




Assessing Humour Appreciation among Pre-diploma Students

Nursyafiqah Zabidin^{1*}, Nor Afifa Nordin², Amirah Mohd Juned³,
Nazarul Azali Razali⁴, Nor Atifah Mohamad⁵

^{1,2,3,4,5} Universiti Teknologi MARA, Melaka, Malaysia
nursyafiqah@uitm.edu.my

Abstract. Humour is both universal and specific in human interaction. Its influences in many fields have been extensively discovered, including in the area of teaching and learning. Numerous past studies have reported positive influences of humour and advocated its inclusion in the classrooms. Hence, the objectives of this study were to assess humour appreciation of three narrative jokes among pre-diploma students and to add to existing teaching materials that can be used by educators. This study included a purposive sampling of an intact group consisting of 32 students. The results revealed two narrative jokes which were rated humorous, indicating their suitable insertion in the classrooms as well as the researchers' future studies on the use of humour in language teaching.

Keywords: Humour appreciation, humour rating, narrative jokes

1 Introduction

Humour is both universal and specific [6]. Most people would generally find unexpected and inexplicable things or events amusing. When humour is present, we would normally laugh or smile as a natural reaction. In other words, it is universally experienced by all walks of life. However, its production, comprehension, and appreciation are specifically influenced by cultural norms and individual factors. What one views and accepts as amusing might differ from the others. This also explains the different reactions that one has compared to the others to similar things or events.

Over the years, numerous studies have explored humour relation to and/or influences on various things, events or contexts. In the education field, the application of humour in the classrooms has been reported to be positively influential [6], thus, widely advocated as an effort to facilitate teaching and learning, with some provisions. One example of such is for humorous materials to be carefully selected before their insertion in teaching. The humour value of the materials has to be assessed to ensure their suitability to the students prior to the lessons. Even though it is subjective in nature and its comprehension and production could not be physically measured, humour value or degree can be assessed with the rating of an appropriate sample of judges or participants [2].

Hence, this study was done to explore the appreciation of three narrative jokes among pre-diploma students in Melaka, Malaysia, to be used in further subsequent studies, to add more teaching materials that can be used by instructors in their English Language classrooms, and ultimately, to provide more insight into the use of humour in the education setting. It was also an interest of the researchers to explore if there are any correlations among the participants' genders and English Language grades on their rating of the jokes.

This study aimed at answering the following research questions:

1. How did the participants rate the jokes provided?
2. Which jokes were the most preferred and the least preferred?
3. Is there any correlation between their genders and their rating of the jokes?
4. Is there any correlation between their English Language grades and their rating of the jokes?

2 Literature Review

Perks theoretically illustrated three explanations of humour: Incongruity Theory (amusement that stems from unexpected occurrence or surprise that contradicts with experience and expectations) [9], Relief Theory (amusement that originates from release of built-up emotion), and Superiority Theory (amusement that arises from elevated feeling of self-worth after mocking a target). Generally, humour can be defined as any comic, absurd, or incongruous quality that stimulates the feeling of amusement and that contradicts our expectations and real-world knowledge [12].

Humour appreciation can be described as one's ability to understand the humour and react accordingly. [4] explained that the structure and the content of the humorous stimuli are mutually influential in humour appreciation. For instance, in humour with incongruity-resolution structure, the appreciation is drawn from understanding or getting the punchline and making sense of the stimulus. Humour stimuli with heavy content, meanwhile, can elicit strong emotions, thus influencing one's humour appreciation.

Gender differences were also found to be present in humour appreciation [5]. However, opposite observation was reported by Bensaber as the participants involved were almost equally appreciative of humour [1]. English Language proficiency levels and comprehension of the humorous stimuli were also reported to be influential [13]. In gauging humour appreciation, Chen and Dewaele described that it is gradient rather than categorical and that participants' evaluation of funniness can be a measurement for the degree of humour [2].

3 Methodology

3.1 Research Design

According to Creswell, it would suffice for educational researchers to apply a purposive sampling of an intact group of minimum 12 participants to avoid disruptive lessons [3].

