

Learning while laughing or learning by laughing?

**Finnish EFL teachers' conceptions of efficient use of
humour in the language classroom**

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Tiivistelmä – Abstract <p>Huumori on hyvin arkipäiväinen osa elämäämme, ja viime vuosikymmenten saatossa siitä on tullut yhä tavallisempi ilmiö myös luokkahuoneissa. Tutkimustulokset huumorin vaikutuksista tässä kontekstissa ovat kuitenkin olleet ristiriitaisia, ja on todettu, että huumori voi sekä hyödyttää että haitata oppimista monella tavalla. Huumori on hyvin monimuotoinen ilmiö ja sitä voi käyttää moniin eri tarkoituksiin. Näin ollen herääkin kysymys siitä, minkälainen huumori olisi todennäköisimmin hyödyllistä oppimiselle ja miten opettajat voisivat käyttää tätä työkalua ryhmänsä oppimisen tukemiseen mahdollisimman tehokkaasti.</p> <p>Tämä tutkimus tarkastelee aihetta Suomessa toimivien englanninopettajien näkökulmasta ja vastaa kahteen tutkimuskysymykseen siihen liittyen. Ensinnäkin tutkimus näyttää, minkälaista huumoria suomalaiset englanninopettajat opetuksessaan käyttävät ja miten he perustelevat tätä. Toiseksi se kokoaa ja tutkii heidän näkemyksiään siitä, minkälainen huumori on kaikista hyödyllisintä kielenoppimista ajatellen. Pääasiallisena tiedonkeruumenetelmänä tutkimuksessa käytettiin kyselylomaketta, joka tavoitti yhteensä 59 opettajaa. Lisäksi kaksi näistä opettajista osallistui puolistrukturoituihin yksilöhaastatteluihin, joilla täydennettiin kyselylomakkeella kerättyä aineistoa. Pääasiallisena analysointimenetelmänä tutkimuksessa käytettiin laadullista sisällönanalyysia.</p> <p>Tutkimustulokset viittaavat siihen, että huumoria käytetään suomalaisessa kielenopetuksessa melko runsaasti ja hyvin monipuolisesti. Kyselyn perusteella viisi suosituinta tapaa sisällyttää huumoria opetukseen ovat spontaanit humoristiset kommentit, oudot tai hassut esimerkkilauseet, sanaleikki, pelit ja meemit. Tutkimukseen osallistuneet opettajat perustelevat huumorin käyttöä etenkin sen positiivisilla vaikutuksilla luokan ilmapiiriin, opettajan ammatissa jaksamisella, oppijoiden kiinnostuksen ja motivaation lisäämisellä, muistamisen tehostamisella sekä paremman yhteyden luomisella oppijoihin. Oppimisen kannalta hyödylliseen huumoriin liittyen opettajat korostavat erityisesti sitä, että huumori ei saa loukata ketään tai jättää ulkopuolelle, ja että sen tulisi liittyä olennaisiin aiheisiin ja oppisisältöihin. Lisäksi moni mainitsee, että kielellinen huumori (esimerkiksi sanaleikit, meemit ja hassut esimerkkilauseet) kiinnittää huomiota kieleen, mikä tekee siitä tehokasta, ja usein juuri oppilailta itseltään lähtevä huumori auttaa heitä muistamaan asioita. Opettajat tuntevat myös olevan tietoisia huumorin mahdollisista haittavaikutuksista luokkahuonekontekstissa. Huumori voi esimerkiksi loukata, edistää kiusaamista tai vaikeuttaa ryhmänhallintaa. Saadut tulokset tukevat ja täydentävät aiempaa tutkimusta. Kaikkiaan tutkimus antaa yksityiskohtaista ja käytännönläheistä tietoa aiheesta ja auttaa näin sekä nykyisiä että tulevia kieltenopettajia käyttämään huumoria kielenoppimisen tehostamiseksi.</p>	
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1 INTRODUCTION

Humour is all around us: it can be found in the workplace, on the streets, in advertisements, on TV, in conversations among friends, at the dinner table, online, and also in the language classroom. Indeed, as it seems that the school has become a less serious place in the past few decades and the idea of making learning fun has spread, the use of humour in this context has increased significantly (Martin, 2010, pp. 349-350). Thus, using humour in teaching has also been quite a popular topic of research in recent years, and many studies have looked into classroom humour in general, its typical characteristics, and attitudes towards it (e.g., Banas et al., 2011; Gonulal, 2018; Heidari-Shahreza, 2018; Weisi & Muhammadi, 2023). However, amusing students is not the main aim of education, and it would be important to know what kinds of effects humour has on learning to determine whether this practice is beneficial or not in the context of a language classroom.

Some researchers have argued that humour functions as a form of social play, meaning that doing something in a humorous and playful manner, such as engaging in language play, allows us to practice our skills in this area and prepare ourselves for situations where we actually need such skills (Bateson, 2005; Cook, 2000, p. 153; Martin, 2010, p. 185). Therefore, humour seems to have served an evolutionary purpose throughout history, helping us develop different abilities. In a classroom context, humour has also been found to have many positive effects. For example, research has shown that humour can reduce anxiety and improve the atmosphere in the classroom, making it more relaxed (Berk & Nanda, 1998; Gonulal, 2018; Weisi & Muhammadi, 2023), and it can increase both motivation and enjoyment (Gonulal, 2018; Heidari-Shahreza, 2018; Weisi & Muhammadi, 2023). Some studies have also found that humour can enhance memorization and improve retention (Cook 2000; Kayali & Altuntaş, 2021; Schmidt & Williams, 2001), which strongly encourages its use in the classroom. Indeed, the Instructional Humour Processing Theory (IHPT) created by Wanzer et al. (2010) explains how the positive affect that comes with humour has the potential to encourage elaboration and motivate students to process the content of the humorous message. This theory suggests that if the humour used by the teacher evokes positive emotions and is related to the course content, it is likely to enhance learning. It seems, then, that the use of humour in the classroom is supported by various studies.

However, the findings on the effects of humour in the classroom are not consistent, and some studies also point out that these effects are not always positive. Researchers have argued that humour might distract students and reduce their willingness to think analytically (Bolkan et al., 2018) and, if the topic of the humour has nothing to do with the course content, it can cause students to remember these irrelevant humorous comments on the expense of more valuable class topics (Martin, 2010). In addition, some teachers have expressed concerns about humour taking up too much of valuable class time, undermining the teacher's authority and status, causing misunderstandings, and increasing the use of the learners' first language(s) (L1) in the classroom (Heidari-Shahreza, 2018). There are also some studies arguing that extensive use of humour can cause problems for classroom management and negatively affect students' motivation (Gonulal, 2018; Heidari-Shahreza, 2018). Therefore, it remains unclear whether humour is more of an asset or a hindrance in the classroom, and more research is needed to provide a reliable answer to this question. One thing that studies seem to agree on, however, is that teachers should only use appropriate and benevolent humour that does not offend or disparage others (e.g., Banas et al., 2011).

As culture may affect what we find funny and in which situations we can laugh (Martin, 2010), it could be assumed that classroom humour also has different characteristics in different cultures. In the Finnish context, classroom humour has not received much attention in research, except for being a popular topic of different theses (e.g., Haapaniemi, 2011; Paajoki 2014; Roininen 2010). There are also some more comprehensive studies on the topic, discussing, for example, students' conceptions of and experiences on classroom humour (Anttila, 2008) and teachers' use of teasing, a specific form of humour, with their students (Saharinen, 2007), but such research is quite scarce. Moreover, it seems that only a handful of Finnish MA theses have looked into the more specific context of language classrooms (e.g., Haapaniemi, 2011; Paajoki 2014; Roininen 2010), and none of the Finnish studies I could find focus on the effects humour has on learning. Thus, this topic still needs to be studied further in the Finnish context.

Hence, the present study aims at complementing previous research by investigating Finnish EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teachers' experiences on using humour in the language classroom and their conceptions of how it could be used the most efficiently in this context. The study focuses especially on the effects humour has on *learning* and investigates this issue through teachers' views, with the help of a questionnaire and two interviews. All in all, the present study strives to provide current and future teachers with concrete advice on how this tool could be used to enhance language acquisition.

2 BACKGROUND LITERATURE

In this section, I define the key concepts of the study and present previous research on the topic. I start by discussing the notion of humour and its different forms, after which I move on to consider humour, its functions, and its potential downfalls in the classroom context. At the end of this chapter, I present Finnish studies on the topic.

2.1 Defining humour

Although humour is something we have all experienced and might assume we know what it means, humour is a multifaceted term that has many interesting dimensions. On a very general level, however, humour could be defined as the forms of communication that aim at amusing others. Indeed, humour evokes a unique feeling of enjoyment that could also be called mirth, hilarity, or merriment (Martin, 2010, p. 8). As a phenomenon, humour is characterised by its social aspects and, in addition to entertainment, it can serve diverse social purposes: it can be used to create in-groups and out-groups, to both reinforce and reduce status differences, to express agreement as well as disagreement, to strengthen connectedness, and to undermine power, just to mention a few examples (Martin, 2010, p. 3). In fact, humour could be considered essential for the notion of being a human, as it seems to be quite universal and even babies are able to express amusement (Martin, 2010, p. 185). Many researchers have argued that there is an evolutionary basis for humour, stating that humour has stemmed from social play that, throughout history, has functioned as a tool for practising and developing different adaptive skills (Bateson, 2005; Martin, 2010, p. 185).

However, even though humour and laughter seem to be innate to humans, the conception of what is funny and which situations are appropriate for laughter might be very different in different cultures (Martin, 2010). In addition to our cultural heritage, our personalities may have an effect on what we consider humorous. In other words, humour seems to be somewhat subjective, and while a joke might make someone burst into uncontrollable giggling, another person might not understand the joke or might even find it insulting (Sover, 2018, p. 4). As can be seen, humour, although such a commonplace term, is actually a very complex phenomenon.

As humour is such a fundamental part of humanity, this topic has inspired many theorists to ponder on its underlying purposes and the sources of laughter. In their book called *Philosophy*

of Humour (2012), McDonald provides quite a comprehensive overview of such theories and describes how conceptions of the essence of humour have changed throughout history. According to them, one of the oldest theories related to humour is the Superiority Theory, the origins of which can be found already in the writings of ancient Greek philosophers. While many philosophers throughout history have expressed ideas associated with this theory, it was officially formulated by Hobbes in the 17th century. The idea of this theory is that laughter always stems from someone else's mischance and that the person laughing always considers the ridiculed person as somehow inferior or absurd (McDonald, 2012, pp. 33-37). However, this thought was later challenged by other philosophers, such as Scruton and Hutcheson (McDonald, 2012, pp. 46-49). Scruton has argued that mocking does not always diminish the object but might rather serve to make us feel more affectionate about them. Hutcheson, on the other hand, has pointed out that not all things we find funny involve comparing oneself to someone else and feeling superior, but laughter can also be caused by absurd contrasts between conflicting images (McDonald, 2012, pp. 46-49).

Based on Hutcheson's ideas and as a reaction to the Superiority Theory of humour, an Incongruity Theory was developed by Kant in the 18th century. This theory focuses especially on jokes and the amusement caused by incompatible elements that are brought together in a surprising way that makes them seem fitting, thus exceeding our expectations (McDonald, 2012, pp. 49-52). This theory has been criticized for focusing too much on the structural elements of humour rather than its content, dismissing the essential connection between jokes and reality, falsely stating that all incongruities are funny, and ignoring the distress caused by the disruption of logic in incongruities (McDonald, 2012, pp. 57-58). Similarly to the Incongruity Theory, the Relief Theory of humour that was formulated by Spencer in the 19th century sees contradictions as the source of laughter, but rather the contradictions in the joker than in a joke. This theory is based on the thought that people relieve repressed energy through laughter (McDonald, 2012, p. 64). As can be seen, it is difficult to determine the essence of humour and the main source of laughter, as it can stem from various things and serve many different purposes.

Although humour is such a complex phenomenon and comes in diverse forms, it seems that at least some common linguistic features of humour can be identified. Nash (1985) discusses these in detail and explains how humour often relies on a dual principle or an ambiguity, such as a word or a phrase with two possible meanings (p. 9). They also note that humorous language is somewhat similar to poetic language in that, for instance, rhyme and alliteration are frequently

used in both (Nash, 1985, p. 12). In addition to these general characteristics, Nash (1985) identifies three key features of humorous acts: a generic reference, a characteristic design, and a locus in language (pp. 9-10). The generic reference, or ‘genus’, means that humorous acts often rely on social, historical, and cultural aspects that could be classified as common knowledge. This might be one of the reasons why humour varies among different cultures, as the generic reference suggests that our humour can only make sense to those who share or at least understand our history and way of life (Nash, 1985, pp. 9-10). The second feature, a characteristic design, refers to the specific lexical patterns that, once recognized, immediately make us expect a humorous effect (Nash, 1985, p. 10). One example of such a pattern could be the knock-knock joke (in my own example below, the underlined parts can be substituted as wished):

Joker: Knock-knock.

Respondent: Who’s there?

Joker: The.

Respondent: The who?

Joker: [Starts singing *Won’t get fooled again* by The Who]

As for the locus, or ‘locative’, it refers to “the point at which humour is held and discharged” (Nash, 1985, p. 10). In other words, it is the word or phrase that is the core of the humorous act and crucial for achieving humorous effect, sometimes also referred to as the punch line (Berger, 2018, p. 38; Nash, 1985, pp. 8-10). Of course, even though these three linguistic features are common for most verbal humour, they may manifest themselves differently depending on the type of the humorous utterance (a joke, a pun, parody, irony, etc.). For example, in forms of humour like satire and parody that are based on imitation and subtle mocking, there usually is not just one word or phrase that could be labelled as the locus, but rather every word contributes to the humorous effect (Nash, 1985, pp. 23-24).

The language, or rather languages, of humour could also be approached from the point of view of different genres: verbal, visual, and physical humour (Sover, 2018). Verbal humour is what was mainly discussed in the previous paragraphs, and it refers to humorous utterances expressed through writing and oral communication, such as jokes, puns, witty comments, irony, and riddles (Berger, 2018, 39; Nash, 1985; Sover, 2018, p. 1). Visual humour, on the other hand,

elicits amusement through visual elements, such as illustrations and other images (Sover, 2018, p. 1). One form of visual humour that has been an important tool for political propaganda throughout history is caricature. The humorous effect of caricatures is based on creating a disproportionate image of a certain person, object, or situation through exaggeration and / or oversimplification (Gérin, 2018, pp. 139-140). Caricatures can also be created through physical humour, for instance by mimicking someone's walk or gestures (Bouissac, 2018, p. 230). In general, physical humour is based on such actions, gestures, and interactions that somehow deviate from the norms of accepted and expected social behaviour and therefore surprise us (Bouissac, 2018). This includes behaviour like tumbling on purpose, mocking someone when they are not watching and suddenly altering the gesture when they turn their head, or acting polite but “accidentally” causing misfortune to someone (Bouissac, 2018). One example of this would be pulling a chair for someone but pulling it so far that the other person falls. Slapstick comedy, which is found in the acts of circus clowns, for instance, often relies heavily on physical humour. (Bouissac, 2018). The three languages of humour are not entirely separate, but there are also several forms of humour that combine them, such as cartoons and memes that combine verbal and visual elements (Canestrari, 2018; Chen, 2018).

