Research note

Humour-integrated language learning (HILL) in perspective, progress and prospect

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Abstract

This research note brings readers' attention to an extensive, ongoing research project named Humour-Integrated Language Learning (HILL). The project investigates HILL as an innovative approach to language education and humour literacy. Within the limits of this short article, HILL is initially conceptualised, and then, an outline of the project is provided. Then, I describe ongoing lines of the research, giving a snapshot of the preliminary results. Finally, future directions of the HILL project are elaborated on.

Keywords: HILL, language learning, humour competency, L2 proficiency .

1. Introduction

Language education today largely pivots on the notion of language as a means of communication. Communicative competence, in turn, includes (and entails) tacit or explicit knowledge of humour (Prichard & Rucynski 2020). Hence, the discussion of second language (L2) humour has recently gained prominence in the relevant literature (see Figure 1). The notable interplay between humour and language can also be inferred from the complete or partial reliance of many forms and types of humour (e.g., puns, jokes, comedies) on linguistic resources (Bell & Pomerantz 2016; Heidari-Shahreza 2020). Thus, humour literacy seems a worthwhile goal in language pedagogy, particularly with an eye to the growing need for intercultural fluency. The present note reports on a research project with such pedagogical objectives. Within the space limits of this brief article, I intend to describe an ongoing research project called Humour-Integrated Language Learning (HILL). This project is a major part of the odyssey I have begun in the realm of humour since 2016. It encompasses several studies under the umbrella of HILL.
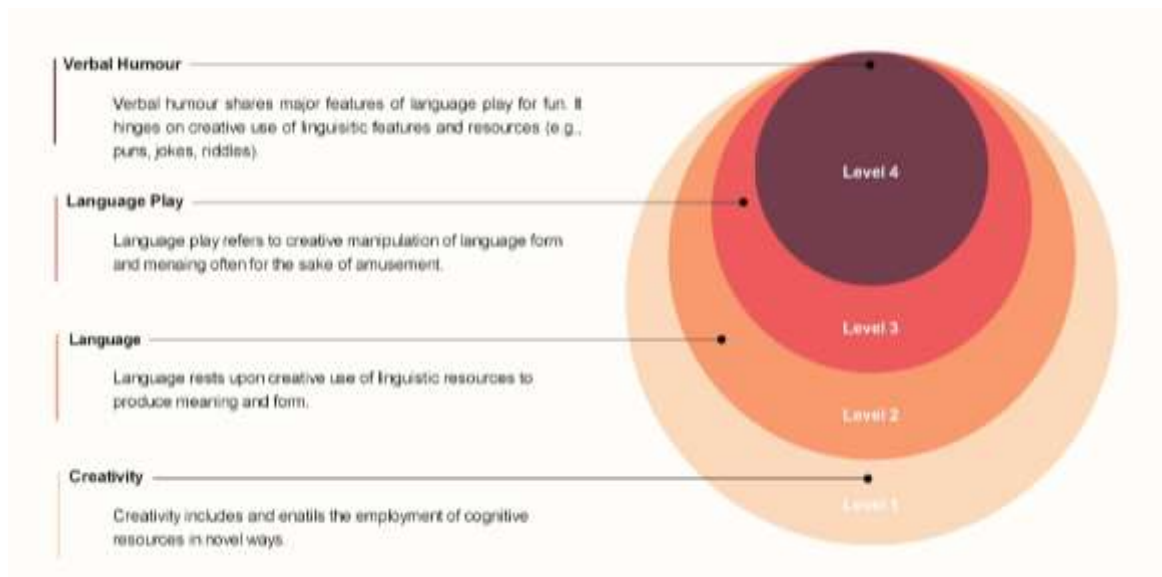
Figure 1. The interplay between humour and language (play)

