processing, making it particularly relevant for improving listening skills (Chaïet, 2024; Hensley, 2023; Luo et al., 2023).

In this study, humor is defined as any verbal, written, visual, or behavioral element used by lecturers or students in the classroom that is intended to provoke amusement or laughter (Chang et al., 2023). Humor typically involves incongruity — the presentation of unexpected or contradictory elements that require cognitive resolution (Kuschel et al., 2023). The Instructional Humor Processing Theory (IHPT), which suggests that students who successfully resolve incongruent elements in humor experience increased cognitive engagement and retention (Charoensap-Kelly et al., 2024; Hensley, 2023; Luo et al., 2023; Rudick et al., 2024; St-Amand et al., 2024). This implies that humor, when strategically applied in EFL listening courses, can stimulate active listening and enhance language processing. Furthermore, humor has been linked to improved psychological outcomes, such as reduced anxiety and increased self-confidence in language use (Botes et al., 2024). In teacher-centered learning environments like Unimed, humor has the potential to shift classroom dynamics toward a more interactive and student-centered model, encouraging greater student participation and reducing the perceived power gap between lecturers and students.

Despite its potential benefits, the use of humor in EFL listening instruction in Indonesia remains limited due to several key challenges. First, humor

is inherently tied to cultural context, which can lead to misunderstandings among students from diverse cultural backgrounds. In Islamic higher education institutions, for instance, humor that contradicts Islamic values or norms may be perceived as inappropriate, thereby undermining its intended pedagogical impact (Usman et al., 2023). Second, there are significant pedagogical barriers to integrating humor into listening courses. Studies have shown that humor used in EFL instruction is often unrelated to course content, making it less effective in enhancing listening comprehension (Weisi & Mohammadi, 2023). Furthermore, many lecturers lack formal training in using humor effectively, which can lead to uncertainty or hesitation in incorporating it into their teaching practices. Finally, legal and ethical concerns regarding freedom of expression present additional obstacles. Indonesia's legal framework does not explicitly protect humor as a form of free speech in educational settings, raising concerns among educators about potential legal or professional repercussions (Assagaf, 2023).

Given the cultural, pedagogical, and legal complexities surrounding the use of humor in Indonesian EFL instruction, there is a clear need for research that examines humor's impact on student motivation, engagement, and listening comprehension in this specific context. While existing studies have established the general benefits of humor in language learning, little is known about how humor functions in hierarchical, lecturer-oriented learning environments such as Unimed. This study aims to address this gap by exploring the perspectives of English Literature students at Unimed on the use of humor in EFL listening courses. Specifically, it seeks to identify whether humor can be used as an effective pedagogical strategy to improve listening comprehension and to understand the broader impact of humor on student motivation, engagement, and classroom dynamics.

To achieve these objectives, the study addresses the following research questions: (1) What are the perceptions of English Literature students at Unimed regarding the use of humor in listening courses? (2) How does humor affect students' motivation and engagement in listening courses? (3) How does humor influence the classroom environment and student-teacher interaction in listening courses? (4) What challenges are faced in using humor effectively in EFL listening instruction?

By investigating these questions, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of

humor's pedagogical value in EFL instruction and provide practical insights for integrating humor more effectively into listening courses in Indonesian higher education settings.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach with a descriptive design. This approach was selected to explore in depth the perspectives and experiences of students regarding the use of humor in listening courses. A qualitative method allows researchers to understand this phenomenon within its natural context, uncovering nuances and meanings that may not be captured through a quantitative approach (Creswell, 2023).

A qualitative approach is more suitable than a quantitative method for this study because the focus is on examining students' perceptions and attitudes rather than simply measuring numerical variables or establishing causal relationships. While a quantitative method can provide statistical data on the effectiveness of humor, it tends to be less effective in capturing the dynamics of interaction and the subjective interpretation of students' experiences. Therefore, a qualitative approach was chosen to gain a deeper and more contextual understanding of how humor contributes to learning in listening courses

This study involved 56 students from two classes enrolled in the Intermediate Listening Comprehension course within the English Literature Study Program at Universitas Negeri Medan (Unimed). This setting was deliberately chosen because humor had not previously been incorporated into the course material, making it an ideal environment to explore its potential effects on learning outcomes. From the total participants, eight students were selected for follow-up interviews to gain deeper insights into their perspectives. A purposive sampling method was used to ensure diversity in experiences and opinions among the interviewees. The selection was based on three specific criteria: (1) students who actively participated in class discussions, (2) students who demonstrated varying levels of engagement in humor-based learning activities, and (3) students representing different levels of academic achievement. These criteria were designed to capture a broad range of perspectives on the role of humor in the learning process.

