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Instructor Humor as a Covariate for Student Engagement in Comparison to Intellectually

Stimulating Teacher Practices in an Armenian Afterschool EFL Program

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## **Abstract**

The use of instructor humor in language classrooms is often contended to positively affect student learning and participation. When studied in relation to student engagement, the findings on instructor humor are similarly positive and suggestive of a strong correlation. However, as there exist studies that report on intellectually stimulating teacher behaviors to be more effective in terms of student engagement, this study aims to test both. The research questions that this study addresses are on the relationships between pedagogical humor and student engagement, and intellectually stimulating teaching practices and student engagement. The two relationships are separately analyzed using correlational matrices. The context of this study is an Armenian afterschool EFL program from where 163 participants were recruited for the sample. The data was collected via an online anonymous survey that comprised three measuring instruments: Student Intellectual Stimulation Scale (SISS), Perceived Effect of Pedagogical Humor Scale (PEPH), Student Engagement Scale (SE). The results of this study showed a stronger correlation between student intellectual stimulation and student engagement than pedagogical humor and student engagement. However, when analyzed by gender, the correlation between pedagogical humor and student engagement for male participants showed equal in coefficients as the overall SISS and SE correlational coefficient. This study and its future furthering is significant for Armenian teachers and young students, as, with the youth's influences of globalization and the heightened online interaction with humorous contents (e.g. memes, funny videos, etc.) on a daily basis, the implementation of humor in the classroom context yields itself potentially more fruitful nowadays.

**Keywords:** Armenia, humor, EFL, student engagement, student intellectual stimulation

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

Language instructors are often encouraged to use humor in teaching as it is found to hold the benefits of enhancing learning (e.g. Nienaber et al., 2019; Pomerantz & Bell, 2011; Torok et al., 2004) and acting as a strong signifier of social compatibility and competence (Graham et al., 1992; Lefcourt, 2001; Morreall, 2009; Provine, 2012). There is considerable evidence that suggests instructor humor to positively affect student motivation (Berk, 2002; Nienaber et al., 2019), retention of course material (Kaplan & Pascoe, 1977; Wanzer et al., 2010), the learning environment (Grumet, 1989; Nienaber et al., 2019; Pomerantz & Bell, 2011), and the overall learning process (Berk, 2002, Garner, 2006; Schmidt, 1994). With the appropriate use of humor in a language classroom, increase in student engagement, cognitive stimulation, and teacher immediacy have also been noted (e.g. Lefcourt, 2001; Nienaber et al., 2019; Pomerantz & Bell, 2011; Torok et al., 2004). Humor as a teaching tool is additionally said to act as “an instructional defibrillator” (Berk, 2002), “soften critical statements” (Wanzer & Frymier, 1999), considerably aid in reducing student anxiety (Morreall, 2009; Vaid & Kobler, 2000) and increase students’ willingness to participate in class (Wanzer & Frymier, 1999). Ketabi and Simin (2009) also note that the appropriate use of humor by teachers significantly helps improve rapport with students, and encourages the more introverted learners or those with lower self-confidence to better fit in with their peers via observed power shifts that humor allows for.

When observed within the EFL context specifically, research on humor reveals similar positive effects as those documented in general pedagogy. With a sample of 104 students from six different private Japanese high school classes, a mixed methods study by Stroud (2013) on the use of humor in the EFL context, as an example among others, found instructor humor to be, in fact, highly favored by students in regards to enhancing learning, improving the classroom environment, boosting student motivation, and acting as an effective

attention-grabbing technique. The study also reported on teacher humor to be perceived by students as a means of reducing anxiety, increasing willingness to participate, and fostering a sense of comfort and belonging in the classroom.

Given that the findings on appropriate humor in EFL classrooms and pedagogy in general are positive, the present paper aims to study the perceptions of Armenian students towards instructor humor in relation to classroom engagement. In correlating the two variables, this study also separately observes the relationship between intellectually stimulating teaching practices and student engagement, as grounds for comparison. Intellectually stimulating instructor practices were chosen as another independent variable for the reason of showing a more consistent positive correlation with student engagement per the majority of findings.

### **1. 1. Research Questions**

This study attempts to observe student engagement in relation to perceived instructor humor, as this relationship was not previously studied within the Armenian EFL context. Intellectual stimulation is additionally used as an independent variable for this study as it seeks to determine the influences of an interactive teaching style, challenging students and encouraging independent thought on students' experiences in the classroom, and has previously been reported to show a strong positive correlation with student engagement. In this vein, the current research aims to compare the correlational statistics of the two relationships and examine whether the use of instructor humor and its perceptions by students would have similarly solid grounds for engaging students as the intellectually stimulating teacher behaviors. Thus, in better navigating through the chosen scope of study, this paper seeks to answer the following research questions:

R1: What is the relationship between students' perceptions of instructor humor and their classroom engagement in the afterschool EFL context?

R2: Is the relationship between student intellectual stimulation and student engagement stronger than that of instructor humor and student engagement in the afterschool EFL context?

## **1. 2. The Problem and Significance**

Armenian schools are still predominantly traditional in their approach to TEFL, which means that they are more language-oriented rather than focused on students, their engagement, and rapport with teachers. Though these traditional and more teacher-centered teaching methods in Armenian schools have a long history and their benefits, the current scope of adolescent student interests renders them outdated and lacking of attraction that, conversely, abounds outside of the classroom context. The reasons for this contention are mostly based on the changes in the quality of Armenian youth's social activity and interests that are heavily influenced by their online presence.

According to the data collected between 2013 and 2015, 68% of Armenian adolescents were reported to spend most of their spare time on social media, which considerably shapes their modes of preferred interactions, values and predispositions (Haroyan, 2017). The rising online presence of Armenian youth, accordingly, exposes them to the influences of globalization on their identity development, and the absorption of ideas, values, means of interactions and culture (Huntsinger et al., 2019). When dealing with and trying to understand the teenagers of today, it is imperative to, above all, consider the types of content that they interact with online. This quest inevitably leads to the phenomenon of memes, which is perhaps one of the most fundamental elements of contemporary digital

culture. Qualified by their handiness at being easily shared, mimicked and remixed, memes, through their distinctly characteristic humorous nature, create independent participatory digital cultures, where, in hand with underlying motives of group membership, there is a heightened play of collective identity formation (MacDonald, 2020; Newton et al., 2022).

