



# The English classroom as “*warai no ba*”: Instructor views on humor and language learning in Japan

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## ABSTRACT

Humor holds promise as a tool to promote positive affectivity within the language classroom, but instructor differences, not to mention the effects of cultural background, make generalizations about successful employment of humor difficult to establish. This is especially true in a culture such as Japan, where the concept of “*warai no ba*” (“laughter places”) establishes sociocultural limits on appropriate environments in which to use humor. The aim of this study is to better understand the role that humor can play in language learning from the perspective of instructors. To address these concerns, we surveyed 62 English language instructors (including both English L1 and Japanese L1 participants) at universities throughout Japan about their views and approaches to humor use. Results from quantitative analysis indicate a general overall endorsement of using humor in the language classroom and its utility in enhancing the learning process, albeit with qualifications expressed concerning instructor personality. Views among the instructor participants as expressed in qualitative responses were far from uniform, however, with a great deal of variability evident regarding individual approaches to in-classroom use of humor.

## 1. Introduction

Humor is a potentially powerful yet hard to define tool in language teaching. On the one hand, a wealth of research praising the potential of humor in education has resulted in it being labeled a possible “magic bullet in instructional settings” (Bieg, Grassinger, & Dresel, 2017, p. 24), and a growing number of language education researchers advocate for its use in teaching (e.g., Bell & Pomerantz, 2016; Heidari-Shahreza, 2021; Wulf, 2010). Nonetheless, there exists scant research on individual instructor views of the role and scope of humor in their classrooms. In other words, how strongly do language teachers, individually and as a whole, endorse the use of humor? More importantly, if they do consider humor to be an important component of their teaching repertoire, what specific forms does this humor take and what role does it play in their teaching?

Although it is common for language teachers to claim to use humor in their teaching, there is limited previous research clarifying whether this means a preference for physical humor (e.g., exaggerated gestures to help explain language points), linguistic-based humor (e.g., puns and riddles), or cultural artifacts (e.g. humorous movies or cartoons from the target culture), to name but a few examples. The type of humor employed could vary widely, depending on factors such as student proficiency level, cultural context, course goals, and personal preference

or teaching style. Indeed, when a teacher claims that they “use humor in teaching,” there is a wide range of possible interpretations. Trying to determine specifically what this means is a reminder that “an issue complicating the study of humor is the vast array of humor types” (Wanzer, Frymier, Wojtaszczyk, & Smith, 2006, p. 180).

This convergent mixed-method study represents an attempt to better understand how and why instructors use humor in English language teaching, specifically within the context of tertiary education in Japan, a culture where humor tends to be context-limited, as elucidated in the concept of “*warai no ba*” (“laughter places”), those being situations or places where it is considered appropriate to engage in humorous discourse (Oda, 2006). One of the study goals is to determine to what degree consensus exists that the language classroom conforms to this category. It is also intended as a complement to an earlier study investigating Japanese learners’ views of humor in the language classes (Neff and Rucynski, 2017)

### 1.1. The role of humor in language teaching

A growing number of researchers have argued that humor plays an integral role in foreign language education, but pinpointing what that specific role might be can be challenging. Some assert that the inclusion of creative or humorous language can make the language learning class-

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room a place with an enjoyable atmosphere that more closely mimics real-world language use (Dewaele, Witney, Saito, & Dewaele, 2018). In rejecting traditional methods of language teaching, such as rote memorization and strict attention to form, Cook (1997) argued that the language classroom should instead be “a play world in which people can practice and prepare” (p. 230). (2000) thus advocated for the allowance of *language play* among learners in order to “broaden the range of permitted interactional patterns within the classroom” (p. 199). While the term *language play* can have different meanings in different contexts, in the specific field of language teaching, (Bell and Pomerantz, 2016) summarized it as “any manipulation of language that is done in a non-serious manner for either public or private enjoyment” (p. 104). Since Cook’s seminal work, a growing number of researchers from a range of teaching contexts have promoted the use of *language play* in making the language classroom a place where learners can engage in more creative, interesting, and realistic language use in a safe environment (e.g., Forman, 2011; Waring, 2013).

In considering the role of humor in the language classroom, it is also important to investigate when and how often teachers make use of this tool. While research suggests that humor has a positive impact on classroom atmosphere (e.g., Reddington & Waring, 2015; Wagner & Urios-Aparisi, 2011), this does not necessarily imply that teachers should liberally spread humor throughout every lesson or make a joke at every opportunity. In fact, much of the previous research suggests that restraint is the key in making humor part of language education, as researchers (Downs, Javidi, & Nussbaum, 1988) have warned against the overuse of humor. Banas *et al.* ((2011) stressed that “it is not simply the use of humor, but how humor is used, that determines its effectiveness in the classroom” (p. 126).

