

# The Contributions of Teacher Humor in EFL Classes in Vietnam: University Students' Perspectives

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## Article Information

Received: March 15, 2022

Revised: April 17, 2022

Accepted: April 21, 2022

Published online: June 14, 2022

## Abstract

According to several studies on English teaching and learning, English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers tend to avoid humor in their classrooms. However, many studies have shown that teachers' sense of humor plays an essential role in EFL students' learning process. Therefore, this study utilizing a mixed-method design was conducted to determine students' perceptions of the impact of teachers' humor (TH) on their learning. Data were collected through a questionnaire with a five-point Likert scale comprising twenty-one items and semi-structured interviews. The study involved 158 university students in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam. Quantitative data from the questionnaire were analyzed by using SPSS 20.0, and data from the interviews were analyzed according to themes. The survey results revealed that the students showed positive attitudes toward the effects of TH in EFL classrooms, especially reducing boredom ( $M=4.59$ ), strengthening teacher-student rapport ( $M=4.53$ ), decreasing sleepiness ( $M=4.47$ ), promoting students' cheerfulness ( $M=4.47$ ), increasing students' consciousness ( $M=4.46$ ), and solving conflicts in classrooms ( $M=4.42$ ). Additionally, non-majored students were appreciated for TH more than their counterparts. Moreover, students' perceptions positively correlated with their gender. The interviews also showed that cultural factors affected the effectiveness of TH in EFL classes. EFL teachers are encouraged to use TH in their classes in order to foster its benefits. However, careful consideration should be taken before using TH in teaching different students with different learning styles or characteristics.

**Keywords:** benefits of teachers' humor; EFL students' perceptions; teacher's humor; the Mekong Delta of Vietnam

## Introduction

The Vietnamese government has made relentless efforts to enhance EFL teaching and learning. For example, Decision 2080/QĐ-TTG

was released to support teaching and learning English in Vietnam from 2017 to 2025. However, students' proficiency is still low. Many reasons have been stated to explain the unsatisfactory results of the project, such as unrealistic goals, lack of a high-quality academic workforce, insufficient teaching and learning conditions, and so on Thao & Mai (2020). Among all, EFL students were much concerned with their teachers' identities. This suggests that EFL teachers and their identities significantly affect students' motivation to learn

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<https://journal.walisongo.ac.id/index.php/vision>

English. Teachers' sense of humor is a part of their identities (Ali Fadel & Al-Bargi,(2018); Englert, (2010); Neuliep,(1991); McCroskey et al., (2006); Baringer & McCroskey (2000); Bell, (2009).

According to Polimeni & Reiss (2006), humor is a biological attribute that everyone can possess. M. Dynel (2009) explained that humor and its functions, such as sociological, anthropological, psychological, philosophical, and linguistic features, have been researched since ancient Greek times. However, it was a pedagogical tool in educational settings in the 20th century Ali Fadel & Al-Bargi (2018). Previous studies have shown numerous benefits of teacher humor (TH), such as increasing instructional effectiveness Englert (2010), lowering students' anxiety and creating a relaxed classroom environment Neuliep (1991), motivating students in learning McCroskey et al(2006), improving students' learning Baringer & McCroskey (2000), facilitating language learning Broner & Tarone(2001), and helping students understand the lessons Bell (2009).

However, few studies on TH in EFL classrooms have been conducted in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam. The Mekong Delta of Vietnam has been considered one of the "low-land" educational contexts. Therefore, this study aims to investigate EFL students' perceptions of the potential benefits of TH in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam.

### **Definitions of Humor**

In Latin, "umor" refers to "bodily fluid," which means controlling a human's good health and emotions. The definition of humor has shifted. For instance, Curnow, S. J., Falciani, F.,

Durrani, O. M., Cheung, C. G., Ross, E. J., Wloka, K., ... & Murray (2005) defined it as something making people laugh or smile. Bekelja Wanzer, M., Bainbridge Frymier, A., Wojtaszczyk, A. M., & Smith (2006) stated that humor could be anything teachers and students find amusing in the educational context. Tuncay (n.d.) remarked that humor could help people understand the language and words, including their use, meaning, subtle nuances, the underlying culture, implications, and verbal messages. Apte (1985) shared two particular elaborations on humor: potential stimuli sources and behavioral responses such as smiles or laughter. Martin (2019) said that humor is used to exchange questions, answers, comments, remarks, or explanations throughout classroom interactions.

### **Benefits of Teacher Humor**

Recently, TH has been used as a teaching strategy to enlighten the educational atmosphere, foster teaching performance, and promote students' learning outcomes (Ali Fadel & Al-Bargi, 2018; Englert, 2010; Neuliep, 1991; McCroskey et al., 2006; Baringer & McCroskey 2000; Bell, 2009). This current study mainly focuses on three main types of TH benefits in EFL classes: psychological, social, and instructional benefits.

