



## **Instructional Humor in Classroom Contexts: Pragmatic Use and Strategies**

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### **Abstract in English**

This study explores the use of instructional humor in classroom contexts, highlighting its usefulness, use, and strategies for implementation. Instructional humor is mainly selected due to its importance as an effective pedagogical instrument that can improve learning experience, foster positive teacher-student relationship, and enhance classroom engagement. Nevertheless, it has not been given an adequate consideration by researchers, as far as the researcher could inspect. This study, hence, is an attempt to achieve the following aims: detecting the criteria that pragmatically best indicate instructional humor in classroom contexts; and identifying the pragmatic strategies used to reflect instructional humor. In line with its aims, this study hypothesizes that: instructional humor is characterized by the availability of various criteria like contextual appropriateness, cultural sensitivity and inclusivity, engagement and motivation, power dynamics and teacher-student relationships, and others; the pragmatic strategies of analogy, hyperbole, exaggeration, mitigating face-threatening acts, codes-switching, personification, simile, and lighthearted self-disclosure can be used by instructors to activate instructional humor. The present study ends up with a variety of conclusions, the most dominant of which is that instructional humor fosters a positive learning environment, improves student-instructor rapport, and facilitates a better understanding of the subject matter.

### **Paper Info**

#### **Keywords**

*Pragmatics,  
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## **1. Introduction**

Instructional humor is an essential aspect of human communication. It has a central role in social interactions, in general, and educational settings, in particular. In classroom contexts, instructional humor can be considered as a strategy for instructors to improve the students' participation, make complex subjects simpler, and foster an encouraging learning environment. If used appropriately, instructional humor can intensify motivation, support the student-instructor relationship, and decrease anxiety. However, its impact is determined by various aspects such as the characteristics of both instructors and students, the nature of the subject matter, and the cultural norms. The present study, accordingly, explores the pragmatic use of instructional humor in classroom contexts. It examines the pragmatic strategies used by instructors to add humor into their teaching methods. It also illustrates how humor can be intentionally used to support the aims of the lesson, clarify complex subjects, and encourage active participation. Besides, this study highlights the potential risks and limitations of the use of humor in classroom contexts with the intention of emphasizing the worth of appropriateness. By analyzing the use of different pragmatic strategies of instructional humor, this study intends to offer insights into how instructors can improve their use of humor with the intention to create a more effective learning environment. Despite its influence, there is a scarcity of research examining the pragmatics of instructional humor in classroom contexts. Hence, the present study makes an attempt to answer the following questions:

1. What are the criteria that pragmatically indicate the activation of instructional humor in classroom contexts?
2. What are the pragmatic strategies employed by instructors to activate instructional humor in classroom contexts?

In line with its problem, this study hypothesizes that: instructional humor is characterized by the availability of various criteria like contextual appropriateness, cultural sensitivity and inclusivity, engagement and motivation, power dynamics and teacher-student relationships, and others; the pragmatic strategies of analogy, hyperbole, exaggeration, mitigating face-threatening acts, codes-switching, personification, simile, and lighthearted self-disclosure can be used by instructors to activate instructional humor. This study intends to tackle these gaps in knowledge by conducting a pragmatic analysis of instructional humor in classroom contexts with a focus on exploring the criteria that indicate its activation.

## **2. Pragmatically Theorizing Instructional Humor in Classroom Contexts**

### **2.1 Pragmatically Defining Instructional Humor**

Instructional humor refers to the deliberate use of humor by instructors to enhance learning and foster a positive classroom environment. Pragmatically speaking, instructional humor in classroom contexts is not merely an act of entertainment but a communicative pragmatic strategy that has pedagogical purposes. Pragmatics, as a branch of linguistics focused on meaning in context, offers a framework for understanding how instructional humor

is used in classroom contexts to achieve intended instructional and social goals. In pragmatics, instructional humor is triggered by means of certain pragmatic strategies. Instructors can use humor to provide feedback, make directives given to students softer, or ease tension in difficult situations. For instance, an instructor can use humor to refer to a student's misunderstanding while keeping a non-threatening learning environment. Likewise, instructional humor can be used as a discourse marker which is helpful in making a transition between subjects or re-engages unfocused students. It should be noted that the success of the use of instructional humor in classroom contexts depends on certain social factors such as the power dynamics between instructors and students, the shared background knowledge, and the cultural expectations.

