EFL Verbal Humor Appreciation

Akbar Afghari, Hamid Allami[*]
University of Isfahan[1]

Abstract

The use of verbal humor in an L2 class has often been a great challenge to the teachers and materials-developers, as it is felt to require great linguistic, social and cultural competence. This feeling has led the instructors to include as little verbal humor as possible in EFL classrooms and textbooks. The present research was an attempt to help FL practitioners make out manageable ways of implementing verbal humor appropriate in an EFL curriculum. It aimed to examine the appropriacy and effectiveness of verbal humor instances to be implemented in L2 classrooms. To this end 225 participants (56 male and 169 female) selected from undergraduate students of English Literature, English Translation and TEFL were given a questionnaire containing 40 short English humorous texts which randomly enjoyed a violation of Gricean Maxims. The results of this study demonstrate that there is a relationship between the humorous language and proficiency (r=.21, n=225, p<.01). The results also suggest that humorous texts with the violation of Relevance maxim (and, to some extent, Quantity maxim) are appreciated more by the EFL learners. The findings also indicate that women enjoy humor as much as men do.
Key Words: language play, verbal humor, pragmatics, Gricean maxims, humor discourse, SL humor.

---

1. Introduction

Foreign language learners often find many non-native jokes unfunny or less entertaining. The 'unfuniness' of foreign humor can be partly due to the learners' lack of acquaintance with the sociocultural norms of the foreign language and partly due to their incompetency in pragmalinguistic system of that language. The language learners' difficulty in grasping FL humor has led the FL teachers and materials developers to include as least as- or even exclude- humor in language classes and texts- although humor is an important personal and interpersonal interaction which can be used as an extremely affective tool in education in general, and language learning in particular. It can reduce tension, improve classroom climate, increase enjoyment, increase student-teacher rapport and facilitate learning (Loomax & Moosavi, 1998).

While the study of the understanding of verbal humor by L1 learners has attracted a great deal of attention, the comprehension and appreciation of verbal humor by EFL learners has always constituted a great challenge to the second language researchers, as it often requires sophisticated linguistic, social and cultural competence. Although recent research has begun to show an interest in humor and language play as it relates to SLL (Sullivan, 2000; Tarone, 2000; Broner & Tarone, 2001), no serious research, to the author's knowledge, has ever been carried out to examine how and what kind of verbal humor sounds appropriate to be implemented in L2 classes. The available research has only examined the use of humor in L2 classrooms from a sociocultural perspective. The findings have led the SLL researchers to view language play as a potential aid in acquisition, claiming that it creates opportunities for the appropriation of L2 resources and also contexts in which access to L2 resources may be facilitated.

Despite ample literature on issue, no serious attempt has been ever made to pragmalinguistically analyze verbal humor or jokes from a pedagogical perspective. The current research conducted by far has merely been either a stipulation of humor construct or its inclusion in FL class as a relief maker. The significant questions of 'how' and 'what kind of' verbal humor to be implemented in FL class have still remained untouched.

The present research aims to examine appropriacy and effectiveness of verbal humor instances to be implemented in L2 classrooms. It, therefore, calls for a pragmatic analysis of verbal humor. To achieve this goal, a practical theory of humor seems in order as grounding for the study.

2. Review of literature
2.1 Humor Defined
One generalization that can be extracted from the literature about humor is that humor involves 'incongruity'. This point, employing varying terminology, has been made by numerous authors (Keith-Speigel (1972) lists 24, the earliest from 1759). Morreal (1987) sees incongruity in humor in the writing of Hutcheson (1750) and Hartley (1810), and also in the much quoted remark of Kant that "laughter is an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing" (Kant, 1892). (See also Keith-Speigel, 1972; Schultz, 1976; Attardo, 1994; Raskin, 1985; Suls, 1983). Incongruity theories account centrally for the cognitive aspect of humor (Suls,1983), not the interpersonal (social, contextual) or psychological aspect. In general, these theories are based on the concept of two different ideas (meanings, frames, scripts, concepts, tropes, etc.) which are in a constellation of mismatch (opposition, oppositeness, conflict, contrast, contradiction, etc.). To this group belong most prominently the works of Beattie (1776). According to Beattie,

> Laughter arises from the view of two or more inconsistent, unsuitable, or incongruous parts or circumstances, considered as united in complex object or assemblage, or as acquiring a sort of mutual relation from the peculiar manner in which the mind takes notice of them. (Beattie, 1776: 602)

Beattie also realized that incongruity does not necessarily lead to the experience of funniness, but may also evoke "some other emotion of greater authority … [which can] bear down this ludicrous emotion" (1776: 682), as he states in the summary of his essay on laughter and ludicrous composition.

