

On the Pragmatics of Humour in Language Teaching

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ABSTRACT

While humour is recognised as an influential resource in language teaching, systematic discourse-based research on how humorous actions shape interactional dynamics in multilingual classrooms—and how teachers respond to humour in students’ heritage languages—remains limited. This study addresses this gap through a qualitative corpus-pragmatic analysis of thirty-three ApaEK corpus transcripts from German L2 classrooms. In addition, ten supplementary interviews with students and teachers were analysed to contextualise and enrich the corpus findings. Using Goffman’s frame analysis and conversation analysis, humorous actions were identified through iterative coding that triangulated semantic incongruity, laughter annotations, sequential positioning, and contextual transcript notes. The analysis shows that irony, playful teasing, and sarcasm were the most frequent humour types observed. Humorous actions often functioned as frame disruptions that prompted teacher reframing efforts such as rule impositions or prohibitions. Humour in students’ heritage languages was disproportionately likely to elicit corrective responses, although the data provide no evidence that such humour was intentionally disruptive. Teachers’ reactions were frequently influenced by comprehension gaps or stereotype-based insecurity rather than student intent. The study operationalises humour competence as the ability to recognise frame disruptions, interpret interlocutor intent, and respond constructively across L1 and L2 contexts. Limitations include the absence of audio/ video data and the qualitative scope of the sample. The inclusion of the ten interviews enhances triangulation but remains limited in number, highlighting the exploratory nature of the findings. Future research should incorporate multimodal corpora and evaluate training interventions to foster humour competence. By clarifying interactional patterns,

teacher responses, and institutional implications, this study enhances empirical understanding of humour’s role in multilingual German L2 education and informs teacher development for more inclusive practice.

Keywords: Frame analysis, humour, language teaching, multilingual classrooms, pragmatics

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received: 30 December 2025

Published: 06 March 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47836/pp.2.1.005>

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INTRODUCTION

Humour constitutes a multifaceted communicative resource capable of shaping classroom dynamics, particularly in language learning contexts, as it engages both linguistic and socio-pragmatic competencies. Although the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001) does not provide an extensive discussion of humour, it explicitly mentions humour in chapters 4 and 5 in connection with socio-pragmatic competences. This indicates that humorous communication is recognised as a facet of pragmatic skill, suggesting its potential to engage students, reduce anxiety, and foster a supportive learning environment.

Despite these potential benefits, the deployment of humour in language teaching presents notable challenges. Humour is inherently subjective, with its interpretation heavily influenced by cultural and individual factors. In multilingual classrooms, where students and teachers come from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, the potential for humour to be misunderstood or to cause unintended disruptions is particularly high.

Moreover, empirical research on humour in language classrooms remains limited, especially in multilingual contexts. Existing studies have rarely examined how cultural and linguistic diversity influences students' reception of humour, leaving a critical gap in our understanding of its pragmatic use and its impact on classroom interactions in L2 settings.

This study investigates the pragmatic dimensions of humour in the context of teaching German as a Second Language (L2). It seeks to understand how humour is utilised within the classroom, how it affects interactions between teachers and students, and what challenges it presents in a multilingual educational environment. By focusing on the use of humour in language teaching, this research aims to contribute to the broader understanding of how linguistic and cultural diversity shapes classroom interactions and how teachers can effectively manage these dynamics to support learning.

RELATED LITERATURE

The role of humour in communication has been a subject of interest across various disciplines, including linguistics, sociology, and education. According to Kotthoff (1998), humour serves as a critical tool for social interaction, helping to establish rapport, diffuse tension, and convey complex ideas in an accessible manner. In the context of language teaching, humour has been identified as a valuable resource for engaging students, facilitating comprehension, and creating a positive classroom environment (Belyaev, 2022). However, perspectives differ: while Belyaev highlights its benefits, Thielemann (2008) cautions that humour can be problematic when cultural interpretations diverge. This contrast underscores the need to examine under which conditions humour supports learning and when it may cause disruption, particularly in multilingual classrooms.

The multimodal nature of humour, which often involves verbal, non-verbal, and contextual cues, adds to its complexity, making it both a powerful and potentially

problematic tool in the classroom (Mondada & Schmitt, 2010). Recent literature further emphasises that humour functions differently depending on socio-cultural and linguistic contexts, suggesting that monolingual-focused studies may overlook challenges specific to multilingual classrooms (Attardo, 2020; Bell, 2009; Dynel, 2009; Ziyaeemehr & Kumar, 2014).

Humour's interpretation is highly context-dependent, influenced by cultural norms, individual experiences, and the specific social dynamics of the classroom (Belyaev, 2022). In multilingual classrooms, students' and teachers' cultural backgrounds may differ considerably, affecting what is perceived as humorous (Dynel, 2009; Thielemann, 2008). Goffman's (1971, 2008) concept of frame analysis provides a framework to understand these dynamics: by examining how participants "frame" classroom situations, researchers can see why humour that aligns with one participant's expectations may disrupt another's, especially in culturally diverse settings.

