

Trying to be Funny: A Conversation Analysis of Humor in EFL University Students' Role-Plays

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Article information

Abstract

Through the lens of conversational analysis (CA), humor or funniness is not an inherent property of a message, nor an internal state of any social action, but as something interactionally achieved (Glenn, 2003). Teachers are often encouraged to utilize humor to reduce anxiety, lower affective filters, and make language more “memorable” (Bell, 2005; Tarone, 2000; Ziyaeemehr et al., 2011). In the current research endeavor, we focused on an activity called “Drama and Creativity,” an extracurricular activity which is offered to first-year undergraduate students at a public university in Thailand. During the activity, students worked in groups of three to four to collaboratively create a role-play which they later performed in front of their peers. Twenty-four students participated in the activity, and a total of seven role-plays were video-recorded. The goal of this study was to offer evidence of student achievements of humor construction in an EFL classroom context. We analyzed the sequences where laughter occurred in the data and identified linguistic and sociolinguistic resources that students used to construct incongruity and project laughable tokens in their role-play performances. The findings

	revealed that students were able to mobilize category-bound practices (Housley & Fitzgerald, 2015), embodied gestures, and activity-bound expectations to create unexpectedness which resulted in laughter among the audience.
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1. Introduction

In the past 30 years, the functions of humor in language classrooms have been documented in a small but growing body of empirical research (Askildson, 2005; Bell, 2009; Çopur et al., 2021; Neff & Dewaele, 2023; Reddington, 2015). In classrooms, humor is deemed a necessary pedagogical tool to generate a low-pressure atmosphere and facilitate students' understanding of the learning material (Çopur et al., 2021). It also plays a significant role in enhancing their enthusiasm and confidence in the process of language learning (Ketabi & Simin, 2009). Teachers have been encouraged to utilize humor in classrooms to help reduce student anxiety and lower their affective filters (Cook, 2000; Schmitz, 2002). These suggestions have later been backed up by empirical research that humor makes language more “memorable” (Bell, 2005; Tarone, 2000; Ziyaeemehr et al., 2011). Humor is also viewed as a safe space (Pomerantz & Bell, 2011) which allows students to explore different identities and push boundaries when it comes to questioning the norms and authorities within the classrooms.

Among a variety of activities adopted to conduct an EFL classroom, role-play is one of the most popular forms of activity used to promote students' engagement in using English (L2) and their creative expressions. As a form of language play, role-plays allow for opportunities during which learners can

experiment with different voices and language varieties (Broner & Tarone, 2001; Bushnell, 2009).

To better understand students' ability to create humor through role-play activities in language classrooms, in this study, we investigated a role-play activity called "Drama and Creativity," an extracurricular activity as part of a required English foundation course at a public university in Thailand. The role-play was performed by groups of five to six students who were tasked to create and perform a role-play on a designated scenario.

2. Literature Review

Humor has long obtained significant attention in the research world across multiple fields from psychology to sociology, and also linguistics. A common thread which connects multiple findings and theoretical understandings of humor is the concept of incongruity. In sociology, Davis (1979) asserts that the power of humor is the "discontinuity" in which one creates a conflict that is otherwise invisible. Thomas (1995) points out that we can analyze humor in terms of how it "violates" and "infringes" any of the Gricean maxims. For example, the maxim of quality is flouted when a speaker intentionally says something that is untrue or false. The maxim of quantity is flouted when a speaker intentionally gives too much or too little information than required. The maxim of relation is flouted when a speaker says something irrelevant to the topic. The maxim of manner is flouted when a speaker conveys an ambiguous or verbose utterance (Thomas, 1995).

In linguistics and pragmatics, scholars have proposed six sources of unexpectedness (i.e., script opposition, logical mechanism, situational objects, target audiences, narrative strategies, and linguistic resources) which carry potentials to generate humor under the General Theory of Verbal Humor (for more details, see Attardo, 1994; Attardo & Raskin, 1991).

More recently, the work on humor has shifted away from the study of decontextualized humor (Martin, 2007) with greater interests in studying humor in interaction. For this reason, in the past 20 years, there has been a clear rise in the number of empirical research utilizing methods such as conversation analysis, discourse analysis, and interactional sociolinguistics in analyzing episodes of humor in natural conversations. The past few decades have witnessed different accounts of various kinds of humorous interactions on wide-ranging situations. For example, Norrick (1993, 2003) has studied humor which occurs when participants collaboratively join in to narrate past events. Kotthoff (2009) has explored the practice of role-reversal through participants' adoption of different voices. Norrick and Klein (2008) have documented the practice of being a "class clown" through the supply of unexpected comments that results in laughter.

