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## A Missing Link in ELT: EFL Learners' Recognition, Comprehension and Appreciation of English Humor

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### ABSTRACT

Familiarity with different aspects of English humor applied by native speakers in their daily interactions could help EFL learners to understand humorous expressions that might be otherwise literally vague or pointless to them. Therefore, the current study attempts to find out whether humor instruction could result in the Iranian EFL learners' ability to recognize, comprehend, and appreciate English humor. To this aim, 82 female intermediate and upper-intermediate EFL learners were selected and taught some linguistic and socio-cultural aspects of English humor. Three researcher-made questionnaires examined the effect of lexical and grammatical knowledge of the learners on their recognition, comprehension, and appreciation of English humor as well as the effect of humor instruction on the three variables. The results of two MANOVA analyses revealed that, unlike lexico-grammatical knowledge, familiarizing learners with structural and socio-cultural aspects of English humor could significantly influence the EFL learners' recognition, comprehension, and appreciation of English humor. This piece of finding might underscore the superior role of cultural factors over linguistic knowledge when dealing with EFL learners' humor comprehension and production; moreover, the instruction of sociocultural aspects of foreign language humor seems to be of higher importance compared with lexico-grammatical and linguistic aspects.

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As an integral part of authentic daily interactions and successful classroom or conference management, humor is a strong device in the hands of a speaker or lecturer for creating an atmosphere of confidence (Raskin, 1992). Palmer (2003) believes that in real life interactions, jokes are intermingled with serious dialogues to convey direct or indirect messages. Many humorous texts contain serious messages that intend to attract readers' attention (Walker, 1998). However, the frequent use of humorous expressions in the discourse of original movies, TV programs, monologues, dialogues, interactions and so on makes

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scholars like Johnson (1992) wonder whether non-native English speakers appreciate this rich aspect of interactions.

Concerning the communicative functions of oral and written humor, Berger (2010, p. 6) contends that humorous texts can be used to "gain some insights into the values, beliefs, practices and concerns found in a society". The knowledge of such values, beliefs, practices, and concerns is seemingly deemed quite helpful in the development of intercultural awareness as a subcomponent of EFL learners' intercultural competence (Wagner & Urios-Aparisi, 2011). Moreover, one needs to know that in every society, there are certain varieties of humorous language applied by different communities, social groups, or even ethnicities, which may not be appreciated by nonmember others; thus, humor can distinguish between insiders and outsiders to these groups. Consequently, being accepted to a new group in a society becomes easier for a person who knows the humorous discourse of that group (Bell & Pomerantz, 2015).

Many experts also contend that linguistic knowledge is only one of the requirements for appreciation of humor, as familiarity with the L2 culture, cognitive ability, and issues related to life experiences are also involved in identifying an utterance as a humorous one (Bell, 2009; Raskin, 1985; Souza, 2008). Based on the same reasoning, it seems justified to claim that foreign language learners need to gain the required sub-competences of humor competence before they are exposed to foreign language humor in real life situations. The claim is further strengthened considering that firstly, the jokes will be ruined through explanation (Deneire, 1995); and secondly, if not recognized as humor by the learners, there is a possibility for the humorous expressions to be misjudged as serious offensive language (Berger & Wildavsky, 1994).

As Bell and Attardo (2010) maintain, numerous studies have focused on the pragmatics of humor during the past two decades; nonetheless, the learners' needs in this regard have received scant attention in the field of L2 learning. Accordingly, another area in need of investigation is humor comprehension, as most of the studies have focused on humor production. Therefore, studies are needed across different cultures and contexts to identify the challenges that L2 learners face when dealing with comprehension of English humor in general, and comprehension of culture-specific humor in particular.

## 2. Review of Literature

According to Raskin (1985), the very first definition of humor is most probably *what* makes people laugh and although this "what" may have different visualizations in various contexts, the concept of humor is associated with "universal human trait" (p. 2). Raskin further believes that for a humorous act to be funny, a successful combination of a few factors is required including speaker/hearer (or writer/reader, etc.), stimulus, life experience, psychological readiness of individuals, situational context, and social values and norms. Some different theories and models, tersely discussed in the following section, address the combination of such factors and their peculiarities.

### 2.1. Incongruity or Incongruity-Resolution Theory

Many theoreticians and practitioners maintain that the dominant theory of humor is the incongruity theory (Berger, 1993, 1994; Berger & Wildavsky, 1994; Hurley, Dennett, & Adams, 2011; Mulder & Nijholt, 2002; Smuts, 2009; Vandaele, 2002; Vasantkumar, 1998). Furthermore, Hurley, Dennett, and Adams (2011, p. 45) refer to the incongruity-resolution (I-R) theory as "the most strongly championed" among the modern theories of humor.

Some scholars believe that the father of this theory is the philosopher Immanuel Kant (Monro, 1951, as cited in Dean, 2003; Mulder & Nijholt, 2002; Reimann, 2010). However, according to Smuts (2009), the origin of the theory goes back to the time of Aristotle, when he advocated the view that laughter happens because of setting up an expectation at first, but delivering something unexpected. The

Aristotle's position is reflected in the contemporary views towards humorous expressions and jokes. Ruch, Attardo, and Raskin (1993) hold that most of the jokes have two senses or scripts that imply basic oppositions such as expected/unexpected, normal/abnormal, good/bad, real/unreal, etc. The problem of understanding occurs when the audience fails in making a connection between the two incongruous words, behaviors, or ideas that form the humor (Oring, 1992). Accordingly, it seems necessary for foreign or second language learners to have access to both interpretations to uncover the incongruity of a joke.

## 2.2. General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH)

Raskin first proposed Script-based Semantic Theory of Humor (SSTH) in 1985, but it was revised and extended into the General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) by Attardo and Raskin (1991) a few years later. GTVH is comprised of six parameters or Knowledge Resources known as KRs. Recipient of verbal humor is expected to possess a complex set of KRs to be capable of decoding the two scripts as these KRs are used in the creation of a joke (Ruch, Attardo, and Raskin, 1993).

