

# Using humour in EFL classes

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Humour is often used in different social situations including as a mechanism to break the ice when meeting a new acquaintance, for easing tensions in unfamiliar social situations, to defuse a social faux pas, and for maintaining social relations. Unfortunately, these are social strategies that are often neglected by course books and English language instruction in general. This study assumes that the aforementioned situations are valid reasons to teach and use humour in English classes. However, prior to using jokes as a subject of research enquiry, it was considered prudent to look at humour from a more pedagogical perspective. Subsequently, this pilot study aimed to measure any increases in student vocabulary acquisition and changes in students' language awareness. Data from first-year students in two universities were used, and it was found that there were measurable gains in student vocabulary and language awareness, suggesting further and more rigorous research is warranted.

ユーモアは、初対面での座を打ち解けさせ、馴染みの薄い社交場で緊張を和らげるなど、様々な社会的関係を維持するために、社交上の非礼を取り除くメカニズムとして、多くの社会的な状況下で用いられる。あいにく、一般の教科書や英語教育全般において、余り関心を向けられていない。当研究は英語の授業においてユーモアを教えたり、使用することの妥当性を仮定している。しかしながら、ジョークを研究課題として用いるに当たり、ユーモアをより基本的な立場から慎重に検討している。当プロジェクトは試験的ではあるが、学生の語彙習得の向上と言語に対する認識の変化を測定することを目的としている。2大学の一年生から得たデータより、学生の語彙及び言語に対する認識の向上がある程度見られたが、さらに厳密な研究の余地があると考えられる。

**T**HERE IS a dearth of studies on using humour to assist in language acquisition. Humour is a social lubricant, and it can defuse difficult situations in social or vocational settings. Using humour in class hopefully gives students an opportunity to explore the humour related aspects of the target language. The advantages for using humour include for improving student motivation and class participation; however, little is known about its use in language acquisition. This pilot study examined the two pedagogical uses of humour: for efficient vocabulary acquisition and for developing communicative knowledge and competence.

## Using emotions as a doorway for learning

Very few people remember where they were and what they were doing on any random date in the past decade. In contrast, most people remember where they were, what they were doing, and possibly what they were holding in their hands the moment they learnt of the 11th



September, 2001 attacks on the New York Twin Tower buildings. This is because events that have strong emotional tags are more easily remembered (Rimmele, Davachi, Petrov, Dougal, & Phelps, 2011; Talarico & Rubin, 2003). All sensory information is firstly processed through the amygdalae (Restack, 2006), two small parts of the brain that govern our initial emotional responses to environmental stimuli. The amygdalae tags all information they process with a kind of emotional tag, so that information can be acted upon immediately, forgotten, or stored more permanently (Restack, 2006). Since emotions assist in the formation of long-term memories (Rimmele et al., 2011), they should be deemed exploitable for language acquisition, to which emotions like humour may be used to assist vocabulary and linguistic knowledge acquisition.

## Vocabulary

Since authentic riddles and jokes were used in this study, vocabulary was not graded, which necessitated the need for an in-situ glossary suggested by Newton (2001). It was assumed that if students were habitually presented with such a glossary they would be sensitised to the need to be familiar with the items it contained. It was observed that students initially paid only a cursory glance at the vocabulary items, then in later weeks they paid particular attention to the glossary, and occasionally some students made notes of particular vocabulary items.

Additionally, it was assumed that students would try to remember their favourite jokes, which would necessitate remembering the specific vocabulary. To test vocabulary acquisition, a pre-test and post-test was given to measure student awareness of target vocabulary items. This posed successive problems. Firstly, what form should the test be in? Secondly, if two or more types of vocabulary tests were to be trialled, there is also the long standing problem of reliability in vocabulary estimation (Goulden, Nation, & Read, 1990).

