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IRANIAN EFL STUDENTS' ENGAGEMENT, MOTIVATION, AND ATTITUDE TOWARDS TEACHERS' USE OF HUMOR

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Abstract
Although humor in language teaching has received limited scholarly attention, research has consistently highlighted its considerable benefits. It is widely believed that incorporating humor can foster positive attitudes toward learning English. This study aimed to explore the relationship between EFL students' engagement and motivation, and their perceptions of teachers' use of humor in language teaching. It also sought to examine the relationship between students' engagement in the classroom and their motivation to learn. The participants comprised 120 Iranian EFL students from various high schools in Kerman Province. To collect the required data, three questionnaires of course engagement, learning motivation, and students' attitudes toward teachers' use of humor were administered. Results of the Pearson product-moment correlation analyses revealed a significant association between course engagement and attitudes toward teachers' use of humor in the classroom. Moreover, a statistically significant correlation was observed between EFL students' motivation and attitudes toward teacher humor. Finally, a significant relationship was found between students' course engagement and their learning motivation. These findings suggest that humor can enhance EFL students' engagement and motivation, although its impact may vary depending on contextual and individual factors.

Keywords: learning motivation, students' attitude, students' course engagement, teachers' use of humor

Introduction
The incorporation of humor in teaching has long attracted scholarly attention, particularly for its influence on student engagement, motivation, and learning outcomes. This is especially critical in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, where humor can enhance motivation and reduce anxiety. Humor is a complex and interactive phenomenon that has been defined in various ways, and its common outcome, laughter, is often regarded as a relief for physical and psychological discomfort. However, defining humor in a single, universally accepted way remains challenging due to diverse forms, functions, and cultural interpretations. This complexity supports the view that humor is a multifaceted and

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context-dependent phenomenon. When applied appropriately in the classroom, humor can produce positive effects on language learning (Isagan et al., 2023). As Aaker and Bagdonas (2021) noted, laughter resulting from humor in class functions as a psychological remedy comparable to medicine. In other words, humor as a coping strategy promotes well-being by enabling individuals to re-evaluate negative situations (Erduran Tekin, 2024). Thus, reframing stressful learning experiences as nonthreatening through humor can mitigate anxiety and support classroom well-being.

Researchers (e.g., Bakar & Kumar, 2023; James & Fox, 2024; Zhou & Lee, 2025) have shown that teachers who incorporate humor into their lessons are often viewed more positively by their students. Consequently, it is not surprising that teachers with a sense of humor are more appreciated by both students and peers than their more serious counterparts. Teachers who appropriately use humor create a more enjoyable learning environment and strengthen their relationships with students, thereby enhancing teacher–student immediacy (Hussain et al., 2024). Recent research indicates that although humor is commonly used in classrooms, its effects on students' academic and psychosocial development are still underexplored, particularly among adolescents (Robinson et al., 2024; Vanderheiden, 2024). Although many theoretical claims link humor to reduced foreign language anxiety, empirical evidence remains limited on how teachers' humor contributes to classroom learning outcomes. Supporting this view, Gopikanta and Dash (2025) confirmed that teachers' use of humor positively influences student success, leading to higher academic achievement. While humor is often defined as something amusing that provokes laughter (Lovorn & Holaway, 2015) and is consequently dismissed as frivolous, it should be re-evaluated as a potent pedagogical tool. Beyond mere entertainment, humor enhances learning by offering psychological benefits like stress relief, fostering stronger teacher-student relationships, and promoting a deeper comprehension and retention of subject matter (Froehlich et al., 2021; Lei et al., 2010).

The pedagogical value of humor in educational settings has been well documented in the literature (e.g., Kumar, 2025; Zhou & Lee, 2025; Ziyaeemehr et al., 2011). Research suggests that humor can significantly improve enjoyment and engagement by increasing interest in learning activities (Erdoğdu & Çakıroğlu, 2021), foster positive attitudes linked to higher motivation and collaboration (Li et al., 2022), and, particularly in EFL contexts, contribute to greater student engagement and motivation (Mai, 2024). Furthermore, the benefits of humor have been observed across academic levels and disciplines, including student performance (Hackathorn et al., 2011), higher education (Harland, 2012), and undergraduate learning (Handelsman et al., 2005).

