TO JOKE OR NOT TO JOKE –
some upper-secondary school students’ perspectives
and experiences of humour in the classroom

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Abstract

The aim of this qualitative study was to attain an increased understanding as to how several upper-secondary school students perceived and experienced teachers using humour during classroom discourse. The study was based on the following questions: What does humour mean to the students? What are the forms of humour utilized by teachers? How do students perceive the use of humour with regards to learning processes? Are there recommendations and cautionary measures for teachers to consider when incorporating humour in teaching? Methodology used was a semi-structured interview of 13 questions. Participants consisted of six students aged 16 to 19 years. The length of the interviews varied between 20-35 minutes. Results of the interviews indicated that openness and understanding the unique sense of humour existing in each classroom, as well as self-confidence and a moderate use of humour, are necessary to effectively incorporate humorous text and anecdotes in lessons to facilitate learning processes. However, the study revealed that openness is pivotal in the construction and maintenance of positive learning climates. Students did not experience humour during ESL lessons, indicating a possible lack of contextual knowledge in language teaching practices.

Keywords: humour, moderation, openness, qualitative, upper-secondary school

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Introduction

Human beings are born with a humour ability which eventually forms into a unique sense of humour for each individual. Olsson, Backe, Sörensen and Koch (2002) state that humour itself acts to facilitate human interaction and is viewed as a powerful communication tool with most individuals preferring to laugh in the presence of others. According to Apte (1985; ref. in Martin, 2007), both humour and laughter are universal aspects of human experience, occurring in all cultures throughout the world. Therefore, in relation to education, the focus of this qualitative study is how humour, fundamentally a social phenomenon, affects teaching practices and influences learning processes in upper-secondary school classroom discourse.

Torok, McMorris and Lin (2004) indicate that humour has historically been considered as having no place in the classroom as the dynamic between the pedagogue and student was perceived to be nothing but serious. This essentially non-serious association with humour has been drastically altered with the acknowledgement that all human societies engage in humorous activities which create opportunities to generate laughter. The purpose of such mirthful activities is not fully known, and as such requires further investigation. Also, due to several factors, for example the complexity and elusiveness of humour, the diversity of stimuli and lack of precise definitions, scientific challenges have been posed which have been seemingly neglected by researchers in the past. Encouragingly though, Martin (2007) ascertains that the field of humorology has attained increasing focus over the past few decades, with investigations studying diverse topics including healthcare, counseling, business and education.

In the modern education climate, the incorporation of humour is encouraged across all academic levels as the advantages of its inclusion seems to far outweigh the disadvantages if an element of humour was excluded (appendix C; Lei, Cohen & Russler, 2010). For example, studies on humour conducted by Olsson, Backe and Sörensen (2003) and Torok et al. (2004) have found an increase in student motivation on courses judged to be tedious or difficult, a facilitation of improved retention of material, increased learning speeds, reductions in stress and anxiety, and increased student perception of teachers.

Social humour in academia

Playing an important role in the majority of social encounters, humour is intimately related to human nature and behaviour. Humorous statements, in both written and spoken forms, have different roles in classroom discourse. For example, some may involve satire (a play on words as can be observed in Shakespeare’s plays), or criticism aimed at a particular demographic group within society, such as a specific gender, sexual orientation, race, religion, colour or creed. The complexity of humour can be acknowledged by the vast array of texts relating to humorous discourse. Long and Graesser (1988) formulated a taxonomy of wit which included many forms of humour which were observed in classroom interactions. The use of humour in education and other public situations, due to its complexity, therefore has an important and noteworthy caveat: to be used with caution (Deniere, 1995). Irony, satire and philosophical witticisms are best targeted at adolescent students aged 15 years or above and only used with common sense by an educator in the form of constructive humour.

In the 1980’s, a debate discussed whether humour can be considered as an academic subject (Apter, 1987). Olsson et al. (2003) consider humor studies to be multidisciplinary with the development of the subject as a recognized science related to two relatively “young” sciences: anthropology and social linguistics. Humour itself has recently been acknowledged to be a valuable teaching tool in education for successfully establishing a type of classroom climate to successfully promote learning. Garner (2006), Torok et al. (2004) and Schmitz
(2002) claim that humour assists in creating a form of mutual openness between teachers and students as well as improving teaching efficacy.

**Theories in humorology**

According to Martin (2007), there are four main classic groups of humour theory: superiority, incongruity, relief-arousal (including psychoanalysis) and reversal theories. Regardless of how humour is used, Martin states that one of these theories will come into play in all humorous interactions. The functions of the theories are based on communication between, specifically in the case of education, the sender (educator) and the receiver (student). The theories indicate that, depending on how it is utilized, humour can act as either a uniting or dividing power in the classroom.

*Superiority/Disparagement theory*. Used mostly up until the 19th century, the superiority theory was founded upon humour acting as the desire to feel, in some way, more powerful in social standing than another individual. Both humour and laughter have a philosophical origin dating back to Plato (427 – 348 BC) and Aristotle (384 – 322 BC) who considered laughter to be a reaction to weakness. In educational terms, this theory explains the social behavior of the sender (the teacher) and the emotional reactions of the receiver (student). But, the superiority theory takes a socio-psychological approach to humour which does not enlighten us as to the function of laughter or its relationship to humour. Therefore, it can be assessed that in circumstances where laughter occurs, that the process is more complicated than the superiority theory suggests.

*Incongruity theory*. By the early 19th century, the superiority theory was replaced by another theory viewing incongruity as the essence of laughter (Martin, 2007; Provine, 2000). Over the last two centuries, incongruity theories have held a dominant position as the leading psychological model to explain how humour and laughter are constructed by both conflict and incongruence. Incongruity theories of humour focus on cognition and less on the social and emotional aspects of the phenomenon. Immanuel Kant (1724 – 1804), an advocate of incongruity theory, conceptualized laughter as “an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing” (Olsson et al., 2003, p. 25).

*Relief-arousal theory*. This theory offers a more psychological perspective in viewing laughter as relieving an accumulation of nervous energy (Provine, 2000). It considers humour to be either a reduction of physiological arousal or a physical change occurring when an individual experiences either a positive or negative effect. Related to the relief-arousal theory, Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytical view of humour was by far the most influential theory in psychological humour research during the first half of the twentieth century (Freud, 1935; in Martin, 2007). Freud theorized that humour is the “highest of the defense mechanisms” enabling individuals to face difficult situations without an overwhelming sensation of unpleasantness (Freud, 1928; in Martin, 2007, p. 35). Therefore, the major function of laughter was thought to be a reaction to reduce built-up tension or energy i.e. acting as a vent for unused and suppressed energy which the nervous system no longer requires. He considered it to be both beneficial and liberating solely for the sender, acting as a way of coping with stressful situations and regulating emotions.