For this study, a total of 32 pre-Diploma students from the faculty of Business Administration in a public university in Melaka were involved. To collect the data, participants were gathered for a reading session. During the session, the participants were given a set of three narrative jokes, taken, and adapted from Reader's Digest Asia. They were then asked to read, rate, as well as categorise the jokes as: 1) not funny at all, 2) slightly funny, 3) moderately funny, and 4) very funny. Analysis of the findings was done by using SPSS.

A similar procedure was used in [11,13]. Serving as pilot studies, both involved groups of intact learners of English as a second language with different proficiency levels to assess their humour appreciation of a similar set of 10 narrative jokes. These studies reported that only three narrative jokes were deemed humorous by their respective groups of participants. In this particular pilot study, meanwhile, three new narrative jokes were given to the participants to be read and rated. The findings of this study are to be added to the materials rated in [11] and [13] and used in further studies.

3.2 Sample

Table 1 shows a total of 32 participants of pre-Diploma students in a public university in Melaka, Malaysia, who were involved in the study. Of these, 12 participants were male, accounting for 37.5% of the total sample. The remaining 20 participants were female, representing 62.5% of the sample. These findings indicate a higher representation of female participants compared to male participants in this study.

Table 1. Gender

Gender	Frequency	Percent
Male	12	37.5
Female	20	62.5
Total	32	100.0

Table 2 shows the participants' final grades for the English Language course taken the semester the study was done. The findings revealed that the majority of the respondents (40.6%) obtained a B+, followed by 31.3% who received an A- grade. A total of 25.0% achieved an A, while only 3.1% of the participants scored a B-. These indicate that the participants possessed an average to high English Language proficiency levels.

Table 2. Grade

Grade	Frequency	Percent
A	8	25.0
A-	10	31.3
B+	13	40.6
B-	1	3.1
Total	32	100.0

4 Results

RQ1. How did the participants rate the three jokes provided?

To examine how participants rated the three jokes, a one-sample proportions test was conducted to compare the proportion of participants who rated each joke as "Very Funny" or "Moderately Funny" against a test value of 0.5. The test value reflects the hypothetical scenario in which 50% of participants rated the joke positively.

Table 3. Humour Rating of the Jokes

Humour Rating	Proportion (Observed)	95% CI	p-value (Two-Sided)
Rating 1: Very Funny	0.125 (4/32)	[0.044, 0.287]	< .001
Rating 2: Very Funny	0.125 (4/32)	[0.044, 0.287]	< .001
Rating 3: Moderately Funny	0.250 (8/32)	[0.126, 0.423]	0.005

For **Joke 1**, 12.5% of participants (n = 4 out of 32) rated it as "Very Funny." The observed proportion (p = .125) was significantly lower than the expected value of 0.5, Z = -4.243, p < .001. Similar results were observed for **Joke 2**, which also received a "Very Funny" rating from 12.5% of participants (n = 4), with Z = -4.243, p < .001. For **Joke 3**, 25.0% of participants (n = 8) rated it as "Moderately Funny." The observed proportion was still significantly lower than the expected value of 0.5, Z = -2.828, p = .005.

RQ2. Which jokes were the most preferred and the least preferred?

Table 4. The Most Preferred Joke

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	J1	21	65.6	65.6	65.6
	J2	11	34.4	34.4	100.0
	Total	32	100.0	100.0	

Table 4 presents the frequency and percentage of participants' preferences for each joke. A total of 65.6% of participants (n = 21) reported liking Joke 1 (J1), while 34.4% (n = 11) indicated a preference for Joke 2 (J2). These findings suggest that **Joke 1 was the most preferred** among the three.

Table 5. The Least Preferred Joke

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	J1	7	21.9	21.9	25.0
	J2	7	21.9	21.9	46.9
	J3	17	53.1	53.1	100.0
	Total	31	100.0	100.0	

Table 5 summarises the distribution of participants' responses for the least preferred joke. Over half of the participants (53.1%, $n = 17$) reported disliking Joke 3 (J3), making it the **least preferred joke**. In comparison, Joke 1 and Joke 2 were each least preferred by 21.9% of the participants ($n = 7$ for each). Only one participant (3.1%) did not report which joke they preferred the least.