Despite the extensive body of literature, most previous research has focused primarily on students' general perceptions of humor, with less attention to its impact on broader learner-related variables such as motivation and engagement. A critical gap remains regarding the impact of students' attitudes toward teachers' use of humor and its influence on their motivation and engagement. Understanding the role of such attitudes is vital, as they are central to determining educational outcomes. Since the interplay among teacher humor, learner attitudes, motivation, and engagement in EFL classrooms has been insufficiently explored, the present study aims to examine the relationship between Iranian EFL students' attitudes

toward teachers' use of humor and their course engagement and language learning motivation. Specifically, it seeks to address the following research questions:

1. To what extent are EFL students' attitudes toward teachers' use of humor associated with their course engagement and learning motivation?
2. To what extent is EFL students' course engagement associated with their learning motivation?

Literature Review

Studies have demonstrated that making learning enjoyable enhances student's ability to notice, understand, and remember what they are taught in class. For example, Christman (2018) and Masek et al. (2018) investigated students' perception of humor and concluded that it increases students' interest in learning. However, these findings were largely based on self-reported data, which may differ from actual learning outcomes. Bakar (2020) distinguished between relevant humor which directly relates to course content, and irrelevant humor which does not. Although students and teachers usually regard humor as appropriate and stimulating, Bakar's (2020) study did not clarify whether relevant humor can lead to greater learning gains than irrelevant humor.

Beyond its cognitive effects, humor also produces physiological benefits. For instance, Tarvin (2019) found that humor can improve the immune system by reducing blood pressure and increasing happiness. Similarly, Haydon et al. (2023) reported that humor could reduce stress in learning situations, enhance critical thinking, and promote focused attention. Humor thus creates a more enjoyable learning experience, though its impact may vary according to individual differences and learners' humor perception. Recent studies have also shown that humor can decrease anxiety, increase student interest, and foster a more positive classroom environment. For instance, León-Pérez et al. (2021) demonstrated that humor-based instruction reduces stress and cultivates a more supportive atmosphere, reinforcing the view that humor plays a vital role in enhancing learning experiences. Moreover, humor positively influences classroom communication, helping students interact more comfortably (Kosiczky & Mullen, 2013).

Although several studies suggest that incorporating humor in the classroom can improve engagement and motivation, the evidence remains inconclusive. Berge and Anderhag (2025) pointed out that due to the complexity of the learning process and the spontaneous nature of humor, its effects on learning outcomes are not always consistent. Hence, while a teacher's sense of humor is undoubtedly a valuable pedagogical tool, its effectiveness must be interpreted with caution. Neff and Dewaele (2022) further emphasized that successful teachers cultivate a positive learning atmosphere using humor, but it should be seen as a means to support learning rather than an end in itself. Humor also plays a pivotal role in forming and sustaining positive teacher-student relationships by fostering a pleasant and collaborative atmosphere. Nesi (2012) observed that playful teacher-student banter and teachers' self-deprecating humor contribute to making the teacher appear more approachable and reduce students' boredom. He further highlighted that rapport between teachers and students is instrumental in creating a conducive learning environment. However, such practices may differ across cultures, particularly in settings where teacher authority is strongly emphasized, such as in many Asian and Middle Eastern classrooms. Similarly, Kardena (2020) argued that students'

engagement with the subject matter can significantly alleviate boredom during the learning process. Boredom, therefore, is a critical variable influencing motivation and engagement. Woo et al. (2019) confirmed that boredom strongly affects students' classroom motivation. To mitigate this, Cann and Cann (2013) suggested that humor is an effective strategy to spark enthusiasm and sustain attention, though it must be contextually appropriate since humor that motivates one group may confuse another, particularly in multicultural classrooms.

