

# Using Humor in the English Classroom: The Japanese Students' Perspective

Jacob Schnickel & Milen Martchev

## Abstract

This paper examines the attitudes and opinions of a sample of students from four different Japanese universities towards their native-speaker English teachers' use of humor in the classroom. We provide a numerical measure of correlation between the teachers' frequency of humor use and the resulting student interest and class usefulness, as evaluated by our survey participants. We also identify the types of humor which seem to be most memorable with our Japanese respondents, and offer a brief discussion of possible comedic pitfalls. Estimates of the frequency and success rates of attempted humor use on the part of the students themselves are also given, together with a summary of the students' views on native English speakers' sense of humor.

## 1. Introduction

This is the second in a series of two papers, in which we focus on the use of humor in the English language classroom, as used by native-speaker teachers in Japan. This time, the boot is on the other foot and we will discuss the students' views on the subject. Our aim is for interested readers to be able to gain a perspective on both sides of the story upon reviewing the results from each study in comparison, and also to assist our English teacher colleagues in deciding how to manage their classroom comedic performances more effectively, or perhaps in becoming more familiar with Japanese students' sensitivities towards English speakers' humor in educational settings as well as in general. The data for the present study was collected anonymously via an electronic survey conducted during several classes at multiple Japanese universities, with our respondents using mobile devices to input their answers.

## 2. Literature Review

There is a strong suggestion that appropriate humor helps to create a positive, comfortable atmosphere, and there is ample support for the notion that such humor does indeed support learning. Although each instructor wishing to employ

humor effectively must understand what “appropriate” means in his or her specific context, there are general guidelines that will be of value to all. In their analysis of humor in the college classroom from the instructors’ perspective, Lei, Cohen, & Russler (2010) provide a good summary of the benefits of appropriate humor use in the classroom, calling it “an appreciated teaching tool for college instructors, and...an integral component for student learning” (p. 331). They go on to present what might be described as a set of minimal requirements for appropriate humor use, explaining that the benefits become available if “instructors are using it appropriately, constructively and in moderation” (p. 331). Indeed, our own past findings (Schnickel & Martchev, 2017) align with this. Our analysis of responses from foreign instructors of English in Japan reveal a consensus that appropriate humor usage must be respectful of students, relevant to the lesson, and not excessive. One might refer to this as a commonsense approach since deviation from any of these points would be likely to raise red flags for a thoughtful observer.

Humor is part of the human experience. Across cultures, we value making one another laugh, a point which is encapsulated by Gervais and Wilson (2005), who assert that “every normal human being is strongly genetically predisposed to develop the ability to produce and perceive laughter” (as cited in Kuhle, 2012). Humor serves a number of purposes in human interaction and can be indicative of the presence of a variety of positive attributes. Ziegler-Hill & Jet (2013), for example, have suggested that certain usages of humor can serve as a signal that the person initiating the humor possesses a variety of positive traits: “It appears that a sense of humor is often viewed as an indicator of a broader ‘healthy’ personality” (p. 203). The link to humor in education here seems clear: humor use can serve as a shortcut to establishing oneself as intelligent and trustworthy, traits that a professor would likely be pleased to have associated with him or her.

Considerable research has been conducted on the role humor plays in the classroom, yet Banas, Dunbar, Rodriguez & Liu (2011) point out that “the overwhelming majority of instructional communication research on humor has focused on the positive consequences of classroom humor” (p. 116). For example Garner (2006) demonstrated that content-specific humor delivered by the professor does indeed help students remember material; moreover, in this study, students reported feeling that professors’ using such humor had taken extra care to prepare for the lesson. Kher, Molstad, and

Donahue (1999) have shown that humor has the potential to reduce anxiety among students. Meanwhile, Wanzer, Frymier, & Irwin (2010) warn that positive student response—smiling and laughter—to instructor humor is not an adequate indicator that student learning has been augmented. They suggest that humor related to course material is more likely to contribute to student learning.

More relevant to the present study is research on the role of humor in language learning. Askildson (2005) has described a range of benefits associated with the use of humor in the second-language classroom by analyzing surveys of both instructors and students. These benefits include enhanced interest and reduced anxiety, as well as a perception that humor in the classroom supports learning. Because the present study focuses on humor in the second-language classroom, the matter of culture and cultural differences become important. Wanzer, Frymier & Irwin (2010) point out that “culturally defined social norms” will have an impact on student perceptions of appropriate and inappropriate humor for classroom instructors. Second-language learners certainly have some unique challenges when it comes to understanding and using humor in the classroom; Bell (2009) describes some of these and also makes suggestions for incorporating humor effectively into language lessons, such as through the careful selection of topics likely to be of common interest to the cultural groups that comprise a given class. Miczo & Welter (2006) have shown that some humor “was negatively related to intercultural communication apprehension” (p. 71), which suggests that humor has the potential to encourage students to make an effort to communicate in a second language.

Banas, Dunbar, Rodriguez & Liu (2011) stress the importance of identifying whether a study is focused on instructor use of humor or the impact of humor on students. Both perspectives are well represented in the literature. Lei, Cohen, & Russler (2010) surveyed existing research to produce a list of benefits of humor in the college classroom from the instructor’s perspective. They included three domains: “Psychological,” “Social,” and “Cognitive,” in which they placed numerous specific benefits, including “alleviates anxiety” and “elevates self-image” under the heading “Psychological”; “creates a positive learning climate” and “encourages a sense of trust” under the heading “Social”; and “increases student motivation” and “inspires creativity” under the heading “Cognitive” (p. 328). The benefits of humor outweigh the list of drawbacks, which identify three categories of humor as inappropriate: “Degrading

Remarks of Students,” “Offensive Humor,” and “Excessive Humor” (p. 330). Of course, the instructor’s perceptions are not the only ones that matter; it is essential to gain an understanding of the student experience, as well.