The KRs include Language (LA) which concerns the actual wording of a text and its linguistic components (Lew, 1996). Narrative Strategy (NS) deals with narrative organization or different forms of presentation, including simple narrative, a dialogue, etc., (Attardo, 1994). Target (TA), also known as victim or butt, is something/someone laughed at. Non-aggressive jokes lack this KR (Mulder & Nijholt, 2002). Donut lover police (Johnson, 2012; Mullin, 1999), incompetent dumb blondes (Gray, 2004; Greenwood & Isbell, 2002; Kuipers, 2006; Porter, 2004; Pym, 2000; Takeda, Helms, & Romanova, 2006), greedy and betrayers of trust lawyers (Cramton, 1996; Galanter, 1997, 2006; Post, 1987) are only some examples of targets of jokes. Situation (SI) refers to people, activities, instruments, surroundings, etc. that can be either obvious, or in the background of a joke or piece of humor. Logical Mechanism (LM) shows the kind of relationship between opposed interpretations or scripts of a joke. Finally, Script Oppositions (SO) describes the two distinct/opposed scripts of a joke. Different terms are used in the literature to refer to the word *script*. Krikmann (2006), for example, proposes "more conventional terms like *theme* or *motif*" (p. 34), whereas Vaid, Hull, Heredia, Gerkens, and Martinez (2003) and Goatly (2012) prefer the word *schema* while Attardo (1994) introduces *sense* and *isotopy*.

## 2.3. Superiority Theory

According to this theory, humor is used to generate a feeling of superiority over the target or butt of the joke whereby the butt loses face. Although this view of humor was first developed by Plato and Aristotle (Reimann, 2010), the philosopher Thomas Hobbes is known as the founder of the superiority theory (Berger & Wildavsky, 1994; Dean, 2003; Ross, 2005). Both Hobbs and Aristotle maintain that humor points out the ugliness or problems that individuals ascribe to others in order to compare the targets with themselves and consequently, correct or boost their own current state to a noble one (Hurley, Dennett, & Adams, 2011). These targets could be either other people or deriders themselves with a negative feature in the past, that is now modified (Archakis & Tsakona, 2005; Hurley, Dennett, & Adams, 2011). Furthermore, wrongdoers may be educated through being derided (Palmer, 2003).

In addition to the prevalent theories of humor discussed above, few relevant models addressing humor are minimally introduced in the following part.

## 2.4. Model of Structural Ambiguity

Ross (2005) proposed a taxonomy of five levels of structural ambiguity in English and identified their realization in English jokes. These levels include phonology, graphology, morphology, lexis, and syntax.

The first level, phonology, concerns the ambiguity caused by homophones, words with a slight difference in their sounds, changes in sounds that occur during connected speech, changes in stress or intonation, etc. This type of ambiguity occurs only in spoken language. The ambiguity at the level of graphology, is only observed in written language. It includes misspellings that result in a change of meaning, hence in a humorous language. Morphology, as the third level of structural ambiguity, deals with the way each word is formed. Some instances of such humor are wrong generalization or interpretation of suffixes and prefixes and playful use of compound nouns. Ambiguity is also caused by English lexis or words as in homonyms, polysemy, phrasal verbs, etc. At the level of syntax as the fifth cause of ambiguity, different interpretations of the same phrase, clause, or sentence may create humor.

#### 2.5. A Four-level Model of Implicatures Associated with Full Support of Humor

Regarding conversational humor, Hay (2001) believes that recognizing, understanding, appreciating, and agreeing with the intended message are the four implicatures, which show that humor is fully supported by the audience. From this point of view, the audience is an important part of a humorous discourse, because laughter or appreciation is needed to save the joke teller's face on the one hand, and recognition and understanding are necessary to save the hearer's own face on the other.

Based on a categorization by Carrell (1997), recognition of a joke from other kinds of texts is the responsibility of one's "joke competence", while judging the funniness falls under the category of "humor competence". A variety of factors might be involved with the inefficiency of humor competence. As an example, unfamiliarity with cultural nuances could affect foreigners' evaluation of a humorous piece and result in either their confusion, or their judgment of a joke as pointless (Nevo, Nevo & Yin, 2001). According to Jezany (2013), language, along with other elements like ethnicity, creates a cultural code and understanding the humor of every ethnic group is highly dependent on familiarity with such a code. Berger (1975) believes that jokes that are not limited to this code could be appreciated in other cultures. Reimann (2010, p. 25) characterizes such universal context-free type of humor as "simple, highly visual and in tune with the basics of innate or more primal levels of human common sense". Accordingly, it seems logical to expect language learners to understand this type of humor more easily than the other types.

As reported by Hsin (2006), Chinese participants showed a greater understanding of universal jokes compared with linguistic and culture-specific ones. He reported that culture-specific jokes were more challenging for the learners than linguistic ones (Hsin, 2006). The importance of cultural knowledge for L2 learners' humor competence development is also underscored by Bell (2002) whose participants introduced a lack of information about culture-specific references as an *obstruction* in contrast with L2 proficiency that was only pointed as a *challenge* for them in understanding and appreciation of L2 humor. Similarly, Johnson (1992) revealed the superior impact of culture over the linguistic ability on comprehension of English humor, where Latinos who shared more common cultural aspects with Americans outperformed Oriental participants including Singaporeans who spoke English as their L1.

#### 2.6. Humor in L2 classrooms

From L2 learners' perspective, three classes of psychological (motivating and relaxing), social (affiliating and enhancing participation in classroom activities), and instructional effects (promoting learning and retention of materials) are among the positive impacts of employing humor in L2 classroom

(Ziyaemehr, Kumar, & Faiz, 2011). However, such benefits are not apparently well exploited in second or foreign language education contexts. Bell and Pomerantz (2014, p. 34) criticize L2 textbooks for regarding a language variability like humor as "an exception" and believe that language is an "interaction between stability and dynamism". Moreover, they state that humor could be used as a tool to improve learners' metalinguistic awareness. Pomerantz and Bell (2011) also disapprove of the analyses that consider students' joking from classroom management perspective and consider it as a "disruptive, off-task behavior" (p. 148).