Instructional humor, pragmatically speaking, is productive when it meets the students' needs and social context in which it takes place to ensure that the intended meaning is understood and appreciated. However, any kind of misunderstandings or culturally inappropriate humor can cause misperception or even conflict. As a result, the instructors should be aware of the pragmatic constraints of the use of instructional humor and they should use it only with the intention to improve their students' results. By inspecting instructional humor via a pragmatic lens, this study, thus, is planned to highlight its role as an effective strategy in classroom contexts. On this ground, knowing how instructional humor is pragmatically triggered gives the chance to instructors to develop their teaching methods, increase their students' understanding, and contributes to a more

active learning environment. Several scholars have contributed to the field of pragmatics by examining the amalgamation of humor, language, and education. Attardo (2001), for instance, proposes a thorough pragmatic analysis of humor by exploring the way in which humor is activated via language, and such analysis is really practical in classroom contexts to improve teaching strategies.

Simpson (2003), in his turn, provides a pragmatic analysis of humor and its adaptation in classroom contexts with instructional purposes to engage students critically. Focusing on the pragmatic aspects of humor, Ross (2005) examines how humor functions within language with an emphasis to incorporate humor effectively into classroom contexts. Egan (2005) explores how teaching strategies such as the use of humor can enhance student performance and their learning abilities. He emphasizes the importance of connecting knowledge with human meaning and narrative understanding.

## **2.2 Criteria of Instructional Humor in Classroom Contexts**

For the sake of illuminating the deep side of instructional humor in classroom contexts, certain criteria are suggested in this study to clearly define it. This study, thus, puts forward the following indicators to detect instructional humor in classroom contexts:

### **2.2.1 Contextual Appropriateness**

Instructional humor must be appropriate to the settings and norms of the classroom. It must also suit the subject matter, student's age, and institutional expectations. Likewise, it should be related to the subject matter and should

strengthen the learning objectives rather than serving as a mere distraction.

### **2.2.2 Appropriateness and Sensitivity**

Any kind of humor that appears to be offensive, discriminatory, or could marginalize any group of students must be avoided by instructor. Hence, instructor should avoid any kind of humor that implies offence towards a particular race, gender, religion, disabilities, or other sensitive topics.

### **2.2.3 Cultural Sensitivity and Inclusivity**

Instructional humor should be culturally appropriate. Instructors, therefore, should avoid any reference that may offend the students. Also, they must confirm inclusivity within classroom contexts and be aware of cultural variations in humor perception. In classroom contexts, humor should promote a friendly and inclusive environment and should not target students negatively.

### **2.2.4 Engagement and Motivation**

In classroom contexts, instructional humor should capture students' attention and increase motivation to take part in learning. It also should be used to reduce stress and anxiety in order to make the classroom more enjoyable.

### **2.2.5 Power Dynamics and Teacher-Student Relationships**

Instructional humor should not exaggerate hierarchical power inequity in a way that threatens the students. Instead, it should foster rapport and create a positive learning environment.

### **2.2.6 Social Identity and Group Dynamics**

Instructors should avoid humor that negatively targets any social group by

means of strategies like sarcasm, ridicule, or stereotypes. Instead, instructional humor should build a sense of community rather than create social separation among students.

### **2.2.7 Pragmatic Effectiveness and Interpretation**

Instructional humor should be easily understood by students, considering their background knowledge and linguistic competence. On this basis, ambiguity and complexity in the use of instructional humor may result in misinterpretation which may cause confusion instead of engagement.

### **2.2.8 Emotional and Psychological Impact**

Instructional humor should contribute to a supportive and stress-free learning environment. It should also be inspiring rather than belittling to ensure that the students feel free and safe to participate.

### **2.2.9 Adaptability and Situational Awareness**

To produce an effective instructional humor, instructors should assess the mood of the classroom and adjust humor accordingly. Distinguishing when humor is appropriate and when a more serious tone is needed is vital for preserving classroom harmony.

### **2.2.10 Balance between Entertainment and Education**

Excessive use of instructional humor can distract from learning. Accordingly, instructional humor should be used in moderation. There should be a clear distinction between using humor as a teaching strategy and as pure entertainment.