I will outline my research in three sections. In Section 2, HILL is put 'into perspective'. That is, I will touch upon the notion of humour and language integration and how L2 proficiency and humour competency can be both targeted in HILL. This way, I will put forth a rationale for the approach I advocate. Afterwards, I will elaborate on research methodology, major aims and the project outlook. In Section 3, I will report on work 'in progress,' outline ongoing strands of HILL research project and briefly report on initial findings. In the final section, HILL 'in prospect' is described. Drawing upon the research objectives, I will point out HILL's future directions and potential areas of investigation (see also Figure 2 below).
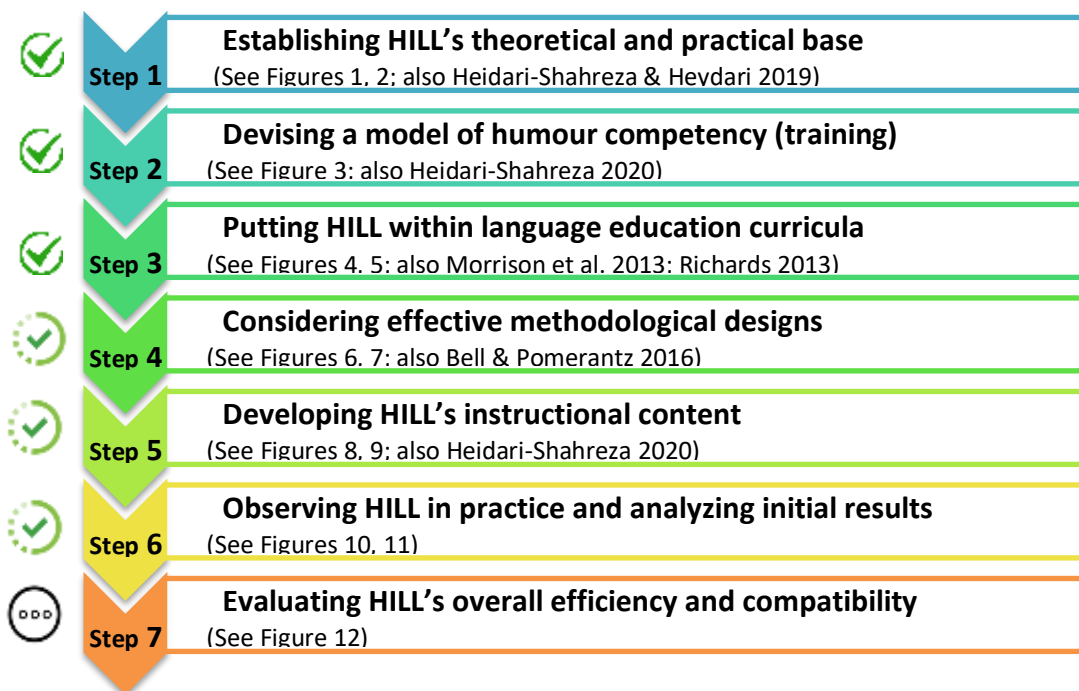

Figure 2. Major steps and objectives of HILL research project

2. HILL in perspective

HILL hinges on the idea of humour and language integration (see Figure 1). It posits that fully developed communicative and linguistic competences of a learner include and entail knowledge of L2 humour (see e.g., Bell & Pomerantz 2016). That is, as an index of *advanced* L2 proficiency, language learners should be able to recognise humorous discourse and react appropriately (see Figure 3; also Heidari-Shahreza 2020). Drawing upon the pedagogical effects of humour, HILL also posits that using humour may be conducive to higher gains in language learning (see e.g., Banas et al. 2011). Thus, *humour as and for language learning* is at the heart of HILL. In other words, this approach strives to enhance learners' humour literacy alongside their language proficiency.
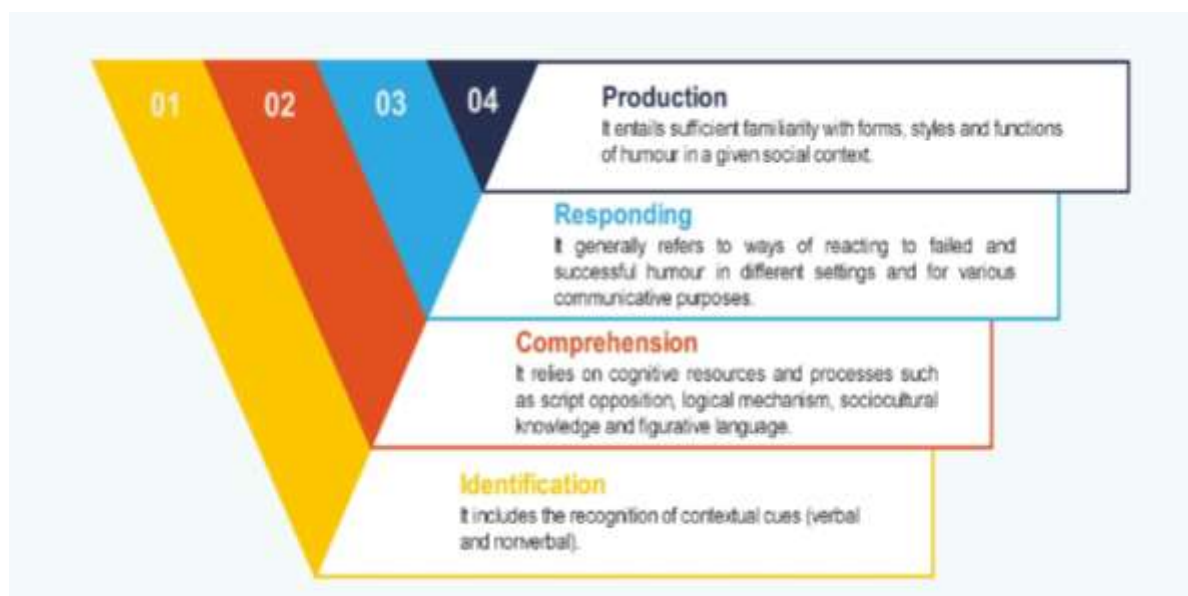