To obtain data, the researchers used three instruments: observation, questionnaires, and interviews (Chikowore, 2023). Observations were conducted to capture real-time interactions and the use of humor within the classroom setting. The

questionnaires were designed to gather students' attitudes and perceptions of humor in learning, while semi-structured interviews provided an opportunity for more in-depth exploration of individual student experiences and opinions.

The data analysis include three main stages: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification (Kotronoulas et al., 2023). In the data condensation stage, the researchers selected, focused, and simplified the data collected from observations, questionnaires, and interviews to highlight the most relevant information. The condensed data were then systematically organized and displayed to identify emerging themes and patterns. Finally, the researchers drew conclusions and verified them to ensure that the findings accurately reflected the students' perspectives on humor in the classroom.

To enhance the consistency and reliability of the analysis, the study applied inter-rater reliability by involving two independent researchers in the qualitative data coding process. Each researcher independently analyzed the interview transcripts and questionnaire data to identify recurring themes. The coding results were then compared, and any discrepancies were resolved through discussion until a consensus was reached. To further strengthen the validity of the findings, the study also employed member checking, where the key findings were presented to the participants to confirm that the interpretation accurately represented their experiences.

The study used thematic analysis to structure the data analysis process. This involved five key steps: (1) data familiarization – reading and understanding the collected data; (2) coding – identifying and labeling key patterns in the data; (3) theme identification – grouping similar codes into broader themes; (4) reviewing themes – examining the identified themes to ensure their accuracy and relevance; and (5) defining and naming themes – formulating the main findings based on the identified themes (Cernasev & Axon, 2023; Naeem et al., 2023). This structured approach allowed for a systematic and in-depth interpretation of the qualitative data, ensuring that the study's conclusions were well-supported by clear patterns and insights.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, a result-by-result discussion is not provided as there is some conceptual overlap among the findings. Instead, the results of this study are discussed under four main themes: (a) the impact of humor on listening comprehension, (b)

the impact of humor on student motivation and engagement, (c) the influence of humor on classroom environment and student-teacher interaction, and (d) challenges in using humor in English language learning.

The impact of humor on listening comprehension

The results of the study on the impact of humor in listening materials in English language learning are shown in Figure 1. The chart illustrates students' responses regarding the effectiveness of humor in improving listening comprehension. The majority of students responded positively to the use of humor in learning. 50% of students strongly agreed and 30.4% agreed that humor made it easier for them to understand listening materials, resulting in a total of 80.4% positive responses. In contrast, 10% of students remained neutral, while 5% disagreed and 4.6% strongly disagreed with the effectiveness of humor in listening comprehension.

Impact of Humor in Listening Materials on Students' Comprehension

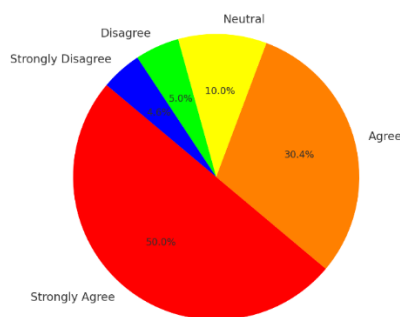


Figure 1. *Impact of humor in listening materials on students' comprehension*

The figure 1 shows that most students perceive humor as an element that improves comprehension in listening activities. The high percentage in the agree and strongly agree categories reflects that humor creates a positive learning atmosphere and enhances motivation. Conversely, the relatively small percentage of negative responses suggests that humor may be less effective for some students due to differences in learning styles or individual perceptions.