The fact that such digital content that circulates among adolescents is predominantly humorous in nature essentially points out the importance of humor in their social needs and communication styles (Literat, 2021). Additionally, there is striking resemblance of the effects of online humorous interaction and content exchange to humorous instances in real life, in that they increase perceptions of similarity among people, boost social connectedness and well-being, relieve anxiety, prompt interaction, battle the sense of loneliness, and induce feelings of happiness (Cauberghe et al., 2020).

Given the findings on the roles of online humorous exchanges in the lives of adolescents, the significance of studying instructor humor in relation to student engagement becomes especially appealing in the current times. The study scope is also significant in that it aims to shed light on a subject that has not been previously examined in the Armenian EFL context.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

The field of pedagogy, TEFL included, constantly sees new developments in the approaches to teaching, which, as of recently, tend especially towards student-centeredness and a supportive learning environment (Kassem, 2019). In this regard, humor has been found to hold the benefits of both ensuring the overall positive classroom experience and engaging students in the learning process. The findings on instructor humor, though relatively scant in number, nevertheless predominantly attest its great potential, which in this chapter is broken down to sections relevant to the study objectives. The chapter sections begin by addressing the overall role of humor among adolescents to provide a better understanding of the importance of humor in today's age, and conclude with the relationship between intellectually stimulating teacher practices and student engagement to provide basis for the second research question of this study.

### **2. 1. The Role of Humor Among Adolescents**

Today, the relevance of humor is especially heightened among adolescents, as they not only encounter it on a daily basis through their active online presence, but also use it as a unique medium for communication, sharing of ideas, self-expression, and bonding (Buxbaum et al., 2022). One explanation for the extensive use of social media by young people is its potential to act as a coping mechanism that allows for social synchronization in the constantly changing and globalization-promising reality. In other words, youth relies on it for the sake of warding off the emotional harm that the hectic pace of modern life poses (Botterill et al., 2015). Social media has long been regarded by researchers as a site for manufacturing linguistic and cultural stereotypes. It has, however, been similarly pointed out that, in the current times, humor takes up a similar role within the digital space. Youth is considerably influenced by the online humorous interactions they partake in, as they are said to play a

significant role in facilitating self-other and in-group identity formations, as well as setting the boundaries that define group memberships (Sierra, 2019). When dealing with social media, the focus, as of today, falls greatly on the phenomenon of memes, which through their popular use and demand now stand as necessary cultural artifacts in modern society (Iloh, 2021; Newton et al., 2022).

Memes, which are digital items that are largely imitated and reiterated around the web, have for the past years become an indispensable feature of digital cultures. Memetic exchanges, attracting both popular and academic attention, are essentially rooted in complex social dynamics, where they operate in a decentralized and quite erratic manner, though often connoting intricate coordinative work and pervasive content (Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2015). Being globally and widely distributed, memes are said to act as key elements of participatory digital cultures, strongly signifying the processes of collective identity formation and community building. These humorous and pervasive utterances within the digital realm not only reinforce community ties but also strongly influence identity formation and new communicative expectations both in and outside of the virtual space (Iloh, 2021; Newton et al., 2022; Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2015).

The abundance of online humorous exchanges and the heightened partaking in the digital cultures as members inevitably mold the social needs and communication styles of adolescents (Literat, 2021). The effects of online humorous interactions, which are said to parallel those of real life instances in that they increase perceptions of belonging, boost social connectedness and well-being, reduce stress, help initiate interaction, dispel the sense of loneliness, and induce elevated feelings, also inevitably create experiences and expectations among adolescents that operate both in real and virtual space (Cauberghe et al., 2020; Yus, 2018).

## **2. 2. Humor in Teaching**

The traditional understanding of humor in teaching has evolved from being seen as a source of hindrance to a substantial instructional tool that is greatly encouraged at all academic levels. Research has shown many benefits to incorporating humor in general pedagogy, especially in regards to courses or topics that are often experienced by students as tedious or difficult. In post secondary education, for example, humor was found to positively affect student comprehension and participation in courses such as statistics (Friedman et al., 1999; Lomax & Moosavi, 2002), business law (Reed, 2014; Schwamm, 1946). In other words, humor is found to be helpful in lessons that require more effort and concentration (Torok et al., 2004).

The reasons for including humor in teaching methods and strategies are not few and have been studied extensively. Appropriate instructor humor is said to facilitate the processing, retention and comprehension of new information (Bradford, 1964; Carlson, 2011; Kintsch & Bates, 1977; Lippman & Dunn, 2000; Schmidt, 1994; Schmidt & Williams, 2001; Summerfelt et al., 2010), improve and build problem solving skills (Berk, 2002; Hunsaker, 1988; Klavir & Gorodetsky, 2001; Lefcourt, 2001), relieve and dispel stress in students (Garner, 2006; Lefcourt, 2001; Morreall, 2009; Vaid & Kobler, 2000; Yip & Martin, 2006), increase student motivation (Hunsaker, 1988; Nienaber et al., 2019; Shao et al., 2013; Wanzer & Frymier, 1999), create a safe and communication-inducing classroom environment (Garner, 2006; Hasegawa, 2018; Kane et al., 1977; Morreall, 2009; Pomerantz & Bell, 2011), increase perceptions of teacher credibility (Berk, 2002; Frymier & Thompson, 1992; Hampes, 2006), successfully act as an attention grabbing technique for important course elements (Meeus & Mahieu, 2009; Schmidt, 1994; Summerfelt et al., 2010; Wanzer et al., 2010), and foster greater concentration, especially during tests and exams (Berk & Nanda, 2006). That appropriately used instructor humor colossally contributes to the classroom environment was

also shown in the studies which investigated the perceptions of both students and professors. Torok et al. (2004) in their quantitative study, investigated 3 college professors' (from different academic disciplines: biology, educational psychology, and theater), and 124 of their students' perceptions of instructor humor in teaching and testing. As a result of the surveys used for data collection, it was reported that 74% of college students strongly agreed on appropriate use of humor in the classroom to positively affect their engagement and in-class participation. When asked whether humor in the classroom assisted in learning, 40% of the students pointed out that humor often facilitates learning, while another 40% noted it to always help in this regard.

