

Original Research

Scaffolding Humor Comprehension Through Pause-and-Discuss in Indonesian EFL Classrooms

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the effectiveness of a *pause-and-discuss* approach in integrating stand-up comedy into English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction. This qualitative case study utilized twenty-six undergraduates from an English class at an Indonesian university. Data comprised a Likert-scale survey, open-ended written reflections, and classroom discussions. Survey responses were summarized using descriptive statistics, and the qualitative data were thematically coded based on Saldana's (2016), with triangulation across sources. Results indicate that while learners initially experienced difficulties in processing humor due to idiomatic language, rapid delivery, and cultural references, the *pause-and-discuss* strategy enabled them to scaffold comprehension collaboratively, improve vocabulary retention, and enhance pragmatic awareness. Exposure to authentic stand-up performances developed learners' intercultural competence, allowing them to compare cultural perspectives and negotiate meaning beyond textbook learning. While previous studies on humor pedagogy in EFL context have provided descriptive account without cross-source validation, this research fills that gap through a triangulated design validating the pedagogy, whereas existing studies offer descriptive accounts without cross-source checks. Broader implications suggest that humor can be deliberately integrated into curriculum design and that teacher training programs should include preparation for scaffolding humor in EFL contexts, making classrooms more engaging, culturally responsive, and learner-centered.

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1. Introduction

Humor is a powerful yet often underutilized pedagogical tool in second language (L2) instruction. Empirical work links humor to higher motivation, reduced anxiety, and stronger engagement, yet it remains rarely implemented in many English as a Foreign Language (EFL) curricula due to its perceived difficulty and cultural specificity (Tianli et al., 2024; Purwanti et al., 2024). For English language learners, especially those from non-Western cultural backgrounds, understanding humor in English poses significant challenges. Jokes often rely on wordplay, idiomatic expressions, cultural references, and context-bound social norms that are difficult to grasp without deep cultural immersion (Heidari-Shahreza, 2024). Consequently, learners may disengage from authentic English content such as stand-up comedy, missing out on an opportunity to develop not only linguistic competence but also cultural literacy.

Humor comprehension is defined as the learner's ability to catch what makes a line funny, including recognizing the unusual turn, seeing how it resolves, and following the delivery cues such as pauses, intonation, and tone that signal when the joke lands (Zhou & Lee, 2025). This ability is particularly relevant

in Indonesia and Southeast Asia, where English instruction remains largely textbook-driven and examination-oriented, limiting exposure to fast discourse. As humor comprehension involves managing incongruity, competing meanings, and delivery cues, Indonesian EFL learners often struggle with authentic stand-up, underscoring the need for explicit, scaffolded instruction rather than incidental exposure (Tianli et al., 2024).

Several researchers have called for more research into how humor can be explicitly taught and assessed in L2 classrooms. Prichard et al. (2025) advocate for structured convergence tasks where learners learn to respond with humor themselves to enhance pragmatic affiliation and comprehension. Meanwhile, Mai (2024) highlights that learners perceive instructional humor as beneficial to both their emotional well-being and cognitive processing, noting improvements in focus, memory, and classroom rapport. However, research specifically centered on Southeast Asian learners remains sparse. The few existing studies often use unstructured humor or visual comedy, bypassing the verbal and cultural intricacies of stand-up routines. As humor deeply intertwines with identity and social bonding, the absence of structured humor instruction may limit learners' communicative competence in real-world contexts (Prichard et al., 2025; Mai, 2024).

This study addresses these gaps by investigating the effectiveness of *pause-and-discuss* technique in using American stand-up comedy, specifically Brad Upton's *"I'm Not Done Yet"*, as a tool for teaching humor comprehension to undergraduate Indonesian EFL students. It introduces a bit-by-bit discussion method, in which comedy segments are paused and analyzed collaboratively during class sessions so that cultural references can be scaffolded, meanings negotiated, and delivery cues inspected in real time. The novelty lies in formalizing a replicable pause-and-discuss protocol for authentic stand-up and validating it with triangulated evidence, whereas prior classroom work typically relies on decontextualized jokes, riddles, or cartoons and reports mainly motivational outcomes without cross-source corroboration (Peng, 2025; Weisi & Mohammadi, 2023; Joudi & Ayoub, 2024; Jiang & Qin, 2023; Elezović, 2022; Sarkar & Siraj, 2022; Mansfield, 2014; Savina, 2023). Positioning stand-up as a discourse genre also provides a concise bridge between authenticity and intercultural pragmatics, enabling learners to practice culturally situated inference rather than benefitting only from humor's affective effects.

Within an Indonesian undergraduate EFL context, the study identifies difficulties learners face with humor comprehension and intercultural pragmatic inference; examines how the pause-and-discuss routine supports collaborative scaffolding, vocabulary growth, and pragmatic awareness; and documents affective conditions, such as psychological safety and willingness to participate that facilitate uptake. These aims structure the Results (themes supported by descriptive statistics) and the Discussion (mechanisms, classroom implications, and relevance for EFL programs in Southeast Asia).