Torok, McMorris & Lin (2004) summarize the results of their study on student response to humor in the classroom thus: “students mentioned that humor has the power to make teachers more likeable, facilitate understanding of course material, lower tension, boost student morale, and increase student attentiveness” (p. 18). In a unique example from the student side of the equation, Meeus & Mahieu (2009) investigated instances of student humor that were directed at the instructor, and though they uncovered a number of reasons students might engage in this variety of humorous expression, the most common, by a wide margin, was humor as an “atmosphere maker.” They write: “The humor is consistent with a pleasant classroom atmosphere and a good relationship between pupils and teachers” (p. 560). Indeed this function of humor is well represented in the literature.

A major commonality between instructors and students is the perception that humor has the potential to make a more pleasant atmosphere. In their survey of 40 years of research, Banas, Dunbar, Rodriguez & Liu (2011) have concluded that “the clearest findings regarding humor and education concern the use of humor to create a learning environment” (p. 137). White (2001) has shown that the majority of instructors and students alike acknowledge that humor can “create a healthy learning environment” (p. 343). Although Ziv (1988) has suggested that humor not related to course material will not enhance learning, it does seem clear that such humor could contribute generally to a positive atmosphere that is conducive to learning.

### **3. Survey Details and Data Description**

Our survey was anonymous, both with respect to the 216 Japanese students that we interviewed and the (often multiple) native-speaker English teachers they provided answers about. It is therefore difficult to say how many language instructors are featured in our response data, but a conservative estimate would be at least 17-20 different teachers. Nearly three quarters of our respondents, 74%, were first-year students, 20% were in their second year, and only 3% and 1% were third- and fourth-year students respectively. Our student sample includes 10 separate class groups from 4 different universities, three of which are located in Tokyo and one in Yokohama.

To give a rough idea about the academic level of the survey participants, the ranks of our four universities are currently (i.e. in 2017) 57th, 125th, 273th, and 406th out of a total of 710 Japanese universities, as listed by uniRank™. This gives us an average rank of 215 in Japan, or a normalized-average rank of 235 if we take into consideration the different number of respondents we had from each institution.

### SURVEY QUESTIONS

**Q1. Did your native-speaker English teacher(s) try to use jokes and humor in your class?**

• *All the time / Often / Sometimes / Rarely / Never*

**Q2. How funny would you say was each of your teachers?**

• *Very funny / Somewhat funny / Neutral / Not really funny / Not funny*

**Q3. How effective (useful) were each of your teachers' lessons, in your opinion?**

• *Very effective / Somewhat effective / Neutral / Somewhat ineffective / Very ineffective*

**Q4. Have you laughed at something funny your teacher(s) said or did in your classes?**

• *No / Yes, once / Yes, a couple of times / Yes, several times / Yes, many times*

✓ If you answered "Yes", please expand and give examples:

**Q5. Can you remember your teacher(s) trying to be funny but failing?**

• *No / Yes, once / Yes, a couple of times / Yes, several times / Yes, many times*

✓ If you answered "Yes", please expand and give examples:

**Q6. Have you ever tried to say something funny/humorous to your foreign English teacher(s)?**

• *No / Once, successfully / Once, unsuccessfully / Multiple times*

✓ Unless your answer was "No", please rate your joke success rate on a scale of 1 to 100, and expand and give examples.

**Q7. What do you think of English speakers' humor in general?**

**Q8. Do you think that teacher humor in your English language classroom helps with your language learning?**

• *Yes, very much / Yes, somewhat / Cannot really say / It's not too helpful / No*

✓ Qualify your opinion if necessary.

**Q9. Can you think of any downsides to using humor in the English language classroom?**

• *No / Yes*

✓ If you answered "Yes", please expand.

The question sections preceded by a "✓" symbol above were optional, i.e. the students could proceed with the survey even without answering them. The above questionnaire was translated into Japanese and our respondents were prompted to answer in their mother tongue, in order for us to get as much accurate and frank input as possible. Five or six of the students did decide to answer our open-ended question sections in English, but almost all of our received feedback was indeed in Japanese. Therefore,

wherever actual examples from student comments are given below, assume that they were translated into English by us, unless indicated otherwise.

Our respondents were allowed to give answers for up to 5 teachers that they'd had in the past, giving them the provisional names Teacher A, Teacher B, etc.; they were also asked to keep these labels consistent for each teacher throughout the questionnaire. The resulting data used in this study had the following overall structure:

Table 1 *Data Structure*

<i>Teachers featured per response</i>	<i>Number of responses</i>	<i>Teacher evaluations</i>
5	15	75
4	5	20
3	20	60
2	85	170
1	91	91
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>216</b>	<b>416</b>

We were thus able to obtain 416 different teacher evaluations from our 216 respondents. Here, by “evaluations” we mean our students’ answers to Questions 1, 2, and 3 about each of their teachers. Moreover, for the purposes of our analysis in Section 4, we assigned numerical values to each possible answer for these three questions, as follows:

Table 2 *Answers to Q1, Q2, and Q3 with Assigned Numerical Values*

Question	Answer Choice					Scale Label
<b>Q1</b>	<i>All the time</i>	<i>Often</i>	<i>Sometimes</i>	<i>Rarely</i>	<i>Never</i>	<b>Frq</b>
<b>Q2</b>	<i>Very funny</i>	<i>Somewhat funny</i>	<i>Neutral</i>	<i>Not really funny</i>	<i>Not funny</i>	<b>Interest</b>
<b>Q3</b>	<i>Very effective</i>	<i>Somewhat effective</i>	<i>Neutral</i>	<i>Somewhat ineffective</i>	<i>Very ineffective</i>	<b>Utility</b>
<b>Numerical value</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>	

The resulting three 5-point scales allowed us to correlate the respective sets of teacher evaluations, which we have labeled: **Frq** (standing for “frequency”, i.e. how often each teacher was perceived to use humor), **Interest** (i.e. how funny and interesting<sup>1</sup> each teacher was thought to be), and **Utility** (i.e. how useful students found each of their teachers’ classes).