Commercial on-line yes/no vocabulary tests (e.g., [www.wordengine.jp](http://www.wordengine.jp)) appear to be relatively easy to administer. These tests simply ask, "Do you know this word? 'Square'." Knowing one sense of a word does not mean its homophones are also known (Goulden et al, 1990). One riddle that was included used the word *square*, but not in the sense of a shape with four sides. The joke was, "What kind of dance do hippies hate? A square dance." Here, for comprehension, the listener needs to know, among other aspects of the riddle, two senses of the word *square*, the type of dance and a kind of person. Harrington and Carey (2009) found that such tests can be reliable predictors of language level and proficiency, though as demonstrated above, yes/no questions may not be sensitive enough for the needs of this project. This necessitated a second type of test. We arbitrarily chose a "choose the most correct sentence" type of test, where the choices included: a) He is a square, b) They square very often, c) Neither [are correct], and d.) Don't know. Here, if the word "square" is known only in the sense of a shape, then students should choose the Neither option. It was expected that in the post-test the number of correct responses to the square question in the multiple-choice test would increase, suggesting that a second sense of the word *square* had been acquired by some students.

## Cross-cultural competence and reasoning

It is impossible to teach students all aspects required for cross-cultural communication competence. Furthermore, Japanese junior and senior high schools students are not taught cultural pluralism to assist in foreign language communication (Kubota, 2002). Consequently, Japanese university students need to acquire skills to navigate various linguistic (and social) situations. To do so, students need to develop their own thinking strategies. Once a message has been spoken, the words are perceived, and then the real pragmatic meaning needs to be found. For

instance, a person says on a cold snowy day, “Beautiful weather, isn’t it?”; students need to understand that the person may be using sarcasm. However, students need to have had practice in this kind of reasoning and need to be able to navigate humour which varies from culture to culture. The term *reasoning* was taken from Prabhu (1987) and his description of task types. Reasoning Gap activities are defined as “...involv[ing] deriving some new information from given information through processes of inference, deduction, practical reasoning, or a perception of relationships or patterns”, and “...involves comprehending and conveying information” (p. 46). Prabhu also adds that reasoning “...brings about a more sustained preoccupation with meaning than information transfer...” (p. 48). The description of the reasoning gap activity also describes the probable skills required for comprehending humour. Without such practice using and interpreting humour, students would probably struggle in actual social situations.

## Research questions

For this study, it was decided to test for these two changes in students:

1. If students’ vocabulary had increased
2. If students’ appreciation of humour increased

The first question could be tested for by measuring if there were an increase in specific vocabulary. The second question was decided on as an easy measure of students’ cross-cultural, linguistic, communicative competence.

## Methodology

### Participants

Classes in three universities in central Japan agreed to be involved. The authors were teachers of the classes and conducted

the activities and the pre- and post-tests. All participants were first year students, and were regarded as intermediate by their respective university administrations. Unfortunately, due to timetabling and examination needs, post-tests could not be conducted in Meijo University. The majors of study of the students are summarised in the table below.

**Table 1. Summarising participant students’ majors and place of study**

Mie University	Biological Resources (one class), and Technology (one class; 30 students in each class). 2nd Semester 2009 and 2010
Meijo University	Pharmacy (two classes, 27 and 28 students each). 2nd Semester 2009 only
Nagoya University of Foreign Studies	International Business and Contemporary Studies (two classes, 15 and 18 students each). 2nd Semester 2009 only

## Preparation

A list of 60 riddles was created and was randomly ordered. Riddles, rather than story-based jokes, were chosen because of their question-answer organisation making the structure more predictable, whilst allowing students to practice question structures. These riddles were numbered for ease of administration. These were placed into a two-columned table in a Word document (available from the lead author). The left side had the riddle (numbered), whilst the right had the bilingual (English and Japanese) in-situ glossary. These were prepared as cards that could be printed, cut out, and folded in half by teachers prior to classroom use. The in-situ glossary items were carefully chosen by the authors and revised extensively for translation accuracy.



## Data gathering: Pre-test and post-test

A pre-test and post-test was designed to judge the success of vocabulary acquisition. A sample of 24 vocabulary items from most of the first 30 glossaries was chosen. Two kinds of vocabulary tests were designed: a yes/no questionnaire and multiple-choice. Both vocabulary tests were piloted with students who were not involved in the study to confirm participants could easily understand the test design.