### **Psychological Benefits**

Humor can release irritation and disappointment that might otherwise be detrimental R. A. Baron (1978). Psychological benefits account for intrapersonal advantages such as boosting students' impulse and readiness to participate in instruction processes due to exposure to humor, avoiding students' sleeplessness, avoiding boredom, reducing

students' stress, enhancing students' comfort, and promoting students' motivations for being in class. Ali Fadel & Al-Bargi (2018) argued that TH is a significant source of impulse for students to participate in classroom activities. Besides holding students' signals during the lectures, humor generates a pleasant, carefree, and tranquil environment in which students feel motivated to take part and study. Undoubtedly, motivation plays a crucial role in teaching and learning. For instance, the motivation-learning relationship theory developed by Christophel (1990) assumed that students would learn when they want to know. Wanzer, M. B., Sparks, L., & Frymier, (2009) also presented specifications for entertaining message/learning links, although this theory still has its degree. What is apparent is that in language lessons, learners may develop their linguistic and cultural knowledge as a result of motivation dawned from the teacher's humor.

### **Social Benefits**

Besides psychological benefits, TH also offers/provides social benefits. Social benefits describe the role of TH in improving interpersonal interaction (i.e., between language teachers and students), attracting students to attend the lectures, reducing student-teacher separation, increasing students' talking time, solving problems/conflicts, and making the instructions approachable. Ali Fadel & Al-Bargi (2018) described that TH could also play a notable role in the growth of teacher-student communication in the classroom, which can support the whole teaching/learning process. Teacher-student interaction can be considered a basis for conveying consciousness, within which humor functions as a grease McGhee

(1979). Particularly, McGhee (1979) pointed out that humor served as grease for social interaction and concluded: "It is difficult to imagine a substitute device that would be equally successful at promoting smooth and comfortable social interaction." (pp. 245-246). Krashen (1982) stated that with a settlement of sufficient interaction and lowered affective filter, students desire to partake in ongoing activities, and this can serve their language learning.

### **Instructional Benefits**

Aside from the two other benefits, previous studies also noted several instructional benefits of TH. The practical use of TH related to curriculum content has been consistently remarked in the literature to be most likely to flatter acquisition/learning and retention of content Wanzer, M. B., Sparks, L., & Frymier (2009); Garner (2006); Gorham, J., & Christophel (1990). Progressed comprehension and learning of a second language can be credited to the enhanced concentration and, thereby, discerning formulated by TH. For instance, TH considers the input, which refers to "noticing", that is, the learner's attention to particular linguistic features in the information. In other words, TH offers the opportunities to deliver linguistic and cultural knowledge to the forefront of consideration and be "noticed". The remarked input susceptibly and easily converts to intake and shifts a part of the learner's linguistic familiarity. In the same indication, humor is likely to reinforce the retention of the input as well. As such, the purpose of TH in "increased noticing" might procure an insight into how TH can afford language learning.

### Related Studies

Ali Fadel & Al-Bargi (2018) utilized a sequential explanatory mixed-methods method to investigate the components and regularity of linguistic humor that negatively affects Saudi EFL tertiary-level students across two different English language proficiency levels. The participants included 42 EFL teachers and 138 male EFL students from the English Language Institute (ELI) at King Abdulaziz University. The students were at beginners (E101) and intermediate (E104) English language proficiency levels. The mixed-methods method was executed utilizing audio and videotapes and a survey as the data collecting instruments. The findings suggested the four foremost properties of both positive and negative verbal senses of humor in Saudi EFL classrooms. The study disclosed that humor was more regularly used at the intermediate than at the beginner level. The most effective forms of humor at both levels involved language play, irony, jokes, and self-defeating humor.

R. Stroud (2013) conducted two surveys to examine student-perceived benefits of both teachers- and student-produced humor in the more specific context of a Japanese language classroom. A hundred and four Japanese high school students participated in the survey, and a set of interviews was employed to gain an in-depth understanding of the abovementioned issues. The study revealed that TH could improve students' retention, make them willing to participate in-class activities, increase the learning environment, and lower anxiety in EFL classrooms. However, some reasons for humor avoidance in EFL classes found in

this study were teacher disapproval, students' lack of confidence, or language proficiency problems.

Petraki, E., & Nguyen (2016) examined Vietnamese university teachers' perceptions of the role of humor in EFL teaching, teachers' practices of humor use, and teachers' preferences regarding humor types. The ethnographic study employed observations, field notes, and interviews to collect data from the participants. It was found that Vietnamese teachers were aware of many beneficial functions of humor in EFL teaching and learning. These forms of humor were used to lighten the atmosphere and increase the teachers' immediacy in EFL classes.

Many studies have investigated the impacts of TH in EFL classes. However, no investigation has examined students' thoughts on TH in EFL classes in the context of Vietnam. Therefore, this study might provide a deeper understanding of the benefits of TH from the university students' view. The current study addresses two main research questions:

1. What are the benefits of TH in EFL classes?
2. Does students' demographic information affect their perceptions of TH in EFL classes?

## Method

### Design

The study employed a mixed-method design. Questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were used to gather the data. The rationale for using the questionnaires to collect data is that they can provide a

comprehensive picture of the issue. Besides, it was necessary to use semi-structured interviews to get in-depth participants' perspectives. They guaranteed the validity and reliability of the data wherein the 158 EFL university students in an educational region of Vietnam.