Previous studies have highlighted the dual role of humour in educational settings: it can enhance engagement and learning but also has the potential to create disruptions, particularly when there is a mismatch between the teacher's and students' perceptions of what is humorous (Kotthoff, 1998; Thielemann, 2008). However, existing research rarely examines humour in multilingual classrooms from a pragmatic or corpus-analytic perspective, nor does it sufficiently explore how teachers manage humorous interactions in practice. This identifies a clear research gap: while general benefits and risks of humour are known, the interactional management of humour in multilingual L2 classrooms remains underexplored.

This study builds on these insights by applying a pragmatic and corpus-analytic approach to investigate humour in the context of German L2 instruction, with a particular focus on how humorous interactions are managed in multilingual classrooms.

METHODS

This study employs a corpus-pragmatic approach, utilising Goffman's frame analysis directly (Goffman, 1971, 2008) as the theoretical framework, with Tark (2024) providing guidance on the practical implementation of frame-analytic coding and his concept of image to analyse the role of humour in classroom interactions. The ApaeK corpus, which consists of transcripts from German L2 classrooms, serves as the primary data source. The corpus includes several dozen transcripts, which were randomly selected from different grade levels and years of data collection within the corpus to ensure transparency and a varied representation of classroom interactions. Examples were also gathered from interviews conducted with students learning German as a second language, who shared their experiences. These interviews were collected independently from the corpus and were analysed systematically alongside the corpus data to contextualise findings. Furthermore,

additional data was obtained through field research in primary schools, collected via observations and narrative interviews with teachers. Field observations were conducted over multiple classroom sessions and recorded via field notes, while interviews were semi-structured and conducted in German. All qualitative data were systematically analysed rather than serving merely as illustrative anecdotes. The analysis focuses on identifying instances of humour, examining how these interactions influence the verbal actions of participants, and assessing the extent to which they align with or disrupt the instructional framework. Frame disruptions in the transcripts were identified following the procedure outlined by Tark (2024), coding for moments where humorous actions or remarks did not align with the prevailing instructional frame. All humour instances were coded individually by the author, evaluating verbal, non-verbal, and multimodal cues to determine whether the intended humorous meaning was recognised, negotiated, or misinterpreted.

The study pays particular attention to situations where students use their native languages to express humour. In multilingual classrooms, the use of non-German languages for humorous purposes can present unique challenges, potentially leading to frame disruptions. These disruptions occur when the intended meaning of a humorous action is not recognised or accepted by others in the classroom, leading to misunderstandings or conflicts. By analysing these instances, the study seeks to understand how teachers navigate the complexities of humour in a multilingual setting and what strategies they employ to maintain a positive and inclusive classroom environment. Ethical procedures were followed: consent obtained from participants, confidentiality maintained, and data anonymised.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the ApaeK corpus reveals that humour plays a complex role in German L2 classrooms, serving as both a pedagogical tool and a source of potential disruption. In many instances, humour was found to enhance classroom interactions, helping to create a more relaxed and engaging learning environment. For example, teachers often used humour to introduce new concepts, explain difficult points, or manage classroom behaviour. When humour was successfully integrated into the lesson, it appeared to facilitate learning by making the material more accessible and enjoyable for students. Across the 33 transcripts examined from the ApaeK corpus, humorous actions occurred on average 2–4 times per 45-minute lesson. These actions were always contextualised and framed, yet the frames were not necessarily identical to the instructional frame. Humour was triggered both by external factors (e.g., teacher interventions, ongoing lesson events) and internal group dynamics among students, independent of the teacher. The analysis shows that irony, playful teasing, and sarcasm were the most frequent humour types observed. Irony and sarcasm appeared almost exclusively in teachers' utterances, while irony and playful teasing were common among students' humorous actions.

However, the use of humour in multilingual classrooms also posed significant challenges. The analysis identified several instances where humorous actions led to frame disruptions, particularly when students used their native languages. In these cases, teachers often struggled to interpret the humour, sometimes perceiving it as a challenge to their authority or as a disruption to the flow of the lesson. Frame disruptions were identified when humorous utterances caused shifts in participation structure or required explicit negotiation of meaning. In several cases, students' humour in languages other than German led to moments of confusion or repair sequences, as described by Tark (2024) in relation to temporary shifts in interactional frames. Laughter was frequently observed as a response to such frame disruptions, especially when they resulted from verbal aggression or teasing among students.

Teachers and interview participants often perceived these events differently: while laughter occurred naturally in the classroom, some teachers interpreted it as a sign of verbal aggression when students used their L1. This discrepancy highlights the difference between perceived and actual manifestations of humour in the multilingual classroom. These disruptions were particularly pronounced in situations where there was a cultural mismatch between the teacher's and students' perceptions of what constituted appropriate humour.

