Exploring L2 Learners' Pragmatic Competence Through Jokes

A Qualitative Study of Swedish Upper Secondary Students' Pragmatic Competence when Interpreting Canned Jokes.

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Abstract

This study investigates Swedish upper secondary students' pragmatic competence in the English 6 course. The aim is to study jokes potential to support their pragmatic development, potential difficulties in interpreting jokes and how a lesson centered on jokes influences the classroom climate. To this end, a lesson was conducted that included a warm-up activity, a pre-reading task, and required students to read a selection of jokes and complete a questionnaire consisting of Likert-scale items and open-ended questions. The responses were analyzed using content analysis and categorized to identify the most frequent response-patterns. The results revealed that most students struggled to derive the implicatures of the jokes, largely due to limited schematic knowledge necessary for interpretation. Consequently, their access to the humor was restricted, and although some jokes were perceived as funny, students often had difficulty explaining why. Finally, the findings indicate that students would have preferred a lesson focused on the oral delivery of jokes rather than reading them, suggesting a lack of motivation when engaging with longer jokes.

Keywords: Implicature, Incongruence-resolution, Schema theory, Canned jokes, Lesson, Questionnaire, Upper secondary school, English 6, Pragmatic competence.

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1 Introduction

Educational research continually seeks innovative and engaging methods to enhance student learning and motivation. Within the field of linguistics, considerable attention has been given to the role of humor in the classroom. Studies suggest that humor can boost student motivation and improve learning outcomes particularly when it contributes to a safe and positive classroom climate (Banas et al., 2011, pp. 116, 135–136).

Nevertheless, humorous communication remains a complex phenomenon in educational contexts (Bell, 2009, pp. 241–242). One challenge is that humor—particularly jokes—often relies on cultural background knowledge that may not be shared by all learners, including advanced second-language (L2) students (Bell, 2011, pp. 136–137). This cultural dependency can limit both teachers' effective use of humor and students' ability to access it. Simultaneously, the development of students' pragmatic competence—the ability to infer meaning beyond what is explicitly stated—is widely regarded as essential for successful language acquisition (Bell, 2011, p. 134).

Despite these connections, research that directly examines students' pragmatic ability to interpret humor remains limited, particularly studies focusing on joke comprehension and the specific challenges L2 learners face when interpreting jokes. Furthermore, given that jokes are culturally recognizable, concise, grammatically rich, pragmatically demanding, and often function as short narratives (Trachtenberg, 1979, p. 90), they hold considerable potential as learning materials through which students can practice pragmatic skills. Shershow (2021) further notes that although jokes are predominantly preferred in oral form, written jokes are produced, shared, and enjoyed to an equal extent (p. 248), which suggests that jokes also intersect with reading-related activities. Reading is understood as a meaning-making process shaped by written information, the readers' current knowledge and the surrounding context, and as a vital skill for learners in developing deeper textual understanding (Yon et al., 2024, p. 1292). Because interpreting jokes requires readers to draw on contextual cues, resolve ambiguity, and infer implicit meaning, joke comprehension naturally overlaps with the inferential processes central to reading. Written jokes can therefore potentially support not only the development of pragmatic competence but also the strengthening of reading skills.

Accordingly, the aim of this essay is to examine the integration of jokes into classroom instruction, with particular attention to their potential to support reading practice and foster the development of students' pragmatic competence.

1.1 Aim and Research Questions

This study aims to contribute to humor research by implementing a classroom lesson and examining students' levels of pragmatic competence as well as their perceptions of jokes.

To achieve this aim, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. To what extent do Year 2 upper secondary English students interpret the same jokes differently? If there are differences in their interpretations, what causes the interpretations to be different?

2. To what extent do Year 2 upper secondary English students find different jokes funny? If there are differences in their perceptions, what are possible causes for these?

3. What are the upper secondary students' attitudes to the English lesson that incorporated jokes?

2 Theoretical Background

This section begins by defining the jokes included in the study, followed by a linguistically oriented overview of the essay's theoretical framework. It concludes with a summary of the pedagogical benefits of using jokes in education and a review of previous research relevant to the present study.

2.1 Defining Jokes

The jokes examined in this essay are defined as canned jokes. These typically follow a pre-established structure, consisting of a short narrative, or in this case a setup, which usually end with an unexpected twist, or a punchline (Attardo, 2015, p. 172). Understanding a joke requires awareness of its context, i.e., the joke recipient must be aware that a joke is taking place to understand the meaning of the information being conveyed. This is usually conveyed by the speaker giving a cue, or by the structure of the joke itself (Aarons, 2012, p. 26).

2.2 Linguistic Features in Jokes

The canned jokes examined in this study contain implied meanings that can be derived from their punchlines, which the joke recipient must process for the joke to be understood. This often requires the activation of the students' prior knowledge related to the context of the joke. The following section describes three key aspects of joke interpretation - implicature, incongruity-resolution and schema theory.

2.2.1 Implicature

During a conversation, a speaker can generate implicature, or implied meaning, in order to communicate something additional to what is said (Aarons, 2012, p. 27). When participants in the conversation try to decode the implied meaning, it is assumed that they operate through cooperative rules known as the cooperative principle. According to this principle, people expect their conversation partner to make their contributions appropriate for the goal of the current conversation (Yule, 2023, p. 162) and is described by four maxims (statements expressing a general truth).

These four conversational maxims are defined as follows (Aarons, 2012, p. 24):

The first is the maxim of Quantity, which is based on the following rules:

- Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange).
- Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

The second is the maxim of Quality, which is based on the following rules:

- Do not say what you believe to be false.
- Do not say that for which you lack evidence.

The third is the maxim of Manner, which is based on the following rules:

- Avoid obscurity of expression.
- Avoid ambiguity.
- Avoid being long-winded.
- Be orderly.

The final one is the maxim of Relation, which is based on the following rule:

- Be relevant.

Aarons states that people who initiate a joke flout (intentionally disregard) the conversational maxims to create conversational implicatures, and that these implicatures are typical for humorous communication such as jokes (Aarons, 2012, pp. 26–27). Since there is an underlying expectation that the cooperative principle is in effect, the joke recipient is expected to understand the speaker's intention that a joke is taking place and be prompted to look for the implicature in the utterance made (p. 24). If there is no indication that the participants are in the process of joking, the joke recipient might not realize that the implicature is meant to be interpreted as a joke, which will risk causing confusion instead of humor (p. 26).

