Is This Thing On? Teacher Views of Incorporating Humor Into Online Language Classes

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Humor has numerous potential benefits in language teaching, but the sudden shift to online instruction in 2020 forced many teachers to re-examine their approach to using it. This study surveyed 59 English language teachers' perceptions of using humor during online instruction in four key areas: differences between online and face-to-face (F2F) humor in teaching, humor as part of the teacher's online repertoire, benefits of humor in online teaching, and challenges of teaching with humor online. Despite strikingly divergent views about the differences between using humor in F2F and online instruction, many participants reported still finding ways to use humor in the online format. While the perceived benefits of using humor were generally similar in both contexts, online teaching presented numerous new challenges, such as a lack of nonverbal cues from learners. Open-ended participant comments provided deeper insights into the differences, benefits, and challenges of incorporating humor into online classes.

ユーモアは語学教育において多くの効果が期待できるが、2020年のオンライン教育への急転換により、多くの教師がユーモアの活用方法を見直す必要に迫られた。本研究では、59名の英語教師を対象にオンライン授業におけるユーモアの使用に関する認識を4つのテーマ（オンライン授業と対面授業でのユーモアの違い、オンライン授業のレパートリーとしてのユーモア、オンライン授業におけるユーモアの利点、オンライン授業でユーモアを使用する際の課題）に分けて調査した。参加者においては、対面とオンラインでのユーモアの使い方の違いについて、特に意見が分かれたが、多くの参加者は、オンライン形式でもユーモアを使う方法を見つけたと報告している。認識されているユーモアの利点はどちらの状況でも似ていると考えられるが、オンライン形式では、学習者からの非言語的な合図がないなど、ユーモアを使う上での新たな課題が数多く示された。参加者の自由形式のコメントからは、オンライン授業にユーモアを取り入れることの対面との相違点、利点、課題についての深い洞察が得られた。

English language teachers in Japan faced an unprecedented challenge starting in the spring of 2020 as concerns over COVID-19 resulted in their courses being moved online. Acquiring the technological skills necessary to implement online classes was a daunting prospect, but many teachers also worried whether their habitual teaching practices, including the use of humor, would still be effective in this new teaching context. In fact, in a January 2021 post in the Online Teaching Japan Facebook group, one teacher questioned his learners' ability to understand or appreciate his use of humorous materials designed to spice up an online class activity. In other words, he wondered whether teacher use of humor naturally translates to this new teaching context, or whether online instruction makes it more challenging to interact with learners in a humorous way.

As we, the authors, consider humor a vital component of our own teaching repertoire, we had the same concern. Humor is an invaluable resource for connecting with our learners and helping them feel less anxious about speaking English. In addition, our previous research (Neff & Rucynski, 2017) has shown that Japanese learners also appreciate the use of humor in English language classes, particularly for its positive impact on enjoyability of learning and on classroom atmosphere. In the context of online classes, however, we wondered whether humor still has the same benefits and, with so many new complications and variables, what the role of humor in online teaching is. As such, this study is an attempt to answer these questions.

The Benefits of Humor in Education

The impact of humor in education is such that it has been referred to as a potential "magic bullet" (Bieg et al., 2017). Much of the research promoting the use of humor in education focuses on the emotional benefits. Humor has particularly been touted for its positive impact on teacher immediacy, or ability to bring learners and teachers closer together (Wanzer et al., 2006). Similarly, the use of humor can improve the class atmosphere, thus reducing learner anxiety and fostering greater participation (Reddington & Waring, 2015; Wagner & Urios-Aparisi, 2011). Finally, humor has the power to make the learning process more engaging (Berk, 2002).

While these interpersonal benefits could apply to any educational context, humor also has benefits specific to language teaching. For instance, Gardner (2008) demonstrated how humor can be used to enhance language and culture instruction. As humor is such an integral part of culture, other researchers have stressed the importance of understanding the humor of the target culture(s) in developing intercultural communicative competence (Bell, 2011; Davies, 2003). Many language learners lack the confidence or motivation to actively communicate in their L2, but researchers have endorsed humor as a tool for creating an atmosphere that makes language learning more enjoyable and memorable (Forman, 2011; Pomerantz & Bell, 2011).