<sup>1</sup> Question 2 was originally simply phrased as “funny” in English, but due to a lack of a non-problematic single-word equivalent in Japanese (due to the available words’ differing nuances and semantic ranges) we settled for “*yūmoa to iu imi de omoshiroi*”, which translates as “interesting in the sense of humorous.”

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1. *Laughing Stock Trade*: Teacher Evaluations and Classroom Laughter

Using the 416 separate teacher evaluations we obtained, we calculated the Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient ( $r$ ) for each pair in the 3 categories: teacher joking frequency, student interest and class usefulness, all of which proved to be positively correlated as can be seen in Table 3:

Table 3 *Pearson Correlation Coefficients*

	Frq	Interest	Utility
Frq	1		
Interest	0.60	1	
Utility	0.31	0.43	1
	$p < .01$	$p < .01$	

These results were calculated to represent a confidence level of 99%. At the same time, given the restricted range of our data (varying only between 1 to 5, and discretely at that)—a factor which tends to bring down the correlation coefficient, we might even say that the respective correlations are probably even stronger than conventional interpretations of the above values for  $r$  would suggest. Be that as it may, we were mostly interested in the relative differences in the strength of each relationship here. *Frequency-Interest* proved to be the strongest correlation, followed by *Interest-Utility* and *Frequency-Utility* in that order. The correlation values above suggest that, while frequency of humor use in the classroom is very conducive to a higher student interest, only about half of that translates into (perceived) class utility.

To give a different perspective on the same data, we also offer the following three tables, which show two category averages for any given level of a third, according to the 5-point scale described above.

Table 4 *Average Student Interest and Perceived Class Usefulness per Humor Frequency Level*

<b>Frq</b>	<b>AVG Interest</b>	<b>AVG Utility</b>	<b>Number of Evaluations</b>
<b>5</b>	4.37	4.30	99
<b>4</b>	3.91	4.06	153
<b>3</b>	3.41	3.85	99
<b>2</b>	2.47	3.49	51
<b>1</b>	2.21	3.43	14
		<b>TOTAL Number</b>	<b>416</b>

Table 5 *Average Humor Frequency and Student Interest per Perceived Class Usefulness Level*

<b>Utility</b>	<b>AVG Frq</b>	<b>AVG Interest</b>	<b>Number of Evaluations</b>
<b>5</b>	4.10	4.21	122
<b>4</b>	3.64	3.70	182
<b>3</b>	3.17	3.05	96
<b>2</b>	3.69	3.15	13
<b>1</b>	1.67	2.00	3
		<b>TOTAL Number</b>	<b>416</b>

Table 6 *Average Humor Frequency and Perceived Class Usefulness per Student Interest Level*

<b>Interest Level</b>	<b>AVG Frq</b>	<b>AVG Utility</b>	<b>Number of Evaluations</b>
<b>5</b>	4.50	4.48	86
<b>4</b>	3.90	4.10	174
<b>3</b>	3.13	3.70	110
<b>2</b>	2.72	3.24	25
<b>1</b>	2.05	3.29	21
		<b>TOTAL Number</b>	<b>416</b>



As far as how much actual laughter goes on in the classroom and how often teacher humor fails, according to our students' subjective estimates, our results are summarized in Charts 1 and 2:

Chart 1 *Students' Laughter Reactions*

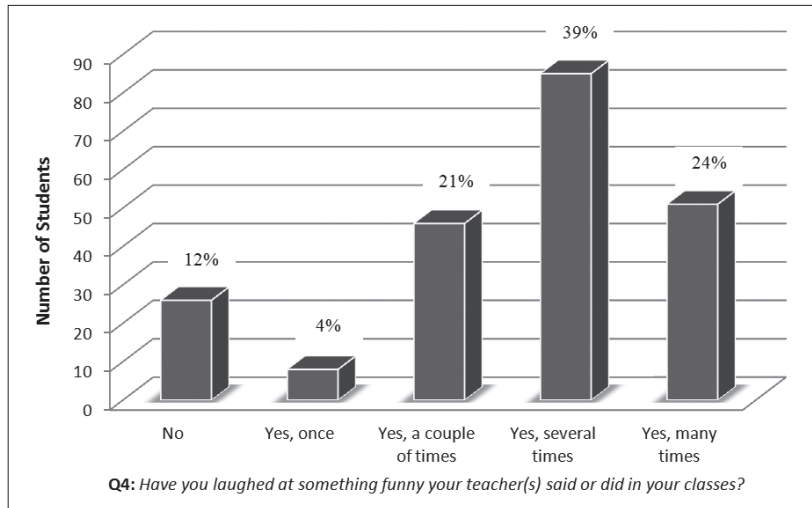
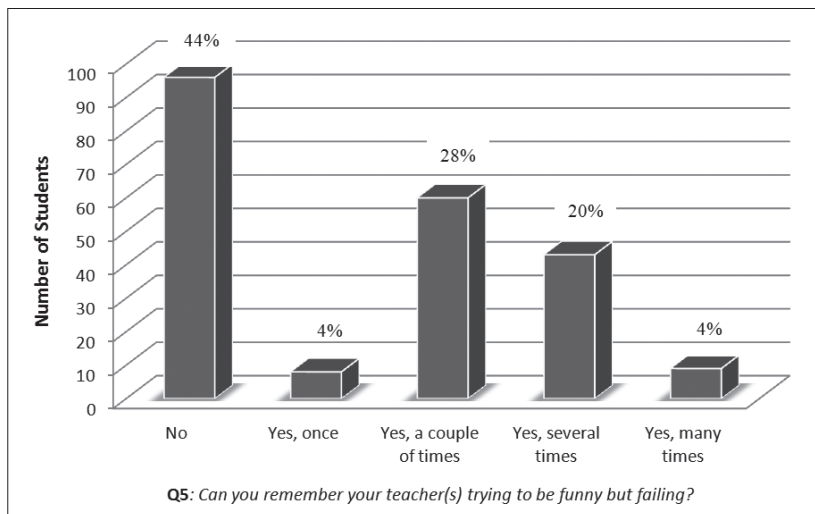
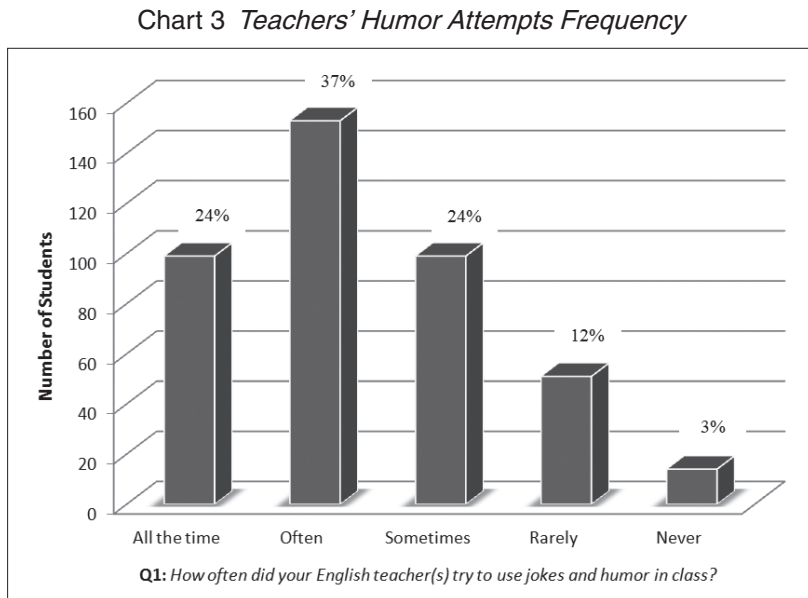