The following joke illustrates how flouting conversational maxims can generate implicature (Yus, 2017a, 192):

> *The newlywed wife said to her husband when he returned from work:*
>
> *"I have great news for you! Soon we are going to be three in the house"!*
>
> *Her husband ran up to her with a smile on his face and delight in his eyes.*
>
> *He was glowing with happiness and kissing his wife when she said:*
>
> *"I am glad you feel that way, since tomorrow morning, my mother moves in with us".*

This joke flouts three of Grice's conversational maxims, generating implicature through ambiguity and misdirection:

- Maxim of Manner: The wife's opening statement is deliberately vague, leading the husband—and the audience—to infer a pregnancy announcement. The final line reveals that this assumption was unfounded, creating surprise and humor.
- Maxim of Quantity (twice): First, insufficient information is given in the wife's initial statement to clarify the true meaning. Second, the joke omits the husband's reaction to the revelation, prompting the audience to imagine it themselves and contributing to the humorous effect.
- Maxim of Relation: The wife's first comment establishes a misleading relevance, suggesting a major life event (pregnancy). The punchline then subverts this expectation, relying on the audience's familiarity with idiomatic expressions and their typical associations.

Attardo (1990) claims that the punchline in jokes is usually what creates the implicature and that deriving the information in the implicature is necessary for the joke recipient to appreciate the humor (p. 358). If the punchline is explained explicitly, it loses its humorous effect. Since the maxim of quantity determines how much information a speaker provides, Attardo suggests that flouting the maxim of quantity (by deliberately giving too little information) is a necessary condition for canned jokes to function effectively (ibid).

2.2.2 Schema Theory

When processing and interpreting stories, we draw on prior knowledge, or schemas, which shape our expectations as we encounter new information. Eysenck and Keane (1990) describe schemas as "organized packets of information" stored in long-term memory (p. 305). These schemas contain general knowledge of objects and events and are activated when we process information in a story or joke. Schemas consist of two components:

- Frames, which contain information about the physical environment or objects. For example, if a bird schema is activated, the frame prompts recall that birds typically have beaks, tails, and wings, while also allowing for variation in features such as color and size (Martin, 2007, p. 86).
- Scripts, which contain information about events or activities. For instance, if a restaurant schema is activated, the script recalls the routine typically associated with dining out, such as sitting at a table, ordering food, and paying the bill (ibid).

Schemas help establish predictability in what we encounter and shape our expectations about what is to come (Eysenck & Keane, 1990, p. 401)—a process comparable to interpreting a joke. When a listener hears the setup of a joke, a schema is activated, enabling the retrieval of information necessary to interpret the punchline (Yus, 2017b, p. 105). This retrieval process depends on culture-specific knowledge and prior experiences, which provide the basis for understanding new information (Tannen, 1993, p. 16).

The following example illustrates how schematic knowledge is retrieved and processed in a joke (Yus, 2017b, p. 107):

> *A police officer in Washington D.C. stops a lady and asks for her license.*
>
> *He says: "Lady, it says here that you should be wearing glasses."*
>
> *The woman answers: "Well, I have contacts."*

The police officer replies: "I don't care who you know! You're getting a ticket!"

In this case, the driver's license states that the woman should be wearing "glasses," which activates the glasses schema in the mind of the joke recipient. The schema is then extended to the word "contacts," interpreted in the context of eyewear. However, in the policeman's final response, the joke recipient is confronted with a different "contacts" schema—one referring to social connections rather than eyewear—resulting in a conflict between the two. Understanding the joke depends on the ability to recognize and shift between these competing schemas; without access to the appropriate schemas, the humor may be lost.

2.2.3 Incongruity in Jokes

When processing a joke, an incongruity (inconsistency) occurs. Resolving this incongruity is considered a key condition for humor to occur (Martin, 2007, p. 64). The setup prompts listeners to form expectations and predict the outcome of the story, while the punchline introduces information that is unexpected and inconsistent with what preceded it, thereby creating incongruence (Yus, 2017b, p. 103).

Canned jokes rely on the resolution of incongruity to be successful (Martin, 2007, p. 200). When encountering incongruity, the recipient is typically surprised and motivated to search for an interpretation that aligns with the punchline. This process often involves revisiting the setup to identify information that can be reinterpreted in a way that fits the punchline. Humor is achieved when both the setup and punchline cohere (Yus, 2017b, p. 105).

Yus (2017b) argues that the perceived humor of incongruity partly depends on the discrepancy between the expected interpretation formed prior to the incongruity and the new interpretation introduced by the punchline (p. 107). He also presents evidence suggesting that greater difficulty in interpretation can enhance the humorous effect, though conflicting findings exist (ibid). In contrast, Martin (2007) contends that a moderate level of mental effort typically produces humor; if a joke is too easy or too difficult to understand, it is unlikely to be perceived as funny (p. 78).

2.3 Benefits of Jokes in Education

Bell (2009) critiques the use of pre-scripted jokes in education, arguing that they do not accurately reflect the humor found in everyday life and natural interaction (p. 243). This position partly responds to Trachtenberg (1979), who similarly emphasizes the importance of

fostering humor in students to encourage a sense of safety in English-speaking environments (p. 90). Trachtenberg highlights several pedagogical benefits of jokes:

- Jokes are short and can be told or taught in minutes.
- They contain material for a lesson in grammar and vocabulary.
- They can take the form of a narrative, suggesting material for reading practice.
- Jokes are common to all cultures, which means that they are recognisable to students.
- Jokes have the potential to elicit humor, which would contribute to a relaxed and safe learning environment (Trachtenberg, 1979, pp. 90–91).