2.1 Conversational Analysis on Humor

The concept of humor in conversation analysis (CA) has been treated more as an abstract category rather than something analytically relevant (Glenn & Holt, 2017). However, given the strength of CA in providing a detailed description of actions in interaction, CA research has contributed to a sizable body of work which explicitly describes related phenomena such as joke telling (Sacks, 1974), teasing (Schegloff, 1987), and non-serious talks which have furthered our academic understanding of humor in interaction. For example, Jefferson (1979) has demonstrated how speakers invite and volunteer laughter in interaction. In her famous work, she shows how speakers use laughter in establishing an affiliative stance towards each other (Jefferson et al., 1987). This can be thought of as an empirical account of a claim by Martin (2007) that humor can function as a social glue connecting people from different backgrounds.

One key contribution of CA to humor studies is a recognition that humor, or funniness, is not an inherent property of a message, nor an internal state of any social action, but something interactionally achieved (Glenn, 2003). As CA

organizes conversations into turns, as the sequence of an action unfolds, according to Sacks (1974), we can start to see humor in interaction as negotiated actions. Sequentially, humorous exchanges constitute three consecutive actions:

- pre-humor: the mundane basis on which a joke can be made,
- an invocation of something laughable, and finally
- a laughter, or a lack of it.

CA studies on humor pays attention to studying the turn designs (e.g., Ford & Fox, 2010; Greatbatch & Clark, 2003) and the social actions which are being done (e.g., flirting, teasing; see Drew, 1987; Dynel, 2008). It also tries to shed more light on participants' resources—linguistic, paralinguistic, or semiotic ones—which they exploit in creating something that can be laughable. Among these works, the concept of incongruity has again been prominently used as a key design feature of “laughable” (Glenn & Holt, 2017). Many CA papers have identified practices or turn designs that can be seen as creating incongruity such as irony or hyperbole (Schegloff, 2001), a breach of tact or courtesy (Bell, 2011; Dynel, 2008; Jefferson et al., 1987), using overdone figurative phrases (Holt, 2011), or invoking extraordinary contexts (Haakana & Sorjonen, 2011).

2.2 Humor in Language Classrooms

Reddington (2015) has summarized humor research in language classrooms into three major purposes: investigating how humor is constructed, identifying social functions of humor, and connecting humor to language learning.

In explaining how students “do” humor in language classrooms, studies have shown that students can use various resources to invoke incongruity to create humor. Lehtimaja (2011) demonstrates how the teacher-student address terms can be manipulated (e.g., opting for a superfluous term or prosodic cues) to generate the audience's laughter. Thanks to a large body of research on classroom discourse and interaction, Reddington and Waring (2015) reveal how students can

also create laughter via taking the turn that would traditionally be iterated by the teacher; thus, they can construct laughables by creating unexpected sequence organization during ongoing classroom talks.

Another strand of humor in interaction research has investigated the social functions that it serves in language classrooms. Findings include the use of humor as mitigating tools that help facilitate class participations. Researchers have noted the use of humor when students encounter difficult situations, such as having to deal with a difficult word (van Dam, 2002) or grammatical concept (Garland, 2010), as a tool to manage “facework” by inviting other students to laugh “with” them instead of laughing “at” them. Additionally, Pomerantz and Bell (2011) have also noted how humor can be used to “shield” oneself when criticizing authority given that the nature of humor also means an absence of seriousness which allows for deniability for the speaker in the case that something would become troublesome down the line.

The final strand of research draws a closer connection between humor in interaction and second language acquisition (SLA) theory research with the goals to show how humor talks can promote attention to form and provide opportunities for language play and experimentation among L2 learners (e.g., Cekaite & Aronsson, 2005). Moreover, language play, especially during role-plays, has been shown to offer opportunities for students to display and negotiate their sociolinguistic competence (Bushnell, 2009) as they are allowed to experiment with different voices.

2.3 Research Gap

Based on our review of literature, it is clear that more work to explore the connection between the use of humor in helping students develop their sociolinguistic competence is in need of more empirical research. Our study aimed to investigate student interactions during a role-play task, using CA to provide a

detailed description of how humor could be constructed and how these humorous exchanges during the activity allowed for language learning opportunities for both the performers and the audiences. Through the lens of CA, we were particularly interested in seeing how students designed their turns around humorous exchanges which created both the participants' and the audience's laughter, the resources which enabled their constructions of "laughables," and the incongruity that had been exploited and manipulated to achieve such effects.

Even though many researchers have acknowledged the potential benefits of humor towards language learning, especially the acquisition of sociolinguistic competence, of humor and play in allowing students to experiment with their L2 voices (Broner & Tarone, 2001; Bushnell, 2009; Waring, 2013), to our knowledge, there has not been a study that has looked into a classroom role-play activity that focuses on analyzing humorous talks while taking into consideration the audience's contribution. This study aimed to fulfill this particular gap.

3. Research Methodology

The current study was set out to answer the following questions:

- 1) What linguistic or sociolinguistic resources that students use to construct incongruity and project "laughable" in their role-play performances?
- 2) Focusing on humorous episodes during student role-play performances, what are the interactional environments where laughter usually occurs?