Figure 3. Major components of humour competency (training)

As mentioned, the overarching purpose of HILL is to 'teach/learn with and about humour'. To investigate this pedagogical approach, mixed-methods research was deemed to be most appropriate. Within this research paradigm, (an ethnographic) concurrent nested design (QUAL + Quan) was mainly employed. Hence, observational data obtained from language classrooms were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistical tools. The data were also qualitatively scrutinised (through content and thematic analysis) to probe into different aspects of HILL and to better interpret what quantitative results had to offer. Language classroom humour was chiefly observed in a number of Iranian (language) institutes. For practical reasons, the research focus was narrowed down to only Iranian learners and teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL). Various EFL classes (with intended characteristics) took part in the studies defined as a part of the project. To operationalise the HILL project, seven research steps or objectives were broadly identified (see Figure 2 and respective figures/references). These steps are meant to provide only a bird's eye view of what this project has aimed to address. Obviously, more could be included; but due to space considerations, only a snapshot is provided here.
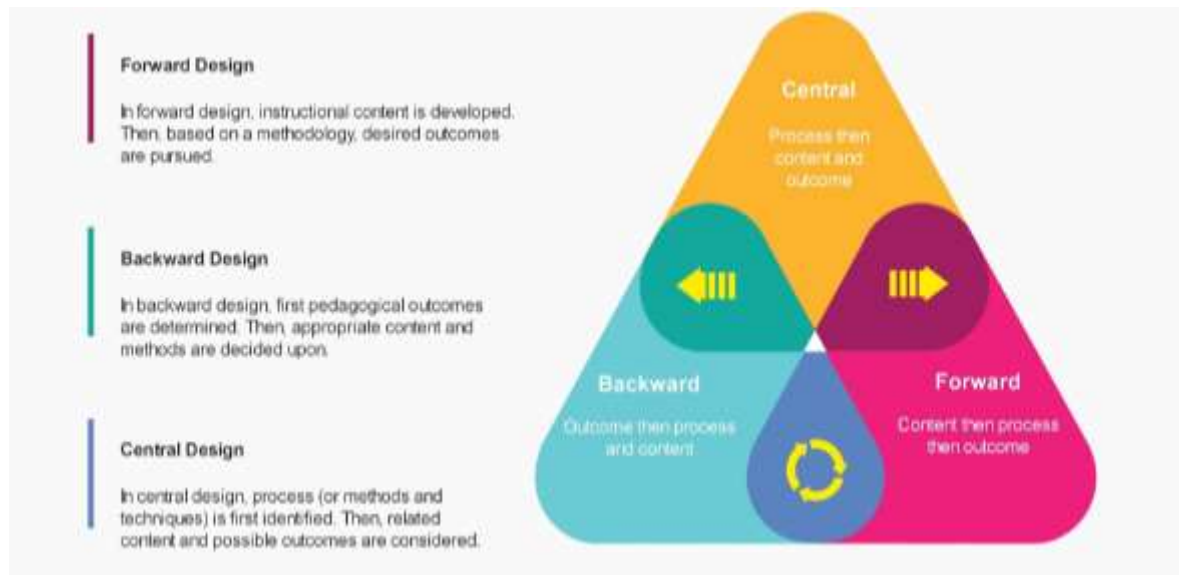
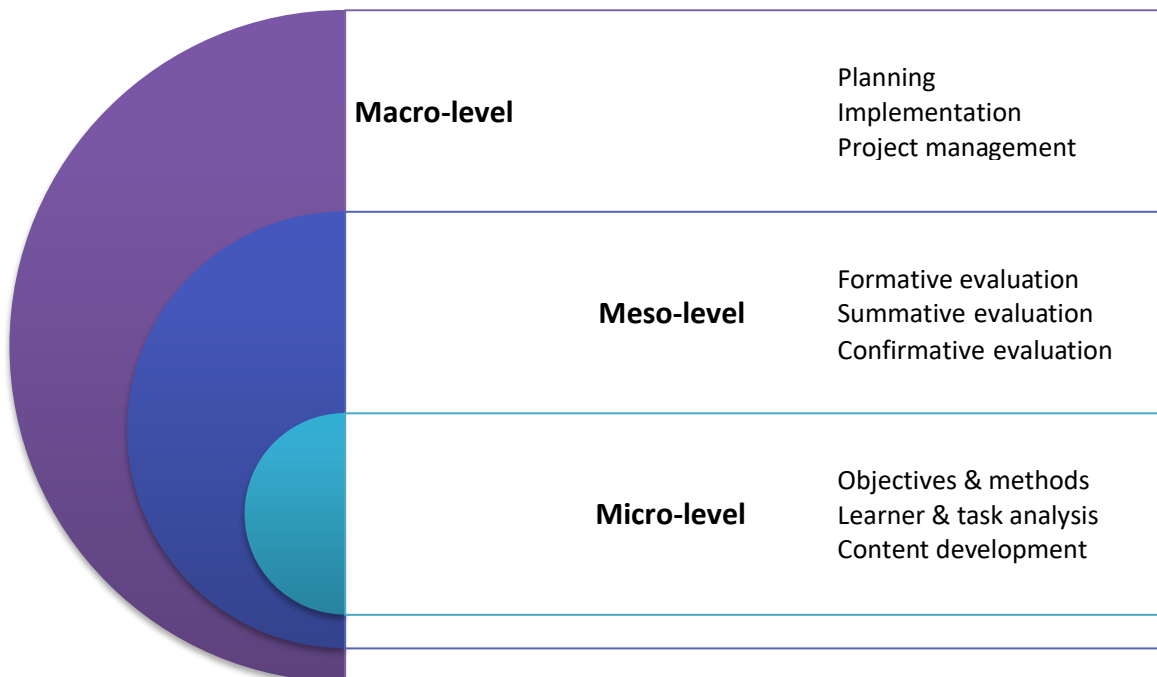Figure 4. HILL's overall curriculum design approaches based on Richards (2013)