Trachtenberg acknowledges that jokes which are "especially culture-bound" may limit their accessibility and should be ruled out from the classroom. This position is illustrated with the following example, which requires specific knowledge about American urban culture (Trachtenberg, 1979, p. 94):

> *Did I tell you about my Uncle Albert? (no.) Well, he finally figured out a way to get rid of his garbage during the garbage strike. (How?) He just gift-wraps it and puts it in the back of his car.*

By contrast, jokes based on widely familiar schemas—such as zoos, flat tires, or movies—are argued to pose little difficulty for students (Trachtenberg, 1979, p. 93). Thus, understanding humor need not be restricted by culture. Nevertheless, when selecting jokes for classroom use, teachers should avoid those that rely on highly specific cultural knowledge, as these may hinder comprehension. Similarly, students may hesitate to tell their own jokes in front of peers for fear that their humor will not translate well across cultures (Trachtenberg, 1979, pp. 93–94)

2.4 Previous Research

The following section reviews prior studies on humor in educational contexts. This body of research highlights the importance of schematic knowledge in interpreting humor, examines the pedagogical benefits of incorporating jokes, considers the role of explicit instruction in humor-related microskills, and explores how teachers integrate humor into classroom practice. Taken together, these findings provide a basis for the present study.

2.4.1 Pragmatic Challenges of Humor for L2 Learners

Bell (2011) emphasizes the importance of pragmatic understanding in second language acquisition, noting that many English as a Second Language (ESL) instructors employ humor—such as jokes—to make both linguistic and cultural aspects of English more engaging (p. 134). Humor is widely recognized as a valuable tool for establishing and maintaining friendly relationships; however, its reliance on specific language use and cultural knowledge often makes it particularly challenging for L2 learners to both comprehend and employ effectively (p. 136).

To explain the mechanisms underlying humor, Bell (2011) draws on the General Theory of Verbal Humor, which builds on incongruity and schema theories (p. 137). According to Bell, script opposition is especially problematic for L2 learners, as each word in the vocabulary is linked to a network of ideas shaped by individual experience. For humor based on a particular script to succeed, the hearer must have access to the relevant script for the humor to be available (p. 138). For example, a joke about the holidays is likely to be perceived differently depending on the individual's experience with the holiday and gift-giving (Bell, 2009, p. 248).

2.4.2 Explicit Instruction in Microskills

Rucynski and Prichard (2024) advocate for the use of humor as a valuable pedagogical tool (p. 497). They argue that training aimed at developing students' humor competence should follow specific guidelines, including explicit instruction in the most relevant microskills for different forms of humor (p. 501). These microskills are defined as the linguistic and cultural cues that enable learners to recognize, interpret, and decode humor in the target language (ibid). Such training should also incorporate numerous examples drawn from varied contexts (p. 502). In the present study, the microskills targeted are vocabulary and pronunciation, as these appear most relevant to joke interpretation, given that schematic knowledge is closely tied to vocabulary knowledge.

In their study, Rucynski and Prichard examined Japanese university students' ability to detect verbal irony. To support comprehension, infrequent English words were translated into Japanese, and participants were provided access to difficult vocabulary during testing (p. 511). The findings demonstrated that humor competence training improved students' ability to recognize verbal irony (p. 521). Moreover, the authors emphasize that the aim of instruction

should not be to teach humor theory, but rather to create practice opportunities for developing humor competence (p. 502).

2.4.3 Developing Students' Pragmatic Competence

Samatova & Kholmatov (2024) argue for the development of students' pragmatic competence in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) classes (p. 1). They note that many students lack sufficient awareness of the target language culture and often transfer cultural traits from their native language into English communication, which can lead to misunderstandings, particularly in the interpretation of implicatures (ibid). Since humor is often based on the concept of implicature, it can be a helpful technique in developing students' skills in interpreting implied meaning (p. 5).

To explore how these techniques can be used, teachers were interviewed about their use of humor in the classroom. The results indicated that most teachers employ humor spontaneously, depending on the situation, while some plan its use in advance. Samatova & Kholmatov (2024) note that there is no systematic approach to incorporating humor into lessons, though they refer to "universal jokes" as a possible option (p. 6). Additionally, two teachers advocated for the use of jokes in classroom practice, emphasizing that students often lack sufficient cultural knowledge to understand humor from American or British contexts. In such cases, jokes can help students acquire cultural knowledge in the target language (ibid).

2.4.4 Individual Differences in Humor

Research suggests that humor can be interpreted differently depending on whether it is perceived as beneficial or detrimental. Martin (2007) identifies four dimensions of humor: two beneficial forms—affiliative and self-enhancing—which are considered relatively healthy uses of humor for oneself or others, and two detrimental forms—aggressive and self-defeating—which are considered unhealthy uses of humor. These four dimensions are outlined below (p. 211):

- Affiliative humor: the tendency to tell jokes or amusing stories with the intent of entertaining others and fostering relationships and group cohesion.
- Self-enhancing humor: maintaining a positive outlook and using humor to cope with stress or adversity.
- Aggressive humor: employing humor to manipulate, ridicule, or tease others, often through sarcasm, sexist humor or disparagement, typically at the expense of others.

- Self-defeating humor: using humor at one's own expense, such as telling self-deprecating jokes or allowing oneself to be ridiculed for the amusement of others.

Through extensive questionnaire responses, Martin (2002) observed that males tend to engage more frequently in all humor dimensions listed above, especially in detrimental forms of humor—both aggressive (e.g., sarcasm, disparagement) and self-defeating—than females (p. 60). He also notes that adolescents are more likely than adults to engage in affiliative joking and laughter, possibly due to greater involvement in social activities (p. 61). Finally, younger males are reported to use aggressive humor more often than adults (p. 62). These findings suggests that men are more likely to engage with negative forms of humor (Martin, 2007, p. 213). In line with these findings, the present study will account for potential differences between genders and potential preference for aggressive humor, e.g., sarcasm or sexist humor.

3 Methodology

This section outlines the methodology used to address the research questions. It begins with a description of the lesson during which the survey was conducted, followed by a brief overview of the participants. Next, the questionnaire used during the lesson to collect data is described, followed by a description of the joke compendium, which was used in conjunction with the questionnaire. Finally, the method and process for data analysis are presented.

3.1 Lesson

This study partly aims to identify potential causes of variation in joke interpretation and appreciation among upper secondary students. Because joke-telling is a specific communicative activity that can be difficult to examine in natural conversation, an experiment in the form of a lesson was designed to provide a controlled setting for researching humor. Experiments are particularly useful for creating artificial situations in which specific instances of language use can be observed (Wray & Bloomer, 2006, p. 144). They enable researchers to study groups of similar participants and can be tailored to address specific research questions (ibid). A well-constructed experiment also generates relevant data that is straightforward to analyze and can be replicated by other researchers (p. 150).