Benefits of Humor in Online Teaching

Despite any barriers to using humor in online teaching, pre-pandemic research suggests value in pursuing it as a means of overcoming some of the limitations of online teaching itself. For example, Shatz and LoSchiavo (2005) found that using humor in online teaching resulted in increased student participation and course enjoyment. Despite the online format, students commented that including a humorous component made the teacher seem more approachable. Other researchers (e.g., McCabe et al., 2017; Smith & Wortley, 2017) have argued that humor can help learners be more creative and open in online environments. Rather than viewing online teaching as a format that restricts the use of humor, Anderson (2011) suggested that humor is instead a strategy for "taking the distance out of distance education" (p. 80). In light of these assertions, we sought to gather additional perspectives from language teachers currently conducting online lessons to determine to what degree the pursuit of using humor in online teaching is indeed worth the effort.

Challenges of Incorporating Humor Into Online Teaching

Some research has already suggested a negative impact of emergency remote teaching (ERT) on foreign language classes. For instance, Resnik and Dewaele (2021) found that language learners complained of ERT classes being less interesting than face-to-face (F2F) classes and that language learning enjoyment decreased, because online teaching provided less emotional resonance.

Despite the potential benefits of using humor in their lessons, the sudden shift to ERT may have severely limited teachers' ability to do so. Henderson (2021) suggested five reasons why using humor is more difficult online: 1) missed contextual cues, 2) technical issues, 3) less contagious laughter, 4) students with their webcams off, and 5) more distractions. Additionally, Smith & Wortley (2017) stressed that attempting to use humor in online teaching is more time consuming, as it disadvantages spontaneity. While humor can be a powerful tool for increasing foreign language enjoyment and decreasing learner anxiety, the new online teaching environment may make its implementation more challenging.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

Designed to investigate English language teachers' views of incorporating humor into online teaching, this study aimed to answer the following four research questions (RQs):

RQ1: Do language teachers view using humor in online contexts to be fundamentally different from using it in F2F classes?

RQ2: How do language teachers manage to incorporate humor into online teaching?

RQ3: What do language teachers view as the main benefits and challenges of using humor in online teaching?

RQ4: To what degree are views about perceived differences between using humor in online and F2F contexts correlated with perceived benefits and challenges of using humor online?

Participants and Instrumentation

The participants were 59 self-reported English teachers. For approximately one month, beginning in early February of 2021, a call for survey respondents was posted to the Facebook page of four relevant groups, namely Online Teaching Japan and the Tokyo, Kobe, and Osaka chapters of JALT. As our aim was to investigate the perceived impact of transitioning to online instruction on humor use in teaching, we specifically solicited individuals who considered the use of humor an integral part of their practice. Although the respondents represented a wide range of teaching contexts, the majority (48) reported teaching at the tertiary level and being based in Japan. Most also reported having spent the previous year teaching 50 percent or more of their English lessons synchronously online.

The study data were collected in accordance with the principles of convergent mixed-method design (Creswell, 2017). Adapted from the instrument originally used in our previous study on student perceptions of humor (Neff & Rucynski, 2017), with alterations and additions made to better suit the

targeted participants (i.e., teachers) and the online focus of this project, the survey (see Appendix) was divided into four sections, each comprising four to five Likert-scale items followed by a short, open-ended follow-up response item and targeting one of four underlying variables: 1) *perceived differences between using humor in online and F2F teaching contexts* (RQ1, RQ4), 2) *degree and amount of humor in the teacher's online repertoire* (RQ2), 3) *perceived benefits of humor in online teaching* (RQ3, RQ4), and 4) *perceived challenges of teaching with humor online* (RQ3, RQ4). Response options for the Likert-type items were on a six-point scale: 1 – "Strongly Disagree"; 2 – "Disagree"; 3 – "Slightly Disagree"; 4 – "Slightly Agree"; 5 – "Agree"; 6 – "Strongly Agree." Each short-response item allowed answers of up to 1,500 characters in length. Survey participation was completely voluntary and anonymous, although additional demographic data, including gender, nationality, and years of teaching experience, were collected (see Table 1).