As is often observed, the idea of incongruity was also proposed by Schopenhauer:
The cause of laughter in every case is simply the sudden perception of the incongruity between a concept and the real objects which have never been thought through it in some relation, and laughter is just the expression of this incongruity. (Schopenhauer, 1883: 76)
Paulos (1980) quotes Hazlitt (1819) as saying; "the essence of the laughter is the incongruous, the disconnecting of one idea from another, or the jostling of one feeling against another." Freud (1966) also argued the case for incongruity, although this is usually overshadowed by his advocacy of a Relief theory of humor.

Humor is mostly linguistic, i.e. it employs language as the dominant medium of humorous expression. To adequately capture such linguistic enterprise, a linguistic framework is needed, which would encompass all its cronies. Cognitive linguistics is one such framework, viewing language as a highly-grounded and experiential facet of general human intelligence.

Humor theoretical accounts mostly developed by Raskin (1985), Norrick (1993, 2001), Graesser *et al.* (1989), Giora (1991, 1997, 2002, 2003), and especially Attardo (1994, 1997, 2001a, 2002) have provided background for a new line of research into humor from a cognitive-linguistic perspective. Such research is cognitive-linguistic in that it explores the interface between language and cognition in highly creative language use.

2.2 Incongruity Theory of Verbal Humor

Appeal to a cognitive scheme can result in a basis for a modern typology of incongruity models of humor, where cognitive scheme can be defined as "every mental construction humor possesses whereby to relate and, thus, to interpret or give meaning to stimuli from outside world (Vandale, 2002: 226). Attardo (1985: 45) states: "Incongruity theories are based on the mismatch between two ideas, thus, they are the direct ancestors of cognitive theories."

One very common proposal which explores the use of incongruity in humor is the Incongruity-Resolution (IR) theory (Suls, 1972, 1983). This analysis states that incongruity alone is not sufficient to create humor. There exists a second more subtle aspect

of humor which renders incongruity meaningful or appropriate, i.e. resolution. Suls (1972) argues it is not the mere presence of incongruity in the punch line of the joke which gives rise to humor, but that it is the *resolution* of this incongruity with what has gone before that is the key. Within this framework, humor appreciation is conceptualized as a biphasic sequence involving first the discovery of incongruity followed by a resolution of the incongruity. The resolution of incongruity means that the humorous text should not be seen to be not as incongruous as first thought. The mechanism of resolution is apparently necessary to distinguish humor from nonsense. While nonsense can be characterized as pure or irresolvable incongruity, humor can be described as meaningful incongruity (Schultz, 1972).

2.3 Verbal Humor in the EFL Class

Humor has long been of interest to L1 researchers. Various aspects and functions of humor have by far been described and analyzed by L1 researchers from different scientific perspectives including the use of humor to negotiate identities (Apte, 1985; Basso 1979; Boxer & Corte´s-Conde, 1997; Eder, 1993; Eisenberg 1986; Wennerstrom, 2000; Yedes, 1996), to mitigate face-threatening acts (Holmes, 2000), to create and affirm affiliation (Basso, 1979; Boxer & Corte´s-Conde, 1997; Eder, 1993; Norrick, 1993; Straehle, 1993), to communicate social norms or to criticize (Eder, 1993; Eisenberg, 1986; Goldberg, 1997; Jorgensen, 1996; Miller, 1986; Norrick, 1993; Yedes, 1996), to attempt to subvert social norms or power structures (Holmes & Marra, 2002), to release feelings of aggression (Pogrebin & Poole, 1988; Yedes, 1996), to protect one's own positive face needs (Holmes, 2000; Norrick, 1993; Zajdman, 1995) and of course, to entertain (Eisenberg, 1986; Holmes, 2000).

The use of humor in SLA, however, has only recently been examined under the rubric of language play by SLA researchers (Belz, 2002; Belz & Reinhardt, 2004; Broner & Tarone, 2001; Cook, 1997, 2000; Crystal, 1998; Davies, 2003; Kramsch & Sullivan, 1996; Lantolf, 1997; Sullivan, 2000; Tarone, 2000). Tarone (2000) suggests that language play can both aid in the acquisition of sociolinguistic competence and make a contribution

to SLL, explaining that the 'IL [interlanguage] system could not develop unless the more conservative forces demanding accuracy were counterbalanced with more creative forces demanding innovation' (Tarone, 2000: 49). Humor, as a type of language play, may help to destabilize the IL system, allowing growth to continue. Tarone also notices that language play may facilitate SLL by lowering the affective filter.