*Reversal theory*. Laughter in children frequently occurs in the context of playful activities, whereas in adulthood, humour is a way in which (with fully developed sense of humors) engage in playful activities, for example by participating in social games such as charades, or board games like “Pictionary” or “Taboo” where words, drawings and cognitive ideas are used as playthings. Apter (1987) proposed the idea of humour as play, deriving his conclusions from a more general theory of motivation and personality. Reversal theory, like psychoanalytic (relief-arousal) and superiority (disparagement) theories, provides an explanation for both aggressive and sexually-derived emotions experienced with humour.
However, this increment in arousal is to be enjoyed in a playful state of mind. In educational settings, both the teller of a humorous statement (educator) and the listener (student) collaborate in playful activities (text, dialogue, role-play, etc.) in which many possible interpretations of the same event can be activated by other students, allowing for “breathing space” from academic texts and variation of classroom activities.

The function of humour
Humour and laughter act as extremely complex personality attributes which are affected by both cultural and historical processes. The unmistakable sound (or language) of laughter is considered to be as unique as an individual’s fingerprint (Martin, 2007). Situations in life which have a humoristic content occur when the rules of communication are challenged as communication between people tends to follow particular conventions. The process of communication consists of a message or form of relation between the sender and receiver. Through social interaction, individuals create relations with their surroundings via many different forms of communication e.g. verbal, written, internet-based, informal/formal, direct/indirect, one-way/two-way/multi-way, individual or using mass-media. Verbal humour itself involves the rules of grammar, spoken words and the use of living language i.e. pronunciation and tone. According to Olsson et al. (2003), there are four main communicative functions of humour: social, expressive, information and control.

The social function is to create companionship and togetherness, as well as forming a strong sense of safety within a group – a kind of “homely feeling” where an individual feels accepted and thought of. The exchange of personal thoughts and experiences gives an outlet for expressions of wishes. Both age and genus can affect the social function of humour. The expressive function aims to provide a method of conscious and semi-conscious expression of emotion and includes tone of voice, facial expressions and gestures to mediate messages of humour. Coupled with the social function of humour, the expressive function allows for developing greater understanding of information. A sense of “comfortable safety” and harmonious camaraderie between sender and receiver can give rise to expressions of fantasy, experience and acknowledgement which are all imperative for the point of humour (be it linguistic, cultural or historical) to be successful. The informational function of humour, related to the mediation of diverse knowledge, can be linked to the other functions in the process of communication. Humour often plays a pivotal role in the process and provides the opportunity to make others more receptive to both information and knowledge. The control function of humour comes into importance when related to content learned by an individual. In other words, whether or not information taught has actually been assimilated and understood. This control often gives the receiver an opportunity to express their understanding via constructive comments, or silence if the context of the witty remark has not been comprehended. To fully understand a language allows for increased social competency and a feeling of safety in different situations.

Martin (2007) states that humour is both an important trait and a phenomenon which acts to stimulate humoristic reactions in others. It is also closely linked to assessments made by the sender and receiver giving rise to humour in the communication process, which can give rise to both positive and negative responses. Individuals differ immensely due to his or her mannerisms, behaviours, prejudices, wishes and objectives. These different aspects are parts of personality i.e. an individual’s method of characteristically connecting their inner and outer worlds. It is quite simply a way in which we process the humour impulses which are activated within us as an answer to the humour stimuli we are interested in. When students learn about the relation between humour and culture (what can be joked about and what cannot), humour can be viewed as a playful way of human expectation to be connected to rules, norms, roles, and other cultural artefacts.
Forms of pedagogical humour

There is a promotion of the use of humour in schools to create more relaxed learning climates with an emphasis on making learning fun. In other words, children are more likely to be motivated to learn and retain information if they are happy and feel secure rather than if feeling threatened or anxious. It has been recommended in previous studies that teachers introduce humour into classroom discourse by the frequent telling of funny, personal anecdotes. Cornett (1986; ref. in Martin, 2007, p. 350) describes humour as being one of the teacher’s “most powerful instructional resources” and claimed that it can be used for effective building of vocabulary when teaching languages.

What are the advantages of using humour as a pedagogical tool? Ahern (2008), Martin (2007) and Torok et al. (2004) agree that humour helps to reduce stress in the classroom, reduces anxiety and boredom, enhances student-teacher relationships, makes learning more enjoyable by creating positive attitudes to learning, stimulates interest in and increases attention to educational information, increases comprehension as well as facilitating improved retention and recall. Therefore, as there are cognitive, emotional, social and psychological benefits of humour, should a goal of upper-secondary schools be to facilitate the development of a good sense of humour in each and every student?

Each classroom is considered to have its own general personality, consisting of numerous individual personalities, as well as a developed collective memory of specific incidents occurring within it. As such, schools act as complex micro-communities comprising of students with different values, beliefs, attitudes, opinions, social skills and views of global issues. Eriksson (1987) stated that, regarding the social aspect of schools and teaching, school culture has three main considerations: (1) culture as pieces of information, (2) culture as a set of symbols and concepts, and (3) culture as an arena of different meanings resulting from both political and social struggles. Therefore, humour has a definite place in education as it relates to culture, but – especially in language courses – humour is recommended to be used with caution (Lei et al., 2010). Misunderstandings of context during the presentation of “jokey” material may create undesired alienation amongst the students and result in a feeling of negativity towards the foreign language itself. This can possibly create relationship problems for the teacher with the students.

As this paper is directed specifically towards the use of humour in upper-secondary schools in Sweden, a question which needs to be addressed is whether, in the social context of schools, is there “room for maneuver” regarding humour at this level of education? The explanation can be considered to include cultural and aspects of aging. Firstly, based on the eleven categories of humour as proposed by Long and Graesser (1988), Schmitz (2002) devised three basic groups of humorous discourse in language teaching: contextual humour and general global functioning (reality-based), cultural humour, and linguistic humour (based on phrenology, morphology and syntax). Due to the fact that, in general, ESL (English as a Second Language) groups are of mixed language ability and, therefore, limit the use of the more complex cultural and linguistic types of humor as these require either an intermediate or advanced level of knowledge of English. In theory, witticisms can be divided into two groups: destructive jokes and non-destructive jokes. These two groups are both considered to be effective in conveying cultural perspectives as they can effectively mirror different nations and societies. However, the same caveat applies that, especially in upper-secondary schools, teachers must exercise caution and care when selecting materials of a humorous nature to be consciously included during lessons. Due to the three groups of humorous discourse, the proficiency of students in ESL is vitally important in the teachers’ choice of texts.

Lei et al. (2010) evaluated the benefits and drawbacks of using humor pedagogically, and indicated many psychological, social and cognitive (specifically related to education) benefits
of humour, but also that only with an appropriate, constructive and moderate use of humour can it become an integral component for effective learning (table 3 of appendix C; Lei et al., 2010). It is acknowledged that humour does not only encourage students to take risks and think creatively, which are important assets in language learning, but also that there are many drawbacks, such as excessive humour, which can undermine the educator’s credibility with students and result in a reduction of self-esteem if humour is used to belittle the students themselves. Also, researchers (Lei et al, 2010; Torok et al., 2004) agree that negative forms of humour, including sarcasm, metaphor, acting ignorant and poking fun at students, are considered as inappropriate and have no place in the classroom (table 4 appendix C).