2. Literature Review

Humor in language learning has long intrigued researchers due to its psychological, social, and pedagogical benefits. However, integrating culturally dense genre humor like American stand-up comedy remains hard to integrate in EFL classroom. The field is anchored in semantic and pragmatic theories. Raskin's (1985) *Script-Based Semantic Theory of Humor* (SSTH) posits that humor arises when two opposing scripts are evoked within the same context. A listener must resolve the incongruity between these scripts to perceive the humor. Building on this, Attardo's (2017) *General Theory of Verbal Humor* (GTVH) expands the analysis to include knowledge resources such as script opposition, logical mechanisms, situations, targets, narrative strategies, and language. These frameworks suggest that humor comprehension involves complex cognitive processing: requiring listeners to navigate linguistic structure, context, and shared cultural understanding simultaneously.

Understanding humor, therefore, is not merely a matter of vocabulary or grammar but a multi-layered cognitive act. As Gerwin (2025) emphasizes, conversational humor also includes subtleties of delivery, tone, and timing, features that are difficult to convey or decode in a second language. In the context of stand-up comedy, which often thrives on rapid delivery and implied meanings, these complexities are further magnified.

2.1 Humor in the L2 Classroom

Recent work converges on two broad trends. First, humor is treated as an affective and cognitive support in L2 learning. Alsakaker (2025) demonstrates that using humor to teach speaking skills significantly reduces speaking anxiety among EFL learners, creating a more comfortable environment that encourages

participation and reduces learners' fear of making mistakes. Zheng (2023) shows that humorous content is processed more quickly, rated as more engaging, and recalled more effectively, suggesting its value in long-term retention. Second, the field is increasingly attentive to cross-cultural pragmatics. Persistent difficulties with conversational implicature and culture-bound meanings are documented as major barriers to comprehension and participation (Wang, 2024), and stand-up comedy, with dense local references and rapid delivery sharpens these challenges.

The existing evidence base has clear strengths. It links humor to reduced anxiety and improved classroom climate, and it recognizes that humor comprehension is inseparable from pragmatic competence and prosodic literacy (Neff & Dewaele, 2023). It also begins to specify pedagogy, for example through Humor-Integrated Language Learning, which advocates structured scaffolds for accessing culture-bound content (Heidari-Shahreza, 2024), and through tasks that cultivate humorous convergence as a pragmatic skill (Prichard et al., 2025). At the same time, limitations are evident. Many studies still report perceptions rather than demonstrated learning; learners' success often hinges on pre-existing rapport or shared background knowledge (Neff & Dewaele, 2023); and the theoretical requirement for access to culture-specific "scripts" (Raskin, 1985) is acknowledged more often than operationalized in classroom routines. Research on Southeast Asian learners, including Indonesian EFL students, remains comparatively sparse, and verbal, performance-based genres such as stand-up are underused relative to simplified or visual humor.

These patterns expose several gaps. There is a lack of replicable, classroom-ready procedures that show how students should process authentic humorous discourse step by step, especially in fast, culturally dense stand-up. Instruments that capture gains in humor comprehension and intercultural pragmatic inference across proficiency levels are limited, and studies rarely triangulate outcomes beyond self-report. Context matters: Indonesian learners may handle grammar and reading yet still miss sociopolitical references and delivery cues that carry the joke, suggesting a need for scaffolds that slow the discourse, surface cultural assumptions, and direct attention to timing, intonation, and stance. These gaps establish the need for research that treats humor comprehension as a teachable skill, not an incidental by-product of exposure.

2.2 Stand-Up Comedy as Authentic Material

The use of authentic materials in language instruction has gained widespread support in communicative language teaching (CLT). Authentic materials expose learners to real-life language use, encourage critical thinking, and improve listening skills (Dja'far, 2022). Among various authentic resources, stand-up comedy is unique in that it combines colloquial language, storytelling, prosody, and cultural insight; all are delivered in a live performance setting.

Despite its rich linguistic and cultural content, stand-up comedy is rarely used in EFL classrooms. Many instructors avoid it, preferring simpler, visual humor or scripted dialogues. As Bell and Pomerantz (2015) note, when verbal humor is included, it often lacks pedagogical structure, leaving learners confused and discouraged. This hesitation, while understandable, limits students' exposure to authentic language and hinders the development of sociopragmatic skills needed for intercultural communication. Brad Upton's *I'm Not Done Yet* illustrates cultural stereotypes, generational humor, and anecdotal storytelling. When such material is segmented and analyzed, learners can grasp not only literal meaning but also cultural scripts and comedic techniques.

2.3 Pedagogical Strategies for Teaching Humor

Effective humor instruction requires deliberate scaffolding and learner-centered approaches. Recent scholarship highlights strategies such as pre-teaching key vocabulary, using multimodal supports, pausing for discussion, and encouraging learner reflection. These methods ensure that learners process humor cognitively and culturally rather than responding only at the surface emotional level (Savina, 2023; Pomerantz & Bell, 2007).

Contemporary research also underscores that guided reflection is central to humor-based instruction. In applied contexts, reflective activities around humor have been shown to deepen engagement with complex content and improve long-term retention (Cai & Zhao, 2023; Dewaele et al., 2017). Similarly, dialogic teaching practices such as "pause-and-explain" and collaborative unpacking of jokes have been used to scaffold understanding while maintaining a supportive environment (Ladilova & Schröder, 2022; Bell & Pomerantz, 2015).