These findings align with the Instructional Humor Processing Theory (IHPT), which states that humor enhances students' attention and memory retention regarding learning materials (Luo et al., 2023; St-Amand et al., 2024; Usman et al., 2023). Humor can create a more relaxed learning environment and improve information processing, making it easier to retain and master concepts (Alsakaker, 2025; Haydon et al., 2023; Zheng & Wang, 2023).

Research by Zulazli et al. (2024) shows that using humor in teaching strengthens neural connections in the brain related to language comprehension and meaning processing. Activation in the middle temporal gyrus (MTG) and superior frontal gyrus (SFG) enhances the brain's capacity to process information and improves listening skills. Humor also triggers activation in the mesolimbic system, which reinforces memory retention and generates positive feelings toward learning (Prenger et al., 2023).

Moreover, humor used in the context of language learning can enhance social interaction and communication skills. Tahir (2024) found that humor conveyed through personal stories or experiences from the instructor increases student engagement and enhances the appeal of learning. Weisi and Mohammadi (2023) noted that jokes, physical humor, and puzzles are the most effective forms of humor for improving conceptual understanding in language learning environments.

The effectiveness of humor is also influenced by cultural context and students' cognitive flexibility (Charoensap-Kelly et al., 2024; Yağan & Kaya, 2023). Humor aligned with students' cultural background and cognitive level is more effective in improving learning outcomes (Bishara, 2023; Ngai et al., 2025). The students with high cognitive flexibility are better able to understand complex humor, while students with limited cognitive flexibility respond more positively to simple and direct humor (Altan-Atalay & Fatih Boluvat, 2024; Prenger et al., 2023; Sun et al., 2025). Therefore, instructors need to consider students' cultural background and cognitive levels when designing effective humor strategies.

Furthermore, humor plays a significant role in increasing motivation and emotional engagement among students. Humor can trigger positive emotional responses that strengthen neural connections involved in information processing, thereby improving listening skills and enhancing memory retention (Liao et al., 2023). Thus, the strategic and context-appropriate use of humor can improve teaching effectiveness and reinforce overall learning outcomes.

The impact of humor on student motivation and engagement

The research findings on the effect of humor on students' motivation and engagement in listening learning in an English course are presented in Figure 2.

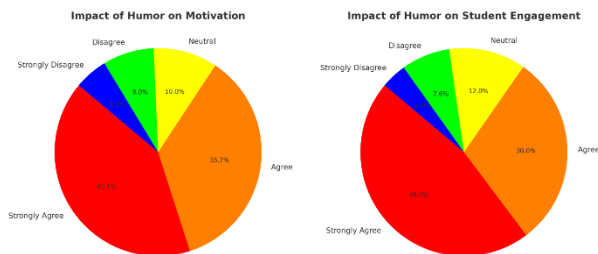


Figure 2. Comparison of humor impact on motivation and student engagement

The figure 2 shows that the majority of students responded positively to the use of humor in teaching. A total of 41.1% of students strongly agreed and 35.7% agreed that humor increased their motivation to participate in class discussions. Additionally, 46.4% of students strongly agreed and 30% agreed that humor created a more enjoyable classroom atmosphere, which contributed to increased focus and participation in the learning process. On the other hand, a small portion of students remained neutral (10%), disagreed (7.6%), and strongly disagreed (4%) regarding the impact of humor on engagement in listening-based learning.

These findings reinforce the view that humor plays a crucial role in enhancing students' motivation and engagement in learning. Neff and Dewaele (2023) state that humor delivered in English language teaching can create a more comfortable learning environment, reduce tension, and encourage active student participation. Additionally, humor in the form of humorous video tasks (HVTs) has been shown to increase students' emotional and cognitive engagement, strengthen interpersonal relationships, and reduce anxiety in learning English vocabulary (Kabooha et al., 2024). In the context of higher education in Malaysia, verbal, visual, and auditory humor have been found to be effective in capturing students' attention and reinforcing classroom discipline (Zulazli et al., 2024).

Beyond increasing motivation, humor also strengthens student engagement in learning (Hackworth, 2024; Rudick et al., 2024). Weisi and Arghandwal et al. (2023) emphasize that humor in the form of jokes, wordplay, and funny stories is effective in building social bonds between teachers and students. This positive impact aligns with the findings of Hensley (2023), which indicate that humor can enhance attention, improve memory retention, and create a more enjoyable learning experience. Therefore, the appropriate and contextually relevant use of humor has the potential to be an effective teaching strategy for

improving students' motivation and engagement in English language learning.