## **2. 2. 1. Appropriate Humor in Teaching**

Underlying the benefits of instructor humor is the common factor of humor appropriateness, which in the studies is highly stressed as crucial for attaining the positive effects of humor. It is argued that the main difference between an appropriate form of instructional humor and an inappropriate one is that the former establishes grounds for promoting student learning, while the latter is either disparaging or offensive in nature, thus leading to classroom disruptions and pedagogical inefficacy (Sidelinger, 2014; Frymier et al., 2008; Wanzer et al., 2010; Yip & Martin, 2006).

In an attempt to solidify the types of instructor humor that are more conducive to learning, Wanzer et al. (2010) proposed the framework of Instructional Humor Processing Theory (IHPT), which they tested in a preliminary quantitative study with a total sample of 378 students. The study used IHPT both in explaining the types of instructor-generated humor that influence positive student feedback, and in defining the ways in which humorous messages are cognitively and affectively processed to potentially influence student learning and motivation in a classroom. The underlying factor leading to appropriate humor, as

mentioned in the study, is the necessity for it to be well-grasped and cognitively processed by students, so as to avoid potential confusion and divergence from reaping the benefits of the experience. Per the theory, among the elements that play a role in the students' decoding of instructor's humorous utterances, the most important is instructors' awareness of the cultural and behavioral norms of the students in their everyday lives. Once the premise of being able to be perceived and decoded as intended is established, instructor humor, according to the theory, is then to meet the following criteria: first, it ought to be relevant to course material and student knowledge, and, second, it is suggested, though in moderation, to positively violate the expected patterns of a lesson, in other words to be unexpected. The researchers found significant positive correlation between instructor's use of content-related humor and "teacher affective learning ( $r=.49, p<.001$ ), course affective learning ( $r=.45, p<.001$ ), and learning indicators ( $r=.39, p<.001$ )" (p.10). Content-related humor was also reported to increase students' willingness to participate, and enhance their ability to process information with clarity and understanding. In regards to the element of unexpectedness in instructional humor, the study found these positive violations to greatly assist student attention and retention of the material. The latter was also found to reduce psychological distance between students and instructors, hence increasing perceptions of immediacy.

Findings suggest that humor, either spontaneous or planned, when related to the theme of the class, instead of merely being jokes for the sake of their telling, not only serves as a potent constructive ground for teaching but also stimulates students' readiness to participate and engage, together with positively contributing to the class environment (Hunsaker, 1988). In a mixed method study with a sample size of 117 undergraduate students, Garner (2006) found that content-centered humor influenced student engagement with course material both in and outside of the classroom, all the while creating the impression of the instructor having put extra effort in delivering their message. It is important

to note that content-relevance is suggested to be foundational for instructor humor, where all the other possible manifestations of humor would branch from. Since humor is linked with pedagogical and learning benefits, and content-based humorous messages are found to be essential for identifying the latter as appropriate, the use of humor in teaching ought to accordingly stem from the criterion of content-relatedness (Frymier & Shulman, 1995; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Sidelinger, 2014).

## **2. 3. Humor in TEFL**

Though the studies on humor in the L2 learning and teaching contexts are fewer than in general pedagogy, they still predominantly attest the key findings of the latter. The most notable difference, however, is the heightened focus on the appropriate language proficiency that would allow a comprehension of instructor humor, which is otherwise referred to as humor competence. According to Deneire (1995), the linguistic and cultural complexity of humor requires a relatively high level of linguistic and discourse competence, which acts as a necessary resource in perceiving and decoding humorous utterances. The researcher contends that students who have humor competence regard classroom humor as an illustration and restatement of what they already know, and do not feel alienated from the class discourse. The construction and interpretation of humor in the EFL context, hence, demand for a rather sophisticated understanding of linguistic and cultural cues from students, for the sake of ensuring smooth execution of humor. As Bell (2005) posits it in their mixed methods case study, such competence permits students to subconsciously draw their attention to linguistic form(s) and meanings, as a result, prompting and motivating them to feel more comfortable and safe in manipulating and playing with the second language within the proposed humorous terrain. The researcher drew these conclusions from analyzing 32-hour tapes of

naturally occurring interactions that comprised 541 examples of conversational humor, where 204 of the instances were initiated by an NNS, and 337 by an NS.

Literature suggests humor competence to assist students in both experiencing the social subtexts of the humorous utterances and exploiting the functional possibilities of their L2 in social situations (Belz & Reinhardt, 2004). Once humor competence is ensured, which is essentially fundamental for studying the effects and perceptions of instructor humor in L2 contexts, the subject of humor reveals itself for more rigorous observations and findings. As stated by Azizinezhad and Hashemi (2011), the use of humor was found to help overcome stress and nervousness of learning a foreign language, thus making students more open to and embracing of the new culture and linguistic forms, become more forgiving of making mistakes, allow the surges of creativity and improvisation, and be more contributing to class discussions. Additionally, and parallel to the findings on humor in general teaching and learning, appropriate instructor humor was found to strengthen in-class relationships, make course material more appealing, and enhance recall of lesson content (Fki, 2021; Ziyaeemehr & Kumar, 2014).

### **2. 3. 1. Instructor Humor and Student Engagement**

According to Streat (2011), all learning is executed through setting the right mood and fostering student engagement, which, in turn, includes considering and managing the overall mood of the classroom: the levels of anxiety and stress in students. As presumed, emotions play a big part in language learning, thus influencing student motivation and in-class engagement. Shao et al. (2013), highlight the many negative consequences of emotional draining, anxiety, fear and stress on students' optimal learning potential and willingness to participate. Conversely, enjoyment, happiness, and positive emotions are said to greatly

increase student engagement, L2 motivation, and social-behavioral dispositions, as well as lead to better academic achievement (Wang et al., 2021).