Deneire (1995) suggests that humor be integrated harmoniously into existing language teaching approaches. The advantage of humor is that it can be used with any language teaching approach or method. Humorous material can add variety to the class, providing a change of pace, and can contribute to reducing tension that many learners feel during the learning process. But the use of humorous texts in classes should be planned by the teacher. It should give learners the impression of being spontaneous but yet be an integral part of the course instrumental in building language skills, and never an incidental or ''by the way'' activity. Watson and Emerson (1988) state:

> When humor is planned as part of the teaching strategy, a caring environment is established, there is an attitude of flexibility, and communication between student and teacher is that of freedom and openness. The tone is set allowing for human error with freedom to explore alternatives in the learning situation. This reduces the authoritarian position of the teacher, allowing the teacher to be a facilitator of the learning process. Fear and anxiety, only natural in a new and unknown situation, becomes less of a threat, as a partnership between student and instructor develops.   (Watson & Emerson, 1988: 89).

Based on Long and Graesser's (1988) categories, Schmitz (2002) proposes, for the purpose of language learning, the division of humorous discourse into three basic groups. The first group includes humor that obtains mainly from the context and the general functioning of the world. To be more precise, this type of verbal humor might be labeled the universal (or reality-based humor) for in theory verbal humor belonging to this group would continue to be humorous in translation from English into other languages. The

second group is the cultural verbal humor or cultural-based verbal humor. The third group is the linguistic verbal humor or word-based verbal humor based on specific features in the phonology, morphology or syntax of particular languages. Schmitz also argues that the cultural or linguistic instances of verbal humor may not always be humorous in translation.

Schmitz (2002) believes that humorous discourse should be introduced from the initial stage of language instruction and continued throughout the language program. He maintains that the humorous material should be selected in a way to gear the linguistic competence of learners. He suggests that the implementation of verbal humor should start with universal humor towards other humorous discourses.

Zabalbeascoa (2005) makes a similar classification. He holds that a linguistic instance of verbal humor is one that depends on the knowledge of certain features of a given language; a cultural instance is one that depends on the knowledge of certain features of a given ethnic group for its understanding, and an appreciation of a certain brand ethnic humor for its funniness. Other types of verbal humor which are on universal themes are easier to comprehend and appreciate.

Regardless of several attempts to classify humorous texts, no definite criteria are proposed yet to clearly identify the three groups of humorous discourse.

3. Theoretical Framework

Recent Incongruity models of humor have introduced the idea that almost all humor involves a linguistic-pragmatic process. This approach can be referred to as pragmalinguistic analysis of humor. Pragmalinguistic account is the linguistic end of pragmatics. It, according to Leech (1983: 11), refers to "the particular resources that a given language provides for conveying particular intentions", such as lexical devices and the syntactic structures. More specifically, pragmalinguistic knowledge is a component of pragmatic knowledge which relates to the individual's knowledge of structural resources available in his language for realizing particular communicative effects, and the knowledge of appropriate

contextual use of these resources. It is different from Sociopragmatic knowledge in that the latter refers to 'the social perceptions underlying participants' interpretation and performance of communicative action' (Leech, 1983: 10).

The claim that all jokes involve the violation of (at least) one maxim of the CP is commonplace within humor research. Attardo (1994) gives the following examples to show how jokes may violate the Gricean maxims:

QUANTITY
"Excuse me; do you know what time it is?"
"Yes"
RELEVANCE
"How many surrealists does it take to screw in a light bulb?"
"Fish"
MANNER
"Do you believe in clubs for young men?"
"Only when kindness fails."
QUALITY
"Why did the Vice-President fly to Panama?"
"Because the fighting is over."

The first example violates the maxim of quality by not providing enough information. By providing only the information literally requested, the second speaker fails to cooperate with the first speaker. Violation through providing excess information is also possible. The second example violates the maxim of relevance in that the response provided by the second speaker is bizarre to the common men (though it may be appropriate to the surrealist). The third example violates the maxim of manner in that an ambiguity which is often found in puns is made in the joke. The last example is a deliberate infraction of the maxim of quality, which is used here to insinuate that the Vice-President is a coward.