Cook (1997) contends that language classroom is a place to practice and prepare, not a part of the real world with serious consequences for wrong behavior; therefore, playing with language can be a part of education, as it is a part of native speakers' lives. Similarly, Bell (2009) believes that classroom is a safe environment where students are more willing to take risks and express themselves; because they are not afraid of being criticized (Chiasson, 2002). Pomerantz and Bell (2011) compare such an atmosphere to Canagarajah's safe houses where students are not concerned about disruptive behavior, play with language, and feel free to use L2 without being afraid of losing face; and as a result, learning is facilitated.

The factors preventing instructors from the application of humor, as mentioned by students, could be their serious personality and negative attitude toward using humor in the classroom, lacking enough competence to produce L2 humor, and syllabus-oriented way of teaching (Ziyaemehr, Kumar, & Faiz, 2011). To increase the knowledge of instructors, Powell and Andresen (1985) suggest that it is necessary to train academics and provide them with opportunities to practice and develop the required skills for presentation of humorous materials in the classroom.

Regarding the proper time for the presentation of humor, Deneire (1995) argues that in order to avoid ruining the joke through explanation, necessary information needs to be presented in advance. In contrast, Schmitz (2002) contends that humorous materials can be introduced during teaching, from the very beginning of language education, in a variety of classes, and with different methods of teaching. For Chiasson (2002), encouraging the natural use of humor; paying attention to individuals' personalities; avoiding sarcastic and racist humor; integrating humor with the content of teaching; considering learners' level of proficiency, and justifying the benefits of using humor in the class for students are among the considerations of employing humor. On the other hand, other scholars advocate the presentation of L2 humor *genres* or unfamiliar structures (Attardo, 1994) and state that it is worth attempting to face the challenges and gain humor competence (Wulf, 2010).

Similarly, advocating the use of humor in L2 classes, Bell (2009) recommends employing activities like: a) analyzing samples of humor by learners, who are also collectors of those samples; b) inductive analysis of types, functions, and the contextualization cues; c) discussing extracts from comic TV programs or movies; and d) even imitation and memorization, which may pave the road for innovative production of humor.

Finally, Bell and Attardo (2010) suggest that, due to the great influence of individual variations on dealing with humor and unreliability of the data collected mainly in self-reports format, more systematic exhaustive studies are required to discover the sources of challenges for L2 learners. In addition to the paucity of studies at the global level, Iranian EFL learners' challenges in dealing with EFL humor are still quite understudied and in need of attention. Against this backdrop, the current study attempted to partially address the lacuna in this regard and the following research questions were formulated:

1. Do grammatical and lexical knowledge have any significant impact on Iranian EFL learners' recognition, comprehension, and appreciation of English humor?
2. Does explicit teaching of English humor components have any impact on Iranian EFL learners' recognition, comprehension, and appreciation of English humor?

3. What are the least appreciated themes and targets of English humor from Iranian learners' perspective concerning the cultural differences and their personal taste?

### **3. Method**

#### *3.1. Participants*

Participants of the study were 82 female Iranian EFL learners at intermediate and higher intermediate level of general English proficiency learning English in private language institutes of Hamadan (a western province of Iran). The age range of the participants was between 15 to 18 years. In addition, three EFL teachers administrated the questionnaires and taught the treatment pamphlet. Besides, 10 male and female American native speakers rated the funniness and validity of humorous items that were selected to be included in the questionnaires.

#### *3.2. Instruments*

Three types of instruments and materials were applied in this study:

1) TOEFL junior standard test: This test does not follow any specific curriculum and is designed for the eleven and above age range of EFL learners. It comprises listening comprehension, language form and meaning, and reading comprehension parts. This test assesses beginner, pre-intermediate, intermediate, and upper-intermediate levels of language proficiency based on Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR).

2) Three researcher-made questionnaires (see the Appendix), all validated based on both English native speakers' ratings and TEFL experts' judgments, were designed and applied. Each of the three questionnaires i.e., A, B, and C, consisted of 12 items which presented humorous expressions including a) four context free jokes and riddles, b) four excerpts from live comic TV talk shows, and c) four excerpts from pre-written comic TV series. These items were followed by alternatives (Likert and open-ended) that aimed to tap the level of humor recognition, comprehension, and appreciation in participants. Questionnaires A and B, administered before treatment, were designed to examine the effect of vocabulary and grammar knowledge on learners' recognition, comprehension, and appreciation of English humor. The third questionnaire (Questionnaire C), administered to the participants after the treatment, was employed to inspect the effect of introducing some socio-cultural, structural, and theoretical aspects of English humor on the students' recognition, comprehension, and appreciation. The reliability indexes of the three questionnaires based on Cronbach's alpha measure of internal consistency were estimated to be .84, .81, and .87 for the questionnaires A, B, and C respectively.

3) A researcher-developed pamphlet including instructional points to help the participants recognize and understand humorous expressions was another instrument designed for the research purpose. It contained information about common formats (e.g. knock-knock jokes), topics (e.g. political issues), and targets (e.g. lawyers) of English humor along with theories such as incongruity theory, some structural points such as sources of structural ambiguity (Ross, 2005), and some content and context related issues which were deemed to be helpful for the participants' recognition, comprehension and appreciation of English humor. In addition, 106 illustrative examples of jokes accompanied the explanations.

#### *3.3. Procedure*

At the outset of the study, a pool of humorous expressions was extracted from comic TV shows; next, in order to develop the three questionnaires items an explanation of the context of situation within which the expression was used was written for each expression. To validate the designed questionnaire items, they were reviewed by TEFL experts and next presented to 10 American native speakers (NS) who were asked to decide whether the items were humorous or serious, moreover the NS rated the humorous items based on their degree of funniness. Twenty four items that were selected as humorous and gained average or above average ratings of funniness were randomly distributed in the three questionnaires, a share of eight items for each questionnaire. In addition to these items, four more context free jokes and riddles were added to each questionnaire to yield three 12-item-questionnaires at approximately the same level of lexical and grammatical complexity.