Across academic disciplines, humor has served several important educational functions. For example, in physics, Berge (2017) found that humor not only facilitated social interactions, but also helped establish a sense of community, maintaining students' attention and improving their learning experience. Several other studies also underscored humor positive influence on attention and comprehension (Qamar et al., 2025; Tait et al, 2015; Ziyaeemehr et al., 2011). Collectively, these findings highlight the numerous benefits of humor in education, particularly regarding student engagement and comprehension. Despite these advantages, however, research still lacks clarity on how teachers can use humor most effectively in classroom instruction. Balta (2023) reported that teachers generally hold positive attitudes toward humor and view it as an essential instructional tool, though its effectiveness depends on timing, relevance, and appropriateness. Similarly, Ziyaeemehr et al. (2011) identified the lack of teacher training in humor use as a major obstacle. Some educators, particularly in higher education, regard teaching as a serious endeavor, thereby avoiding humor in their pedagogical approach (Lei et al., 2010). Recognizing how teachers implement humor and how students perceive it as a learning tool remains a key challenge in educational research. Although scholars generally acknowledge the benefits of humor in teaching, its subjective and context-dependent nature makes it difficult to study empirically. Lovorn and Holaway (2015) outlined several challenges in researching humor in educational contexts. First, humor's subjectivity complicates generalization across learners and contexts. Second, its intangible nature has limited the scope of academic inquiry. Third, a "humor paradox" persists in education. while humor's benefits are widely recognized, integrating it effectively into teaching remains complex. The authors defined humor as a subjective construct lacking a universal definition, explaining the scarcity of empirical work in the field. Thus, understanding how to operationalize humor across cultural and educational contexts remains a central question for educators.

As humor in educational contexts is both subjective and relatively underexplored, a more thorough investigation of learners' personal attitudes may provide a more reliable understanding of its influence. Language learning success is shaped not only by cognitive and linguistic abilities but also by students' attitudes and perceptions toward the target language (Zhang & Xu, 2025). Several studies have explored how positive attitudes facilitate effective language learning, though findings are mixed. For example, Fakeye (2010) examined the relationship between students' attitudes toward English and their academic performance among 400 high school students and found a strong correlation between positive attitudes and achievement, with no gender differences. However, that study did not sufficiently consider instructional quality or contextual factors that may have affected attitudes. Similarly, Al Hloul et al. (2024) found that Jordanian males and females shared positive attitudes toward English learning across behavioral, emotional, and

cognitive dimensions, with no significant gender differences. Hashwani (2008) investigated learners' motivations and anxiety and revealed that while students reported positive attitudes and motivation, external factors such as future career prospects strongly influenced their learning drive. Although the study underscored the role of extrinsic motivators, it did not examine how these factors might affect sustained engagement when such motivations are absent.

While the relationship between humor and motivation appears promising, it remains insufficiently explored and warrants further empirical validation. Motivation, a complex psychological construct, has been conceptualized in multiple ways. This highlights that motivation is a multidimensional construct and achieving consistent findings in this domain is challengeable. Historically, researchers in second language acquisition moved beyond purely cognitive and social psychological theories that treated attitude as the sole driver of behavior. Later frameworks, such as those by Ushioda and Dörnyei (2012), emphasized motivation as a multidimensional process encompassing affective, cultural, and contextual factors. Despite encouraging findings showing that students enjoy English and view it as an essential life skill, previous studies overlooked how these positive attitudes differ across backgrounds, proficiency levels, or sociocultural settings. Moreover, the relationship between social and psychological variables in EFL education remains underexamined, emphasizing the need for broader, context-sensitive research to clarify how motivation, attitudes, and humor jointly influence language learning outcomes.

In summary, while humor, attitudes, and motivation play crucial roles in student engagement and academic achievement, the existing evidence remains fragmented and occasionally contradictory. Humor can reduce stress, build rapport, and enhance class engagement, yet its direct effect on measurable learning outcomes is still uncertain due to its subjective and culturally variable nature. Furthermore, most prior research has relied on self-reported data, overlooking the complex interplay of social, cultural, and psychological factors shaping language learning. This highlights the need for holistic, context-aware investigations, such as the present study, to deepen understanding of how humor influences motivation and engagement in EFL education.