As previously stated, we are all born with a sense of humour which develops through childhood and the teenage years until adulthood, but how is age a determining factor in understanding the cognitive and social differences in using humour? What are the personal traits and abilities which are associated with a sense of humour? Associations with how often children initiate humour in school has been examined for different school ages, except for the later teenage years of humour development. In relation to this, a study of 12 and 15 year olds indicated that, due to an increased interest in the opposite sex, a sense of humour seemed to positively correlate with popularity (Oppenheimer & Sherman, 1996; ref. in Martin, 2007). The study demonstrates a distinct difference as to how the two groups investigated define humour: pre-adolescent children use terms of joke-telling and make funny faces, whereas adolescents use witty verbal skills. Extroversion (the general tendency to experience positive emotions) and introversion (loners with small numbers of intimate friends, more serious than extroverts) are concepts which exist in understanding a child’s perspective of humour, but teenage humour is considered to be specific for that stage of personal development and extremely difficult to comprehend by out-groups (those ages which are not teenagers) within society (Olsson et al., 2003). Thus, more research is necessary in this field.

If humour is a by-product of social interaction, it can be considered as forming part of the social hierarchy. Therefore, it can be questioned if teenagers (aged 16 to 19 years) and teachers fully understand and appreciate different levels of humour? In Olsson et al. (2002), it was concluded that it is not only humour development, but also the ability to experience empathy which does not fully develop until adulthood, thus coinciding with cognitive development and establishment of personal coping strategies. It is only when reaching twenty years of age that a sense of humour is thought to be fully developed, but still continues to change throughout adulthood until death.

Even though it has been recommended that teachers avoid the use of teasing, ridicule, sexism, and racism, there is evidence that these aggressive forms of humour are commonplace in upper-secondary school educational facilities. A study of college students indicated that over half of all instances of humour by instructors could be categorized as “tendentious” (aggressive), in that they were channelling the witty remark at one individual, group of people or an institution. This study, by Gorham and Christopel (1990; ref. in Martin, 2010, p. 251), gave the following results: humour directed at individuals or class (20%), at the instructors – self-deprecating or self-defeating humour (12%), related to lecture topic (30%) and other tendentious (e.g. famous people, state) or non-tendentious (personal anecdotes) types of humour (38%).

Neuliep (1991) conducted a large-scale survey of high school teachers asked respondents to describe their most recent use of humour in the classroom. Responses to this question were utilized to develop a taxonomy of teachers’ humour and consisted of the following categories: (1) teacher-directed (self-deprecating, embarrassing personal stories), (2) student-targeted (joking insult, teasing about mistakes), (3) untargeted (incongruities, joke-telling, puns, exaggeration), (4) external sources (historical accounts, cartoons, and demonstrations) and (5) non-verbal (funny experiences, vocal styles, physical bodily gestures). Thus, teachers appear
to use humour in a plethora of ways from aggressive (teasing and playful put-downs) to non-aggressive (social and historical anecdotes). Used as a method of increasing social interaction within the classroom, humour adds both levity and playfulness to the learning environment by making the lessons more vivid and memorable.

**Classroom climate & learning processes**

What is the effect of humour on the climate or atmosphere of the classroom and how does it influence the learning process? Does the use of humour promote high levels of cognitive academic performance? Oppliger (2003; ref. in Martin, 2007) proposed that there are several possible factors which can explain this phenomenon. Firstly, the positive emotions which accompany humour (i.e. mirth) may become associated with the learning experience, inducing a generally more positive attitude to education which increases motivation to learn and improves academic results. Secondly, the emotionally arousing properties of humour may assist in attracting and sustaining the students’ attention to the lesson content, thus facilitating acquisition of knowledge. Thirdly, incongruous mental associations – which are an inherent characteristic of humour – may facilitate in the process of cognitive elaboration, thus helping in the storage and retention of information in the long-term memory for later recall. Finally, memory cues linked to previously learned course information may facilitate the retrieval of details at a later date when answering questions in an exam or test situation.

Early studies investigating attention to humorous educational input has concentrated on younger age groups (first and second grade, or 7 to 8 years old) and college/university students, not teenagers. There is some evidence that humour captures and holds the attention of younger pupils, but the results on whether the humorous information was learned better were disappointing. Gruner (1976; ref. in Martin 2007) concluded that, generally, there were no influences of humour on memory. Davis and Apter (1980; ref. in Martin, 2007) revealed that children aged between 8 to 11 years recalled significantly more information presented with humour than non-humorous content, but this difference in memory retention was no longer apparent nine months later. Therefore, even retention of humorous information at those ages is limited by time. Ziv (1988b; ref. in Martin, 2007) studied the beneficial effects of humour on learning of university-level statistics students during a 14-week course. The two conditions included lectures with either humorous or non-humorous content. At the end of the term, analysis of the final examination grades revealed that the humorous condition increased by 10% as compared to the non-humorous grades.

As motivation for this present study, it was noted that very few research studies have been aimed at investigating the use of humour in the classroom by Swedish upper-secondary school educators, and thus no guidelines have as yet been generated indicating how to effectively use of humor in the classroom environment. This has still not transpired even though the many positive contributions of humor during interpersonal interactions between educators and students have been recognized (Schmitz, 2002). There has been very little description of teenage-humour in scientific literature. The phenomenon is considered to be extremely unique and special for the age-group, as well as being difficult to fully comprehend for individuals in teenager out-groups. Therefore, the sense of humour for this specific age-group has not been extensively investigated. At upper-secondary school level (gymnasium in Swedish), students enter a transitional period in life where they develop from childhood to adulthood. Due to the fact that it is not obligatory for students to attend this level of school, students tend to take their studies seriously and with high levels of ambition. Therefore, it is thought that there is no room for the inclusion of forms of humour in some subjects.

But, even if there is apparently no room for laughter and joviality at school between 15 and 19 years of age, how often are teenagers supposed to be laughing on a daily basis? According to Provine (2000), individuals are more likely to laugh in social situations than
alone. Olsson et al. (2003) quote that the number of instances of laughter per day is also affected by age with five year olds laughing 400 times a day as compared with adults at a mere 15 times per day and old-aged pensioners even less. Therefore, it can be questioned as to whether this drastic decrease in the number of daily occurrences of laughter takes place on a physiological, psychological or social basis. Until recently (i.e. the last 20 years), the vast majority of educational humorology research has concentrated on quantitative studies, predominantly of the younger school ages (nursery, primary and lower-secondary), with data collection in the form of either Likert scaled questions in surveys, semi-structured interviews, open-ended questions or modified checklists. A deeper understanding of interpersonal interactivity and teenage appreciation of humour needs to be gained, as well as generating guidelines for Swedish school teachers in the effective application of humour during educational discourse.

