

## **A Comparative Study of The Effect of Humor Strategies on Iranian EFL Learners' Vocabulary Learning**

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### **Abstract**

This paper aimed at examining and comparing the effects of different humor-based strategies (joke, pun, and limerick) on vocabulary learning of EFL learners at intermediate and advanced levels. To this end, 120 EFL learners in a private institute were asked to serve as the participants of the study. They were then divided into two groups according to their proficiency levels (i.e. advanced and intermediate). Each group contained four subgroups: three experimental groups (joke, pun, and limerick groups) and one control group. Before the treatment, the participants took part a pretest, which aimed to ascertain the homogeneity of the participants. The treatment for the three experimental groups then commenced, and it was followed by a vocabulary posttest. The data were gathered and analyzed via one-way between-groups ANOVA. The results revealed that for the intermediate learners, joke was more effective (although not significantly) than pun, which was (not significantly) more effective than limerick. The difference between joke and limerick, however, was statistically significant. For the advanced learners, the joke group outperformed both pun and limerick groups significantly. However, the difference between pun and limerick groups did not reach statistical significance. There was thus not a considerable difference between intermediate and advanced learners in terms of how they were affected by the treatments.

**Keywords:** Humor; joke; pun; limerick; vocabulary learning

## Introduction

Humor is an inseparable part of the human experience and therefore a crucial part of humanity's unique capacity for language. Actually it stands as one of the few universals applicable to all peoples and all languages throughout the world (Kruger, 1996). In any case, regardless of such breadth and scope, humor has infrequently been discussed among language researchers or educators. Despite the fact that humor has been given meager consideration by SLA researchers in the literature, researchers in the social sciences, particularly those in the fields of education and psychology, have long investigated humor for its general, conducive pedagogical effects on a variety of levels (Bryant, Comisky, & Zillman 1979; Gruner, 1967). This study argues that such general pedagogical benefits of humor are uniquely suited to the language classroom and makes a comparison between the three different strategy-based instructions (joke, pun, and limerick) for the purpose of teaching EFL vocabulary to the learners.

Despite its present pervasiveness within general education, humor has only recently taken its place as a fixture of language classroom culture. Indeed, formal education was viewed as a wholly serious matter up until the mid-twentieth century—when classic educational models began to give way to the more flexible and humanistic approaches upon which the contemporary methods are based (Byrant, Comisky, & Zillman, 1979; Zillman & Bryant, 1983). The introduction of humor to language teaching has followed a similar though progressively distinct path: While the death of the classical language classroom, based upon the traditional grammar translation approach, occurred at roughly the same time as the demise of most classical educational models in general, its replacement by behavioral approaches based on conformity, repetition, and cadence—such as the Audio Lingual Method (ALM)—allowed few new opportunities for use of classroom humor.

Thus, with the dawn of communicative syllabi in the early seventies and eighties, humor was finally implicitly reintroduced alongside a new emphasis on authentic and creative language learning. Nonetheless, SLA researchers, in conjunction with foreign/second language educators, have been slow to investigate, recognize, and/or exploit the significant potential of humor within the language classroom. This study was, therefore, intended to explore the effects of different humor strategies on vocabulary learning of Iranian EFL learners. Since vocabulary plays an important role in learning a foreign language, it is very important for a teacher to make the classroom environment as suitable as possible for learning. Nowadays in our classrooms we can observe that many students suffer from lack of fun in their learning process, which by itself can bring many advantages such as making student more eager to participate in the class and involve in learning process. In spite of its importance in developing motivation in learners, few studies have been done in the area of using humor-based instruction as a mean of making the learning process exciting and interesting. This study thus aimed at making some clarifications on the effectiveness of humorous materials in order to encourage teachers to consider this strategy as a useful means of teaching vocabulary.

## Review of the literature

Various theories have been put forward regarding why individuals laugh and what controls our sense of humor. The Egyptians accepted that the world was made by the first Egyptian God through laughter (Sanders, 1995). Plato and Aristotle believed that humor resulted from superior people looking at the inadequacies of inferiors (Lefcourt & Martin, 1986). Several theories attempted to connect humor to the arousal of our emotions, proposing that the function of humor is to discharge pleasurable feelings (McGhee, 1983). Three fundamental theories, have been

accepted as being the most prominent theories in the present though: the incongruity, the superiority theory, and the relief theory.