Figure 5. HILL's overall instructional design based on Morrison et al. (2013)

3. HILL in progress

While, theoretically speaking, the HILL project may need to be revised at any stage, as Figure 2 indicates, steps one, two and three are already addressed. That is, HILL is conceptualised within humour and (language) pedagogy scholarship. A pedagogical, practical framework is also put forth to teach with and about humour. Steps four, five and six are, however, in progress. This, in practice, means three lines of research are still going on. Firstly, different instructional designs are being examined. In this regard, a 'backward design' was initially employed to create (or curate) learning materials and teach via HILL (see Bell & Pomerantz 2016; Heidari-Shahreza 2020). In doing so, pedagogical outcomes were determined; evidence for attainment was

identified; and humour was, then, incorporated into the language learning process and content (see Figure 5 below). Other approaches to curriculum development (e.g., forward, central) are being investigated (see Figures 6 and 7).
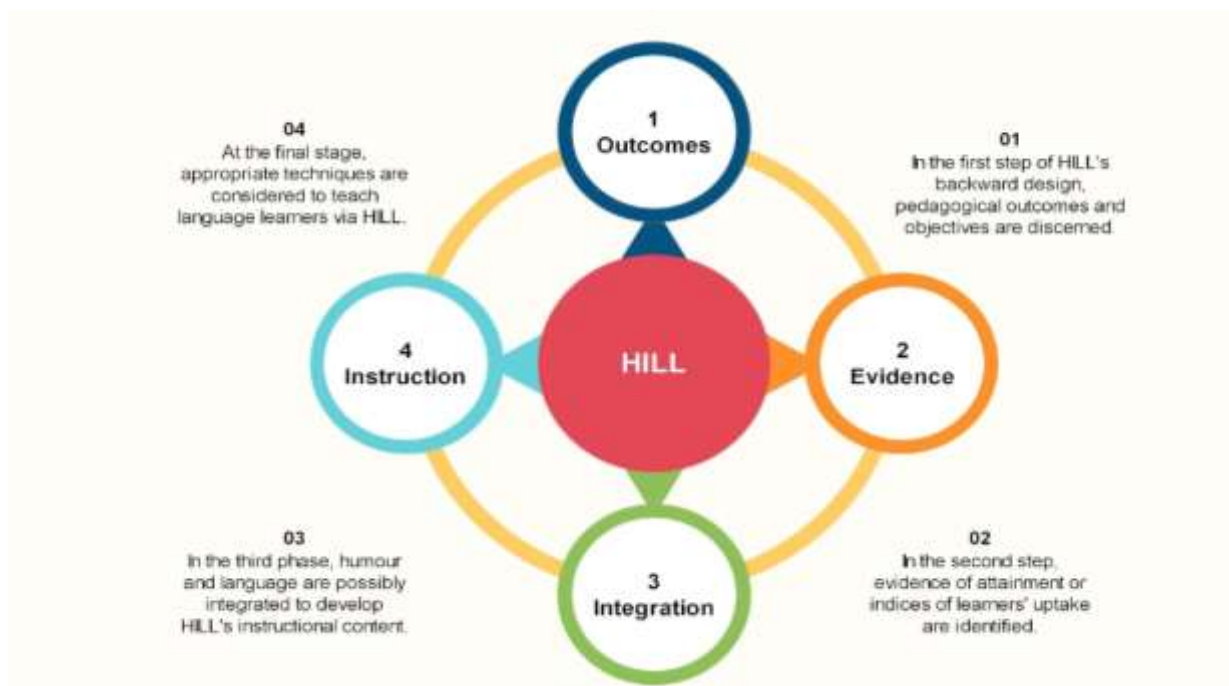