3.1 Participants

The participants were recruited on a voluntary basis from EFL undergraduate students of various faculties across a public university in central Thailand. They were first-year students who enrolled in a required fundamental English course in the first semester of the 2022 academic year and participated in an extracurricular activity called "Drama and Creativity" (see Appendix for activity

instructions), which was an elective activity consisting of three sessions, each of which lasted two hours.

The participants were randomly put into groups of four to five people in order to conduct a role-play conversation based on the controlled phrases, themes, and places provided (see Appendix 2). Each group collaboratively wrote a dialogue consisting of at least 15 turns or more and performed the role-play after submitting the dialogue to the instructor.

This “Drama and Creativity” activity was offered three times during the months of September and October 2022. There were 27 participants from all the sessions conducted, and they were divided into seven groups. Each group was given an information sheet to study the purposes of the research apart from the instructor’s verbal explanations. A consent form was distributed for them to sign, and all students who took part in the extracurricular activity agreed and consented to participate in our research study. They understood that their dialogues as well as their role-play performances would be video-recorded for the purposes of the research.

3.2 Data Collection Process

After the activity introduction, students were grouped with students who may or may not come from the same faculty by using the 1-4 counting system. This was to separate them from their friends who were sitting next to them. Each group of students was provided with a controlled phrase which they had to include in their conversation, a theme, and a place in which their role-play was taking place. (The task instructions provided to all participants can be found in Appendix 1, and the themes, places, and controlled phrases used in this study can be found in Appendix 2.)

Each group of students was given 30-40 minutes to prepare a dialogue consisting of 15 to 20 turns. They were allowed to be creative in their language usages and performances during which any objects they had at hand could be used as props. Each group then was allowed up to five minutes to perform their role-plays.

The written scripts of 15 or more turns that each group had prepared were also available for the researchers in case of possible confusion with their deliveries. The main set of data consisted of seven video recordings of student role-plays which were subsequently transcribed and analyzed. The names in the scripts and transcripts shown in this paper are the generic names we replaced according to their roles, e.g., Customer, Moderator 1, etc. to protect the identities of all participants in this study.

3.3 Data Analysis

The analysis was conducted through the framework of conversation analysis (CA). Conversation analysis is a study of talk-in-interaction in terms of its structural organizations that are stable across any similar kinds of interactions. For CA, the most fundamental unit of analysis is a “turn,” that is recognizable by the participants during the interaction as carrying out an action. CA seeks to describe how participants organize their turns to achieve or negotiate the kinds of interactional outcomes and the sequence of actions which are unfolded and recognized turn-by-turn by the participants themselves.

To CA, the analysts act as observers of this fast and intricate interactional process. CA, therefore, does not primarily focus on exogenous categorizations, or the labels that the analysts, as an outsider, would bring to the analysis. On the other hand, CA’s major research contributions reside in its robust relationship between the first pair parts and the second pair parts as they are the constructions underlying ordinary interactions and the engine that makes successful interactions

possible. With that understanding, newer generations of CA researchers can begin to identify problematic turns or sequence organizations and the linguistic, as well as paralinguistic resources which allow intersubjectivity, the state where participants understand each other, to be mutually achieved.

Hence, as we have mentioned above in the literature review section, through the lens of CA, “humor” is something that is achieved by the participants in interactions, and not something that the researchers would later categorize or label. The goal of this project was to see how students designed their turns around humorous exchanges which created laughter (from both the participant and audience), the resources which enabled their constructions of “laughable,” and the incongruity that had been exploited and manipulated to achieve such effects.

The video data of student role-plays were qualitatively analyzed for humorous interactions that generated participants’ laughter. The written scripts provided a reference for the researchers to see the “intended” version of interactions behind their deliveries which were helpful in identifying their current sociolinguistic understanding before the role-play performance and provide a basis for the researchers to see how students may use the audience’s reactions and the instructors’ feedback to improve their linguistic or sociolinguistic understanding of natural interactions in their L2.

4. Findings

Seven role-play performances were video-recorded and humorous sections of the performances have been transcribed and analyzed with the goal to inspect the sequences during the role-plays in which the audience’s laughter occurred. The humorous episodes were transcribed turn by turn using CA transcription format (Atkinson & Heritage, 1984), and the results discussed the sequences of these turns along with the incongruity which contributed to the audience’s laughter.

From the seven role-plays that we recorded, the major themes students came up with included superstition, love affairs, and political satire, all of which reflected what Thai university students in general regarded as situations with a great potential for comedy. As we investigated the resources that were used by students to achieve humor, membership categorization was found to be one of the main resources from which students constructed incongruities. Membership categorization analysis (MCA) (Housley & Fitzgerald, 2015; Stokoe, 2012) is a branch of ethnomethodological studies which examines participants' categorization practices embedded in sequential structures of interactions. It concerns mainly with describing participants actions in relation to how certain identities or group memberships are invoked and resisted within the fabric of talk in interaction.