### Participants

As stated, 158 EFL university students in the Mekong Delta participated in this study. Table 1 presents the demographic information about the participants.

**Table 1**  
*Brief information about the participants*

	Variable	Number
Gender	Male	48
	Female	110
Major	English-Majored	84
	Non English-Majored	74

### Instruments

The questionnaires concentrated on the benefits of humor according to the participants' perceptions. It comprises 21 items, adapted from Ali Fadel & Al-Bargi's (2018) study, rated on a five-point Likert scale (5=strongly agree, 4=agree, 3=neutral, 2=disagree, 1=strongly disagree), which enables the respondents to express how much they agree or disagree with each piece. These 21 items included three main clusters, psychological benefits (items from 1 to 8), cultural benefits (items from 9 to 15), and instructional benefits (items from 16 to 21).

The survey used Vietnamese, the participants' mother tongue, to avoid ambiguity and misinterpretation of the language because the study was conveyed in a Vietnamese context. Moreover, the Vietnamese transcription questionnaire empowers the respondents to fully comprehend the items' meanings and fully provide reliable answers. To verify the validity of the translation, the

researchers first turned the questionnaire into Vietnamese. Then, the researchers requested two TESOL colleagues to translate that version back into English to examine whether these English versions were equivalent to the original English ones. If any differences were found, the researchers and the experts discussed them according to the Vietnamese version and agreed on which one should be used.

To measure the reliability of the questionnaires, they were piloted via Google Form to fifty EFL students from a university that is different from the two universities in this study. All of them were randomly chosen as participants. Cronbach's alpha ( $\alpha=.92$ ) indicated high internal consistency, which means the questionnaires could be applied to collect the study data ( $0.7 \leq \alpha \leq 0.95$ ).

The fully revised questionnaires were then administered to 158 students using Google Forms. The researchers first explained to the students to ensure that they profoundly understood the contribution of the research to

English teaching and learning in practice. The participants were encouraged to complete the questionnaires as soon as possible. After a month, the data were fully collected and were ready to implement in the next stage, checking the reliability of the results of the actual

questionnaires. The results of the Scale Test confirmed the reliability coefficient of the questionnaire ( $\alpha=.93$ ). Table 2 displays the key to understanding the average proposed by Oxford (1990).

**Table 2**  
*Key to understanding the averages*

Levels	Range
Very high	4.5 to 5.0
High	3.6 to 4.4
Medium	2.5 to 3.5
Low	1.0 to 2.4

There were six individual semi-structured interviews, including three English-majored (named A, B, and C) and three non-majored interviewees (named D, E, and F). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it was not easy to conduct face-to-face interviews. Eventually, the research team used Skype and Zoom platforms to organize them. Each interview lasted approximately an hour. Both interviewers and interviewees used Vietnamese to help the participants express their ideas comprehensively. The interview questions, self-developed by the researchers, mainly focused on how the interviewees perceived the benefits of TH in their English learning. Before taking the official interviews, the interview questions were piloted with five university students who would not participate in this current study.

The questions got positive feedback from them as they could understand the questions comprehensively and were able to respond quickly. The research team recorded and note-took the interviews back to the official interviews under the participants' permission. After that, the research team sent the scripts to the participants to ensure the information.

Then, the research team translated them into English. Finally, the English versions were double-checked by two experts in the field of translation. According to themes, the research team presented the results of the analysis. The themes were coded by colors, red for psychological benefits, yellow for social benefits, and green for instructional benefits. All research team members analyzed the data first by themselves before regrouping to discuss the results. The similarities were kept. Otherwise, the differences would be discussed with the participation of an experienced researcher in applied linguistics. The research team and the referee read through the theoretical framework and applied the framework to the data. The discussions lasted until no more disagreement occurred.

The research used SPSS to analyze the quantitative data regarding the data analysis. First, the researchers employed Descriptive Statistics tests to examine the average mean scores of the participants' perceptions. Then, One-Sample T-tests were administered to check the level of perceptions by comparing the test value proposed by Oxford (1990). Next, the

current study ran One-Way ANOVA tests to check whether there was any difference between male and female students and the majored and non-majored ones. As mentioned, qualitative data were then analyzed according to themes.

## Findings and Discussion

### The Results of Quantitative Data

Table 3 presents the results of the Descriptive Statistics test on three main groups of TH benefits, psychological, social, and instructional benefits.