**Aim & research questions**

As previously stated, the focus of this paper is how humor, fundamentally a social phenomenon, effects teaching practices and influences learning processes in upper secondary classroom situations. The aim of this qualitative study was to attain an increased understanding as to how some upper-secondary school students' perceived and experienced teachers using humour during classroom discourse. The study was based on the following questions: What does humour mean to the students? What are the forms of humour utilized by teachers? How do students perceive the use of humour with regards to learning processes? Are there recommendations and cautionary measures for teachers to consider when incorporating humour in teaching?

**Method**

**Participants**

The target population for this study consists of all upper-secondary school students from different disciplines and year courses in Sweden. From the accessible population of who attended a school in the region of Halland, the participants selected for this study consisted of six students - three male and three female – aged between 16 to 19 years old. The students were contacted based on the prerequisite that they were studying at least English level six and interested in willingly divulging information about their experiences. Once these criteria had been met, a random sample of six students was selected.

**Data collection**

In this study, the researcher was the instrument for data collection, striving to give assistance to the informant without leading the in-depth discussion. A semi-structured interview guide was constructed consisting of thirteen open-ended questions and several follow-on questions to assess the students’ perceptions and experiences of the use of humour in teaching (appendix A). No specific types of humour were included in the questioning as this could have been misconstrued as leading the interviewee to a desired answer. Open-ended questions were asked so as to encourage the participants to discuss their experiences in detail.

**Procedure**

After consent forms (appendix B) were signed and returned, potential participants were contacted directly by the researcher. A mutually convenient time was planned for each face-to-face interview to take place. Participants were informed that they were being questioned about humour and teaching styles, and briefed on issues regarding confidentiality, the minimal risk of harm, and his or her right to refuse participation at any time. All of the
interviews were informal in style and the participants spoke freely, appearing both comfortable and relaxed during the whole interview process. The interviews lasted between 20 to 35 minutes. After the interviews had been digitally recorded, each participant was fully debriefed. They were also informed that a summary of the research findings would be made available to them upon request.

**Analysis of data**
For the purpose of this study, all interviews were transcribed verbatim and read several times by the researcher so as to acquire a sense of the data. The consent forms, digital recordings, transcripts and notes were kept in the researcher’s office, with the consent documents being kept separate from the other forms of data collected. Quotations pertaining to the research questions were extracted from the texts, and several themes from within each individual interview, as well as in comparison with other participants, were conducted. This procedure was performed in accordance with the constant comparative method of qualitative data analysis guidelines in Maykut and Morehouse (2003). Also, there were a number of limitations which had to be taken into consideration, which included the extremely small sample size, the geographical area being limited to the region of Halland, and the reliance of the students’ recall of their teachers’ use of humour.

**Ethical considerations**
Ethically, the investigative procedure follows the guidelines as proposed by Hassmèn and Hassmèn (2008), and Mitchell and Jolley (2010). The informed consent form (appendix A) intricately described the study and was signed by the participants to indicate their involvement with the research. The form included several important points such as any possible risks or discomfort caused by the procedure (none in this case), contact details, a statement of voluntary participation, and a statement to the effect that no penalties would be applied due to refusal to take part at any stage. Also, the consent form included a section regarding the confidentiality of personal information in that the researcher would not talk about the participants in public. This also meant maintaining the six participants’ anonymities, therefore code numbers were assigned to each participant and stored in a different area to the data produced from the study.

**Results**

**What is humour?**
The participants divulged their personal definitions as to the concept of humour and what it means to them as individuals. All of the replies included positive elements relating to two main topic areas: the importance of humour and humour as a social phenomenon. Even though the concept itself was considered problematic to describe definitively, all of the participants regarded humour as important with one female student describing it as important as strong emotions such as love.

> Something very positive I think. Umm, it’s as important as love and other things I think. I feel like I really need humour in my daily life and something I use a lot with my friends and something you also like, you like to watch humoristic movies and you love to make jokes, so it one way influences all aspects, I think, of life. Very important I think [laughs].

In all cases, humour was indicated as a social phenomenon, with different forms of humour being used with friends, family and teachers. Five out of six participants stressed that humour involves some form of social interaction where “you make someone laugh and be happy” and “when you laugh with the person and not at them”. One male participant added that “humour
is a way to conduct joy, making people happy through action or speaking”. In all cases, humour was described as being a positive phenomenon involving not just physical vocal actions such as laughter, but also facial expressions such as “smiling with your eyes” and not just with your mouth as one female participant put it. Therefore, humour was considered to be both a social and necessary element in life.

**Forms of humour in the classroom**

There was a common consensus by the participants that humour was utilised by the majority of upper-secondary school educators, but the type and frequency of classroom humour varied immensely. This was evident in the fact that four of six students stated that there was either no, or very rare occasions, when humour was used in ESL lessons, but existed in the teaching of subjects such as Mathematics and Physics. Popular types of positive, appropriate humour included personal stories, course-related jokes, speaking in a funny voice or accent, making funny facial expressions, and effective use of body language and gestures. When describing the behaviour of a Maths teacher’s, one female student exclaimed:

> …he always does super-crazy stuff with his body by standing in different ways, and we say “Oh, that’s when he did that” or “when we learned that” like. Not really remember everything but kind of a bit. And then you look back and yeah, that’s that, ok yeah.

Therefore, the effective use of body language was utilized to create a link with the course content which, for this particular student, was considered by the student to facilitate an element of recall of information. The appropriate and inappropriate forms of humour are illustrated in table 1. The types of humour deemed unfitting and offensive for an upper-secondary school environment included disparaging humour which may degrade students’ gender, ethnicity, religion, political view or physical appearance, as well as the negative use of sarcasm. It was also stated by the participants that over-the-top distasteful jokes regarding sex, morbidity or vulgarisms have no room in Swedish classroom environments.

**Table 1**

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<tr>
<th>Different forms of teacher humour experienced by students in this study</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Appropriate humour</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Personal anecdotes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Funny voices</td>
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<td>Body language (incl. facial expressions)</td>
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<td>Gestures</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jokes related to topic material</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sarcasm (accepted by classroom consensus)</td>
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<td>Irony</td>
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The level of humour used by educators was viewed quite differently by the participants. It was mentioned by one male student that there was a lack of humour in ESL lessons due to learning the basic grammar rules at lower-secondary school, and that at higher levels of education there is ample opportunity for humour “when you actually know the language”. On the other hand, another male student stated that the amount of humour experienced at upper-secondary level is significantly lower to that of primary school and lower-secondary school levels of education.
It doesn’t matter if the teacher is funny. Most people go to school and do what they should do. I don’t think it’s so much humour.”