Method

Research design

This study employed a quantitative correlational research design to examine the associations among EFL students' course engagement, learning motivation, and attitudes toward teachers' use of humor in the classroom. A correlational approach was chosen because it allows the exploration of natural relationships between variables without experimental manipulation. It is particularly suitable for investigating perceptual and attitudinal factors in educational settings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Specifically, the cross-sectional design enabled the researchers to collect self-reported data and determine the strength and direction of relationships among the target variables. Data were collected using validated questionnaires administered to high school EFL students. Pearson product–moment correlation analyses were conducted to test the hypotheses. This design provided valuable insights into how perceptions of humor influence learner outcomes while

addressing the ethical and practical limitations often present in classroom-based research.

Participants

The participants consisted of 120 EFL students enrolled in different high schools, including an equal number of male and female students (60 each). Their ages ranged from 16 to 18 years. The sample was obtained through intact group sampling, as the students were placed in existing classes following the same curriculum and using the same materials. This method was appropriate because it preserved the natural classroom setting and ensured representativeness of the sample. All participants had studied English for approximately two years and were native speakers of Persian.

For ethical considerations, each participant signed an informed consent form that clearly explained the study's aims and issues of confidentiality and anonymity. Permission was also obtained from the school principals to conduct the study. Participants were assured that their responses would remain confidential and used solely for research purposes.

Instruments

Three validated questionnaires were employed to collect data. First, Student Course Engagement Questionnaire (Handelsman et al., 2005) was used to assess the students' level of course engagement. This 20-item instrument measured the degree of student engagement using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("not typical of me") to 5 ("very typical of me"). The questionnaire was translated into Persian, and both its validity and reliability were evaluated. The Persian version achieved a reliability coefficient of 0.96, indicating high internal consistency. Two experienced English professors reviewed the translation to confirm its content validity and linguistic accuracy.

Second, the Learning Motivation Questionnaire (adapted from Gardner, 1985) was employed to assess students' levels of motivation towards language learning. This instrument comprised two sections. The first section collected demographic information (e.g., age, gender, first language), while the second section included 20 Likert-scale items designed to measure EFL students' motivation to learn English. The instrument demonstrated high reliability (α = 0.98). It was also translated into Persian to ensure accessibility and cultural appropriateness.

Third, a questionnaire measuring participants' attitudes toward teacher humor was administered, adapted from the instruments developed by Askildson (2005) and Morrison (2008). This 20-item instrument was translated into Persian, and its validity was confirmed by two expert English instructors. The reliability coefficient was 0.95, indicating high consistency. The translation process was rigorously reviewed to ensure semantic equivalence between the English and Persian versions.

Data collection procedure

Four intact classes, comprising a total of 120 EFL students, were selected for data collection. To prevent participant fatigue and ensure data accuracy, the process was organized over three consecutive days. On the first day, the researchers conducted an orientation session explaining the study's purpose and the procedure

for completing the questionnaires. The course engagement questionnaire was then distributed and completed by students under supervision. On the second day, the learning motivation questionnaire was administered following the same procedure. On the third day, students completed the attitude toward teachers' use of humor questionnaire.

All sessions were conducted during regular class hours to maintain ecological validity. Attendance was 100%, ensuring that the responses accurately represented the entire participant group. After data collection, all questionnaires were coded and tabulated for analysis. This systematic procedure ensured that the data were reliable, comprehensive, and suitable for subsequent statistical testing.

Data analysis

Data analysis involved several key steps, each designed to ensure thorough interpretation of the results. First, the questionnaires were reviewed for completeness, and incomplete responses were excluded to maintain data quality and accuracy (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013). Descriptive statistics were computed to summarize central tendencies (mean, median) and variability (standard deviation) for each variable. Frequency distributions were also generated to identify patterns in students' engagement, motivation, and attitudes toward humor (Field, 2018).