In this study, we organized our findings in terms of the different resources manipulated by the students to make their audience laugh. Through the lens of CA and MCA, we identified three main sources of normative expectations which students violated to make room for creating humor: category-bound expectations, semantic interpretation, and the activity-bound expectations with the role-play activity in itself. Representative cases of humorous episodes that we found in our dataset are presented below.

4.1 Category-Bound Expectations

In the dataset, we see how students played with the cultural expectations of a political debate, where candidates ought to answer questions thoughtfully and rationally to portray intellect and credibility and gain trust from their supporters. The focal participant of this exchange was Kai who played a role of a candidate who flouted all those expectations. Students showed their normative understanding of political debates in how they designed Penny's turn and contrasted hers with Kai's subsequent turn to create humor.

Except 1 shows how students' performance played out in more detail. The group was assigned to create a role-play which took place in front of the parliament. They chose to portray a debate between two candidates, *Penny* and *Kai*, running for the Prime Minister's office, with the other two playing moderators, whose jobs were to interview and introduce each candidate. This excerpt started at a point after the first candidate, Penny, had finished her lengthy speech about her policies and goals. Then, Moderator 2 (M2) directed the audience's attention to another candidate, Kai (K), and gave him the platform to talk about his policies (line 11).

Excerpt 1

10 M2: oh, thank you, Ms. Penny! I can see how ready you are!
 11 and how about you?
 12 → K: Hi- (.) I am (.) Kai. Yes. Thank you.
 13 → (0.4)
 14 A: ((audience's laughter))

From the role-play performance, Kai's turn in line 12 was successful in projecting laughter from the audience in line 14 thanks to his very short, choppy turn design which markedly displayed a sharp contrast to Penny's enthusiastic and lengthy speech delivery just earlier. The 0.4 seconds of silence in line 13 marked an absence of any follow-up actions or account from Kai, and this, consequently, prompted the audience to start laughing.

On another level, Kai's turn in line 12 also indexicalized a famous political figure in Thailand who is often mocked and criticized for his military-like and non-communicative ways of public speaking. This stylized speech of an often-targeted political figure at around the time this performance took place could also be another factor for the success in bringing about laughter from the audience in line 14.

4.2 Semantic Interpretations

The next excerpt came from the same role-play. Following the first laughter discussed in the previous excerpt, the student who played Moderator 1 (M1) then launched her assessment token which sequentially came as a pre-closing turn of this question-answer sequence. The way that the student designed and performed this turn was able to generate more audience's laughter as shown in Excerpt 2 below.

Excerpt 2

15 M1: wow.
16 (0.6)
+((LH touched her temple; pic.1))
+((Gz → Kai)) +((Gz down; pic. 2))
17 → that's very: +(.(4) in- in- +informative.
18 (0.6)
19 ((audience's laughter))
20 M1: thanks Mr. Kai

Picture 1



Picture 2



The way in which Moderator 1 (M1) formulated her assessment token, “*Wow. That’s very informative,*” stipulated incongruence in terms of the quality of Kai’s self-introduction. Interestingly, Moderator 1’s assessment token served a dual function of being non-confrontational to the candidate while delivering a sarcastic tone which could be read as a negative commentary to the audience. This duality, especially the non-literal interpretation of her assessment, was what created laughter among the audience. Multimodal data showed how the student displayed a level of stress and discomfort when delivering her assessment (line 17) by touching her temple and then averting eye gaze away from the candidate when commenting on Kai’s answer. This incorporated a word-searching design into her turn construction, e.g., a brief pause in line 16, an elongated vowel, “*very:*” in line 17, and two cut offs (in- in-) before restarting the word “informative” with noticeable difficulty, all came together to make it clear of her intended meaning of her assessment “informative” could either be the opposite of the word informative.

or a playful commentary that his mannerism was informative in telling us how lacking he was as a Prime Minister candidate.

This stylization to create humor in Excerpt 1 was the students' way to experiment with different voices during this activity of language play. This group's appropriation of a famous political figure's voice was then followed by a sarcastic positive assessment token (Excerpt 2), both of which generated a good amount of laughter among the audience, showing solidarity that they were on board with the joke being made on this political figure's expense.

4.3 Activity-Bound Expectations

Laughter could also stem from a breach of the audience's expectations which came with the fact that this whole activity was a role-play performance. The boundaries that students crossed while performing the role-play showed the shared understanding of what was considered normal during a role-play activity in a classroom setting such as this one. Breaching such expectation generally resulted in the audience's laughter.

The data in Excerpt 3 were taken from the later part of the same role-play performance in excerpts 1 and 2. The sequence began with Moderator 1 shifting the topic in line 28. Moving the discussion along, Moderator 2 announced the topic in line 29 and launched her question in line 30.