2.2 Different forms of humour

As already mentioned, humour can take many different forms and can thus be categorized in many ways: it can be written, spoken, or illustrated, it can be in a form of a joke or some kind of word play, it can be either intentional or unintentional, or it can be verbal, visual, or physical, just to name a few possibilities (Martin, 2010; Nash, 1985; Sover, 2018). Therefore, it is challenging to come up with an exhaustive list of all the different forms of humour. Nevertheless, Nash (1985), investigating the language of humour, manages to give quite a comprehensive overview of linguistic (or verbal) humour. They discuss, for example, riddles, different categories of jokes, allusion, parody, play with likelihoods and logics, different forms of puns, and the humorous use of rhymes and frames. Wanzer et al. (2005, p. 116) also include this kind of witty verbal communication and word play in their list of different types of humour, but they also identify other humour categories. These include low humour (such as acting silly or being absurd), nonverbal humour (such as gestures, funny faces, or vocal tones), impersonation, other orientation (for example, humour used to ease someone's negative feelings), expressiveness or general humour (in other words, using humour to increase positive

emotions in general), and funny props (Wanzer et al., 2005, p. 116). Based on these two sources alone, one can already get a preliminary idea of the plethora of different ways to be humorous.

One specific type of humour related language is language play. Like humour itself, language play is difficult to define exhaustively, but broadly this term could be described as a cognitive-linguistic form of play that evokes the feeling of mirth through playful use of contradicting ideas, words, and concepts (Martin, 2010, p. 156). More precisely, it involves play with different levels of language, including linguistic form, semantic meaning, and pragmatic use (Cook, 2000, p. 5). Linguistic features of language play are, for instance, the patterning of forms into rhythms, emphasis on exact wording, and repetition. Semantic features include ambiguous meanings, vital subject-matter, reference to an alternative reality, and inversion of the relation between language and reality. The pragmatic aspect of language play can manifest itself through focus on performance, focus on the interlocutor, play with the language use typical of public and / or intimate conversations, creation of solidarity or oppositions, lack of direct usefulness, conservation or inversion of the social order, and enjoyment (Cook, 2000, pp. 122-123). Not all of these features can be found in every expression of language play, but rather they vary depending on the genre and context in question, and this variability is deemed to be one of the reasons why playful utterances have such a remarkable presence in all domains of life and can be found in very different societies (Cook, 2000, p. 123).

As for the functions of language play, it has been argued that it resembles the play fighting of animals: similarly as play fighting teaches animals skills they will need later when hunting and defending themselves, language play prepares us to use the language in more practical and serious situations (Bateson, 2005; Cook, 2000, p. 153). Therefore, it seems to be an essential part of language acquisition. Moreover, it has been argued that the ability to manipulate language and play with it is a sign of high communicative competence and advanced proficiency (Bell & Pomeranz, 2016, p. 105; Cook, 2000, p. 150). Although language play is not always humorous, it can be used to evoke laughter in the form of jokes, insults, riddles, puns, or inversions (Cook, 2000, pp. 71-86). Of course, understanding language play requires adequate cognitive and linguistic skills, so, for example, very young children might find it confusing (Martin, 2010, p. 156). Based on the abovementioned findings on the ways language play can positively affect language acquisition, it seems reasonable to encourage this kind of behaviour in language learners.

However, neither Nash's, Wanzer et al.'s, or Cook's work is very recent and, as humour constantly evolves alongside language, culture, and technology (Martin, 2010), it can be assumed that the humour one encounters nowadays differs from that of the 80s or early 2000s, at least to some extent. For instance, alongside the emergence of the internet and social media, memes have become a very prominent source of humour in today's online discourse (Hinchman & Chandler-Olcott, 2018, p. 249). Originally, the term 'meme' was developed by Richard Dawkins in the late seventies to describe how cultural ideas are passed from one person to another through imitation (Dawkins, 2016, p. 249) but, in the modern context of the internet, memes have become a particular form of visual humour. Internet memes combine text and images in a humoristic way and often rely on metaphors, aiming to amuse their audience, and they can be circulated, imitated, and reconstructed by anyone on the internet (Mitsiaki, 2020, p. 108; Shifman 2013, p. 367). It has been argued that, in fact, some internet memes act as a modern version of the political cartoons that were more popular during the heyday of print media (Chen, 2018). In a sense, internet memes do circulate cultural ideas as they are shared online, which relates them to the original definition for the word 'meme', but they have developed a strong humoristic element that Dawkins perhaps did not presume. This relatively new form of humour is just one example of how humour, in addition to being tied to culture, is also tied to time and the changes it brings to language as well as technology.

Humour is also tied to time in the sense that the notion of acceptable humour can change with time, and jokes that were deemed funny a decade ago might be labelled as discriminatory or hostile today. Indeed, with the rise of woke and cancel culture during the past decade and the emergence of movements like #MeToo and Black Lives Matter, there have been drastic changes in the conception of what can and cannot be said (Heitzman, 2022; Nieuwenhuis & Zijp, 2022). These movements have brought forth how certain groups of people have been and still are discriminated and ridiculed in societies (such as people of colour, women, and Jews) and it has been acknowledged that using such groups as the target of humour is dangerous, as it downplays their vulnerability and further encourages discrimination against them. The term 'woke' comes from the slang of African American people and was originally related to anti-racist struggles alone, but later the meaning of the term has expanded to include other forms of oppression, such as discrimination based on sexuality or gender (Cammaerts, 2022, pp. 734-735). The idea of this ideology is being aware of the injustices around us, and it promotes a narrative of love overthrowing hate (Cammaerts, 2022, p. 734; Heitzman, 2022, p. 6). Closely tied to the woke ideology, cancel culture refers to the attempt to silence discriminatory opinions in the public

discourse through real consequences (Cammaerts, 2022, p. 737), such as boycotting. In short, it could be stated that the aim of these movements is to draw attention to the hostile attitudes that are still present in our modern society and uproot racist, sexist, and LGBTQ-phobic discourses from public discussion, including humour expressing such attitudes.

What all this means for humour is that it is continuously under elaborate scrutiny and seems to be generally labelled as a possible tool for promoting hostile attitudes. This has been visible in that several series, sitcoms, and movies have quite recently been either edited or completely removed from streaming services due to content that has been deemed racist. For example, the comedy series *League of Gentlemen* was deleted from the streaming service Netflix because it features a black faced character (Heitzman, 2022, pp. 39-40). While it is unarguably true that humour can be and has been used for discriminatory purposes, the woke ideology has sometimes been accused of being “in war” against humour, separating things from their context, and ignoring the way humour can also function to make tough situations seem less serious and help us discuss difficult and sensitive topics (Heitzman, 2022, p. 39).

As a reaction to the woke ideology, an anti-woke discourse has emerged, criticising the woke culture for hampering the freedom of speech and suggesting that expressing racist, sexist, or anti-LGBTQ views is just an opinion among others and, thus, should be tolerated (Cammaerts, 2022, p. 738). However, the woke culture is strongly against tolerating intolerance, which has led to a situation that some have even described as an anti-woke culture war (Cammaerts, 2022). Therefore, there is an ongoing, heated, and polarized debate on the limits of the freedom of speech and what is acceptable and what is not, which also affects the ways one can be humorous in today’s society.

2.3 Humour in the classroom

As discussed in the previous sections, humour is present in all domains of life – also in the classroom. During the past few decades, conceptions of the acceptable language in teaching situations have changed and, instead of treating learning as something relatively serious, teachers have wanted to develop their teaching methods to make learning more fun and enjoyable from the point of view of their students (Martin, 2010). Therefore, there has been a growing tendency to implement humour in the classroom context (Martin, 2010, pp. 349-350). This pedagogical practice has fascinated many researchers, and many studies have been conducted to investigate and establish the role humour plays in education.

2.3.1 Forms of humour in the language classroom

When it comes to the forms of classroom humour, it is very much up to the teacher to decide what kind of humour they apply, as there are no explicit rules on what is appropriate and what is not. However, there are some general, research-based guidelines that can be followed to make sure the effects of the instructional humour are as positive as possible. First, teachers should note that using humour is not an obligatory part of this profession, which is why they should only use it if it feels natural to them and in a way that does not make them uncomfortable (Banas et al., 2011, p. 135). It is also important to use humour that fosters positive feelings about the teacher as well as the students and the whole classroom environment. In other words, teachers should not use humour that is hostile or derogates students based on their behaviour or characteristics or excludes them from a group (Banas et al., 2011, pp. 135-136; Wanzer et al., 2010, pp. 10-11).

Moreover, the audience and the educational context should always be taken into consideration when using humour in the classroom. Regarding the audience, the age of the students is one of the key factors here, as younger children might not completely understand some forms of humour, such as irony or exaggerations, and might therefore find them confusing (Banas et al., 2011, p. 136). As for the educational context, teachers should always consider students' educational needs their priority and only use humour that fits the register of schools, hence avoid discriminatory or sexual jokes, for instance (Banas et al., 2011, p. 136). In addition, as excessive use of humour may undermine the credibility of the teacher, this tool should be used moderately (Banas et al., 2011, p. 136; Gorham & Christophel, 1990).

Although teachers can use humour quite freely in the classroom, many researchers have investigated the more specific types of teacher humour and attempted to find trends among instructors. For example, a study by Weisi and Mohammadi (2023) investigated Iranian EFL teachers' use of humour in a setting of a private language institute. They used observations and interviews and found that jokes and physical humour were the most popular types of humour in the teachers' classes, and they were equally frequent. Riddles and humorous stories were also used frequently, while puns and visual humour were not quite as common (Weisi & Mohammadi, 2023, p. 173). Nevertheless, all these forms of humour could be perceived in the observations of 20 English classes, so humour was used diversely by these teachers.

Another Iranian study (Heidari-Shahreza, 2018) also focused on EFL teachers working in Iranian language institutes and investigated their use of humour in the classroom through an ethnographic approach. They found that visual and physical humour are commonly used by elementary teachers but are not as frequent in higher levels of education (Heidari-Shahreza, 2018, p. 8). Instead, teachers' use of verbal humour that relies on linguistic elements seems to increase when they are faced with more proficient students, and humour takes the form of jokes, riddles, and funny stories increasingly often. The number of funny comments remained consistent in all levels of proficiency. However, the variation among these different forms of humour across different proficiency levels was not statistically significant (Heidari-Shahreza, 2018, pp. 8-9), so no definitive conclusions can be drawn based on these results alone. However, teachers seem to use more diverse forms of humour with more proficient students, as the number of verbal humour techniques employed was significantly higher with more proficient groups (Heidari-Shahreza, 2018, p. 8). Overall, the three most employed humour techniques among the teachers participating in the study were puns, allusion, and irony (Heidari-Shahreza, 2018, p. 8). The popularity of irony showed in this study is especially interesting, since Banas et al. (2011, p. 136) have stated that this kind of humour should be used with caution in the classroom, as children might find it confusing.

All in all, as can be seen, humour seems to be quite a natural part of the modern language classroom context, and teachers use various techniques to include it in their teaching.

2.3.2 Learners' attitudes towards classroom humour

One aspect that supports the use of humour in the language classroom is that, according to previous studies, learners seem to appreciate humorous teachers and humorous tasks. For instance, in a Turkish study by Gonulal (2018) on the potential of humour in EFL teaching, college level students' attitudes towards the use of humour in the English classroom were immensely positive and they deemed it very useful for both the classroom atmosphere and their learning. Similar results were gained by another Turkish study (Kayali & Altuntaş, 2021) on the use of memes in vocabulary teaching in the College of Foreign Languages: in the feedback section, students expressed positive attitudes towards learning vocabulary through creating memes and stated that it was more efficient than using traditional learning methods. In addition, they reported that this humorous task made learning more fun, enjoyable, and interesting (Kayali & Altuntaş, 2021, p. 158). It seems, then, that students are open to the use of humour

in the classroom and appreciate this style of teaching due to its benefits on their learning as well as its effects on the classroom atmosphere.

However, Bryant et al. (1980) have suggested that students might have different attitudes towards instructional humour based on the gender of their teacher. Based on tape-recordings and evaluations by students attending a variety of undergraduate courses, this American study states that male teachers that used humour frequently usually obtained higher evaluations from their students while female teachers that were humorous tended to receive lower scores. Curiously, though, teachers of both genders, and female teachers especially, seemed to benefit from hostile and aggressive humour which, according to the researchers, might be due to the sense of authority it creates (Bryant et al., 1980, pp. 517-518). While this is an interesting finding, it must be noted that the study is over forty years old, so the differences might be caused by the stricter conceptions of masculinity and femininity of that time, and the results might thus be outdated. Indeed, the researchers explain these results by the masculine dominance in the world of comedy in the 80s and the restrained female stereotype of the time (Bryant et al., 1980, p. 518). This assumption is supported by the findings of Nienaber et al. (2019), an American survey study that also targeted undergraduate students and investigated the relationship between teacher humour and teacher gender, and how these factors influence student engagement. They found that only the type of humour teachers used influenced students' level of engagement while teacher gender seemed to play no role in this (Nienaber et al., 2019, pp. 56-57). However, recent studies on this topic are quite scarce. In addition, it should be noted that the results of both aforementioned studies are based on the assumption that there are only two genders, the masculine and the feminine, thus ignoring all people outside this gender binary. Therefore, more recent studies should be conducted to determine whether gender, in its modern sense, truly affects students' attitudes.

To be efficient, the humour used in the language classroom should be pleasant to learners. However, teachers might not always know what kind of humour to use and what kind of humour to avoid. A study by Neff and Dewaele (2023) provides useful information regarding this point, as they have researched foreign language learners' opinions on eight different forms of classroom humour (cartoons, props, faces, voices, memes, puns, spontaneous, and role play) and the possible factors causing these opinions. The target group of the study mainly consisted of UK or EU citizens, but there were also participants from Eastern Europe, Asia, North America, South / Central America, and Oceania, and they were of different ages and had different proficiency levels (Neff & Dewaele, 2023, p. 572). This study reveals that the most

appreciated form of humour amongst learners seems to be spontaneous comments by the teacher, suggesting that humour should not be the main focus of instruction but rather an auxiliary. Learners also seem to appreciate visual humour (cartoons and memes) as well as role play, while faces and props are deemed less desirable (Neff & Dewaele, 2023, pp. 575-576). Of course, it must be noted that, as the researchers themselves mention, the list of different humour types used in the study is not exhaustive, meaning that there might also be other forms of humour that are significantly popular or unpopular among students. Nevertheless, the study provides concrete examples of the humour appreciated and not appreciated by learners, which can help teachers reflect on and improve their teaching.

As for the factors affecting students' attitudes towards different forms of humour, four variables were identified and investigated: foreign language proficiency, foreign language enjoyment (FLE), perceptions of humour in the language classroom, and frequency of teacher-initiated humour (Neff & Dewaele, 2023, p. 571). Of these, the *perceptions of humour in the language classroom* -factor was the most prominent, as it showed significant correlation with all forms of humour in the study. This means that general appreciation of humour in the language learning seems to be related to the appreciation of various forms of humour in the language classroom as well. The second most important factor was FLE, which correlated with cartoons, puns, role play, and spontaneous comments. The researchers theorized that this might be due to the fact that especially cartoons, puns, and role play require explicit linguistic knowledge to understand the humour or take part in it, so being engaged in this kind of humour demands motivation from the learners' part. The last two factors, foreign language proficiency and frequency of teacher humour, only correlated with one type of humour each: foreign language proficiency with role play and the frequency factor with props. According to the researchers, the correlation between proficiency and role play might stem from the amount of participation this type of humour demands from the learners' part (Neff & Dewaele, 2023, p. 576).