The influence of humor on classroom environment and student-teacher interaction

The findings on the impact of humor on the classroom environment and student-lecturer interaction are shown in Figure 3.

Impact of Humor on Classroom Environment and Teacher-Student Interaction

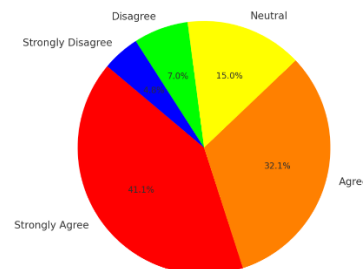


Figure 3. Impact humor on classroom environment and teacher-student interaction

The majority of students responded positively to the use of humor in learning. A total of 41.1% of students strongly agreed and 32.1% agreed that humor made them feel more comfortable interacting with lecturers. Meanwhile, 15% of students were neutral, while 7% disagreed and 4.8% strongly disagreed with the impact of humor on classroom interaction.

The survey results demonstrate that humor has a positive impact on the classroom environment and student-lecturer interaction. The majority of students felt more comfortable engaging with lecturers when humor was used during lessons. This finding aligns with previous studies showing that humor creates a more relaxed and comfortable learning atmosphere, which encourages students to actively participate in class (Neff & Dewaele, 2023). A relaxed classroom atmosphere reduces student anxiety, enhances comfort in receiving materials, and strengthens engagement during the learning process (Derakhshan & Zhang, 2024; Maharam & Norazman, 2024; Putman et al., 2024; Tang & Wang, 2024). When students feel comfortable and entertained, they are more likely to understand and retain the material presented by the lecturer (Neff & Dewaele, 2023).

Beyond improving the classroom atmosphere, humor also strengthens student-lecturer interaction. Appropriately used humor can build more effective communication and strengthen interpersonal relationships between lecturers and students (Rucynski & Prichard, 2024). When lecturers use humor that aligns with students' cultural backgrounds and contexts, it encourages

students to be more open in expressing their opinions and asking questions about the material (James & Fox, 2024). Emotional engagement created through humor also increases students' trust in lecturers, making them feel more comfortable interacting and discussing in class (Arghandwal et al., 2023; James & Fox, 2024; Jia & Cheng, 2024). This positive relationship ultimately enhances students' motivation and learning outcomes. In conclusion, the appropriate use of humor in English language teaching can create a positive learning atmosphere, strengthen student-lecturer interaction, and enhance students' motivation and understanding of the learning material.

Challenges in using humor in english language learning

The survey results on the challenges of using humor in listening materials for English language learning are shown in Figure 4.

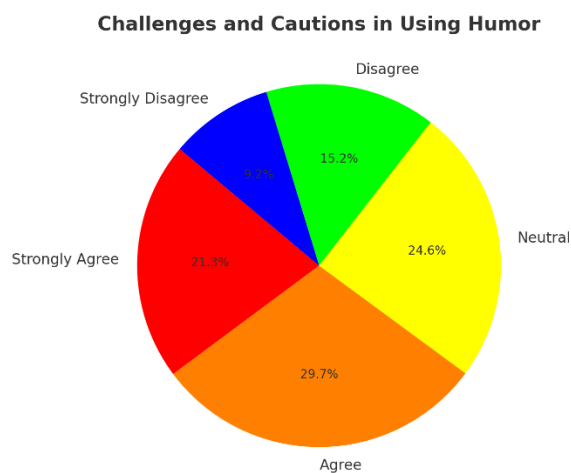


Figure 4. *Challenges and cautions in using humor*

The chart shows that 21.3% of students strongly agreed and 29.7% agreed that excessive humor could reduce their focus on the main material. Additionally, 24.6% of students remained neutral, suggesting that some students did not perceive any significant impact from humor use in learning. Meanwhile, 15.2% disagreed and 9.2% strongly disagreed, indicating that humor that is out of context or overly complex can hinder comprehension.