After preparing the questionnaires, based on convenience sampling procedure 110 EFL learners were chosen from three accessible English institutes in Hamedan province. Next, the TOEFL junior standard test was given to them as a measure of their general English proficiency to assure that the participants were above pre-intermediate level. Based on the scoring rubrics of the test, 82 learners who were identified at the required level of general proficiency were chosen as main study participants. Next, all 110 participants received the study treatment as an integrated part of their regular English course content. However, only the data from the 82 chosen participants were analyzed for the study purposes. Meanwhile, during the treatment sessions the assisting teachers observed and recorded the participants' reactions to humor instruction and the follow-up activities.

During the first and second sessions of the treatment, participants took the test-like Questionnaires A and B, respectively. For the administration of Questionnaire A, at the very first session, the participants were not allowed to use any reference sources of lexical or grammatical information (for example digital or usual dictionaries, websites, or even queries from their teacher) for difficult vocabulary or grammar. Whereas, in the second session, i.e., administration of Questionnaire B, they were permitted to use the above-mentioned sources of information or help if they had any vocabulary or grammar-related questions. During both administrations, teachers assisting the researchers were requested to avoid giving any explanation about the humorous nature of the items as one of the alternatives after each questionnaire item was "It is a serious statement, not a humorous one". The choice of this alternative by a learner would reveal that the learner could not recognize the humorous nature of the item.

After the administration of Questionnaire B, the instructional pamphlet containing points about structural and cultural aspects of English humor along with illustrating examples was taught during 12 thirty-minute sessions. The instruction included a direct explanation of the structural and cultural points and provision of illustrative examples extracted from TV shows, comic series, Hollywood movies, and even jokes and riddles named by the participants themselves. Participants were encouraged to discuss their ideas about cultural differences or their own personal views about the given material during the instruction. After the treatment phase, Questionnaire C was administered under conditions similar to Questionnaire B.

Finally, the data obtained from the two questionnaires A and B were compared to spot the possible effects of vocabulary and grammatical knowledge, and questionnaires B and C for the effect of treatment on participants' recognition, comprehension, and appreciation of English humor.

#### **4. Results**

The first research question addressed the effect of lexical and grammatical knowledge on recognition, comprehension, and appreciation of English humor. Therefore, participants' performances on questionnaires A and B under two different conditions (i.e., non-use and use of sources of help for difficult vocabulary and grammar, respectively) were compared running a MANOVA, to spot the



differences among the recognition, comprehension, and appreciation of English humor in the two performances of the participants. The results of the analysis are presented in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1.

Descriptive statistics for participants' performances on Questionnaires A and B

|               | Conditions      | Mean | Std. Deviation | N   |
|---------------|-----------------|------|----------------|-----|
| Recognition   | Questionnaire A | 6.68 | 2.28           | 82  |
|               | Questionnaire B | 7.28 | 2.02           | 82  |
|               | Total           | 6.98 | 2.17           | 164 |
| Comprehension | Questionnaire A | 2.11 | 1.98           | 82  |
|               | Questionnaire B | 1.78 | 1.93           | 82  |
|               | Total           | 1.95 | 1.96           | 164 |
| Appreciation  | Questionnaire A | 1.17 | 1.40           | 82  |
|               | Questionnaire B | 1.12 | 1.44           | 82  |
|               | Total           | 1.15 | 1.42           | 164 |

Table 1 summarizes the participants' first and second performances' descriptive results. As is evident, the values for recognition mean for questionnaire A were 6.68 and SD = 2.28, comprehension mean = 2.11 and SD = 1.98, and apprehension mean = 1.17 and SD = 1.40, with no help for difficult vocabulary and grammar. While, the values for recognition mean for questionnaire B were 7.28 and SD = 2.02, comprehension mean = 1.78 and SD = 1.93, and apprehension mean = 1.12 and SD = 1.44. The statistical analysis of the differences among the means and the test of the assumed null hypothesis for the first research question, i.e., the role of lexical and grammatical knowledge in dealing with English humor are presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2.

MANOVA for the effect of grammatical and lexical help on recognition, comprehension, and appreciation

| Source          | Dependent Variable | Type III Sum of Squares | Sum of Df | Mean Square | F       | Sig. | Partial Eta Squared |
|-----------------|--------------------|-------------------------|-----------|-------------|---------|------|---------------------|
| Corrected Model | Recognition        | 14.64 <sup>a</sup>      | 1         | 14.64       | 3.14    | .07  | .01                 |
|                 | Comprehension      | 4.44 <sup>b</sup>       | 1         | 4.44        | 1.15    | .28  | .00                 |
|                 | Appreciation       | .09 <sup>c</sup>        | 1         | .09         | .04     | .82  | .00                 |
| Intercept       | Recognition        | 7994.05                 | 1         | 7994.05     | 1716.86 | .00  | .91                 |
|                 | Comprehension      | 620.49                  | 1         | 620.49      | 161.59  | .00  | .49                 |
|                 | Appreciation       | 215.51                  | 1         | 215.51      | 106.31  | .00  | .39                 |
| Test            | Recognition        | 14.64                   | 1         | 14.64       | 3.14    | .07  | .01                 |
|                 | Comprehension      | 4.44                    | 1         | 4.44        | 1.15    | .28  | .00                 |
|                 | Appreciation       | .09                     | 1         | .09         | .04     | .82  | .00                 |

a. R Squared = .019 (Adjusted R Squared = .013)

b. R Squared = .007 (Adjusted R Squared = .001)

c. R Squared = .000 (Adjusted R Squared = -.006)

As is demonstrated in Table 2, grammatical and lexical knowledge do not exert any significant effect on recognition  $F(1, 162) = 3.14, p = 0.07 > 0.05$ , comprehension  $F(1, 162) = 1.15, p = 0.28 > 0.05$ , and appreciation  $F(1, 162) = 0.04, p = 0.82 > 0.05$ , of English humor of Iranian EFL learners. In other words, there was no significant difference between the participants' first performance in which there was no help

regarding difficult vocabulary and grammar and their second performance in which participants received assistance for their lexical or grammatical problems while taking the questionnaire.