Chart 2 *Remembered Instances of Teachers' Failed Humor*



These results suggest that the teachers in our sample generally do a good job of making their students laugh, but also that they encounter occasional difficulties in getting their humorous messages across. Even so, however, the data presented in this section strongly suggests that an approach to classroom activities which involves humor is definitely worth pursuing. Many, though of course far from all, of our students are in our required English courses only because they have to be there and

they will probably remember a good story or a good joke better than the English they are being taught, which is a good opportunity to get both the baby and the bathwater into the tub (to paraphrase a popular expression), that shouldn't be missed. Easier said than done but, at the very least, both teacher and students will have had a better time and, sure enough, most foreign language instructors were judged to actively incorporate humor in their classes, as Chart 3 indicates.



According to our 5-point scale, the average frequency of humor use by foreign English teachers, as estimated from our student responses, is 3.65, which is between “sometimes” and “often”, but leaning slightly more towards “often.”

Finally, here are three actual examples that we found in our data, where students explicitly compare different teachers they have had in the past (Remember that “Teachers A, B, C, etc.” do not refer to one and the same person for different students):

- *Teacher A has a sense of humor and is also kind. Teacher B has no sense of humor and is scary. Teacher C has a sense of humor.*
- *Teacher A is our grammar teacher and always has interesting stories for us (like personal episodes, etc.), and that makes it easier to remember what he said in class. Teacher B is a writing teacher and almost never jokes. It would be much more*

*enjoyable if he could have some interesting/funny things to say, as his class deals with serious content. Teacher C is our writing teacher and doesn't joke around much. If he does, he is usually being sarcastic, and it's not exactly like we are rolling with laughter. Teacher D doesn't joke much either, but when he does, it's very interesting and the class is enjoyable. Teacher E jokes most of the time and that way it's easier to remember what happened in class afterwards. That also helps us be less shy in trying to speak English.*

*Teacher A has very exaggerated gestures and laughter and we sometimes end up laughing even when it's not so funny, and it was easier to understand him. Teacher B talks slowly and loudly and is easy to follow, but his classes were not as interesting as A's. Teacher C speaks faster than A or B and his classes were not that interesting.*

#### 4.2. What's Fun and What's 'Nuff: Students' Reactions to Teacher Humor

Questions 4 and 5 had non-obligatory open-ended sections and we were able to elicit 102 and 40 responses respectively, which makes for corresponding response rates of 47.2% and a very modest 18.5%.

##### 4.2.1. Positive experiences with teacher humor

Table 7 lists the relative shares of different types of teacher humor in our sample of responses to Question 4, which the students mentioned as having found amusing, in decreasing order from left to right. Note that comments made by individual students might sometimes qualify for multiple categories.

Table 7 *Relative Share of Different Types of Humor Mentioned in 102 Responses to Q4*

<i><b>Humor Type</b></i>	<i>Personal</i>	<i>Slapstick</i>	<i>Japan-Relate</i>	<i>Puns</i>	<i>Self-Deprecating</i>	<i>Sarcasm</i>	<i>Black Humor</i>
<i><b>Relative Share</b></i>	33.33%	22.55%	17.65%	9.80%	5.88%	3.92%	1.96%

The single most common type of appreciated humor, dubbed “Personal” above, included instances when the teachers were sharing personal stories and past experiences. This corroborates many teachers' intuitive feeling that this type of humor works, as discussed in Schnickel & Martchev (2017). Unfortunately, mentions of more specific jokes and episodes were generally much fewer than the broader descriptions of humor types that students usually gave, but some examples include:

- *the story about a teacher taking a mid-class bathroom break. while forgetting to switch off his wireless microphone*
- *a teacher of broader stature getting annoyed while sitting in a crowded Tokyo train*
- *the beginnings of a teacher's romance with his future wife*
- *a teacher outwardly appearing to be just walking to work like any other person, but internally "dancing" along while listening to his music.*
- *unexpected and new experiences that teachers had in Japan*

Interestingly, some of the actual examples given by students were not things that we would classify as jokes, but rather just intriguing or unusual experiences, one reason for which might have to do with the difficulty in translating “funny” between English and Japanese, due to the frequent use of “*omoshiroi*”—literally, “interesting”—to talk about jokes and humor in the latter. One example was a creepy story about the strange “unlucky number 17” that a teacher told his class about the first time he had shared it with a different group of students, after happening to glance at the time (17:17) on his classroom screen. The story: an airplane took its maiden flight on July 17, 1997 and was brought down on July 17, 2014 over eastern Ukraine—exactly 17 years later. The name of the Malaysian Air flight was of course MH17. Later, after leaving work, the teacher went back to the nearest train station only to find out that he had exactly 1,717 yen remaining in his rechargeable smart card when checking in at the ticket gates. Another example regarded the experience a teacher had while trying to give a fingerprint for his “Alien Registration Card” (as Residence Cards issued to foreigners were officially called at the time in Japan). Unfortunately, the day before he had cut the very index finger required of him at the City Hall with a kitchen knife, and tried to be helpful by asking if the official in front of him would like to register the neighboring finger instead, or perhaps the index finger on the other hand. The City Hall employee seemed confused and told him to wait a little before disappearing for close to half an hour. When he returned, he instructed the teacher to use his next digit—one of the very options the teacher had offered all those minutes ago, upon which the teacher gave him his middle finger.