**Table 3.**  
*General views on TH in EFL classes*

Benefits	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD
Psychological	158	1.00	5.00	4.40	.69
Social	158	1.00	5.00	4.36	.68
Instructional	158	2.00	5.00	4.24	.77
<b>Total</b>	<b>158</b>	<b>1.76</b>	<b>5.00</b>	<b>4.34</b>	<b>.68</b>

**Table 4.**  
*Comparison of non-majored and English-majored participants' perceptions of TH in EFL classes*

		N	Mean	SD	SE	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Min.	Max.	F	Sig.
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound				
Psychological	M	84	4.29	.61	.07	4.16	4.43	2.88	5.00	4.40	.04
	NM	74	4.52	.76	.09	4.35	4.70	1.50	5.00		
	Total	158	4.40	.69	.06	4.29	4.51	1.50	5.00		
Social	M	84	4.23	.61	.07	4.10	4.36	3.00	5.00	6.19	.01
	NM	74	4.50	.74	.09	4.33	4.67	2.00	5.00		
	Total	158	4.36	.68	.05	4.25	4.47	2.00	5.00		
Instructional	M	84	4.04	.70	.08	3.89	4.19	2.00	5.00	12.36	.00
	NM	74	4.46	.80	.09	4.28	4.65	2.00	5.00		
	Total	158	4.24	.77	.06	4.12	4.36	2.00	5.00		
Benefits	M	84	4.20	.58	.06	4.08	4.33	2.90	5.00	7.87	.01
	NM	74	4.50	.74	.09	4.33	4.67	1.76	5.00		
	Total	158	4.34	.68	.05	4.23	4.45	1.76	5.00		

*M: English-majored students; NM: Non-English-majored students*

The results of the One-Sample T-test with the test value of 4.5 as very high perceptions (Oxford, 1990) showed that the participants perceived TH as being important in EFL classes (M=4.34; p=.00). The psychological benefits were prominently observed (M=4.40; p=.07). The results of the One-Sample T-test on the

mean scores of the clusters on social benefits (M=4.36; p=.01) and instructional ones (M=4.24; p=.00) showed that the students gained these two types of TH benefits at a lower level, comparing to the psychological impact.

Table 4 displays the results of the One-Way ANOVA test used to check whether there was a difference between majored and non-majored students.

The results showed that the non-majored participants ( $M=4.50$ ) benefited from TH in EFL classes more than the English-majored ones could do in this current study ( $M=4.20$ ) ( $p=.01$ ).

In other words, the non-majored students were more positive about using TH in EFL classes than the English-majored students.

Then, Table 5 illustrates the results of the One-Way ANOVA test used to check whether there was a difference between male and female students.

**Table 5.**  
*Comparison of male and female participants' perceptions of TH in EFL classes*

		N	Mean	SD	SE	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Min.	Max.	F	Sig.
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound				
Psychological	M	48	4.61	.67	.10	4.41	4.80	1.50	5.00	6.35	.01
	F	110	4.31	.69	.07	4.18	4.44	1.75	5.00		
	Total	158	4.40	.69	.06	4.29	4.51	1.50	5.00		
Social	M	48	4.56	.62	.09	4.38	4.74	2.00	5.00	5.99	.02
	F	110	4.27	.69	.07	4.14	4.40	2.00	5.00		
	Total	158	4.36	.68	.05	4.25	4.47	2.00	5.00		
Instructional	M	48	4.49	.68	.10	4.29	4.68	2.00	5.00	7.32	.01
	F	110	4.13	.79	.08	3.98	4.28	2.00	5.00		
	Total	158	4.24	.77	.06	4.12	4.36	2.00	5.00		
Benefits	M	48	4.56	.63	.09	4.37	4.74	2.05	5.00	7.29	.01
	F	110	4.25	.67	.06	4.12	4.37	1.76	5.00		
	Total	158	4.34	.68	.05	4.23	4.45	1.76	5.00		

*M: Male students; F: Female students*

**Table 6.**  
*Psychological benefits of TH in EFL classes*

Psychological Benefits	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD	t	Df	p
Feel conscious	158	1.00	5.00	4.46	.81	-.60	157	.56
Keep awoken	158	1.00	5.00	4.47	.76	-.42	157	.67
Reduce boredom	158	2.00	5.00	4.59	.69	1.62	157	.11
Reduce stress	158	1.00	5.00	4.41	.79	-1.41	157	.16
Feel comfortable	158	1.00	5.00	4.47	.73	-.44	157	.66
Increase willingness to learn	158	1.00	5.00	4.42	.82	-1.27	157	.21
Motivate willingness to come to class	158	1.00	5.00	4.15	1.09	-4.02	157	.00
Prevent students from being truant	158	1.00	5.00	4.22	.97	-3.62	157	.00
<b>Total</b>	<b>158</b>	<b>1.00</b>	<b>5.00</b>	<b>4.40</b>	<b>.69</b>	<b>-1.81</b>	<b>157</b>	<b>.07</b>

The test results showed that gender affected EFL students' perceptions of TH in EFL classes ( $p=.01$ ;  $p=.02$ ;  $p=.01$ ; and  $p=.01$ ).

Specifically, the male students were appreciated with TH in EFL classes more than their counterparts.

After that, Table 6 presents the results of a Descriptive Statistics test on the cluster of psychological benefits of TH in EFL classes and a One-Sample T-test with the test value of 4.5 as a very high perception Oxford (1990).

Except for motivating students to come to class (M=4.15; p=.00) and preventing them from being truant (M=4.22; p=.00), other psychological benefits were very highly perceived by the participants (p>.05). Specifically, among the psychological benefits

of TH in EFL classes, reducing boredom was the most prominent (M=4.59), followed by keeping students awakened (M=4.47), helping students feel comfortable (M=4.47), and increasing students' consciousness (M=4.46).