From the perspective of humor, emotional stress is logically antithetical, which, though cliched in popular culture, is strongly backed up by the studies on humor's cognitive and physiological implications. As Vaid and Kobler (2000) explain it, emotional stress is linked to laryngeal muscular hypertonicity, causing people to physically and psychologically refrain from articulation, which is the exact opposite of the effect of laughter that at a cognitive level relieves stress and reduces laryngeal muscle tension. It, therefore, comes as no surprise that humor has also been widely used as a therapeutic tool, facilitating expression and social participation. In a similar vein, humor and laughter were postulated to aid learning through enhanced respiration, lower blood pressure, increased oxygenation of blood, and the release of endorphins into the bloodstream (Garner, 2006). Adding to the propositions of humor as a coping mechanism with stress, it was also found to act as an important emotion regulating mechanism, permitting positive synchronicity of the moods of those affected (Yip & Martin, 2006).

On par with the psychological and physiological observations on the subject, the findings on instructor humor attest humor to increase student engagement on the condition of it creating an enjoyable classroom environment, which helps significantly reduce student anxiety (Wanzer & Frymier, 1999). Research on humor in TEFL reveals similar effects of its use, given that, despite the potential student hesitations and reservedness in light of SLA anxiety, instructor humor greatly assists in dispelling fear and stress by creating a safe environment that essentially calls for student engagement and participation (Fki, 2021; Heidari-Shahreza, 2018; Pomerantz & Bell, 2011; Weninger & Kiss, 2013).

It is imperative to note that in EFL-contextualized humor, content-relevance, again, factored in coordinated positive outcomes of instructor humor. With the perception of teacher

humor related to course content, students reported more enjoyment and less boredom in regards to class lessons (Bieg et al., 2017).

## **2. 4. Student Intellectual Stimulation and Engagement**

Although appropriate instructor humor is found to positively correlate with overall student learning, there exists a contention that perceived cognitive learning has greater association with affective learning, and thus contributes more to an increase in student engagement, motivation and learning than the use of classroom humor. In their quantitative research that explores the influences of intellectual stimulation on student motivation and engagement, Shin and Bolkan (2020) use the self-determination theory (SDT) in explaining teacher's use of intellectually stimulating behaviors on students' self-efficacy. The study was conducted with a sample of 418 undergraduate students that were recruited from 31 communication classes: 164 of the participants identified as male, 240 as female, one as nonbinary, one preferred not to answer, and 12 individuals did not report their gender. The age of the study participants' ranged from 18 to 37 ( $M = 18.8$ ,  $SD = 1.9$ ). In terms of the races of the participating students, 116 participants identified as Asian, 14 as black/African American, 168 as Latino/ Hispanic, 14 as Middle Eastern, one as Native American, eight as Pacific Islander, 53 as white/Caucasian, 28 "mixed," three as "other, and thirteen did not report their race. Having analyzed the data collected over the span of 8-10 weeks of a semester, the researchers found that perceived intellectual stimulation was negatively associated with students' feelings of boredom and positively associated with their autonomous decisions to engage in class activities and sustain their attention in class, which in turn, influenced increased self-efficacy for learning. Continuing the self-efficacy narrative, it has been reported by Bolkan and Goodboy (2014) that intellectually stimulating teacher behaviors accounted for more variance in perceived cognitive learning than the impact of

instructor humor. The study recruited participants from upper-division communication classes at a large Western university, which comprised a total sample of 208 female, one unreported, and 91 male students, with the ages ranging from 19 to 50 ( $M = 22.8$ ,  $SD = 3.8$ ). Within the study, the impact of humor on cognitive engagement was shown to be minimal, while the latter was reported to have a significant correlation with affective learning that, as proposed by the self-determination theory, fulfills students' needs and therein increases students' perceptions of self-efficacy that, in turn, promote their intrinsic interest and engagement in the classroom. The use of intellectually stimulating teacher behaviors is suggested to influence student intrinsic motivation by prompting them to approach their learning in thorough and strategic manners, instead of adopting surface-level approaches to their studies. These dispositions have been reported to yield positive learning outcomes with heightened student engagement within the classroom setting (Bolkan et al., 2011).

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

This study adopted a survey research methodology with correlational data analyses to examine the following two relationships: the correlation between perceived instructor humor and students' engagement, and that of perceived intellectual stimulation and students' engagement. The two relationships were observed within the context of an Armenian afterschool EFL program.

The ensuing chapter sections, which are titled accordingly, expand on the sampling strategy, the research model utilized, the overall procedure followed, and the specific instruments used for measuring.

### **3. 1. Participants and Procedures**

Participants in this study were recruited from an afterschool EFL program in Yerevan, Armenia, and comprised a total sample of 163 students. 104 participants identified as female, and 57 identified as male. The age of the participants ranged from 11 to 18 ( $M = 14.42$ ,  $SD = 1.39$ ), which allowed targeting the population that is especially digital in its communication, ideation and expression, hence all the more prone to the frequent exchange and consumption of online humorous content. Since, as mentioned in the literature, students' complete understanding of humorous utterances in English is often found a necessary criterion for research on humor in TEFL, the proficiency levels of the participants were chosen to range from pre-intermediate to upper-intermediate. In addition to ensuring humor competence, this choice in proficiency levels also allowed for the administration of the scales in English and without translation.

Insight into the effects of instructor humor and intellectual stimulation on EFL classroom engagement was made possible through an anonymous survey. The survey was distributed and collected online for the sake of ensuring trustworthiness of the results, and

avoiding paper waste. Participants were instructed to keep in mind the EFL class they were attending at the moment of data collection as they were responding to each of the measurements listed in the section below. No risks were expected for the participants, while complete anonymity was guaranteed and informed of. A consent form for the participating students was provided on the first page of the survey, indicating also that no personal identifiers were to be collected. In addition to the three measuring scales used for the purposes of the study, the survey also asked for the participants' level of English proficiency, age and gender.

Overall, 10 EFL classes from the afterschool program that met the mentioned criteria of proficiency and age were chosen to participate in this study. Only two of the classes were taught by the same instructor, thus making it eight different teachers instructing the participants.