### 3. Methodology

To accomplish its aims, this study has followed certain steps. It briefly reviewed the relevant literature about the pragmatics of instructional humor. In this section, a model of instructional humor is intended to be developed to analyze the data. Then, five representative situations will be qualitatively analyzed using the model developed in this study for this purpose. The data of this study is represented by five real-life situations in which instructional humor is activated by instructors in classroom contexts. Instructional humor demands the activation of ten criteria which are contextual appropriateness, appropriateness and sensitivity, cultural sensitivity and inclusivity, engagement and motivation, power dynamics and teacher-student relationships, social identity and group dynamics, pragmatic effectiveness and interpretation, emotional and psychological impact, adaptability and situational awareness, and balance between entertainment and education. It also requires the active employment of certain pragmatic strategies which are analogy, hyperbole, exaggeration, mitigating face-threatening acts, codes-switching, personification, simile, and lighthearted self-disclosure.

On this basis, a pragmatic model of instructional humor in classroom contexts is proposed in this study. The model is a top-down model that works from the top to the bottom where the two phases of this model; namely, identification and analysis, have a vertical sequence. First, it starts with the identification of the criteria of instructional humor in classroom contexts. Second, it moves to the analysis where instructional humor is

pragmatically activated in terms of some pragmatic strategies. Thus, the proposed model is clearly sketched in Figure (1) below:

### 4. Analysis

In this section, five situations, where instructional humor is used in classroom contexts, are analyzed by means of the model developed in this study for this purpose.

#### Situation (1)

During a biology class, an instructor wants to clarify the concept of mitosis to his students. In his attempts to make the topic more engaging, the instructor humorously says:

*"Imagine mitosis as a photocopy machine. The cell just wants to clone itself like students copying each other's homework, but legally!"*

The students laugh, and the instructor follows up with:

*"But remember, if the cell doesn't follow the correct steps, you get mutations just like when you copy the wrong answers from your friend!"*

#### Analysis

In this situation, instructional humor is employed by means of several pragmatic strategies to enhance the students' comprehension. The instructor uses the strategy of analogy to compare mitosis to a photocopy machine and homework copying to make an abstract biological process more physical. This kind of humor helps the students perceive the concept through everyday experiences. Such humorous analogy keeps the students engaged while reinforcing the key concept of mitosis. The instructor also activates the strategy of hyperbole in his utterance *"copying each other's homework, but legally"* which

humorously exaggerates the idea of perfect replication. The idea of mutations happening like copying wrong answers is an exaggerated comparison making the concept more memorable. Likewise, the instructor resorts to the strategy of mitigating face-threatening act because the humor is not directed at any specific student in order to avoid any kind of embarrassment. Thus, by using neutral subjects, i.e. cells and homework copying, the humor maintains a positive classroom environment. Moreover, the instructor employs the strategy of code-switching as he shifts from informal to formal learning context when he uses a kind of humor that balances informal "*homework copying*" and formal "*biology mitosis*" language to make the concept accessible without losing its academic significance. Thus, the instructional humor used in this situation is strategically used to make a complex scientific process more engaging, relatable, and memorable.

### **Situation (2)**

Teacher: "*Alright, class, today we're tackling one of the most feared creatures in mathematics, fractions! Now, I know some of you might think fractions are scary, but trust me, they're just numbers that couldn't decide if they wanted to be whole or not*". (Students chuckle)

Teacher: "*Think of a fraction like sharing a pizza. If you eat half the pizza, you don't have a whole one left, unless, of course, you order another pizza, which is the kind of math I fully support*".

### **Analysis**

In this situation, the instructor uses the strategy of personification when he humorously describes fractions as "*numbers that couldn't decide if they*

*wanted to be whole or not*". Such strategy makes fractions more attractive to the students in order to reduce their fear or anxiety towards the subject. The instructor uses the strategy of simile when he relates fractions to a real-life scenario "*pizza sharing*" to make the concept real. This strategy helps the students to connect abstract mathematical ideas to familiar experiences. The instructor also resorts to the strategy of lighthearted self-disclosure when he humorously comments about supporting the idea of ordering another pizza. This strategy adds an element of instructor reliability as it fosters a positive student-instructor relationship and makes the classroom environment more relaxed. By using instructional humor strategically, the instructor not only makes the lesson enjoyable but also enhances cognitive engagement, social bonding, and overall learning outcomes.