Next, Pearson correlation analyses were conducted to examine the relationships among the three main variables, students' engagement, motivation, and attitudes toward humor. The correlation coefficients indicated the strength and direction of these relationships, allowing the researchers to determine whether more positive attitudes toward humor were associated with higher motivation and engagement. The results from both descriptive and correlational analyses were interpreted to draw conclusions regarding the pedagogical implications of humor in EFL contexts

Findings and Discussion

Findings

The first research question examined the relationship between students' attitudes toward teacher humor and their levels of course engagement and motivation. A Pearson product-moment correlation was used to quantify these relationships. The results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Correlation between attitudes toward teacher humor and course engagement

		Course Engagement	Attitudes Toward Teacher Humor
Course Engagement	Pearson Correlation	1	.54
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.03
	N	120	120
Attitudes Toward Teacher Humor	Pearson Correlation	.54	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.03	
	N	120	120

As shown in Table 1, a positive, moderate, and statistically significant correlation was found between students' attitudes toward humor and course engagement (r = .54, $p < .05$). The positive direction indicates that as students' attitudes toward teachers' humor became more positive, their level of behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement also increased. The correlation coefficient (r = .54) suggests a meaningful association between the two constructs, supporting the hypothesis that humor plays a role in enhancing classroom engagement.

A second Pearson correlation analysis was performed to explore the relationship between EFL students' attitudes toward teachers' humor and their motivation to learn English. The results are displayed in Table 2.

Table 2. Correlation between attitudes toward teacher humor and learning motivation

		Learning Motivation	Attitudes toward Teacher Humor
Learning Motivation	Pearson Correlation	1	.84
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.01
	N	120	120
Attitudes Toward Teacher Humor	Pearson Correlation	.84	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.01	
	N	120	120

Table 2 reveals a strong and significant positive correlation between EFL students' attitudes toward humor and their learning motivation (r = .84, $p < .05$). This indicates that students who held more positive perceptions of teachers' humor were also more motivated to learn English. The high correlation coefficient (r = .84) emphasizes the motivational influence of humor in the EFL classroom. In other words, teachers' effective use of humor appears to be associated with increased student motivation and a more enjoyable learning experience.

The second research question examined the relationship between EFL students' course engagement and their motivation to learn. Pearson's product–moment correlation was again computed to assess this relationship, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Correlation between course engagement and learning motivation

		Course Engagement	Learning Motivation
Course Engagement	Pearson Correlation	1	.95
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.01
	N	120	120
Learning Motivation	Pearson Correlation	.95	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.01	
	N	120	120

Table 3 indicates a strong, positive, and significant correlation between EFL students' course engagement and their motivation to learn the language (r = .95, $p < .05$). This finding suggests that as students' engagement increased, their motivation also rose proportionally. The high degree of correlation highlights the

interdependence between these two variables, demonstrating that engaged learners are often more motivated and vice versa. This mutual reinforcement underscores the pivotal role of active engagement in sustaining motivation within the EFL learning process.

Discussion

The first research question examined whether a relationship existed between students' attitudes toward teachers' use of humor and their course engagement and motivation. The findings showed a moderate, positive correlation, suggesting that positive attitudes toward humor were linked to higher engagement levels. This finding was consistent with a substantial body of research highlighting the positive effects of humor in educational settings, particularly in language learning contexts. Erdoğdu and Çakıroğlu (2021) argued that humor enhances emotional engagement, which is a crucial factor for effective learning. This finding is corroborated by the current study, whose positive association suggests that humor fosters a sense of belonging and encourages active participation among adolescents in EFL classes. Klik et al. (2023) further demonstrated that students who experienced a positive school climate were more likely to feel a stronger sense of belonging. This school identification was associated with higher well-being and lower depression levels, implying that students who actively participated in their classes were those who felt more connected and satisfied with their learning experience. In the Iranian EFL context, where classroom anxiety and teacher–student distance often create barriers due to exam-oriented instruction and limited oral practice, this positive correlation suggests that humor may serve as an effective bridge, enhancing emotional safety and peer rapport.

The positive impact of humor in educational settings was further supported by Qamar et al. (2025) and Tait et al. (2015), who found that humor helped teachers maintain students' attention and improved the overall learning experience. The role of teachers was also underscored by Ngai et al. (2025), who argued that teachers' sense of humor is an essential element in encouraging student engagement. This was especially true in Iranian classrooms, where teachers' use of light and appropriate humor can counteract students' fear of making mistakes in English, thereby increasing participation. Similarly, Bakar and Kumar (2023) highlighted that humor creates supportive rapport and fosters positive attitudes toward both learning and the teacher. Masek et al. (2018) noted that it is essential for instructors to understand and apply humor appropriately to effectively engage students. Recent studies have also confirmed that humor promotes a relaxed atmosphere, reducing anxiety levels and facilitating better learning and retention (Ziyaeemehr et al., 2011). This is particularly relevant to Iranian EFL learners, who often report high levels of language anxiety (Ziyaeemehr et al., 2011). In EFL contexts such as Iran, where most students face additional pressure due to language obstacles, humor plays a particularly valuable role in enhancing engagement and motivation (Banas et al., 2011).