The perceptions of how often humour is used in teaching varied greatly from one witty comment per lesson to none at all. An explanation from one male student was that due to upper-secondary schooling being non-obligatory in the Swedish education system, as compared to primary and lower-secondary years, laughter is replaced by ambition and the need to obtain grades necessary for further study or employment. In table 1, it can be observed that sarcasm is a form of humour acknowledged as being both an appropriate and inappropriate form of classroom humour. One female student gave an example of a male teacher who used both sarcasm and irony when going through a personal development report with the student:

We had this teacher and he’s very like ironic and sarcastic in his humour… he was like, “oh I think this is funny but you don’t” and he has his ironic and sarcastic ways. I know he thinks he is funny himself, but he doesn’t show it.

The student mentions that, due to her understanding of sarcasm as a form of humour - one she uses herself on a regular basis - that the seriousness of the teaching perceived was humorous, and found that she could recall the lesson content during test situations. Therefore, the use of sarcasm was accepted as an appropriate form of classroom humour if both the students and teacher have a mutual understanding that it will be respectfully used within the context of that particular class, as part of the unique character of the class’s sense of humour. In other words, only when the teacher fully understands and appreciates a student’s sense of humour, otherwise misunderstandings of context can occur. Also, sarcasm can be directed, not personally, towards the interests or hobbies of a student even though it may still be part of the student’s identity. One male student gave the example of supporting a particular football club being the target of jokes, but considered that sarcasm in that context should be an acceptable part of life as “it’s a bit of give and take really…..there’s always people who support the other team…if you take it in a bad way then you know that you can’t always joke with them, and you always want to joke with them if you lose”.

The meaning of humour in learning processes

The benefits of the use of educational humour are summarized regarding the cognitive, social and psychological effects which can occur as stated by the six participants (Table 3). Humour captures interest which, in turn, reduces the boredom endured by some students as a male student said, “you pay attention to the teacher automatically because you think that teacher is funny…..and the lessons are, well they are better than boring lessons”. Four out of six participants stated that humour helps in the retention and recall of learned course material. If the material was in some way presented in a humorous manner, or in a situation “that catches your eye”, then it was deemed easier to recall. One male student recalled an example in Biology, in a lesson eighteen months previous to the interview, where the class were taught a mnemonic device in order to remember the different taxonomy of the animal kingdom:

My teacher actually said there’s quite an easy way to remember the, um, like the order that these are supposed to be learned in when looking at the first letter of them and then instead of actually saying “phylum, class, order” and such, he actually said “kinky people come over for great sex”….and then generally helps you to understand it, because otherwise I think I wouldn’t understand it that well.
Therefore, from these examples, not only does humour facilitate improved learning, it can also support the comprehension of difficult concepts and theories in the form of learning devices, such as mnemonics.

The considered benefits of humour in teaching can be seen in table 2 which included improving student attention, as well as increasing motivation to complete tasks and better comprehension of taught material. These benefits were thought by the students to lead to improved achievement in tests and examinations. As previously stated, a humorous touch was stated to capture the students’ attention and, thus, make lessons more interesting and memorable. There are several social benefits of humour which were mentioned as important aspects in building a sense of trust between students and the teacher. This mutual trust was thought to act as an important building block in the creation of a positive, relaxed classroom climate and paves the way for better cooperation during tasks. In using humour, a teacher was considered to be more humane and approachable which, psychologically, increases the students’ positive feeling of wellbeing during lessons. Social interaction and cooperation were thought to elevate the self-esteem of students when occurring in a secure learning environment. To quote one female student describing a Physics lesson:

> It was like there was a great mood in the classroom ‘cos everyone was happy…I like it when teachers joke, and you really look up to them if they kind of make a good joke and make you laugh….you’re happier and then it’s easier to start with your work and so on.

Feeling safe and secure during classroom discourse was a factor mentioned by half of the participants. By teachers being personally open about themselves as individuals and seeming more humane, students undergo a feeling of being more “comfortable” in their surroundings when taught in a more personal, friendly manner, as opposed to an authoritative, stringent style of teaching.

**Table 2**

**Benefits of humour on learning from students’ perspectives (following analysis of interview data)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cognitive (educational)</th>
<th>Social (relation to teacher)</th>
<th>Psychological effects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Captures interest</td>
<td>Creates relaxed atmosphere</td>
<td>Increases feeling of wellbeing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduces boredom</td>
<td>Positive learning climate</td>
<td>Enhances secure feeling in classroom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitates improved learning</td>
<td>Increases teacher humanness</td>
<td>Acknowledgment elevates self-esteem of students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supports comprehension</td>
<td>Increases teacher approachability</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increases listening &amp; focus</td>
<td>Encourages trust</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increases motivation</td>
<td>Increases mutual respect</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increases achievement</td>
<td>Encourages cooperation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reduces academic gap</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Strengthens bond between teacher and student</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reduces anxiety and tension</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Recommendations & limitations**

Humour does not function alone to facilitate learning, but instead works in tandem with other teacher traits to be effective. This causes a problem in using humour to promote learning. Teacher attributes, such as immediacy and socio-communicative teaching styles, interact with humour in a complicated social process to facilitate learning. The student participants illustrated a number of areas of recommendation for effectively using humour in classroom discourse. Firstly, it was demonstrated that the participants identified sarcasm to be a form of
humour which was viewed to be both appropriate and inappropriate. All of the students stated
that the type and amount of humour used in the classroom is unique to each individual
teacher:

But then it’s how you are as a person because some people are good at talking and
They are made to stand in front of the crowd and talk and if you are, then it’s easier
to make a joke…But two people can make the same joke and laugh at the one and
not the other one.

A number of students indicated that it was inappropriate to make fun of or jibe about a
specific student in the classroom. It was stressed that sometimes it was acceptable to use
sarcasm within the boundaries of the classroom, but only on one condition: the teacher
“knows” the class. In other words, they are in tune with what the students may or may not
find funny. Secondly, participants acknowledged that using humour in the classroom can be
seen as challenging as “not everyone can be funny”. It was stated that teachers need to refrain
from using negative forms of humour which result in poking fun at particular students in the
class. All of the female participants mentioned that when they observed a student being
ridiculed by a teacher, they felt both upset and frustrated at the teacher, viewing the behaviour
as unacceptable. The male participants expressed that the educators need to be aware of the
personal familial situations of each student so as not to cause problems and create a negative
atmosphere. Another point was that all of the participants stated that it was vital that the
humour is connected to the subject matter whenever possible so as to maintain focus.
Humorous personal anecdotes and jokes were thought to assist students in recalling course
material at a later date. Even after several years, students found that they could recall
complicated concepts or theories illustrated by teachers using humour.
However, unrelated humour or overuse of humour were considered to be mere
distractions as the receivers (i.e. students) found that they struggled to find a contextual link to
between the joke and material being taught. Therefore, the humorous remark and not the
concept was remembered. Also, too much humour was perceived to have an adverse effect on
learning processes, resulting in the students losing their motivation and “switching off”. Not
everyone can succeed in being funny or witty. So, teachers are recommended to just be their
natural selves if they are not the type of person to use humour automatically in the classroom.
Students would rather that teachers use verbal and non-verbal immediacy behaviours as often
as possible. A positive, happy mood, effective eye contact, varying vocal tones, and use of
body language and gestures are all immediacy behaviours which can effectively facilitate
learning.
Moderation was considered a key aspect when using humour in teaching processes. The
students mentioned that teachers who regularly use humour need to recognize that each class
has a kind of saturation point. Excessive amounts of humour were described as being
disadvantageous and students considered it to have a negative impact on their learning
processes. It was stated by four students (two male and two female) that classes tended to
“warm to” and interact most with teachers who successfully balance fun with teaching, but
this is acknowledged as a difficult task due to the uniqueness of the micro-community of each
class.