These different factors behind students' attitudes might, to some extent, explain why a certain form of humour may be popular in one group but have no effect in another. Based on the findings, it would, for example, seem likely that puns are more popular in groups that enjoy studying the language than in groups that are less motivated. However, it must be noted that the aforementioned study only investigated correlations between different factors, and no causal connections can be confirmed.

2.3.3 Learner-initiated humour

In addition, teachers should keep in mind that the classroom humour that benefits language learning does not always have to come from them, but learner-initiated humour can also serve this purpose. A recent study by Gheitasi (2022) reports how young children (aged from 9 to 11) in a private language institute in Iran were observed to be spontaneously engaged in linguistic, semantic, and pragmatic language play in the classroom and discusses how this enhanced their language learning. Common forms of language play were sound play (such as exaggerating sounds), word switching, and role play, to name a few examples. According to Gheitasi (2022), language play has at least three distinctive positive effects on language acquisition: it fosters focus on form, helps learners develop their sociolinguistic competence, and promotes a supportive classroom atmosphere that invites participation. The teacher's role in these learner-initiated humorous instances is to facilitate it, and Gheitasi (2022) argues that language teachers should be educated on the benefits of language play and the ways they could orchestrate, foster, and encourage it in their classroom. In addition, humour initiated by the students can abrupt tedious, teacher-lead activities and add an element of surprise to the language classroom (Bell & Pomerantz, 2016, p. 119). Therefore, it might be beneficial for learners if the teacher let go of some of the control in the classroom and let students play freely with the language in between structured activities.

Of course, not all humorous comments by students enhance learning, and some of them might even be disruptive. It has been found that students often express humour through exclamations referring to self-directed expressions of success, failure, frustration, or other emotions, and byplay, which grasps comments on the ongoing interaction that are not meant to be heard by the person speaking, who in the classroom context is often the teacher (Norrick & Klein, 2008, p. 87). However, these two forms of student humour rarely disrupt normal classroom interaction, as they are not addressed to the speaker (Norrick & Klein, 2008, pp. 87-90). Students' humour is disruptive especially when it breaks the I-R-F (teacher Initiation – student Response – teacher Feedback) pattern that seems to be typical of the classroom context (Norrick & Klein, 2008, p. 91). This kind of behaviour is often characteristic of the so-called “class clowns”, who keep throwing humorous comments around in the classroom, mocking the teacher, and giving cheeky answers despite reprimands from the teacher (Norrick & Klein, 2008, p. 85). It has been theorized that these students use humour to construct a certain classroom identity that makes them stand out from the group and separates them from the quiet pupils and the “teacher's pets” (Norrick & Klein, 2008, p. 102). So, while students' humour is

not always beneficial for learning per se and might even interrupt classroom interaction, it seems that humour can serve as a tool for identity creation and, therefore, help students find their place in the group.

2.4 The functions of humour in the language classroom

Probably one of the best-known benefits of using humour in the classroom is its positive effect on the classroom atmosphere. Studies have shown that classroom humour can, for example, decrease anxiety (Berk & Nanda, 1998, p. 402; Gonulal, 2018, p. 156), and make the classroom a more joyful, agreeable, and encouraging environment (Weisi & Muhammadi, 2023, p. 179). Indeed, Gonulal (2018) found that students think the use of humour in the language classroom serves to make the atmosphere more relaxed and can increase the level of immediacy between the teacher and the students by making the teacher seem more approachable and likable. The study also suggests that, because of these effects, humour can increase participation and risk-taking from the students' part (Gonulal, 2018, pp. 155-156). Other researchers have also stated that one of the underlying reasons why humour is valuable in the classroom is its ability to increase immediacy (Martin, 2010, p. 353). In light of these results, it can be stated that humour has the potential to make the learning environment less threatening. Therefore, using humour in teaching might prove especially beneficial when treating topics that often cause anxiety in students, such as pronunciation (Lintunen & Mäkilähde, 2015).

In addition, students in Gonulal's study (2018) stated that humour, if used efficiently, can boost their attention, make their attitudes towards the subject matter more positive, and help them understand and memorize the classroom materials. It seems that students are not the only ones who have noticed this effect, as teachers have also reported humour having positive effects on students' concentration, interest, enjoyment, and motivation (Heidari-Shahreza, 2018, p. 11; Weisi & Muhammadi, 2023, p. 179). Teachers have also noticed that humour can be used to "wake up" students if they seem tired and direct their attention back to the subject matter in a subtle and positive manner (Weisi & Muhammadi, 2023, pp. 175-176). So, in addition to improving the learning atmosphere, it seems that humour can increase students' attentiveness and motivation.

Moreover, humour does not just help create an encouraging atmosphere in the classroom and improve learners' attitudes, but it appears to be beneficial for memorizing course content as well. Wanzer et al. (2010) have come up with the Instructional Humour Processing Theory

(IHPT) to explain the positive and negative effects that humour can have in the classroom context through exploration of the affective and cognitive processing of humorous content. First, students must recognize the teacher's humorous attempt for it to have any kind of effect on their learning (Wanzer et al., 2010, pp. 6-7). This brings us back to the abovementioned finding that classroom humour should always be carefully targeted at its audience, or in other words, the students (Banas et al., 2011, p. 136). Then, according to the IHPT, it is the nature of the humour used and the way it is interpreted that define whether it has a positive or a negative effect on students' learning (Wanzer et al, 2010, p. 6). Based on the study by Wanzer et al. (2010, pp. 10-11), it seems that only appropriate humour that is related to the topic has a positive effect on students' learning and retention. Conversely, unrelated appropriate humour and inappropriate humour, such as offensive and other-disparaging humour, either has a negative or no effect on the processing of the course content and, therefore, does not enhance learning (Wanzer et al, 2010, pp. 10-11). They explain that appropriate humour is likely to stir up positive emotions that encourage elaboration and motivate learners to process the content of the humorous message (Wanzer et al., 2010, p. 7), which is why appropriate related humour is the most efficient way to use this tool in teaching. Thus, it seems that humour, if used correctly, can support the processing of course content through positive affect and, by doing so, enhance learning.

This seems to be true in the more specific context of language learning as well: many researchers have investigated this phenomenon and obtained results that encourage the use of humour in the language classroom and provide implications on its efficient use. For instance, Cook (2000, pp. 169-170) describes how people tend to pay more attention to weird and unconventional uses of language and how such utterances seem to be remembered more efficiently than neutral examples derived from everyday life. Therefore, they argue that the meanings of the language examples used in teaching should be bizarre in order to be memorable to learners and efficient for learning (Cook, 2000, pp. 169-170). This idea is supported by an empirical study (Schmidt & Williams, 2001), where participants were presented with three versions (original / humorous, literal, and weird) of 24 cartoons and, without being informed about the memory test beforehand, they were asked to recall these cartoons. The results reveal that humorous cartoons were recalled significantly better, and humour seemed to enhance the participants' memory. According to the researchers, this strongly points out the mnemonical benefits of humour (Schmidt & Williams, 2001).

In addition, another study investigating the effects of a meme creating task on vocabulary learning found that students performed better in the post-test than in the pre-test (Kayali & Altuntaş, 2021). Thus, the task of coming up with a meme using an assigned set of words seemed to enhance the learning of these words. Students' answers to the feedback form also reflected the positive effects that memes had on remembering the words (Kayali & Altuntaş, 2021). Of course, it must be noted that it cannot be differentiated here to what extent the better scores were due to the use of humour alone and not due to other factors, such as student engagement with the words. Nevertheless, humour seems to have the potential to help learners acquire and remember new utterances efficiently.

However, using humour in the classroom is not always straightforward, and studies on the benefits of classroom humour are inconsistent: while some researchers consider humour a helpful teaching tool, others deem it useless or even detrimental in the classroom context. Contradicting with the findings presented above, an American study by Bolkan et al. (2018) found that students exposed to humorous instead of serious examples in university level communication classes scored lower on tests of the concepts in question. According to the researchers, humour might have distracted the students and made them too relaxed and therefore less prone to analytical thinking. There are also some findings suggesting that, if used extensively, humour can have negative effects on classroom management and students' motivation (Gonulal, 2018; Heidari-Shahreza, 2018, p. 11). Some teachers have also been concerned about the way humour can take up valuable class time, undermine teacher's authority, cause cultural misunderstandings, and increase the use of L1 in the classroom (Heidari-Shahreza, 2018, p. 11). Moreover, the humour used should be related to the essential, language-related content of the lesson to be beneficial for learning, as the humorous content is often remembered on the expense of other, non-humorous content (Martin, 2010, p. 356). In other words, if the teacher only jokes about irrelevant things, it can distract students and might result in students not learning the main content of the lesson. In light of these results, it can be stated that the positive effects of humour in the classroom are not self-evident, so teachers should not consider this tool a magic fix that automatically improves learning outcomes. Instead, they should reflect on their own use of humour in the classroom and its possible effects on learning critically.

In addition to the quantity and context of the humour used, teachers should also pay attention to the quality and type of the humour they employ. Indeed, it has been found that the kind of humour the teacher uses matters when considering its effects and whether it is beneficial for

learning or not (Bell & Pomerantz, 2016, p. 101). First, it is important that the humour used is appropriate considering the target group, relates to the topic, and does not offend anyone (Gonulal, 2018). This is supported by the IHPT which suggests that the use of offensive and other-disparaging humour does not benefit students' information processing and therefore does not enhance language learning (Wanzer et. al., 2010, p. 14). However, studies have shown that teachers still use such aggressive and tendentious humour from time to time, like picking on students to discipline them, despite its negative effects on the classroom atmosphere and students' attitudes towards them as teachers (Gorham & Christophel, 1990, p. 58; Martin, 2010, p. 358; St-Amand et al., 2023). It seems important, then, for teachers to be aware of the potential downfalls of humour in order to utilize it efficiently in their teaching.

2.5 Finnish classroom humour

There are also some studies that investigate classroom humour in the Finnish context (e.g., Anttila, 2008; Haapaniemi, 2011; Paajoki 2014; Roininen 2010; Saharinen, 2007). As humour varies across different cultures (Martin, 2010), it could be assumed that the humour found in Finnish classrooms has its own peculiar features compared to classrooms in other countries. In their dissertation, Anttila (2008) discusses lower and upper secondary school students' conceptions of humour and their experiences on teachers' humour. They report finding that students mostly understand and define humour through its different forms and identify it as a mainly social phenomenon (Anttila, 2008, p. 118). Students in Anttila's (2008) study had almost an equal number of experiences of both positive and negative humour: they reported that positive humour increased immediacy between the teacher and the students, cheered students up, improved the classroom atmosphere, and enhanced learning, while negative humour was described as insulting, embarrassing, and discouraging (pp. 133-134). Negative humour was reported to mainly target individual students and their mistakes (Anttila, 2008, p. 204), whereas positive humour was not directly addressed to anyone but rather aimed at making everybody laugh (Anttila, 2008, p. 133). The topic of positive humour was most commonly teachers' stories of their own life, and most of it was not related to the subject or topic in question (Anttila, 2008, p. 203). In addition, it seems that male teachers use more humour than female teachers, at least according to the students participating in Anttila's study (2008, p. 203). This dissertation provides a good, general description of humour found in Finnish lower and upper secondary schools, seen from the students' point of view.

In addition, Saharinen (2007) studied how teachers use a specific form of humour, teasing, as a way to react to students' mistakes. They observed a Finnish upper secondary school teacher of Finnish and found that the teacher frequently used teasing to react to situations where students broke classroom norms, joked about the topic in question, expressed uncertainty, or made a careless error (Saharinen, 2007, p. 286). Saharinen (2007) also states that teasing was used to undermine hierarchical structures in the classroom and built a comradely relationship between the teacher and the students, even though the teacher remained the leader of the class throughout the lessons (p. 287). All in all, benevolent teasing was found to improve classroom atmosphere and, based on the observations, was deemed a successful pedagogical tool by the researcher (p. 287).

While there are some Finnish studies like the ones by Anttila (2008) and Saharinen (2007) that aim at explaining the use of humour in Finnish classrooms, it seems that there is not much research on this topic in this context. In addition, neither of the aforementioned studies is very recent and, as humour changes with time, their findings might be somewhat outdated. There are some more recent studies (e.g., Haapaniemi, 2011; Paajoki 2014; Roininen 2010), but these are mainly theses that are quite narrow. Therefore, more research on this topic would be needed to provide a comprehensive and topical overview of Finnish classroom humour.

3 THE PRESENT STUDY

In this section, I discuss the purpose of this study and present the questions it attempts to answer. Furthermore, I present the data used and explain how it was collected and analysed.

3.1 Aims and research questions

As discussed in the literature review, humour can be beneficial for learning in many ways. Many studies have confirmed that humour can help make the classroom atmosphere more relaxed, positive, and encouraging (Gonulal, 2018, pp. 155-156; Martin, 2010, p. 350; Weisi & Muhammadi, 2023, p. 179) by decreasing anxiety (Berk & Nanda, 1998, p. 402) while also having positive effects on learners' attitudes and motivation (Martin, 2010, p. 353; Weisi & Muhammadi, 2023, p. 179). Moreover, some researchers have found connections between the use of humour and increased retention of learnt language content, suggesting that humour might also serve as an efficient mnemonic device (Cook, 2000, pp. 169-170; Kayali & Altuntaş, 2021; Schmidt & Williams, 2001). However, there has not been much research on the specific humour techniques that seem to benefit language learning according to teachers, at least in the Finnish context, which is why the present study sets out to study this issue. Indeed, as humour is culture-based (Martin, 2010), it seems relevant to investigate this phenomenon in the Finnish context that has received little attention in earlier research.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate the use of humour in Finnish EFL classrooms and teachers' conceptions of this practice, focusing on the point of view of language learning. By doing this, I aim at providing concrete suggestions on how humour could be used efficiently in teaching. To achieve this goal, the two research questions below were formulated. In the present study, efficient humour is understood as humour that supports and enhances language learning, and the term *Finnish EFL teacher* refers to someone teaching in the Finnish education system.

1. What kind of humour do Finnish EFL teachers report using in their teaching and for what purposes?
2. What kind of humour enhances language learning according to Finnish EFL teachers?

3.2 Data and data collection

The data used in this study consists of the questionnaire answers of 59 Finnish EFL teachers as well as semi-structured interviews with two of them. The data was collected between the 16th of January and the 8th of February in 2024. The participants were recruited via Facebook: a link to the electronic questionnaire (Appendix 1) was shared in a Facebook group of 4,800 members intended for Finnish EFL teachers (*Englannin opettajat*) and emailed to the association of Finnish EFL teachers (*Suomen englanninopettajat ry*), who also published it on their Facebook page. The questionnaire consisted of four short sections: the first two sections focused on the different forms of teacher humour and the participants' reasonings for their practices, while the latter two sections concerned the participants' views on efficient classroom humour. The interview (Appendix 2) mainly followed the structure of the questionnaire but included more precise questions that were meant to complement the questionnaire data. The language of both the questionnaire and the interview was Finnish because I assumed that this would be the mother tongue of most respondents and hoped that answering the questionnaire in this language would make it comfortable and effortless. Moreover, Finnish is also my first language, which is why I thought this could prevent misunderstandings from my part. The interviews were conducted while still collecting survey answers.