Despite these challenges, the findings suggest that with appropriate strategies, teachers can effectively manage humour in the classroom to enhance learning and foster an inclusive environment. One key strategy identified in the study was the development of humour competence, which involves the ability to recognise and appropriately respond to humorous actions, even when they are expressed in a language or cultural context different from one's own. In this study, humour competence is understood as the teacher's pragmatic ability to interpret, adapt, and integrate humorous actions into the instructional frame without losing pedagogical focus (Kotthoff, 2006; Thielemann, 2017). Teachers who demonstrated higher humour competence were able to reframe student humour productively, either by linking it to the lesson content or by translating it into a shared linguistic code. This reflects a form of meta-pragmatic awareness that supports inclusive participation and maintains interactional balance (Bell, 2009; Kotthoff, 2003; Walker 2021). Teachers who demonstrated a high level of humour competence were more successful in using humour to support their instructional goals and in maintaining positive classroom dynamics.

These findings confirm that humour in L2 classrooms operates as a multifunctional communicative practice rather than a binary phenomenon. It can simultaneously foster engagement, regulate participation, and challenge classroom hierarchies (Dyner, 2009; Tark, 2024). The analysis further underscores that the effectiveness of humour depends on the shared interpretive resources of teachers and learners—what Goffman terms the alignment of frames.

While these findings offer valuable insights into the pragmatic and interactional functions of humour, certain limitations must be acknowledged. As this study draws on the ApaeK corpus and a limited number of classroom observations, the findings represent specific communicative constellations and cannot be generalised to all L2 learning contexts. The analysis was qualitative and based primarily on transcribed verbal interactions; non-verbal and paralinguistic aspects of humour were not systematically captured. Future research could extend this approach through multimodal analysis, incorporating video data to explore gestures, facial expressions, and prosody as additional carriers of humorous meaning.

CONCLUSION

Humour is a double-edged sword in language teaching, particularly in multilingual classrooms. While it has the potential to enhance engagement, facilitate learning, and create a positive classroom atmosphere, it also carries the risk of causing misunderstandings and disruptions. Drawing on the ApaeK corpus, this study demonstrates that humorous actions are an integral part of classroom interaction, with both teachers and students contributing to their occurrence. Yet, humour in L2 classrooms emerges as a dynamic and context-dependent resource rather than a uniformly positive or negative phenomenon.

The analysis revealed that humour can lead to frame disruptions, especially when it involves students' native languages or culturally divergent forms of irony and teasing. This study highlights the importance of developing humour competence among teachers, enabling them to navigate the complexities of humour in a way that supports their instructional objectives and promotes an inclusive learning environment. These findings directly address the study's guiding questions concerning how humour manifests in L2 classrooms and how teachers manage its pedagogical and interactional challenges.

In theoretical terms, the study extends frame-based approaches to classroom discourse (Tark, 2024; Goffman, 1974) by illustrating how humour can temporarily shift participation frameworks and how such shifts are negotiated in multilingual contexts. This perspective contributes to a more nuanced understanding of humour as a communicative strategy that simultaneously supports learning and indexes social relations (Bell, 2009; Kotthoff, 2006; Thielemann, 2017; Walker 2021; Ziyacemehr & Kumar, 2014).

By understanding and effectively managing the use of humour, teachers can harness its benefits while minimising its potential downsides, ultimately contributing to more effective and enjoyable language learning experiences. For teacher education, these findings underscore the need to cultivate humour competence through reflective practice and intercultural awareness. Training modules could include the analysis of authentic classroom interactions, discussions of cross-cultural humour norms, and role-play scenarios that involve humorous breakdowns. Such approaches would enable future teachers to develop

conscious sensitivity to humour's pragmatic and cultural dimensions in linguistically diverse settings.

While humour cannot be fully controlled or standardised, it can be more consciously understood and pedagogically integrated. Future research should explore how different types of humour such as self-irony, linguistic play, or peer teasing interacts with language proficiency, group dynamics, and teacher identity in multilingual classrooms.

Finally, it must be acknowledged that the findings of this study are limited by the nature of the data. The analysis is based primarily on transcribed verbal interactions from the ApaeK corpus and a small number of classroom observations; consequently, multimodal dimensions of humour such as gestures, facial expressions, and prosody could not be systematically analysed. Moreover, as the data reflect specific school contexts and classroom constellations, the results cannot be generalised to all L2 teaching situations. These limitations, however, point to promising directions for future research that integrates multimodal and comparative perspectives.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The author would like to thank all participants involved in the project and in the data collection process and expresses gratitude to the ApaeK – Archive for Pedagogical Casuistry team for granting access to data from their corpus.

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