There is an insertion sequence (lines 31-32) between Penny (P) and Moderator 2 (M2) before the actual answer was launched. To show her eagerness as a more competent candidate, Penny self-selected as the next speaker. She did so by using multiple techniques (Line 31). First, the "okay" with high pitch initial was hearable as a preface to her answering the question. That alone would have sufficed in securing the turn, but Penny added "me first"—an explicit turn-taking announcement—right after "okay." Then, she also added a permission seeking

“please” at the end of line 31. This “please” that Penny said with a falling intonation sounded more assertive than a request, projecting a strong preference for affirmative response in which Moderator 2 granted the permission, “okay,” in line 32. Altogether, the turn-initial “okay,” the explicit self-nomination token, and the permission seeking “please” in line 31 embodied a rather excessive work to secure the first speakership. All these works conformed with the eagerness image she portrayed through her choice of self-nomination.

Excerpt 3

```
28      M1:      Let's move on to another topic, shall we?
29      M2:      okay (.) The topic of debate is the rising petrol price;
30              And how would you do if you were the prime minister?
31      P:      ↑okay (.) me first (.) please.
32      M2:      okay.
33              (1.2)
                                     +((BH palm up and down--))
34→    P:      um so (.) uhm (.) my solution is (.3) +<blah blah blah blah>
                                     ((-----BH palm up and down---))
35              [>blah blah blah bla-blah<]
36      A:      [((audience's laughter))  ]
                                     ((-----|)) +((BH down on the table))
37      P:      >blah blah blah< +(.) thank you.
38      M1:      °hh°↑wow (.) that's great!
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The main contributor to laughter then came in line 34 when Penny launched her answer for Moderator 2's question earlier in line 30. After a long pause in line 33 and some mitigation tokens in line 34, her answer, “my solution is … blah blah blah …,” generated big laughter from the audience members.

Penny's proposed solution, “blah blah blah,” generated huge audience laughter. She shifted her frames of participation from within the role-play to the real-life situation where she interacted directly with the audience. This unexpected shift created incongruity noticeable to the audience, resulting in the laughter in line 36. Aside from generating laughter, Penny's choice of using “blah blah blah” was noteworthy for a few reasons. First, it allowed her to portray the identity of a

competent candidate through embodied gestures while she only repeated the word “blah blah blah.” Notice how she also repeated her hand gestures until she finished her answer, then put her hand back down immediately on the table as she closed her answer with a thanking token in line 37. Secondly, considering the alternative in which she could have instead stated an actual policy solution which would have fitted for the role-play situation more realistically, the “blah blah blah” solution served as an example of how students oriented to the goal of this role-play activity as a playful one.

Excerpt 4

+((LH air pounding))

10 H: you are talking +nonsense.
11 (.7)

+((LH point at M))

12 H: uh I’m just +help(h)ing her to (.) walk comfortably.
13 M: ((holding husband’s arm tighter))
14 W: do you think I’m stupid?

+((LH swiping up)) +((LH air pounding))

15 H: +enough! I do(h)n’t (h)love (h)you a- (.) +anymore.

+((LH swiping up))

16 +Let’s divorce!
17 W: why are you doing this to me.
18→ Do you know that [(.) ♪all of me [love all of you♪ hh=
19 H: [h [hhh
20 =h[hHhHhHhHh
21 A: [°hHhHhHhHh°]

Another occurrence of laughter from students’ manipulation of the role-play as the overall frame of activity is shown in Excerpt 4. In this group performance, there were three students portraying the roles of a husband (H), his wife (W), and his mistress (M)—a common trope of Thai soap operas. Though the characters they portrayed were a male and two females, students who played these three roles in this role-play were all female. This excerpt involved the use of the controlled phrase “*all of me love all of you*” which was a required phrase students had to use in their dialogue as part of the role-play task set up by the instructor. At the beginning of the role-play, the husband was out shopping with his mistress, his supposed secretary, when the wife confronted them about their relationship.

In line 10, we can see the husband's response to his wife's accusation of infidelity as she pointed out the fact that they were holding arms while walking.

It is interesting to see a complex interplay of the role and the role-player in this incident. In line 10, in response to the accusation, the female student who played the husband role uttered a strong denial "you are talking nonsense" along with an embodied gesture potentially showing his anger. The husband then provided an account "I'm just helping her walk comfortably" in line 12. However, at this point, it appeared that the student was struggling to stay in character as she began to laugh while saying "helping" as she gestured to the student who played the mistress role in line 12. After the wife questioned the legitimacy of his account, asking if he thought she was stupid enough to believe his explanation in line 14, the husband pivoted into a sharp command "enough" for his wife to stop the interrogation which was then followed by an announcement "I don't love you anymore" in line 15 before ending his turn with a proposal for them to get a divorce in line 16. The student portraying the husband's role continued to laugh through her delivery of "I don't love you anymore" even though her character was going through a quick escalation of actions. Her embodied actions corresponded to her words, but her delivery suggested that she was rather amused by the situation rather than upset by it. Clearly, these students were not professional actors, so an incident like this where the student performers broke characters and laughed while delivering the role-plays was quite common in the dataset.