### **3. 2. Data Collection**

The research data was collected in class via an online survey, with the researcher present and ready to answer the potential questions of the participants. The survey consisted of three measuring scales in their original language: English. It was completed and submitted by the participants through their phones, with the network connection distributed by either the researcher or the institution. Before initiating the data collection process, participating students were provided with a brief explanation of the study and its objectives, as well as the details of their rights. Participants were also notified that their contribution to the research is voluntary, and that they could withdraw from participating at any given moment.

The two of the measuring instruments used in this study were in reference to teachers' practices, while the third one was used to measure student engagement. The scales that addressed pedagogical practices were Perceived Effect of Pedagogical Humor and Student

Intellectual Stimulation Scale, which were separately correlated with student engagement to identify the strongest relationship with the latter.

The survey consisted of 35 items (see Appendix A), excluding those that asked for age, gender and proficiency level. Upon completion of the survey, participants were directed to a page with a specially tailored confirmation letter that thanked them for their time and effort, explaining also their contribution to the findings on humor in the Armenian EFL context.

The following paragraphs detail each measuring instrument that was used in this study. The scales adopted for data collection are outlined and expanded on, while their validity and reliability are reported. The selection of the measurement tools used for this research were based on their successful implementation in previous studies on humor in the EFL, L1, and general pedagogical contexts. It shall also be noted that none of the scale items were adapted or reverse scored.

#### *Student Intellectual Stimulation Scale (SISS)*

The Student Intellectual Stimulation Scale, developed by Bolkan and Goodboy (2010), is a 30-item scale that was built around the following three core behaviors outlined by the researchers: using an interactive teaching style, challenging students, and encouraging independent thought. The scale was created to measure how intellectually stimulated students feel in regards to the three behaviors. Bolkan and Goodboy framed the concept of intellectual stimulation as the ability to activate the thought process and imagination, necessitate problem awareness and problem solving, and relate to personal technical expertise and intellectual power. The SISS, thus, studies the dimensions of intellectual stimulation via three subscales: interactive teaching style (e.g. “my teacher has a boring teaching style,” and “my teacher uses an innovative teaching style to get students excited about learning”), challenging students

(e.g. “my teacher helps me see things we learn about in new perspectives,” and “my teacher pushes me to produce quality work”), and encouraging independent thought (e.g. “my teacher encourages independent thought from students”). As a substitute to the original 30-item scale, Bolkan and Goodboy created a 10-item scale to avoid response fatigue in participants. This short version, still retaining the three dimensions, was tested by the researchers to remain similarly high in alpha reliability as its parent scale. Previous alpha reliability obtained was .96 from a study conducted by Bolkan (2015). The current study uses the 10-item scale with each statement assessed on a 5-point Likert scale with responses ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) (see Appendix A). In this study the Chronbach’s alpha reliability obtained for the overall scale was .71 ( $M = 4.21$ ,  $SD = 0.39$ ), and .67, .53, and .43 for the three dimensions.

#### *Perceived Effect of Pedagogical Humor Scale (PEPH)*

The Perceived Effect of Pedagogical Humor in the Language Classroom questionnaire was developed by Askildson (2005) to measure students’ perceptions of teacher humor. The scale includes 13 items, each with 1 to 5 response options of corresponding qualitative values on an inclining Likert-scale (see Appendix A). For instance, one of the items asked the following: “Do you feel that humor generally improves your ability to learn a language in the classroom by creating a more comfortable and conducive learning environment overall?”, offering these responses: 1 (hampers learning), 2 (no effect), 3 (slight improvement), 4 (improvement), 5 (considerable improvement). The Chronbach alpha reliability coefficient of the scale obtained for this study was .81 ( $M = 3.76$ ,  $SD = 0.48$ ).

### *Student Engagement Scale (SE)*

The Student Engagement Scale, developed by Mazer (2012), was used in this study as an instrument to measure student engagement within the selected EFL classes. The scale itself was designed to explain the relationship among classroom communication, learning and emotional response in students. The elements comprising this measurement are cognitive in nature and target emotional reactions of students towards engaging in learning situations, instead of avoiding them. The scale elaborates on four dimensions of engagement: silent in class behaviors (i.e. attending class, taking notes, etc.), oral in class behaviors (i.e. questioning, participating, discussing, etc.), thinking about course content (i.e. thinking about and relating course material to personal experiences), and out of class behaviors (i.e. reviewing course material, discussing lesson content with others, etc.). The instrument consists of 13 items that are each assessed on a 5-point Likert scale with responses ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) (see Appendix A). The Cronbach alpha reliability coefficients as previously studied by Tindage and Myers (2020) ranged from .66 to .88 for the four dimensions of engagement. The Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient obtained within this study ranged from .64 to .84 for the four dimensions, and showed .79 ( $M = 4.07$ ,  $SD = 0.47$ ) for the overall scale.

### **3. 3. Data Analysis**

The research data obtained from the three measuring instruments were analyzed via the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), version 25, for Windows. The three scales used in data collection were tested for Chronbach's alpha reliability, with the means and standard deviations obtained. For statistically answering the research questions of the study, Pearson correlation matrices and regression analyses were executed in eliciting the relationships between all the variables in question. In this manner, data on student

engagement were separately analyzed in relation to perceived effect of pedagogical humor and student intellectual stimulation via one-tailed correlation and linear regression tests.

## **Chapter 4: Results**

The analysis of results and their interpretation are reported in the following sections of this chapter. The sections examine the data sets, Pearson correlation matrices, and the regression analyses of humor perception, student engagement and student intellectual stimulation. Concludingly, the chapter reports on the statistical analysis of the two research questions that form the conceptual basis of this research. In this study, perceived pedagogical humor (PEPH) and student intellectual stimulation (SISS) are chosen as predictors, while student engagement (SE) acts as an outcome variable.