To answer the second research question which addressed the effect of explicit teaching of English humor on recognition, comprehension, and appreciation of English humor, second MANOVA analysis was run on the data gained from questionnaires B and C, the results of which are presented in Tables 3 and 4 below.

Table 3  
Descriptive statistics for participants' performances on questionnaires B and C

|               | Conditions      | Mean  | Std. Deviation | N   |
|---------------|-----------------|-------|----------------|-----|
| Recognition   | Questionnaire B | 7.28  | 2.02           | 82  |
|               | Questionnaire C | 11.63 | .57            | 82  |
|               | Total           | 9.46  | 2.63           | 164 |
| Comprehension | Questionnaire B | 1.78  | 1.93           | 82  |
|               | Questionnaire C | 9.78  | 1.45           | 82  |
|               | Total           | 5.78  | 4.36           | 164 |
| Appreciation  | Questionnaire B | 1.12  | 1.44           | 82  |
|               | Questionnaire C | 7.22  | 2.76           | 82  |
|               | Total           | 4.17  | 3.76           | 164 |

The descriptive statistics summarized in Table 3 above are the results of participants' performances on questionnaires B and C. As is presented, recognition mean of 7.28 and SD = 2.02; comprehension mean of 1.78 and SD = 1.93; and, appreciation mean of 1.12 and SD = 1.44 were obtained for the participants' performance on Questionnaire B. Furthermore, data from their performance on Questionnaire C revealed the recognition mean of 11.63 and SD = 0.57; comprehension mean = 9.78 and SD = 1.45; and, appreciation mean = 7.22 and SD = 2.76. As can be seen, the mean of recognition, comprehension, and appreciation apparently increased after treatment, however, the difference among the performance means before and after the treatment needed to be statistically tested. The MANOVA analysis results of the comparison between questionnaires B and C performances are presented in Table 4 below.

Table 4.  
MANOVA for the effect of explicit teaching of humor on recognition, comprehension, and appreciation

| Source          | Dependent Variable | Type III Sum of Squares | df | Mean Square | F       | Sig. | Partial Squared | Eta Squared |
|-----------------|--------------------|-------------------------|----|-------------|---------|------|-----------------|-------------|
| Corrected Model | Recognition        | 777.12 <sup>a</sup>     | 1  | 777.12      | 352.08  | .00  | .68             |             |
|                 | Comprehension      | 2624.00 <sup>b</sup>    | 1  | 2624.00     | 896.62  | .00  | .84             |             |
|                 | Appreciation       | 1524.39 <sup>c</sup>    | 1  | 1524.39     | 313.85  | .00  | .66             |             |
| Intercept       | Recognition        | 14668.29                | 1  | 14668.29    | 6645.53 | .00  | .97             |             |
|                 | Comprehension      | 5479.90                 | 1  | 5479.90     | 1872.49 | .00  | .92             |             |
|                 | Appreciation       | 2852.78                 | 1  | 2852.78     | 587.35  | .00  | .78             |             |
| Test            | Recognition        | 777.12                  | 1  | 777.12      | 352.08  | .00  | .68             |             |
|                 | Comprehension      | 2624.00                 | 1  | 2624.00     | 896.62  | .00  | .84             |             |
|                 | Appreciation       | 1524.39                 | 1  | 1524.39     | 313.85  | .00  | .66             |             |

a. R Squared = .685 (Adjusted R Squared = .683)

b. R Squared = .847 (Adjusted R Squared = .846)

c. R Squared = .660 (Adjusted R Squared = .657)

As is evident above in Table 4, the P value equals 0.00 in all cases. Therefore, explicit teaching of humor have had a significant effect on recognition  $F(1, 162) = 352.08$ ;  $p = 0.00 < 0.05$ ,  $\eta^2 = .68$ , comprehension  $F(1, 162) = 896.62$ ,  $p = 0.00 < 0.05$ ,  $\eta^2 = .84$ , and appreciation  $F(1, 162) = 313.85$ ,  $p = 0.00 < 0.05$ ,  $\eta^2 = .66$ , of English humor as reported by Iranian EFL learners. In other words, there was a significant difference between the participants' second performance (i.e., before treatment with vocabulary and grammar help) and their third performance (i.e., after treatment with vocabulary and grammar help). Furthermore, the Wilks' Lambda was estimated to be  $\Lambda = .148$ ,  $F(3, 160) = 307.354^b$ ,  $p = .000$ . Answering the second research question, this finding suggests that explicit teaching of humor-related cultural and structural points influences participants' abilities in recognition, comprehension, and appreciation of English humor in a positive way. To further inspect into the strength and the exact location of differences, a Tukey post hoc analysis was conducted; the results are presented in Table 5 below.

Table 5.

Tukey multiple comparisons between second and third performances

| Dependent Variable | (I) test | (J) test | Mean Difference (I-J) | Std. Error | Sig. | 95% Confidence Interval |             |
|--------------------|----------|----------|-----------------------|------------|------|-------------------------|-------------|
|                    |          |          |                       |            |      | Lower Bound             | Upper Bound |
| Recognition        | Test 2   | Test 3   | -4.35*                | .28        | .00  | -5.01                   | -3.69       |
| Comprehension      | Test 2   | Test 3   | -8.00*                | .28        | .00  | -8.67                   | -7.33       |
| Appreciation       | Test 2   | Test 3   | -6.10*                | .30        | .00  | -6.82                   | -5.37       |

Based on observed means.

The error term is Mean Square (Error) = 3.895.

\*. The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

As is evident in Table 5, a significant difference was found between the participants' second performance and their third one with the latter outperforming the former ( $P_{\text{recognition}} = .00$ ,  $P_{\text{comprehension}} = .00$ ,  $P_{\text{appreciation}} = .00$ ) regarding recognition ( $M_2 = 7.28$  &  $SD_2 = 2.02$  vs.  $M_3 = 11.63$  &  $SD_3 = .57$ ), comprehension ( $M_2 = 1.78$  &  $SD_2 = 1.93$  vs.  $M_3 = 9.78$  &  $SD_3 = 1.45$ ), and appreciation ( $M_2 = 1.12$  &  $SD_2 = 1.44$  vs.  $M_3 = 7.22$  &  $SD_3 = 2.76$ ) of English humor.

