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Research note

Responding to humour online: an exploratory L2 study on the effect of instruction

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Abstract

Although L2 learners report having great difficulty responding to humour, research on this area is lacking. There is also a relative lack of studies on whether there is the need for humour instruction for European learners of other European languages. Therefore, this pilot study explored instruction on humour responses for learners of French at a Dutch university. Participants reported that humour instruction is warranted in their B2-level French class.

Keywords: humour responses, L2 humour, humour competency, humour convergence.

1. Introduction

Responding to conversational humour by playing along and adding humour, termed *humour convergence* (Coolidge et al., 2023), is difficult and is often considered the most frustrating aspect of humour competence for L2 learners (Bell & Attardo, 2010). As humour convergence is believed to lead to affiliation (Coolidge et al., 2023), it could be especially beneficial for language learners hoping to form bonds with target language speakers. Therefore, humour instruction aiming to increase learners' willingness and ability to converge may be worthwhile.

However, convergence may not be applicable for incomprehensible (Bell, 2013), offensive (Bell, 2009a), and self-deprecating humour (Hay, 2001). Responses to teasing also vary greatly depending on a variety of factors, including whether the humour is affiliative or aggressive (Bell, 2009b; Haugh, 2009). Responses to specific types of teasing, such as *jocular flattery* (a form of

affiliative teasing), are nuanced and likely vary between cultures (Qui et al., 2021). As humour responses are complex, instruction needs to carefully consider these nuances.

A second research area that is lacking is whether L2 humour instruction is beneficial for learners from European countries learning languages of other European cultures. Irony and humour studies have focused on English learners from East Asian countries, as humour use greatly differs (Ellis et al., 2021; Kim & Lantolf, 2016; Prichard & Rucynski, 2020; 2024). However, humour differences may be less extreme between different western cultures (Ruch et al., 1991), though significant differences certainly exist (Mullan & Béal, 2022; Davies, 2004).

To begin to address the research gap, this research note overviews a pilot study which examined the feasibility of instruction on online humour responses among learners of French at a Dutch university.

2. Methods

This pilot pre-, posttest control group study had the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1: How does instruction on humor responses affect L2 learners' humor convergence?
RQ2: How does instruction affect their ability to respond effectively?

An open-ended survey was also distributed to answer RQ3:

RQ3: How do learners of French from a Dutch university feel about humor instruction?

2.1. Participants

There were 16 high-intermediate L2 participants of French from a Dutch university. Two classes were used, one for experimental group (n = 10) and one for the control group (n = 6).

2.2. Materials and procedures

For both the pre- and posttest, participants responded in writing to 18 scripted text messages in French. They were asked to imagine that they were responding online to a French friend that they did not know too well but wanted to get closer with.

As responses greatly differ based on the type of humor, whether it is affiliative or aggressive, and who is the target, there were six different categories of humor included (see Table 1) with three items for each per test. The absurd irony items were edited from Coolidge, Montagnolo, and Attardo (2023), but items for other categories were drafted after consulting the research on each humor style. The items were piloted with eight L1 French speakers to ensure each fit the intended category. There were two versions of the test, one randomly assigned for the pretest and the other for the posttest.

Table 1. Humour types and example items that participants responded to

Type	Example item (1 of 3; translated in English)
Absurd irony	I separated my sister's sons, who were about to fight. I'm going to end up with the Nobel Peace Prize! 😂
Third-person sarcasm	My coffee was cold and the waiter was rude…. Yes, I am TOTALLY going to give them a 5-star rating! 🙄
Jocular flattery	Your new hairstyle looks great on you. 😍 It's going to be hard to deal with all the people following you on Instagram. 😉
Self-deprecation	I failed all my classes this year. What a genius I am! 😳
Offensive humor	My neighbors are loud and stupid. They must be immigrants! 😂
Incomprehensible humor	I'm as hopeful as Hermine Nantes Atlantique. 😂

Each participant completed the pre- and posttest on Google Forms. Thirty minutes of class time was allotted for each test.

2.3. Intervention

The intervention for the experimental group took place in class, one week after the pretest and one week before the posttest. The coordinated curriculum of the French course allowed for only one 50-minute lesson. The intervention was created based on backwards design and other guidelines for humor instruction (Bell & Pomerantz, 2016; Rucynski & Prichard, 2020).

Students first reflected on their own use and style of humor. In pairs, they then discussed keys for responding to the kinds of humor listed in Table 1. There were also sample humorous texts on a handout, and students wrote responses collaboratively.