To further simulate the classroom experience, reading comprehension was chosen as a suitable pedagogical focus. Yon et al. (2024) define reading comprehension as the construction of new meaning from written text, based on the reader's prior knowledge (p.

1293). In the lesson, students engaged with a compendium of five jokes and completed a questionnaire about their interpretations. They were asked to assess the humor, explain their reasoning, and suggest revisions to enhance comedic impact. Finally, they reflected on their overall impression of the lesson and elaborated on what they had learned.

The full lesson plan is presented in Appendix 1. Although originally designed with five stages, only four were executed due to time constraints. The completed stages are described below:

1. Warm-up activity: The students were asked questions about jokes and to tell each other some jokes. This stage aimed to activate their schemata about jokes. Finally, students were asked to reflect on why they found certain jokes funny or not, which was supposed to prepare them for the while-reading activity.
2. Pre-reading activity: The students were pre-taught words selected from the jokes the teacher assumed they were not familiar with (Appendix 2). The researcher practiced pronouncing the words with them, helping to ensure their responses to the questions making up the questionnaire in the next stage were not influenced by a lack of vocabulary knowledge.
3. While-reading activity: The students read the jokes (Appendix 3) and filled in a questionnaire (Appendix 4). The students were instructed to do this individually to prevent influencing each other's answers. At the end of the stage, the researcher collected the questionnaires from the students.
4. Post-reading activity: The students were asked to discuss which jokes they found funny or not. This stage aimed to encourage them to further elaborate on their reactions to the jokes they read and share their reactions with the rest of the class and the researcher.

3.2 Participants

The lesson was conducted with a group 17- to 18-year-old students enrolled in English 6 at an upper secondary school in Sweden, who had met the researcher during their VFU-period. On the day of the lesson, 27 students, 8 males and 19 females, attended the class. One week prior, the students were given a consent form (Appendix 5) from their teacher. Those who consented participated in the study anonymously on the date of the lesson.

3.3 Questionnaire

During the lesson, students were asked to complete a paper-based questionnaire (Appendix 4) while reading a compendium of jokes. As Wray & Bloomer (2006) highlight, questionnaires are effective tools for gathering both qualitative and quantitative data and are useful in addressing a wide range of research questions (p. 158). The questionnaire used in this study contained partially closed questions—namely yes/no items—which allow for quick collection of quantitative data without requiring extended responses. These results can be easily tallied and compared across participants (p. 156). Additionally, two Likert-scale items were included, enabling students to indicate the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with given statements on a scale from one to five (ibid).

In addition to the closed questions, the questionnaire also used open questions to gather qualitative data (Wray & Bloomer, 2006, p. 157). These types of questions allow researchers to elicit more detailed responses, providing insight into individual differences. Given that the research questions in this study aim to explore variations in students' interpretations and opinions about the humor in the jokes, as well as their opinions about the lesson itself, it was necessary to incorporate open-ended questions alongside the closed ones (p. 161).

The questionnaire in this study was designed to answer the research questions mentioned in section 1.1. To address the first and second questions, the questionnaire began with a question regarding the student's gender, allowing for the collection of data on potential differences in interpretation between males and females. This was followed by a Likert-scale question where the students rated how humorous they considered the joke on a scale from one to five, and four open questions that allowed students to give more detailed answers regarding their interpretation of the jokes. Apart from the initial question targeting the students' gender, the same Likert-scale question and open questions were used for each of the five jokes in the compendium.

To investigate the third research question, the questionnaire included an additional Likert-scale item asking students to rate the overall lesson. This was followed by an open-ended question that encouraged students to elaborate on what they felt they had learned during the session.

3.4 Joke Compendium

The jokes accompanying the questionnaire were arranged in ascending order of complexity, beginning with those whose implicatures the researcher considered easiest to interpret and progressing to the most challenging. This sequencing was designed to test the theories proposed by Yus and Martin (see Section 2.2.3) regarding the role of discrepancy between a joke's setup and punchline. It also aimed to maintain students' motivation and engagement by preventing potential disinterest that might occur if the most difficult jokes were presented first.

As Attardo (1990) notes, jokes often flout the maxim of quantity, since certain information is omitted and must instead be inferred by the recipient (p. 358). This is evident in the jokes presented below. In addition, flouting the maxim of quality can render a joke absurd, permitting, for example, the inclusion of talking animals. A detailed account of how specific maxims are flouted in each joke used in the lesson (see Appendix 3) is provided below:

- **Joke 1 – the Penguin Joke** flouts the maxim of quantity by repeating the same event multiple times; the penguin repeatedly enters the store and asks the cashier the same question. It also flouts the maxim of quality, specifically the rule "Do not say what you believe to be false," since penguins cannot talk, which renders the setup absurd. In addition, the maxim of manner is flouted as there is no reason provided for why the penguin is asking for grapes. When the penguin asks, "Got any nails", the question reveals that the cashier cannot actually nail the penguin's flippers to the floor, creating the implicature that the penguin intends to continue irritating the cashier by repeatedly asking, "Got any grapes?"

- **Joke 2 – the Businessman Joke** flouts the maxim of quantity and quality similarly to the first joke, by repeatedly depicting the same event. Specifically, the businessman watches the other patron eat an orange, chug his beer and jump out the window multiple times. It also flouts the maxim of quality as it relies on the fictitious existence of Superman. Finally, the maxim of relation is flouted by the bartender's final remark, "Superman, you're a real jerk when you're drunk", since it is seemingly irrelevant to the businessman's actions. The implicature is that, while intoxicated, Superman tricks the businessman into jumping out the window to his death. The humor further relies on the audience's schematic knowledge of Superman and his supernatural powers, such as being able to fly.

- **Joke 3 – the Two Hunters Joke** flouts the maxim of quantity by not providing enough contextual detail in the statement, "…we have to make sure he is really dead". The hunter is depicted as misunderstanding this and interprets the statement literally as an instruction to kill his partner, rather than a prompt that he should check for signs of life. The misunderstanding seemingly causes the hunter to flout the maxim of relation with his response, "Okay, he's definitely dead. Now what," and the act of shooting his partner, which are not relevant to the operator's intended meaning.