Erm, don’t let the humour overtake in, uh, the lessons, like you have to be serious
sometimes, all the time. Depends on the subject. Yeah, just don’t make too much
jokes because that’s just obnoxious…you have to balance it. Those teachers who
do it, they are always our favourite teachers, I think.

Personal anecdotes and self-deprecating jokes were thought to be acceptable as long as they
do not creep over humour borders sub-consciously agreed upon by the class and teacher. The
overuse of jokes, as well as those including rude or extreme content, can be a cause of embarrassment and considered detrimental to learning as can result in a loss of respect for the teacher.

**Know the class know the humour.** When contemplating using classroom humour in teaching, students require educators to understand their audience with respect to age, gender, culture, religious backgrounds, familial situations and life experiences which can influence interpretations of intentionally humorous messages. It is never to be presumed that the class and the teacher have similar senses of humour and that the educator must be able to read the mood of the class before consciously including planned witticisms. For example, if using visual aids such as television programmes or movies, teachers have to ensure that the students can identify with the characters or events in order to create a form of meaning of the content. When this comprehension of humour occurs, an increase in openness facilitates greater mutual respect as well as the creation of a relaxed atmosphere more conducive to learning.

Openness of character promotes both social communication and bonding between the students and the teacher. By illustrating concepts with personal stories demonstrates a teacher’s willingness to “give a little of oneself” to classroom discussion. This is interpreted by students as acting more humanely, in other words being more of a friend than an authoritative figure. When discussing the reasons why a female teacher uses humour regularly during Science lessons, one female participant stated:

_Mmm, maybe to show, that she isn’t this – how do you say – scary, authority, power. I mean, she’s like us. She’s also become our friend maybe, I don’t know [laughs]._

Self-confidence was stated by four of the participants to be an important factor when using humour in teaching. To be able to discuss personal stories and share real-life experiences to illustrate context shows elements of trust and interest, allowing teachers to improve their rapport with the individual members of the class. Students expressed that they enjoy listening to the stories of confident teachers as can link the lesson content to reality, as well as maintaining focus on the subject being taught. The confidence and openness of teachers in the use of personal anecdotes tends to be viewed as narrowing the academic gap which exists between pedagogue and student. Thus, an “us and them” scenario becomes a “we”, but overconfidence or complacency was considered to be arrogant and aggressive as well as indicating insensitivity to the humoristic needs of the class.

Finally, humour was considered to be an important aspect of second language courses with respect to illustrating historical, cultural and linguistic semantics incorporated in course content. Teachers are required to fully understand the contexts of jokes or witty comments before using them in planned classroom discourse. Second language teachers were described, by one male participant, to be afraid of using humour:

_I think that they’re kind of scared to get, to make people upset or something. It’s many religions and people from backgrounds or something…I think it’s less humour there [in English] because of students, they don’t as comfortable with English as Swedish and I think the teacher thinks that so it lowers the humour level a bit._

The proposed reason given for this accommodating behaviour was that both the students and language teacher are not fully comfortable with the true, original meaning of the joke or pun, and so do not use humour as a pedagogical tool to save the students from possible taking offence and becoming upset. Discussion and a trial-and-error method of understanding a class’s unique sense of humour was acknowledged by both male and female students as an acceptable method of “getting to know” what the class finds funny or not: a method which helps both the immediacy bonding process and promotion of future learning.
Results of the interviews indicated that openness and understanding the unique sense of humour existing in each classroom, as well as self-confidence and a moderate use of humour, are necessary to effectively incorporate humorous text and anecdotes in lessons to facilitate learning processes. However, the study revealed that moderation is a key aspect in balancing humour with serious teaching styles, otherwise both focus and context of lesson content are lost. Self-confidence in using humour whilst teaching was illustrated as an invaluable personal trait which facilitates a humorous teaching style, as well as creating and sustaining an enthusiastic and motivated classroom climate for increased retention of knowledge. Students stated that they did not experience humour during ESL lessons, indicating a possible lack of contextual knowledge in language teaching practices.

Discussion

The aim of this qualitative study was to attain an increased understanding as to how some upper-secondary school students perceived and experienced teachers using humour during classroom discourse. The study was based on the following questions: What does humour mean to the students? What are the forms of humour utilized by teachers? Does humour facilitate learning? Are there recommendations and cautionary measures for teachers to consider when incorporating humour in teaching? The four main themes which arose from the interviews included moderation, the value of immediacy, effects on learning processes and openness.

Moderation

The role of humour in education is a complex, social phenomenon. A form of interpersonal communication, humour may be incorporated beneficially for a plethora of purposes, such as to illustrate important concepts, to increase the effectiveness of lessons due to increase the vividness and memorability of content taught, as well as to create a relaxed learning environment which, in turn, facilitates enjoyable and enthusiastic learning on behalf of the students. But, if used too often, humour can distract students’ attention, so they end up not focussing on the important lesson content but rather on the joke itself. Thus, humorous remarks must be related to the topic at hand. Bryant & Zillman (1989; ref. in Martin, 2010, p. 359) acknowledged that this is no easy task as teaching with humour “depends on employing the right type of humour, under the proper conditions, at the right time, and with properly motivated and receptive students”.

Teachers who effectively balance sense of humour tended to be more popular with the students in this study, as one female student stated “those teachers who do it, they are always [our] favourite teachers”. The results agreed with Fortson and Brown’s student survey in that a sense of humour is highly rated as a desirable characteristic of an effective teacher (1998; ref. in Martin, 2010). Figure 1 illustrates that the moderate use of humour in teaching is pivotal in classroom discourse, and that the learning process is cyclical, initially beginning from teacher openness and consciousness of immediacy, through to increased motivation and improved learning.
The value of immediacy

Students in this study valued humour in particular relation to its role in promoting immediacy i.e. the educational concept referring to the degree to which the teacher makes a close personal connection with students instead of remaining distant and aloof. This connection is enhanced by teachers using personal anecdotes, experiences and examples from their own lives. Other factors include the encouragement of class discussion, calling students by their first names, praising work submitted or in progress, as well as making eye contact and smiling at the class when speaking. Greater levels of immediacy are associated with more positive attitudes towards the subject and teacher, as well as an increase in enjoyment and motivation during lessons, which leads to greater levels of perceived learning. Also, humour is viewed as a method of reducing the academic gap between the class and the teacher (Torok et al., 2004), as one student eloquently put it “to become more of a friend instead of an authoritative figure”. Students at upper-secondary school would rather have a relation of “we” with teachers, in other words as a single integrated group, instead of “us and them”.