Table 7 displays the results of a Descriptive Statistics test on the cluster of social benefits of TH in EFL classes and a One-Sample T-test with the test value of 4.5 as a very high perception Oxford (1990).

**Table 7**  
*Social benefits of TH in EFL classes*

Social Benefits	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD	t	df	p
Increase lesson interestingness	158	1.00	5.00	4.37	.83	-2.01	157	.05
Reduce student-teacher distance	158	1.00	5.00	4.18	1.08	-3.68	157	.00
Increase willingness to listen to lesson	158	1.00	5.00	4.35	.82	-2.33	157	.02
Increase talking time	158	1.00	5.00	4.32	.80	-2.89	157	.00
Strengthen teacher-student rapport	158	1.00	5.00	4.53	.72	.55	157	.58
Resolve conflict	158	2.00	5.00	4.42	.79	-1.31	157	.19
Make teacher more approachable	158	1.00	5.00	4.34	.80	-2.47	157	.01
<b>Total</b>	<b>158</b>	<b>1.00</b>	<b>5.00</b>	<b>4.36</b>	<b>.68</b>	<b>-2.61</b>	<b>157</b>	<b>.01</b>

According to the results of the tests, two social benefits, including strengthening teacher-student rapport (M=4.53; p=.58) and resolving conflict (M=4.42; p=.19), were very highly perceived by the participants. In other words, TH contributed to building a stronger bond between the participants and their EFL teachers as well as solving the conflicts occurring in their classes.

Among the items in this cluster, reducing student-teacher distance got the lowest mean score (M=4.18); as a result, the participants might still find it uncomfortable about interrupting teachers' instructions. In an interpretation, the students were anxious even though their teachers were humorous.

Then, Table 8 displays the results of a Descriptive Statistics test on the cluster of instructional benefits of TH in EFL classes and a One-Sample T-test with the test value of 4.5 as high perception.

Compared to the psychological and social benefits, the instructional ones were the least recognized advantages of TH in EFL classes. Nonetheless, the participants perceived these ideas at a high level (p<.05).

There were positive signals for using TH to better the teachers' instructions in EFL classes, including making the lessons memorable (M=4.30) and delivering the lessons quickly (M=4.29).

**Table 8**  
*Instructional benefits of TH in EFL classes*

Instructional Benefits	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD	t	df	P
Make lesson easy to understand	158	1.00	5.00	4.22	.84	-4.26	157	.00
Help understand the course content	158	1.00	5.00	4.15	.94	-4.76	157	.00
Deliver messages of the lesson quickly	158	2.00	5.00	4.29	.73	-3.58	157	.00
Foster language learning	158	1.00	5.00	4.22	.94	-3.72	157	.00
Make main points easier to remember	158	1.00	5.00	4.26	.90	-3.37	157	.00
Make lessons memorable	158	1.00	5.00	4.30	.86	-2.88	157	.01
<b>Total</b>	<b>158</b>	<b>2.00</b>	<b>5.00</b>	<b>4.24</b>	<b>.77</b>	<b>-4.24</b>	<b>157</b>	<b>.00</b>

**Qualitative Findings**

***Overall Students’ Attitudes Towards TH***

In the interviews, most participants showed positive attitudes towards TH in their EFL classes. Students B and D said,

“Compared to studying with a solemn teacher, I think that studying with a humorous one is better in terms of English learning.” (B; Female; Majored Student)

“Absolutely, I’m afraid that I will learn with a serious teacher who never makes jokes or makes something funny in classes. It will be a nightmare...” (D; Female; Non-majored Student)

It is not difficult to say that TH is a valuable component in bettering the learning and teaching atmosphere. Therefore, the students showed positive attitudes toward learning English with humorous teachers rather than solemn ones.

***The Impact of Students’ Demographic Information on their Perspectives on TH***

*Major*

The findings from the interviews also strengthened the conclusion that non-majored and majored students perceived the benefits of TH in EFL classes differently. While the non-

majored students were highly delighted when talking about TH, the majored ones seemed to have some doubts about its advantages in helping them reach their future dreams. To be specific, Student F represents non-majored students, optimistically shared,

“Honestly, my demands on English learning are not really high. So, I do not need to learn a lot and just want to have some fun as well as get some new vocabulary. That’s it! I do not find any inconvenience when my teacher tells funny stories; even I really love them.” (F; Male; Non-majored Student)

In reverse, the representative for majored students, Student B stated,

“In spite of understanding the benefits of TH, I sometimes feel uncomfortable because it distracts my concentration on the lessons. Therefore, I’m afraid that my teacher does not have enough time to deliver all the knowledge I need for my future job.” (B; Female; Majored Student)

Future job prospects significantly affect students’ attitudes towards their learning and their teacher’s teaching in practice. Lacking awareness of the TH contributions to their future jobs leads to English-major students’ resistance to TH. On the other hand, non-major students seemed to be more relaxed as English

is not a must-have thing they need to do their jobs. As a result, it explained why there was a significant distinction between major and non-major students' perceptions of TH benefits.