Due to the methods chosen, the gained data is mainly qualitative but includes some quantitative elements as well, as the questionnaire consisted of both closed-ended and open-ended questions. Since the present study does not aim at eliciting widely generalizable results but rather at understanding teachers' views and practices related to the topic, a qualitative research design was deemed suitable.

Questionnaire was chosen as the main method of data collection because it is a versatile tool and suitable for obtaining both factual and attitudinal as well as behavioural information (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2010, p. 5), such as teachers' conceptions of the use of humour in the language classroom. One of the biggest advantages of a questionnaire is its efficiency: it is easy to administer and can reach a wide range of people in a very short period of time (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2010, p. 6; Mligo, 2016, p. 54). In addition, this data collection method is adaptable and can be successfully used to target different groups of people and different topics (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2010, p. 6). As opposed to interviews, questionnaires provide higher level of anonymity and are less prone to the effect of researcher bias, as the researcher is not usually present when the participants answer the questions (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2010, p. 6; Mligo,

2016, p. 54). Considering the target group of teachers, it was also deemed beneficial that the teachers were able to fill in the questionnaire whenever it suited them.

Nevertheless, there are also some disadvantages in using questionnaires. First, as this method is familiar to most people, it might seem simple to construct a successful questionnaire when, in fact, this requires a lot of effort (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2010, p. 1). As already mentioned, the researcher is not present when respondents answer the questions, which means that the questions need to be simple and clear enough not to cause any confusion, as misunderstandings cannot be corrected on the spot. This often results in quite superficial data, which is why it is difficult to get a profound image of a phenomenon by just using questionnaires (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2010, p. 7; Gillham, 2008, as cited in Mligo, 2016, p. 54). The reliability of questionnaire answers can also be questioned, as it is impossible to make sure that respondents have answered the questions truthfully and they may have modified their answers according to what they deem would be socially desirable (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2010, pp. 7-8). Moreover, motivating participants might also prove challenging (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2010, p. 7). Taking these disadvantages into account, I piloted the questionnaire beforehand with my peers in January and revised it based on the feedback, and the dataset was complemented with semi-structured interviews with two of the participants.

At the end of the questionnaire, there was a space where participants willing to take part in an interview could leave their email address. In total, there were nine volunteers for this, and the interviewees were chosen randomly among them. Unfortunately, all the volunteers could not be interviewed, as this would have resulted in too extensive a dataset for an MA thesis. As a research method, interviews resemble conversations but are particular in the sense that they have been planned beforehand and the participants have clear roles: the interviewer who mainly asks the questions and the interviewee(s) who answer them (Mligo, 2016, pp. 50-51). Interviews are most often used to collect qualitative data, and they can be divided into three categories based on their structure: structured, semi-structured, and unstructured (Brinkmann, 2013, pp. 18-21; Galletta & Cross, 2013).

The interviews in the present study were semi-structured. In semi-structured interviews, there is a core agenda, and the same questions are presented to all interviewees, but there is also room for changes in the order, follow-up questions, and elaboration (Brinkmann, 2013, p. 21; Galletta & Cross, 2013, pp. 1-2). One essential procedure from the interviewer's part is to reformulate the interviewee's answers to make sure they have been understood correctly and to allow the interviewee to explain things further (Galletta & Cross, 2013, pp. 75-78). One factor that must

be considered when conducting interviews, however, is the interviewer bias, or in other words the interviewer's impact on the interviewee's answers (Galletta & Cross, 2013, pp. 104-117). This in mind, I strived to make the questions as neutral as possible and, during the interview, avoided interrupting the interviewee and let them speak freely.

Regarding the ethical aspects of data collection, all participants were presented with a privacy notice containing information on the use of their answers, and they were informed about the purpose and the aims of the study. In addition, it was made clear that participation was completely anonymous and voluntary, and the questionnaire participants were asked to confirm their consent. The participants were also told that they could quit the questionnaire at any point and their answers would not be saved unless they clicked the "submit" ("lähetä") button at the end. As for the interview, leaving an email address on the questionnaire was completely voluntary as well, and this personal information was not connected to the participants' questionnaire answers at any point, as was promised to them. The two interviewees were randomly chosen among nine volunteers and their consent was confirmed once more before the interview. They were also informed that they could refuse to answer any questions they were uncomfortable with, interrupt the interview (in which case their answers would not be used in the study), or withdraw their answers at any point before the study was completed. The interviews took place in Zoom and were videorecorded but, after the discussions had been transcribed, the video and audio files were deleted permanently. To protect the interviewees' privacy, they were given pseudonyms and all recognizable information was either deleted or replaced. The data was stored safely and protected with a username and a password, and only the researcher (me) was able to access it.

3.3 Participants

The participants of the present study are EFL teachers working in Finland. This target group was chosen because this issue has not been studied much in the Finnish context. Participation was completely voluntary and, in the end, 59 teachers chose to take part in the questionnaire part of the study. A vast majority of the participants identified themselves as females (55), the rest of the respondents (4) identified themselves as males.

The participants mainly had teaching experience from elementary school (47.5%), lower secondary school (66.1%), and upper secondary school (37.3%), but some of them also reported teaching or having taught English in vocational school (10.2%), polytechnic (8.5%), and /or

university (1.7%). Therefore, all levels of education (primary, secondary, and tertiary) were covered. In addition, some teachers mentioned teaching or having taught English in a community college and / or as a private teacher. In addition to the type of experience, there were differences in the amount of experience the participants reported having, ranging from less than one year to over twenty years. Thus, except for the one-sided gender distribution of the respondents, the sample of the study seems to include teachers quite comprehensively, with diverse career paths and teaching experiences.

Two of the questionnaire respondents, Inka and Annika (pseudonyms), were also interviewed. Inka had nearly seven years of experience in working as an English teacher, and they had been working in the same school the whole time. Inka had taught lower secondary school students for the most part but also had some experience from elementary school. In addition, they had taught some English courses with students with special needs integrated in the group. Annika, on the other hand, had started working as an English teacher full time in 2007, but had also worked as a classroom teacher for a couple of years in between. However, they had already worked as a teacher before this, alongside their studies. Annika reported having approximately 11 years of experience from lower secondary school and upper secondary school, but told that, all in all, they had taught different learners ranging from small children to adults and had also worked in liberal adult education.

3.4 Method of analysis

Data-driven qualitative content analysis was chosen as the main method of analysis, as the focus of the present study was on the *content* of the teachers' answers (their views and experiences) and this method is suitable for analysing such information (Tuomi & Sarajarvi, 2018). Of course, this method was only used for the open-ended questions of the questionnaire and the interview data, while the answers to all closed-ended questions were analysed quantitatively, with regard to descriptive statistics. While qualitative content analysis is good in that it allows the researcher to analyse the data quite freely and develop new ideas, it also requires the researcher to act as an interpreter, which is why the results obtained through this method cannot be treated as purely objective, as the attitudes and opinions of the researcher always affect their interpretation to some extent (Willig, 2012, p. 45). Thus, even though I tried to remain impartial when analysing the data, my views have most likely had an effect on my interpretations, which should be taken into consideration when reading the results of the present study. Nevertheless,

this method was deemed the most suitable for analysing the collected data, as it allowed me to identify the most prominent characteristics of efficient classroom humour in the participants' answers and create connections between different aspects of it.

When going through the questionnaire answers and the transcribed interviews, I followed the general structure of data-driven content analysis presented by Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2018, section 4.4.3). I read the data carefully, tried to identify frequent themes that could be relevant regarding my research questions by searching for certain key words, listed these themes, and categorized the answers to form an overall image. The participants' answers to Questions 4-10 of the questionnaire provided essential information regarding the first research question, while Questions 11-16 focused on the topic of the second research question. The interview data was used to support and complement the analysis. By using colour coding, I grouped similar statements together in order to compare the frequencies of different views or themes and to create categories. When grouping and categorizing data, it is important to make sure that there is a sufficient number of categories to describe the phenomenon exhaustively and that there is enough homogeneity within and heterogeneity between the categories (Chenail, 2008, p. 74). This was taken into consideration, and I strived to create enough categories to cover all essential aspects and group the data logically, so that there would not be findings that could be put into multiple categories.

To answer the first research question on the kinds of humour Finnish EFL teachers report using, I compared the participants' answers to Questions 4-10 of the questionnaire and aspired to form an overall review of different humour techniques. After this, I focused especially on the answers given in Question 7 of the questionnaire and the corresponding questions in the interview. Based on the answers, the reasons for using humour in teaching were grouped into five categories: (1) creating a positive and relaxed classroom atmosphere, (2) coping with the profession, (3) increasing students' motivation and interest, (4) enhancing memorization, and (5) connecting better with the students. As for the second research question regarding efficient use of classroom humour, data derived from the interview and Questions 11-16 of the questionnaire was coded and, by doing this, I tried to identify the main characteristics of efficient teacher humour. Especially the teachers' answers to Question 13 (*What kind of humour do you find the most useful considering language learning?*) and the interviewees' tips guided this process.

4 ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, I present and analyse the findings of the present study and discuss them in relation to previous research. By doing this, I attempt to answer the research questions posed above. In sections 4.1 and 4.2, I discuss findings related to the first research question, while section 4.3 focuses on findings that are relevant regarding the second research question. The questionnaire and interview answers are discussed concurrently with regard to each topic.

4.1 Characteristics of humour used by Finnish EFL teachers

Overall, Finnish EFL teachers seem to use humour quite frequently in their teaching. When asked to finish the sentence “*I use humour in my teaching...*” (Question 6), 35% of the participants reported using humour all the time, 44% often, 19% occasionally, and 2% rarely. None of the teachers chose the option *hardly ever*, which seems to imply that humour is indeed quite a prominent part of many language classes in Finland. This supports Martin’s (2010, pp. 349-350) observation of the changed nature of teaching situations and the increase of humour in the context of education. Teachers also seem to recognize the benefits of classroom humour: in Question 11, 90% of the participants completely disagreed and 8% disagreed with the statement “*Using humour in teaching does not benefit language learning in any way*”.

Regarding the language in which humour is expressed in the classroom (Question 8), the teachers’ answers were a little mixed. Approximately half of the respondents (48%) reported expressing humour equally in Finnish and in English, while 32% applied humour mainly in English and 20% mainly in Finnish. In other words, it seems that no language is notably favoured over the other, but English is used slightly more often as the language of humorous attempts. This could be seen as reassuring considering that, according to Heidari-Shahreza (2018, p. 11), teachers have been concerned about humour increasing the use of L1 in the language classroom. In the Finnish EFL teaching context, the target language English is more often used as the language of humour, and it seems logical to assume that this would encourage the use of the target language in the classroom rather than decrease it.

Using the target language when expressing humour is also good in that it has the potential to include everyone, which is important for the successfulness of classroom humour (Banas et al., 2011, pp. 135-136). As classrooms are becoming increasingly multilingual in Finland, the

students and the teacher might not all share the same first language. Therefore, a joke told in the teacher's first language might only reach a part of the group, leaving some students feeling excluded. Of course, due to different skill levels, it cannot be guaranteed that the whole group would understand a joke told in the target language either, but at least they would have a more equal possibility to do so.

The participants were also asked about the ways in which they apply humour in their teaching, and their answers can be seen in Figure 1. As can be noted, the five most popular options were *spontaneous humorous comments*, *funny or weird example sentences*, *puns*, *games*, and *memes*, respectively, while *props* and *silly rhymes* were the least frequent answers.

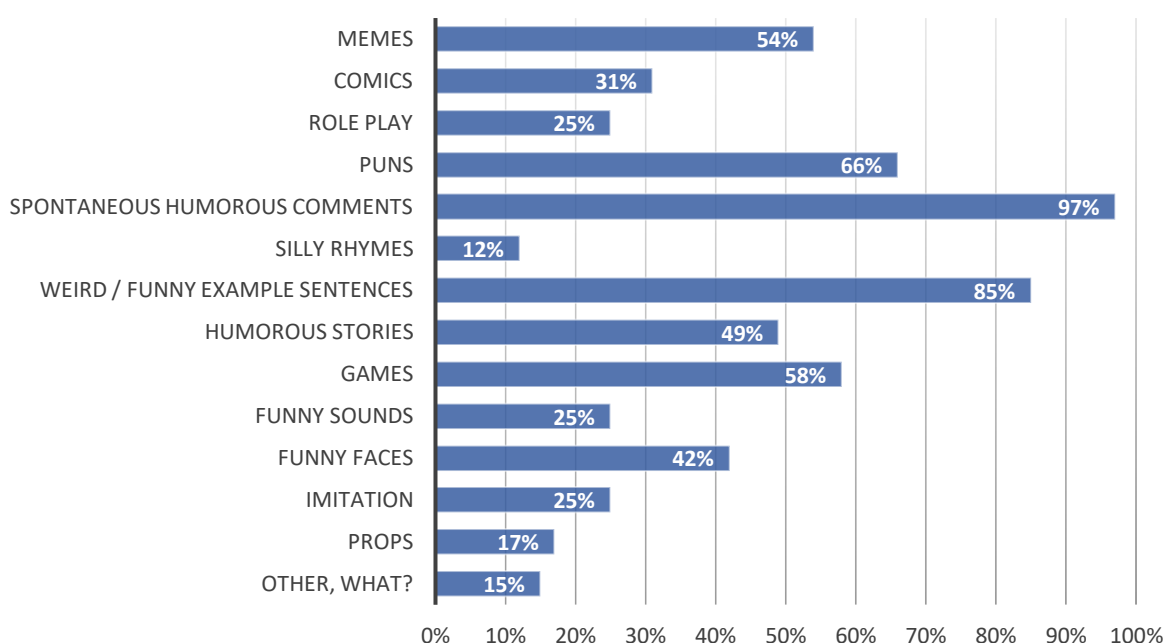


Figure 1: Finnish EFL teachers' (n=59) answers to Question 4: Through what means do you integrate humour in your teaching? (You can choose multiple options.)

The popularity of spontaneous humorous comments is in line with previous research: according to Heidari-Shahreza (2018, pp. 8-9), the forms of teacher humour vary slightly depending on the proficiency level of the students, but humorous comments are commonly used on all levels of education. Previous research has also shown that this form of humour is highly appreciated by learners (Neff & Dewaele, 2023, pp. 575-576). The popularity of memes and especially puns is a little more surprising, since they have not been among the most common forms of teacher humour in previous research (Weisi & Mohammadi, 2023, p. 173), even though at least memes seem to be appreciated by students (Neff & Dewaele, 2023, pp. 575-576). This could be due to

the different cultural contexts in which these studies have been conducted, but this is only an assumption. It must also be noted that the list of different humour techniques provided in the questionnaire is by no means comprehensive, which may have had an effect on the results.

The teachers were also asked to explain why they integrate humour in their teaching through the specific means they reported using (Question 4). Here, the most prominent answer was that they feel the most comfortable with these techniques and that using them feels natural to them and suits their personality. Over half of the participants (57.6%) mentioned this as one of the factors guiding their choices. Hence, the participants seem to follow Banas et al.'s (2011, p. 135) guidelines on that teachers should only use humour in a way it feels natural to them instead of forcing it, as it is not obligatory in teaching. This is perhaps also reflected in the popularity of certain humour forms: some participants explained that the possibilities to use humour in the classroom often arise quite spontaneously, which is why techniques that do not require planning beforehand, such as spontaneous comments, funny faces and sounds, and funny example sentences, are more common and feel more natural in teaching situations. Indeed, a couple of teachers even stated that they hardly ever plan their use of humour beforehand.