One author then gave research-informed guidelines to students. For example, it was pointed out that responding to humor with similar humor (humor convergence) can lead to affiliation but that converging to a self-deprecating joke may be hurtful. The instructor also discussed ways to counter offensive humor. Key phrases were introduced, such as French translations for "LOL," "Oh, brother," and "I don't get it." Sample responses to the handout were also given, yet participants were encouraged to reflect on their own humor style and how their responses would affect themselves and others.

2.4. Analysis

To answer RQ1, a scale on humor convergence (Coolidge et al., 2023) was utilized:

Level zero: replied that the joke was rude, offensive, or not funny
One: expressed confusion, asked for clarification, or did not respond
Two: replied to the content without acknowledging the humor
Three: positively acknowledged the humor (a laughing emoji or positive comment).
Four: added humor, but did not converge on the humor message
Five: the respondent added humor, building on the previous humor
(Level zero was added since this research included offensive humor.)

Coding was done by two researchers, who coded each of the participants' 18 responses in both tests. Interrater reliability was 86%, similar to prior research (Coolidge et al., 2023).

To answer RQ2, two French L1 users independently rated each of the participants' responses on a scale from 1 (very ineffective) to 5 (very effective).

For RQ1 and RQ2, the items were blinded and randomized, so the raters and coders did not know if each response was from a pre- or posttest or the control or experimental group. Means were calculated and compared, but statistical tests were not run due to the lack of participants.

To answer RQ3, anonymous open-ended survey questions were used, and responses were coded by emerging themes.

3. Results

3.1. Humour convergence (RQ1)

The control group averaged slightly less convergence in the posttest (Pre = 2.86; Post = 2.68), while the experimental group had marginal gains (Pre = 2.27; Post = 2.38). Table 2 shows that larger gains were made for the kinds of humor (e.g., absurd irony) that were suggested in the intervention as being more fitting for convergence.

Table 2. Humor convergence by type

	Absurd Irony		3rd-Party Sarcasm		Jocular Flattery		Self-Deprecation		Offensive		Incomprehen-sible	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Control	4	4	2.7	2.5	3.8	3.4	2.9	3.4	1.3	0.8	2.9	2.7
Experi-mental	3.2	3.9	2.4	2.8	3.4	3.1	2.1	2.3	0.9	0.8	2.3	2.4

3.2. Effectiveness of responses (RQ2)

Ratings on the experimental group's responses slightly increased (2.32 to 2.43), while ratings on the control group did not (2.59 to 2.56). Table 3 shows that the experimental group made minimal improvements on most types.

Table 3. Humour convergence by type

	Absurd Irony		3rd-Party Sarcasm		Jocular Flattery		Self-Deprecation		Offensive		Incomprehen-sible	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Control	2.6	3.0	2.3	2.4	2.9	2.8	2.6	2.8	2.3	2.1	2.8	2.3
Experi-Mental	2.4	2.7	2.3	2.5	2.7	2.7	2.2	2.5	2.3	2.3	2.3	2.4

3.3. Useful? (RQ3)

Twelve of the 13 participants replied that humour instruction was worthwhile. Seven noted that humour is important for affiliation. For example, one said it is "very important in the process of forming human relations [and is] an asset for the integration into a new society." Two more noted that humour proficiency is needed to be proficient in an L2. One noted, "You can't call yourself a proficient French speaker if you don't know how to express yourself using humour." Four participants qualified their response saying the lesson would be more useful for more proficient learners. Two others noted that the training was too short. The one person who said the lesson was not worthwhile replied that French humour was not that different from her L1.

4. Conclusion

When comparing the means, it appears that there were marginal posttest gains by the experimental group in humour convergence (especially on the affiliative humour items; RQ1) and in the effectiveness ratings for their responses (RQ2). However, it should be stressed that participant numbers were lacking for empirical statistical analysis, and the gains could be due to other factors, such as individual variation. Regardless, any gains made were minimal, perhaps suggesting that one short lesson may not be enough to significantly improve learners' ability to respond to humour online.

Finally, although the gap between French and Dutch humour may not be as large as the one between Eastern Asia and western English-speaking countries, the responses suggested that humour competency was generally considered useful (RQ3).

Overall, the research suggested that a larger follow-up study is feasible and warranted. This would involve more participants to allow for empirical analysis and a more extensive intervention.

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