Table 1

Participant Characteristics

Characteristic	*n*	%
Nationality		
USA	33	55.9
UK	9	15.3
Australia	7	11.9
Canada	3	5.1
Japan	2	3.4
Other	5	8.5
Teaching experience		
1-5 years	2	3.4
6-10 years	5	8.5
More than 10 years	52	88.1
Gender		
Female	31	52.5
Male	28	47.5
Unspecified	0	0.0

Analyses and Results
Quantitative Findings

As the possible range of participant mean scores for each group of Likert-scale items spanned from a minimum of 1.0 to a maximum of 6.0, with a mid-point of 3.5, the overall results indicated a generally positive endorsement of using humor in online language teaching (see Table 2). The highest mean (*M* = 4.99) was for *perceived benefits of humor in online teaching*, while the lowest (*M* = 2.94) was for its approximate inverse—*perceived challenges*.

However, the wide range of mean item response scores for each variable signals that, despite the seeming overall endorsement of humor online, there was by no means a consensus on its use and benefits across participants. Nowhere was this clearer than in the responses to *perceived differences between using humor in online and F2F teaching contexts*, where the participant means included the lowest and highest possible values (1.0 and 6.0, respectively) as well as nearly every possible value in between, indicating the maximum range of divergent opinions on the equivalency of using humor in both situations. The means for the other variables, although lesser in extent, were nonetheless also widely dispersed.

Table 3 shows the Pearson product-moment correlations between all six possible pairings of the four study variables. In four of the six cases, the correlations were statistically significant at the .05 level, with the strength of these correlations being either medium ($r > .30$) or strong ($r > .50$). The strongest correlation ($r = .70$) was between *perceived differences between using humor in online and F2F teaching contexts* and *perceived challenges of teaching with humor online*, indicating that those who perceived the greatest degree of difference between the two teaching contexts were also most likely to highlight the difficulties of effectively using humor online. Additionally, *degree and amount of humor in the teacher's online repertoire* was positively correlated with *perceived benefits of humor* and negatively correlated with *perceived challenges*. These relationships suggest that those who integrate more humor into their online teaching routine are more likely to perceive the advantages and less likely to focus on the difficulties.

Qualitative Findings

Similar to the quantitative results, the short-answer items on the survey likewise yielded a diverse range of responses (see the sample in Table 4). Nowhere was this more apparent than in answers to the first qualitative item, related to perceived differences (or lack thereof) between online and F2F contexts. While some respondents insisted that differences in utilizing humor were minimal to non-existent, others pointed to difficulties in transferring humor from one context to another.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics

Variable	N	M	SE	Min	Max	Cronbach's alpha
Perceived differences between using humor in online and F2F teaching contexts	59	3.69	1.20	1.00	6.00	.87
Degree and amount of humor in the teacher's online repertoire	59	4.17	0.88	2.00	5.80	.77
Perceived benefits of humor in online teaching	59	4.99	0.75	3.00	6.00	.87
Perceived challenges of teaching with humor online	59	2.94	0.94	1.25	5.00	.81

Table 3

Correlations

Variable	M	SE	1	2	3	4
1. Perceived differences between using humor in online and F2F teaching contexts	3.69	1.20	—			
2. Degree and amount of humor in the teacher's online repertoire	4.17	0.88	.03	—		
3. Perceived benefits of humor in online teaching	4.99	0.75	-.18	.56**	—	
4. Perceived challenges of teaching with humor online	2.94	0.94	.70**	-.30*	-.40**	—

*$p<.05$. **$p<.01$.