### 1.2. The impact of humor on the learning process

Another reason instructors may incorporate humor into their teaching is the possible positive impact on the learning process. Research by Schmidt (1994) and Schmidt and Williams (2001), for example, support the memory-enhancing power of humor by using incongruity in sentences and comic strips. Language teaching researchers have also advocated including bizarre or humorous language in class examples to enhance memorability (Bell, 2012; Cook, 2000). We certainly cannot conclude, however, that humor is indeed a “magic bullet” (Bieg *et al.*, 2017) that automatically improves learner performance as research results have been mixed (see Bell & Pomerantz, 2016; Martin & Ford, 2018). This returns us to the question about whether instructor humor use is generally prepared or spontaneous. While the study by Petraki and Nguyen (2016) revealed that a majority (70 percent) of teachers prefer spontaneous humor, Bell and Pomerantz (2016) warned that any studies linking classroom achievement to instructor humor use have involved carefully constructing the curriculum to incorporate humor.

Other teachers and researchers claim that the biggest impact humor has on the learning process is through increasing learners’ motivation to study a language. This could be achieved either by introducing the humor of the target culture(s) or employing (planned or spontaneous) teacher-created humor. Along with English movies or music, humor is another pop culture artifact with the potential to increase interest in the target culture(s) and, consequently, motivation to learn the language (Murray, 2008). Other researchers have noted how allowing creative language use through both teacher-created and learner-created humor naturally makes learners more interested in a subject that they consider tedious. As previously noted, proponents of *language play* in the language teaching classroom (e.g., Bell & Pomerantz, 2016; Cook, 2000; Forman, 2011; Waring, 2013) argued that humor makes language learning more engaging and memorable. Humor thus has the possible dual benefits of alleviating boredom and lowering the affective filter (Dörnyei, 2001).

### 1.3. The role of humor in understanding other cultures

Although humor use undeniably carries the risk of cross-cultural misunderstanding in the context of language education, many researchers also stress the importance of using the language classroom as a place for empowering learners by raising their awareness of how humor is used in the target culture(s). Because a lack of understanding of humor in the L1 can cause embarrassment or isolation for language learners, some (e.g., Bell, 2009; Wulf, 2010) have stressed the importance of helping learners to better comprehend and respond to L1 humor. Again, there may be some confusion about what this actually entails. Bell and Pomerantz (2016) explained that the goal is not to produce “funny students,” but rather to “familiarize learners with a variety of conventional practices around humorous interaction” (p. 170).

Despite the potential importance of humor comprehension as a component of cross-cultural communicative competence, some researchers have also expressed reservations about the necessity or effectiveness of using humor to provide cross-cultural insights. Considering the complexity of defining a “target culture” in contemporary EFL teaching, Hann (2020) questioned the validity of teaching about humor in such contexts. Bell and Pomerantz (2016) also argued that, despite good intentions, too many teachers introduce cultural norms about humor based merely on intuition. Additionally, even if humor is used with the aim of promoting cross-cultural awareness, there is also always the risk that it will instead merely lead to cultural misunderstandings. Reimann (2010) warned that “Many jokes, sarcastic or ironical remarks which may be deeply tied to culture are often unperceived, misunderstood, or offensive” (p. 23).

### 1.4. Humor in Japan and “warai no ba”

When incorporating humor into language teaching in an EFL context, careful consideration of the norms of the local culture are to be ignored at the instructor’s peril. Language teachers need to understand that the benefits of classroom humor use (e.g., improved atmosphere and rapport) in one culture will not always naturally transfer to a different cultural context. Knowledge of the humor norms of the local culture of the learners will assist the instructor in making informed decisions about how and when to incorporate humor into their teaching. Failure to do so can lead to English L1 language teachers in non-western cultures like Japan potentially leaving their students feeling confused, frustrated, or even offended by non-judicious use of humor in the English language classroom. Furthermore, instructor knowledge of the L1 can also help to deepen understanding of how learners use humor in their L1. As but one example specific to the context of Japan, the relatively small number of phonemes in the Japanese language has resulted in a proliferation of wordplay or puns (Nagashima, 2006), a fact that, if known to language instructors there, can be exploited through use of such wordplay in the learners’ L1 or L2 to bring some levity to the classroom learning experience. If one purpose of the humor is to build rapport or improve classroom atmosphere, the language used does not necessarily need to be the target language. Therefore, non-Japanese instructors could benefit from knowledge of both Japanese humor and the Japanese language.

Additionally, sometimes it is not merely the type of humor that results in misunderstandings, but the use of any humor at all. As previously mentioned, Oda (2006) designated the term “*warai no ba*” (literally “laughter places”) to describe “places [in the context of Japan] where laughing is socially permissible” (p. 18). In discussing these restrictive social conventions regarding humor use, Davis (2013) adds that the concept of *warai no ba* dictates not only the time and location for humor but also concerns “who is present in a conversation, who signals the introduction of humor and what form it may take” (p. 8). As a real-world example of this, McGraw and Warner (2014) were surprised to be informed in a visit to the headquarters of the Japanese and Humor and Laughter Society that since they were in an office, even this space was

not a *warai no ba*. However, this does not necessarily mean that Japanese learners do not welcome or appreciate instructor humor use in such a context. One survey of over 900 Japanese university students revealed that they greatly endorse the inclusion of humor to enliven university English classes (Neff and Rucynski, 2017).

Despite Japanese university students' acceptance of humor in their English courses, gaps in the frequency and style of certain forms of humor can still lead to misunderstandings or conflict. As an example, one ubiquitous form of English humor that often fails to translate in Japan is sarcasm. While sarcasm certainly exists in the Japanese language, the frequency and purpose differ from the sarcasm of anglophone cultures (Okamoto, 2007). And although Japan does have a tradition of satire, researchers have noted that modern satire in Japan is relatively mild and lacks the critical edge of western satire (Wells, 2006).