In the interview, Inka and Annika were also asked about this, and they stated that their humour is often quite spontaneous and stems from situations that happen to arise in the classroom but, if they have come up with a great story or a successful joke once, they use it year after year. Annika, for instance, mentioned that they always like to tell stories about their own language mishaps to help students memorize certain things and show that even teachers make mistakes sometimes (Extract 1).

(1) Aika spontaania. Et toki mul on muutamia tosi hauskoja anekdootteja [--] ja omista kielimokista siis matkoilla. Täähän on ihan ihan aika kiva et opiskelijat kuulee et joo et kyl mäkin oon mokannu, että mä oon jossain niinku kahvilassa tilannu breadiä sandwichin sijaan [--] ja ihmettelen että kun kukaan ei kadulla anna mulle tietä kun mä sanon "sorry, sorry" enkä "excuse me" niin ehkä tämmöset jää niinku mieleen.

Quite spontaneous. Of course, I have some pretty funny anecdotes [--] and about my own language mishaps when like traveling. And this is quite nice that students hear that yes, I have made mistakes, too, that I have ordered bread instead of a sandwich like in a café [--] and wonder why no one gives way when I say "sorry, sorry" and not "excuse me" so maybe these stick in the students' minds.

In the questionnaire, other frequent reasons for choosing specific techniques were their accessibility, popularity among students, suitability for the target group, and ability to draw students' attention to a certain class topic. Some teachers reported using games, stories, and

rhymes that they can readily find in textbooks, as this makes it easy to include them in their teaching. As for the popularity of different techniques, spontaneous comments and fun games were mentioned as generally appreciated by students, but some participants also explained that they use different techniques depending on the age of the learners. They mentioned that elementary school students often appreciate rhymes, games, and funny faces and gestures more than older learners, who are more likely to enjoy funny comments, videos, and stories. This seems to be in line with previous research stating that physical humour is more common in elementary schools while verbal humour is favoured when teaching older and more proficient students (Heidari-Shahreza, 2018, p. 8). However, this view was not shared by all the teachers participating in the present study, and, for example, the interviewees Inka and Annika both stated that their use of humour is not strongly affected by the age of the learners per se but rather the group and its dynamic. As for the ability to focus on a specific language topic, this seemed to be an especially prominent reason for using memes, funny example sentences, and puns. Memes were also mentioned as a good way to bring both authentic English and “the students’ world” into the classroom, and help students learn how to analyse these texts that many of them frequently encounter in their everyday life.

All in all, Finnish EFL teachers seem to use diverse means to integrate humour in their teaching. Even though some of the options (especially spontaneous humorous comments, funny example sentences, games, puns, and memes) were significantly more popular than others, all of them were chosen by at least seven teachers (see Figure 1). The participants were also offered the option *other; what*, which was chosen by nine teachers. They introduced even more ways to bring humour into the classroom, including videos, funny illustrations, pantomime, series, students’ comments and stories, funny websites, and spontaneous situation comedy. In addition, all the three languages of humour, verbal, visual, and physical (Sover, 2018), seem to be present in Finnish language classrooms, although verbal humour appears to be favoured over the other two. This is visible in the popularity of spontaneous humorous comments, funny or weird example sentences, and puns, for instance. Nevertheless, it can be stated that the teacher humour in Finnish language classrooms takes many different forms, which reflects the multiplicity of this phenomenon.

Question 9 of the questionnaire focused on the topics of teacher humour, and the participants were asked to rank the presented topics (the topic you are teaching, you and your actions, social norms, students, colleagues, a certain social group, other) on a scale from 1 to 7 based on how

often they are the target of their humour in the classroom. Figure 2 presents their answers to this question.

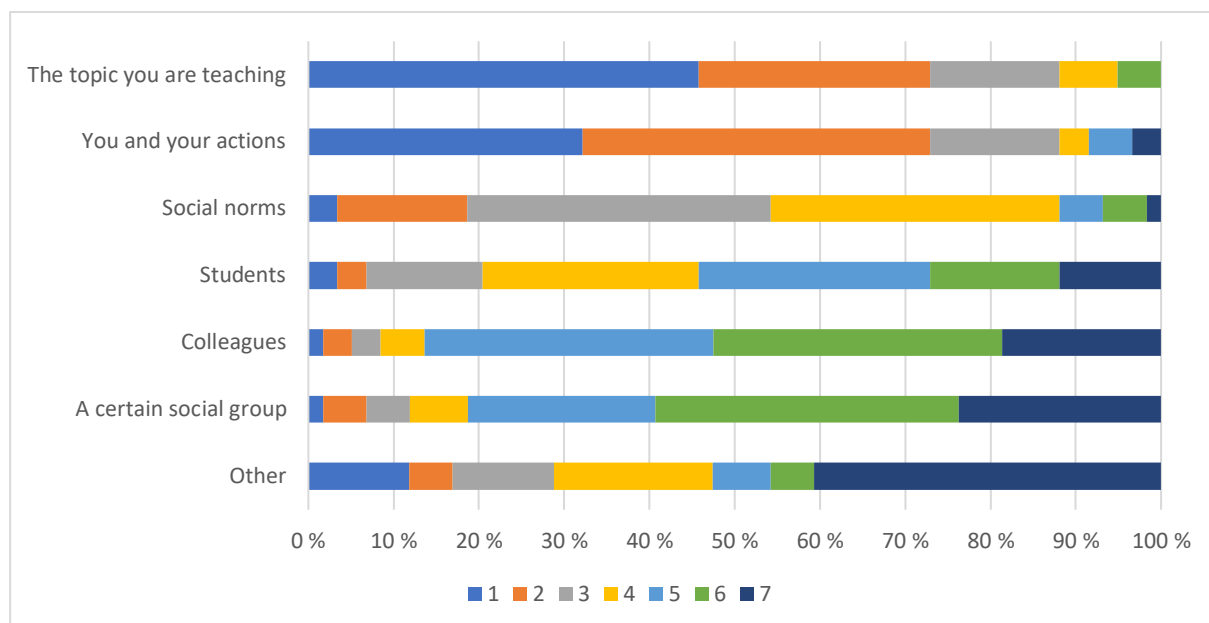


Figure 2: Finnish EFL teachers' answers to Question 9: Rank the following topics based on how often they are the target of your classroom humour (1. = the most common, 7. = the least common).

As can be seen in Figure 2, the teachers most commonly joke about the topic they are covering (ranked as number one by 45.8%) or themselves and their own actions (ranked as number one by 32.2%). Of the given options, students, colleagues, and societal groups are the least frequently targeted topics. Nevertheless, all these topics seem to appear in Finnish EFL teachers' humour at least to some extent. Below this question, teachers could specify what they meant by "other" or explain their choices otherwise, and, for example, technology, outdated learning materials, the weather, historical events and their effects today, the school, current news, celebrities, and stereotypes were mentioned as other possible targets of humour used in the classroom. In the interview, Inka also gave one example of joking about learning materials (Extract 2):

(2) [--] *esimerkiks kasiluokan edellisessä enkun kirjasarjassa oli semmonen kappale missä semmonen mies koskettelee junassa yhden jalkoja ja sit se niinku parantaa sen nilkkaongelman niin sit aina sen jälkeen mä kysyin että "would you let a stranger touch your feet?"*

[--] for example, in 8th graders' previous English textbook there was a chapter where this man touches another person's feet in a train and then he like heals the other person's ankle problem, so always after that I asked "would you let a stranger touch your feet?"

Related to the different topics of teacher humour, an interesting dichotomy appeared among the questionnaire respondents. In the space where participants could explain what they meant by “other” in Question 9, some of them expressed their dissatisfaction with this question, stating that they felt uncomfortable putting students, colleagues, and social groups on this scale, as they would never joke about these topics in the classroom. One teacher even considered such jokes to be a taboo in this context. This clearly reflects the point raised by many previous studies that teacher humour should not be discriminatory, offensive, or exclude anyone from the group (Banas et al., 2011, pp. 135-136; Gonulal, 2018; Wanzer et al., 2010, p. 14). What was interesting, however, was that, as Figure 2 shows, some participants still ranked these topics the first or the second, meaning that these are among the most common targets of humour in the classroom for some teachers.

To investigate this dichotomy further, I asked the interviewees whether they think it is acceptable to joke about students and colleagues and, if so, what kind of humour is appropriate. Interestingly, their views on this differed. Annika immediately said no and stated that while it might sometimes be appropriate to tell benevolent stories about colleagues, this should always be done with caution. They also seemed to think that targeting students should be avoided altogether (Extract 3).

(3) Et varsinki niinku oppilaista et se voi olla kyl sit niinku tosi paha [--] Tai kollegoista mä koen että ehkä jotain hauskoja juttuja joista nyt oikeesti sä voit olla aika varma et sä tiedät että ei tuu mitään mut siinki tulee helposti sit semmonen että sä et niin sanotusti dissaa [--] Et mieluummin mieluummin itsestä niitä vitsejä tai jostain kummin kaiman kissan serkun jostain tämmösestä, jolle ei anneta ees nimee.

Especially like (joking) about students can be really bad [--] Or about colleagues, I think that maybe some funny stories you can truly be quite sure that won't cause any harm but that can also easily be interpreted as dissing [--] So rather just joke about yourself or about some godparent's namesake's cat's cousin's something that is not even given a name.

Inka agreed that joking about students and colleagues is risky and that teachers need to pay careful attention to the nature of the humour that targets them. However, Inka seemed to think that it is sometimes acceptable to joke about students but not about colleagues (Extract 4).

(4) No siis sekin on niin semmonen että mistä asioista vitsaillaan. Niinku et ”sä oot niin huono, hahaa” ei semmosta voi vitsailla mutta niinku esimerkiksi [--] yks mun oppilas on nyt alkanu tehdä sillai et se laittaa mun kaiuttimet pois päältä joka tunti

ja sit mä vitsailen aina sillai et mä sanon että ”Ai ne on taas pois päältä. Se olit sinä! [--] tästä mä tykkään vitsailla paljon kun ne esittää et en ollu minä [--] niinku tämmösistä asioista mutta että ei vitsaile vaikka tulis kuinka hauska läppä jostain että kun joku sanoo väärin tai ei osaa tai ymmärrä nii ei. Ja siis kollegoja mä voisin roustata vaikka kuinka paljon mutta mun pitää purra kieltä niin saakutin kovasti koska se se menis heti heille tiedoks ja se ei oo ok.

Well that, too, depends on what you joke about. Like, it’s not ok to say “you’re so bad, haha” and joke about that but like for example [--] one of my students has started to switch off my speakers during every class and then I joke about it by saying “Oh they’re switched off again. It was you!” [--] this is something I like to joke about a lot when they pretend that they didn’t do it [--] so things like that but not about someone answering wrong or not knowing the answer or not understanding, no matter how funny a joke it would be, it’s a no. And I mean, I could roast my colleagues so much, but I just have to bite my tongue so damn hard because they would hear about it immediately and that’s not ok.

Therefore, based on the survey and the interview answers, it is not entirely clear whether joking about students and colleagues counts as appropriate teacher humour. Based on Inka and Annika’s answers, it depends on the tone of the humour and in what kind of light the humour presents its target. This strong dichotomy that appeared in the questionnaire could be an interesting topic for future research. One point that appears to be agreed upon, however, is that teachers should always be careful if they choose to target students or colleagues with their humour, and they should never do this in an aggressive or hostile manner.

4.1.1 Examples of teachers’ humour in Finnish EFL classrooms

The multiplicity of Finnish EFL teachers’ classroom humour was also visible in the participants’ answers to Question 10, where they were asked to give at least one example of the humour they have used in their teaching. Most teachers described, for example, how they had used funny or absurd example sentences when teaching grammar. There were also a lot of mentions of using memes and videos (either ready-made or created with the students), humour derived spontaneously from the teaching situation, and funny stories about the teachers’ real-life mishaps. Thus, it can be stated that, overall, teachers’ answers to this question are in line with their answers to Question 4 (see Figure 1).

In addition, some teachers gave examples related to pronunciation especially. One participant reported using memes in pronunciation teaching, while another explained that they had used examples derived from “rally English” (English with a strong Finnish accent) when teaching

the difference between [v] and [w] sounds. They had demonstrated this in their classes by referring to (but not saying out loud) a Finnish curse word that starts with [v] and contrasting it with the [w] sound by explaining how it sounds like you are amazed and want to say “Wow”. One participant also described how they had read certain sentences multiple times with the students and continuously increased the speed, which made the students laugh because it made the sentences sound funny and, in the end, impossible to say. Related to this, another participant mentioned using tongue twisters and creating them together with the group. The high number of mentions related to pronunciation could reflect the need to make this part of language teaching more enjoyable and less intimidating: as stated by Lintunen and Mäkilähde (2015), this part of language acquisition often causes a lot of anxiety in learners. Perhaps humour could, through its ability to decrease anxiousness (Berk & Nanda, 1998, p. 402; Gonulal, 2018, p. 156) and make the classroom atmosphere more encouraging (Weisi & Muhammadi, 2023, p. 179), be a solution to this issue and help students practise and learn pronunciation.

As for grammar, one teacher gave an interesting example of a funny mnemonic they had used when teaching the conditional mood. They had come up with a story about two couples, *If* and *The Past Tense* and *Would* and *The Infinitive*, who are neighbours but do not get along and never visit each other. A rat called *Comma* lives in the basement of *If* and *The Past Tense*'s house and tries to keep these quarrelsome couples apart, especially if *If* and *The Past Tense* try to jump the queue somewhere. Thus, this teacher has created a narrative that both introduces the elements of this grammatical structure and explains their functions and relations in a potentially amusing manner.

There were also some creative examples of using physical humour in the classroom. For instance, one teacher mentioned playing charades in the classroom and, after the teacher had mimed the first word with exaggerated gestures and facial expressions, the students were encouraged to participate as well. Another participant described how they had practised adjectives and interrogative sentences with third graders by asking them questions and having students answer by moving between the assigned “yes” and “no” sides of the classroom. According to this teacher, the students found it especially funny to answer “yes” to question: “Is your teacher old?” A third example of physical classroom humour was related to vocabulary learning: one teacher explained that they had practised body parts with their group by moving around in the classroom so that a certain body part (decided by the teacher) dominates the movement. It seems, then, that although physical humour was not among the most common

forms of humour in answers to Question 4 (see section 4.1), it is still used in the classroom in many different ways.

Some teachers also gave concrete examples of how they have joked about their students and colleagues, which is very interesting considering the aforementioned controversy regarding such humour. One teacher, for example, mentioned that they had compared different teachers in the school with the students to teach them the comparison of adjectives. The students were asked to complete sentences like “The loudest teacher is...” or “The most demanding teacher is...” by suggesting teachers that they thought suited the description the best. According to this teacher, this was considered funny by the teachers themselves as well and they were keen to find out if they had been mentioned. There was also one example of joking about students, as one teacher reported including students’ names in their funny example sentences when teaching grammar. Although there were only a few teachers that gave such examples, this is important, as many teachers stated in Question 9 that they would never joke about students or colleagues while these teachers clearly find this kind of humour acceptable in the classroom.

The examples presented above by no means cover all the creative humour techniques that the participants described, but already the selected stories demonstrate how diversely humour can be integrated in the classroom.