### **Situation (3)**

Teacher: "*Alright, class, today we're talking about gravity. Yes, the force that keeps us from floating away like lost balloons at a birthday party!*"

(Students chuckle)

Teacher: "*Gravity is like that friend who never lets you leave. No matter how high you jump, it's always there to pull you back down. It's basically the clingiest force in the universe!*"

(Laughter from students)

### **Analysis**

In this situation, the instructor successfully uses certain pragmatic strategies to incorporate instructional humor. He makes use of the strategy of analogy when he compares gravity to "*a friend who never lets you leave*" and

"lost balloons at a birthday party". This kind of humor makes an abstract scientific concept more accessible by linking it to familiar and everyday experiences. Personification is also activated when "gravity" is described by the instructor as "clingy" giving it human-like characteristics. This use of personification makes the concept more engaging and memorable, allowing students to form a stronger mental connection with the idea. By employing these strategies, the instructor creates a dynamic and enjoyable learning experience, making complex ideas easier to grasp.

#### **Situation (4)**

Teacher: *"Alright, class, today we're diving into parts of speech. Now, think of them like a big family. Nouns are like the grandparents—old, wise, and always around. Verbs are the energetic kids—they just won't sit still!"*

(Students chuckle)

Teacher: *"Adjectives? Oh, they are like that one relative who just can't stop describing things. Oh, what a beautiful, stunning, absolutely magnificent dress! Alright, Aunt Linda, we get it!"*

(Laughter from students)

#### **Analysis**

In this situation, the instructor uses certain effective pragmatic strategies to incorporate instructional humor. He utilizes the strategy of analogy when he compares parts of speech to members of a family. He compares nouns to "grandparents" and verbs to "energetic kids". This strategy helps students relate abstract concepts in grammar to familiar social roles which make them easier to be understood and remembered by the students. Personification is also used by

the instructor when he gives human characteristics to parts of speech when he compares verbs to "restless kids" and adjectives to "talkative relatives". This strategy makes the lesson entertaining while reinforcing the distinct roles of each part of speech.

The strategy of exaggeration is also activated by the instructor for comic effect in his over-the-top description of the adjectives in his utterance *"Oh, what a beautiful, stunning, absolutely magnificent dress! Alright, Aunt Linda, we get it!"*. This kind of humor makes the function of adjectives more memorable and it helps the students to recall their role in sentences. By using instructional humor strategically, the instructor transforms a potentially dull grammar lesson into an enjoyable learning experience.

#### **Situation (5)**

Teacher: *"Alright, class, today we're talking about the French Revolution—where the people had just about had it with their king. Imagine you come home, open the fridge, and see that your sibling ate the last slice of pizza. You'd be upset, right?"*

(Students nod and chuckle)

Teacher: *"Now imagine instead of pizza, it's your money, food, and rights, and instead of your sibling, it's King Louis XVI spending all of it on fancy clothes and parties. That's the mood in France in the late 1700s".*

(Laughter from students)

#### **Analysis**

The instructor in this situation uses certain pragmatic strategies to engage students and facilitate their understanding. He makes use of the strategy of analogy when he compares

the French Revolution to a familiar and everyday situation "*a sibling eating the last slice of pizza*". The strategy of analogy makes the historical context more relevant and reachable to students' minds. Moreover, the instructor makes use of a lighthearted exaggeration in his utterance "*King Louis XVI spending all of it on fancy clothes and parties*" for the sake of keeping his students amused and engaged with the lesson. Also, the instructor activates the strategy of rhetorical question in order to prompt the students to respond with nods and chuckles, to encourage participation, and to ensure they are following along. By using these strategies, the instructor makes the lesson more engaging, understandable, and enjoyable for the students.

## **5. Results and Discussion**

The sociopragmatic analysis of the situations selected from classroom contexts reveals that instructional humor is commonly activated by the instructors using various pragmatic strategies in classroom contexts. The analysis shows that analogy, hyperbole, exaggeration, mitigating face-threatening acts, code-switching, personification, simile, and lighthearted self-disclosure are the most common pragmatic strategies used to manifest instructional humor. These strategies are successfully triggered by the instructors in order to increase their students' understanding because such strategies allow the students to relate abstract concepts to familiar experiences in real life situations. Hence, a promising and positive association is observed between the use of instructional humor and students' participation in classroom contexts. Furthermore, the analysis illustrates that those instructors who incorporate instructional humor intentionally in their teaching methods

intend to increase their student participation, sustain their attention, and make complex subjects easier. To make it happen, instructors regularly employ instructional humor to unite academic content with students' personal experiences.