Such key differences in humor styles between Japan and anglophone cultures presents a conundrum for EFL instructors in Japan. On the one hand, one might choose to avoid using or teaching about such styles of humor in order to prevent misunderstandings or offense. On the other hand, many instructors view such differences as a potential teaching resource—a springboard to deeper understanding of the humor of the target cultures that could also have a positive impact on cross-cultural understanding and, consequently, cross-cultural communicative competence. With regards to classroom humor use in general, Japanese and non-Japanese instructors may also face different expectations from learners. Due to generalizations about differences in frequency of humor use between Japan and anglophone cultures, learners could unfairly label respective teachers as offering “fun” or “serious” lessons (Lowe & Kiczowski, 2016).

### 1.5. Humor and language learner proficiency

Researchers are divided on if specific learner proficiency levels are necessary when using humor in teaching. On the surface, humor may come across as something best saved for advanced proficiency learners since a certain level of both cultural and linguistic knowledge is often necessary for understanding even basic English jokes. In one study, Bell and Attardo (2010) identified seven different reasons why learners failed to comprehend English humor, ranging from a lack of vocabulary to pragmatic knowledge. Despite being a proponent of humor in language teaching, Deneire (1995) warns that “humor should never be used as a technique to acquire new linguistic and world knowledge, but rather as an illustration and reinforcement of acquired (if not assimilated) knowledge” (p. 294).

Other researchers, however, propose that humor can be introduced much earlier, although learners' proficiency level still must be taken into careful consideration. Schmitz (2002) divides humor into three categories (based on an earlier framework by Long & Graesser, 1988), suggesting that *universal humor* (or reality-based humor) can be introduced at any level, *cultural humor* is appropriate from intermediate level on, and *linguistic humor* should be introduced last.

While it may seem efficient for teachers to assign levels to different forms of humor, its multifaceted nature makes this a complex task. Bell (2009) argues that wordplay, for example, takes many forms and “different types of humor are not categorically more difficult for learners of certain levels of proficiency” (p. 245). Although it is obvious that using humor with lower-proficiency English students does run the higher risk of leading to misunderstandings, Schmitz (2002) proposes that “the earlier students in foreign language courses are introduced to authentic language input, to different styles of speech and to speakers of different ages, sex, socio-cultural level and from different regions, the less artificial or ‘classroom-like’ their output will be” (pp. 95–96).

### 1.6. Humor as a component of the instructor's repertoire

Despite the general endorsement among researchers of the power of humor in the context of foreign language teaching, there is still a lack

of specific understanding of how and why individual instructors include humor as part of their teaching repertoire. With regards to the *how* of humor use, it is clear from the previous research that there is a myriad of ways that language teachers may make humor a part of their classroom repertoire. In fact, Schmitz (2002) claimed that “the advantage of humor is that it can be used with any language teaching approach or method” (p. 94). As another example of considering the proper proficiency level for respective forms of humor, Pomerantz (Bell & Pomerantz, 2016) tasked a group of pre-service language teachers and intercultural educators with creating a lesson on humor for adult ESL learners. By employing backward design, they correlated desired results with appropriate levels and humor topics. Example topics included puns or knock-knock jokes for beginner learners and sarcasm or self-deprecating humor for intermediate or advanced proficiency learners.

With regards to *why* teachers should make humor a part of their teaching repertoire, two key terms that frequently appear in the research are *class atmosphere* and *rapport*. Bell and Pomerantz (2016) argued that “the most robust argument for using humor in education is affective” (p. 101). As an example of this, humor is commonly cited as an integral component of *teacher immediacy*, or behaviors employed to bring the instructor and learners closer together (Berk & Nanda, 1998; Wanzer et al., 2006). Teacher immediacy can be particularly important in the specific context of foreign language teaching, considering the anxiety or dread learners may feel about speaking in the L2 in a classroom setting. Many foreign language education researchers have thus praised the power of humor in establishing the necessary class rapport that contributes to a relaxed classroom atmosphere with increased student participation (see Bell, 2009; Reddington & Waring, 2015; Wagner & Urios-Aparisi, 2011). In one survey of English language teachers in Vietnam (Petraiki and Nguyen 2016), for example, teachers cited creating a relaxed classroom atmosphere as the most important affective advantage of humor. It must be noted, however, that other researchers have warned that humor is a “double-edged sword” (Askildson, 2005) in the context of English language teaching. Despite good intentions on the part of the instructor, misuse or overuse of humor could also have a negative effect on class atmosphere (Deneire, 1995; Zhang, 2005). The risk of misunderstood humor and the ensuing negative impact on class atmosphere and rapport is one reason some language instructors may avoid rather than embrace humor as part of their teaching repertoire.