#### *Gender*

Additionally, in the interviews, the participants' perceptions also differed by their gender. Specifically, Student C remarked on the differences made by gender,

"Sometimes, I am not really comfortable with TH in classes. Especially, some jokes are more suitable for my male friends than for me." (C; Female; Majored-student)

Females are often considered to be more sensitive than male students. Therefore, males are more open to TH when their teachers make jokes about them. On the other hand, jokes about girls should be carefully taken into consideration if the humor users do not want to hurt girls' feelings.

### ***Students' Perceptions of the Benefits of TH***

#### *Motivation*

The participants also perceived the impact of TH on their motivation for being in class. Students A and D stated,

"It is very true that I usually stayed at home last semester because my teacher is a boring one. However, this term is better, and I'm willing to come to class. My teacher is humorous. I love that!" (A; Male; Majored Student)

"In fact, I go to class, of course, in order to improve my knowledge. However, there are some subjects that I feel bored when being there due to the fact that my teachers are so serious. So I decide to stay at home." (D; Female; Non-majored Student)

EFL teachers are sometimes reluctant to use TH in their classes because they want to maintain professionalism. However, it intentionally reduces their learners' learning motivation, even their desire to go to the classroom. Without learning motivation, the current study participants decided to stay at home instead of learning with boring teachers.

#### *Social relationship*

Furthermore, the interviewees also stressed that TH does not strengthen the relationship between them and their teachers only but also ameliorates the rapport of their peers. Students A and F remarked,

"When my teacher says something funny in class, we laugh together. Thanks to that, we have a good time being together. That's awesome!" (A; Male; Majored Student)

"I'm a shy and a bit introverted person, so I rarely start a conversation with others. However, a comfortable learning environment helps me communicate with other friends." (F; Male; Non-majored Student)

In the interviews, there was a precious finding related to Vietnamese culture. Students B and E said,

"I do not think that it is suitable for me to ask my teacher in class even though that is a humorous teacher. You know, it is something ... just unacceptable. I do not know how to explain it." (B; Female; Majored Student)

"My teacher is very humorous. He usually tells funny stories or organizes funny activities. However, it is still difficult to interrupt the class and ask questions. I think it shows disrespect for him." (E; Female; Non-majored Student)

A delightful atmosphere can help people become closer to others. Therefore, TH, an excellent way to delight the learning and teaching atmosphere, is encouraged to help build up a close relationship between teacher-students and student-student. The current study showed that TH was to help better the teacher-student interaction in EFL classrooms. However, the Vietnamese students are still strongly affected by Confucism, which teaches people to show their definite respect to the older ones. Therefore, the participant students in this current study refused to interrupt their teacher's lesson when they did not understand a thing since doing so showed disrespect to the instructor.

#### *Learning Retention*

The interviewees also shared that they could remember the lessons longer because of their teachers' impressive and funny stories. Students C and D stated,

"I do not know why but after listening to my teacher's funny stories, the lessons are just in my mind even though I do not review them at home. That is incredible, right? [...] I think that the strong impression of the stories helped me remember more." (C; Female; Majored Student)

"It is surprising that when I remember what happened in class, I remember the lessons also. Maybe, it is really impressive to me." (D; Female; Non-majored Student)

People tend to remember special things longer than usual ones. Consequently, it is not challenging to get the results of this current study. If TH was used with good timing to help students pay attention to the main points of the lesson, they would remember these points

longer, and their learning process would be more effective.

Based on the results of quantitative data and the findings of qualitative data, it was concluded that the participants highly perceived the benefits of TH in EFL classes, including reducing boredom (M=4.59), strengthening teacher-student rapport (M=4.53), decreasing sleepiness (M=4.47), promoting students' cheerfulness (M=4.47), increasing students' consciousness (M=4.46), and solving conflicts in classrooms (M=4.42). Besides, there were some differences between majored and non-majored students' perceptions of TH in EFL classes. Moreover, the male students were positive about the use of TH in EFL classes more than their counterparts.

## **Discussions**

First, the students had positive attitudes towards TH in EFL classes in this current study. Petraki and Petraki & Pham Nguyen (2016) also found the importance of TH in EFL classes in the Vietnamese context, but it was under teachers' perspectives. Vietnamese teachers are aware of the benefits of TH in EFL classes Nguyen (2014). The contribution of this current study strengthens the conclusion that TH in EFL classrooms is effective in the Vietnamese context.

In the educational context of Indonesia, Algafar (2017) also found that EFL teachers had positive attitudes toward humor in EFL classes; Indonesian teachers, however, were concerned about some drawbacks of TH in EFL classes that some jokes are uncomprehensive. The above concerns were discussed in Deiter (2000) and Nguyen (2014) studies, which also found that EFL teachers tend to avoid TH in EFL classes due

to its drawbacks. Liu (2009) found that Chinese students did not see the value of TH in EFL classes because they sometimes did not understand the jokes of their tutors. As a result, TH in EFL classes is not always practical. Therefore, TH in EFL classrooms has to be comprehensive to help students perceive its values. Besides, Deiter (2000) asserted that TH in EFL classes is only effective when it is not offensive or aggressive. Sharing the same view, Miczo et al. (2009) said that affiliative humor enhances positive feelings and solidifies relational bonds, while aggressive humor diminishes morale and creates distances in relational bonds. Eventually, teachers should avoid using aggressive humor. Otherwise, teachers are encouraged to use affiliative humor, such as telling jokes, saying funny things, or witty banter.