Humor related to how a foreigner sees Japan, its people and its language was the second most popular category among our students, with mentioned non-specific examples including talking about the differences between Japanese culture and foreign cultures, funny/interesting experiences teachers had in Japan (there is of

course an overlap here with the category of Personal humor), commonly misused English by Japanese speakers or, alternatively, commonly misused Japanese by foreign speakers, teachers speaking Japanese in a funny way, or sometimes making a note of the English messages written on students' T-shirts. The above "fingerprint story" certainly qualifies in this category too, but another example was about a teacher's younger brother who came to visit and promptly forgot his favorite jacket on the train on the day of his arrival. The older sibling initially succeeded in assuaging his fear of losing it forever by telling him how Japan was a "safe country" and that it would definitely come back. All they had to do was report the missing item. No such luck, as it eventually turned out.

There is also a word or two to be said about teachers using body language to convey humor, this category being labeled "Slapstick" above. A frequently mentioned theme here was students enjoying their teachers "exaggerated" reactions and facial expressions. Exuberance of expression is not typical of Japanese culture in general, but it obviously can be enjoyed if it is done by a foreigner in an educational setting. Other examples include teachers performing magic tricks, walking into the classroom in a funny way, laughing at their own jokes, moving their body while explaining something, pretending there was a snake nearby, calling out student names in a "rhythmical" fashion while taking attendance, opening their eyes wide and making other funny faces, producing funny noises like the sound of a doorbell or simply saying "Yeah!", imitating Japanese people in an exaggerated way, or singing Beatles songs in class. Thus, slapstick, which often tends to be perceived as childish in other settings, can certainly be a valuable and welcome addition to a class environment where normal verbal communication is hampered.

Moving on to the next couple of humor categories, we did expect to get a few more mentions of self-deprecating humor based on our prior research on classroom humor from the teacher's perspective (cf. Schnickel & Martchev, 2017), as it is usually considered safe and effective by instructors<sup>2</sup>. This is in contrast to the "Puns" section, which proved to be slightly more popular than we might have thought.

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<sup>2</sup> Hence, follow-up studies should probably also include obligatory multi-choice questions on humor types, to see if this is just a coincidental result, or indeed represents a mismatch between students' reactions and teachers' expectations.

The least-mentioned types of humor in the above table are sarcasm and black jokes, which is not really surprising to people familiar with Japanese sensitivities. The couple of instances of sarcastic humor that were indeed mentioned came from students enrolled in more advanced classes—also not a surprise. Incidentally, one particular student had this to say:

*·Teacher C is our writing teacher and doesn't joke around much. If he does, he is usually being sarcastic, and it's not exactly like we are rolling with laughter.*

Even though we do not have sufficient data at the moment to shed ample light on the situation regarding sarcasm, it is perhaps safe to say that it would mainly depend on who the sarcasm is pointed at. Unless it is particular students, it may be relatively harmless and enjoyable, while self-deprecation on the part of the teacher also often comes in the form of sarcasm directed at him or herself.

“Black jokes” came in last as a source of classroom entertainment. There was arguably only one clear mention in the students’ input, and two at most. This seems to further suggest that teachers should be careful here (cf., for example, a teacher’s negative experience with trying to tell a “black joke” in Schnickel & Martchev, 2017).

Among other things not included in the table above, but which individual respondents said they had found funny, we had giving the students nicknames and using them, pointing out the funny or stupid side of illustrations in the textbook, showing hidden camera videos in class, or displaying an interest in the students’ belongings.

#### **4.2.2. Negative experiences with teacher humor**

As far as instances of failed humor on the part of the teachers (Question 5), we unfortunately got far less open-ended feedback. The table below summarizes the comments that we did receive:

Table 8 *Feedback on Failed Attempts at Humor by Teachers (Q5)*

<b><i>Stated reasons for failed humor</i></b>	<b><i>Insufficient English language skills</i></b>	<b><i>Incompatible senses of humor</i></b>
<b><i>Number of responses</i></b>	20	9
<b><i>Relative share (in 40 responses)</i></b>	50%	22.5%

The most commonly stated reason for humor failure was, just as expected, the lack of sufficient English language skills on the part of the students and we (speaking from a language teacher's perspective) have to wonder how many times the very intent to apply humor also went unnoticed by class participants in a country where seemingly most people usually feel obliged to clarify: "Oh, it's just a joke!", after they have said something questionable in jest, thus effectively "ruining" the joke as some people in other cultures would see it. One respondent even stated he did not care for the fact that, after attempting a "black joke" (something to the effect of, translating back from Japanese, "*All right, everybody who is absent today will undergo torture next week!*") his teacher said, "I'm joking", while making a scary face. Another mentioned that her English teacher sometimes jokes but never changes his or her tone of voice, and she therefore usually failed to realize that what was said was meant to be a joke. Even when the students perceive their teacher's humorous intent, however, they sometimes state that the "laughing point" (to use a Japanese-English phrase) of the joke doesn't match their own sense of humor. Let us give a couple of examples here: a teacher was laughing about the differences between British and American English, but the student thought it was just useful information rather than funny; another teacher started to mix in Spanish while addressing the students as a joke but, according to the respondent, he was met with silence from the class as they were not sure why he was speaking in that language given that nobody understood it. Sometimes the problem could also be a generational gap (or as it is called in Japan "*neta ga furui*"), as some older teachers will joke about things the students have no idea about.