Attardo (2003) argues that pragmalinguistics is the most appropriate way to analyze verbal humor. He believes that "pragmatics, with its programmatic lack of boundaries, is then the natural place to locate the linguistic side of interdisciplinary study of humor." (Attardo, 2003: 1289) Yus (2003) argues that humorous discourses involve specific paths favored by the retrieval from the

context of assumptions related to the communicator's communicative strategies. If an utterance is not as informative as required, a search for a more relevant interpretation worth being processed may be activated. Attardo (2003) argues that Yus' proposal is close in spirit and methodology to the work on the violation of the CP in humor.

The central assumption on which this study is based is that a theory of humor in general and of verbal humor in particular should not only tell whether the verbal material is humorous and funny but also how funny it is and –ideally- how this 'funniness' can be related to pragmalinguistically defined elements of the text. The core of the theory employed for this purpose is a 'congruity model' of humor developed recently in the works of Raskin (1985, 1987, 1995, 1998), Suls (1983), Attardo (1994, 1997, 1998, 2001, 2002) and Ritchie (1999, 2000, 2004).

4. Research Design
4.1 Research Questions
An unhappy experience that FL learners often find is that jokes and humorous dialogs and stories in the course-books often leave them puzzled and unaffected. All of it leaves the learners to wonder bitterly what is 'funny' in these texts.

While in the existing literature, there have been a host of attempts to analyze humorous texts; no step has ever been taken to do it pedagogically. Therefore, this study will venture on the development of a linguistic humor theory, more precisely a pragmalinguistic theory of verbal humor to serve pedagogically FL purposes. The present study, then, attempts to find answers to the following questions:

1. Do language learners at different levels of language proficiency respond differently/ similarly to instances of verbal humor?
2. What pragmalinguistic mechanisms in the humorous texts lead to funniness?
3. Do men and women react differently to different instances of verbal humor?

4.2 Participants

The participants in this study included 225 students (56 male and 169 female) who were selected from undergraduate students of English Literature, English Translation and TEFL at three universities in Iran, namely, University of Isfahan, University of Yazd and Sheikh-Bahaei University. They were selected from freshmen and seniors as they normally represent two different levels of English proficiency. To determine any significant difference between the two groups a proficiency test was administered to the students (30 students were selected from freshmen and 30 from juniors). An independent-samples t-test indicated a significant difference between the groups (df = 58, t=-4.193, p = 0.000). See Tables 1 and 2 below.

Table 1: Group Statistics

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
	Freshmen	30	45.7000	9.1883	1.6775
	Seniors	30	54.8667	7.6777	1.4018

Table 2: Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Var.		t-test for Equal of Means					95%Conf. Interval Difference	
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. 2-tailed	Mean Dif	Std. Error Dif		
									Lower	Upper
Fresh. & Sen.	Equal var. assum	2.000	.163	-4.193	58	.000	-9.1667	2.1861	-13.5426	-4.7907
	Equal var. not assum			-4.193	56.225	.000	-9.1667	2.1861	-13.5456	-4.7878

4.3 Instrumentation and Procedure
The elicitation procedure to collect data in this study was a questionnaire containing 40 short English humorous texts randomly violating Gricean Maxims. Each maxim was violated ten times. Thus, there were ten texts with the violation of quantity maxim, ten with the violation of quality maxim, ten with the violation of relevance maxim, and the last ten with the violation of manner maxim.

The students were asked to read each text and express their responses as to how they understood it linguistically and how much they enjoyed it on two Likert scales with five values each from 'very much' and 'completely' to 'not at all'. An example follows:
"They tell me your son in college is quite an author. Does he write for money?"
"Yes, in every letter."

How much did you understand it structurally and lexically?
Completely ☐   *almost completely* ☐   *fairly* ☐
 very little ☐   *not at all* ☐
How much did you enjoy it?
Very much ☐   *much* ☐   *fairly* ☐   *very little* ☐   *not at all* ☐

Care was taken to select those humorous texts that would correspond to the principles of the two-stage congruity-resolution model. Therefore, each text included an incongruity which was resolved in the punch-line.