4.2 Reasons for using humour in teaching

In Question 7 of the questionnaire, the participants were asked to explain why they use or do not use humour in their teaching. When analysing the answers, five main reasons for using humour could be identified (see Table 1 below): (1) creating a positive and relaxed classroom atmosphere, (2) coping with the profession, (3) increasing students’ motivation and interest, (4) enhancing memorization, and (5) connecting better with the students.

	Reason	mentioned by (%) teachers
1.	Creating a positive and relaxed classroom atmosphere	47.4%
2.	Coping with the profession	32.2%
3.	Increasing students’ motivation and interest	28.8%
4.	Enhancing memorization	25.4%

5.	Connecting better with the students	16.9%
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Table 1: The percentage of teachers mentioning each of the five reasons in their answers to Question 7.

As shown in the table above, the most prominent of these reasons was improving the classroom atmosphere, which was mentioned by 28 participants (47.4%) when asked why they use or do not use humour in their teaching. Moreover, 98% of the participants agreed with the statement “*The main purpose of humour in the classroom is creating and maintaining a positive atmosphere*” (Question 11). This is in line with the results of previous research that seem to emphasize this function of classroom humour. Previous studies have shown how humour has the potential to decrease anxiety and make the classroom a more joyful, relaxed, and encouraging place (Berk & Nanda, 1998, p. 402; Gonulal, 2018, p. 156; Weisi & Muhammadi, 2023, p. 179), which was also visible in the questionnaire answers of the present study. Teachers described, for example, how humour can help break the ice, make students feel welcomed, and point out that learning languages does not have to be so serious.

In addition, as suggested by Gonulal (2018, pp. 155-156), some participants mentioned that using humour makes it easier for students to take risks in the classroom and encourages participation. Indeed, some participants explained how being silly in the classroom as a teacher helps students laugh at themselves as well and realize that making mistakes is acceptable, thus making language learning seem less intimidating. When asked about the effects teachers have noticed humour having on their students, one participant explicitly stated that they think humour decreases language anxiety. It seems, then, that the positive effects humour can have on the classroom atmosphere are widely recognized among Finnish EFL teachers.

The second most frequently mentioned reason for using humour was coping with the profession, which entails teachers’ need to express their own personality through humour and to make teaching enjoyable not just for students but for themselves as well. This reason was mentioned by 19 participants (32.2%). Many teachers reported that using humour feels very natural to them and one participant even stated that they would not know how to *not* use it. A couple of teachers also seemed to think that the lack of humour in teaching would be a sign that they are not coping well with the job or do not feel motivated. One of them stated that they had lost their humour because of being so exhausted. This is something that came up in Annika’s interview as well: according to them, a teacher that is overburdened may lose all their classroom humour and will most likely only do the minimum and give routine classes. Thus, being humorous and

well-being at work appear to go hand in hand at least for some teachers. This is an interesting finding, as I could not find any previous research focusing on the relationship between these two factors.

Another reason for using humour in the classroom was increasing students' motivation and interest. This was mentioned by 17 teachers (28.8%), which makes it the third most prominent reason. The participants described how presenting things in a humorous way helps learners get excited, even about the more "boring" topics, and guides their attention to relevant points. It was also mentioned that bringing humour into the language classroom makes language learning seem more enjoyable to students and ameliorates their overall attitudes towards it. Later in the questionnaire, some participants explained further how humour can help students focus and improve their attentiveness, and one of them stated that students learn better if they find the language classes pleasant. In previous studies, such observations have been made by both teachers and students: students have, for instance, stated that humour can improve their attentiveness in the classroom and make them feel more positive about the subject matter (Gonulal 2018) while teachers have reported noticing how humour seems to increase students' concentration, level of interest, enjoyment, and motivation, and can be used to guide student's attention to the subject matter (Heidari-Shahreza, 2018, p. 11; Weisi & Mohammadi, 2023, pp. 175-179). Therefore, this appears to be a commonly identified benefit of using humour, and previous studies seem to support the reasoning provided by the participants of the present study.

One reason for using humour that the participants mentioned and that is especially interesting considering the topic of the present study is enhancing memorization. All in all, 15 teachers (25.4%) explained their use of humour with its positive effects on language learning and mentioned, for example, that funny example sentences are easier to remember than neutral ones and that funny sounds may help students when learning pronunciation. In addition, 93% of the participants either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "*Humour helps students memorize language content, such as vocabulary and grammatical structures*" (Question 11).

As mentioned in Chapter 2, previous studies have gained mixed results on the effects humour has on learning. Some studies state that humour can support learning through positive affect, increased motivation, and encouraged elaboration (Wanzer et al., 2010, p. 7), draw attention to language more efficiently than conventional examples (Cook, 2000, pp. 169-170), and have mnemonical benefits (Schmidt & Williams, 2001). However, other researchers have argued that humour may in fact distract students and make them less prone to analytical thinking (Bolkan

et al., 2018) or, if not related to class topics, cause students to remember humorous comments at the expense of relevant content (Martin, 2010, p. 356). The results of the present study support the former point of view, as the participants seemed to have noticed how humour helped their students learn and remember language content. Nevertheless, it must be noted that, although a considerable number of teachers brought this up, this was only the fourth most mentioned reason. This could imply that Finnish EFL teachers also have differing views on whether humour has such effects or not. Therefore, the contradiction remains unresolved.

The fifth most prominent reason for using humour among the participants was connecting better with students, which was mentioned by 10 teachers (16.9%). They explained that humour encourages interaction between the teacher and the students and brings them closer together, creates a feeling that everyone in the classroom is “in the same boat”, and makes the teacher seem more approachable. This also came up in the question about the effects teachers have noticed humour having on their students (Question 12), where some teachers described how a humorous atmosphere makes students more open and how students often like to talk to humorous teachers outside the classroom as well. This, too, supports previous studies that have found that students tend to find humorous teachers more likeable and approachable, which appears to be why humour has the potential to increase the immediacy level between the teacher and the students (Gonulal, 2018). Indeed, Martin (2010, p. 353) even states that the ability to increase immediacy is one of humour’s fundamental benefits in the classroom context. The participants of the present study did not seem to consider this reason quite as essential as Martin’s (2010) statement implies, but it was still the fifth most mentioned explanation for using humour and therefore considerable.

Except for creating a positive and relaxed atmosphere, which was mentioned 28 times, the five reasons were almost equally notable when it comes to the number of times they appeared in the participants’ answers (see Table 1). To get a fuller idea of the order of importance among these reasons, the interviewees were asked to rank them. At the time of the interview, I had only managed to identify four reasons, which is why *coping with the profession* was not included in this comparison. Inka and Annika both recognized the importance of all these reasons, but their rankings were quite different from each other (Table 2).

Inka		Annika
1.	Creating a positive and relaxed classroom atmosphere	Connecting better with the students

2.	Enhancing memorization	Enhancing memorization
3.	Connecting better with the students	Increasing motivation and interest
4.	Increasing motivation and interest	Creating a positive and relaxed classroom atmosphere

Table 2: Interviewees' (n=2) rankings of the reasons for using humour in teaching (order of importance)

As Table 2 shows, the interviewees' rankings differ from each other regarding all reasons except one: they both agreed that the positive effects humour has on memorization is the second most important reason for using this tool in teaching. This is interesting because, based on the number of mentions alone, this reason was only the fourth most prominent but, in the light of Inka and Annika's answers, it seems to be an even more important factor. Of course, it must be taken into consideration that the interview answers of just two teachers do not give a comprehensive image of the views of all Finnish EFL teachers, and Inka and Annika may both represent the group of participants that mentioned this reason already in their questionnaire answers. What can be stated, however, is that it seems that teachers have many different reasons for using humour and they value the effects humour has in the classroom differently. Moreover, it seems that the reasons I have identified in the questionnaire data are quite comprehensive, as Inka could not think of any other reason to add, and Annika mentioned coping with the profession, which was later added to the list.

In addition to these five most prominent reasons, there were other explanations for using humour mentioned in the questionnaire answers, such as maintaining order in the classroom and creating a sense of authority, taking small breaks during classes, creating room for expressing different emotions, and not seeming humourless to students. Of these, especially creating a sense of authority is interesting, as previous research states that teachers seem to be worried that using humour might undermine their authority (Heidari-Shahreza, 2018, p. 11). This raises questions regarding the type of humour used by the participants that mentioned this reason: previous studies have found that humour can be used as a disciplinary tool in the classroom, but this often has negative effects on the classroom atmosphere and students' attitudes towards the teacher (Gorham & Christophel, 1990, p. 58; Martin, 2010, p. 358; St-Amand et al., 2023). Nevertheless, one of the participants mentioned disciplining the students through humour because, according to them, this allows the overall atmosphere to remain lighter, which is not in line with previous findings. Therefore, it would be interesting to

investigate further if and how humour could be used for disciplinary purposes without damaging the classroom atmosphere. However, it seems that most of the participants in the present study would not use humour to discipline students, as 58% of the participants disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement “*Humour can be used as an efficient disciplinary tool (e.g., ridiculing a disobedient student’s behaviour)*” while only 23% agreed and 2% strongly agreed (Question 11).

It must also be noted that not all teachers were able to reason their use of humour and simply answered “I don’t know”. This might be related to the fact that, as mentioned earlier, many of the participants reported using humour quite spontaneously, without planning it beforehand. Therefore, it can be questioned whether the reasons provided by the participants are indeed the underlying factors guiding their use of humour in the classroom or if they were just the first things they came up with when trying to argue the use of humour in the classroom in general.

4.3 Views on efficient use of humour

In Question 13 of the questionnaire, the participants were asked to describe the kind of humour they find the most useful from the point of view of language learning. Of course, as many of the teachers stated, there is no straightforward answer to this and the usefulness of different forms of humour depends on multiple factors, such as the learners’ preferences and the situation. Nevertheless, when going through the answers, some common themes could be identified.

Regarding the general features of efficient classroom humour, one important theme that was raised by the teachers was that classroom humour should be inclusive and non-offensive. It was mentioned that the humour used in the classroom should be well-intentioned and understandable to everyone in the group, and it should not target students (at least not one student specifically) or convey discriminatory attitudes. This appears to reflect the principles of the IHPT, which states that only appropriate humour that is understood by the students can be beneficial for their learning and retention (Wanzer et al., 2010, pp. 6-11). Other researchers have also emphasized the importance of avoiding other-disparaging humour and considering the target group and whether the humour used is suitable for them (e.g., Banas et al., 2011, pp. 135-136). In the present study, 15 teachers (25.4%) mentioned this when listing the characteristics of efficient classroom humour, which makes it considerable. However, it must be noted that the participants may have been sensitized to this point of view after the ranking exercise (Question 9) that was deemed controversial, which may have affected their answers.

One specific type of humour that was labelled problematic in the classroom context was sarcasm. A few participants mentioned this in the questionnaire and explained that students may find it difficult to understand and might not recognize it as humour. Inka also brought this up in the interview (Extract 5):

(5) *Mä oon kokenu et esimerkiks sarkasmi ei toimi, koska oppilaat tulkitsee sen sillä lailla että sä oot tosissas ja sä et vaan tajuu yhtään mistään mitään.*

I've experienced that, for example, sarcasm doesn't work because students interpret it so that you're serious and you just don't get anything about anything.

It has been found in earlier research that humour that is based on subtle mocking, such as irony or exaggerations, may be confusing to young children and therefore might not be successful in a classroom context (Banas et al., 2011, p. 136). Sarcasm could be put into this category as well, which might explain the participants' answers. All in all, the comments made by the participants of the present study seem to support previous findings and point out that sarcasm should be avoided in the classroom.

Based on the questionnaire respondents' answers, another general characteristic of efficient classroom humour seems to be that it is related to the topic in question. This was also mentioned by 15 teachers (25.4%), many of whom explained that this kind of humour helps students memorize class content. Indeed, Martin (2010, p. 356) states that teacher humour should always concern the important topics and language-related content of the class in order to be beneficial for students' learning, as humorous content may derogate the memorization of non-humorous content. Thus, this seems to be quite an essential point to consider when using humour in a learning context.

As for the more specific type of efficient classroom humour, a considerable number (24 = 40.6%) of the participants reported that they had found verbal and linguistic humour especially beneficial for learning. Many teachers mentioned puns, silly proverbs, and funny or weird examples, and stated that these help students memorize class content, such as grammatical structures and vocabulary. It was also mentioned that funny or exaggerated sounds can be beneficial when teaching pronunciation. Based on the answers, it seems that especially humour that targets and is built on different linguistic elements or language as a system has the potential to support language learning. This kind of humour could also be seen as favourable considering the two points discussed above: humour that targets language instead of people is probably less likely to offend anyone and can easily be connected to relevant class content of a language

course. Therefore, the use of word play and other forms of linguistic humour appears to be especially encouraged in the language classroom. Although previous studies have shed light on the mnemonical benefits of humour (e.g. Cook, 2000, pp. 169-170; Schmidt & Williams, 2001; Wanzer et al., 2010, p. 7), none of the studies I could find focus on what kind of humour is beneficial for learning, at least in the more specific context of a language classroom. Thus, this is an interesting finding and could be investigated further.

A couple of participants also mentioned that especially humour that comes from the learners themselves is beneficial for their learning, as they often remember their own jokes and funny examples the best. In addition, 98% of the participants either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement “*Only teacher-generated humour can be beneficial for learning*” (Question 11), which could imply that, even though only a few teachers mentioned this in the question about efficient humour (Question 13), a vast majority of them recognizes the benefits of learner-initiated humour as well. Indeed, Gheitasi (2022) also found that children often spontaneously engage in language play in the language classroom, such as exaggerating sounds, word switching, and role play, and this appears to support their learning in many ways. According to them, it can foster focus on form, support the development of learners’ sociolinguistic competence, and promote an encouraging classroom atmosphere, just to name a few examples. In the present study, however, this point of view was only visible in two participants’ answers, which raises the question whether Finnish EFL teachers allow learner-initiated humour in their classroom. Of course, the main focus of the present study is the humour used by teachers, which might explain why only a few respondents mentioned this.

4.3.1 The interviewees’ tips

At the end of their interviews, Inka and Annika were asked to give 3-5 concrete tips on how they think humour could be used to support and enhance language learning, based on their own experiences. In their answers, Inka especially emphasized the possibilities humour has considering pronunciation teaching (Extract 6).

(6) [--] *no esimerkiksi ääntämyksessä on paljon sitä et jos käydään vaikka erilaisia s-äänteitä läpi [--] vaikka että mitä eroa on [s] ja [ʃ] äänteillä että kuinka se on hyvin eri asia että ”Can I sit on a chair?”, ”Can I mmm?” elikkä se vähän ryhmästä riippuu et voitko sanoa sen ääneen mut ne yleensä kyllä tajuaa [--] et just ääntämyshommat on semmonen missä eniten et vaikka jos harjotellaan intonaatiota*

niin siinä et juuri niinku vedelkää tollai niinku et kiekasette nii kauheesti että tuntuu ihan pöljältä sit pitää olla niinku ekana pitää olla itse siellä vetämässä [--] ja just kaikki kun käydään vaikka läpi vaikka [tz], [ʃ] niin että on ne kaikki ilmeet ja tämmöset päräyttelyt mukana että on semmonen mihin semmosella korostetulla huumorihommalla saa hyvin sitä mukaan.

well, for example, in pronunciation there's a lot of that [humour] that if we go through different s sounds, for instance [--] like what is the difference between the [s] and [ʃ] sounds like how it makes a huge difference whether you say "Can I sit on a chair?", "Can I mmm?" so it depends on the group if you can say it out loud but usually they get it [--] so especially these pronunciation things are where there's the most like if we practice intonation and there you tell them to exaggerate so much it feels completely stupid and then the teacher has to be the first one there being silly [--] and like everything when you go through the [tz], [ʃ] sounds so that you use all the faces and exaggerated sounds so that's where you can really easily use humour.