Building on this literature, the present study extends these practices into *pause-and-discuss* routine in which a comedy set is segmented into “bits”, each paused for guided prompts, peer negotiation of meaning, and brief reflective consolidation. This procedure is intended to move humor from passive entertainment into active learning, allowing students to acquire both linguistic input and cultural knowledge in an interactive setting. Motivating the evaluation design, Askildson (2005) notes that students are more likely to engage with humor-based materials if they perceive them as beneficial to their language development. In this regard, combining structured analysis with reflective surveys can provide insight into how students experience and internalize humor comprehension strategies. A dual-method assessment, using Likert-scale surveys and open-ended reflections, enables educators to capture both the measurable outcomes and nuanced learner experiences. Lems (2011) recommend integrating both types of feedback to inform curriculum design and ensure that humor instruction remains accessible, meaningful, and pedagogically sound.

3. Method

This study employed a qualitative research design, which is well-suited for exploring learner perceptions and experiences in authentic educational settings (Sandelowski, 2000; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2023). This design was chosen because it allows for an in-depth understanding of participants’ experiences with humor in EFL learning and provides rich and detailed insights into how humor comprehension occurs within a real-world context. The decision to use a qualitative approach was informed by the need to capture the nuanced and subjective experiences of students.

The theoretical grounding drew on Vygotsky’s (1978) sociocultural theory, which emphasizes scaffolding and peer collaboration in learning. Vygotsky’s framework supports the idea that learning is a social process, where interaction with more knowledgeable others facilitates cognitive development. Additionally, Krashen’s (1982) affective filter hypothesis, highlighting the role of reduced anxiety in facilitating second language input acquisition. Humor pedagogy was additionally framed through incongruity-resolution theory, which conceptualizes humor as a cognitive process of reconciling mismatched expectations (Savina, 2023).

The participants were recruited using purposive sampling, a non-probability method commonly employed in small-scale educational studies to ensure alignment between participants and research objectives (Etikan et al., 2016). The sample comprised 26 undergraduate intermediate EFL learners from an Indonesian university, selected because they shared comparable proficiency and were enrolled in a course emphasizing communicative English learning. Such purposive sampling ensured focused examination of humor comprehension within an authentic instructional context, consistent with similar humor-in-education studies (Weisi & Mohammadi, 2023; Joudi & Ayoub, 2024).

Data collection included two primary sources: (1) Likert-scale surveys which captured attitudinal data on humor’s role in language learning, and (2) open-ended written reflections which provided qualitative insights into learners’ experiences during *pause-and-discuss* stand-up comedy sessions. These methods were chosen to provide a comprehensive view of both learners’ attitudes and lived experiences with humor. The Likert-scale surveys allowed for statistical analysis of learners’ general perceptions, whereas the open-ended reflections provided a deeper and more personalized account of their thoughts and challenges.

The Likert-scale surveys focused on assessing students’ views on humor’s ability to reduce anxiety, enhance engagement, and facilitate language learning. The data collected from the surveys were analyzed descriptively, providing frequency distributions that allowed us to capture overall trends in attitudes toward humor in language learning.

The open-ended reflections provided richer qualitative data on how learners navigated humor comprehension in the context of stand-up comedy. These reflections were analyzed using thematic coding, following Saldaña’s (2025) iterative coding cycles. The first-cycle involved descriptive coding, where initial codes were assigned based on recurring themes such as linguistic barriers, affective benefits, and intercultural insights. The second cycle used thematic clustering, where similar codes were grouped into broader categories. This allowed for an in-depth understanding of the cognitive, affective, and cultural dimensions of humor comprehension.

To ensure the validity and reliability of the findings, triangulation was employed by cross-referencing data from the Likert-scale surveys and open-ended reflections. This method allowed for a more robust understanding of the learners’ experiences by combining quantitative and qualitative data, thus reducing the

risk of bias from any one data source. Triangulation across qualitative sources enhanced validity, ensuring that findings were not reliant on a single instrument (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2023). This methodological transparency strengthens replicability and aligns with best practices in applied linguistics research where authenticity, rigor, and learner-centered perspectives are prioritized (Elezović, 2022; Weisi & Mohammadi, 2023).

The students were enrolled in a course titled “Casual Conversation,” which is designed to develop spontaneous speaking and listening skills using authentic and context-rich materials. Consent was obtained from all students, and participation in the research component was voluntary and anonymous. The primary instructional material was the stand-up comedy special *I’m Not Done Yet* by Brad Upton. This performance was selected for its accessible language, clean humor, and inclusion of culturally relevant topics like generational differences and everyday situations. The routine was segmented into shorter “bits” of approximately 1–2 minutes each, enabling detailed focus on specific jokes, expressions, and cultural references. This segmentation allowed for in-depth examination of specific jokes, expressions, and cultural references, making it easier for students to engage with the material.

Following Lems’ (2011) recommendations for teaching humor in L2 settings, each segment was played in class and paused immediately afterward. Students were asked to explain the context and identify why the audience laughed. If a student could not provide an explanation, peers were encouraged to contribute or discuss possible interpretations collaboratively. When needed, the instructor provided scaffolding through vocabulary clarification, cultural explanations, and guided questioning. This pause-and-discuss method, aligned with Nguyen’s (2016) dialogic teaching framework, which emphasizes reflection and joint negotiation of meaning, creating an interactive learning environment that fosters deeper engagement.