4.4 Statistical Analysis
The relationship between degree of understanding and the degree of humorousness of texts was investigated using Pearson product-moment correlation. The result shows some positive correlation between the two variables (r = .21, n = 225, p < .01). It is shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Correlations between Understandability and Humorousness of Texts

		Understandability	Humorousness
Understandability	Pearson Correlation	1.000	.210
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.002
	N	225	225
Humorousness	Pearson Correlation	.210	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.002	.
	N	225	225

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The same measure was run once more, but this time in terms of the participants' years of learning English at the university. The results are shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Correlation between Understanding Scores and Humorousness Scores for freshmen, and seniors

Understanding Scores for Freshmen	Pearson Correlation	1.000	.196
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.057
	N	95	95
Humorousness Scores for Freshmen	Pearson Correlation	.196	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.057	.
	N	95	95
Understanding Scores for seniors	Pearson Correlation	1.000	.212
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.016
	N	130	130
Humorousness Scores for seniors	Pearson Correlation	.212	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.016	.
	N	130	130

The table shows that the correlation is significant for senior students (r=.21, n=130, p<.05) while it is rather insignificant for the freshmen (r =197, n = 95, p > .057).

A further analysis was run to study the difference between male and female subjects in terms of the degree of humorousness of texts. It is shown in table 5.

Table 5: Independent Samples Test

	GENDER		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
TOTAL	Male		56	2.0469	.6347	8.481E-02
	Female		169	1.9149	.5934	4.565E-02
		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances	t-test for Equality of Means				
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Differ.	Std. Error Differ.	95%Confid. Interval Of Differ.	
									Lower	Up
Total	Equal variances assumed	.234	.629	1.417	223	.158	.1319	9.311 E-02	-5.1546E-02	.3154
	Equal variances not assumed			1.370	89.034	.174	.1319	9.631 E-02	-5.9439 E-02	.3233

TOTAL = Degree of Humorousness of Texts

The analysis shows no significant difference in scores for males (M = 2.046, SD = 6.35), and females (M = 1.92, SD = 0.593; t (223) = 1.42, p = 0.16).
In order to explore the effect of Gricean Maxims on EFL learners' understanding of humorous texts and their enjoyment of the texts, two two-way ANOVA's were run to verify the possible impact statistically. (See tables 6 and 7)

Table 6: Tests of Between-Subjects Effects
Dependent Variable: Understanding texts, Independent Variables: Gricean Maxims

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	2.559	3	.853	5.481	.001
Intercept	11963.255	1	11963.255	76863.748	.000
Maxims	2.559	3	.853	5.481	.001
Error	139.456	896	.156		
Total	12105.270	900			
Corrected Total	142.015	899			

a R Squared = .018 (Adjusted R Squared = .015)

Table 7: Tests of Between-Subjects Effects
Dependent Variable: Enjoyment of Maxims, Independent Variables: Gricean Maxims

Source	Type III Sum of squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	15.078	3	5.026	11.166	.000
Intercept	3337.758	1	3337.758	7415.334	.000
Maxims	15.078	3	5.026	11.166	.000
Error	403.304	896	.450		
Total	3756.140	900			
Corrected Total	418.382	899			

a R Squared = .036 (Adjusted R Squared = .033)

As the results of the analyses of variance show, the difference for both variables (understanding of maxims and enjoyment of maxims) is statistically significant at the .05 level of confidence ($p<.05$). Post-hoc comparisons using LSD indicate that the difference for the degree of understanding is far more between maxims of Quality and Relevance, and Relevance and Manner (Table 8).

Table 8: Multiple Comparisons of Maxims in Terms of Understanding
Dependent Variable: Understanding Degree

(I)	(J)	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Quant.	Qual.	4.711E-02	3.720E-02	.206	-2.5889E-02	.1201
	Relev.	-6.8000E-02	3.720E-02	.068	-.1410	5.000E-03
	Man.	7.200E-02	3.720E-02	.053	-9.9999E-04	.1450
Qual.	Quant	-4.7111E-02	3.720E-02	.206	-.1201	2.589E-02
	Relev.	-.1151	3.720E-02	*.002*	-.1881	-4.2111E-02
	Man.	2.489E-02	3.720E-02	.504	-4.8111E-02	9.789E-02
Relev.	Quant	6.800E-02	3.720E-02	.068	-5.0000E-03	.1410
	Qual.	.1151	3.720E-02	*.002*	4.211E-02	.1881
	Man.	.1400	3.720E-02	*.000*	6.700E-02	.2130
Man.	Quant	-7.2000E-02	3.720E-02	.053	-.1450	1.000E-03
	Qual.	-2.4889E-02	3.720E-02	.504	-9.7889E-02	4.811E-02
	Relev.	-.1400	3.720E-02	*.000*	-.2130	-6.7000E-02

Based on observed means.