The psychological benefits of TH in EFL classes were most perceived by the Vietnamese participants of this current study. The prominence of psychological benefits was in line with the study by Ziyaeemehr et al. (2011), which found that Malaysian lecturers used TH to enhance their students' motivation in classroom activities. In the Vietnamese context, Nguyen (2014), systematically investigating the role of humor in the EFL classrooms, found that most students welcomed TH, especially TH in English, due to their beliefs that it can enhance their English and motivation for language learning. Besides, TH is an excellent way to create a cheerful, relaxed, and comfortable atmosphere. A Ziyaeemehr (2014); (R. Stroud (2013); Nguyen (2014); Petraki, E., & Nguyen (2016). V. P Richmond (1990) explained the two-way relationship between students' learning and their motivation to learn only

when they want to do it. Therefore, it is helpful to use TH to enhance students' motivation for language learning.

Interestingly, the non-majored students benefited from TH in EFL classes more than the English-majored ones. Based on the opposition of the students' perspectives on TH, who have different purposes in language learning, the research should discuss the interaction between students' objectives and their attitudes towards classroom activities. Laguador (2013) claimed that students' activities must address their needs to help them achieve their goals after graduating from university. Compared to non-majored students, the majored ones' expectations of the effectiveness of their learning and their teachers' instructions can be much higher. As a result, they would like to stay focused on learning rather than finding something funny. On the other hand, non-majored students seemed to be not under high pressure since English is just a supporting tool for their future jobs. Consequently, their perceptions were different in the current study.

Besides, the participants' gender affected their perceptions of TH in EFL classes. The female students were perceived to benefit from TH less than the male students in the current study. The findings aligned with the study by Falanga et al. (2014), which found that boys can feel humor better than girls. However, the results were different from the study by Ziv (1988), which indicated that gender did not affect EFL students' perceptions of TH in EFL classes. As inferred, Vietnamese female students may be more antagonistic to TH than their counterparts are.

The different perceptions regarding students' demographic information in the current study, such as gender and learning major, also led to concerns about the misuse of TH in EFL classrooms, especially audience-related issues. Dickmeyer(1993) made a list of dangerous consequences due to the lack of student audience consideration. For example, students would get hurt if the funny stories violated some rules in their beliefs or religions Dickmeyer (1993) suggested that before teachers use humor in classes, they should consider whether their students belong to a fair homogeneous community and appreciating their humor, whether their humor is offensive or aggressive to any student in the class, and whether their humor isolates anyone.

The students highly the positive impact of TH in EFL classes on their motivation for learning. The findings were similar to the study by Maurice (2006), which indicated that humor could help activate students' motivation. Differently speaking, TH in EFL classes can reduce students' boredom. The adverse effects of boredom in EFL classes have been well-explored in previous studies by Dewaele, J. M., & Li (2020). Goetz, T., & Hall (2014) defined the conceptualization of academic boredom as an unpleasant emotional and psychological state. Besides, they listed the consequences of anxiety that negatively affect students' behaviors, engagement, cognition, interests, curiosity, motivation, learning strategies, and learning achievements. Accordingly, it increases the value of TH in EFL classrooms as it helps EFL teachers deal with problems related to students' anxiety.

Furthermore, the students stated that they are more willing to study with humorous

teachers than with serious ones. According to Raychaudhuri, A., Debnath, M., Sen, S., & Majumder (2010), students' performance is affected by their presence in the classroom. Additionally, students' absence negatively affects their learning achievements, but poor attendance also leads to countless negative social issues, such as creating a tiresome and unpleasant learning environment or even making teachers feel bothersome Brauer (1991)

It was to state that TH contributed to building a stronger bond between the participants and their EFL teachers and solving the conflicts occurring in their classes. Nguyen (2014) also found that using TH in EFL classes can strengthen teacher-student relationships in the Vietnamese educational context. (Ali Ziyaeemehr et al. (2011) investigated that TH in EFL classes can gain social benefits in enhancing interpersonal interaction between teachers and their students in the Malaysian educational context. Ketabi, S., & Simm (2009)stated that sharing a joke with students can help teachers maintain a good teacher-student rapport. Better interpersonal interactions between teachers and students foster the transmission of knowledge Krashen (1982) further explained that the benefits of a good teacher-student relationship could help students increase their desire to participate in ongoing in-class activities and their language learning. To better social relationships, understanding each other is a must-have element. According to Wyer & Collins (1992), compelling TH demands one's ability to shift mentally to different perspectives of others. As a result, TH becomes helpful in understanding and experiencing their feelings and thoughts.

Besides, TH strengthens the relationship between them and their teachers and facilitates the rapport of their peers. Several comparative studies have investigated the impact of teacher-student and student-student relationships on learning outcomes Wang, M. T., & Eccles (2013); Virtanen, T. E., Lerkkanen, M.-K., Poikkeus, A.-M., & Kuorelahti,(2014); De Laet, S., Colpin, H., Vervoort, E., Doumen, S., Van Leeuwen, K., Goossens, L., & Verschueren (2015). Some indicated that the teacher-student relationship substantially impacts students' school engagement, while others showed the opposite results. Eventually, both relationships are equally important and necessary for keeping students' school engagement and avoiding truancy or dropout.