While most studies have emphasized the positive outcomes, some have also pointed to potential drawbacks of humor in classroom settings. Qamar et al. (2025) noted that although humor can make learning enjoyable, its inappropriate use may lead to confusion, discomfort, or disengagement. Likewise, St-Amand et al. (2024) distinguished between types of humor, finding that only course-related humor positively affects students' well-being and engagement. In contrast to the present

study's findings, some earlier research (e.g., Banas et al., 2011; Lei et al., 2010) reported mixed or negligible effects, where humor occasionally distracted students from content rather than reinforcing it. Such inconsistencies may stem from sociocultural factors. For instance, in Iranian classrooms, where teacher authority is traditionally strong, humor that is respectful, inclusive, and contextually appropriate is more likely to be effective, whereas sarcastic or culture-specific humor might have counterproductive effects. Students' responses to humor also vary based on multiple factors, including teacher personality, learner characteristics, and classroom context. Our findings reinforce that humor yields positive outcomes when perceived as supportive, relevant, and culturally appropriate, emphasizing the need for culturally responsive pedagogy in Iranian EFL classrooms.

The results of the correlational analysis between students' attitudes toward humor and their motivation revealed a strong positive relationship between the two variables. This correlation can be attributed to humor's ability to lower anxiety, enhance teacher–student rapport, create positive emotions, and build a supportive classroom climate. The finding aligns with Al Arief (2023), who found that humor has beneficial effects on motivation, engagement, and communication. He further argued that humor can encourage students to become more confident and motivated. Studies by Lei et al. (2010) and Zhao et al. (2012) also supported the current findings, showing that teachers' humor positively influences students' learning motivation, leading to higher levels of understanding and attention. One of the main implications of this relationship is that humor can reduce stress and shyness, fostering a conducive environment for active participation (Abdali et al., 2016). This observation is particularly applicable to Iranian EFL classrooms, where students' reluctance to speak English is common; humor creates a more relaxed and inviting environment for communication. Similarly, Azizifard and Jalali (2012) found that humor in teaching enhances comprehension, reduces anxiety, and captures attention, thereby improving learning outcomes.

However, this finding contradicts the results of Wanzer et al. (2010), who reported that inappropriate humor can provoke negative emotions and diminish motivation. Humor perception, as Nesi (2012) explained, is deeply rooted in cultural norms and values, which means that the same humor may not be equally effective across cultures. In EFL classrooms, including Iran's culturally diverse learning environments, humor that is appealing to one group may fail to engage others. Qi and Wang (2024) further demonstrated that humor is most effective when learners maintain positive attitudes toward their social environment. The present study's results also diverged from Matarazzo et al. (2010), who observed that humor enhanced motivation among less-interested students but reduced it among highly motivated ones. This may be due to differences in how humor affects emotional states. For less-motivated students, humor creates positive emotions that lower anxiety, while for those already motivated, humor may be perceived as a distraction. Furthermore, studies such as Daumiller et al. (2020) and Tavakolian et al. (2025) confirmed that content-related humor is uniquely effective in supporting learning goals, whereas unrelated humor can divert attention. This interpretation aligns with the Iranian EFL context, where students value teacher authority and instructional relevance; thus, humor is most successful when integrated meaningfully into lesson content.

Regarding the second research question, the results showed a strong and significant correlation between EFL students' course engagement and their motivation to learn English. The relationship between these two variables can be explained by their interactive nature. Motivation drives students to engage in tasks, and engagement reinforces motivation by providing satisfaction and achievement. Contextual factors, such as teacher feedback, peer collaboration, and supportive classroom environments, also contribute to this reciprocal relationship. The positive relationship observed in this study supports previous research, indicating that engagement and motivation are closely linked and essential to academic success. When students find learning materials relevant and engaging, they are more likely to sustain motivation and participation. Reeve (2013) asserted that engagement can itself foster motivation by increasing interactivity and enjoyment in the learning process. Similarly, Lee et al. (2019) observed that students who are driven by external incentives often demonstrate greater engagement and improved academic performance. In Iranian schools, where exams and grades are primary motivators, teachers' humor and engaging instruction can help shift external motivation toward more intrinsic, self-driven learning.