Humor has been shown to have different effects on students of different ages. The majority of the certain impacts of humor on learning have come from studies done with preschool and elementary school children (Hauck & Thomas, 1972; Wakshlag, Day, & Zillmann, 1981; Zillmann, Williams, Bryant, Boynton, & Wolf, 1980). Studies done with secondary and college students have been less effective (Ziv, 1988). Humor appears to have a motivating impact on the younger students' attention, which might illustrate the reason why studies on older students, who are presumably more internally inspired to be attentive, find humor to have less effect on learning.

Moreover, humor research on college students is not without its problems (Ziv, 1988). In his review, Ziv cites eleven sources concerning the effect of humor on college students, eight of which demonstrated that humor has no significant effect on learning. All this research, however, was conducted at least 38 years ago (between 1961-1977) and six of the studies are listed as either "unpublished master's thesis" or "unpublished doctoral dissertation." In a more recent study (Schmidt, 1994), undergraduate students remembered humorous words more often than non-humorous words. Humor was believed to have an arousal effect on the students; therefore, humor was considered to be an inspiring element in the classroom. Much disagreement remains on the effectiveness of humor on older students.

The type of humor is also an important factor. Younger students respond well to visual humor and puns, but they become easily confused when presented with satirical or ironic humor (Zillmann et al., 1984). Punning is one of the primary concepts examined in humor research. Puns not only are forms of conversational humor (witticisms, one-liners, joke's set-up or punchline) but also coincide with advertising slogans or article headlines and occur in jokes. A pun can be defined as a humorous verbalisation that has (prototypically) two interpretations couched in purposeful ambiguity of a word or a string of words (collocations or idioms), dubbed the punning element, manifesting itself in one form (or two very similar ones) but conveying two different meanings. Take life with a pinch of salt, a slice of lemon and a bottle of tequila (idiom 'take something with a pinch of salt' read at the idiomatic level, i.e. 'remain doubtful of something', and literally). You are stuck with your debt if you cannot budge it (homophony, i.e. phonetic similarity, of 'budge it' and 'budget'). Puns are immensely complex and diversified humorous forms that never cease to garner scholarly interest (see, e.g. Attardo 1994; Ritchie 2004; Dynel 2009; and further references therein).

A study by Hezel, Bryant, and Harris (1982) with college students using four versions of a videotaped lecture with different levels of humor (four levels of humor were used: relevant, related, unrelated, and none) showed no significant differences in information acquisition between relevant humor and no humor, whereas the related and unrelated humor showed lower scores on information acquisition. Related humor seems to have a negative impact on younger students and have little or no impact on older students, whereas unrelated humor seems to have a positive impact on younger students and a negative impact on older students.

Research has shown that humorous sentences and examples have a positive impact on retention abilities (Garner, 2006; Kaplan & Pascoe, 1977; Schmitt, 1994) and students who studied vocabulary through humorous lessons performed better on achievement tests than those who did not (Aria & Tracey, 2003). A number of studies have examined the impact of humor on improving the four language skills. In one of these studies, two groups of twenty students who were studying humorous and non-humorous texts during their reading sessions in the EFL context of Iran were compared.

Furthermore, humor can be verbal or nonverbal. Verbal humor is dichotomized into jokes and conversational humor, which embrace an array of semantic-pragmatic categories, such as lexemes, phrasemes, witticisms, retorts, teasing, banter, putdowns, self-denigrating humor and anecdotes. It is worth noting that the categories are not mutually exclusive and thus certain overlaps between them can be observed and the categories can be combined in particular instances of humor. Additionally, with the witticism as an example, several linguistic formulations were presented, among which the most prominent are puns, irony and allusions. All the types and forms of humor offer copious research material, which can be approached from a variety of linguistic vantage points, i.e. cognitivism, semantics, pragmatics, discourse analysis, sociolinguistics or translation. In the current study, efforts were made to figure out the effectiveness of three types of humor (i.e. jokes (something said or done to provoke laughter), puns (a form of word play that suggests two or more meanings, by exploiting multiple meanings of words, or of similar-sounding words, for an intended humorous or rhetorical effect), and limericks (a humorous poem five lines long in which the first, second, and fifth lines have one rhyme and the third and fourth another) in the lexical acquisition of Iranian EFL learners at differing levels of proficiency.

#### Objectives of the study

The first objective of this study is to investigate whether there are any significant differences among the different types of humorous strategies (joke, pun, and limerick) as regards Iranian EFL learner's vocabulary improvement. This study also aims at identifying the significant differences among intermediate and advanced Iranian EFL learners in terms of vocabulary improvement through applying different types of humorous-based teaching strategies.