To answer the third research question, i.e., what were the least appreciated themes and targets of English humor from Iranian learners' perspective concerning the cultural differences and their personal taste, using the data obtained from the fourth question designed after each questionnaire item which addressed the reasons behind the lack of appreciation, comprehended questionnaire items were classified into three categories of a) appreciated, b) not appreciated due to cultural differences, and c) not appreciated due to personal factors. Table 6 shows the frequency and percentage of each one of the three categories.

Table 6.

Appreciated and not appreciated items considering comprehended items

|                    | Appreciated | Not appreciated      |                | Total comprehension frequency |
|--------------------|-------------|----------------------|----------------|-------------------------------|
|                    |             | Cultural differences | Personal taste |                               |
| Questionnaire A    | 73.48       | 1.65                 | 24.86          | N=181                         |
| Before treatment   | N=133       | N=3                  | N=45           |                               |
| No linguistic help |             |                      |                |                               |

|                  |       |      |       |       |
|------------------|-------|------|-------|-------|
| Questionnaire B  | 79.43 | 1.41 | 19.14 | N=141 |
| Before treatment | N=112 | N=2  | N=27  |       |
| Linguistic help  |       |      |       |       |
| Questionnaire C  | 86.78 | 1.37 | 11.84 | N=802 |
| After treatment  | N=696 | N=11 | N=95  |       |
| Linguistic help  |       |      |       |       |

According to Table 6, for Questionnaire A, from among 181 cases of comprehension, 133 (73.48 percent) were appreciated or judged to be funny, three cases (1.65 percent) were considered as tasteless due to cultural differences, and 45 (24.86 percent) were not appreciated due to personal factors. This means that when comprehension took place, participants tended to appreciate the English humorous items rather than reject them as tasteless. Besides, personal factors played a greater role in identifying items as tasteless than the cultural differences between their L1 and foreign language.

In the case of Questionnaire B, as demonstrated in Table 6, for the total number of 141 cases of comprehension, appreciated items were 112 (or 79.43 percent) cases, not appreciated due to cultural differences were two items (or 1.41 percent), and not appreciated due to personal taste accounted for 27 items (or 19.14 percent). As in Questionnaire A, the greatest percentage of comprehended items in Questionnaire B belonged to “appreciated” category, and between personal taste and cultural differences, the former was a stronger reason for choosing an item as tasteless.

A total number of 802 cases of successful comprehension was observed after the administration of Questionnaire C, from which 696 (or 86.78 percent) were appreciated items, 11 (or 1.37 percent) items were counted as the tasteless items due to cultural differences, and 95 (or 11.84 percent) belonged to tasteless items due to personal taste. The order of frequency and percentage for the three classes of comprehended items in Questionnaire C followed the same pattern observed in the previous questionnaires of A and B; i.e., first appreciated items, next not appreciated due to personal taste, and last not appreciated due to cultural differences.

The comparison of the appreciated items before and after the treatment revealed that the participants showed a greater appreciation of English humor after the treatment, in terms of both frequency and percentage. The amount of appreciation in their first performance (N=133, 73.48 percent) and their second performance (N=112, 79.43 percent), both before treatment, were lower than the percentage of appreciation in their third performance (N=696, 86.78 percent) which was done after treatment.

On the contrary, despite the increase in the number of items that were not appreciated due to personal factors after the treatment (N= 45 first performance & N=27 second performance, both before treatment; while N=95 third performance, after treatment), the percentage decreased. In other words, the percentages of items selected as tasteless due to personal taste were higher in the two performances before treatment (24.86 percent for the first performance, and 19.14 percent for the second performance); while the figure decreased after treatment (11.84 percent for the third performance). However, the difference was too trivial (less than 0.5 percent) for the cultural differences factor and no clear pattern for the classes of jokes that were not appreciated by participants due to cultural differences was evident.

The most frequently observed cases of not-appreciated items due to personal taste were identified and labeled based on their main themes or targets. Table 7 presents this classification.

Table 7.

Main themes or targets of the tasteless jokes due to personal taste

| Themes or targets        | Observed cases |
|--------------------------|----------------|
| 1. Women marry for money | 14             |
| 2. Politics in America   | 13             |
| 3. An unknown celebrity  | 10             |
| 4. Grammar police        | 9              |
| 5. Obesity               | 8              |

As is evident in Table 7, the item in which women were mocked for an attributed materialistic characteristic was assessed as the most tasteless one (N=14). The second most tasteless item was a joke attacking politics in the US (N=13). At the third position there was a joke about a Hollywood star who was almost unknown to the participants (N=10), and the fourth item that was judged to be tasteless by the participants of this study, was a "grammar police" joke in which too much sensitivity to correct use of grammar was ridiculed (N=9). Finally, targeting fat people was determined to be tasteless as the fifth type of jokes that could not satisfy participants' personal taste (N=8).

## 5. Discussion

The main purpose of this study was to explore the extent to which Iranian EFL learners could benefit from humor instruction and recognize, comprehend, and appreciate English humor. The first research question aimed at discovering whether lexical and grammatical knowledge affected participants' capability in coping with humor. It was found that although the participants were allowed to use dictionaries and ask teachers to help them with difficult vocabulary and grammar during the administration of the second questionnaire, their second performance was not significantly different from their first performance, during which they received no help for their lexical and grammatical problems.

The finding suggests that participants cannot rely solely on their lexical and grammatical knowledge to grasp English humor successfully. This finding is in line with the results of studies like Johnson (1992), Bell (2002), and Bell and Attardo (2010) which underlined that high linguistic proficiency could not guarantee effective understanding of L2 humor. Consistent with this piece of finding were the remarks of some of the participants in the present study who stated that although there was no lexical and grammatical problem during the second performance, they had difficulty grasping the humorous points behind most items. Such evidence underscores what almost three decades ago, Hartung (1983) and James (1986), in the US and the UK respectively, concluded when they reported that non-native students had named English humor as one of the greatest challenges they faced.