The instructional sessions were conducted over two 90-minute class meetings. During these sessions, each student interacted with at least three different comedy “bits.” Class discussions were audio-recorded with permission to support later analysis. To capture both perceptual and reflective responses, two types of data were collected post-instruction:

(1) Likert-scale survey (Part A): Students responded to 10 statements related to humor comprehension, teaching effectiveness, and perceived challenges, using a 5-point scale from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” This format followed the guidelines of Bell and Pomerantz (2015) for assessing student engagement and affective response in humor-based language instruction.

- 1) *Humor is a very important aspect of learning English.*
- 2) *English humor is very easy to understand.*
- 3) *I prefer English humor over Indonesian humor.*
- 4) *Vocabulary is a major factor in understanding English humor.*
- 5) *Listening skill is a major factor in understanding English humor.*
- 6) *Grammar mastery is important to understand English humor.*
- 7) *I understood all the jokes in the English stand-up video.*
- 8) *I enjoy learning English that involves humor.*
- 9) *Cultural factors influence whether a comedy is perceived as funny.*
- 10) *Understanding humor in English requires high English proficiency.*

(2) Open-ended questionnaire (Part B): Students answered five reflective questions, each requiring approximately 100 words. These prompts explored specific challenges, cultural misunderstandings, emotional responses, and perceived long-term value of learning humor in English.

- 1) *Explain the specific challenges you faced while trying to understand English-language stand-up comedy during last week's session.*
- 2) *Was there any part that made the studio audience laugh, but you personally did not find funny? Why do you think that was?*

- 3) *When it was your turn to answer the lecturer's question and explain the humor in the stand-up clip, how did you feel?*
- 4) *Do you think the discussion and explanation techniques used by the lecturer were effective in helping you learn about humor in English? Why or why not?*
- 5) *In the future, do you believe that the ability to understand and produce humor in English will be useful in your life? Why?*

Likert-scale data were analyzed descriptively to identify trends in students' perceptions of humor in language learning. Open-ended responses and classroom interaction transcripts were subjected to thematic analysis using Saldaña (2016) coding framework, which provided a systematic approach for identifying and clustering recurring patterns. These emergent themes were then interpreted to capture the cognitive, emotional, and cultural dimensions of students' humor comprehension processes offering a nuanced understanding of how learners navigate and make sense of humor in EFL classrooms.

4. Results

This study investigated learners' general perceptions of humor in English language learning, with a focus on its perceived efficacy, as well as the linguistic and non-linguistic factors that support or hinder comprehension. Data from 26 undergraduate EFL learners were collected using Likert scale in which one refers to strongly disagree, 2 refers to disagree, 3 refers to agree, and 4 refers to strongly agree across ten items. No data were missing and all participants responded to all items. Items were coded positively, and no reverse-coded items were included.

Table 1. Perceptions, factors and efficacy trends based on Likert Scale recapitulation.

	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9	Q10
Strongly Agree (4)	8	0	1	19	19	5	0	6	17	5
Agree (3)	16	11	9	6	6	15	3	20	8	16
Disagree (2)	2	15	16	1	1	6	23	0	1	5
Strongly Disagree (1)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Average Index	3.23	2.42	2.42	3.69	3.69	2.96	2.12	3.23	3.62	3.00
Standard Deviation	0.58	0.50	0.57	0.54	0.54	0.66	0.32	0.43	0.57	0.63

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for all ten survey items. The results indicate that learners expressed strong agreement on items related to linguistic competence as key to understanding English humor. The statements *"Vocabulary is a major factor in understanding English humor"* and *"Listening skill is a major factor in understanding English humor"* both received the highest average ratings (3.69). These results highlight learners' belief that effective humor comprehension in a second language is strongly dependent on the ability to recognize and process vocabulary and auditory input.

In addition, grammar was also viewed as an important aspect, though with slightly more variation in responses. The statement *"Grammar mastery is important to understand English humor"* received a moderate average score of 2.96. While 15 respondents agreed, only five strongly agreed, and six disagreed. This suggests that grammar is acknowledged as relevant, but perhaps not as central as vocabulary and listening in learners' mental model of humor processing.

Beyond linguistic aspects, participants also recognized the role of broader communicative and cultural factors. The item *"Cultural factors influence whether a comedy is perceived as funny"* received an average score of 3.62, indicating a strong awareness that humor is shaped by cultural context and shared knowledge. This insight reflects a growing intercultural sensitivity among learners, particularly in response to content such as stand-up comedy, which often draws heavily on cultural references.

General attitudes toward humor in language learning were also positive. The statement *"Humor is a very important aspect of learning English"* achieved an average score of 3.23, while *"I enjoy learning English that involves humor"* scored 3.23 as well. These results suggest that learners perceive humor as both enjoyable and

beneficial in the learning process, supporting its use as a motivational and pedagogical tool. However, responses to some items reveal underlying challenges. Notably, the statements “*English humor is easy to understand*” and “*I prefer English humor over Indonesian humor*” each received the lowest average score of 2.42. This indicates that while students appreciate the presence of humor, they still find English humor difficult to interpret and less relatable than humor in their native language.