- **Joke 4 – the Tapeworm Joke** flouts the maxim of quantity similarly to Jokes 1 and 2, by repeatedly depicting the same event. In this case, the patient visits the doctor multiple times and undergoes the same unusual procedure of having an apple and a lemon cookie inserted into his bottom. The maxim of quantity is also flouted by providing excessive information, making the joke considerably longer compared to the other jokes in the compendium. The maxim of quality is flouted by the doctor's unlikely procedure, and the appearance of a talking tapeworm. Furthermore, the doctor provides no explanation for his actions, thereby flouting the maxim of manner.
  The implicature is that the tapeworm, having been conditioned to receive a cookie, did not get one and subsequentially pokes his head out of the patient's rectum to ask for it, which the doctor takes advantage of and smashes its head in.

- **Joke 5 – the Condom Joke** flouts the maxim of quantity by omitting much explicit information, which makes the joke short in comparison to the other ones. The cashier's question, "Would you like a bag?" is intended to offer a bag for carrying the condoms, but the man's response, "No thanks, I'll turn off the lights," is unexpectedly indirect and lacks explicit context. Both utterances rely on the audience inferring the implied meanings. To understand the joke, the audience must draw on the schematic knowledge of condoms being used in sexual activities and infer the man's implicature that he plans to have sex in the dark to avoid seeing his (presumably unattractive) partner.

3.5 Joke Selection and Pedagogical Considerations

The jokes selected for this study were chosen primarily for their varying levels of interpretative difficulty. It should be noted, however, that some of the jokes may be considered inappropriate for classroom use—particularly Joke 3, which addresses the theme of death, and Joke 5, which contains a sexual theme. Research, however, suggests a more nuanced perspective. Deniere (1995) observes that sexual humor is often central to how humor is conceptualized (p. 287). Although this type of humor is typically excluded from educational settings due to the enforcement of puritanical and societal values, Deniere argues that sexual jokes can function as a means of expressing repressed feelings (ibid).

Frymier et al. (2008) examined humor appropriateness among college students and found that "a great deal of the humor used by college teachers is hardly 'innocent' since nearly one half of it is used to convey hostile or sexual messages" (p. 268). Their results indicate that the perceived appropriateness of sexual jokes depends largely on how the individual interprets such humor (p. 282). Furthermore, what is considered controversial in a classroom among students may also vary depending on the students' experiences, and the ability to discuss controversial themes is a necessary skill for students to develop in school (Tenfält, 2022).

Finally, the Swedish curriculum (Lgy11) states that education should provide students with opportunities to critically analyze how sexuality is portrayed in different contexts, including pornography (Skolverket, 2025). While the sexual joke featured in the questionnaire may not be considered strictly pornographic, this curricular position opens space for the inclusion of sexual themes. Moreover, the "core content" in Lgy11 emphasizes that education should address ethical questions (ibid). In line with this, students were invited to share their opinions about the jokes both in the questionnaire and during the post-activity discussion. As stated in the consent form (Appendix 5) students were also free to withdraw their participation at any time.

4 Results

This section presents the findings collected from the questionnaire and observations of the lesson. It begins with a discussion of methodological considerations related to the analysis. The questionnaire results are then reported in three stages: first, the responses to the Likert-scale items; second, the answers to Questions 1 through 4; and third, a brief overview of the

major findings associated with each joke. This structure is applied consistently across all five jokes.

The section then concludes with students' responses to the second Likert scale and Question 5, both of which elaborate on their opinions of the lesson. Finally, relevant observations from the lesson are presented, including students' reactions to the warm-up activity, their initial attitudes toward the lesson, and how those attitudes evolved throughout its different stages.

4.1 Questionnaire Responses

To account for the diverse interpretations and varying levels of comprehension in students' responses, answers were systematically categorized. This method was applied consistently across all questions and all five jokes, as similar patterns in student responses emerged throughout.

Some questionnaire responses were difficult to interpret due to poor handwriting or insufficient detail. If a response was impossible to interpret, or if no answer was provided, it was deemed unreliable and placed in the category *"No specific answer given by the student"* for Questions 3 and 4, or *"No specific reason given by the student"* for Question 2.

In most cases, however, a reasonable interpretation could still be made. For example, one student answered "little" to Question 1 ("Did you think the joke was funny or not?"). Their response to Question 2 ("Depending on your previous answer, why did you/did you not find the joke funny?") was simply "dad joke," a term often used with a negative connotation to suggest that the joke was corny. Taken together, these responses indicate that the student likely found the joke mildly amusing but clichéd.

For Question 3 ("Is there any hidden meaning that makes the joke funny? If so, what is the meaning"), some students stated that they found the joke funny but struggled to clearly explain the punchline or underlying implication. Others appeared to misunderstand the question entirely. These responses were categorized as *"The student attempts but cannot answer the question properly."* In some cases, however, students demonstrated their understanding of the implied meaning in other answers. For instance, one student responded "Yeah" to Question 1 and, in Question 2, wrote "It involves dark humor and a Superman fanfiction." Since the student identified the joke as involving dark humor and expressed appreciation for it, it is likely that they understood the implicature, even if they could not fully articulate it.

Two students' responses were excluded from the analysis. One male student answered only Questions 1 and 2 for the first joke, responding "Not at all" to Question 1 and "I thought all the jokes were dry" to Question 2. Another female student provided identical answers to every question for each joke. These responses suggest that neither student engaged with the jokes appropriately, and therefore these outliers did not yield reliable insights.

In the Likert-scale responses, one student did not provide a rating for Joke 4 (the tapeworm joke). Their answer to Question 2 suggested that they had not read the joke, stating, *"it was too long, ain't gonna read all that"* [sic]. As a result, the female column in the Likert-scale table contains one fewer rating than the others. Nevertheless, the student offered valuable insights into why they chose not to read the joke, and her responses are therefore included in the analysis of Question 4.