Besides, the analysis illuminates that while some cases of instructional humor are spontaneous, others are pre-planned by the instructors to make it appropriate into the intended subject and the lesson plan. In order to ensure inclusivity, effective instructors wisely avoid any kind of humor that could be misinterpreted or deemed offensive to their students. Additionally, the analysis proves that engaging the students through interactive humor encourages participation and discussion in the classroom contexts. This study, thus, approves that instructional humor in classroom contexts is a valuable pedagogical strategy that improves the students' understanding, and the classroom dynamics. However, its effectiveness depends on the instructor's ability to carefully and wisely apply humor while maintaining academic rigor.

## **6. Conclusions**

This study ends up with some significant conclusions as follow:

1. In classroom contexts, instructional humor is actively used by the instructors for the sake of enhancing the students' comprehension and activating the dynamics of the classroom.
2. When used appropriately by the instructors, instructional humor works as an influential pedagogical strategy that promotes a more interactive and stimulating learning environment.



3. As a communicative strategy, instructional humor is more than entertainment. It helps many pragmatic functions to be achieved such as reinforcing learning environment, reducing the students' anxiety, and facilitating teacher-student rapport. So, instructors activate instructional humor to cope with the classroom discourse, the transition between the topics in a particular subject, and the student participation and engagement in the classroom contexts.
4. There are various criteria for the activation of instructional humor in classroom contexts including contextual appropriateness, appropriateness and sensitivity, cultural sensitivity and inclusivity, engagement and motivation, power dynamics and teacher-student relationships, social identity and group dynamics, pragmatic effectiveness and interpretation, emotional and psychological impact, adaptability and situational awareness, and balance between entertainment and education.
5. In classroom contexts, instructors exploit certain pragmatic strategies to trigger humor including analogy, hyperbole, exaggeration, mitigating face-threatening acts, codeswitching, personification, simile, and lighthearted self-disclosure.
6. These pragmatic strategies are cooperative and helpful in strengthening the contents of the subject, relieving the classroom anxiety, and reinforcing the instructor-student relationships.
7. The efficiency of instructional humor is highly context-dependent as it necessitates a careful consideration of

the cultural norms of the society, the student demographics, and subject matter.

8. Any kind of misuse or overuse of humor may result in misinterpretation, distraction, or even discomfort among the students. As a result, instructors must strike a balance to ensure that the used humor aligns with pedagogical aims and enhances, rather than detracts from, the learning experience.