Table 4

Sample Participant Responses to Item 5

Not different	Different but with opportunities	Different and difficult
"I find it is very similar and have been successful in my approach." (Participant 17)	"Online teaching physical jokes are restricted to what you can see on the video screens. It is easier to bring props to an online meeting, though." (Participant 21)	"Online interactions could more easily be misunderstood." (Participant 1)
"The opportunity is always there regardless of format or setting." (Participant 31)	"Both venues have possibilities for humor. You need to think ahead about what works best in each situation." (Participant 54)	"Humor requires reading the room which can be incredibly difficult in online teaching settings." (Participant 8)
"Humor works similarly in both situations." (Participant 44)	"My sense of humor was very sarcastic early on, but this didn't translate, so I changed over time to use more puns and visual jokes that I could throw on a [PowerPoint slideshow]. These work online also." (Participant 48)	"Certain forms of physical humor are unavailable, and a friendly classroom atmosphere is difficult to establish, which puts a damper on inter-student joking." (Participant 53)

Frequently mentioned challenges included using physical humor effectively, "reading the room" or gauging learners' responses to humor, successfully injecting sarcasm or other types of verbal play into lessons, and building rapport with students. Many responses were somewhere in the middle, however, noting the challenges mentioned above but also describing the participants' evolution in employing humor as they learned to adapt to the vagaries of online instruction.

Responses to other short-answer items also demonstrated striking variation in how respondents adapted their humor to the online context. For instance, in answer to whether and how they use humorous materials when teaching online, respondents described a diverse array of approaches, including humorous musical cues, short video clips on YouTube or TikTok, comics, and memes, all of which were mentioned by multiple individuals. Funny images and props were also commonly cited as humorous material. Despite these numerous mentions of humorous aids, other participants expressed reliance on spontaneous humor alone while voicing wariness of "planned" humor, such as Participant 2: "I don't really want to be that guy who thinks he's funny but actually isn't.... I think if we are deliberately searching for humor in our planning, it can be a little forced, or hokey." Nonetheless, such views tended to be in the minority, at least for those who responded to the question (which most did).

The third and fourth short-answer items asked participants to describe what they perceived to be the respective benefits and challenges of using humor in online teaching. In terms of benefits, frequently mentioned were building rapport with students (and between them), helping them relax, enhancing class atmosphere and group dynamics, and improving learner motivation and attention. Not coincidentally, these were all mentioned as benefits in our other (pre-COVID) studies of humor in the language classroom, both by students (Neff & Rucynski, 2017) and teachers (Neff & Rucynski, 2021). Thus, it appears that the dividends of introducing appropriate humorous content into language learning are similar regardless of format.

By contrast, the reported challenges of using humor tended to be more online specific. These ranged from technical issues, such as unstable Wi-Fi connections, inconsistent sound, and peculiarities of dealing with unfamiliar video conferencing software, to students being easily confused or misunderstanding attempts at humor. A frustration cited by numerous respondents was the inability to read the room, especially when students' cameras were turned off or when opportunities for individual interactions with students were more limited. The response of Participant 58 summed up many of these online issues: "Again, the lack of nonverbal communication. The black screens. I also find with online teaching my lectures are less spontaneous; a lot of my humor came from in person interaction and discussion, and there's just a bit less of that."

Discussion

Participants displayed a wide range of views concerning the role of humor in online instruction. However, the multitude of potential instructional uses of humor has always complicated pinpointing its specific function in the classroom (Banas et al., 2011). Additionally, language teachers have had varying reactions to online instruction, ranging from feeling sheer panic about how to replicate years of F2F activities in an online format to embracing the possibilities and conveniences of such a teaching context (Apple & Mills, 2022). This diversity of views about humor and online teaching came through in both the quantitative and qualitative responses to the survey.

With regard to RQ1, it has been noted that participants had divergent views about whether using humor differs in the F2F and online formats. While many participants echoed Henderson's (2021) assertion that complications such as technical issues and students with their webcams turned off make the incorporation of humor more difficult, others claimed that the transition to online instruction had a minimal impact. Long before the advent of ERT, Goldsmith (2001) argued that humor is one tool for keeping learners more engaged during online lessons. Some participants similarly argued that incorporating humor into online teaching should be viewed as a powerful tool for making virtual learning more engaging rather than a tool that has been lost because of this new teaching format. One positive implication of our study is that despite the challenges of online teaching, many participants still maintained that teachers can reap the benefits of humor regardless of the teaching format.