4.1.1 Joke 1 (the penguin joke)

The students' responses to each joke were organized into a set of five tables. Each set begins with a table presenting the students' ratings on the Likert scale to illustrate differences in how funny they found the joke. This structure was applied consistently for every joke in the compendium, as shown in the table below:

Table 1: Students' ratings for Joke 1 (the penguin joke)

Students' Answers	*Gender*	*Male*	*Female*	*Total*
Not funny at all.		4	12	17
Very little funny.		3	2	5
Funny.		1	3	4
Quite funny.		0	0	0
Extremely funny.		0	0	0

Following this, a content analysis was conducted on the students' responses to Questions 1-4 for each joke. The responses were analyzed to identify recurring themes, which were then used as categories for the subsequent quantitative analysis, based on the frequency of their occurrence in the survey.

These results were organized into separate tables for each question, illustrating differences in interpretation and perceived humor, as well as the frequency of specific response types. Each set of five tables per joke is followed by a brief summary of the most noteworthy findings and reasons for these. This process was applied consistently across all questions for each joke.

Table 2: Students' answers to Question 1, "Did you find the joke funny or not?" (the penguin joke)

Answers	*Gender*	*Male*	*Female*
Yes.		1	1
No.		6	12
It was okay.			1
It was a little funny.		1	3

Table 3: Students' answer to Question 2, "Depending on your previous answer, why did you/did you not find the joke funny?" (the penguin joke)

Answers	*Gender*	*Male*	*Female*
It was funny because the cashier was tricked.		1	3
Did not understand the joke.		1	8
No specific reason given.			3
Thought the joke was bad.		2	2
Does not like this type of joke.		1	1
Thought the joke was boring.		3	1
Thought the joke was corny.		1	
The joke was too long.		2	2
Not assuming it is a joke.			1
The repetitiveness in the joke is funny.			1

Table 4: Students' answer to Question 3, "Is there any hidden meaning that makes the joke funny? If so, what is the meaning?" (the penguin joke)

Answers	*Gender*	*Male*	*Female*
The penguin tricked the cashier.		2	3
Student answers that they do not know.		1	6
Answers "No."		2	2
The student attempts but can not answer the question properly.			2
No specific answer given by the students.		3	3
Does not seem to understand the question.			1

Table 5: Students' answer to the Question 4, "How could the joke be improved for you to find it funny, or for you to appreciate it more?" (the penguin joke)

Answers	*Gender*	*Male*	*Female*
Student answers that they do not know.		3	6
Answers "No."		1	
No specific answer given by the students.		1	3
Joke should be explained more clearly.			5
Joke should be shorter.			2
Suggests a different joke altogether.		2	1
Jokes should be told, not read.		1	
Prefers a joke with dark humor.			1

The results show that most of the students did not find the joke funny, as eighteen students answered "No", in response to Question 1. Specifically, seventeen students rated it as "not funny at all", and none rated it as "Quite funny," or "Extremely funny". As suggested by their responses to Question 2, nine students did not understand the joke. In response to Question 3, four students answered "no", and seven responded that "they do not know". In response to Question 4, nine students answered that they "did not know"" how the joke could be improved and five students responded that the joke should be "explained more clearly".

4.1.2 Joke 2 (the businessman joke)

Table 6: Students' ratings for Joke 2 (the businessman joke)

Students' Answers	*Gender*	*Male*	*Female*	*Total*
Not funny at all.		2	9	11
Very little funny.		6	5	11
Funny.		0	2	2
Quite funny.		0	1	1
Extremely funny.		0	0	0

Table 7: Students' answers to Question 1, "Did you find the joke funny or not?" (the businessman joke)

Answers	*Gender*	*Male*	*Female*
Yes.		2	3
No.		4	9
It was Okay.		1	1
A little fun.		1	3

No answer.			1

Table 8: Students' answer to Question 2, "Depending on your previous answer, why did you/did you not find the joke funny?" (the businessman joke)

Answers	*Gender*	*Male*	*Female*
Funny because they understood the joke.			4
The last sentence made it funny.		1	1
It was funny because it was confusing.			1
It was funny because of the dark humor.			2
Did not understand the joke.		1	4
No specific reason given.		5	2
Thought the joke was bad.		2	
Does not like this type of joke.			2
The joke was more interesting compared to the previous joke.		1	
It is not fun to read jokes.			1
The joke is boring.			1
The joke is complicated.			1

Table 9: Students' answer to Question 3, "Is there any hidden meaning that makes the joke funny? If so, what is the meaning?" (the businessman joke)

Answers	*Gender*	*Male*	*Female*
Superman tricks the businessman.		3	3
No specific answer given by the students.		3	3
Answers "No."		1	5
Student answers that they do not know.			5
The student attempts but can not answer the question properly.		1	1

Table 10: Students' answer to the Question 4, "How could the joke be improved for you to find it funny, or for you to appreciate it more?" (the businessman joke)

Answers	*Gender*	*Male*	*Female*
Student answers that they do not know.			6
No specific answer given by the students.		4	4
Answers "No."			1
Joke should not be too long.		1	2
Suggests a different joke altogether.		1	

Joke should be explained more clearly.			3
Jokes should be told not read.		2	1
More superhero jokes.		1	

The overall reception of this joke was negative, with eleven students rating the joke as “not funny at all”, and another eleven students rating it as “Very slightly funny”. The responses to Question 2 revealed that five students reported not understanding the joke, and seven left the question unanswered, suggesting that they most likely did not know how to respond. Similarly to the previous joke, difficulties in deriving the implicature in the joke is reflected in the responses to Question 3, as six students responded that they “did not know” the hidden meaning, another six simply answered “No.” and five responded that they “do not know”.

Despite the predominantly negative ratings, the responses to Question 2 showed that four students found the joke funny because they understood it, two appreciated its dark humor, and two others enjoyed the punchline. Among the six students who successfully derived the implicature in Question 3, all identified that Superman could fly, but only one also recognized that he was intoxicated. This suggests that many students may lack the schematic knowledge necessary to interpret references to intoxication.