#### Research questions

The research is intended to answer the following research questions:

- (1) Are there any significant differences among the different types of humorous strategies (joke, pun, and limerick) as regards Iranian EFL learner's vocabulary improvement?
- (2) Are there any significant differences among intermediate and advanced Iranian EFL learners in terms of vocabulary improvement through applying different types of humorous-based teaching strategies?

### **Methodology**

#### Participants

A total number of 120 Iranian female students studying English as their second language in Donyaye Zaban institute were the subjects of this investigation. All of them spoke Persian as their first language and had studied English as a second language. The age of the students ranged from 18 to 23 years old. Half of these participants were intermediate learners, while the other half were advanced learners. The level of their language proficiency was determined based on the institute's placement test. The 60 intermediate learners were subsequently divided into four groups of roughly equal size: joke, pun, limerick, and control group, and the same was done for the advanced learners (i.e. they were divided into four groups).

#### Instruments

##### *Pretest and posttest*

All the intermediate subjects in different groups took a 30-item vocabulary pretest. After the pretest the experimental groups received their relevant treatments, while the control group

learners were taught without humorous texts of any type. The four groups at each proficiency level once again took the same vocabulary test after the implementation of the experiment. The test enjoyed content validity since the words taught in class were included in the test. The reliability of the test, calculated through split-half reliability formula, was found to be .78 for the pretest and .81 for the posttest.

A structurally similar test was also devised for the advanced learners. This test also contained 30 items and enjoyed content validity. The split-half reliability indexes for the pretest and posttest were .84 and .87, respectively.

### Procedures

The study was conducted in a private institute called Donyaye Zaban in Isfahan, Iran, where classes met three times a week. A total number of 120 EFL learners participated in this research project. The 60 intermediate participants were divided into four groups, with 15 learners in each group. The same procedure was done for advanced learners. All the subjects in different groups and at different levels took a 30-item vocabulary pretest, to make sure the learners in different groups at a given proficiency level were homogeneous in terms of their vocabulary knowledge. After ascertaining the homogeneity of the learners at the beginning of the study, the treatment started. The experimental groups received their relevant treatments, while the control group learners were taught without humorous texts of any type. The teacher was asked to teach the humor-based vocabulary items for 10 minutes as an extra class activity in each session. To teach the target words to the learners, their teacher made use of jokes, puns, and limericks which contained those words. These humor-inducing materials were collected from the Web. Some parts of the materials were improvised by the teacher or the learners when the teacher, in the course of class activities, asked the learners to make jokes, puns, or limericks with the newly taught words. Then the four groups at each proficiency level once again sat for a vocabulary test after the implementation of the experiment.

### Result

One of the aims of the study was to find out whether intermediate learners of English could benefit from humor while trying to learn new vocabulary items. To achieve such an aim, one-way between groups ANOVA was employed twice: once for the comparison of the vocabulary knowledge of the four groups (joke, pun, limerick, and control) at the outset of the study and a second time for comparing these groups' vocabulary knowledge after the implementation of the experiment. What follows is the results of the related analyses.

#### Results of data analysis for intermediate learners

##### *Pretest results*

The results of the comparison of the four intermediate groups on the pretest are displayed in Tables 1, and 2.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Comparing the Intermediate Joke, Pun, Limerick, and Control Groups' Vocabulary Pretest Scores

| <i>N</i> | Mean | <i>Std.</i><br>Deviation | <i>Std.</i> Error | 95% Confidence Interval for |                | Minimum | Maximum |
|----------|------|--------------------------|-------------------|-----------------------------|----------------|---------|---------|
|          |      |                          |                   | Mean                        | Mean           |         |         |
|          |      |                          |                   | Lower<br>Bound              | Upper<br>Bound |         |         |

|                |    |       |      |     |       |       |       |       |
|----------------|----|-------|------|-----|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Joke Group     | 15 | 17.26 | 1.86 | .48 | 16.23 | 18.30 | 14.00 | 21.00 |
| Pun Group      | 14 | 15.92 | 1.89 | .50 | 14.83 | 17.02 | 12.00 | 19.00 |
| Limerick Group | 17 | 16.47 | 1.73 | .42 | 15.57 | 17.36 | 14.00 | 20.00 |
| Control Group  | 14 | 16.85 | 1.16 | .31 | 16.18 | 17.53 | 15.00 | 19.00 |
| Total          | 60 | 16.63 | 1.72 | .22 | 16.18 | 17.07 | 12.00 | 21.00 |

The mean scores of the joke group ( $M = 17.26$ ), pun group ( $M = 15.92$ ), limerick group ( $M = 16.47$ ), and control group ( $M = 16.85$ ) were different from one another on the vocabulary pretest. To find out whether the differences among these mean scores were significant or not, one has to examine the  $p$  value under the *Sig.* column in the ANOVA table below.