The strong link between engagement and motivation should be understood within the cultural and motivational framework of the Iranian educational system. Although the current findings indicate a direct connection, prior research has shown that cultural orientation influences how motivation translates into engagement. Trumbull and Rothstein-Fisch (2011) explained that in collectivist cultures, such as Iran, motivation is often shaped by group belonging and teacher–student relationships, fostering stronger engagement through social harmony rather than personal ambition. In the context of the present study, Iran is widely characterized as a collectivist society, where values such as group harmony and respect for teachers' authority are emphasized. This suggests that the observed motivation among Iranian students is likely less driven by individual competition and more by a desire for social affiliation and maintaining positive relationships with teachers and peers. Consequently, engagement is a way of fulfilling social obligations and achieving collective academic success, rather than solely pursuing personal goals. Moreover, extrinsic motivation appears to have limited influence on long-term engagement (Zeng et al., 2022). In the Iranian EFL context, teachers' appropriate use of humor may serve as a key cultural facilitator, harmonizing social expectations with learner motivation and engagement. In other contexts, however, excessive or misaligned humor might reduce teacher credibility and hinder engagement (Zhou & Lee, 2025). These findings underscore the importance of contextual sensitivity and call for further research on humor's role across diverse educational settings, particularly in collectivist EFL environments.

Conclusion

This study investigated the relationships between students' perceptions of teachers' use of humor and their levels of motivation and engagement in the Iranian EFL context. A secondary objective was to explore the connection between students' course engagement and their learning motivation. The results revealed that teachers' use of humor was significantly related to students' motivation and engagement, and engagement was also closely linked to motivation. These findings suggest that humor, when appropriately integrated into instruction, can effectively

enhance both engagement and motivation in EFL classrooms. Teachers who incorporate humor into their teaching are generally viewed more positively by students, who often describe them as influential and inspiring figures. A teacher's sense of humor reduces students' anxiety, promotes attentiveness, and strengthens the teacher–student relationship. In other words, when humor is skillfully embedded in instruction, students tend to become more motivated and actively involved, which leads to reduced anxiety and heightened interest in learning. Such positive classroom dynamics ultimately contribute to a more enjoyable and effective learning experience. Moreover, teachers who use humor are often rated highly by students for creating emotionally supportive learning environments, reflecting humor's capacity to build rapport and facilitate deeper engagement.

The findings extend existing research on humor in education and provide practical implications for both teachers and curriculum designers. For educators, humor can serve as a pedagogical strategy to improve motivation, increase participation, and create a classroom climate conducive to learning. For curriculum designers, these results underscore the need to integrate affective and psychological dimensions, including humor, into language teaching frameworks. Understanding how humor interacts with students' motivation and engagement is essential for designing learner-centered curricula that promote both academic and emotional development. The broader psychological benefits of humor may also extend beyond the classroom, contributing to students' overall well-being and resilience in their learning journey.

Future research should investigate the effects of humor across different cultural and educational contexts to enhance the generalizability of findings, as humor perception is strongly shaped by cultural norms and values (Nesi, 2012). Mixed-method or longitudinal approaches could provide deeper insights into how humor influences classroom dynamics and long-term learning outcomes. Future studies might also explore the comparative effects of various humor types such as verbal, visual, and content-related humor (Tavakolian et al., 2025) to determine which forms are most effective in improving engagement and motivation. Additionally, training programs for teachers should include guidance on the culturally appropriate and pedagogically meaningful use of humor, helping educators harness humor as a constructive teaching tool.

In conclusion, the study demonstrated that teachers' use of humor, when used thoughtfully and contextually, can enhance students' motivation, engagement, and overall learning experience. By promoting a balance between academic rigor and emotional connection, humor emerges as a valuable, evidence-based approach to effective language teaching in EFL contexts.