The greatest challenge was reflected in the statement “*I understood all the jokes in the English stand-up video,*” which received the lowest average of 2.12. A majority of learners disagreed, suggesting that humor delivered in fast-paced, authentic spoken formats remains difficult to decode, likely due to a combination of linguistic complexity and cultural unfamiliarity. Learners hold positive perceptions of humor in English language learning and recognize its pedagogical value. Vocabulary, listening, and grammar emerge as key linguistic enablers, while cultural understanding plays a significant non-linguistic role. However, the actual efficacy of humor comprehension is often limited by the complexity of real-world usage.

Overall, the quantitative results indicate that learners hold positive perceptions of humor in English language learning and acknowledge its pedagogical value, yet they also highlight persistent challenges in comprehension. Vocabulary, listening, and grammar emerge as the key linguistic enablers, while cultural understanding plays a significant non-linguistic role in facilitating humor interpretation. Despite favorable attitudes, the data suggest that the actual efficacy of humor comprehension remains constrained by the complexity and cultural embeddedness of real-world humorous discourse.

Analysis of 26 student reflections revealed nuanced experiences with understanding English-language stand-up comedy. Drawing from values coding, in vivo coding, and pattern coding, five primary themes emerged: comprehension challenges, emotional responses, metacognitive strategies, collaborative learning perceptions, and perceived future value. These qualitative findings deepen the quantitative patterns by showing how learners negotiate meaning, manage affective responses, and build strategies when engaging with authentic humor. Collectively, these results suggest that while humor promotes motivation and engagement, its instructional success depends on scaffolding that supports both linguistic decoding and intercultural understanding.

Table 2. Recapitulation of Thematic Codes

Category	Codes	Freq
Challenges	Cultural references	14
	Fast speech	12
	Unfamiliar vocabulary	12
	Accents	5
	Processing difficulty	5
Strategies	Guessing from context	9
	Using subtitles	5
	Rewatching / replaying	2
	Looking up cultural references	3
Participation & Collaboration	Class discussion	15
	Lecturer explanation / scaffolding	13
	Peer support	4
Perception of Method	Clear and effective structure	26
	Helped understand cultural context	13
	Encouraged participation	15
	General usefulness / confidence	21
Future Aspirations	Social fluency / networking	12
	Teaching role / classroom application	5
	Professional use / workplace	5

4.1 Challenges in Understanding Humor

One of the most prominent challenges students faced was deciphering humor that relied heavily on cultural referents and high-speed delivery. Many students expressed that even when the grammar or vocabulary seemed within their reach, the humor remained inaccessible due to culturally embedded content. ARR explained,

“The joke about Washington State University made the audience laugh, but I only guessed what made it funny because I’ve never encountered that reference before.” (P2, male, undergraduate EFL student).

Similarly, SNL noted,

“It sounded like a normal sentence. I didn’t realize ‘live nativity scene’ was a Christmas tradition in America.” (P6, female, undergraduate EFL student).

These responses align with the code cultural referent misalignment, reflecting how humor comprehension often depends on shared societal knowledge. In addition to cultural knowledge gaps, many students highlighted difficulty keeping up with the speed and phrasing of the stand-up material. TBP admitted,

“I missed several jokes because I didn’t understand the vocabulary, and the delivery was too fast.” (P1, male, undergraduate EFL student).

SHS similarly shared,

“The comedian spoke too fast, and I focused on catching the words instead of understanding the joke.” (P4, female, undergraduate EFL student).

This challenge was consistently coded under fast delivery and lexical overload, indicating that even when learners had basic proficiency, the rapid pace and colloquial style of humor added significant cognitive strain.

Accent and pronunciation were also obstacles for some. As WAA noted,

“The comedian had a different accent, and I couldn’t catch the punchline at all.” (P7, female, undergraduate EFL student).

These instances collectively highlight that humor comprehension in L2 contexts requires more than linguistic accuracy, it demands cultural fluency and advanced listening skills.

4.2 Emotional Response During Speaking Tasks

When tasked with explaining the humor aloud, many students reported feelings of anxiety, nervousness, and self-doubt. This emotional friction became a central theme and was coded as performance anxiety. TBP reflected,

“I felt nervous because I thought I missed the jokes. I couldn’t confidently explain the punchline.” (P1, male, undergraduate EFL student).

SHS expressed a similar sentiment:

“When it was my turn to speak, I was very nervous and couldn’t express myself fluently even though I understood the meaning.” (P4, female, undergraduate EFL student).

RO added,

“Even though I had the idea in mind, I got anxious and ended up explaining it awkwardly.” (P3, female, undergraduate EFL student).

These comments demonstrate how anxiety can inhibit oral performance, even when cognitive understanding is present. For many, the pressure to perform publicly in a foreign language overshadowed their actual grasp of the material. TM shared,

“My hands were shaking. Even when I knew the meaning, I was afraid to say it wrong.” (P8, female, undergraduate EFL student).

This finding reinforces the importance of recognizing affective filters in humor-based language instruction, where emotional readiness is as critical as cognitive competence.

4.3 Metacognitive and Strategic Learning Approaches

Despite the challenges, students employed various metacognitive strategies to enhance their understanding. These included replaying video clips, using subtitles, guessing from context, and independently researching cultural references. IHS commented,

“Only after replaying it a few times did I understand the joke.” (P5, male, undergraduate EFL student).