Figure 5. HILL's instructional cycle, a modified version of backward design

Figure 6. HILL's ongoing research strand in an online context with a forward design
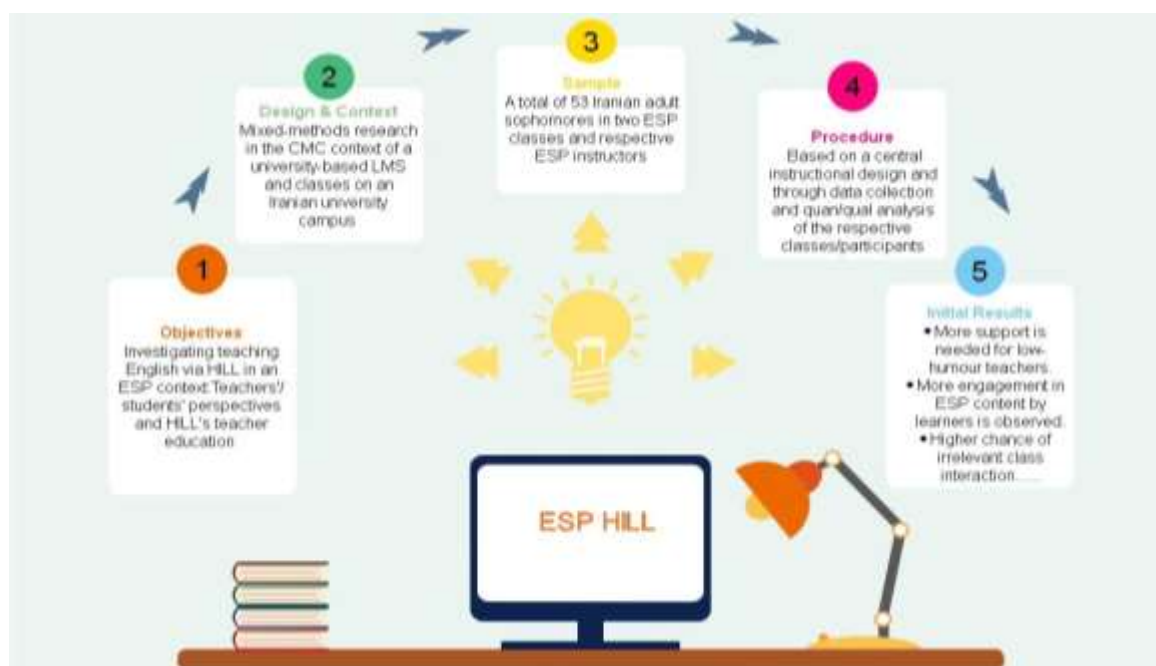
Figure 7. HILL's ongoing research strand in an ESP context with a central design

The second area of work in progress concerns HILL's materials development (see Figures 8 and 9; also, Heidari-Shahreza 2020). As both humour and language are to be taught, the challenge is doubled. In other words, HILL's materials should possibly include some aspect of L2 humour while simultaneously having language learning potential. Although ideas abound, a myriad of factors may come to play a role. For example, the amount, type and dominance of either language or humour learning input can make important differences. In this respect, so far, several humour forms (e.g., short funny stories, sitcom video clips and cartoons) have been employed to develop HILL's materials within a language-dominated instructional cycle (see Heidari-Shahreza 2020).