So far, the performance had not elicited any laughter from the audience. The line which was able to make the audience laugh a little was after the wife protested the divorce proposal ("why are you doing this to me") in line 17 and then questioned his knowledge of her love for him in line 18. Drawing upon the shared knowledge among the performers and the audience that the phrase "all of me loves all of you" came from a very popular song *All of me* by John Legend, the student who played the wife broke into song as she delivered the required phrase. This

successful use of the required phrase, largely thanks to the student's shift from the ongoing talk into her singing voice, generated a spontaneous laughter from the audience. This shift into a musical performance arguably violated the audience's expectation of the role-play.

4.4 Absence of Laughter

While the dataset included many instances of humorous episodes which were able to generate varying degrees of the audience's laughter, a staggering five out of seven role-plays were unable to generate any audience laughter at all. It is important for us to remind ourselves that humor is not a quality inherent in the formulation of incongruity, but a negotiated effort that unfolds turn-by-turn. To account for the absence of laughter we encountered, we then presented the role-play performances which failed to amuse their audience despite observable incongruity along with some possible explanations.

In this dataset, there were several incidents where a long pause was observed following a turn constructed with incongruity. We identified the sequences which contained pauses in this environment and the absence of laughter was then explored. Particularly, we discussed two types of failures which led to absences of laughter in multiple occasions: the failure from clearly establishing the roles and situations to the audience and the failure to execute the controlled phrase appropriately.

4.1.1 Failure to Establish the Roles and Context of the Role-Play

Excerpt 5 is taken from a role-play taking place at a cat café. The role-play started with one student ordering a sandwich and another student taking hers at the cash register. This excerpt started after that food ordering sequence was completed. The student who played the staff remained in the role-play, while the one who played the customer exited the stage area. Another student (Student 3)

entered the role-play and started talking to the student who played the role of café staff earlier.

Excerpt 5

17 Student 3: Wo:w (.) A new girl is coming=
18 Café staff: =uhm she surely has an eye on us.
19 Student 3: Absolutely.
20→ (3.4)

To the audience at this point, it was unclear what characters these two students were trying to portray. This information was revealed later at the end of the role-play when the instructor asked if they were acting out as cats, including the café staff who had also switched to playing one of the cats. This knowledge was not available to the audience when this role-play was performed, and this unfortunately rendered much of the dialogues incomprehensible to the audience, let alone finding the role-play performance funny at all.

However, with an understanding of what roles students were playing, we could understand the role-play interaction in a different light. In line 18 when the café staff commented that “she” surely had an eye on them, she was referring to the customer, who was not participating in the role-play with them at the time. There was an incongruity between the lack of attention from the customer and the cats’ assessment of the situation. Firstly, Student 3 (who played Cat 1) made use of positive assessment tokens like “Wow” (line 17). The second cat (café staff) then formulated a hyperbole observation “surely” had eyes on us in line 18, and finally, an extreme agreement token from Student 3, “Absolutely,” (line 19). Arguably, the audience’s laughter was expected in line 20 at the 3.4 seconds silence. The following excerpt provides an example of the unsuccessful launch of a humorous episode despite the embedded incongruity.

Figure 1*Setup of Students Positions for Excerpts 1-3*

Evidently, to communicate and set up clear context and scenario to their audience was difficult, and this seemed to be what this group of students were struggling with. Some conversations could invoke an understanding of the context and the roles attached to them more easily than others. From the earlier examples in excerpts 1-3, the setup of two students sitting in the middle and two standing on the sides (Fig. 1), when the moderators started introducing the seated members, invoked a clear understanding that this situation was at a political debate. This was also easily recognizable at the beginning of the cat café role-play when there was a café staff talking to the customer. As we can see in Figure 2, the student with a small board on her hands played the café staff, and another played a customer. If the set up was not obvious enough, their dialogue also made it clear who was playing who without much explanation or setup needed. Unfortunately, when the role-play shifted its setting and the roles (see Fig. 3), there was not enough indicator for the audience to grasp that they were now watching two cats pining for the customer's attention.

Figure 2*Setup of Student Positions at the Beginning of the Cat Café Role-Play***Figure 3***Setup of Student Positions for Excerpt 5***4.1.2 Failure to Use the Controlled Phrase Appropriately**

One of the challenges of this role-play activity was that students had to use the “controlled phrase,” randomly selected by the method of drawing lots, in their role-play. We saw an example when the use of controlled phrase had successfully generated laughter from the audience in Excerpt 4. Usually, the use of controlled phrase can be a source of great hilarity when used by a highly skilled performer. For example, in the game *Word Sneak* played several times on the *Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon*, two people must sneak the required words or phrases into their ongoing conversation. It is funny to watch how these people sneak in an array of random words into their turns as the audience watches their talk unfolds. While