RA described,

“I went back to the part where the audience laughed to figure out what triggered it.” (P9, female, undergraduate EFL student).

These strategies were coded as rewatching and contextual guessing, revealing that students were aware of their comprehension gaps and took steps to address them. Subtitles were another key tool. WAA shared,

“Sometimes I didn’t get the joke from just listening, but when I read the subtitles, it became clearer.” (P7, female, undergraduate EFL student).

In a few cases, learners took their inquiry outside the classroom. SNL explained,

“I searched online about ‘live nativity scene’ to understand why it was funny.” (P6, female, undergraduate EFL student).

This action reflects cultural inquiry, an advanced metacognitive behavior where learners extend their learning beyond immediate instructional content.

Although such strategies were mentioned by a minority, their presence suggests a growing learner autonomy. These students weren’t passively waiting for meaning, they actively monitored their comprehension and adapted their strategies to recover meaning, hallmarks of self-regulated learning.

4.4 Perceptions of the Teaching Method

The majority of students responded positively to the segmented, pause-and-discuss approach employed during instruction. This technique, which involved watching short segments followed by group discussion and contextual explanation, was consistently coded as lecturer scaffolding and class discussion. TBP remarked,

“At first, I didn’t find the motion detector joke funny. But after the lecturer explained it, I understood and laughed.” (P1, male, undergraduate EFL student).

ARR echoed this, saying,

“The lecturer explained the context of each joke clearly. That’s when I realized this wasn’t slapstick, it was observational humor.” (P2, female, undergraduate EFL student).

Students also valued the social aspect of discussion. SHS shared,

“The class discussions made me feel less alone when I didn’t understand the joke. Everyone was confused together.” (P4, female, undergraduate EFL student).

IHS noted,

“The lecturer and friends both helped clarify jokes. Their input made me see things I had missed.” (P5, male, undergraduate EFL student).

These responses further highlight the value of collaboratively constructing meaning, where humor functions not only as a topic of analysis but also as a medium for peer connection and shared understanding. Many learners noted that this collective process strengthened their sense of community and deepened their comprehension of the material. Several participants also emphasized the benefit of the gradual, step-by-step pacing. As TM remarked,

“Breaking it down gradually helped me process the joke without getting overwhelmed.” (P8, female, undergraduate EFL student).

These reflections demonstrate that the instructional approach not only offered clear cognitive guidance but also fostered emotional reassurance. As a result, learners felt more confident and capable when engaging with complex material, allowing them to participate more actively and construct understanding with greater clarity.

4.5 Perceived Value of Humor for the Future

When asked whether humor competence in English would be useful in the future, students offered rich and aspirational responses. A significant number emphasized humor's social utility. TBP said,

"Humor helps build connections. It breaks the ice, especially when meeting new people." (P1, male, undergraduate EFL student).

RA noted,

"If I ever live abroad, this skill will help me seem more fun and approachable." (P9, female, undergraduate EFL student).

These comments were coded under social fluency and networking. Other students imagined using humor in professional contexts. TM stated,

"In presentations, humor makes the message stick. It grabs attention." (P8, female, undergraduate EFL student).

WAA added,

"Knowing how to make a joke in English makes you seem smart and relatable in the workplace." (P7, female, undergraduate EFL student).

These views reflect a growing awareness of humor as professional communication capital. Several participants envisioned humor as part of their future identity as teachers. IHS explained,

"I want to be the kind of teacher who creates a light atmosphere. Humor will help my students feel comfortable." (P5, male, undergraduate EFL student).

SHS agreed:

"Humor will help me engage students and make class more enjoyable." (P4, female, undergraduate EFL student).

These reflections align with the theme of teacher identity development, showing how learners begin to imagine themselves as future communicators who use humor pedagogically. Participants also mentioned humor's impact on self-confidence and social ease. RO wrote,

"Being able to laugh and make others laugh in English gives me more confidence in conversations." (P3, female, undergraduate EFL student).

These responses indicate that humor functions not only as a linguistic skill but also as a personal resource that shapes identity, fosters social connection, and supports authentic self-expression. In this sense, humor emerges as a meaningful communicative asset that influences how individuals present themselves and build relationships within learning interactions.

The findings portray a multifaceted learning process in which students navigate humor's linguistic, cultural, and emotional layers. Through scaffolded teaching, metacognitive strategies, and collaborative reflection, learners construct not only understanding but also confidence, competence, and future aspiration. Humor in the second-language classroom emerges as more than entertainment, it is a deeply human practice that builds bridges across cultures, enhances participation, and prepares learners for real-world interaction.

5. Discussion

The findings demonstrate that humor, while a valuable pedagogical tool, presents significant challenges for EFL learners, particularly those engaging with fast-paced, culturally specific content such as stand-up comedy. In response to the research question which explores the challenges in humor comprehension, several participants described difficulties arising from unfamiliar expressions, rapid delivery, and cultural references. It requires students to decode culturally embedded references, navigate pragmatic nuances, and process verbal delivery styles that may differ significantly from their native language experience. These challenges support [Bell and Pomerantz's \(2015\)](#) claim that humor understanding entails multiple levels of interpretation: semantic incongruity, cultural schemas, and discourse pragmatics.