Despite the numerous potential limitations and obstacles to online teaching, participants shared valuable insights into how they still managed to incorporate humor into online instruction. For instance, their qualitative responses suggested that planned humor was less affected by online constraints than was spontaneous humor, and although online teaching may lack the contagious laughter possible in the traditional classroom, multiple participants reported still being easily able to incorpo-

rate prepared materials such as humorous memes and YouTube videos into their lessons. One participant explained that humor in prepared materials could be even more accessible to learners in the online context, as it is "more salient if PowerPoint is being used because it's easier to see for all students" (Participant 18). While several participants mentioned usually preferring spontaneous classroom humor, the potential issues associated with online teaching caused some participants to question the effectiveness of such humor in this context. Reasons for limiting or even avoiding spontaneous humor online included a lack of nonverbal cues from students, more pressing needs (e.g., managing technical issues), and teacher anxiety about implementing online lessons. Pre-pandemic research on humor in language teaching is divided on whether planned or spontaneous humor is more effective. Some scholars have argued that humor should be planned (e.g., Schmitz, 2002), while others (e.g., Pomerantz & Bell, 2011) have advocated a more spontaneous approach. As one participant in our study noted, however, "Both venues [F2F and online instruction] have possibilities for humor. You need to think ahead about what works best in each situation" (Participant 54).

RQ3 focused on perceived benefits and challenges of incorporating humor into online classes. Past research on the role of humor in education has often centered on interpersonal benefits, such as teacher immediacy and classroom atmosphere (Reddington & Waring, 2015; Wagner & Urios-Aparisi, 2011; Wanzer et al., 2006). Speaking a foreign language is already a source of anxiety for many learners, but communicating in the L2 via video conferencing could lead to even greater unease. While humor has traditionally been a powerful tool for helping learners to overcome this anxiety, participants in this study mentioned a variety of challenges with incorporating humor into online instruction. As previously noted, many participants echoed Henderson's (2021) argument that using humor in online teaching is more difficult, especially when attempting to read the room, as learners may have their cameras off and teachers may only get grainy thumbnail-sized images of students. Several participants also suggested that the possibility of learners misunderstanding humor was much greater in an online context. However, previous research warns that, whatever the context, incorporating humor into language teaching always entails certain risks, such as confusing learners or even causing offense (Reimann, 2015).

As previously noted, participants consistently mentioned that, regardless of the challenges presented by the online format, the use of humor

in this new virtual classroom still has many benefits. Many participants responded that despite the online context, they still attempted to use humor to connect with learners, help them relax, and improve the "classroom" atmosphere. Different participants praised humor as a "human connection, when all of our communication is being technologically mediated" (Participant 2) and a way to "break through the digital ice" (Participant 42).

Participants also shared potential solutions for overcoming the challenges and reaping the benefits of using humor in online teaching. Possible methods for incorporating humor included making use of the reaction buttons on Zoom, using props (more easily than in the classroom), and saving more personalized humorous interaction for breakout rooms. Such methods were also suggested as ways to include students in the humor and not merely make humor production a teacher-centered endeavor. One participant mentioned how students sometimes used humor in their Flipgrid videos, which could then be used as examples in subsequent classes. While some participants warned that humor perhaps should not be prioritized until students (and the teacher!) become comfortable with the online format, this new environment also offered new and exciting possibilities for using humor to improve the language learning experience.