Pedagogical Outcomes	
Language component	**Humour component**
-Learners' L2 reading comprehension at the elementary level will be improved. -New vocabulary & grammar in the reading will be (implicitly) learned. -Learners' intercultural knowledge will be enhanced.	-Learners will be familiar with the structure of a 'funny story' as a form of humour. -Learners will learn how two 'opposite scripts' work together to create humour. -Learners will see an example of 'cultural humour'.
Evidence of Attainment	
Language component	**Humour component**
-Learners will show understanding of complex sentences. -Learners will be able to guess the meaning of new vocabulary and use them in similar contexts. -Learners will show their intercultural awareness through discussing how their culture is similar or different from English culture.	-Learners will be able to identify the 'punch line'. -Learners will be able to explain why the story is funny; what works against the presumed interpretation. -Learners will set examples of cross-cultural differences that may cause laughter.

Figure 8. An example of HILL's backward design: Outcomes and evidence

Integration & Instruction
1. Teacher asks learners to skim through the passage in their groups.
2. One student from each group tells the class what the story is about.
3. Next, teacher reads the passage, dealing with any grammar or lexis that may be troublesome for learners.
4. Afterwards, learners are instructed to do reading comprehension questions in their groups.
5. Teacher, then, directs them to humour activities.
6. Firstly, class addresses "what is funny in the story?"
7. Teacher, then, asks learners how black and white are misinterpreted by the boy in the story.
8. Learners try to spot where in the story humour is realized.
9. They discuss about the different connotations of colors across cultures.
10. Teacher encourages them to find funny examples of such differences.

HILL Materials

Funny story

Mrs. Robinson was a teacher in a big school in a city in America. She had boys and girls in her class, and she always enjoyed teaching them, because they were quick, and because they thought about everything very carefully. One day she said to the children, "People in a lot of countries in Asia wear white clothes at funerals, but people in America and in Europe wear white clothes when they're happy. What colour does a woman wear in this country when she marries, Mary?" Mary said, "White, Miss, because she's happy." "That's good, Mary," Mrs. Robinson said. "You're quite right. She wears white because she's happy."

    But then one of the boys in the class put his hand up. "Yes, Dick!" Mrs. Robinson said. "Do you want to ask something?" "Yes, please, Miss," Dick said, "Why do men wear black in this country when they marry, Miss?"

Source: Leslie A. Hill. 1982. *Elementary Steps to Understanding*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Figure 9. An example of HILL's backward design: Integration, instruction and materials

The third strand of this ongoing research project addresses the practical side of HILL. Metaphorically, putting the HILL ship to water might unmask unpredicted challenges. Therefore, observing target language classes, surveying learners and teachers and probing into contextual factors seem vital (see Figures 10 and 11; also, Heidari-Shahreza & Heydari 2019).

Higher Enjoyment
It enlightens class ambience and increases learners' engagement and enjoyment.

Higher Uptake
It aids teaching delivery, learning uptake and second language development.

Higher Motivation
It lowers affective filters and enhances motivation, participation and satisfaction.

Higher Interaction
It increases immediacy behaviours and facilitates class management and interaction.

Lower Authority
It decreases teacher's class authority, making class management difficult.

Lower L2 Use
It may increase L1 use and decrease class interaction in L2.

Lower Immediacy
It can be prone to cultural misunderstanding and making learners feel offended.

Lower Instruction
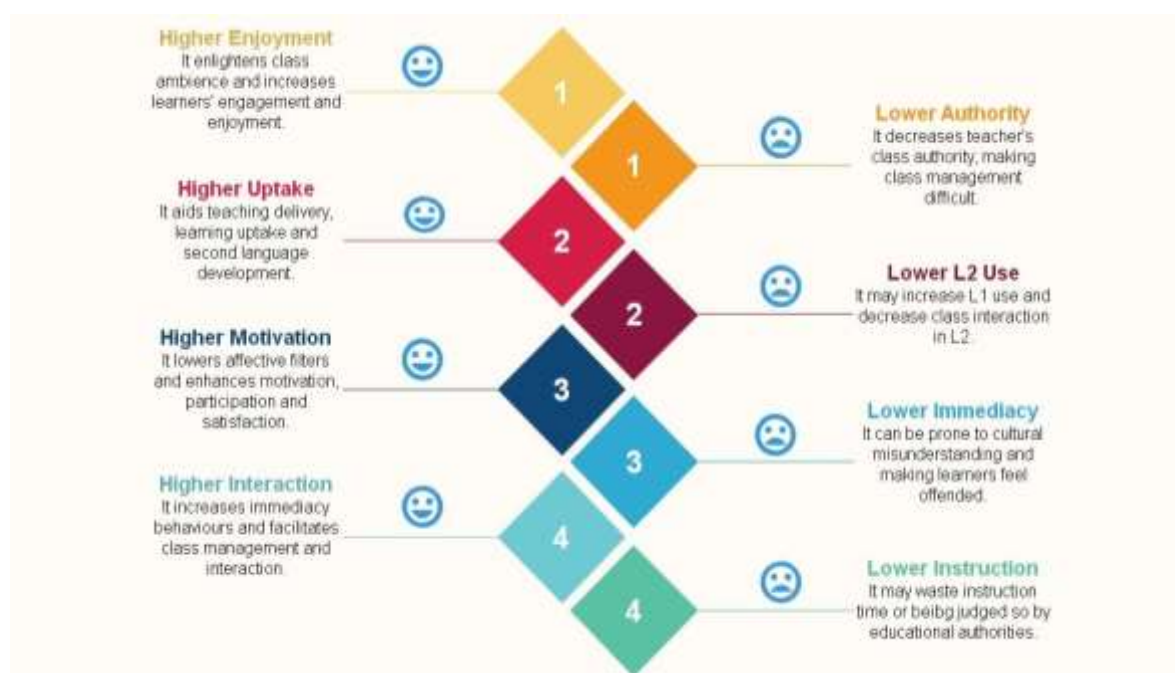It may waste instruction time or beibg judged so by educational authorities.