the concept of using required words or phrases can be hilarious, executing the task can be very challenging, especially for language learners. In our dataset, all except two groups' interactions that included the controlled phrases failed to generate any laughter at all.

Excerpt 6 is an example of a failure to use the controlled phrase appropriately. This excerpt was taken from the final part of a role-play situation which occurred in an abandoned temple where a group of friends were playing with a Ouija board. One of the friends, Rachel (R), went to the toilet and came back with blood covering her head. Her friends mistook her as a ghost and got scared. At the beginning of this excerpt, we saw how Rachel finally informed her friends she was not a ghost, and one of the friends, Nat (N), noticed that she was still alive.

Excerpt 6

26	R:	Guys, (.4) I'm here (.2) help me.
27		(.9)
28	N:	Oh my go:d you're still alive?
29	R:	Yes
30		(.2)
31	R:	and I'm bleeding to death right now!
32		(.7)
33	R:	but (.) it is never (.2) easy for me (.2) >to be<
34		(.4) so good-looking.
35→		(.8)
36	R:	.thhh
37		(.3)

The controlled phrase assigned to this group was "*It's never easy for me to be so good looking*," which was quite a tricky phrase, very rarely used in real life situations. In the role-play, the placement of this phrase was at the very last turn after a confirmation check by Nat in line 28, and a confirmation by Rachel in line 29. After a brief pause, Rachel then provided additional information linking to the previous sequence with "and," saying that she was alive *and* "bleeding to death" at that same moment. There was no further contribution from her group members as we could see a long pause of 0.7 seconds in line 32. Then, the controlled phrase was launched in line 33, disconnected to the previous turns, unclear on who the

intended recipient of that turn was. Using a contrastive discourse marker, “but,” at the turn-initial position somehow made the controlled phrase sound like it had a connection to the previous turns. However, making the phrase “It’s never easy for me to be so good-looking” stand in contrast to the fact that she was bleeding to death did not seem to make enough sense to the audience. Then, the role-play ended. There was no audience laughter until Rachel let out some laughter herself in line 36, which was then followed by more silence before the instructor intervened and pivoted to the next group’s performance.

We saw this pattern multiple times across the dataset where students would stick the controlled phrases at the end of the role-plays when they did not know how or when to use the phrases.

5. Discussions

This study was set out to answer two main research questions:

- 1) What linguistic or sociolinguistic resources that students use to construct incongruity and project “laughable” in their role-play performances?
- 2) Focusing on humorous episodes during student role-play performances, what are the interactional environments where laughter usually occurs?

For the first research question, based on the findings, students constructed incongruity by manipulating category-bound expectations (Excerpt 1), semantic interpretations (Excerpt 2), and activity-bound expectations (Excerpts 3 and 4). Membership categorization analysis (MCA) provided a needed framework to understand how humor was created in this dataset. While never been used in analyzing humor in language classrooms, MCA has been used to analyze humor in sitcom television programs to show how scriptwriters of these show employ ambiguous membership categorization to create humorous incongruities in characters’ interactions (Okazawa, 2021, 2022). As we investigated the humorous

episodes in our dataset, it turned out that students had borrowed their method and was quite successful at creating laughter among their small audience.

Apart from the use of category-bound practices as a base for constructing incongruities, we have also seen how it was used along with other spatial-interactional work to invoke certain contexts and relationships among the role-players, which were crucial in making the role-play understandable and the humor accessible to the audience. We have seen in the results how the group in Excerpts 1-3 was able to invoke the context of political debates through the simple formation of its members, as well as how the use of props, such as a small tablet, could signify the roles of staff and customers at a service encounter interaction. We have learned from the data that achieving this is not always easy, given the fact that classroom environments can be limited in both space and availability of props. Therefore, as instructors, when any role-play activities are used in class, we cannot overlook the importance of guidance and feedback necessary for the students to set up each scene in such a way that all performers' roles and scenarios are obvious to the audience.

Embodied actions are also of great importance to role-play performances, largely to enhance the humorous interpretations of students' performance on several occasions, e.g., Excerpts 2 and 3. In some cases, such as Excerpt 4, the embodied actions even functioned as the "main" message of the role-play when the student performer was struggling to keep a straight face.

For the second research question focusing on sequential environments of humorous episodes, we found that incongruity could be employed in various sequential positions, with some being highly structured, such as Kai's choppy turn in Excerpt 1. The overall sequential organization of this humorous episode contained two question-and-answer pairs done in tandem. The first answer was from Penny, who issued the type conforming expected answer to portray a