* The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

Similar Post-hoc comparisons using LSD indicate that the difference for humorousness degree is more significant between maxims of Quantity and Manner, Quality and Manner, and Relevance and Manner (table 9).

Table 9: Multiple Comparisons of Maxims in Terms of Humorousness
Dependent Variable: Humorousness degree

(I) CODE	(J) CODE	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Conf. Interval Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Quant.	Qual.	4.222E-02	6.325E-02	.505	-8.1920E-02	.1664
	Relev.	-7.3333E-02	6.325E-02	.247	-.1975	5.081E-02
	Man.	.2729	6.325E-02	*.000*	.1487	.3970
Qual.	Quant.	-4.2222E-02	6.325E-02	.505	-.1664	8.192E-02
	Relev.	-.1156	6.325E-02	.068	-.2397	8.587E-03
	Man.	.2307	6.325E-02	*.000*	.1065	.3548
Relev.	Quant.	7.333E-02	6.325E-02	.247	-5.0809E-02	.1975
	Qual.	.1156	6.325E-02	.068	-8.5871E-03	.2397
	Man.	.3462	6.325E-02	*.000*	.2221	.4704
Manner	Quant.	-.2729	6.325E-02	*.000*	-.3970	-.1487
	Qual.	-.2307	6.325E-02	*.000*	-.3548	-.1065
	Relev.	-.3462	6.325E-02	*.000*	-.4704	-.2221

Based on observed means.

* The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

A simple descriptive analysis for understanding degree and humorousness degree of the maxims indicates that the texts with Relevance violation are more understandable and humorous. (Tables 10 and 11)

Table 10: Descriptive Statistics for the Understanding of Maxims

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Quantity	225	2.00	4.00	3.6587	.3801
Quality	225	1.70	4.00	3.6116	.4024
Relevance	225	1.50	4.00	3.7267	.3528
Manner	225	1.60	4.00	3.5867	.4378
Valid N (listwise)	225				

Table 11: Descriptive Statistics for the Humorousness of Maxims

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Quantity	225	.30	3.70	1.9862	.6650
Quality	225	.40	3.50	1.9440	.5981
Relevance	225	.30	4.00	2.0596	.7156
Manner	225	.20	4.00	1.7133	.6989
Valid N (listwise)	225				

5. Discussion

The use of verbal humor in an L2 class has often been a great challenge to the teachers and materials-developers, as it is felt to require linguistic, social and cultural competence. This feeling has led them to include as little verbal humor as possible in EFL classrooms and textbooks.

As the results of this study have demonstrated, there is a trend between the humorous language and proficiency. Although this may seem to marginally support the discussion suggested by Cook (2000), Belz and Reinhardt (2004), and Bell (2005), which states that there is a relationship between learners' degree of awareness of the formal and functional structures of their L2 and their ability to exploit the humorousness of its texts, the result is not strong enough to make a claim.

The results obtained through the present study may counterevidence Thomas's (1983) suggestion that pragmalinguistics is akin to grammar and that the misinterpretation of the intended pragmatic force of an utterance is due to an imperfect command of lower-level grammar. The results also question Binsted *et al's* (2003) suggestion that a natural humor reaction depends on the range of comprehensibility of the humorous texts. If the text is easy, the joke will be facile whereas a difficult text is more a puzzle than a joke. The findings of the present study, by implication, can support Kasper and Schmidt's (1996) claim that learners of lower and higher proficiency both have access to the same range of pragmatic strategies (or at least to the same pragmalinguistic devices). As the results of the study indicate language learners of

low and high proficiency levels are not much different in appreciating humorous texts while their proficiency levels vary. This might be attributed to the suggestion made by Blum-Kulka (1999) and Ochs (1996) who believe that part of pragmatic knowledge is universal and some other aspects may be transferred from the learners' L1.

As it was mentioned earlier, Raskin's Semantic-Script Theory of humor (SSTH) marked a significant turning point in the humor research. According to this theory, all humor involves a semantic-pragmatic process. Any humorous text includes a semantic opposition between scripts activated by a text and a violation of the principle of cooperation. SSTH and its spin-off General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) established the ground for launching a series of pragmatically oriented research on humor.