### Yes/No questionnaire

A yes/no questionnaire was included to determine viability of using the yes/no format as a quick means of assessing vocabulary in follow-up studies. Test items were designed to appear simply structured, as shown below:

13. Do you know this word? Y / N (circle)

Biscuit

Students who did this test finished much more quickly than students who did the multiple choice test.

### Multiple-choice test

Each multiple-choice question tested the same vocabulary as in the yes/no questionnaire. Each question had four components.

1. A grammatically and pragmatically possible sentence using the vocabulary item
2. Either a grammatically or pragmatically impossible sentence using the vocabulary item
3. A “neither” option

4. An “I don’t know” option.

Instructions were “Choose the most correct response for each set.” For instance:

- a. He swims crossly
- b. I’m very cross with him
- c. Neither (両方間違いい)
- d. Don’t know

Some questions included two false a and b options.

- a. He goes inventioning often
- b. I like to invention
- c. Neither (両方間違いい)
- d. Don’t know

This type of question was included to check honesty (that students complete the test earnestly) and validity, and for vocabulary confidence. It was predicted that options “c” and “d” would be chosen more accurately in post-tests. Students were randomly given either the true/false or the multiple-choice tests in both pre- and post-tests. Both pre-tests and post-tests were identical and were given as timetabling and class needs allowed. There were at least seven weeks (seven classes) that separated the pre- and post-tests. It was assumed that this temporal separation allowed the identical pre- and post-tests to be used without a learning effect influencing the post-test.

### Difficulty and humour

This was tested in a pre-test and post-test arrangement. On the first and final days of the presentation of riddles, students were asked to record difficulty and humour on a Likert scale (1 being *least* and 5 being *most*) for each riddle. This was done only for



the first 30 riddles with the first author, but with all 60 riddles with the second author.

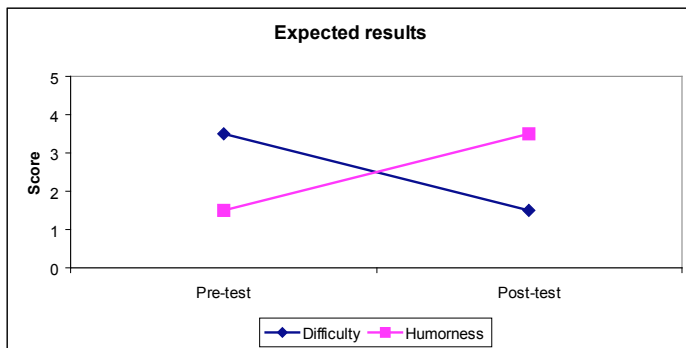


Figure 1. Display of expected change of difficulty and humour over time (Note: 1 is low, 5 is high)

### Qualitative notes

The first author kept a research journal, as advised by Dörnyei (2007), where incidents of interest were recorded. Such notes included the class' general response to the riddle presentations, as well as comments on students' responses to particular riddles. Qualitative observations were considered important, especially to assist in grading riddles for use in future pedagogy and future research.

### Presentation and practice

After the pre-test was administered, the riddle-telling activity was conducted. These activities were done in most lessons in the second semester of 2009 and were repeated with new classes in the second semester of 2010. The first author used only riddles numbered 1-30 and recycled these, so students had the opportunity to encounter the same riddle several times; whilst

in 2009 the second author at Mie University used 15 riddles a week for four weeks (riddles 1-60), students did not encounter any riddles more than once. However, the second author used riddles 1-15 in 2010 and recycled these for several presentations.