4.1.3 Joke 3 (the two hunters joke)

Table 11: Students' ratings for Joke 3 (the two hunters joke)

Students’ Answers	*Gender*	*Male*	*Female*	*Total*
Not funny at all.		4	3	7
Very little funny.		1	8	9
Funny.		3	3	6
Quite funny.		0	1	1
Extremely funny.		0	2	2

Table 12: Students' answers to Question 1, "Did you find the joke funny or not?" (the two hunters joke)

Answers	*Gender*	*Male*	*Female*
Yes.		2	7
No.		4	6
A little fun.		1	3
No answer.		1	1

Table 13: Students' answer to Question 2, "Depending on your previous answer, why did you/did you not find the joke funny?" (the two hunters joke)

Students' Answers	*Gender*	*Male*	*Female*
Funny because they understood the joke.			6
Funny because it was a "dumb" joke.			3
The ending made it funny.			2
The joke was short and easy to understand.			1
No specific reason given.		3	3
The joke was bad.		1	2
The joke was boring.			1
It was funny because of the dark humor.		2	1
It was not funny because of the dark humor.			1
Not funny, because they figured out the punchline before reading it.			1
Not funny because they have heard the joke before.		1	

Table 14: Students' answer to Question 3, "Is there any hidden meaning that makes the joke funny? If so, what is the meaning?" (the two hunters joke)

Students' Answers	*Gender*	*Male*	*Female*
The Hunter misunderstands the operator.		2	5
Answers "No."		1	3
No answer.		5	5
The student attempts but cannot answer the question properly.			4

Table 15: Students' answer to the Question 4, "How could the joke be improved for you to find it funny, or for you to appreciate it more?" (the two hunters joke)

Students' Answers	*Gender*	*Male*	*Female*
The Joke needs no improvement.			4
No specific answer given by the students.		5	10
More jokes involving dark humor.		2	
No jokes about death.			1
Jokes should be shorter and easy to understand.			1

Joke is too easy to understand.			1
Jokes should be told, not read.		1	

A considerable number of students found this joke funnier than the previous ones. Specifically, six students rated it as “Funny,” one as “Quite funny,” and two as “Extremely funny.” Responses to Question 2 indicate that more students were able to elaborate on why they found the joke humorous (or not) compared to earlier jokes. Six students explained that they found it funny because they understood it, three appreciated its simplicity and described it as “dumb,” and another three valued its dark humor. Moreover, a greater number of students appeared to grasp the implicature, as seven explicitly demonstrated their understanding in responses to Question 3, for example: “the hunter misunderstood the operator” or “the hunter shot his friend.”

4.1.4 Joke 4 (the tapeworm joke)

Table 16: Students' ratings for Joke 4 (the tapeworm joke)

Students’ Answers	*Gender*	*Male*	*Female*	*Total*
Not funny at all.		6	11	17
Very little funny.		2	3	5
Funny.		0	0	0
Quite funny.		0	1	1
Extremely funny.		0	1	1

Table 17: Students' answers to Question 1, "Did you find the joke funny or not?" (the tapeworm joke)

Students’ Answers	*Gender*	*Male*	*Female*
Yes.			2
No.		4	11
No answer.		2	2
A little fun.		2	2

Table 18: Students' answer to Question 2, "Depending on your previous answer, why did you/did you not find the joke funny?" (the tapeworm joke)

Students' Answers	*Gender*	*Male*	*Female*
Funny because the apple and cookie were for the tapeworm.		1	
Funny because they understood the joke.			1
Funny because they have not heard the joke before.		1	
Not funny because the joke was "dumb."			1
The joke was too long.		2	6
Joke was too unrealistic.		2	3
No specific reason given.		4	3
Does not like this type of joke.			1
Answers that they do not know.			1
Does not like tapeworms.		1	3

Table 19: Students' answer to Question 3, "Is there any hidden meaning that makes the joke funny? If so, what is the meaning?" (the tapeworm joke)

Students' Answers	*Gender*	*Male*	*Female*
That the worm didn't get his cookie and came out.		1	1
The apple and cookie were for the worm.			1
The student attempts but can not answer the question properly.			1
No specific answer given by the students.		6	5
Answers that they do not know.		1	6
Answers "No."			3

Table 20: Students' answer to the Question 4, "How could the joke be improved for you to find it funny, or for you to appreciate it more?" (the tapeworm joke)

Students' Answers	*Gender*	*Male*	*Female*
Does not know.		1	6
No answer.		5	4
Do not make tapeworm-jokes.		1	2
Shorter jokes.		1	5

This joke received almost entirely negative ratings from students. Specifically, seventeen students gave it the score of "not funny at all". Eight students stated that "the joke was too long," in response to Question 2 and five students stated that the joke was too unrealistic. In response to Question 3, eleven students gave "no specific answer" and seven answered that they "did not know". In response to Question 4, six students suggested to "make the joke shorter."

The joke relies on the recipient possessing schematic knowledge about tapeworms and recognizing that the doctor's proposed treatment is medically implausible. Without this background knowledge, the humor becomes difficult to access. The students' responses—"No specific reason" in Question 2 and "No answer" in Question 4—suggest that many may not have engaged with the joke deeply enough to infer its intended implicature.

4.1.5 Joke 5 (the condom joke)

Table 21: Students' ratings for Joke 5 (the condom joke)

Students' Answers	*Gender*	*Male*	*Female*	*Total*
Not funny at all.		4	11	15
Very little funny.		1	2	3
Funny.		1	2	3
Quite funny.		2	1	3
Extremely funny.			1	1

Table 22: Students' answers to Question 1, "Did you find the joke funny or not?" (the condom joke)

Students' Answers	*Gender*	*Male*	*Female*
Yes.		2	3
No.		2	11
A little fun.		1	1
It was okay.		1	
No answer.		2	1
Student's answer cannot be interpreted as their answers contradict each other.			1

Table 23: Students' answer to Question 2, "Depending on your previous answer, why did you/did you not find the joke funny?" (the condom joke)

Students' Answers	*Gender*	*Male*	*Female*
Funny because of the sexual humor.		1	2
The joke is short.			3
The joke is relevant to people their age.		1	2
The joke is easy to understand.			2
Funny because the punchline was unexpected.			1
It was "better" compared to the previous jokes.		1	
Did not understand the joke.		2	8
Not funny because the joke is sexist.			1
Thought the joke was bad.		1	
No specific reason given.		2	4

Table 24: Students' answer to Question 3, "Is there any hidden meaning that makes the joke funny? If so, what is the meaning?" (the condom joke)