Inka also gave tips regarding grammar and homework. They stated that coming up with silly relations between different grammatical structures makes learning more fun for learners while also serving as a mnemonic device. The abovementioned mnemonic related to the conditional mood (see section 4.1.1) could be seen as an example of this. As for homework, Inka mentioned that students are often quite passive when checking homework together in the classroom and explained how they had solved this problem by providing funny and / or absurd answer options until someone volunteered to answer in order to make them stop.

Annika agreed that humour is helpful in pronunciation teaching and conversational activities, but they did not emphasize this as much as Inka did. Instead, Annika seemed to especially appreciate the limitless possibilities English provides for language play and encouraged the use of tongue twisters and funny example sentences, for instance. They also deemed it beneficial to analyse memes together with the learners and discuss *why* they are funny, as this draws attention to language. In addition, Annika advised to search for humorous ready-made material online, such as memes and funny videos and reels, and brought up that this kind of humour can be used to make pauses and structure the lesson while still staying in the relevant theme (for example, showing a working life sketch when talking about jobs).

All in all, the tips from the interviewees could be summarized as follows: (1) use humour, such as exaggerations and funny contrasts, when teaching pronunciation, (2) come up with funny example sentences or silly relations to help learners memorize structures, (3) bring examples of language play, such as puns or memes, into the classroom and analyse them together with the group, (4) use humour as an icebreaker when learners are passive, (5) structure your classes

with humorous breaks, such as funny videos, and (6) do not be afraid of making a fool of yourself, as it encourages students to get involved.

4.3.2 Potential downsides of classroom humour

When asked about the perceived effects humour has on learners in the classroom (Question 12), the survey respondents mainly described positive effects that supported their reasoning for using humour. However, some teachers also raised challenges related to classroom humour when answering this question. Moreover, as previous research has gained mixed results regarding the effects humour has on learning, I added a separate question about the potential downfalls of classroom humour in the questionnaire (Question 14).

The concern that the participants expressed the most was insulting others with humour. Many stated that teachers should never knowingly use discriminatory or other-disparaging humour, as this can make students feel anxious and uncomfortable, but some mentioned that it is sometimes difficult to know what is appropriate and what might insult learners. It was also emphasized that joking about students and their behaviour is especially tricky and, while some participants advised to avoid this kind of humour altogether, some explained that it requires that the teacher knows their students well and understands what kind of comments are accepted from the teacher's part. What many teachers highlighted especially was that teachers should never joke about the mistakes that students make and that they should be very careful not to encourage bullying in the group. Similar points have been raised by earlier research, and many studies have found that teacher humour should never be offensive, aggressive, hostile, exclusive, or other disparaging (Banas et al., 2011, pp. 135-136; Gonulal, 2018; Wanzer et al., 2010, pp. 10-11).

When I asked the interviewees if they could give an example of a teaching situation where the humour they had used would have had negative effects, both of them gave examples related to targeting students with humour. Inka explained that they had sometimes played a song called *Känkkäränkkä* (=a person who is cranky) in the classroom after noticing that a student was in a bad mood but then realized that this was a mistake and the student in question did not find it funny. Annika also gave an example of a situation where well-intentioned humour had backfired and even led to a conversation with the student's parent (Extract 7). These examples illustrate how this kind of humour can be risky and point out that the teacher needs to be sure

that the students are comfortable with the teacher's humorous comments towards them and understand them as humour.

(7) [--] viime syksynä kävi yhen lukion kakkosluokkalaisen kans silleen että hän oli suureen ääneen omasta sanakokeestaan et tuli vaan neljä puol ja et ei hän tätä uusi et tää on nyt läpi ja niinku siis ihan suureen ääneen puhu kaikkien edessä mut sitten kun mä seuraavalla tunnilla itse ihan yritin lämpimästi kun [--] meil oli vähän ehkä sit huonot välit tai huonot kemiat niin mä yritin vaan rikkoo sitä jätää just hänen kanssaan ja kaikkien kaikkien edessä niin et kyl sä oot tarkka et kun mua ihan oikeesti huvitti et hänen stude oli tasan 50% ei yhtään enempää et kun hän oli et hän ei niinku pikkurillään et hän englannin eteen minimin ja mä sit kaikkien edessä niinku sanoin ku mua ihan aidosti huvitti. Tasan 50%. Niin hän oli vetäny täst aivan järkyttävät kilarit kotona [--] mut meil oli sit hänen isänsä kaa hyvin hedelmällinen keskustelu ja se hyvin sit meni. Mut niinku et vaikka mä ajattelin et kaikki luokassa tuntee hänet ja tietää että häntä ei niinkun ei välttii nappaa mut et siltikään se ei ollu sopivaa.

[--] Last autumn I had this situation with an upper secondary school sophomore that they had loudly announced in the classroom that they had only got a 4,5 on a word test and they were not going to redo it because it was still a pass but then in the next class when I myself tried to, in a benevolent way, because [--] we maybe were on bad terms or had bad chemistry so I just tried to break the ice with them and said in front of everybody that aren't you precise because I was genuinely amused that they had honestly done the bare minimum for English and I commented on this in front of everybody because I genuinely found it funny. Their effort was precisely 50%. An then they had completely freaked out about this at home [--] but we then had a very fruitful conversation with their father and everything was resolved. But like, even though I thought that everyone in the class knows this student and know that English is not necessarily their cup of tea, but it still wasn't appropriate.

What the questionnaire respondents also deemed challenging regarding classroom humour was that all students have their own sense of humour. Indeed, as pointed out by Sover (2018, p. 4), humour is quite subjective and not everyone finds the same things funny. The teachers explained that this makes a classroom full of students quite a demanding audience for humour, and misunderstandings occur easily, which is a concern expressed in earlier research as well (Heidari-Shahreza, 2018, p. 11). Some participants also described how students that come from different language backgrounds or have lower proficiency levels and therefore do not understand the teacher's humour might feel confused and excluded from the group. It has been established that classroom humour should not exclude anyone (Banas et al., 2011, pp. 135-136) so, even though teachers cannot make sure everyone in the group understand their humour, it would be important to try and use humour that is likely to be accessible for the whole group to ensure the equality of teaching. However, regarding the different skill levels, Inka pointed out

in the interview that it can sometimes be acceptable to use humour that is only understood by the most proficient students in the classroom, as this is a way to reward them and take their aptitude into account.

The questionnaire participants also stated that humour should be used moderately, and teachers should carefully consider which things and situations can be joked about and what needs to be taken seriously. One participant stated, for example, that teachers should not create an image that students' worries are a joke and not something serious. It was also recognized that humour may cause chaos in the classroom and distract or annoy students, especially if it is used excessively. This supports the findings of researchers like Bolkan et al. (2018), Gonulal (2018) and Heidari-Shahreza, (2018), who have found that humour may make students too relaxed and deteriorate their concentration, make classroom management more challenging, and have negative effects on learners' motivation. Therefore, it seems that extensive use of humour should be avoided in the classroom, and it should only be used in appropriate situations.

When comparing these downsides recognized by the participants of the present study to the characteristics of efficient humour listed in section 4.3, it can be noticed that they seem to complement each other. For instance, the first characteristic of efficient humour listed was that the humour should be inclusive, non-offensive, and understandable to learners, and this point was also raised when describing the potential downsides of classroom humour. In addition, according to the participants, humour should be related to relevant class content in order to be efficient, which was reflected in their statements regarding extensive and inappropriate uses of humour and how that may negatively affect the students' emotions and the order in the classroom. Therefore, the participants' answers to Question 12 (*In your opinion, what are the downsides of using humour in the classroom?*) further support the list of the characteristics of efficient classroom humour provided above.

To summarize, the data suggests that Finnish EFL teachers use humour frequently in the classroom and apply diverse techniques to include it in their teaching both spontaneously and deliberately. Verbal humour seems to be somewhat favoured over visual and physical humour, and the most common ways to bring humour into the language classroom seem to be spontaneous humorous comments, funny or weird example sentences, puns, games, and memes, while props and silly rhymes seem to be the least frequent techniques. The teachers participating in the present study argued their use of humour especially with its positive effects on the classroom atmosphere, their own well-being, students' interest and motivation, memorization,

and the immediacy between them and their students. According to their answers, it appears that efficient classroom humour does not offend anyone and is related to relevant class content, and especially verbal humour, such as puns and funny example sentences, and learner-initiated humour seem to benefit learning. The respondents were also aware of the potential downsides of classroom humour. They emphasized, for example, that the teacher should be careful not to insult students or promote bullying and stated that extensive use of humour may also cause chaos in the classroom. Nevertheless, the respondents did not agree on whether it is acceptable to joke about colleagues or students. All in all, based on the data, it seems that humour is a common phenomenon in Finnish EFL classrooms.

5 CONCLUSION

The present study set out to investigate Finnish EFL teachers' use of humour in the language classroom and their reasons for doing this. The main goal was to identify some key characteristics of efficient classroom humour or, in other words, humour that enhances language learning by investigating teachers' views on this. The topic was deemed important because humour has become a natural element in the previously serious educational context in the past few decades (Martin 2010) yet the results regarding its effects on learning are mixed. While some researchers promote the benefits of classroom humour (e.g., Berk & Nanda, 1998; Schmidt & Williams, 2001; Weisi & Muhammadi, 2023), others have found it to have negative effects on the acquisition process (e.g., Bolkan et al. 2018; Gonulal, 2018; Heidari-Shahreza, 2018). Moreover, this issue has not been widely studied in the Finnish context, which is noteworthy because humour seems to be tied to culture (Martin, 2010). Thus, the present study aimed at shedding light on this phenomenon both on a general level and in the more specific Finnish context. The first research question focused on the forms of humour teachers report using and their reasons for doing this, while the second research question aspired to investigate teacher's views on efficient classroom humour.

To answer the first research question, it could be stated that Finnish EFL teachers use humour quite often in the classroom and use diverse techniques to include it in their teaching. The most popular ways to do this seem to be through spontaneous humorous comments, funny or weird example sentences, word play, games, and memes, respectively. Regarding the language of humour, it was found that teachers express humour almost equally in Finnish and in the target language English. The most common targets of teacher humour appear to be the topic in question and the teacher themselves, while joking about students, colleagues, or social groups seems to be deemed problematic or controversial by most. As for why teachers use humour in teaching, five main reasons were identified: (1) creating a positive and relaxed classroom atmosphere, (2) coping with the profession, (3) increasing students' motivation and interest, (4) enhancing memorization, and (5) connecting better with the students.

As for the second research question, despite the multiplicity of teacher humour in the Finnish EFL classrooms, some key characteristics of efficient humour could be recognized in the survey respondents' answers. Based on the data, it can be stated that efficient classroom humour does not offend or exclude anyone, it is suitable for the target group, and it is related to relevant class content. Moreover, according to the participants, especially verbal humour and learner-initiated

humour are beneficial for learning. The interviewees also gave some concrete tips on how humour could be used efficiently, and they suggested using humour especially when teaching pronunciation, coming up with funny mnemonics, analysing puns, memes and other forms of language play, and using humour as an icebreaker or to take breaks during the class. They also emphasized that it is important that the teacher is not afraid to make a fool of themselves, because this is often essential for students to feel comfortable enough to participate.

These results are in line with previous research and complement it. All the participants reported using humour in their teaching, which seems to confirm Martin's (2010) statement that humour is a commonplace phenomenon in the modern classroom. As for the different ways to introduce humour, spontaneous humorous comments have been the most popular form of teacher humour in earlier research as well (Heidar-Shahreza, 2018; Neff & Dewaele, 2023), but the frequency of puns and memes was surprising. Four of the reasons that participants gave for using humour in the classroom reflect previous findings on the effects humour may have in the classroom: improving the classroom atmosphere (e.g., Berk & Nanda, 1998; Weisi & Muhammadi, 2023, p. 179), enhancing memorization (e.g., Schmidt & Williams, 2001; Wanzer et al., 2010), increasing students' motivation and interest (e.g., Heidari-Shahreza, 2018), and connecting better with the students (Gonulal, 2018). The fifth reason, coping with the profession, has not been mentioned in previous research as far as I am aware.

The key characteristics of efficient classroom humour found in the present study are also supported by previous studies which have found that classroom humour should not insult or exclude anyone (e.g., Banas et al., 2011), it should be related to the course content (Martin, 2010), and it may also be beneficial when coming from the learners (Gheitasi, 2022). The found characteristics also reflect the principles of the IHPT (Wanzer et al., 2010). However, none of previous studies that I could find focus on the point of view of efficient classroom humour in as much detail, provide as clear a list of its characteristics, or give concrete tips on how humour could be used to enhance language learning.

However, the present study has some limitations that need to be taken into account. As discussed in Chapter 3, using questionnaires and interviews for data collection may be problematic because questionnaires often produce simplistic data due to simplified questions, interviews are prone to the effect of interviewer bias, and no causal connections can be drawn due to the qualitative nature of the data. Moreover, as the data was analysed through qualitative content analysis, the results cannot be treated as completely objective, as this method required me to

act as an interpreter. The sample was also not as comprehensive as wished, and the gender distribution of the respondents was quite one-sided. In addition, since all participants reported using humour in their teaching, it can be questioned if only teachers that find this tool to be useful in the classroom chose to participate, which would of course distort the results. Some participants also felt uncomfortable with the question about different targets of humour (Question 9), which suggests that it could have been formulated differently. Furthermore, the present study was solely focused on teachers, thus ignoring the point of view of learners completely. Therefore, future research should investigate this issue further from this perspective.

Despite these limitations, the study succeeded in reaching its goals, and it provides quite a detailed overview of different humour techniques used by Finnish EFL teachers as well as concrete advice on how to use humour in a way that supports language learning. In addition, regardless of the limited number of participants, the study managed to reach teachers with quite diverse career paths, as the participants reported having experience from all levels of education and the number of their teaching years ranged from less than one year to over twenty years. All in all, the present study not only supports previous research but also complements it and provides some new insights into this issue.

In conclusion, it can be stated that Finnish EFL teachers' humour appears to come in as many different shapes and forms as the teachers themselves and, all in all, it seems to be quite a natural part of language teaching. Nevertheless, teachers should pay attention to their use of humour and observe its effects on learners because, although humour has the potential to have many kinds of wonderful effects in the classroom, it can also be very harmful if used carelessly. As described by one of the participants, *it is a matter of skill*.

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APPENDICES

Here you can find the questionnaire and the planned structure of the interview. Both instruments of data collection were originally created in Finnish, but English translations are provided here.

Appendix 1: The questionnaire

Arvoisa osallistuja,

Olen luonut tämän kyselylomakkeen maisterintutkielmaani varten, jonka aiheena on Suomessa toimivien englanninopettajien opetuksessaan käyttämä huumori ja sen vaikutukset kielenoppimiseen. Tutkimukseni tarkastelee aihetta opettajien näkökulmasta, eli olen kiinnostunut juuri Sinun kokemuksistasi. Huomaathan siis, että esittämiini kysymyksiin ei ole olemassa oikeita tai vääriä vastauksia.