Responsiveness to students can be linked to immediacy. Significant associations were found linking instructors’ humour with student evaluations of courses and perceptions of learning coursework, which can largely (but not fully) be accounted for by immediacy. Thus, humour seems to be one of a broad set of behavioural components which contribute to a secure sense of immediacy in the classroom, which in turn leads to the students’ increased enthusiasm, motivation and focus, all mirrored by a teacher’s ability to listen to the classroom opinions, openness (demonstrating an element of humanness), and moderation in the use of humour.

Effect on learning processes

What were the perceptions of students regarding the effects of humor on their learning? Ahern’s qualitative and descriptive study (2008) investigated the experiences of nursing students and their perceived experiences of humor. It concludes, as does this present study, that students believed humor enhances learning processes and should be incorporated into the syllabus, as well as positively impacting on recall and retention of information, facilitating a relaxing educational atmosphere and strengthening interpersonal relations between the teacher and students. The link between humor and learning (retention and recall) has resulted in
conflicting conclusions. Garner (2006) studied the relationship of humor as a pedagogical tool and its impact on the recall of information. Results indicated that the humor condition gave higher positive ratings for the lesson content. But, the most important result was that subjects in the humor group significantly retained and recalled more information about the taught topic. The present study indicates that upper-secondary school students consider that the inclusion of humor boosts class moral and students’ sense of wellbeing which increases the enjoyment of the lesson content. It was stated by the participants of this study that the addition of humor does create a link to concepts and theories which seems to aid the retention of information and eases recall during examinations. Conversely, Mantooth (2011) conducted a similar research study investigating the effect of instructor humor, which included the engagement and information retention of junior and senior level college students, obtained different results. Results indicated that participants perceived the educator as humorous during the experimental group presentation and, as a result, were more engaged when humor was included in the taught material. This present study suggests that the effect of moderate and appropriate humor facilitates improved retention and recall of information learned, but this was not tested quantitatively. Therefore, further investigation is required.

There have been a limited number of empirical research studies targeting college and university students which have produced inconsistent results, but no evidence has yet been collated with regards to the upper-secondary school age group. This study reached a similar conclusion as Torok et al. (2004) and Lei et al. (2010) in that the appropriate use of humor by teachers in the classroom has an effect on how students positively relate to their teachers, an increase in course enjoyment, and a more positive perception of expected and actual semantic learning. However, aggressive or too personal forms of humor—even if self-deprecating—were thought to be disadvantageous to learning. Neither naturalistic classroom studies nor laboratory controlled humour experiments regarding memory have indicated that course content presented in a humorous manner is better recalled than non-humorous. However, enhanced learning of humorous material can occur at the expense of serious content. Therefore, it is recommended that teachers pay particular care when incorporating humor during lessons. It is not recommended that continual humor is used as this will ultimately have little effect on retention of information to be learned. Instead, if used in moderation (*lagom* in Swedish) and perfectly balanced with more stringent instances of teaching, students consider this style of teaching to be vitally important in the effective facilitation of teaching key concepts which are part of the course content. Humour must not override the relevant facts to be retained.

**Openness**

Without openness the system fails and communication breakdown occurs (see figure 1). Openness is an important aspect of immediacy which is the cornerstone of creating an effective learning climate within upper-secondary classrooms. As previously stated for immediacy, by being more open as to whom teachers are as individuals, students interpret this as effectively bridging the academic gap in the sense that the class and the teacher become a “we” instead of an “us and them”. In using humour to create a positive learning atmosphere, and forming a secure climate within the classroom, students feel that these factors have a positive effect on their retention and recall of course material. So, openness and the thoughtful use of humour are important concepts involved in the intricate processes of teaching and learning. Openness is a pivotal aspect which is considered to be both appropriate and necessary by upper-secondary school students. It is a factor which cannot be ignored by pedagogues. The results of this qualitative study are brief and need to be reproduced with a larger population of upper-secondary school students, possibly with a view to expand the research process internationally. However, the study does indicate and suggest that the value
of humour in both teaching and learning is evidentially very high, and a necessity in all subjects which form the curricula of modern-day education systems.

*Niche in the research community.* Humor serves to facilitate human interaction and can be viewed as a powerful interactive tool. This is one of the many reasons why humor is required to be included in teaching ESL in Sweden. In listening to the perceptions of both students and teachers regarding humor in class discourse, with direction from previous experimental procedures (Ahern, 2008; Garner, 2006; Torok et al., 2004), valuable insight and further understanding may be gained as to the advantages and disadvantages of the incorporation of humor in classroom situations. Previous research, for example Mantooth (2011) and Garner (2006) have involved subjects listening to or watching a lecture, or being part of a lesson, with either incorporated humour (the experimental group) or not (the control group), and the recall of taught material was the only commonly used dependent variable which was tested during these studies. As humor is such a complicated issue, with individuals having general, cultural and linguistic differences in their understanding of the context of humorous material, further extensive qualitative research of this phenomenon is of vital importance regarding education.

*Future research.* Further research is necessary to improve the understanding of the perceived benefits of humor on learning processes, which can help in fully appreciating the impact of humor in educational institutions, and to provide a foundation for the appropriate use of humor during classroom discourse. Both qualitative and quantitative studies exploring the perceptions of students have indicated that there are conflicting views regarding the impact of humor on classroom climate and results obtained after testing knowledge recall. According to Linge (2010; ref. in Hallberg, 2010), modern research into humour should concentrate on not only the positive aspects of the social process of the phenomenon, but also the negative. The question of whether Swedish upper-secondary schools should be fostering a unique and fully-flourishing sense of humour in every student is quite apt when regarding Linge’s question of how can children and teenagers develop their sense of humour into a constructive tool in the social context.

However, it has been noted that there has been a shortage of qualitative studies in educational setting aimed at exploring the perceptions of both students and/or teachers. Studies are required which are specifically concerned with the effects of humor on personality attributes and traits such as motivation, openness, optimism and self-confidence, and not only with the retention and recall of taught material. By using appropriate types of humor in moderation, upper-school educators in Sweden may be able to create a more positive pedagogical climate within classrooms that is more conducive to effective student learning.

**Conclusion**

In this qualitative study to gain increased understanding in how some upper-secondary school students perceive and experience humour in the classroom, the semi-structured interview technique facilitated the disclosure of a major common theme of openness. The participants indicated that having the self-confidence to effectively incorporate humorous personal anecdotes in illustrating concepts and theories is both desired and necessary in upper-secondary school education in Sweden. Students interpret openness as a teacher’s willingness to initiate immediacy with the class, as well as bridging the academic gap which acts to facilitate the construction and maintenance of a positive learning climate. Without openness immediacy fails, resulting in a reduction of student motivation and focus which, ultimately, may affect future grades.