It has to be said, however, that we got very little feedback for Question 5 (despite the fact that about half of our respondents remembered their teachers failing to be funny on at least a couple of occasions, as reflected in Chart 2), so it is difficult to draw any hard conclusions here. Is it that the students tend to remember the good more often than the bad, or is it simply that it is hard to recall something you didn't quite understand? Anyway, we would need more data to be sure, especially considering that some teachers report successfully attempted humor in much the same situations as above. For example, one of us (Martchev) has had positive experiences when talking about differences between US and UK usage<sup>3</sup>, or so he thinks, while a colleague of ours reports managing to amuse his students by suddenly switching to German in class.

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<sup>3</sup> As in, for instance, "*You don't use your foot 99% of the time, and it's not really a ball. Why do you call it "football" then? And, what on earth does 'soccer' mean, anyway?*", or sometimes feigning an American accent.

Or so he thinks. Many students also appear to love hearing about the Beatles, even though the band hasn't been around for half a century. A study specifically designed to investigate possible mismatches between teachers' and students' perceptions of particular situations seems like a good idea.

#### 4.3. *Look who's trying to be funny... Or not: The Student Side of Classroom Humor*

In stark contrast to most teachers' active attempts to incorporate humor in their classes, the data suggests that our Japanese students themselves rarely, if ever, try to be funny with their teachers. One could think of many reasons for this, some obvious candidates being: lack of confidence in speaking English, being shy, facing an authority figure, or just being used to the presumed serious setting of a university class (which, however, still doesn't stop many of them from performing all kinds of other extracurricular activities such as talking to each other, typing on their smartphones, or blissfully falling asleep). 92.5% of our study participants say that they have never attempted to say anything funny to their foreign English teacher, while 64% of the remaining brave few judge the success rate of getting their joke across to be zero. Charts 4 and 5 provide more details.

Chart 4 *Student -to-Teacher Humor Attempts*

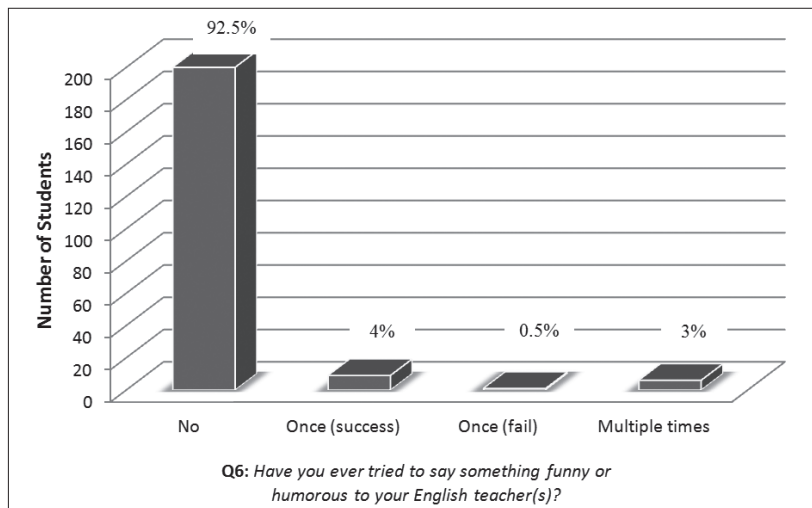
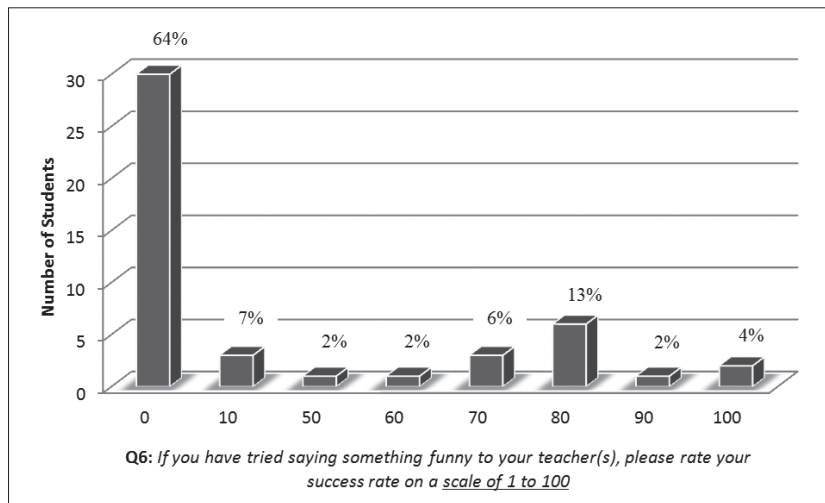




Chart 5 *Student -to-Teacher Humor Attempts*  
*-Subjective Success Rates-*



We received feedback from only 7 students in this section of the survey, three of them saying that they reacted to a teacher’s joke by trying to say something funny back. One student, for example, asked her teacher (when she felt she was being teased) whether he or she was going to “keep repeating that” until the end of the semester. In other reported instances, a student compared her teacher to a famous actor/actress (which apparently qualifies as a joke), one declared himself a genius, a third one said “*yukichi*” instead of “money”<sup>4</sup>, while another one wrote in his notebook that his sleeping in class shouldn’t be a problem to anyone, which the teacher saw and appreciated as a joke.