However, while this theoretical framework provides a robust foundation for understanding humor in EFL contexts, it is important to note that its application and relevance have not been fully explored within the discussion of the current study's findings. Therefore, it is essential to explicitly highlight how the learners' struggles in decoding humor align with the theoretical constructs presented by [Bell and Pomerantz \(2015\)](#). Similar to their earlier research, the learners were not disengaged or inattentive. Instead, their challenges

arose from a lack of cultural familiarity, which prevented them from understanding the references, implications, and subtle meanings embedded in the comedic material. By establishing this connection between the theory and the study's results, the discussion provides a deeper understanding of the factors influencing humor comprehension.

One of the most prominent findings that emerged from the study was the significant barrier posed by culturally specific humor. A large proportion of the jokes in the comedy routines relied heavily on implicit knowledge of American institutions, social norms, historical events, and colloquial expressions. While these references were easily accessible to native speakers of English, they were largely inaccessible to language learners who lacked the necessary cultural context. This observation closely aligns with the conclusions drawn by [Such \(2021\)](#), who noted that English learners often struggle with complex vocabulary unless they have received explicit instruction that connects linguistic forms with their corresponding cultural and contextual meanings. The findings from this study thus provide further support for Such's assertions, highlighting how cultural references in humor can be an obstacle for second-language learners.

Moreover, while the study builds on the theoretical claims made by [Bell and Pomerantz \(2015\)](#), it also goes a step further by emphasizing that humor comprehension in the EFL context involves more than just cultural incongruity. The findings suggest that understanding humor in a second language also requires a deeper understanding of intercultural pragmatics. This perspective enriches the current literature on authentic audiovisual input, where learners are often faced with humor embedded within different cultural frameworks, making it even more challenging to comprehend. This study extends our understanding of how humor functions as a pedagogical tool in EFL instruction by incorporating the dimensions of intercultural pragmatics where learners are required not only to recognize the incongruity in humor but also to navigate the cultural and pragmatic elements of the delivery and timing, which are central to understanding jokes. The study of humor in this context, therefore, serves as a gateway for enhancing intercultural competence, as learners must develop the ability to interpret humor across cultural boundaries.

In focusing on pedagogical strategies for facilitating humor comprehension, the study examined the segmented instructional method. This approach which involved short video clips followed by reflection and group discussion, emerged as an effective scaffolding strategy to process meaning collaboratively. The findings show that pausing enabled cognitive processing time, while discussion facilitated shared interpretation and reduced anxiety. These results align with [Nguyen \(2016\)](#), who emphasizes this dialogic teaching method, emphasizing that guided interaction enhances learners' ability to understand complex linguistic material. Likewise, [Heidari-Shahreza \(2021\)](#) and [Bakar and Kumar \(2023\)](#) emphasize that scaffolded, culturally sensitive instruction not only facilitate collaborative exploration of humor but also strengthens classroom rapport where learners can feel empowered to engage with the complex content without having the fear of misunderstanding.

While cognitive and cultural comprehension can be supported through structured methods, emotional barriers, particularly performance anxiety, continue to hinder full learner engagement. Many students in the study expressed apprehension about explaining jokes publicly, even when they understood the content. This finding resonates with [Neff and Dewaele \(2021, 2023\)](#), who reported that affective factors such as anxiety, enjoyment, and self-confidence play a significant role in learners' responses to humor-based teaching. Although humor is often thought to reduce stress and encourage participation, it can have the opposite effect if learners feel socially exposed or fear being misunderstood ([Zhang, 2021](#); [Huang & Li, 2024](#)). More recent work also suggests that learners' emotional responses to humor are dynamic, evolving over time as classroom interactions and peer relations shape their comfort levels ([Savina, 2023](#); [Ladilova & Schröder, 2022](#)).

Recent scholarship has further acknowledged this tension, noting that humor can lower affective filters for some learners but increase anxiety for others, particularly in contexts requiring spontaneous oral performance ([Askildson, 2005](#); [Frymier & Wanzer, 2021](#)). In this study, some students reported physiological symptoms like trembling and stuttering, which aligns with recent findings that language anxiety is embodied and can manifest physically ([Zhang, 2021](#); [Huang & Li, 2024](#)). To mitigate these emotional barriers, it is recommended that humor can be introduced gradually, with participation and low-stakes activities designed to build confidence over time ([Savina, 2023](#); [Cai & Zhao, 2023](#)).

Regarding the learners' strategies and engagement, learners in this study employed metacognitive strategies such as rewatching segments, using subtitles, and researching unfamiliar cultural references. These

practices indicate that humor comprehension activates deeper cognitive processing (Bell & Pomerantz, 2015). Humor learning also emerged as a social and collaborative process, as class discussions and peer explanations helped learners co-construct meaning which is consistent with Reddington (2015) and Sulistyowati et al. (2024). This aligns with the pause-and-discuss method, grounded in Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, where scaffolding occurs through collaborative meaning and making during pauses (Vygotsky, 1978).

Additionally, humor was shown to enhance intercultural awareness, with students expressing interest in applying humor skills in their professional and social roles, supporting the argument that humor fosters pragmatic competence and cultural fluency (Savina, 2023; Naznean, 2024). The pause-and-discuss method thus proves to be more than a tool for comprehension as it becomes a multi-functional classroom strategy that not only aids understanding and vocabulary retention but also encourages confidence and intercultural learning which make it adaptable for various EFL contexts.