### **4. 1. Descriptive Analysis**

Table 1 showcases the characteristics of the data in relation to the variables of the study: perceived effect of pedagogical humor, student intellectual stimulation, and student engagement, including the subscales of SISS and SE. Table 2 reports on the correlation coefficients between PEPH and SE, while Tables 3 presents the model summary of SE in regards to PEPH. Tables 4 and 5 concern the correlation coefficients by gender, and Table 6 lists the correlation coefficients between SISS and SE, with their subscales included. All the tables are illustrated in detail to help create a better and more thorough understanding of the results, as well as help establish a basis for further implications and conclusions on reported data.

*Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Variables (scale range = 1-5) (N=163)*

Variables	Mean	SD	$\alpha$
PEPH	3.76	0.48	.81
SISS	4.21	0.39	.71
SISS_ITS	4.46	0.48	.67
SISS_CS	4.11	0.56	.43
SISS_EIT	3.97	0.58	.53
SE	4.07	0.47	.79
SE_SIC	4.34	0.52	.72
SE_OIC	4.16	0.71	.84
SE_TACC	4.09	0.71	.77
SE_OUT	3.65	0.79	.64

Note: *PEPH* = Perceived Effect of Pedagogical Humor; *SISS* = Student Intellectual Stimulation Scale; *SISS\_ITS* = Interactive Teaching Style; *SISS\_CS* = Challenging Students; *SISS\_EIT* = Encouraging Independent Thought; *SE* = Student Engagement; *SE\_SIC* = Silent in Class; *SE\_OIC* = Oral in Class; *SE\_TACC* = Thinking About Course Content; *SE\_OUT* = Out of Class

Table 1, above, presents the descriptive statistics of the dependent (SE) and the independent (PEPH and SISS) variables of the study. The table also reports on the subscales that comprise the SE and SISS scales for additional insight. As previously noted in the methodology section, none of the items from the scales used in this study were reversed.

The highest mean among the three variables, as illustrated, was obtained for student intellectual stimulation, with a score of 4.21. Second highest mean was recorded for the variable of student engagement, with a score of 4.07. Perceived effect of pedagogical humor scored relatively lower, with a 3.76 mean. In terms of standard deviation, as shown in the

table, student perceptions of intellectual stimulation, though having the highest mean, showed the lowest variance among participants ( $SD = 0.39$ ). The lower variance in students' reports on intellectual stimulation suggests that the responses did not deviate from the mean as much as the other two observed variables. Student engagement ( $SD = 0.47$ ) and perceived effect of pedagogical humor ( $SD = 0.48$ ), in turn, differed only slightly in their standard deviation values. Since the two variables scored greater than student intellectual stimulation, the assumption is that participants' perceptions of intellectual stimulation varied significantly more than those on engagement and perceived pedagogical humor.

*Table 2: Pearson Correlation Matrix (N=163)*

Variables	SE	SE_SIC	SE_OIC	SE_TACC	SE_OUT
1 PEPH	0.25**	0.17*	0.21**	0.25**	0.07

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed)

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (1-tailed)

Table 2 presents the correlation coefficients of the two variables: perceived effect of pedagogical humor and student engagement. This Pearson product-moment correlation was computed to examine the statistical relationship between total Perceived Effect of Pedagogical Humor (PEPH) and Student Engagement (SE). The correlation analysis also included the subscales of the SE scale, for the sake of identifying the factors that are most conducive to a significant relationship.

As reported in the table, the findings reveal a slightly moderate correlation between perceived effect of pedagogical humor and student engagement ( $r=0.25$ ). When examining

the relationship in more depth, it is revealed that the student engagement dimension of thinking about course content (TACC) has the highest correlation ( $r=0.245$ ) with perceived pedagogical humor among the other subscales at the 0.01 level, while the dimension of out of class behaviors (OC) received the lowest score ( $r=0.068$ ) in relation to PEPH, thus indicating a weak correlation.

The inference, accordingly, is that perceived instructor humor and student engagement have a positive relationship with a close-to-moderate correlation. Though the correlation is relatively low and not very obvious, it is nonetheless suggested that students' perceptions of pedagogical humor can slightly promote an increase in student engagement, and vice versa.

*Table 3: Pearson Correlation Matrix by Gender (Male) (N=57)*

Variables	SE	SE_SIC	SE_OIC	SE_TACC	SE_OUT
1 PEPH	0.39**	0.11	0.26*	0.28*	0.24*

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed)

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (1-tailed)

*Table 4: Pearson Correlation Matrix by Gender (Female) (N=104)*

Variables	SE	SE_SIC	SE_OIC	SE_TACC	SE_OUT
1 PEPH	0.19*	0.19*	0.19*	0.24**	-0.01

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed)

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (1-tailed)

Interesting dynamics of the results were observed in correlating instructor humor and student engagement by gender. Table 4 and 5 present the correlation coefficients of the two variables: perceived effect of pedagogical humor and student engagement, grouped by gender. When compared, the two tables reveal a striking difference in terms of male and female participants' perceptions of instructor humor and its correlation with student engagement. As reported, the male participants' attitudes reveal higher correlation between instructor humor and student engagement ( $r=0.39$ ) in comparison to those of the female participants ( $r=0.19$ ). In regards to the four dimensions of student engagement: silent in class (SIC), oral in class (OIC), thinking about course content (TACC), and out of class (OUT), TACC showed the highest correlation with instructor humor for both the male ( $r=0.28$ ) and female ( $r=0.24$ ) participants, indicating that the use of humor had the most relevance for and

influence on thinking about course content, which, in turn, reasserts the factor of content-relevance previously covered in the Literature Review chapter. Silent in class behaviors and instructor humor showed the lowest correlation for the male participants ( $r=0.11$ ), though a slightly higher one for the female participants ( $r=0.19$ ); while out of class behaviors showed very low correlation for the female participants ( $r=-0.01$ ), and a considerably higher one for the male participants ( $r=0.24$ ).

The inference accordingly is that perceived instructor humor and student engagement were seen to have higher correlation by the male participants, where the dimension of thinking about course content reported to hold the highest value point.