Although much has been written about the *why* of including humor in the language teaching classroom, many teachers may still struggle with the *how* of incorporating humor into their teaching. Recent suggested systematic approaches to pedagogical humor include implementing a humor competence curriculum (Wulf, 2010) and HILL (Humor-Integrated Language Learning) (Heidari-Shahreza, 2021; Heidari-Shahreza & Heydari, 2019). While some instructors may have concerns about their own sense of humor, incorporating humor into language teaching does not necessarily entail teacher-produced humor, but alternatively could involve providing instruction on the humor of the target culture(s) (for examples of humor instruction, see Bell & Pomerantz, 2016; Kim & Lantolf, 2018; Rucynski & Prichard, 2020).

## 2. Study purposes and research questions

As a universal cultural phenomenon, used around the world daily and across multiple contexts, humor would seem to be an ideal teaching tool for use in the communicatively-oriented language learning classroom. Indeed, prior research confirms humor's potential benefits for learning, and learners themselves have endorsed its use; but despite its universality, humor is also tinged by culture, as well as the personality of the one using it (Martin & Ford, 2018). Its multifaceted nature, not to mention the different ways that individuals choose (or choose not) to utilize it, makes determining best humorous practices for language instructors a less than straightforward proposition, especially in a culture such as Japan which, compared to the West, tends to have a more restrictive sense of humor's time and place.

The purpose of this study is therefore to better understand the role of humor in language education from the perspective of long-term instructors in Japan. To this end, we formulated the following research questions:

- RQ1: To what degree do EFL instructors in Japan endorse the use of humor in the language classroom?
- RQ2: To what degree do these views of humor align with those of EFL learners in Japan?
- RQ3: To what degree do these instructors perceive humor as a means to promote learning and cross-cultural understanding?
- RQ4: Are these views impacted by the L1 status (English or Japanese) of the instructors?
- RQ5: Are these views impacted by the English proficiency of the learners they teach?
- RQ6: How do individual instructors utilize humor as part of their teaching repertoire?

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Participants

The study attracted 62 participants, all of whom were instructors of English in Japan. The initial call for survey takers was promoted on the member page of a professional organization dedicated to improvement of English teaching practices in Japan. The survey was limited to university educators so as not to conflate findings among instructors of greatly different teaching contexts and learners. All of the respondents were teaching either full-time or part-time at the tertiary level at the time of the study, and all had been teaching English for at least one year, with 52 of them (84%) having taught for six or more years.

The participant pool included a variety of respondents. In terms of the instructors' first language, 22 stated it to be Japanese while 40 stated English, with the latter participants predominantly hailing from three countries: Canada, the UK, and the USA. In terms of gender, 34 were male, 26 were female, and two selected "Unspecified."

#### 3.2. Instrumentation

Initial data collection was undertaken through the use of a survey instrument, following the principles of convergent mixed-method design (Creswell and Creswell, 2017). The survey was published online and consisted of 16 Likert-scale questions and two short response questions. It was adapted from the one originally used in our previous study on student perceptions of humor (Neff and Rucynski, 2017), with alterations and additions made to better suit the target participants of this project—university English instructors. The survey was initially developed in English and then translated and checked respectively by two native speakers of Japanese for bilingual online use. Participants were given the choice of language at the survey landing page, and subsequently all items and responses were then limited to the chosen language.

The survey comprised items relating to four constructs—*humor in the language classroom*, *humor and the learning process*, *humor's role in understanding other cultures*, and *humor in the instructor's repertoire*—with four items representing each variable. Response options for each item were on a six-point scale ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree." Additional demographic and professional data, including gender, nationality, and years of teaching experience, were collected. Participants were also asked to indicate the average English proficiency of the students they teach from choices ranging from beginner to advanced, with the ability to select multiple options. Survey participation was completely voluntary and anonymous, and participants were informed upon taking the survey of its purpose and asked to agree to the collection of their data for research purposes. They were also given the option to discontinue the survey at any time and request that their data not be used.

Data collection and analysis followed the ethical guidelines set out by both researchers' institutions.

In addition to the Likert-scale items, short response items (Items 4a and 8a) comprised the qualitative component of the survey. These items were follow-up questions requesting the respondent to elaborate on their response to the immediately preceding Likert-scale item. Each short-response item in the survey allowed answers up to 300 characters in length.

#### 3.3. Quantitative data analysis

Once the Likert-scale survey data was collected it was input into a spreadsheet and analyzed, initially to calculate descriptive statistics and a measure of reliability (Cronbach's alpha) to determine if there were any irregularities in the data. Cronbach's alpha measures ranged from 0.75 to 0.88 for the four DVs.

Rasch model analysis was then undertaken, utilizing Winsteps software (Linacre, 2009), in order to determine an individual measure for each participant in relation to each of the four variables in the survey. Rasch model analysis subjects data (in this case in the form of survey responses) to probabilistic modeling measurement in order to rank the participants according to their likelihood of endorsing a group of survey items representing variables in the survey. For each participant, output from Rasch analysis results in data points called "person measures," each representing the degree to which that participant is likely to endorse the items representing a given variable. The advantage of person measures over simple transformation of the data (to mean scores) is that the participants' responses more closely approximate a true interval scale.

Using one Rasch person measures per dependent variable (DV) for each participant (i.e. four measures per person), *t*-tests were conducted for the independent variable (IV) *participant L1* (English/Japanese). An ANOVA was run for the one IV with three levels—the proficiency level of learners most commonly taught by the instructor.