Any humorous text involves two or more interpretive paths favored by the retrieval from the contexts of assumptions related to the communicator's communicative strategies. As a necessary condition for the funniness of a humorous text, 'script oppositeness' is often a local ambiguity which is evoked by the pragmalinguistic elements present in the humorous text. Depending on how much the opposite scripts overlap, the result can range from highly humorous to lowly humorous or even tragic. As for a joke, a search strategy starts into the combinatorial rules (rules to combine scripts evoked by the words of the sentence into one if unambiguous and more if ambiguous), detecting the text not lending itself to the bona-fide mode of communication, but to a non-bona-fide mode. The result for the text, then, will be humorousness. In other words, the receiver of humor interprets the text in terms of a set of assumptions ostensively provided by the communicator. If the text is not as informative as required, irrelevant, untrue, etc., the receiver begins to search for an implicature that can be recovered from the assumptions.

As the results of the present study suggest, humorous texts with the violation of Relevance maxim (and, to some extent, Quantity maxim) are more appreciated by the EFL learners. A pragmalinguistic analysis of such texts reveals that they belong to the first group of humorous discourse suggested by Schmitz (2002).

The analysis of texts with the violation of Quality and Manner maxims, on the other hand, suggests that they belong to the second and third groups of humor discourse respectively. The present study could, then, suggest certain yardsticks with which appropriate humorous discourses can be easily discerned to be implemented at different levels of EFL proficiency.

As for the relationship between humor appreciation and gender, the results of this study indicate that women enjoy humor as much as men do. This is in contrast to Lakoff's (1975) argument that women lack a sense of humor since they don't tell or "understand" jokes, although later research has noted that women tend to be the audience of jokes while men prefer to tell jokes especially if they are in large groups (Tannen, 1992; Lampert, 1996). The finding of the present study is more in line with the recent studies on gender differences which suggest that women are more likely to laugh at humor.

6. Conclusion

The current research has indicated that learners at higher levels of proficiency are not much different from learners with lower levels of proficiency in terms of their pragmatic knowledge, as their appreciation of verbal humor was not much significantly different. This is in accord with Takahashi's (1996) finding that proficiency does not play a significant role in pragmatic development. It may imply that low proficiency learners can also have the same chance of mastering pragmatic knowledge as the more proficient learners.

Traditionally, language teaching materials have principally focused on phonetic, lexical and syntactic development. However, that is not the whole picture. Pragmatic development is just as much a part of language development as pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar are, and needs to begin at the early stages of language learning, for a grammar or pronunciation error is recognizable as non-native, but a pragmatic error can sometimes cause offense. It can, then, be implied that a judicious amount of verbal humor (as a text with a rich bundle of pragmatic content) in the EFL curricula can lead to the enhancement of pragmatic knowledge in the EFL learners.

References

Attardo, S. (1994). *Linguistic Theories of Humour*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Attardo, S. (2001a). *Humorous Texts: A Semantic and Pragmatic Analysis*. (Series: Humor Research 6). Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter.

Attardo, S. (2003). Introduction: The Pragmatics of Humor. *Journal of Pragmatics* 35.9: 1287-1294.

Beattie, J. (1776). An essay on laughter, and ludicrous composition. In *Essays*. Edinburgh: William Creech, Reprinted by Garland, New York, 1971.

Bell, N. D. (2005), Exploring L2 language play as an aid to SLL: a case study of humour in NS-NNS interaction. *Applied Linguistics* 26, 2: 192-218

Belz, J. & Reinhardt, J. (2004). Aspects of advanced foreign language proficiency: Internet-mediated German language play, *International Journal of Applied Linguistics* 14, 3: 324–62.

Blum-Kulka, S., House, J, & Kasper, G. (1989). Investigating cross-cultural pragmatics: An introductory overview. In S. Blum-**Kulka, J. House, & G. Kasper** (Eds.), *Cross-cultural pragmatics: Requests and apologies* (pp. 1-34). Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

Broner, M. & Tarone, E. (2001). Is it fun? Language play in a fifth-grade Spanish immersion classroom. *The Modern Language Journal* 85, 3: 363–79.

Cook, G. (2000). *Language Play, Language Learning*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Freud, S. (1966). *Jokes and their relation to the unconscious*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul. First published 1905.

Graesser, A. C., Long, D. L. and Mio, J. S. (1989). What Are the Cognitive and Conceptual Components of Humorous Text? *Poetics* 18:143-163.

Hartley, D. (1810). *Of Wit and Humor. From Observations on Man.* (5th ed). London, Part 1, ch. 4, sect. 4. Also in Morreall 1987:41-44.

Kant, I. (1892). *Critique of Judgment.* J. Bernard, trans. NY: Hafner 1951.