*Table 5: Pearson Correlation Matrix (N=163)*

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1 SISS	1								
2 SISS_ITS	.76**	1							
3 SISS_EIT	.75**	.33**	1						
4 SISS_CS	.74**	.33**	.37**	1					
5 SE	.39**	.17*	.38**	.35**	1				
6 SE_SIC	.29**	.19**	.27**	.19**	.76**	1			
7 SE_OIC	.24**	.09	.27**	.19**	.59**	.32**	1		
8 SE_TACC	.19**	.04	.21**	.21**	.74**	.48**	.35**	1	
9 SE_OUT	.36**	.15*	.31**	.36**	.67**	.29**	.22**	.23**	1

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed)

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (1-tailed)

Note: SISS = Student Intellectual Stimulation Scale; SISS\_ITS = Interactive Teaching Style; SISS\_CS = Challenging Students; SISS\_EIT = Encouraging Independent Thought; SE = Student Engagement; SE\_SIC = Silent in Class; SE\_OIC = Oral in Class; SE\_TACC = Thinking About Course Content; SE\_OUT = Out of Class

Table 3 presents the correlation coefficients of the two variables: student intellectual stimulation and student engagement. Together with the subscales of the Student Engagement (SE) scale, the analysis also included those of the Student Intellectual Stimulation Scale (SISS) in order to identify the factors that would potentially play a role in establishing the strongest correlation between the two.

As reported in the table, the correlations among the variables are significant at the 0.01 level, and reveal that there exists a moderate correlation between perceived intellectual stimulation and student engagement ( $r=0.39$ ). When analyzed in greater detail, the findings reveal the dimension of challenging students (CS) from the SISS scale to have the highest correlation ( $r=0.38$ ) with student engagement among the rest of the subscales, thus indicating that student engagement, overall, and the perceptions of being challenged have the biggest reciprocity.

The inference, accordingly, is that the perceptions of intellectual stimulation and student engagement have a positive relationship with a moderate correlation. Though the correlation is not precisely strong between the two, it is nonetheless presumed that the presence of one can promote an increase in the other, and vice versa.

## **Chapter 5: Discussions and Conclusions**

### **5. 1. Implications**

The current study aimed at contributing to the field of ESL in Armenia by observing students' perceptions of pedagogical humor and its effects on student engagement. Since student engagement was numerously reported to have a strong and positive correlation with the teaching practices that were intellectually stimulated, this study used the latter as another independent variable for comparison. The insights lended by this study are noteworthy in that instructor humor was not previously studied in the context of Armenian EFL classrooms. The study, therefore, was used as a window to determining, first, whether humor is significant enough in implementing in the Armenian EFL classrooms, and, second, whether it could act as a covariate for student engagement (SE). The study results cannot be generalized, as the data was collected from one particular EFL afterschool program.

The first research question of the study asked about the relationship between students' perceptions of instructor humor and student engagement. The findings showed slightly weak, verging on moderate, correlation between the two variables, thus suggesting that perceived instructor humor, though still positively affecting students in terms of engagement, was found to be relatively insignificant in its effect. There, however, was an interesting nuance that revealed itself during the analysis, which concerned the difference of the male and female participants' attitudes toward the subject. When analyzed by gender, a higher correlation was found between instructor humor and student engagement for the male participants, thus indicating that they perceived pedagogical humor to influence their classroom engagement more than the female participants did.

The second research question sought to find whether student intellectual stimulation is stronger in its relation to student engagement than perceived instructor humor. The results of the analyses showed greater correlation and significance between student intellectual

stimulation and engagement in comparison to those between instructor humor and student engagement, demonstrating that the teaching practices that focus on intellectual stimulation are more effective and conducive to student engagement than the pedagogical use of humor.

It shall be noted, however, that the correlation between pedagogical humor and student engagement for male participants were equal in coefficients ( $r=0.39$ ) as the overall SISS and SE correlational coefficient ( $r=0.39$ ).

## **5. 2. Limitations**

There were a number of limitations in this study, the most prominent of which was the scarcity of previous research on the influences of humor on student engagement in the EFL context, especially that of Armenia. Another limitation noticed in conducting the study was the unavailability of scales that specifically measure student perceptions of humor and its effects in a classroom setting. Sample size was also among the encountered limitations, which if expanded, would have certainly lended a considerably more reliable and generalizable picture. In regards to the sample, it would have also been beneficial to include participants from various EFL programs across the city or country, which may have helped enhance the findings on perceived instructor humor by providing a larger scope for observation.

Given that the study observed the relationship between instructor humor and student engagement in only one particular afterschool EFL program in Armenia and still managed to find a slight correlation, it is safe to assume that the subject of humor holds the potential of being studied for additional insight that might lead to more optimistic conclusions.

### **5. 3. Future Research**

Considering the findings on instructor humor and its relationship with student engagement, the subject is certainly worth furthering, testing and studying from alternative angles. There are many research foci that could be used in examining the vast terrain of humor, though, within the scope of this study, one thing that particularly stood out when observing the classes during data collection was the reactions of the more extroverted students in comparison to the more introverted ones, which were very positive and embracing of humor in general. Since the study did not include any scales on measuring these variables, it would be interesting to see the correlation between student personalities and their perceptions on humorous interactions in future research. Another important aspect that would also be worthy of studying in the future would be the influence of online humorous interactions and exchanges on students' expectations of EFL instructors or the learning process in general. This is particularly imperative in the current times, as already noted in the problem statement of this study, and would yield great insight into the possible ways of enhancing rapport, strengthening the levels of student engagement, and overall constructing a more conducive learning environment. Concludingly, as the analyses of this study revealed striking differences between the male and female participants' perceptions on the subject, the factor of gender could also be considered as a ground for future observations.

### **5. 4. Conclusion**

This study aimed to test whether perceived pedagogical humor could act as a predictor of student engagement within the Armenian EFL afterschool context. Although the findings revealed low correlation between the two, the relationship was still positive, thus, worthy of further examination. The suggestion for future research, therefore, is that instructor humor be observed either from other angles or in relation to other variables, as these would

allow for a clearer understanding of the factors that inhibit the full effects of pedagogical humor on student engagement.