Conclusion

Online teaching presents language teachers who endorse the use of humor with a paradox. On the one hand, many teachers consider humor to be a powerful means of making classes more comfortable and engaging, which would only seem to enhance its potential in online courses that teachers and learners alike might otherwise perceive as boring, distancing, or stressful. On the other hand, the limitations of online instruction may also make incorporating humor into online language classes much more difficult, thus potentially negating one of the most effective tools in the teacher toolbox. So, when it comes to online instruction, does humor lose its effectiveness, or does it become even more essential? Participants had differing opinions on this question, with some arguing that the transition from using humor in F2F teaching to online teaching was not particularly complicated, as "the opportunity [to use humor] is always there regardless of format" (Participant 31). Others, however, noted that humor had to take a backseat to more pressing concerns. As one respondent stated, "Especially while using Zoom[,] the humor needs to be tempered by attention to learners who struggle

to even join the session thanks to technical difficulties" (Participant 6).

While participants had divergent opinions about just how different using humor in F2F and online teaching is, several trends did emerge. First, spontaneous humor was viewed as much more complicated to successfully incorporate than planned humor in the online context. Second, participants responded that humor in online teaching has many of the same important benefits as in F2F teaching, but there is also a stronger possibility of the humor being misunderstood. Finally, while using humor in online teaching does indeed have limitations, there are also—as with any teaching context—solutions to doing so successfully. It should be noted that one limitation of this study was that, as previously explained, the survey only targeted teachers already inclined to use humor in class. Despite this limitation, there is much overlap with challenges to incorporating humor (e.g., lack of contextual cues, connection problems) and online teaching in general. As online instruction is likely, at least to some extent, to continue in the future, we hope the findings of this survey provide valuable insights into incorporating humor into online language classes.

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Appendix

Survey

Likert scale: 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = slightly disagree, 4 = slightly agree, 5 = agree, 6 = strongly agree

Contrasting humor use in online and F2F teaching

1. Using humor in online and F2F classes is fundamentally very different. 1 / 2 / 3 / 4 / 5 / 6
2. I feel that teachers must change their humor styles when switching between online and F2F teaching. 1 / 2 / 3 / 4 / 5 / 6
3. My inclination to use humor is different depending on if I am teaching online or F2F. 1 / 2 / 3 / 4 / 5 / 6
4. The chance of using humor successfully in online and F2F teaching situations is not the same. 1 / 2 / 3 / 4 / 5 / 6

5. Please briefly explain your response to Q4.

Degree and amount of humor in the teacher's online repertoire

6. I think humor should be a part of every online language lesson. 1 / 2 / 3 / 4 / 5 / 6
7. Without humor, my online classes would be very different. 1 / 2 / 3 / 4 / 5 / 6
8. I carefully consider how to incorporate humor into my online classes. 1 / 2 / 3 / 4 / 5 / 6
9. I take advantage of humorous opportunities in online teaching. 1 / 2 / 3 / 4 / 5 / 6
10. I frequently use humorous materials (videos, cartoons, memes) in my online teaching. 1 / 2 / 3 / 4 / 5 / 6
11. If you use humorous materials, please briefly describe them.

Perceived benefits of humor in online teaching

12. Humor is an important tool for helping students to feel less anxious during online classes. 1 / 2 / 3 / 4 / 5 / 6
13. Including humor in online teaching improves the class atmosphere. 1 / 2 / 3 / 4 / 5 / 6
14. Humor makes online activities and learning much more interesting. 1 / 2 / 3 / 4 / 5 / 6
15. Using humor in online teaching really humanizes the digital learning experience. 1 / 2 / 3 / 4 / 5 / 6
16. What are some, if any, benefits you have found when using humor in online teaching?

Perceived challenges of teaching with humor online

17. Online teaching is not a good context for trying to include humor. 1 / 2 / 3 / 4 / 5 / 6
18. Students do not seem to react well to humor in online classes. 1 / 2 / 3 / 4 / 5 / 6
19. There is a higher risk of humor being misunderstood in online classes. 1 / 2 / 3 / 4 / 5 / 6
20. It has been very difficult to incorporate humor into my online instruction. 1 / 2 / 3 / 4 / 5 / 6
21. What are some, if any, of the humor challenges you have found when teaching online?

Do you have any other thoughts about humor in online teaching?