Backtracking to the literature, TH can provide a comfortable learning environment, better teacher-student relationship, and reduce the tension that many students feel in their learning process Christophel (1990); Richmond (1990); Dickmeyer (1993); Ali Ziyaeemehr et al. (2011); R. Stroud (2013); Nguyen (2014); Petraki, E., & Nguyen (2016)). However, the current participants might still feel uncomfortable about interrupting their teachers' instructions even though they are humorous teachers. Onwuegbuzie, A. J., & Wilson (2003) discussed many things about students' anxiety in a multidimensional construct that prevent them from raising their questions to the teachers and lower their learning outcomes. Cruise, R. J., Cash, R. W., & Bolton (1985) indicated that fear of teachers is one of the main reasons causing students' anxiety. Moreover, the negative impact of fear and anxiety harmed the partnership between students and their teachers Watson & Emerson

(1988). This finding might be positively correlated with the Vietnamese culture. Scollon (1999) found that Vietnamese students are affected by several cultural aspects in classes, such as Confucian philosophy stressing the importance of word choices, behaving in an exemplary manner with modesty, and avoiding social conflicts. It reduces students' willingness to stand up and ask. Besides, the current study results also reflected a cultural dimension in Vietnam, power distance. Hofstede, G., Hofstede, G. J., & Minkov (2010) defined the conceptualization of power distance as unequal power among members of an institution or organization. Besides several Asian countries such as Malaysia, the Philippines, Bangladesh, China, and Singapore, with a score of 70 on the Power Distance Index Value scale proposed by Hofstede, G., Hofstede, G. J., & Minkov (2010), Vietnam also put itself on the list of large power distance countries. As explained, the hierarchy, centralization, and inherent inequalities are acceptable in Vietnam; therefore, the inferiors tend to obey and do what their bosses tell them (Petraki & Pham Nguyen,(2016) . In education, although the student-centered approach has been in the higher education context in Vietnam for years, it has faced several barriers, such as local infrastructure conditions and cultural aspects Thanh, (2010). As inferred, teachers still get the dominant power in the classroom. Maybe power distance was one of the reasons students felt fear of interrupting their teachers' instructions in this study.

Besides, resolving conflicts in the classrooms was a remarkable social benefit of TH in EFL classrooms. According to L. A. Coser (1967), conflict can gain objectives and simultaneously neutralize, injure, or eliminate rivals. Warren

(2005) warned that when conflicts occur, people tend to stop working. As interpreted, students may stop learning or participating in ongoing activities when they conflict with their friends or even their teachers. This current study showed the positive impacts of TH on dealing with such situations in classrooms.

Moreover, TH in EFL classes was to have a significant influence on students' learning retention. These findings were in line with the studies by Kaplan & Pascoe (1977), Garner (2006), Robert Stroud (2013), and Nguyen (2014). These studies found that TH can help better students' learning and retention. According to O Simpson (2003), student retention is crucial for language learning at any level. Besides, enhancing students' retention requires teachers and even the institutional level to find appropriate strategies Ormond Simpson (2003). This current study proposed TH as a potential and no-fee strategy for students' retention enhancement.

Nevertheless, the study also remarked on a concern of TH in EFL classes, the conceptualization of "impression." Schlenker (1980) stated that good impressions could make others feel good and inspire them to seek new challenges. As inferred, if teachers used TH effectively and impressively, it could foster their retention. It, however, might depend on teachers' sense of humor to employ impressive TH.

## Conclusion

This study was conducted to determine students' perceptions of the impact of TH on their learning. The study results revealed that the students in the research context showed positive attitudes towards their English learning

as they were aware of several benefits of TH in the EFL classroom, such as strengthening teacher-student rapport and resolving conflict. Accordingly, EFL teachers are encouraged to find a way to increase their sense of humor and use TH in their classes.

The study has several educational implications for TH in EFL classes. Firstly, exploring students' perceptions enhances educators' awareness of TH in EFL classes to adjust to diverse expectations. Secondly, the findings and discussions of this current study provide a clear view of how EFL teachers can maximize the use of TH in EFL classes. Thirdly, this present study satisfies all the concerns related to TH, especially in the Vietnamese context. Finally, the findings of this current study also ensure that teachers will not face any discouragement from EFL students; they, however, should consider who will be the audience, English-majored or non-English-majored students, and males or females.

Due to the sampling of the current study, the findings can not be generalized to the whole Vietnamese educational context. Therefore, further investigation should involve a more extensive selection. Then, the study employed a survey and individual semi-interviews to collect data; as a result, further studies should administer other instruments, such as group interviews, observations, or content analysis. Regarding the participants, students' perceptions may help them understand significant issues related to TH in EFL classes. However, teachers need to voice up and share why they may avoid using TH in EFL classes in Vietnamese and other educational contexts.

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