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Appendix 1: Course Engagement Questionnaire

Course Engagement Questionnaire						
N	**Items**	**Not at all characteristic of me**	**Not Usually characteristic of me**	**Neutral**	**Characteristic of me**	**Very characteristic of me**
1	Making sure to study on a regular basis.					
2	Putting forth effort.					
3	Doing all the homework problems.					
4	Staying up on the readings.					
5	Being organized.					
6	Taking good notes in class.					
7	Listening carefully in class.					
8	Coming to class every day.					
9	Applying course material to my life.					
10	Finding ways to make the course interesting to me.					
11	Thinking about the course between class meetings.					
12	Really desiring to learn the material.					
13	Asking questions when I don’t understand the instructor.					
14	Having fun in class.					
15	Participating actively in small-group discussions.					
16	Going to the teacher’s office hours to review assignments or tests or to ask questions.					
17	Helping other students.					
18	Getting a good grade.					
19	Doing well on the tests.					
20	Being confident that I can learn and do well in the class.					

Appendix 2: Learning Motivation Questionnaire

Learning Motivation Questionnaire						
N	**Items**	**Strongly Disagree**	**Disagree**	**Neutral**	**Agree**	**Strongly Agree**
1	I mainly focus on using English for class assignment and the exams.					
2	I simply quote the textbooks and do not really communicate myself when speaking or writing in class.					
3	I am interested in reading only English textbooks for my school, but not other English texts e.g. newspapers, magazines.					
4	I am more interested in earning a university degree and a good job than learning English language itself.					
5	I am more interested in furthering my higher education than learning English language itself.					
6	Learning English is important for travelling abroad.					
7	Learning English is important for making me a knowledgeable and skillful person.					
8	Learning English is important for making me an educated person.					
9	Being proficient in English can lead to more success and achievements in life.					
10	Being proficient in English makes other people respect me.					
12	Studying English enables me to better understand and appreciate the ways of life of native English speakers.					
13	Studying English enables me to keep in touch with foreign acquaintances.					
14	Studying English enables me to discuss interesting topics in English with the people from other national backgrounds.					
15	Studying English enables me to transfer my knowledge to other people e.g. giving directions to tourists.					
16	Studying English enables me to participate freely in academic, social, and professional activities among other cultural groups.					
17	Studying English enables me to behave like native English speakers: e.g. accent, using English expressions.					
18	Studying English enables me to appreciate English arts and literature.					
19	Studying English helps me to be an open-minded, and sociable person like English speaking people.					
20	I am determined to study English as best as I can to achieve maximum proficiency.					

Appendix 3: Questionnaire of Teachers' Use of Humor

Questionnaire of Teachers' Use of Humor						
N	**Items**	**Always**	**Often**	**Sometimes**	**Rarely**	**Never**
1	Teachers' use of humor in classroom attracts students' attention to the lessons.					
2	Students feel relaxed when teachers use humor during lessons.					
3	Humor makes lessons more enjoyable and alleviates the boredom.					
4	Humor helps students to remember the gained knowledge.					
5	Using humor by teacher in classroom has a positive psychological impact on students.					
6	Using humor during lessons increases the students ' sense of comfort and reduces stress, anxiety and fear.					
7	Using humor in class creates a positive learning environment.					
8	Humor helps to solidify the scientific material in the minds of students.					
9	Humor helps students overcome shyness and encourages them to interact with the teacher in class.					
10	Using humor in teaching is considered one of the modern educational methods.					
11	It is necessary that teachers use some humor during lessons.					
12	Humor motivates students to participate in classroom activities.					
13	Humor makes the relationship between teachers and students more open and flexible.					
14	Teachers' use of humor during lessons increases students' understanding of the study materials.					
15	Humor is an innovative way of improving students' performance.					
16	Humor is an effective tool to maintain mental health.					
17	Using humor by teachers increases students' motivation for learning.					
18	Humor is an effective learning tool to teach subjects which are difficult to comprehend.					
19	Students prefer the teacher who uses humor in classroom to one who does not.					
20	Using humor during lessons stimulates students ' creative work.					