Figure 10. Teacher humour: Perceived benefits and concerns

So far, the HILL research project has shed light, more or less, on a) the interplay between humour and language, b) how humour can be integrated to help language learners become more successful L2 communicators, c) how HILL can become a part of the gestalt of language education as well as of humour literacy, and d) what practical precautions are due for successful implementation of HILL. For instance, it was found that language learners' use of humour could be an index of their L2 ultimate proficiency. Humour was also found to be a safe house (i.e., a secure social milieu) for them to experiment with different identities, have their voices heard, and enjoy pedagogical tasks (Heidari-Shahreza & Heydari 2019; see also Pomerantz & Bell 2011). In addition to generally winning the favour of learners, HILL was an attraction to language teachers, particularly those seeking more 'humanistic', effective approaches to language education. That said, some teachers seem to need training on HILL in different respects ranging from updating their educational mindset to getting equipped with appropriate techniques to implement HILL (see Figures 6,7,10 and 11).
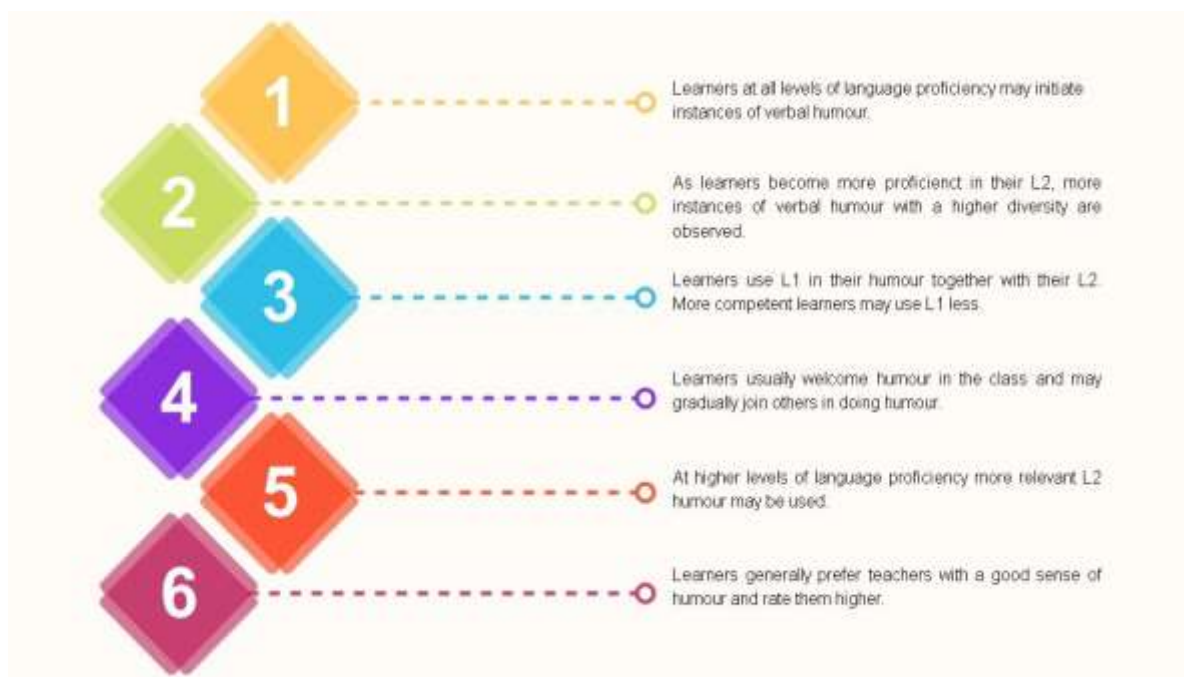

Figure 11. Learner humour across L2 proficiencies

4. HILL in prospect

HILL, as a new approach in language and humour education, certainly has a long way to go. Hence, quite a number of un(der)-explored areas await further investigation. This project, in the short run, will investigate four research avenues (see Figure 12 below).