Table 2. Results of One-Way ANOVA for Comparing the Intermediate Joke, Pun, Limerick, and Control Groups' Vocabulary Pretest Scores

|                | Sum of Squares | <i>df</i> | Mean Square | <i>F</i> | <i>Sig.</i> |
|----------------|----------------|-----------|-------------|----------|-------------|
| Between Groups | 14.12          | 3         | 4.70        | 1.62     | .19         |
| Within Groups  | 161.81         | 56        | 2.88        |          |             |
| Total          | 175.93         | 59        |             |          |             |

As is shown in Table 2, there was not a statistically significant difference in the pretest scores for joke group ( $M = 17.26$ ,  $SD = 1.86$ ), pun group ( $M = 15.92$ ,  $SD = 1.89$ ), limerick group ( $M = 16.47$ ,  $SD = 1.73$ ), and control group ( $M = 16.85$ ,  $SD = 1.16$ ) since the  $p$  value under the *Sig.* column was greater than the specified level of significance (i.e.  $.19 > .05$ ), the conclusion being that the four groups did not significantly differ at the outset of the study, which made the four intermediate groups comparable. This is also evident in the bar chart below.

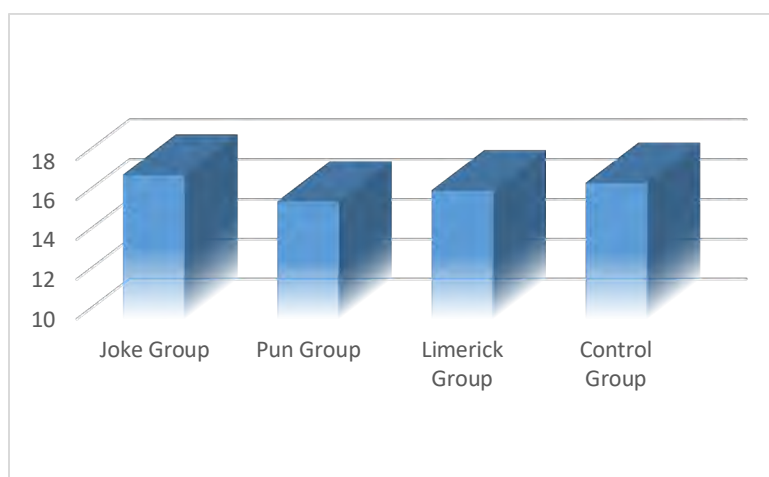


Figure 1. The Mean Scores of the Joke, Pun, Limerick, and Control Groups on the Pretest

This bar chart shows that the differences among the four intermediate groups on the vocabulary pretest were not considerable.

### Posttest results

The results obtained upon the administration of the posttest are presented in this section. Table 3 depicts the descriptive statistics for the comparison of the four intermediate groups on the posttest:

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics for Comparing the Intermediate Joke, Pun, Limerick, and Control Groups' Vocabulary Posttest Scores

|                | N  | Mean  | Std. Deviation | Std. Error | 95% Confidence Interval for Mean |             | Minimum | Maximum |
|----------------|----|-------|----------------|------------|----------------------------------|-------------|---------|---------|
|                |    |       |                |            | Lower Bound                      | Upper Bound |         |         |
| Joke Group     | 15 | 22.06 | 1.66           | .43        | 21.14                            | 22.99       | 19.00   | 25.00   |
| Pun Group      | 14 | 20.64 | 2.06           | .55        | 19.45                            | 21.83       | 16.00   | 23.00   |
| Limerick Group | 17 | 19.94 | 1.34           | .32        | 19.24                            | 20.63       | 18.00   | 24.00   |
| Control Group  | 14 | 17.50 | 1.09           | .29        | 16.86                            | 18.13       | 15.00   | 19.00   |
| Total          | 60 | 20.06 | 2.23           | .28        | 19.48                            | 20.64       | 15.00   | 25.00   |

The mean scores of the joke group ( $M = 20.06$ ), pun group ( $M = 20.64$ ), limerick group ( $M = 19.94$ ), and control group ( $M = 17.50$ ) were not as homogeneous as they had been on the vocabulary pretest. To find out whether the differences among these mean scores were statistically significant or not, one needs to look down the Sig. column Table 4 below.