A probable explanation for the results gained here in this regard might be that, as also emphasized by Vega (1990), knowledge of humor seems to be an independent competence and cannot be achieved through acquiring other competencies including linguistic one. Therefore, introduction and/or instruction of English humor may need to be distinctively considered and included in language teaching programs (Bell & Pomerantz, 2014, 2015; Vega, 1990).

The second research question focused on the effect of familiarizing EFL learners with structural and socio-cultural aspects of English humor including common stereotypes, targets, and topics on their recognition, comprehension, and appreciation of English humor. The analyses revealed a significant impact of this instructional treatment on the three variables. This finding indicates that EFL learners' knowledge in these areas helps them better distinguish humorous and serious language (recognition) from each other, grasp the humorous points (comprehension), and accept it as funny or humorous (appreciation).

As for recognition, the improvement could be partially attributed to the exposure of participants to the established forms and topics of English humor. For instance, during the treatment, the participants were taught that the structures like "knock knock" or the words such as "blonde", when associated with unintelligent behavior, might signal a humorous statement. It is clear that this small piece of knowledge leads to a better recognition of the humorous language of the foreign language learners. Supporting this idea, Attardo (1994), refers to forms of English humor as genres and advocates introduction of these genres to language learners in order to familiarize them with unknown structures of English humor. To clarify his opinion, Attardo (1994) refers to "knock knock" jokes as unfamiliar structures to Italian learners; hence familiarizing the Italian English learners with the "knock knock" genre could facilitate their understanding.

The knowledge or skill of the foreign language learners for recognizing humorous statements from serious ones is especially vital when the mode of speaking/writing plays a role in clarifying the intention behind an expression as the audience may misinterpret the message if s/he fails to recognize that the humorist is joking inside a play frame (Berger & Wildavsky, 1994). This point was evidenced in the present study when some of the participants reported that in some cases they had identified an item as humorous (recognition was done), but could not determine what made the item funny (lack of play frame knowledge). During the treatment, some of learners explained how their perception of the jokes in questionnaires A and B had changed after gaining knowledge of the points that made those jokes humorous. The results of quantitative analyses verified their claims when comprehension rate showed a significant growth after treatment.

Among the subjects covered in the instructional pamphlet were stereotypes and targets of English humor. According to McGarty, Yzerbyt, and Spears (2002) three functions are identified for stereotypes; first, they act as a guide to help the hearer to understand or make sense of the situation; second, individuals who are familiar with stereotypes can apply their knowledge to perceive more using less effort; and third, stereotypes are representative of accepted norms and views in a community. Thus, a part of the improvement in recognition and comprehension of the participants could be associated with their gained familiarity with stereotypes and targets.

EFL learners' appreciation of L2 humor also improved as a result of humor instruction implying that their familiarity with cultural aspects of L2 humor could help them better understand the foreign language humor scripts. Bell and Attardo (2010) suggest that one of the deficiencies leading to perception of the humorous situation as serious and failure in appreciation of a joke by the hearer is the different cultural backgrounds that may interfere with hearer's access to the scripts that are intended by the humorist. Once the scripts are revealed to the learners, they will be equipped with necessary knowledge to decide about the funniness of L2 humorous statements and enjoy them. Prior to Bell and Attardo (2010), Attardo (1994, p. 213) recommended teaching non-native speakers "what scripts are available in a given culture for humorous purposes, and which scripts are unavailable (tabooed)". Bell and Pomerantz (2015) also recommend raising awareness of these topics and how they are used in L2.

Apparently, the introduction of stereotypes was also effective for the enhancement of appreciation because, as stated by Porter (2004, p. 66), "comic pleasures associated with the recognition of certain stereotypes in humor cannot be disavowed". In fact, based on the findings of this study, it is evident that, although humor is known more of a sense than knowledge, transferring the related knowledge can unveil this sense in learners and increase their appreciation of L2 humor. This was evident in few spontaneous observations along with comments from participants. Some learners were interested in making comparison between Persian and English jokes through discussing similarities and differences. For example, they referred to the stereotypes in English that also existed in Persian humor which targeted different individuals or social groups. Davies (1998) believes that, when people learn a joke from another country, they begin to use its form to produce new versions with their own local content. Bell (2011)

advocates employment of such activities, as they help learners investigate cultural and linguistic differences between their L1 and L2.

Investigating the role of cultural differences and personal taste in appreciation of humor were at the focus of third research question. As Wagner and Urios-Aparisi (2008) state, both individual and cultural differences may be involved in the creation of different humor styles.

Concerning cultural differences between L1 and L2, it was noteworthy that because of the low number (and low percentage) of selected items as tasteless, the researchers were not able to find any unanimity in the responses to identify distinctive patterns. This may indicate that participants of the study, i.e. Iranian teenagers, did not tend to disagree with cultural aspects of English humor; or at least with those aspects presented in the instructional pamphlet or items of the questionnaires, as they were deemed culturally appropriate for the context of Iran. However, lack of appreciation that originated from personal taste in contrast, was observed in a number of items more frequently than in others. This finding suggests that personal factors play an important role in judging the funniness of a humorous expression. Reimann (2010, p.23) underscores the same point when he uses the term "highly personal" as one of the characteristics of humor.

Descriptive frequency analyses revealed the most tasteless humorous items in the following order: The most tasteless one was an item in which women were targeted for their materialistic personality. In this item, women were characterized as individuals who fall in love for money. Of course, one obvious reason for the attested rank might have been the fact that all of the participants of the study were *female* EFL learners. Lampert and Ervin-Tripp (1998) summarized the results of a number of gender-based studies and concluded that women do not appreciate the jokes that target females; they prefer the humor that targets males. Kochersberger (2012) came to a similar conclusion. It seems probable that the most tasteless item would be a different one if male learners had also participated in the study.

The same critical point was reflected in the participants' classroom discussions as well, when they criticized women targeting jokes for considering women as the shallow sex with lower power of reasoning. Ermida (2009) points to sexism, ageism, and racism as the factors leading to prejudice against specific groups of individuals who serve as common targets of the jokes. Evidently, teenage female participants of the study did not appreciate such sexist humor and detested to be recognized or mocked as the one-dimensional superficial sex.