In Meijo and NUFs universities, and Mie University in 2010, riddle cards were distributed, one per student, then the activity was demonstrated. The activity was done in pairs, where one student (the riddle teller) held up the card showing the glossary to his or her partner (riddle recipient), whilst the riddle on the opposite side was viewable only to the cardholder (the riddle teller). The riddle recipient then nodded once he or she was familiarised with the vocabulary. The riddle teller told the riddle, without the riddle receiver being able to see it, which forced the riddle recipient to listen closely. The riddle teller told the question and paused. The recipient was told that they would normally reply with "I don't know," to which the teller would complete the riddle. Once the riddle had been told and understood, the riddle recipient then held up his or her card and the process was repeated. They then exchanged riddle cards and then went looking for a new partner. This allowed for circulation and engagement with a variety of riddles.

Often, in a 10-minute segment of a lesson, each riddle would exchange hands about five times. In a class of 20 students, over the course of seven weeks, this meant that each riddle was likely to be encountered by each student more than once. It was assumed that it would be beneficial if some students re-encountered the same riddle a few times, as they might not remember the outcome of the riddle, and more importantly students might be re-familiarised with the vocabulary. It was expected that there would be some difficulty with some riddles such as "What is red and goes up and down? A tomato in an elevator." Such riddles needed to be explained to the pair of students when they requested help from the teacher. After exchanging riddle cards, the new riddle teller with the problematic riddle was then encouraged to explain the riddle and help the new recipient if they failed to comprehend it.

In Mie University in 2009, students were presented with 15 riddles each week for four lessons. The riddles were listed on a sheet of paper and distributed to pairs of students. Students were expected to read each riddle in turn, together, and were encouraged to discuss with each other any possible difficulties in comprehension.

## Results

### Vocabulary

Figure 2, below, shows that for the yes/no tests in Mie and NUFs universities there was an increase (more than 5%) in post-test average scores, suggesting significant and positive changes in vocabulary knowledge. However, in the Mie University 2009 cohort, it was found that there appeared to be no change in vocabulary knowledge between pre- and post- multiple-choice tests. Note that these students had all 60 riddles presented, with only one presentation of each riddle and no recycling. In contrast, students at Meijo and NUFs, where only the same 30 riddles were used, recycled, and randomly distributed over the trial period, has shown an increase in vocabulary knowledge of more than 5% in post test scores.

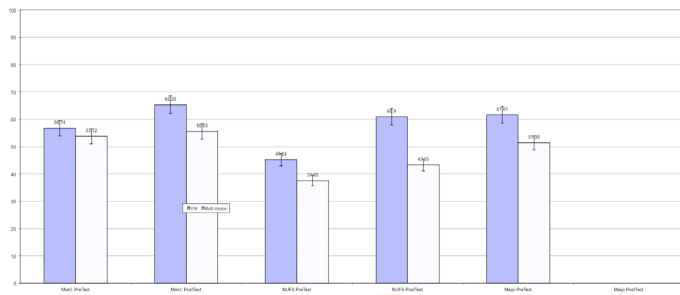


Figure 2. Percentage averages for pre- and post-test results for vocabulary for 2009 only (Note: error bars are set at  $\pm 5\%$ )

## Vocabulary confidence

As expected, students showed an increase in vocabulary confidence. In a post-hoc analysis of responses at NUFs on “Choose the most correct sentence,” the percentage of “Don’t know” responses (the fourth option) was 32%, which decreased to 15% in the post-test as shown in Figure 3 below. Interestingly, the change in 2009 at Mie University was not as great, where the change was from 27% to 22%, but still significant at 5%.

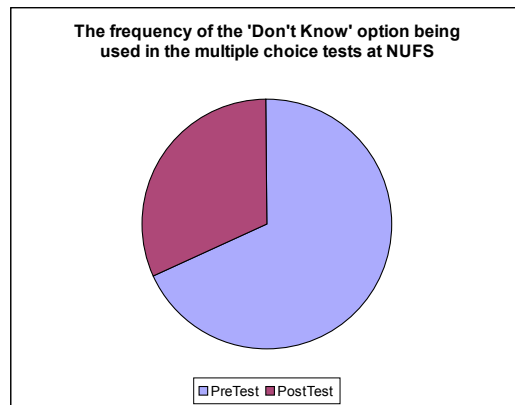


Figure 3. Change in students’ vocabulary confidence at NUFs, in percent average (32% pre-test, and 15% post-test)