The *pause-and-discuss* method is grounded in several overlapping frameworks. From a sociocultural perspective, Vygotsky's (1978) *Zone of Proximal Development* (ZPD) highlights the importance of collaborative scaffolding, which was evident in this study as pauses provided processing time, whereas discussions served as scaffolding. Krashen's (1982) *Affective Filter Hypothesis* explains why pauses reduced anxiety, making learners feel relaxed and more willing to engage. Humor theory, particularly *Incongruity Theory*, suggests that pausing allows learners to cognitively process incongruities before they dissipate (Savina, 2023). Finally, constructivist learning theory underscores that knowledge construction through reflective dialogue, which was evident in learners' interactions during pauses.

The unique contribution of this study lies in the structured application of the pause-and-discuss method to a real-world, fast-paced humor source, American stand-up comedy. This approach, which incorporates both cognitive scaffolding and collaborative learning, is particularly relevant in the context of Indonesian EFL classrooms, where learners often struggle with the rapid pace and cultural specificity of authentic humor. Thus, the findings emphasize the importance of using authentic materials in EFL teaching and underscore the need for explicit instruction in decoding culturally embedded humor. While humor-based activities are often used to foster engagement, this study demonstrates that they can be systematically employed to teach humor comprehension as a skill requiring deliberate scaffolding and interaction.

Despite these compelling findings, the study is subject to several limitations that should be acknowledged. The sample size was relatively small and drawn from a single university context, which may limit generalizability. Furthermore, the instructional material, Brad Upton's stand-up performance, while accessible and pedagogically appropriate, represents only one comedic style rooted in American culture. Broader materials, including multicultural and multilingual humor sources, could yield richer comparative insights. Lastly, the study was limited in its time frame: it did not explore long-term retention or track changes in humor comprehension across semesters.

This study also highlights a gap in current research on the operationalization of humor comprehension in EFL settings, particularly with authentic materials. Most prior studies have focused on the motivational aspects of humor without examining how specific teaching methods can scaffold comprehension and cultural understanding. This study addresses that gap by presenting a replicable model of humor instruction, suggesting that humor comprehension can be actively taught and learned through structured, reflective, and collaborative approaches. As such, future research should focus on refining and testing the pause-and-discuss method across different educational contexts and learner groups. Additionally, longitudinal studies that track the long-term retention of humor comprehension and its role in intercultural pragmatics are needed to further substantiate the effectiveness of humor-based pedagogy.

6. Conclusion

This study contributes a replicable pause-and-discuss routine for teaching humor comprehension with authentic stand-up comedy. It demonstrates that this technique effectively enhances humor comprehension in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, particularly within an Indonesian undergraduate context. The approach offers a structured way to address the linguistic and cultural barriers that often hinder learners' understanding. It also carries important pedagogical implications by encouraging teachers to systematically integrate humor through authentic materials and by emphasizing the role of scaffolding and peer discussion in decoding culturally dense and rapid verbal humor. Furthermore, the study highlights the need for teacher education programs to train educators in using humor as a pedagogical tool, equipping

them with techniques to support comprehension and reduce affective barriers. Although the small sample size may limit the generalizability of the findings due to the specific cultural and educational setting, the study provides convincing evidence of the pause-and-discuss technique in facilitating humor comprehension. Future research should explore this approach across diverse cultural contexts and larger participant groups, as well as investigate long-term retention and the broader impact of humor-based instruction on language development.

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Appendix

A. Ten statements used in Likert Scale in Phase 1.

- 1) Humor is a very important aspect of learning English.
- 2) English humor is very easy to understand.
- 3) I prefer English humor over Indonesian humor.
- 4) Vocabulary is a major factor in understanding English humor.
- 5) Listening skill is a major factor in understanding English humor.
- 6) Grammar mastery is important to understand English humor.
- 7) I understood all the jokes in the English stand-up video.
- 8) I enjoy learning English that involves humor.
- 9) Cultural factors influence whether a comedy is perceived as funny.
- 10) Understanding humor in English requires high English proficiency.

B. Component Loadings of Statements

	RC1	RC2	RC3	RC4	RC5	Uniqueness
Q3	0.928					0.146
Q7	0.791					0.143
Q6	0.631	-0.432				0.208
Q2		0.942				0.131
Q1		0.649			0.471	0.171
Q8		0.445				0.164
Q4			0.912			0.152
Q10			0.878			0.153
Q9				1.004		0.102
Q5					0.990	0.107

Note. Applied rotation method is promax.

C. Five Open Questions in Phase 2.

- 1) Explain the specific challenges you faced while trying to understand English-language stand-up comedy during last week's session.
- 2) Was there any part that made the studio audience laugh, but you personally did not find funny? Why do you think that was?
- 3) When it was your turn to answer the lecturer's question and explain the humor in the stand-up clip, how did you feel?
- 4) Do you think the discussion and explanation techniques used by the lecturer were effective in helping you learn about humor in English? Why or why not?
- 5) In the future, do you believe that the ability to understand and produce humor in English will be useful in your life? Why?