RQ3. Is there any correlation between their genders and their rating of the jokes?

A Pearson correlation coefficient was calculated and presented in Table 6 to show the correlation analysis between gender and the humour rating for three different jokes. The results indicated that gender was not significantly correlated with any of the humour ratings where Humour Rating 1, $r = .176$, $p > .05$; Humour Rating 2, $r = -.08$, $p > .05$; and Humour Rating 3, $r = -.129$, $p > .05$.

Table 6. Correlation between genders with humour rating

Variables		1	2	3	4
1. Gender	Correlation Coefficient	1.000			
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.			
2. Humour Rating 1	Correlation Coefficient	.176	1.000		
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.335	.		
3. Humour Rating 2	Correlation Coefficient	-.080	.594**	1.000	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.663	<.001	.	
4. Humour Rating 3	Correlation Coefficient	-.129	.435*	.539**	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.483	.013	.001	.

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

* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

RQ4. Is there any correlation between their English Language grades and their rating of the jokes?

Another Pearson correlation coefficient was calculated to evaluate the relationship between English Language grades and humour rating. The results indicated that the relationship between grades and humour rating was not significant; Humour Rating 1, $r = -.277$, $p > .05$; Humour Rating 2, $r = .012$, $p > .05$; and Humour Rating 3, $r = .015$, $p > .05$.

Table 7. Correlation between grades with humour rating

Variables		1	2	3	4
1. Grade	Correlation Coefficient	1.000			
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.			
2. Humour Rating 1	Correlation Coefficient	-.277	1.000		
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.124	.		
3. Humour Rating 2	Correlation Coefficient	.012	.594**	1.000	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.949	<.001	.	
4. Humour Rating 3	Correlation Coefficient	.015	.435*	.539**	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.937	.013	.001	.

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

* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

5 Discussion

The results analysis for Research Question 1 revealed that two narrative jokes (Joke 1 and Joke 2) were rated funny while one joke (Joke 3) was rated not funny. Since this study served as a pilot study, the finding revealed that Joke 1 and Joke 2 can be considered as humorous stimuli that can be utilised in further studies and teaching materials in classrooms. On the other hand, the rating received for Joke 3 indicated that it was not deemed humorous and was not suitable to be included in the researchers' further studies and teaching aids collection. These were further accentuated by the results found for Research Question 2 as Joke 3 were rated as the least preferred joke among the three. Additionally, participants also rated Joke 1 as their most preferred joke compared to Joke 2. In the context of language teaching and learning, humour has been reported to be positively influential. [6] wrote that humour helped in building rapport in the classrooms while [12] found that humorous materials aided in vocabulary comprehension and retention.

In addition, the researchers were also interested in finding out if the participants' genders and language proficiency correlated with their humour ratings. Results analysis for Research Question 3 and 4 both indicated that both did not significantly correlate with the humour ratings. This revealed that both male and female participants of this study equally appreciated the jokes presented, a similar observation reported by [1]. However, it contradicted the results documented by [5] where gender differences were found to be influential to the participants' rating of the humorous stimuli. This finding also contradicted with results found in [11] and [13] as these two pilot studies reported observable differences between the humour rating of the male and female participants within the intact group and between the two intact groups of different language proficiency levels.

6 Conclusion

The ratings given by the participants justified the selection of two out of three narrative jokes presented in this pilot study as both teaching materials in the classrooms and research materials in future studies. As teaching materials, educators interested in using humour in their teaching can be certain of their humour value and apply them suitably in their lessons. As research materials, these narrative jokes would be added to the other narrative jokes rated in Zabidin *et al.* and further explored in future studies [13]. Since the results of this study both corroborated and contradicted other past studies, more explorations are needed with the hope of expanding understanding on the use of humour in language teaching.

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