## Difficulty and humour

Figure 1 above shows expected results for difficulty and humour, where over time as difficulty of interpreting the riddles decreases, humour increases. Testing only the first 30 riddles at NUFs found that there was a positive change in humour appreciation, though not as striking as expected. It was found

that the humour and difficulty became equal, though if riddles were used for more than seven lessons there may be an expected crossing over of lines as shown in Figure 1. Figure 5 below, the results from Mie University in 2009, shows lines that are near to parallel, which are not the expected results. This may be because students encountered new jokes every week and there was no recycling of riddles, and so students did not get a chance to become familiar with the riddles. In 2010, the first 15 riddles were used and recycled over several weeks at Mie University, and the results were similar to the 2009 NUFFS results (see Figures 4 and 6), confirming the validity of the data obtained in 2009, whilst suggesting that familiarization is important.

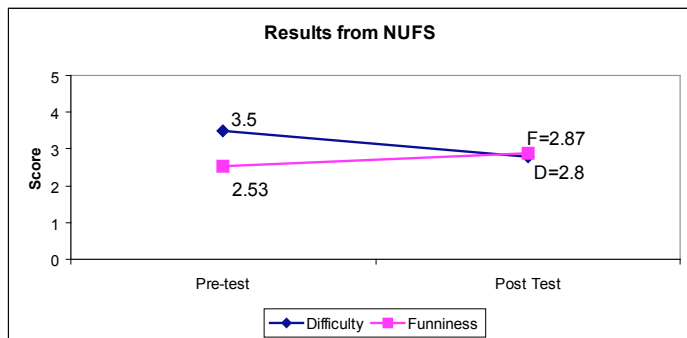


Figure 4. Results of averages of scores of difficulty and humour at NUFFS in 2009

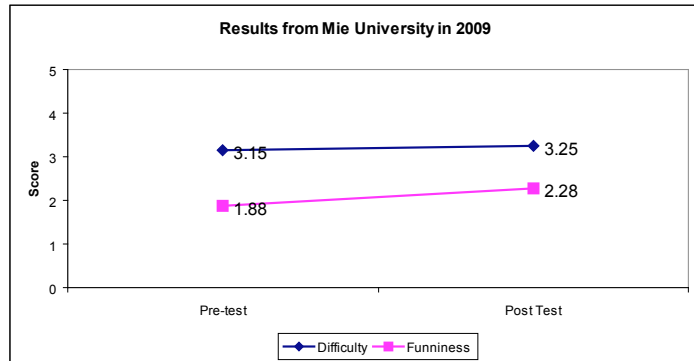


Figure 5. Results of averages of scores of difficulty and humour at Mie University in 2009 (Note: 1 is low, 5 is high)

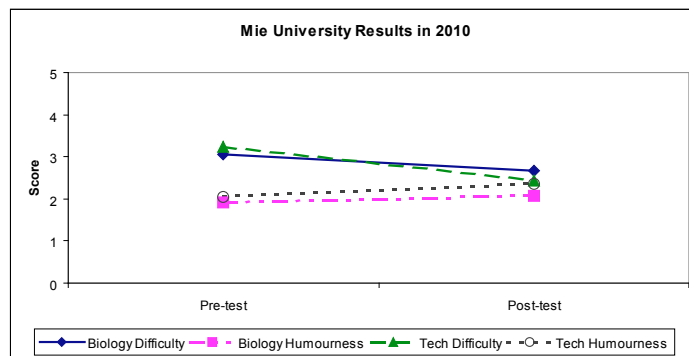


Figure 6. Results of difficulty and humour at Mie University (Biology and Technology majors separated) in 2010 (Note: 1 is low, 5 is high)