Needless to say that for those considering furthering the research on instructor humor in Armenia, this study will readily serve as a helping hand.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Student Perception of Humor in an EFL Classroom Survey**

#### ***Section 1: Consent Form***

The American University of Armenia  
Informed Consent to Participate in Research  
Study title: MA TEFL

This survey is completely voluntary and anonymous. If you don't wish to take it, you are free to do so. If you start the survey, you can always change your mind and stop at any time.

#### **What is the purpose of this study?**

This study aims to find the connection between the use of humor in class and student participation, engagement and intellectual stimulation.

#### **What will you do?**

You will be asked several questions about the teaching methods of your instructor, the use of humor in class, and your overall performance in and outside of class.

#### **Things to note:**

- Some questions may be personal or upsetting. You may quit the survey at any time.
- Data is anonymous. None of your personal information is collected or seen.

#### **Possible benefits:**

- You will greatly help the research on humor in teaching, and possibly contribute to the EFL teaching approaches in Armenia.

#### **How long will it take?**

The survey will take somewhere between 15 to 20 minutes.

#### **Agreement to Participate**

Your participation is completely voluntary, and you can stop it at any time.

If you agree to take the survey, check the button below to start completing it.

## ***Section 2: General Information***

Please answer the following questions on general information. Keep in mind that this survey is anonymous and does not collect any personal information.

1. What is your EEC level?

Pre-Intermediate  
 Intermediate  
 Upper-Intermediate  
 Advanced

2. What is your age? \_\_\_\_

3. What is your gender? \_\_\_\_

## ***Section 3: The Survey***

Please read the survey statements carefully. If you have any questions, feel free to ask for explanations. Please answer the survey questions as truthfully as possible. Keep in mind that this survey is anonymous and does not collect any personal information.

### ***Student Intellectual Stimulation Scale***

**Directions: Use the provided scale to answer the following questions.**

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree

1. My teacher uses unique activities to get the class involved with the course material.  
\_\_\_\_

2. My teacher uses exciting teaching techniques in class. \_\_\_\_

3. My teacher helps us get excited about learning through classroom activities. \_\_\_\_

4. My teacher stimulates students to help us get involved in the learning process in a variety of ways. \_\_\_\_

5. My teacher challenges me to be the best student I can be. \_\_\_\_

6. My teacher makes me work hard to ensure that I really know the material well.. \_\_\_\_

7. My teacher helps me realize that my hard work is worth it. \_\_\_\_
8. My teacher helps me think deeply about the topics taught in class. \_\_\_\_
9. My teacher encourages me to come to my own conclusions about course material.  
\_\_\_\_\_
10. My teacher wants me to think critically about what we are learning. \_\_\_\_

*Perceived Effect of Pedagogical Humor Scale*

**Directions:** Answer the following set of questions on the given scales of 1 to 5.

1. How would you rate your teacher in terms of their overall effectiveness as a teacher?

1	2	3	4	5
Totally ineffective	Slightly ineffective	Moderately effective	Effective	Extremely effective

2. How often (on average) does your instructor use humor (i.e. jokes, witticisms, humorous facial expressions, funny stories, etc.) during each lesson?

1	2	3	4	5
Uses no humor	1-3 times	4-7 times	8-11 times	12 times or more

3. How much of the humor used by your language instructor is related or relevant to the lesson material?

1	2	3	4	5
None	A little	About half	Most	All

4. To what degree does humor make you feel more relaxed (or less anxious) in your language classroom?

1	2	3	4	5
Increases anxiety	No effect	Slightly relaxed	Noticeably relaxed	Considerably relaxed

5. To what degree does humor in English increase your interest in learning English?

1	2	3	4	5
Decrease in interest	No increase	Slightly increase	Noticeably increase	Considerably increase

6. Do you feel that you learn more about (or come closer to) English culture by using or hearing humor in English?

1	2	3	4	5
Not at all	A little more	Slightly more	Noticeably more	Considerably more

7. Do you feel that your teacher's use of humor makes him/her more approachable in class?

1	2	3	4	5
Less approachable	No effect	Slightly more	Noticeably more	Considerably more

8. Do you feel that classroom humor generally helps you in learning a language by creating a more comfortable and conducive learning environment overall?

1	2	3	4	5
Hampers learning	No effect	Slight improvement	Improvement	Considerable improvement

9. How often does your instructor use humorous examples in English (e.g. jokes, puns, comic strips, funny stories, etc.) to explain grammar, vocabulary, spelling, etc. during a lesson?

1	2	3	4	5
Never	1-2 times	3-4 times	5-6 times	7 times or more

10. To what degree do you feel that using humor in English during explanations (as characterized in question #9 above) helps you learn English?

1	2	3	4	5
Not at all	Very little	Somewhat	Noticeably	Considerably

11. In your opinion, what is the ideal amount of humor (number of humorous items used) for a typical lesson in order to create the most comfortable classroom environment for learning?

1	2	3	4	5
None	1-3 times	4-7 times	8-11 times	12 times or more

12. In your opinion, overall, how important is humor for language learning in the classroom?

1	2	3	4	5
Not at all	Minimally	Slightly	Important	Considerably important

13. How often (on average) do you use humor to communicate in English during each lesson?

1	2	3	4	5
Never	1-3 times	4-7 times	8-11 times	12 times or more

#### *Student Engagement Scale*

**Directions:** Use the provided scale to answer the following questions.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree

1. I listen attentively to the instructor during class. \_\_\_\_

2. I give my teacher my full attention during class. \_\_\_\_

3. I listen attentively to my classmates' contributions during class discussions. \_\_\_\_

4. I always attend class. \_\_\_\_

5. I participate during class discussions by sharing my thoughts/opinions. \_\_\_\_

6. I participate during class discussions by speaking. \_\_\_\_

7. I think about how I can use the course material in my everyday life. \_\_\_\_

8. I think about how the course material relates to my life. \_\_\_\_

9. I think about how the course material will help me in my future career/profession. \_\_\_\_
10. I review/study my notes outside of class. \_\_\_\_
11. I always practice before a test or quiz out of class. \_\_\_\_
12. I talk about the topics discussed in class with others outside of class. \_\_\_\_

Thank you for your time and participation! Your response will help researchers better understand the nature and effects of humor in the Armenian EFL context.