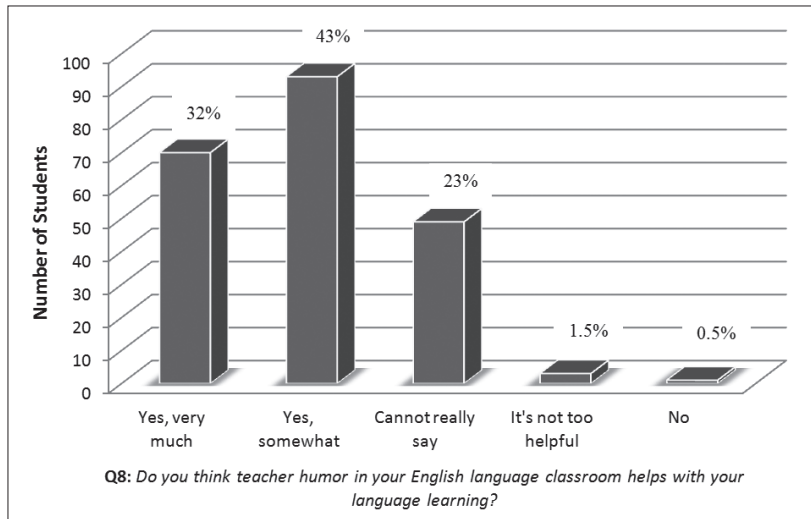
#### 4.4. *“In a funny atmosphere, sleeping students disappear”*: The Educational Value of Classroom Humor

Asked whether they think that humor used by their teachers helps with their language education, a combined three quarters of our respondents said it does so very much, or at least somewhat. Only one lone student declared that she does not see a place for teachers using humor in her classroom. Unless it was a joke<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> A reference to the historical Japanese figure Yukichi Fukuzawa, whose portrait appears on ten-thousand yen notes.

<sup>5</sup> It has to be mentioned that the same student’s answer to Q5 was “*The teacher was handing out playing cards, and I was able to relax.*” This is the kind of souvenir that surveys have to survive on sometimes.

Chart 6 *The Students : Is Teacher Humor Good for Learning?*



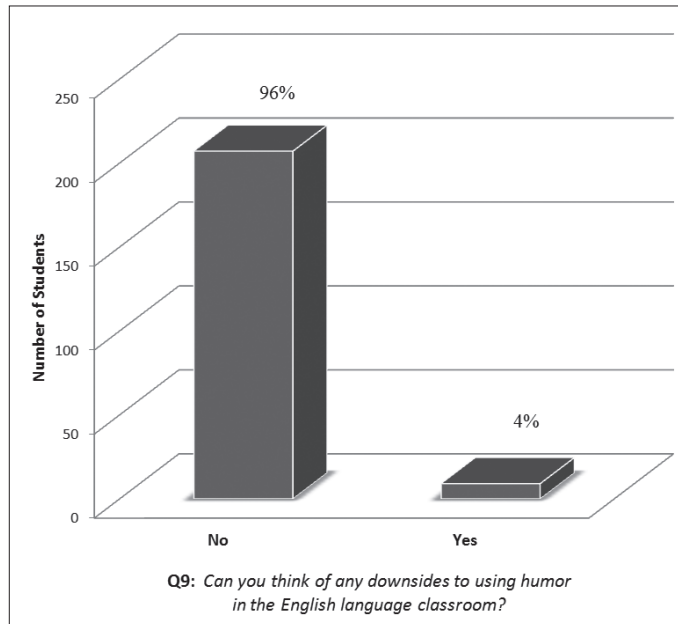
In the feedback section attached to Question 8 about humor and language learning, the most common themes we found had to do with increased motivation, decreased nervousness about speaking English, and improved learning and recall, which is very much in line with prior research on classroom humor. Many students also thought about the probable need to actually communicate with foreigners in the future. Here is a representative sample of student responses (the total number of which was 69):

- *I like teachers with humor, because the classes are not boring and that makes you want to participate more.*
- *I don't know whether the presence of humor directly helps you to learn more English, but it definitely makes you more interested in the language.*
- *I don't know if it's something I'd be able to use in an actual situation, but it makes you more interested in the English language.*
- *You have to do it anyway, so it's better to have a good time.*
- *Foreign teachers are interesting and funny in a different way to our Japanese teachers, and I like it.*
- *In a funny and enjoyable classroom atmosphere, sleeping students disappear.*
- *Without humor, you cannot appreciate the language.*
- *If the class is interesting, it makes you want to listen and you remember better.*
- *The wall between teacher and student disappears.*
- *If the teacher talks in an engaging and interesting way, our lack of confidence about speaking English diminishes.*

- *You notice: "Oh, that's how native speakers say it!"*
- *Humor increases the time you spend thinking in English.*
- *There are many idioms and expressions particular to using humor, and they are very difficult to learn in normal English classes.*
- *Humor helps us learn "real" reactions that are useful in everyday life.*
- *When you go abroad, you'll be able to talk about more things if you can communicate with humor.*
- *Contacts with English-speaking people will only increase in the future, so it would be good to understand their jokes.*
- *If I went abroad and somebody tried to make me laugh, it wouldn't be nice of me if I didn't understand them.*
- *Many foreign jokes would not be understood in Japan, and I would like to learn more about foreigners' sense of humor. It would be useful when I travel or go to study abroad.*
- *I have an image of native English speakers as being cheerful, and I'd like that to continue.*
- *As long as it doesn't impede class progress, I think it's good to use humor.*
- *I think it's the same for both foreign and Japanese English teachers, but if something is interesting, you tend to remember it. Together with the funny bits you also remember the actual class content better. Foreign teachers' humorous conversation is useful as students have no confidence in speaking English and are shy to speak it. In an enjoyable English class where the teacher speaks to you with a sense of humor and a smile on his face, it's easier to stop worrying about making mistakes.*
- *Sometimes I don't understand my teacher's jokes, but I appreciate the fact that he tries to make me laugh.*

The remaining quarter of students who were not sure about the value of humor in English language education might reasonably be expected to then point out possible downsides associated with their teachers trying to be funny, but only 4% provided any feedback at all under Question 9, as can be seen from Chart 7.