Table 4. Results of One-Way ANOVA for Comparing the Intermediate Joke, Pun, Limerick, and Control Groups' Vocabulary Posttest Scores

|                | Sum of Squares | df | Mean Square | F     | Sig. |
|----------------|----------------|----|-------------|-------|------|
| Between Groups | 157.14         | 3  | 52.38       | 21.16 | .000 |
| Within Groups  | 138.58         | 56 | 2.47        |       |      |
| Total          | 295.73         | 59 |             |       |      |

As is shown in Table 4., there was a statistically significant difference in posttest vocabulary scores for joke group ( $M = 22.06$ ,  $SD = 1.66$ ), pun group ( $M = 20.64$ ,  $SD = 2.06$ ), limerick group ( $M = 19.94$ ,  $SD = 1.34$ ), and control group ( $M = 17.50$ ,  $SD = 1.09$ ) inasmuch as the p value under the Sig. column was less than the specified level of significance (i.e.  $.000 < .05$ ). It could thus be concluded that the experiment brought about significant changes in the intermediate learners' vocabulary knowledge. To see where exactly the differences among the groups lie, the Scheffe post hoc test table should be checked.

Table 5. Results of the Scheffe Post Hoc Test for Comparing the Intermediate Joke, Pun, Limerick, and Control Groups' Vocabulary Posttest Scores

| Groups         |                | Mean Difference | Std. Error | Sig. | 95% Confidence Interval |             |
|----------------|----------------|-----------------|------------|------|-------------------------|-------------|
|                |                |                 |            |      | Lower Bound             | Upper Bound |
| Joke Group     | Pun Group      | 1.42            | .58        | .128 | -.26                    | 3.10        |
|                | Limerick Group | 2.12*           | .55        | .005 | .51                     | 3.73        |
|                | Control Group  | 4.56*           | .58        | .000 | 2.88                    | 6.25        |
|                |                |                 |            |      |                         |             |
| Pun Group      | Joke Group     | -1.42           | .58        | .128 | -3.10                   | .26         |
|                | Limerick Group | .70             | .56        | .678 | -.93                    | 2.33        |
|                | Control Group  | 3.14*           | .59        | .000 | 1.42                    | 4.85        |
|                |                |                 |            |      |                         |             |
| Limerick Group | Joke Group     | -2.12*          | .55        | .005 | -3.73                   | -.51        |
|                | Pun Group      | -.70            | .56        | .678 | -2.33                   | .93         |
|                | Control Group  | 2.44*           | .56        | .001 | .80                     | 4.07        |
| Control Group  | Joke Group     | -4.56*          | .58        | .000 | -6.25                   | -2.88       |
|                | Pun Group      | -3.14*          | .59        | .000 | -4.85                   | -1.42       |
|                | Limerick Group | -2.44*          | .56        | .001 | -4.07                   | -.80        |

Beginning from the bottom row, the differences between the control group on the one hand and the three experimental groups on the other were statistically meaningful. This would mean that different types of humorous texts were effective in boosting the intermediate learners' knowledge of vocabulary. The difference between the joke group and pun group was not statistically significant since the Sig. value in front of them was greater than the significance level (i.e.,  $.128 > .05$ ). The difference between the joke group and limerick groups, however, was shown to be meaningful since the relevant p value was  $.005$ . Finally, pun and limerick groups were not significantly different from one another. The obtained results are also shown in the bar chart below.

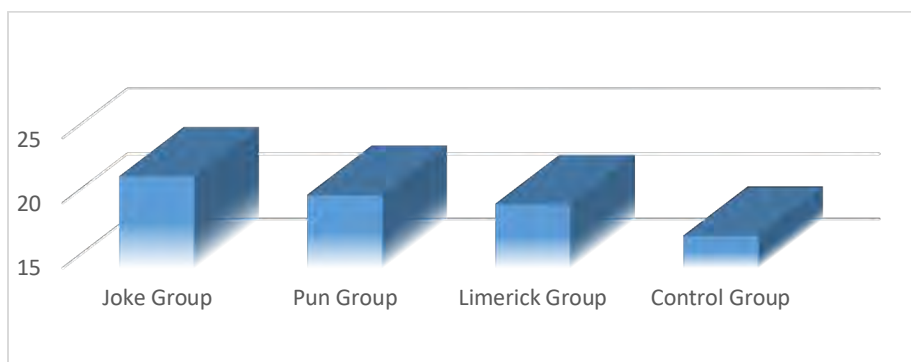


Figure 2. The Mean Scores of the Joke, Pun, Limerick, and Control Groups on the Posttest