Finally, an additional *t*-test was run comparing person measures for the instructors against those of the EFL learners ( $N=918$ ) surveyed in our previous study (Neff and Rucynski, 2017). However, this was conducted only for the first DV—*humor in the language classroom*—as this was the only variable where the wording of the items was nearly identical on both the current survey (for instructors) and the earlier instrument (for learners).

#### 3.4. Qualitative data analysis

For the short response items in the survey, participants' responses were input into a spreadsheet and then coded. Coding was performed following the guidelines set out by Creswell and Creswell (Creswell and Creswell, 2017), in this case searching for thematic patterns in the data that gave rise to emergent common response categories and then color coding these for analysis. Due to the qualitative nature of the data, responses did not always fit exclusively into a singular response category and so were classified into two or more categories (or sometimes none at all).

### 4. Results

#### 4.1. Quantitative analysis

In order to answer the first research question, as well as RQs 3 and 4, descriptive statistics were measured for each of the four variables in the study. Results can be seen in Table 1.

Mean scores for all four DVs were above 4.0, indicating general endorsement (i.e., "agree") across the participant pool of the benefits of using humor in the language classroom, as well as its usefulness for promoting cross-cultural understanding and enhancing the learning process. Mean ranges varied notably, however, depending on the variable. The DV *humor's role in understanding other cultures* exhibited the largest



**Table 1**  
Descriptive statistics for the four study variables.

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range	Cronbach's $\alpha$
Humor in the language classroom	4.40	.85	2.50 - 6.00	.75
Humor and the learning process	4.69	.82	2.50 - 6.00	.88
Humor's role in understanding other cultures	4.34	.81	1.00 - 6.00	.84
Humor in the instructor's repertoire	4.85	.74	3.25 - 6.00	.82

**Table 2**  
T-test results comparing instructors and learners for the first study variable.

Variable	Instructors		Students		<i>t</i> (978)	<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
Humor in the language classroom	1.36	1.71	1.87	1.81	-2.16	.03*	.51

Note. \* $p < .05$ .

**Table 3**  
T-test results according to participant L1.

Variable	English L1		Japanese L1		<i>t</i> (60)	<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
Humor in the language classroom	1.07	1.58	2.07	2.27	-2.05	.04*	.51
Humor and the learning process	3.31	3.28	3.47	3.33	-.19	.85	.05
Humor's role in understanding other cultures	1.29	2.40	3.01	2.52	-2.66	.01*	.70
Humor in the instructor's repertoire	3.81	2.76	2.65	3.31	1.47	.15	.38

Note. \* $p < .05$ . Values represent Rasch person measures as opposed to raw Likert-scale mean scores. Rasch analysis converts raw scores to person measure scales indicative of item endorsability by respondents as opposed to fixed scales mirroring Likert means. As such, each variable is put onto a different numeric scale that more accurately reflects the underlying response trend.

range in mean values, and it also had the lowest combined mean score of the four DVs. On the other hand, DV *humor in the instructor's repertoire* was the most strongly endorsed, with a mean value close to 5.0, and it also the highest average range, indicating that the majority of participants do utilize humor in their language instruction.

To answer RQ2, a *t*-test was conducted comparing person measures for the instructors in this study with the learner participants in the previous study for the first DV only—*humor in the language classroom*. Despite the large sample size mismatch, a test of the equality of variances assumption passed and the *t*-test was conducted. Results (Table 2) show that the learners as a whole more strongly endorsed the importance of humor in the language classroom than did the instructors to a significant degree. The effect size was small, although this could be impacted by the wide discrepancy in sample sizes between the two groups.

To answer RQ4, Rasch person measures were extracted for each of the four DVs and an independent-samples *t*-test was conducted for the bi-variate independent variable *instructor L1*. Results can be seen in Table 3.

When comparing responses from participants according to their L1, two DVs were significantly different—*humor in the language classroom* and *humor's role in understanding other cultures*. L1 users of Japanese more strongly endorsed the value of humor's role in the language classroom as well as its importance in cultural understanding than did native speakers of English, indicating that the Japanese instructors of English, contrary to lingering stern cultural stereotypes, in fact value humor as a group more than the amalgam of English L1 speakers in the study. Effect sizes were in the moderate range for both DVs.

Finally, in order to answer RQ5, a one-way ANOVA was run for the final IV—the proficiency of the instructors' learners on their views of humor. Once again Rasch person measures were used for analysis. Participants were divided into three groups, this time according to the proficiencies of the learners they most frequently taught: Group 1 teaching mainly lower-proficiency learners ( $n=14$ ), Group 2 teaching intermediate proficiency learners ( $n=36$ ), and Group 3 teaching higher-proficiency learners ( $n=12$ ). Of the four DVs, two—*humor in the language classroom* and *humor in the instructor's repertoire*—reached the threshold

of significance:  $F(2, 59) = 4.30$ ,  $p = .02$  and  $F(2, 59) = 3.6$ ,  $p = .03$ , respectively, with the eta-squared effect sizes calculated to be 0.12 for *humor in the language classroom*, and 0.11 for *humor in the instructor's repertoire*—both measurements being between a moderate and large effect size.