The use of humor in English language teaching offers many benefits but also presents notable challenges that educators need to address. One major challenge is cultural sensitivity. Humor is highly contextual, and what is considered funny in one culture may not be interpreted similarly in another, potentially causing misunderstandings or even offending students in a multicultural learning

environment (Martin, 2023). In intercultural interactions, humor is often complex and difficult for second-language (L2) learners to grasp. If humor is not presented within the proper context, the likelihood of misunderstanding increases, which can disrupt the learning process (Rucynski & Prichard, 2024).

Furthermore, the effectiveness of humor in language learning is influenced by the subjectivity and perception of students. Timing, frequency, and the teacher's personality play a crucial role in determining the success of humor in learning. Overuse of humor or humor that is not aligned with the learning context may reinforce stereotypes or create discomfort among students (Bishara, 2024; Vanderheiden, 2024).

The complexity of humor in language learning is also a significant challenge. To understand and use humor in a second language, students need a high level of linguistic and cultural competence. Students who have not yet mastered the target language may struggle to grasp the meaning of humor, leading to feelings of isolation or disengagement from learning activities (Rucynski & Prichard, 2024). Therefore, teachers need to provide clear explanations and ensure that humor is accessible to all students, regardless of their language proficiency.

To overcome these challenges, educators need to adopt the right strategies when incorporating humor into the classroom. It is crucial for teachers to be aware of students' cultural backgrounds and avoid humor that may be offensive or misinterpreted. Avoiding sensitive topics and humor that could create discomfort should be prioritized (Arief, 2023; Haydon et al., 2023). In addition, using inclusive and supportive humor can help create a positive classroom atmosphere and strengthen relationships between students and teachers. Humor that enhances student engagement and motivation has been shown to improve participation and foster a more conducive learning environment (Clanton Harpine, 2024; Hussain et al., 2024; Xiong, 2025).

Educators are also encouraged to integrate humor competency training into English language instruction (Pandey, 2024; Zhang, 2025; Zhou & Lee, 2025). This training should include an introduction to the functions and forms of humor across various cultural contexts, helping students better understand and use humor effectively in cross-cultural communication (Burgos et al., 2025). Moreover, teachers need to be flexible and responsive to student feedback on the use of humor. Adjusting teaching strategies based on

students' responses and preferences can increase the effectiveness of humor in supporting the learning process (Neff & Dewaele, 2023).

Using spontaneous humor, memes, and cartoons relevant to the taught material can also boost student engagement and interest, especially when the humor aligns with the lesson's context (Ngai et al., 2025). Students' characteristics, such as enjoyment in learning a foreign language and attitudes toward humor, also influence the effectiveness of humor strategies (Kim & Ahn, 2025; Tianli et al., 2024).

By understanding these challenges and implementing appropriate strategies, educators can effectively use humor as a teaching tool to enhance student motivation and engagement in English language learning. Contextual, culturally sensitive, and inclusive humor can foster a more comfortable, interactive, and supportive learning environment, ultimately improving students' academic success.

CONCLUSION

This study confirms that humor plays a significant role in enhancing listening comprehension, motivation, and student engagement in English language learning. Humor has been shown to effectively improve listening comprehension by reducing anxiety and increasing students' focus. Additionally, the use of humor creates a more relaxed learning environment and supports positive interactions between students and lecturers, thereby strengthening active participation in the classroom. However, challenges in applying humor also emerged, particularly concerning cultural sensitivity and linguistic complexity, which can lead to confusion and discomfort. If humor is not aligned with students' cultural backgrounds or language proficiency levels, its effectiveness in supporting the learning process will diminish.

This study has two main limitations. First, the small sample size may limit the generalizability of the findings to broader educational contexts. Second, the descriptive research design limits the ability to establish direct causal relationships. Future research is recommended to adopt an experimental approach to measure the causal impact of humor on learning outcomes. Additionally, cross-cultural studies involving diverse cultural contexts could enrich the understanding of humor's effectiveness in English language teaching. For listening instruction in EFL contexts, lecturers are advised to use culturally relevant humor, adjust the intensity and frequency of humor, and regularly evaluate its effectiveness based on student feedback. The use of

proportionate and contextually appropriate humor has the potential to significantly improve students' comprehension and motivation.

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