Chart 7 *The Students : Downsides to Classroom Humor?*



Given the small number of comments here, let us list them all:

- *The class atmosphere becomes too relaxed, people tend to start speaking to each other in Japanese and class progress stalls.*
- *We don't talk about things Japanese very much.*
- *There is the danger of students failing to understand that something is being meant as a joke, they may take it seriously and people get offended.*
- *Sometimes we don't understand the teacher's humor and the class atmosphere goes cold.*
- *It can be disturbing to students who are shy and not good at communicating.*
- *I don't know what we're doing. [the single student who replied "No" to Q8]*
- *I once saw on the news a story about how a teacher joked around with a student, but it was too much for him and he stopped coming to school.*
- *Teachers have to explain, otherwise we don't understand or sometimes cannot even realize it's a joke.*

#### 4.5. Students' Views on Native English Speakers' Humor

In the 181 responses we received to Question 7 about what the students thought of English speakers' sense of humor, 53% of our respondents stated a positive attitude,

15% negative, and 32% expressed opinions which were neutral or balanced. Among the reasons for their positive attitude, students most often mentioned the “freshness” factor (i.e. types of humor not found in Japan), as well as the abundance of gestures and highness of spirits on the part of their teachers. Among the negative comments, they usually talked about a difficulty in simply understanding the humor or the punch line (both in terms of the English and the humor itself), with a few students mentioning the higher presence of cynicism and black humor in English-speaker jokes (although one student did say he liked black jokes).

Finally, here a sample of the more nuanced comments:

- *Japanese humor is basically based on “boke-tsukkomi” [i.e. the idiot and straight man manzai type of duo], while you often have one person talking and making you laugh in English speaking countries.*
- *Compared to Japanese humor, English humor makes you think more.*
- *English humor gets to the core of things more, but it can also be more cruel.*
- *I think English speaker humor is interesting when I watch movies, etc. But I also think it can be meaner and more roundabout.*
- *It's not too different from Japanese humor, but English speakers pretend to be serious more often when they joke, it seems.*
- *(sic) I can't understand what is joke in English, but if the talk is interesting, I laugh.*
- *I like it, basically. But our foreign teachers know that sarcastic humor is not so common in Japan and they usually say things that are funny to us. But when my foreign friends talked to me as if I was one of them, it was much more difficult to understand.*

## 5. Summary

In conclusion, the results of our study seem to suggest that humor can indeed serve as a useful tool for university instructors in Japan more often than not. A number of the benefits of using humor in the classroom perceived by students in the present study align with those reported by Lei, Cohen, & Russler (2010) in their review of existing research. What follows is a series of humor benefits listed by these authors, each accompanied by an illustrative comment from a participant in our survey: “Increases motivation” (*I like teachers with humor, because the classes are not boring and that makes*

*you want to participate more.*); “Captures student interest” (*I don’t know if the presence of humor directly helps you to learn more English, but it definitely makes you more interested in the language.*); “Increases student attention” (*In a funny and enjoyable classroom atmosphere, sleeping students disappear.*); “Facilitates comprehension of course information” (*If the class is interesting, it makes you want to listen and you remember better.*); “[Bridges] the gap between instructors and students” (*The wall between teacher and student disappears.*); “Elevates students’ self-confidence” (*If the teacher talks in an engaging and interesting way, our lack of confidence about speaking English diminishes.*); “Enhances boring and/or dreaded subjects and courses” (*You have to do it anyway, so it’s better to have a good time.*); “Reveals humanness of instructors” (*Sometimes I don’t understand my teacher’s jokes, but I appreciate the fact that he tries to make me laugh.*); “Alleviates anxiety” (*In an enjoyable English class where the teacher speaks to you with a sense of humor and a smile on his face, it’s easier to stop worrying about making mistakes.*) Another caveat from a student (*As long as it doesn’t impede class progress, I think it’s good to use humor.*) echoes the observation of Lei, Cohen, & Russler (2010) that “Excessive humor can undermine the credibility of speakers and have the opposite effect on student learning, making them bored or frustrated by the relentless string of jokes” (p. 331).

All this shows that our students as a group are largely aware (when asked to think about it) of what humor brings to the table in an educational environment. Moreover, an analysis of our respondents’ input also supports the reported judgment of many teachers that there is a sort of law of diminishing returns for classroom humor above a certain threshold, especially if we are concerned with class usefulness. We might argue about what that threshold is, but if the *de facto* mean value of teachers’ perceived humor frequency in our data is any indication of a “sweet spot”, we found that value to be 3.65 on a scale of one to five, with five representing the highest rate of occurrence.

Although not entirely unexpected, a side-effect of this study was to highlight the fact that the semantic boundary between the concepts “funny” and “interesting” is more blurred in Japanese than it is in English and some other languages. Students gave many examples of classroom humor which were actually stories that we would not call worthy of laughter, but rather fascinating or intriguing.

Furthermore, our research found that Japanese students do not themselves attempt to use humor in the classroom in most cases, or if they do they usually feel that it has not worked. (Of course, the reported frequency will probably change if more students in possession of higher English speaking skills are interviewed.)

We also attempted to estimate the share of different types of humor in terms of their seeming popularity with Japanese students. In decreasing order: *personal*, *slapstick*, *Japan-related*, *puns*, *self-deprecating*, *sarcasm*, and *black humor*. At the same time, our finding that most students have a positive attitude towards English speakers' humor may have been enhanced by the fact that, as one student observed, their foreign teachers are usually careful with what kind of jokes they can afford, if not outright get away with. Which is not to say that other, less popular types will not work, given judicious and tactful use.

As every comedienne knows, it is very difficult to please everyone with a joke. Teacher humor can be similarly treacherous. Is it all right to go for something that will get a laugh, but that will perhaps leave some students confused or displeased? Is it a good idea to squeeze in a joke which probably wouldn't be appreciated as such, but which will at least serve the educational purpose of showing the students what English speakers' humor can be like? It is up to every teacher to decide, but we would certainly like to know where the pits are before we choose whether to fall in or not, in the name of some good-willed hunting for classroom laughter. Our best advice at this point: "It's not what you do, but how you do it." Well, this was always true, and you certainly didn't need to read this whole thing to learn it. So, here is our second-best piece of advice: "Know your young Japanese audience. They may not say much most of the time, but they are watching you!"

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