#### 4.2. Qualitative analysis

In order to gain deeper insight into the quantitative responses, especially as pertain to RQ1, RQ3, and RQ6, qualitative analysis was undertaken on two short-response items in the survey, which followed up on related Likert-scale items in the survey (Items 4a and 8a). Each item will be briefly discussed in turn with a focus on the five most common response categories and quotations that exemplify some of these themes. Additional analysis will focus on similarities and differences in responses from the English L1 and Japanese L1 respondents.

##### 4.2.1. The essentialness of humor in language instruction

Item 4a: *Why do you agree or disagree with this statement [A good sense of humor is an essential trait for language teachers to have]?*

Table 4 In response to the Likert-scale item immediately preceding this short-response question, a large majority of respondents (50) agreed to some degree that humor is an essential trait for teachers. Despite this strong endorsement, however, the most frequently repeated notion in the follow-up responses was that humor is *not* a necessary trait to be an effective instructor. The fact that even some of those who agreed with the “essentialness” of humor hedged their response with such a disclaimer points to mixed feelings that at least a proportion of instructors had. Such was the case in this response by Participant 35, who did not want to immediately dismiss otherwise effective instructors who may nonetheless be lacking in this one area:

“Using humor is part of my personal teaching style. But the word ‘essential’ suggests the goals of a language teacher could not be met without humor, and, intuitively, I don’t think that’s true.”

**Table 4**  
Most common response categories for item 4a.

Category	Response Category	Instances
1	Humor not necessary to be effective	19
2	Improves atmosphere	17
3	Improves rapport with students	12
4	Reduces anxiety/stress/tension	10
5	Increases learner motivation	8

**Table 5**  
Most common response categories for item 8a.

Category	Response Category	Instances
1	Making spontaneous jokes	9
2	Self-deprecation	5
3	In interactions with individual students	5
4	Memes/wordplay/puns	5
5	Jokes in the students' L1	3

The next three most common themes include the impact humor can have on classroom “atmosphere,” whether that means lightening the mood, helping learners to relax, or improving relationships within the classroom. Participant 19 referred to the way humor can balance language-learning tedium:

“Humor helps build relationships within a classroom and reduces stress that is inevitable from the seemingly endless and arduous task of learning a foreign language.”

Improvement of atmosphere was also a benefit widely mentioned by learners in the similarly worded short-response question from our previous study (Neff and Rucynski, 2017). For those learners, however, the most cited impact of humor was its ability to increase their learning motivation, which, while also mentioned by some instructors in this survey, was not nearly as strongly highlighted as was done by the learner participants. This could therefore be a significant value that humor holds for learners that is nonetheless underappreciated by many instructors.

#### 4.2.2. Humor as a part of the instructor's repertoire

Item 8a: *If you agree [that humor is an integral part of your teaching approach], please briefly explain your use of humor while teaching.*

**Table 5**

As an illustration of the diversity of ways that instructors employ humor in their language classrooms, this question elicited a high number of distinct response categories, calculated to at least 18 in total (even with the question being optional, and not everyone responding to it). Moreover, the most discussed approach—making spontaneous jokes—had only nine mentions, with the next highest category having just five instances, providing further evidence of the broad range of options that different instructors use to incorporate humor into their teaching. Nevertheless, even when it was not discussed explicitly, the value of spontaneity was sometimes indirectly stated, such as in this excerpt from Participant 31:

“Going out of my way to create humor is unnatural and makes as many students uncomfortable as happy.”

And although several respondents repudiated “planned” humor, there were also those who expressed comfort in their repeated use of pre-arranged jocular content when teaching, such as introducing memes or bilingual puns.

Besides the approaches listed, other ways respondents discussed using humor include: physical comedy, to illustrate common language errors, to soften a scolding, to describe funny anecdotes, political satire, and the telling of “dad” jokes. This multiplicity of possible approaches was sometimes referred to in the answers, such as that of Participant 4:

“I know colleagues who make up funny games and things like that, but I tend to just make jokes as they fit into the lesson. I also use

self-deprecating humor and try to laugh at myself. I make mistakes when I spell sometimes! It's OK if students do too!”

More than anything, the variegated responses to this survey item bring into question the possibility of even defining what a “humorous” approach to language teaching might entail.

#### 4.2.3. English L1 and Japanese L1 participant response comparison

Distinctions between the qualitative responses of the two groups of L1 participants were mostly subtle, and in fact there was a great deal of overlap in their respective comments, especially for Item 4a (the essentialness of humor). For instance, there were similar points made by members of both L1 groups about instructors not needing to be humorous to be effective, as well as the benefits that humor can bring to the ELT environment. If anything, a few of the Japanese L1 participants were more emphatic than their English L1 counterparts about the need for language learning to include moments of levity, such as Participant 18, who stated that, “A life without humor is not worth living, and a language without humor is not a language.” Such declarations were in the minority, however, with most Japanese respondents focusing on improved classroom atmosphere and general enjoyment in learning as the key benefits of integrating humor into their lessons.

Occasional mention was made of the need to break away from Japanese traditions of language education that do not emphasize humor and enjoyment, such as (Japanese L1) Participant 40, who stated that:

“In Japan, English education and communication have a stiff image, and have been carried out in an overly serious atmosphere. Actually, I think that a good sense of humor is very important.”