It is beyond question that the three experimental groups of the study outperformed the control group, and that the difference between the joke and pun groups was minimal. So was the difference between the pun and limerick groups. However, joke and limerick groups were significantly different from one another.



### Results of data analysis for advanced learners

One of the other aims of the study was to find out whether advanced learners of English could benefit from humor while trying to learn new vocabulary items. To achieve this aim, one-way between groups ANOVA was conducted twice: once for the comparison of the vocabulary knowledge of the four advanced groups (joke, pun, limerick, and control) at the beginning of the study and a once again for comparing these groups' vocabulary knowledge after the experiment was conducted. What follows is the results of the related analyses.

#### Pretest results

The results of the comparison of the four advanced groups on the pretest are displayed in Tables 6 and 7.

Table 6. Descriptive Statistics for Comparing the Advanced Joke, Pun, Limerick, and Control Groups' Vocabulary Pretest Scores

|                | N  | Mean  | Std. Deviation | Std. Error | 95% Confidence Interval for Mean |             | Minimum | Maximum |
|----------------|----|-------|----------------|------------|----------------------------------|-------------|---------|---------|
|                |    |       |                |            | Lower Bound                      | Upper Bound |         |         |
| Joke Group     | 14 | 18.28 | 1.89           | .50        | 17.18                            | 19.38       | 15.00   | 22.00   |
| Pun Group      | 14 | 17.50 | 1.99           | .53        | 16.35                            | 18.64       | 14.00   | 21.00   |
| Limerick Group | 17 | 17.82 | 2.00           | .48        | 16.79                            | 18.85       | 15.00   | 22.00   |
| Control Group  | 15 | 17.46 | 1.18           | .30        | 16.80                            | 18.12       | 13.00   | 19.00   |
| Total          | 60 | 17.16 | 1.78           | .23        | 17.30                            | 18.22       | 14.00   | 22.00   |

The mean scores of the Joke group ( $M = 18.28$ ), pun group ( $M = 17.50$ ), limerick group ( $M = 17.82$ ), and control group ( $M = 17.46$ ) were different from one another on the vocabulary pretest of the advanced learners. To figure out whether the differences among these mean scores were significant or not, one needs to check the  $p$  value under the *Sig.* column in the ANOVA table below.

Table 7. Results of One-Way ANOVA for Comparing the Intermediate Joke, Pun, Limerick, and Control Groups' Vocabulary Pretest Scores

|                | Sum of Squares | df | Mean Square | F   | Sig. |
|----------------|----------------|----|-------------|-----|------|
| Between Groups | 6.17           | 3  | 2.05        | .63 | .59  |
| Within Groups  | 182.56         | 56 | 3.26        |     |      |
| Total          | 188.73         | 59 |             |     |      |

As is displayed in Table 7, there was not a statistically meaningful difference in the pretest scores for joke group ( $M = 18.28$ ,  $SD = 1.89$ ), pun group ( $M = 17.50$ ,  $SD = 1.99$ ), limerick group ( $M = 17.82$ ,  $SD = 2.00$ ), and control group ( $M = 17.46$ ,  $SD = 1.18$ ) of the advanced learners because the  $p$  value under the *Sig.* column was greater than the specified level of significance (i.e.  $.59 > .05$ ), indicating that the four groups did not significantly differ prior to the implementation of the

experiment. This made the four advanced groups comparable. This result is also evident in the bar chart below.



Figure 3. The Mean Scores of the Joke, Pun, Limerick, and Control Groups on the Pretest

This bar chart elucidates the fact that the differences among the four advanced groups on the vocabulary pretest were not substantial.

#### Posttest results

The results obtained upon the administration of the posttest are presented in this section. Table 8 shows the descriptive statistics for the comparison of the four advanced groups on the posttest.