Firstly, it will widen its research scope to include more educational stakeholders. In addition to language teachers (and learners) who are directly concerned with HILL, the project will also consider the role of other educational decision makers such as school boards, teacher educators and parents. Secondly, effects of HILL in different educational contexts (e.g., formal/informal, online/face to face) will be compared to discern if initial (positive) effects will be maintained across various contexts and what HILL requires to function optimally in such settings. A third avenue for further research will be HILL's compatibility with other (language) teaching paradigms. While preliminary ideas about how HILL may safely be embedded in such approaches have already been laid out (see Heidari-Shahreza 2020; also, Prichard & Rucynski

2020), more insights should be gained to ensure HILL's full compatibility. To this aim, communicative language teaching (CLT), task-based language teaching (TBLT), competency-based instruction (CpBI) and computer-assisted language learning (CALL) are of particular interest to this project. The fourth strand of research deals with educational efficiency. In the context of this project, efficiency is broadly defined as the sum of major variables in an educational context that determine the overall quality and success of education. Although many factors can be involved in and informed by the relevant literature (see e.g. Banas et al. 2011; Bell & Pomerantz 2016), the project is going to examine variables such as skills transferability, teacher education, materials development, etc.
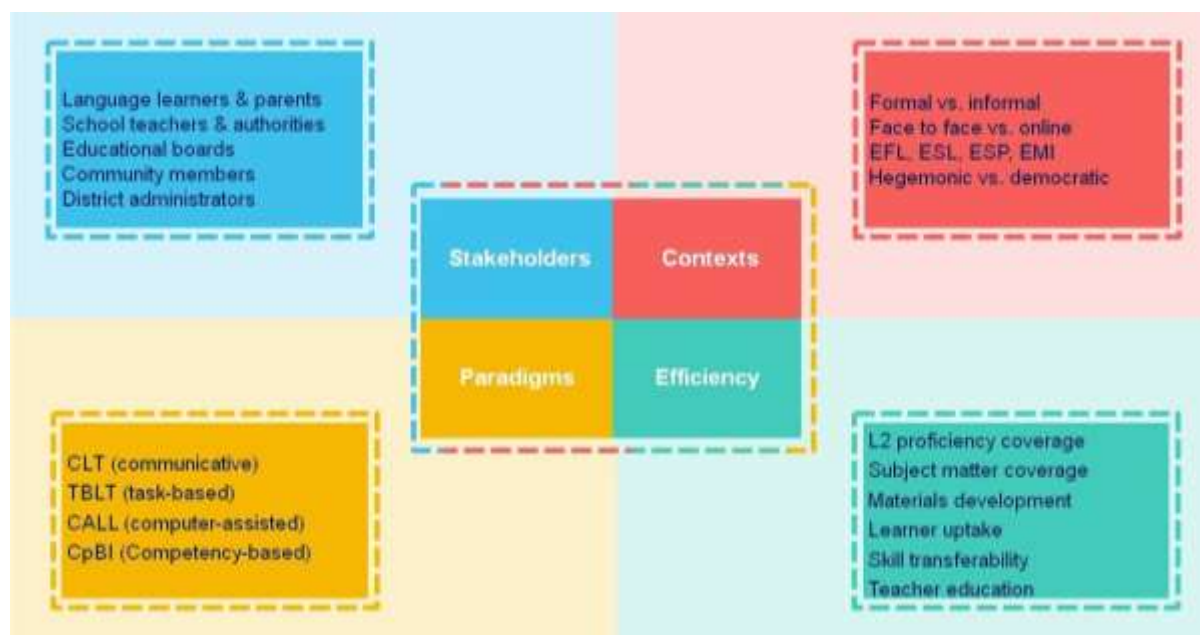

Figure 12. HILL's future directions and areas of investigation

5. Conclusion

Although HILL as a pedagogical approach is still in its infancy, I hope this research project can shed light on how it may successfully be developed and implemented in language settings. With the support of other researchers, it can contribute valuable insights to the burgeoning field of L2 (pedagogical) humour and bridge the humour barrier in language education.

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