Kasper, G., & Schmidt, R. (1996). Developmental issues in interlanguage pragmatics. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 18, 149-169.

Keith-Speigel, P. (1972). *Early Conceptions of Humor: Varieties and issues*. In Goldstein and McGhee (Eds.), *The Psychology of Humor*. New York: Academic Press, 3-39.

Koestler, A. (1970). *The Act of Creation*. London: Pan Books. First published 1964, Hutchinson & Co.

Lakoff, R. (1975). *Language and Woman's Place*. New York: Harper Colophon.

Lampert, M. D. (1996). Studying gender differences in the conversational humor of adults and children. In: Slobin, D.I., Gerhardt, J., Guo, J., Kyratzis, A. (Eds.), *Social Interaction, Social Context, and Language*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Mahwah, NJ, 579–596.

Lampert, M. D. & Ervinn-Trip, S. M. (2006). Risky laughter: teasing and self-directed joking among male and female friends. *Journal of Pragmatics* 38, 51-72

Leech, G. (1983). *Principles of Pragmatics*. London: Longman

Loomax, R. G., & Moosavi, S. A. (1998). Using Humor to Teach Statistics; Must they be Orthogonal?, *Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association*, San Diego, April 17th, 1998. Retrieved from the World Wide Web http://www.bamaed.ua.edu/~rlomax/LOMAX/HUMOR.HTM

 Morreall, J. (1987). *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*. Albany: State University of NewYork Press.

Ochs, E. (1996). Linguistic resources for socializing humanity. In J. Gumperz & S. Levinson (Eds.), *Rethinking* L*inguistic Relativity* (pp. 407-437). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Paulos, J. (1980). *Mathematics and Humor*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Raskin, V. (1985). *Semantic Mechanisms of Humor*, Dordrecht/Boston/Lancaster.

Raskin, V. (1995). *Logical Mechanisms: The Elusive Knowledge Resource of theJoke*. In: G. E. C. Paton and Robert W. Jones

(eds.),13ᵗʰ International Humor Conference . Birmingham, England: University of Aston (for Harper Collins), 45.

Schmitz, J. R. (2002). "Humor as a pedagogical tool in foreign language and translation courses." *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research* 15.1:89-113.

Schopenhauer, A. (1883). *The World as Will and Idea*. Vol. 1, London: Routledge.

Shultz, T. R. (1976). *A Cognitive-Developmental Analysis of Humour*. In Chapman and Foot, chapter 1: 11–36.

Sullivan, P. (2000). Playfulness as mediation in communicative language teaching in a Vietnamese classroom, In J. P. Lantolf (ed.): *Sociocultural Theory and Second Language Learning*, 115–31. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Suls, J. M. (1972). A Two-Stage Model for the Appreciation of Jokes and Cartoons: An information-processing analysis. In Jeffrey H. Goldstein and Paul E. McGhee, (eds) *The Psychology of Humor*, 81-100. New York: Academic Press.

Suls, J. M. (1983). Cognitive processes in humor appreciatio*n*. In McGhee, P. E., and J. H. Goldstein (eds.), *Handbook of humor research*, vol. 1. New York: Springer, 39-57.

Takahashi, S. (1996). Pragmatic Transferability. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition.* 18, 189-223.

Tannen, D. (1992). The relativity of linguistic strategies: Rethinking power and solidarity in gender and dominance. In: D. Tannen, (Ed.), *Gender and conversational interaction*, 165-188. New York: Oxford University Press.

Tarone, E. (2000). Getting serious about language play: Language play, interlanguage variation and second language acquisition In B. Swierzbin, F. Morris, M. E. Anderson, C. Klee, and E. Tarone (eds).*Social and Cognitive Factors in Second Language Acquisition*. Selected Proceedings of the 1999 Second Language Research Forum. Somerville, MA: Cascadilla Press, 31–54.

Thomas, J. (1983). Cross-cultural pragmatic failure. *Applied Linguistics*, 4, 91-112.

Vandaele, J. (2002.) Introduction: (Re)Constructing humor: Meanings and means. *The Translator* 8 ,2: 149–172.

Vogel, S. T. (1989). *Humor: A Semiogenetic Approach*. Bochum, Germany: Studieneur/Brockmeyher.

Watson, M. J., & Emerson, S. (1988). Facilitate Learning with Humor. *Journal of Nursing Education, 2* , (2), 89-90.

Zabalbeascoa, P. (2005). Humor and Translation: Interdiscipline. *Humor* 18, 2, 185-207