Table 8. Descriptive Statistics for Comparing the Advanced Joke, Pun, Limerick, and Control Groups' Vocabulary Posttest Scores

|                | N  | Mean  | Std. Deviation | Std. Error | 95% Confidence Interval for Mean |             | Minimum | Maximum |
|----------------|----|-------|----------------|------------|----------------------------------|-------------|---------|---------|
|                |    |       |                |            | Lower Bound                      | Upper Bound |         |         |
| Joke Group     | 14 | 24.92 | 1.14           | .30        | 24.26                            | 25.58       | 22.00   | 27.00   |
| Pun Group      | 14 | 23.00 | 1.61           | .43        | 22.06                            | 23.93       | 19.00   | 25.00   |
| Limerick Group | 17 | 22.94 | 1.24           | .30        | 22.29                            | 23.58       | 20.00   | 26.00   |
| Control Group  | 15 | 20.20 | 1.89           | .48        | 19.14                            | 21.25       | 17.00   | 27.00   |
| Total          | 60 | 22.73 | 2.22           | .28        | 22.15                            | 23.30       | 17.00   | 27.00   |

Based on Table 8, the mean scores of the joke group ( $M = 24.92$ ), pun group ( $M = 23.00$ ), limerick group ( $M = 22.94$ ), and control group ( $M = 20.20$ ) were different from each other. To find out whether the differences among these mean scores were of statistical significance or not, one should look down the *Sig.* column Table 9 below.

Table 9. Results of One-Way ANOVA for Comparing the Advanced Joke, Pun, Limerick, and Control Groups' Vocabulary Posttest Scores

|                | Sum of Squares | <i>df</i> | Mean Square | <i>F</i> | <i>Sig.</i> |
|----------------|----------------|-----------|-------------|----------|-------------|
| Between Groups | 165.46         | 3         | 55.15       | 24.46    | .000        |
| Within Groups  | 126.27         | 56        | 2.25        |          |             |
| Total          | 291.73         | 59        |             |          |             |

As could be seen in Table 9, there was a statistically significant difference in posttest vocabulary scores for joke group ( $M = 24.92$ ,  $SD = 1.14$ ), pun group ( $M = 23.00$ ,  $SD = 1.61$ ), limerick group ( $M = 22.94$ ,  $SD = 1.24$ ), and control group ( $M = 20.20$ ,  $SD = 1.89$ ) of advanced learners since as the  $p$  value under the *Sig.* column was less than the specified level of significance (i.e.  $.000 < .05$ ). Like what was the case for the intermediate learners, it could thus be inferred that the experiment engendered significant changes in the advanced learners' vocabulary knowledge. To find out where exactly the differences among the groups lie, the Scheffe post hoc test table should be looked at.

Table 10. Results of the Scheffe Post Hoc Test for Comparing the Advanced Joke, Pun, Limerick, and Control Groups' Vocabulary Posttest Scores

| Groups         |                | Mean Difference | <i>Std.</i> Error | <i>Sig.</i> | 95% Confidence Interval |             |
|----------------|----------------|-----------------|-------------------|-------------|-------------------------|-------------|
|                |                |                 |                   |             | Lower Bound             | Upper Bound |
| Joke Group     | Pun Group      | 1.92*           | .56               | .014        | .29                     | 3.56        |
|                | Limerick Group | 1.98*           | .54               | .007        | .42                     | 3.54        |
|                | Control Group  | 4.72*           | .55               | .000        | 3.12                    | 6.33        |
|                |                |                 |                   |             |                         |             |
| Pun Group      | Joke Group     | -1.92*          | .56               | .014        | -3.56                   | -.29        |
|                | Limerick Group | .05             | .54               | 1.00        | -1.50                   | 1.62        |
|                | Control Group  | 2.80*           | .55               | .000        | 1.19                    | 4.40        |
|                |                |                 |                   |             |                         |             |
| Limerick Group | Joke Group     | -1.98*          | .54               | .007        | -3.54                   | -.42        |
|                | Pun Group      | -.05            | .54               | 1.00        | -1.62                   | 1.50        |
|                | Control Group  | 2.74*           | .53               | .000        | 1.20                    | 4.27        |
| Control Group  | Joke Group     | -4.72*          | .55               | .000        | -6.33                   | -3.12       |
|                | Pun Group      | -2.80*          | .55               | .000        | -4.40                   | -1.19       |
|                | Limerick Group | -2.74*          | .53               | .000        | -4.27                   | -1.20       |
|                |                |                 |                   |             |                         |             |

In the top row, it could be seen that Joke group was significantly different from the other groups. This means that using jokes in class had the most contribution to the learners' learning vocabulary. On the other hand, in the bottom row, the difference between the control group on the one hand and the three experimental groups on the other were statistically meaningful. This would mean that different types of humorous texts were effective in improving the intermediate learners' knowledge of vocabulary. In the case of advanced learners, the difference between pun and limerick groups did not reach statistical significance. The obtained results are also shown in the bar chart below.