Therefore, the results of this study suggest the importance of educators adopting an open style of personality in teaching and utilizing humour moderately whilst teaching upper-secondary school students.
References


Appendix A

Interview guide for students’ perspectives on humour

1. Tell me about your background.
2. What does humor mean to you?
3. What is your view on your teachers’ use of humor in the classroom?
4. To what extent do they use humor whilst teaching?
5. What types or forms of humor do they use?
6. What kinds of humor have you enjoyed in class?
7. Describe an experience when humor has been utilized in a negative manner?
8. Does humor help you with completing your coursework?
9. Describe an event where humor facilitated your learning. Why?
10. Describe an event where humor failed to help your learning. Why?
11. Do you recommend the use of humor in teaching? Why?
12. What would you consider to be the limitations or cautions of using humor in the classroom?
13. Have you any other information you wish to add?

Examples of follow-on interview questions

- How are different genders treated in the classroom regarding the use of humour?
- Have you have experienced appropriate humour?
- Is humour different from one group to another?
- Can you think of any occurrence when humour has been constructive in your learning?
- Can you think of any occurrence when humour has been destructive in your learning?
- How do you think that age differences affects humour?
- Do you think body language is important?
- How does openness increase effective communication between the teachers and students?
- What is the reaction of the class when teachers act the way they do?
- How do you feel when you hear different types of comments?
- How does humour draw your attention to what the teacher is saying?
- Are there any particular gestures that teachers use which make you laugh?
- Does the use of humour vary from teacher to teacher?
- What would you say would be the best style of teaching for the facilitation of effective learning?
Appendix B

Letter of consent

TITLE OF PROJECT: To joke or not to joke – some upper-secondary school students’ perceptions and experiences of humor in the classroom.

RESEARCHER: Ashley Blackmore

PROGRAMME: Master of Education (MEd)

Dear Participant,

I am a graduate student teacher enrolled on the Master of Education program at the University of Halmstad and am conducting a study to investigate English students’ experiences of humor in the classroom setting. You are invited to take part in this study which is to be conducted as part of the requirements (known as a C-thesis) for the completion of the Psychology section of my teaching course. The study will be conducted by me, Ashley Blackmore, under the distanced supervision of Lotta Linge. Your participation would be greatly appreciated and may help in improving understanding of how humor can be used to facilitate learning processes.

Should you agree to participate, you would be asked to contribute by taking part in an interview which will occur on site at *********** at a convenient time. The interview process will last for a maximum of 30 minutes and will not take place during lesson time. I will be asking you to share your experiences, thoughts and feelings related to your perceptions of humor in the classroom.

With your permission, the interview will be digitally recorded so that I can make an accurate record of what you say. When the recording has been transcribed (written down in full), it will be analyzed for themes to describe the impact of humor on students. A copy of the transcript can be provided after transcription so that you can verify that the information is correct and if you wish to request any information be deleted from the text.

I intend to protect your anonymity and the confidentiality of your responses to the fullest possible extent. Your name will be kept in a separate, password-protected computer file from any data that you supply. In the final report, you will be referred to by a pseudonym (in this case in the form of a code). Even though the number of students sought to be interviewed is quite small (a maximum of six), no-one will be able to identify you even on publication of the results. Once the thesis arising from the study has been completed, a brief summary of the findings will be made available to you on application to me via e-mail.

Please be advised that your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may wish to decline altogether. Also, if you wish to withdraw at any stage, or to withdraw any data you have supplied, you are free to do so without any form of prejudice. There are no foreseeable personal or social risks associated with this research study. It is not anticipated that you will be at risk or discomfort; there will only be an inconvenience of your time.
If you wish to participate, please indicate that you have read and understood this information by signing the consent form below. For participants under 18 years of age, you are requested to ask a parent or guardian to sign the form as well. After returning the form to me, I will then contact you to arrange a mutually convenient time for the interview to take place.

Thank you for your future assistance in this study.

Yours sincerely,

Ashley Blackmore

Lotta Linge, Department of Human Resources, University of Halmstad.

Signatures

Participant:
I have been satisfactorily informed about the purposes and procedures of this research study and agree to take part as a participant. I understand that I am free to end my participation at any time and the researcher will attempt to answer any questions that arise as the study progresses.

____________________________________
Signature of Participant

____________________________________
Date

Parent/Guardian:
I have read the information and agree for my son/daughter to participate in the detailed research study. I am over 18 years of age.

____________________________________
Signature of Parent/Guardian

____________________________________
Date

Researcher:
I have discussed the research process with the participant. I have asked whether they have any questions and answered them to the best of my ability.

____________________________________
Signature of Researcher

____________________________________
Date

Contacts and Questions

If you have any questions regarding this study, please do not hesitate to call 0763 405979 (Ashley Blackmore) or send an email to ashbla08@student.hh.se. If you have any further concerns about the research itself or the process of the interview, you may contact the supervisor (Lotta Linge) via email at lotta.linge@hh.se.

(Please sign this copy and hand it to me as soon as possible.)
Appendix C

Table 3
Benefits of humor on learning from instructors’ perspectives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Psychological (students):</th>
<th>Social (relationship with students):</th>
<th>Cognitive (educational):</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Improves mental health</td>
<td>• Improves student moral</td>
<td>• Captures interest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Improves physical health</td>
<td>• Establishes professional relations</td>
<td>• Reduces boredom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Releases endorphins</td>
<td>• Encourages trust</td>
<td>• Increases attention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Helps cope with stress</td>
<td>• Breaks the ice</td>
<td>• Increases motivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Alleviate tension</td>
<td>• Reduces fear</td>
<td>• Elevates self-confidence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Alleviate fear</td>
<td>• Reduces tension</td>
<td>• Facilitates comprehension</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Alleviates anxiety</td>
<td>• Increases instructor humanness</td>
<td>• Inspires creativity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Alleviates depression</td>
<td>• Breeches academic gap</td>
<td>• Assists problem solving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Reverses negative feelings</td>
<td>• Creates relaxed atmosphere</td>
<td>• Encourages risk taking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Enhances wellbeing</td>
<td>• Positive learning climate</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Elevates self-image</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Elevates self-esteem</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4
Drawbacks of humor on learning from instructors’ perspectives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Degrading remarks:</th>
<th>Offensive humor (types):</th>
<th>Excessive humor:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Gender</td>
<td>• Sexual</td>
<td>• Undermines credibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Ethnicity</td>
<td>• Morbid</td>
<td>• Increases self-consciousness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Nationality</td>
<td>• Vulgar</td>
<td>• Increases boredom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Religion</td>
<td>• Sarcasm</td>
<td>• Increases frustration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Creed</td>
<td>• Metaphor</td>
<td>• Lose of focus on objectives</td>
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<td>• Political views</td>
<td>• Cynical thinking</td>
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<td>• Sexual orientation</td>
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<td>• College stereotypes</td>
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<td>• Area of residence</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Embarrassing stories</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Poking fun at mistakes</td>
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(Lei et al., 2010)