Kysely on anonyymi, eikä antamiasi vastauksia voida yhdistää Sinuun. Alussa pyytämiäni taustatietoja käytän ainoastaan tulosten tilastollisessa vertailussa. Kyselystä saatua dataa tulen käyttämään vain tässä Jyväskylän yliopistolle tekemässäni maisterintutkielmassa, ja kaikkia tietoja käsitellään luottamuksellisesti. Tutkimuksen valmistuttua tiedot tullaan hävittämään asianmukaisesti. Lisätietoja antamiesi tietojen käsittelystä löydät [tietosuojailmoituksesta](#).

Varsinainen kysely pitää sisällään neljä lyhyttä osiota, jotka koostuvat sekä suljetuista että avoimista kysymyksistä. Kokonaisuudessaan kyselylomakkeen täyttäminen vie noin 15 minuuttia, riippuen toki siitä, kuinka laajasti haluat kysymyksiin vastata.

Jos olisit halukas osallistumaan kyselyn lisäksi lyhyeen haastatteluun aiheeseen liittyen, voit jättää sähköpostiosoitteesi kyselyn loppuun. Tämä ei kuitenkaan sido sinua vielä mihinkään, vaan voit edelleen halutessasi kieltäytyä haastattelusta myöhemmin.

Mikäli haluat kysyä jotain tähän kyselyyn tai tutkimukseeni liittyen, voit ottaa minuun yhteyttä sähköpostitse:

milja.lm.naskali@student.jyu.fi

Suurkiitos osallistumisestasi!
Ystävällisin terveisin
Milja Naskali

Vastaamalla tähän kyselyyn annan luvan käyttää vastauksiani yllä mainitussa maisterintutkielmassa. Vastaamalla vakuutan myös olevani vähintään 18-vuotias, kuuluvani tutkimuksen kohderyhmään ja osallistuvani tutkimukseen vapaaehtoisesti. Ymmärrän, että kysely on mahdollista keskeyttää missä vaiheessa tahansa, eivätkä vastaukseni tallennu ennen kuin olen painanut lopun "Lähetä" -painiketta.

Olen ymmärtänyt ja haluan osallistua tutkimukseen.

* * *

Dear participant,

I have created this questionnaire as a part of my Master's thesis, the topic of which is how EFL teachers working in Finland use humour in their teaching and how this affects language learning. I examine this topic from the point of view of teachers especially, so I am interested in your own viewpoints and experiences on the topic. Note that there are no right or wrong answers to the questions I pose.

The survey is completely anonymous, and the answers you give cannot be traced back to you. The background information gathered at the beginning of the questionnaire will only be used for statistical comparison. The data gathered with this questionnaire will only be used in this MA thesis, done for the University of Jyväskylä, and all information will be handled confidentially. After the research is complete, all data will be disposed of appropriately. You can find more information on the use of the data in [the privacy notice](#).

The survey itself consists of four short sections that include both closed- and open-ended questions. All in all, it takes approximately 15 minutes to complete the questionnaire, depending of course on how extensively you choose to answer the questions.

If you would also be willing to participate in a short interview on this topic, you can leave me your e-mail address at the end of the questionnaire. However, note that this does not bind you to anything yet, and you can still refuse to participate in the interview later on.

In case you want to ask something related to this survey or my study in general, you can contact me via e-mail:

milja.lm.naskali@student.jyu.fi

Thank you very much for your participation!
Kind regards,
Milja Naskali

By answering this questionnaire, you allow your answers to be used in the Master's thesis presented above. By answering, you also confirm that you are at least 18 years old, belong to the target group of the study, and participate in this study voluntarily. You can quit the questionnaire at any point, and your answers will not be saved unless you click "Lähetä" at the end.

I have understood and want to participate in the study.

TAUSTATIEDOT / BACKGROUND INFORMATION

1. Sukupuoli / Gender
 - Nainen / Female
 - Mies / Male
 - Muu / Other
 - En halua kertoa / I prefer not to say
2. Opetan tai olen opettanut englantia... (voit valita useita vaihtoehtoja) / I teach or have taught English... (you can choose multiple options)

- alakoulussa / in primary school
 - yläkoulussa / in lower secondary school
 - lukiossa / in upper secondary school
 - ammattikoulussa / in vocational school
 - ammattikorkeakoulussa / at polytechnic
 - yliopistossa / at university
 - Muualla, missä? / Elsewhere, where? _____
3. Opetuskokemukseni / My teaching experience
- Alle 1 vuosi / Less than 1 year
 - 1-5 vuotta / 1-5 years
 - 6-10 vuotta / 6-10 years
 - 11-20 vuotta / 11-20 years
 - Yli 20 vuotta / More than 20 years

HUUMORI OPETUKSESSA / HUMOUR IN TEACHING

OSA 1 / PART 1

4. Millä seuraavista tavoista sisällytät huumoria opetukseesi? (Voit valita useita vaihtoehtoja.) / Through what means do you integrate humour in your teaching? (You can choose multiple options.)
- Meemit / Memes
 - Sarjakuvat / Comics
 - Roolileikki / Role play
 - Sanaleikki / Puns
 - Spontaanit humoristiset kommentit / Spontaneous humorous comments
 - Loret / Silly rhymes
 - Oudot esimerkkilauseet / Weird example sentences
 - Humoristiset tarinat / Humorous stories
 - Pelit / Games
 - Hassut äänet / Funny sounds
 - Hassut ilmeet / Silly faces
 - Rekvisiitta / Props
 - Muu, mikä? / Other, what? _____
5. Miksi käytät juuri näitä tapoja? / Why have you integrated humour through these means especially?
6. Käytän huumoria opetuksessani / I use humour in my teaching...
- jatkuvasti / all the time
 - usein / often
 - silloin tällöin / occasionally
 - harvoin / rarely
 - en juuri koskaan / hardly ever

7. Miksi käytät tai et käytä huumoria opetuksessasi? / Why do you use or do not use humour in your teaching?

OSA 2 / PART 2

8. Ilmaisen huumoria luokkahuoneessa... / I express humour in the classroom...
- enimmäkseen suomeksi / mostly in Finnish
 - enimmäkseen englanniksi / mostly in English
 - tasapuolisesti molemmilla kielillä / in both languages equally
9. Järjestä seuraavat asiat sen mukaan, kuinka usein ne ovat käyttämäsi huumorin kohteena (1.= yleisin, 7.= harvinaisin). / Rank the following topics based on how often they are the target of your classroom humour (1. = you use it the most and 7. = you use it the least)
- Opettamasi asia / The topic you're teaching
 - Sinä itse ja oma toimintasi / You and your actions
 - Sosiaaliset normit / Social norms
 - Oppilaat (joko yleisesti tai oppilaat luokassa) / Students (either in general or the students in your class)
 - Kollegat / Colleagues
 - Tietty sosiaalinen ryhmä (esim. jonkin maan kansalaiset, jokin ikäryhmä tai jonkin sukupuolen edustajat) / A certain social group (e.g., people of a certain nationality / age / gender)
 - Muu (voit tarkentaa alla) / Other (you can specify this below)
10. Anna ainakin yksi esimerkki opetustilanteesta, jossa olet käyttänyt huumoria. / Give at least one example of a teaching situation in which you have used humour.

OSA 3 / PART 3

11. Arvioi seuraavia väittämiä asteikolla 0-5 (0= en tiedä, 1= täysin eri mieltä, 2= jokseenkin eri mieltä, 3= en samaa enkä eri mieltä, 4= jokseenkin samaa mieltä, 5= täysin samaa mieltä). / Rate the following statements on a scale from 0 to 5 (0= I don't know, 1 = completely disagree, 2 = somewhat disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = somewhat agree, 5 = completely agree)
- Kielenoppimista voi tehostaa huumorin avulla / Language learning can be enhanced through the use of humour.
 - Huumori auttaa oppilaita muistamaan esimerkiksi kielioppirakenteita ja sanastoa / Humour helps students memorize language content, such as vocabulary and grammatical structures.
 - Huumorin päätehtävä on positiivisen ilmapiirin luominen. / The main purpose of humour in the classroom is creating and maintaining a positive atmosphere.
 - Huumorin käyttäminen ei auta kielenoppimista millään tavalla. / The use of humour does not benefit language learning in any way.
 - Vain opettajan käyttämä huumori on hyödyllistä oppimiselle. / Only teacher-generated humour can be beneficial for learning.
 - Huumorin käyttäminen opetuksessa on yksiselitteisesti hyvä asia. / Using humour in teaching can only be a good thing.

- Huumori on tehokas kurinpidollinen työkalu (esim. vitsailu häiriköivän oppilaan käytöksestä). / Humour can be used as an efficient disciplinary tool (e.g., ridiculing a disobedient student's behaviour).
12. Millaisia vaikutuksia olet huomannut huumorilla olevan oppilaisiisi? / What kinds of effects have you noticed humour having on students in your classes?
 13. Millaisen huumorin koet kaikista hyödyllisimmäksi kielenoppimisen kannalta? / What kind of humour do you find the most useful considering language learning?
 14. Mitä huonoja puolia huumorin käyttämisellä voi mielestäsi olla luokahuoneympäristössä? / In your opinion, what are the downsides of using humour in the classroom?

OSA 4 / PART 4

15. Vaihtelee ko käyttämäsi huumorin muoto riippuen opettamastasi aiheesta (esim. sanasto / ääntäminen / kielioppi)? Miten? / Does the type of humour you use vary depending on the topic you are teaching (e.g., vocabulary / pronunciation / grammar)? How?
16. Onko mielestäsi jokin kielen osa-alue, jonka opetuksessa ei voi tai ei pitäisi käyttää huumoria? / Is there some aspect of language that cannot or should not be taught through humour in your opinion?

Jos haluat osallistua tämän aiheen tiimoilta myös lyhyeen haastatteluun, voit jättää sähköpostiosoitteesi tähän: / If you are willing to also take part in a short interview related to this topic, you can leave your email address here:

HUOM! Sähköpostiosoitettasi EI yhdistetä vastauksiisi. Sitä käytetään ainoastaan mahdollista yhteydenottoa varten. / NB! Your email address will NOT be connected to your answers. It will only be used for a possible contact.

Appendix 2: The interview questions

Here you can find the planned structure of the interview. As the interviews were semi-structured and therefore a little more flexible, the order of the questions was not the same for the interviewees, but we proceeded in an order that seemed logical and natural for each conversation. In addition, some questions were not explicitly asked if the interviewees had already answered them earlier during our discussion.

Lämmittely / Warm-up:

Kertoisitko hieman tähänastisesta opettajan urastasi? / Could you tell me a little about your career as a teacher so far?

- Kuinka pitkään olet toiminut englanninopettajana? / For how long have you taught English?
- Millaisia ryhmiä olet opettanut? / What kinds of groups have you taught?

Varsinainen haastattelu / The actual interview:

1. Miten yleisellä tasolla kuvaisit huumorinkäyttöäsi luokassa? / In general, how would you describe your use of humour in the classroom?

- Käytätkö huumoria opetuksessasi enemmän suunnitellusti vai spontaanisti? / Do you use humour in your teaching spontaneously or do you plan it beforehand?

2. JOS ON OPETTANUT USEAMMILLA LUOKKA-ASTEILLA: Eroaako käyttämäsi huumori riippuen oppijoiden iästä? Miten? / IF HAS TAUGHT LEARNERS OF DIFFERENT AGES: Does the humour you vary depending on the age of your students? How?

3. Kyselylomakkeessa huumorin käyttöä perusteltiin (1) rennon ja vapautuneen ilmapiirin luomisella, (2) kontaktin saamisella oppilaisiin, (3) kiinnostavuuden ja mielekkyyden lisäämisellä sekä (4) muistamisen tehostamisella. / In the questionnaire answers, the use of humour was explained with its ability to (1) create a relaxed and open atmosphere, (2) increase contact between the teacher and students, (3) make the lesson more interesting and enjoyable, and (4) enhance memorization.

- Mitä mieltä olet näistä perusteluista? / What do you think of these reasons for using humour?
- Minkälaiseen tärkeysjärjestykseen itse laittaisit nämä? / How would you rank these?
- Lisäisitkö listaan jonkin perusteen? / Is there something you would add to this list?

4. Voiko kielenopetus mielestäsi olla samaan aikaan sekä hauskaa että tehokasta? Joissakin vastauksissa kerrottiin huumorin toisinaan vieneen huomiota pois opetettavasta aiheesta, toiset taas olivat sitä mieltä, että opetus voi olla molempia yhtä aikaa. / In your opinion, can language teaching be both fun and efficient at the same time? Some questionnaire answers reported humour distracting students from the topic in question while others thought teaching can be fun without undermining its efficiency.

5. Millaisia vaikutuksia koet huumorin käyttämisellä olevan opettajan asemaan luokassa? / What kinds of effects have you noticed humour having on the status of the teacher in the classroom?

- Osa vastaajista mainitsi huumorin heikentävän opettajan auktoriteettia ja lietsovan pelleilyä. Oletko itse huomannut sillä olevan tällaisia vaikutuksia? / Some participants mentioned that humour can undermine the teacher's authority and increase fooling around in the classroom. Have you noticed humour having such effects?
- Miten olet toiminut tällaisissa tilanteissa? / How have you acted in these situations?

6. Osa vastaajista koki, että heikommat oppilaat eivät aina pääse huumoriin mukaan eivätkä siksi hyödy siitä yhtä paljon kuin vahvemman kielitaidon omaavat. Mitä mieltä olet tästä? Oletko huomannut tällaista omassa opetuksessasi? / Some participants mentioned that students with lower proficiency levels might be left outside humorous conversations in the classroom and therefore do not benefit from the use of humour as much as students with

higher proficiency levels. What do you think about this? Have you noticed such a phenomenon in your teaching?

7. Osa vastaajista totesi huumorin käyttämisen luokassa olevan haastavaa, koska aina ei tiedä, mistä voi vitsailla ja mistä ei. Lisäksi todettiin, että huumorin kanssa pitää olla varovainen, ettei edistä kiusaamista. Onkos sinulla kokemuksia opetustilanteista, jossa käyttämälläsi huumorilla olisi ollut negatiivisia vaikutuksia? / Some participants stated that using humour in the classroom is challenging because you cannot always know what you can and cannot joke about. In addition, they mentioned that teachers should be careful with their humour because they might promote bullying. Have you faced situations where the humour you used had negative effects?

- Voisitko antaa esimerkin tällaisesta tilanteesta? / Could you give me an example of such a situation?

8. Vastaajat jakautuivat kahtia siinä, voiko oppilaista ja kollegoista vitsailla luokassa. Mitä mieltä itse olet? / There were strongly differing opinions on whether it is okay to joke about students and colleagues. What do you think?

- Jos näistä voi mielestäsi vitsailla, niin millä tavalla? / If you can joke about these, in what way?

9. Jos sinun pitäisi antaa 3–5 vinkkiä siitä, miten huumoria voisi parhaiten käyttää kielenoppimisen tukemiseen ja tehostamiseen, minkälaisia vinkkejä antaisit? / If you had to think of 3–5 tips on how humour could be used the most efficiently to support and enhance language learning, what kinds of tips would you give?

10. Haluatko kysyä minulta jotakin? / Would you like to ask me something?