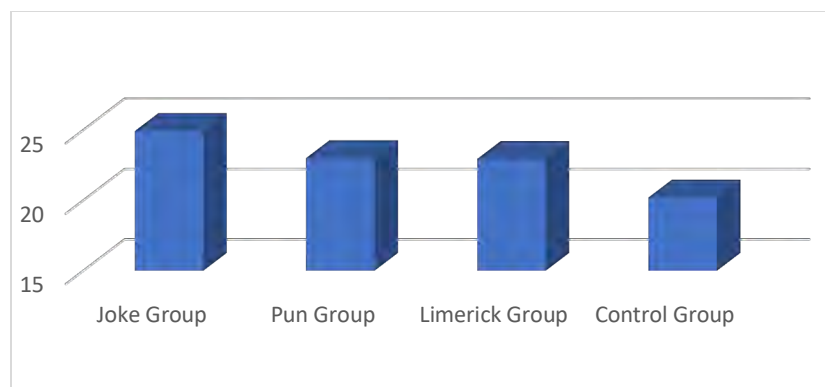


Figure 4. The Mean Scores of the Joke, Pun, Limerick, and Control Groups on the Posttest

It is clear that the three experimental groups of the study outperformed the control group, and that the difference between the pun and limerick groups was very minimal.

### Discussion

This study mainly explored the effects of different humor strategies on vocabulary improvement. A language teacher needs to know how to engage students in the learning process and humor is an effective tool to ensure this. This is because it develops and encourages creativity in the target language while helping to create an optimal learning environment (Muñoz-Basols, 2005). According to the results, it can be claimed that students prefer jokes than two other strategies utilized in this study. The results are consistent with Aria and Tracey (2003) who believed that students who studied vocabulary through humorous lessons performed better on achievement tests than those who did not.

The findings also showed that for both intermediate and advanced learners, the treatments were effective, and joke group at both proficiency levels outperformed pun and limerick groups. One could infer that different levels of proficiency did not matter since they could not drastically change the outcome of the study. In the same tune with the present study, Bell (2009) argues that proficiency does not play an important role in interpreting humor since students have adequate potential for making and enjoying different kinds of humor in any category. Therefore, humorous materials can be used with students in all levels of proficiency.

Based on the findings of this study, it can be suggested that not every context leads to vocabulary learning; therefore, teachers should dedicate some time to finding texts that are appealing to the learners. This aligns with what Paribakht and Wesche (1999) who contended that the nature of the written text significantly affects vocabulary-learning process. However, with regard to the use of humorous material in the classrooms, a word of caution is in order: care should be taken in selecting those humorous materials that are appropriate. As Wanzer et al. (2010) observed, negative humor results in the reduction of motivation and learning.

### Conclusion

As the results of the present study revealed, the participants in joke group outperformed the other three groups significantly. However, it should be mentioned that there was not a big difference between intermediate and advanced learners in terms of how they were affected by the treatments. The results of this study evinced that students prefer jokes compared to other two strategies. The reason behind this fact is may be because that they feel more comfortable with jokes than other strategies. Furthermore, the effect of jokes on improving their ability to

learn, and helping them to do their best is further than pun and limerick.

#### Implications of the study

Findings of this study have important instructional implications, especially for improving language instruction in the classroom. The humor-learning relationship, importance and effectiveness of humor are areas not only of instruction, but also of administration, that this study may inform. Positive humor-learning relationship could encourage L2 instructors and materials developers to develop instructional plans with more humor oriented teaching materials. To realize the benefits of humor, teacher education programs could also take into account incorporating the skills, strategies and methods for successful infusion of appropriate humor in teaching/learning processes via in-service courses and workshops. In this respect, instructors who use humor effectively can serve as role models and mentors. Additionally, students' strong tendency towards humor enactment in the classroom and support for the importance and effectiveness of instructor humor in their L2 learning can raise consciousness among language instructors of the opportunities that can be created by verbal humor to foster L2 acquisition/learning.

#### Declaration of conflicting interest

The authors state that there is no conflict of interest concerning the publication of this paper.

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