Among those Japanese participants who responded to the qualitative items in the survey, such sentiments tended to be the norm.

Responses to Item 8a, asking about how participants use humor in their teaching repertoire, revealed differences between the two groups of instructors in terms of the range of humorous expression used in participants' teaching practices. The English L1 participants described a wide range of individual approaches in their examples of in-class humor use, often providing specific details of pre-planned jokes or even use of humorous props, as well as other methods described above, to engage students and lighten the atmosphere. Japanese participants, on the other hand, were more circumspect in detailing their specific humorous approaches in the classroom. Several did not discuss their methods in any detail—Participant 53 wrote simply, “I don't use humor consciously,” for example—and more than half of them did not even answer this follow-up question. Of those that did, spontaneous humor and self-deprecation were the most cited variations, mirroring the overall results for this item. Beyond these two categories, however, there were few other specific humor styles mentioned, unlike the multitude of approaches described by the English L1 instructors.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1. The role of humor in language learning: Instructor and learner views

The focuses of our first three RQs were language instructors' perspectives on humor in the classroom and how closely these align with learners' views, as well as how humor might benefit the learning process. According to the survey results, there was fairly strong endorsement of humor in the language classroom by instructors, both for its use in general and as a tool to achieve these educational ends. This mirrors to some degree the perspective of language learners, as described in our previous study (Neff and Rucynski, 2017). At that time we found that the participants overwhelmingly approved of teachers who find ways to integrate humor into their regular instruction. Examining this issue now from the other side of the equation, so to speak, it appears that instructors by and large also agree that humor can play an important role, although

this sentiment was expressed with more qualification and for sometimes different reasons than was the case with learners. One example of this can be seen when respondents in both studies were asked why (or why not) humor was an essential trait for language instructors. Almost all of the learners agreed it was, with very few (less than 3%) stating in their short responses that it was not necessary for a teacher to be humorous to be effective. In contrast, instructors were warier of declaring this essentialness outright in their short responses, with nearly one-third asserting that fine teachers are not necessarily humorous teachers. Some of this hedging possibly reflects their consideration for instructors whom they might respect but do not envision as being particularly humorous; but the fact that this concern was expressed so frequently may also be seen as instructors being self-conscious about their own ability, or the necessity, to “be funny,” when ultimately it is learning, not laughing, that takes precedence. This was reinforced by several responses later in the study survey expressing disdain for the concept of “teachers as entertainers”—a stereotype representing the type of flippant and callow approach to education that many university language instructors obviously do not wish to associate themselves with (Geluso, 2013).

There were a few other key distinctions in response trends between instructors and students in the earlier study. In terms of humor’s perceived influence on the learning process, the largest benefit of humor by far for the learner participants was stated to be its role in motivating them to study English, with close to 40% mentioning this in their responses. Not nearly as many instructors commented on this benefit, however, so we can surmise that there is some degree of mismatch between the two groups in their ideas about what humor can bring to the learning process. In fact, little research to date has focused explicitly on the power of humor as a tool for stimulating language learner motivation, and what evidence exists is mostly anecdotal. Another difference was the prominence with which teacher-student rapport was mentioned as a benefit by instructors but not by learners. This connects to the concept of teacher-immediacy type behaviors (Berk & Nanda, 1998) that were likely on the minds of many instructors who may see humor as a means to bond with students on a more intimate level than would be the case in a traditional authority-subordinate relationship structure. Additionally, these results also support Bell and Pomerantz’s (2016) claim that “the most robust argument for using humor in education is affective” (p. 101). The lack of mention by learners, however, while not necessarily signifying disinterest in such a relationship, nonetheless indicates that this was not as prominent in their minds when considering the benefits of classroom humor.

## 5.2. Instructor differences by L1

Our fourth RQ focused on the impact that the instructors’ L1 (English or Japanese) might have on their perspectives on humor in language teaching and learning, especially because this distinction connects so strongly to the underlying origin cultures of the participants in this study (western anglophone culture for the English L1 speakers and Japanese culture for the English-speaking Japanese L1 participants). One commonly cited effect by instructors (and learners) is the improvement of classroom atmosphere that the injection of humor can bring about, with this being an especially common refrain among the Japanese respondents in the study. To our surprise, these Japanese L1 participants (teachers and students alike) expressed significantly more concurrence with the notion of humor being necessary in language education than the English L1 instructors did, and improvement in atmosphere was a large reason for this. We suspect this aligns closely with the previously discussed notion of *warai no ba* or “laughter places” (Oda, 2006), these being environments in everyday Japanese society where humor is deemed appropriate or encouraged rather than proscribed. Looking at the survey responses by the Japanese L1 participants, the university language classroom appears to fall clearly within the scope of a *warai no ba*, so a certain amount of humor is not only appreciated but perhaps even expected in order to create a fulfilling and harmonious learn-

ing environment. western instructors, while likewise frequently noting classroom dynamics and “atmosphere” as things that can be improved by the inclusion of humor, were also far more likely than their Japanese counterparts to point out merits that centered on their own personal well-being, such as how humor can help them to maintain enjoyment, a positive outlook, or even “sanity” through long hours of instruction.