The second least funny joke was the one which was targeting politics in America and addressed budgeting. Although, this item was among the humorous items in Questionnaire C, administered after the treatment in which political jokes were introduced and exemplified, participants were unwilling to accept it as funny. Of course, the instructional pamphlet did not elaborate on political issues in the US and was confined to giving the hint that politics and politicians are themes and targets of English humor, along with a few illustrative examples. Supporting Davies (1998), of appreciation of the political jokes may indicate that political jokes are among the ones that need deeper understanding and greater public knowledge before appreciation. According to Davies (1998), when the social and political structures of societies differ, people appreciate different types of political jokes that are specific to their own situation.

The third place tasteless humor item was an item targeting a celebrity. As the participants claimed, this celebrity was almost unknown to them. He was famous for his ability in martial arts. However, the new generation of Iranian females, as much as represented by teenager participants of the study, did not appreciate the joke targeting this Hollywood star. Such unfamiliarity with the celebrity and his movies might have been caused by the theme of his movies, martial arts, which is supposedly more favored by males than females, or the time of his famous movies, which were mostly created few decades ago.

Regardless of the reasons for not knowing this celebrity, lack of appreciation may be explained based on GTVH theory (Attardo & Raskin, 1991) which introduces knowledge of the *target* of humor as

one of the knowledge resources needed by the hearer of a joke. Appreciation of the above-mentioned joke was highly dependent on participants' (lacking) familiarity with the celebrity and his movies; hence, making it difficult to grasp the *sense* that the joke intended to transfer.

Grammar police was the fourth tasteless joke. In this type of joke, people who are too sensitive to the correct use of grammar are criticized. Because native speakers know the boundaries of proper grammar, they can decide on how to apply their mother tongue grammar with confidence; as a result, they comprehend and appreciate such jokes. However, in the case of language learners, it was possibly difficult to decide what grammatical points were supposedly used correctly and which ones were considered as instances of paying extra attention to the correct use of grammar. In fact, for EFL learners, struggling with English grammar and using it correctly is seemingly a typical serious issue. Besides, every time they attend their language classes, they face a different type of grammar police, i.e., their teachers, whose corrections may never look funny. Moreover, grammar is not a typical subject for jokes in Persian culture. This indicates that there is no corresponding situation between L1 and L2 cultures in this regard (Reimann, 2010), which could make the sense unavailable for Iranian EFL learners.

Finally, obesity stood at the fifth place of tastelessness. Similar to grammar police type, Iranians do not typically mock overweight people, that is, corresponding situation does not exist in participants' own culture. Even though, many Iranians prefer to be slim, being chubby does not seem to be a humor target for them. Furthermore, the detested joke involved a comparison between obesity in America and Mexico. Sharing geographical borders and having historical relationships between these two nations may add particular aspects to the joke, which were of course meaningless to the Iranian participants of the study.

Due to the scarcity of research examining the effect of introducing L2 humor to language learners on their recognition, comprehension, and appreciation, as far as the researchers' knowledge is concerned, the results of this study cannot be directly compared with other findings. However, we can refer to studies that point to the necessity of gaining knowledge of L2 humor as an important part of a language program. For example, Attardo (1994) proposes that in order to enable the learners to process L2 humor, teachers need to present sufficient information about the subject. Other studies underscoring the major role of familiarity with cultural points in dealing with L2 humor include Bell (2002), Jezany (2013), Johnson (1992), and Palmer (2003).

## 6. Conclusion

The study was designed to investigate the teachability of English humor and its impact on the Iranian EFL learners' recognition, comprehension, and appreciation of English humor. Furthermore, the effect of lexico-grammatical knowledge on the given dependent variables was explored. The intermediate and upper-intermediate EFL learners responded to the humorous items presented in three questionnaires two of which were taken before the instructional treatment and one was given after the instruction. The analysis of difference between the first two questionnaires revealed lack of significant effect of lexical and grammatical knowledge on learners' capability in recognition, comprehension and appreciation of English humor. However, EFL learners performed significantly differently after receiving information about socio-cultural and structural aspects of English humor.

Such findings imply that socio-cultural and structural aspects of L2 humor need to be incorporated into language teaching materials and pedagogy in order to help learners deal with this salient aspect of English language. Furthermore, humor instruction may affect second or foreign language development through the provision of insights into L2 culture. The study also examined the role of cultural differences and personal taste in appreciation of English humor. Regarding cultural differences, participants did not consider this factor as a barrier to their appreciation of English jokes, however, learners' choice of items as



tasteless due to personal factors was frequent enough to yield a list of tasteless themes. The most tasteless theme pictured women as gold diggers. According to the participants, who were all female, these jokes question women's intelligence and introduce them as the shallow gender. Themes or targets of politics in America, a celebrity almost unknown to the participants, grammar police, and obesity were at the second to fifth position of tastelessness, respectively. This last piece of finding implies that unless introduction and/or instruction of sociocultural aspects of second or foreign language are included in the second or foreign language pedagogy scope, the foreign language humor will at most be looked at from L1 spectacles or KR's and the final lack of appreciation will be the end result.

It was also observed that humor encouraged pair and group work among participants as they felt more comfortable reading jokes and laughing in groups and pairs. Besides, some learners attempted to spread the joy by helping their classmates understand the message or resolve the incongruity. Furthermore, the management of disruptive behavior as one of the reasons for the use of humor in the classroom (Powell & Andresen, 1985) was quite evident. The *clowns* of the class (Dornyei and Murphey, 2003, as cited in Scrivener, 2012), started to tell jokes in English, or make jokes that mixed L1 and L2 humor, although not in perfect form and hence their disruptive behavior decreased noticeably. Moreover, as Wulf (2010) maintains that using language creatively is not limited to skillful production of literal statements, but involves the ability to express creative forms of language such as humor that consists of playful figurative language conflicting with normal language, the participants got involved in the creative use of language.

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