competent political candidate; the second one was Kai, who, on the contrary, launched an unexpected answer to the similar question. This overall sequential organization resembled that of a comedic act, juxtaposing a straight man's action to the punch line that twisted the audience's expectations. While some sequence environments for students' laughable could be quite orderly, others could be launched with little to no foreshadowing. For example, in Excerpt 3, the student who played the wife suddenly broke into songs in the middle of her turn protesting her husband's divorce proposal surprised and amused the audience.

Therefore, it can be argued that there were no consistent interactional environments within this role-play dataset where humor was usually launched. Students successfully and unsuccessfully constructed humor in their ongoing role-plays with little foreshadowing and minimal account. This could be a result of the fact that there were no real consequences from violating normative expectations within this role-play activity, and this made creating humor in this type of role-play activity differs significantly from achieving humor in ordinary conversations.

This finding may seem obvious. Many researchers have discussed this inconsequential nature of role-plays (see Huth, 2010 for a nuanced discussion of the relationship between role-plays in inconsequentiality). Some see this quality as a limitation of role-play activities (Bordovi-Harlig & Hartford, 2005; Felix-Brasdefer, 2007; Gass & Houck, 1999). Some see this as a strength as it offers opportunities for learners to experiment with language use in a safe environment for language plays (Bushnell, 2009; Pomerantz & Bell, 2011).

In this study, while we acknowledge that the inconsequential aspect of role-plays can mitigate the benefits students could gain from showcasing or practicing real-life interactions, it opens up unlimited possibilities for students to show and practice other skills. Our results have shown that, through their role-play performances, students do display their understanding of category-bound actions

of various competent memberships of speech practices, from a political moderator, political candidates, and café staff during a service encounter. In fact, underneath all violations of expectations which had successfully led to humorous episodes, we could see students' solid understanding of ordinary conversation behind their clever ways to manipulate those expectations for humorous effects.

6. Practical Implications

From this study, there are two practical guides for teachers who wish to use a role-play activity in class. First, give students feedback on whether their roles and context that they are portraying are clear. Using membership categories and discuss their knowledge of category bound practices can be of great resources for the students. This can also be a great topic for discussions after each role-play to make explicit these understanding for all students who may have missed the joke during their classmates' performances. Afterall, this activity appears to be an environment where the students get to practice their humor delivery and observe many incidents where other students successfully and unsuccessfully deliver their humors.

For our final suggestion, because students in our study struggled while trying to employ the controlled phrases as a source of incongruity in many of the role-plays, it would be better if teachers check how students use these phrases in their scripts before their role-play delivery. Teachers can opt to teach how each controlled phrase usually fits in ordinary conversations at the beginning of the session before assigning them to the groups. We see this to have a huge benefit for students' acquisition of sociocultural competence which they would otherwise rarely get exposed to.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, it is undeniable that humor is an irreplaceable part of human nature, and we cannot deny its usefulness for language learning. Given its

desirability, we echo Davies' (2003) recognition that an ability to produce and understand humor is an important part of communicative competence for language learners. Yet, given the large proportion of unfunny performances in our data, it must be emphasized that creating humor is no simple feat. What we can observe from these role-plays is a wide range of students' abilities to execute funniness. Our analysis has shed some light on the fact that students are able to masterfully construct incongruities by relying on their knowledge of membership categories and their skills to employ them in sequentially competent manners. From this study, we hope that teachers do not take students' ability to be funny for granted. Instead, teachers can view this as an opportunity to help students bridge the gaps of knowledge and skills necessary for them to learn how to be funny in their foreign languages.

8. About the Authors

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11. Appendices

Appendix 1 “Drama and Creativity” Activity Instruction

Role-play activity:

Instructions: Count 1-4 and gather with people with the same number so that you will get to associate with new friends.

Each group will be given:

- 1) Theme/ Genre
- 2) Scene/ Setting
- 3) Controlled phrase

(See Appendix 2.)

Each of the above is different and it will be selected in a random manner.

Rules:

- 1) All of you have to be involved in the role-play.
- 2) The role-play is going to be based on the theme/genre and scene/setting provided and the restricted words have to be used in the role-play.
- 3) You may use anything you have as props for the role-play and feel free to be creative.
- 4) You are given 30 minutes to prepare a short script consisting of at least 15 turns
- 5) You are given no longer than 10 minutes to perform your role-play in front of the whole class. You will be videorecorded during the performance (a consent form is given to you beforehand).
- 6) At the end of the activity, please evaluate the activity.

Appendix 2

Themes:

- 1) Ghost/supernatural
- 2) Comedy
- 3) Drama
- 4) Action

Places:

- 1) In the temple
- 2) At Fitness First
- 3) In front of the parliament
- 4) At an animal café

Controlled phrases:

- 1) “Frankly, my dear, you smell like candy to me.”
- 2) “It is never easy for me to be so good-looking.”
- 3) “All of me loves all of you.”
- 4) “Today, I consider myself the luckiest man on earth.”