**Table 2. Difficulty and humour average scores for Mie University, 2010, as summarised in figure 6, above**

	Biology		Technology	
	<i>Difficulty</i>	<i>Humour</i>	<i>Difficulty</i>	<i>Humour</i>
<b>Pre-test</b>	3.05	1.92	3.25	2.04
<b>Post-test</b>	2.67	2.06	2.44	2.35

## Classifying riddles

If humour could be classified into categories, where categories could be ranked from easier to more difficult to interpret, then each new riddle added to the collection could be reliably added to a level-appropriate group without the need to test and collect data. To classify riddles, arbitrary categories were made and statistical comparisons were done using difficulty and humour results. In the first attempt at forming groups, riddles were organized into five groups. However, these groups showed no significant differences, so in the second attempt some riddles were reorganised and expanded into ten categories, adding groups VI to X as shown in Table 3.

**Table 3. Second attempt of categorising riddles, with average scores for difficulty and humour of pre- and post-tests at Mie University**

Group	Name	Difficulty	Humour
I	Homonyms	2.6	3.2
II	Paronomasia	3.9	1.6
III	Synonyms	3.3	2.4
IV	Phonetic similarity	3.2	1.9
V	Obvious answers	3.0	3.3
VI	Colours	3.9	2.6

Group	Name	Difficulty	Humour
VII	(Lexical difficulty)*		
VIII	Problematic question structure	3.2	1.0
IX	Background cultural knowledge required	3.3	2.6
X	Taboo**	1.0	4.0

\* This group was later merged with other groups

\*\*Represented by one joke

Our second attempt showed paronomasia, synonyms, and problematic structures were difficult. On the other hand, no particular riddle-group was exceptionally humorous except for the taboo group, which was represented by only one riddle: "What is the definition of an idiot? George Bush." Consequently, these first categorisation attempts failed, so a different premise or construct for forming riddle groups is required in the future. Also, some groups had only three or four riddles included, which made it difficult to have any confidence in the representative data for those categories.

## Discussion and conclusion

### Listening and pronunciation opportunities

The riddle telling activity, where students had to speak and listen, proved to be a welcomed opportunity for many students to practice listening to vocabulary and to practice pronunciation. Some riddles posed a problem for the listener, as for some riddles the listener needed to reconstitute the sounds into a different form, for instance, "What did the baker give to his wife? A quiche on the cheek." This requires the listener to decipher "quiche" to "kiss," whilst the speaker needed to pronounce quiche as accurately as possible. Students had problems pronouncing words like quiche, tear (verb) and tear (noun), trousers, monkey, Ayers (Rock), idiot, among others, which



needed to be pre-taught or on-the-spot assistance provided by the teacher as needed.

### **Vocabulary**

As shown in Figures 2 and 3, students' vocabulary and vocabulary confidence appeared to improve, though external and contributing factors cannot be completely ruled out. However, due to the specific vocabulary used in the vocabulary tests, and the time between pre- and post-tests, it is unlikely that the results are attributable to test-learning effects or other external factors. For instance, at NUFS, one student indicated the correct answer ("He is a square") in the pre-test, yet five students chose the correct option in the post-test. Similar results occurred with "bark" ("The dog barks loudly", compared to the outer part of trees; four in pre-test to eight in post-test), and "cross" (compared to anger and a shape; three in pre-test to five in post-test), among other examples. Therefore, it appears there was a gain in vocabulary knowledge as a result of these riddle-telling activities.

As mentioned above, another aspect of this pilot study was to determine the usefulness of the yes/no and multiple-choice tests for follow-up studies. There appears to be a significant difference between these tests, especially as the yes/no test appears to give an inflated positive result when compared to the multiple-choice test, inline with the claim made by Goulden, Nation, and Read (1990). Whilst the yes/no test is quicker and easier to administer, the benefits over that of the multiple-choice test for the purposes of this study are perhaps negligible, though the change in confidence, as shown in figure 3, from the multiple-choice test data, is valuable.