Aside from the already mentioned differences between English L1 and Japanese L1 instructors, these groups also differed in how they perceived humor in relation to culture. The Japanese participants as a whole were far more likely to endorse the facility of humor for introducing (English-speaking) culture than were the westerners, and in fact this was the largest single distinction between any two groups for any variable in the study. This can potentially be attributed to the nuance English L1 speakers often perceive regarding the wide-ranging varieties of humor employed in and between western nations that the Japanese speakers were perhaps less aware of or selected to ignore. Japan being a largely homogeneous nation, its citizens often choose to see themselves, on the national level at least, as a largely monolithic culture, and this perception is also evident in the language-learning policies set out by the government (Liddicoat, 2007). Thus, when looking outward, particularly towards the English-speaking world, the concept of “culture” tends to be similarly monolithic (focused on the United States), or at best duolithic (including England) in nature (Butler & Iino, 2005; Kubota, 2002). Evidence of this can be seen in the fact that any English-language humor is commonly reduced in Japanese to the phrase “American joke,” no matter the actual origin (Oshima, 2013; Reimann, 2010). English L1 instructors coming from heterogeneous societies, however, are often (although not always) more aware of intercultural (and intracultural) deviations from any one English speaking “culture” (Kramsch & Hua, 2016). Their societies also lack the time-and-place restrictions on humor as described in the aforementioned concept of *warai no ba*, so they are less likely than their Japanese counterparts to see humor as a limited-scope communication mechanism that can easily be taught to gain quick insight into English-speaking culture.

## 5.3. The effect of learner proficiency

Learner proficiency was the focus of the fifth research question and the final quantitative variable in this study. There was a distinction when it came to those who teach less and more proficient students, although the results here were not what was anticipated. As noted earlier, there are so many potentially complicating factors—linguistic and cultural—that can impede understanding of humor by learners that on the surface it would almost seem advisable to avoid all but the most basic humor when instructing less proficient learners (Bell & Attardo, 2010; Deneire, 1995). Respondents in this study, however, indicated that while humor can certainly be adjusted according to learners’ proficiency, it should also not be avoided for this reason. Those who regularly teach students of lower proficiency more strongly endorsed the role of humor in the classroom and also asserted more firmly that humor was integral to their own approach than did those who taught more advanced learners. While the content and style of any humorous output can certainly be more sophisticated when used with those of higher proficiency (Bell & Pomerantz, 2016; Chen & Dewaele, 2019), this does not equate to humor being any more integral to lessons with them. In fact, it can be argued that including humor is *more* essential for beginner and pre-intermediate classes where students are still formulating their attitudes about the foreign language and learning to adjust to the demands of studying it. Under these circumstances, maintaining their motivation by providing an enjoyable learning environment is critical.

## Conclusion and limitations

This study was an investigation into instructors’ views on and approaches to humor in language education. One particularly striking finding from the instructor responses was the sheer variability in approaches



to incorporating humor into the language classroom. Undoubtedly some of this variability results from the type of classes or the proficiency of the learners one is teaching, but putting these considerations aside there was still enormous variance, even among instructors teaching in similar circumstances. This offers yet more proof that humor is a complex, multidimensional characteristic very much contingent on individual differences (Kirsh & Kuiper, 2003; Ruch & Heintz, 2019)—a fact that language teaching approaches must accommodate in order to be utilized successfully by a broad range of instructors. We found that, within this study's context at least, humor in the language classroom in Japan, while not necessarily essential, can nonetheless play an important role in the learning process for both students and instructors, and schools, teacher trainers, and other entities involved in formulating language teaching policies and practices would do well to understand and encourage, within reason, individual approaches to humor.

How best to go about encouraging a “culture of humor” within in educational institution, however, is both an underdeveloped area of inquiry and a prospect full of opportunity. While humor as a trait tends to be very much tied to individual personality and/or culture, this does not mean that the sharing of humorous anecdotes and approaches between instructors would not be fruitful. Teacher workshops devoted to discussing in-class humor, classroom observations, and discussion panels on effective (and culturally sensitive) use of humor in language education could all be engaging activities with the potential to open instructors' eyes to some new types of comedy they can employ in their own classes that they might never have considered previously. This would be particularly useful in a culture such as Japan, where the concept of *warai no ba* laughter places—a sociological concept and phrase that is not widely used outside of academia—is either unknown or not clearly understood by many non-Japanese (or even Japanese) instructors.

Still, despite humor's potential, and the advancement of humor research in the field of foreign language education, successfully utilizing it in language teaching can be challenging. Meyer (2000) warned that humor in communication is a double-edged sword, and this is certainly true in the context of the language classroom. While many participants in this study strongly endorsed the use of humor, we still must consider the advice of Bryant & Zillman, 1989 that using humor effectively in education “depends on employing the right type of humor, under the proper conditions, at the right time” (p. 74).

It must be noted again that this particular study looked only at teacher views of humor in the specific context of university English education in Japan. While many participants in this study strongly endorsed the potential of humor as a powerful tool with multiple benefits in language education, this should not be taken as a sweeping declaration that a vast majority of foreign language educators value the use of humor in their teaching. Participants in this study shared a common teaching context, but instructor views on the usefulness of humor may vary greatly when considering other factors, such as curricular goals or restrictions, age of learners, and cultural context.

## Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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