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## Abstract in Arabic

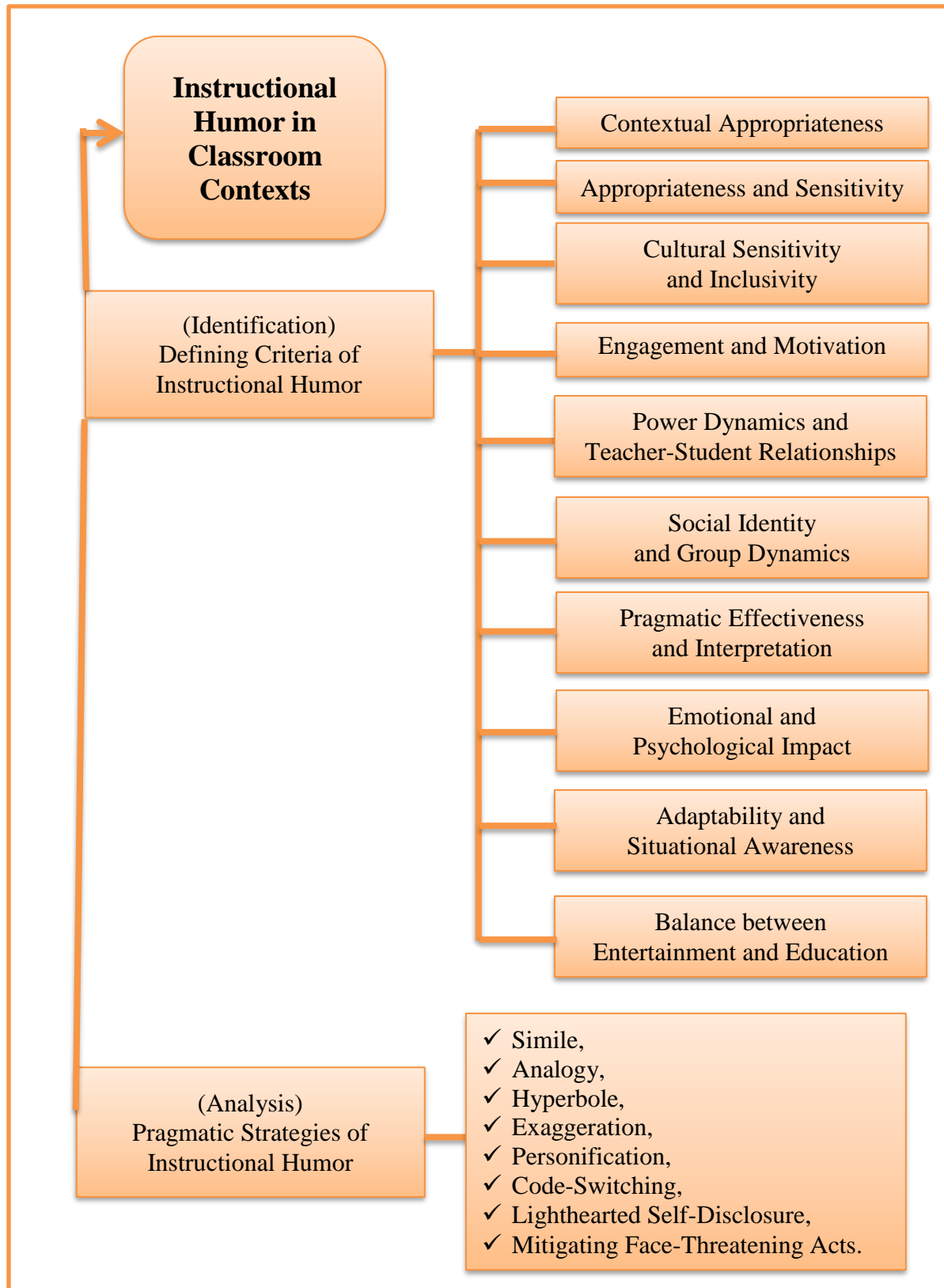
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### الفكاهة التعليمية في سياقات الفصل الدراسي: الإستخدام التداولي والإستراتيجيات

**المستخلص:** تستكشف هذه الدراسة استخدام الفكاهة التعليمية في سياقات الفصل الدراسي، مع تسليط الضوء على فائدتها واستخدامها واستراتيجيات تنفيذها. تم اختيار الفكاهة التعليمية بشكل أساسي نظرًا لأهميتها كأداة تربوية فعالة يمكنها تحسين تجربة التعلم وتعزيز العلاقة الإيجابية بين المعلم والطالب وتعزيز المشاركة في الفصل الدراسي. ومع ذلك، لم يتم منحها اعتبارًا كافيًا من قبل الباحثين. وبالتالي، فإن هذه الدراسة هي محاولة لتحقيق الأهداف التالية: اكتشاف المعايير التي تشير إلى الفكاهة التعليمية تداوليًا في سياقات الفصل الدراسي؛ وتحديد الاستراتيجيات التداولية المستخدمة لتعكس الفكاهة التعليمية. وتماشياً مع أهدافها، تفترض هذه الدراسة أن: الفكاهة التعليمية تتميز بتوافر معايير مختلفة مثل الملاءمة السياقية والحساسية الثقافية والشمول والمشاركة والدافع وديناميكيات القوة والعلاقات بين المعلم والطالب وغيرها؛ يمكن للمعلمين استخدام الاستراتيجيات التداولية، كالتشبيه، والمبالغة، والتخفيف من حدة الأفعال المتهكمة، والتبديل بين الألفاظ، والتشخيص، والتشبيه، والكشف عن الذات بعفوية، لتفعيل روح الفكاهة التعليمية. وخلصت هذه الدراسة إلى مجموعة من الاستنتاجات، أبرزها أن روح الفكاهة التعليمية تعزز بيئة تعليمية إيجابية، وتعزز علاقة الطالب بالمعلم، وتسهل فهم المادة الدراسية بشكل أفضل.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** التداولية؛ الفكاهة التعليمية؛ سياقات الفصل الدراسي.

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**Figure (1): A Pragmatic Model of Instructional Humor in Classroom Contexts**