### **Difficulty and humour**

It appears that, if given enough time, the difficulty of interpreting riddles should continue to lessen, and appreciation of humour

in these riddles increase, and so gaining familiarity of riddle structures and vocabulary is important. Consequently, recycling the riddles is needed. This is supported by Hay (2001, cited in Bell 2007), who claims students' appreciation of jokes is increased with repetition, so students' partial understanding becomes clearer in time. Furthermore, in most cases, riddles that seem to be culturally similar are easily enjoyed, for instance, "What number is bigger when it is upside-down? The number 6."

### **Qualitative review**

During the teaching phase, students in Meijo and NUFS universities were observed and some of their interactions were recorded, particularly for their response to some riddles. Riddles such as "What is red and goes up and down? A tomato in an elevator" were problematic. These kinds of riddles were assumed to not be understood by Japanese students. The inclusion of these riddles led to the realisation that these are perhaps sentimental to native speakers, as they were funny to them as children, due to the unexpected nature of the answer, and lingering attachment to these remained in adulthood. However, Japanese students do not share the same sentimental history. Some students asked "A tomato? Why not an apple?" Other, similar riddles were also met with similar responses. Such riddles are not shared among Japanese children in the Japanese language; consequently, young Japanese adults did not appreciate these riddles.

In another riddle, "Where were potatoes first found? In the ground," proved problematic for other reasons. The phrase, "Where were ... first found?" might be uttered in school for eliciting facts, for homework assignments, and trivia. The answer is most often factual (e.g., "In the Andes, in 1536, by the Span- ish"). However, in the instance of the potato riddle, the humour assumes that the listener is expecting a trivial fact rather than a commonly known one. Because Japanese students were not



primed for this, the answer “In the ground,” was perhaps underwhelming. Interestingly, for some students, once this background information (as explained above) was provided, they exclaimed “*wakata*” (Japanese for “I get it”); students were then enthusiastic to share this riddle with their next partner. These moments could be considered important, especially as they bring the student closer to the native language *speech community*, a concept put forward by Sapir (1929, cited in Lukes, 2008, p. 7).

There were other similar situations with “What’s the latest invention that allows you to see through walls? A window,” and “What job is easy to stick to? A job in a glue factory.” With experience from other riddles, however, some students were able to understand and enjoy these, even if it was their first encounter with them. However, surprisingly, “glue” was not a word that many of our students were familiar with. This was unexpected, and so glue needs to be included in the glossary in the future.

During the practice sessions, it became clear that Difficulty and Humour did not encompass another important aspect of using riddles, so in the future, students should be asked if they *liked* the riddle. From a sociolinguistic standpoint, humour is important as a social lubricant. Consequently, we remember our favourite jokes and repeat them when needed. Jokes and riddles that are most liked are perhaps the easiest to remember. Therefore, we should remove riddles that are not as liked by the students, and provide them with more that are of greater interest. This, in turn, is expected to enhance students’ interest in English lessons overall and lessen the staid aspects of language lessons.

There are a number of notable points to consider from this pilot study. It has to be noted that this study was used to inform the design and focus of more rigorous follow-up projects. Future research can focus on improvements in students’ listening as a result of focusing on a specific linguistic outcome. More rigorous study on the changes in student motivation should

also be considered, as Sakai and Kikuchi (2009) attribute boring teaching methodologies as a cause of demotivation of Japanese high school students. Related to this, a study of students’ interest and engagement in English lessons as a result of using humour should also be considered in addition to a focus on which jokes and riddles are most appreciated by Japanese students. Of course, more rigorous studies on vocabulary acquisition should be done as well as studies investigating students’ ability to reason and interpret sentences beyond face value and across cultural or speech community divides.

Whilst jokes and riddles are potentially of high pedagogical value, they are still relatively little understood, so this is potentially fertile ground for future ELT research. There is some evidence that jokes and riddles can increase vocabulary acquisition. As the difficulty of jokes decreases, conversely, the appreciation of the humour increases over time. Jokes and riddles appear to maintain students’ interest, and can potentially foster enjoyment of English in an exam-oriented context; however, much more research is required.

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## Bio data

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