Students' Answers	*Gender*	*Male*	*Female*
The man wants to cover up his partner's face.		1	1
Student answers that they do not know.		1	4
No specific answer given by the students.		5	10
Answers "No."			2
The student attempts but cannot answer the question properly.		1	1

Table 25: Students' answer to the Question 4, "How could the joke be improved for you to find it funny, or for you to appreciate it more?" (the condom joke)

Students' Answers	*Gender*	*Male*	*Female*
The Joke needs no improvement.			2
Joke should be explained more clearly.			2
No specific answer given by the students.		6	6
Student answers that they do not know.		2	6

Most students responded negatively to Joke 5. Specifically, fifteen students rated it as “not funny at all”. In response to Question 2, ten students stated that they had not understood the joke. Additionally, one student thought the joke was “sexist”, perhaps assuming a heteronormative context of a male buyer of condoms and an unattractive female partner. Furthermore, in response to Question 3, a total of fifteen students could not describe the implicature behind it and another five students answered that they “did not know”.

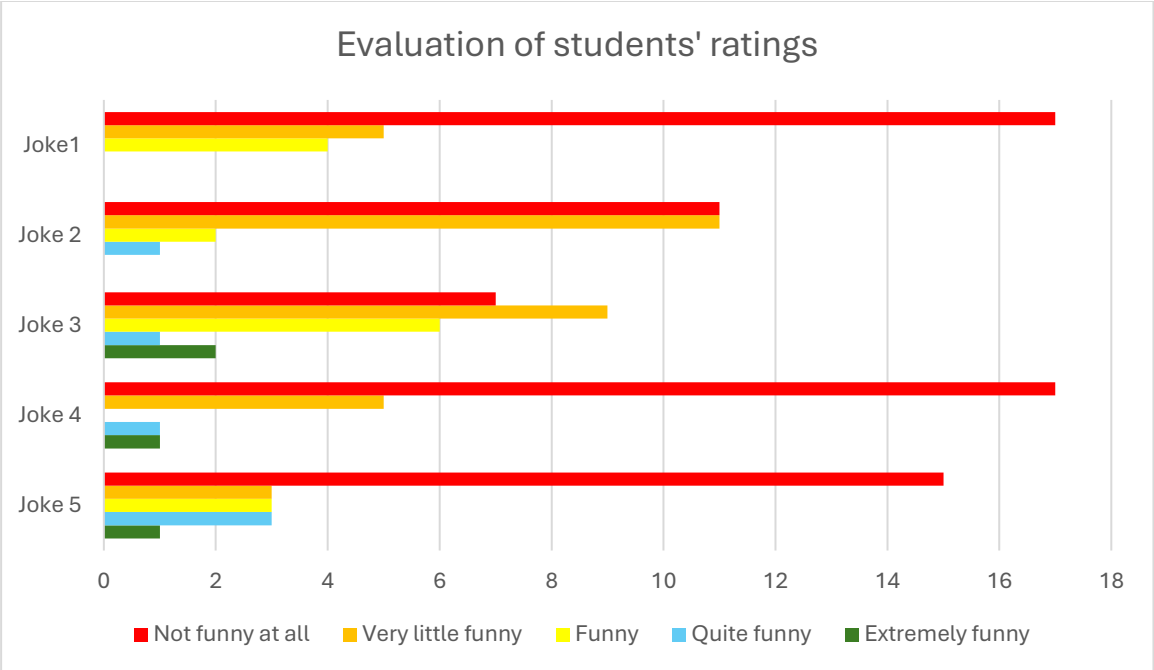
In contrast, a smaller number of students reacted positively: three found the joke funny because of its sexual humor, three felt the humor was relevant to people their age, and two indicated that the joke was easy to understand.

The joke relies on the joke recipient having schematic knowledge related to sex, an area that students aged 17-18 might not be fully familiar with, and on their ability to infer that the man’s partner is implied to be unattractive, an implication that is neither explicit nor immediately obvious by his seemingly irrelevant statement “*no thanks, I’ll turn off the lights”*.

4.2 Popularity (Perceived Humor Effect)

To illustrate the students’ overall appreciation of the jokes in the compendium, their ratings were compiled into a graph representing which jokes were the most and least popular. The graph is presented below:

Graph 1: Evaluation of students’ ratings for all jokes



As illustrated in the graph, Joke 3 appears to be the most well-received, despite also receiving a number of negative ratings. In contrast, Joke 1 and Joke 4 are nearly equal in being the least appreciated ones, as they have the most negative ratings and very few positive ones.

4.3 Students' Evaluation of the Lesson

On the final page of the questionnaire, students were asked to rate the lesson on a 1–5 Likert scale in response to the question, *"What did you think of the lesson centered on jokes?"* In addition to the two outliers noted in Section 4.1 (whose responses were deemed unreliable and excluded from the analysis), two male and three female students did not provide a rating, resulting in slightly fewer responses compared to the first scale. Students were also asked to answer a final open-ended question: *"What did you learn in this lesson?"* The following tables present their lesson ratings, followed by their responses to Question 5.

Table 26: Students' ratings for the lesson centered on jokes.

Students' Answers	*Gender*	*Male*	*Female*	*Total*
I didn't like it at all.		1	2	3
I didn't like it much.		1	1	2
I thought it was alright.		3	3	6
I liked it.			5	5
I loved it!		1	3	4

Table 27: Students' answer to Question 5, "What did you learn in this lesson?"

Students' Answers	*Gender*	*Male*	*Female*
A lesson can be funny and humorous.			2
New words.		2	3
About jokes.			4
New jokes.		1	
About bad jokes.			2
Answers "Nothing."		2	1
Student answers that they do not know.			1
No specific answer given by the students.		3	4
Would rather have talked more about the jokes instead of reading.			1
How boring jokes can be.			1

As shown by the results in Table 26, the lesson seemed to be generally well received, with six students rating it “It was alright”, five rating it as “I liked it”, and four as “I loved it.” As shown by Table 27, five students indicated that they had learned “new words” and four that they learnt “about jokes”. However, since seven students did not provide any specific answer to the question and three students answered “nothing”, it was difficult to draw reliable conclusions regarding overall learning outcomes.

4.4 Lesson Observations

The students initially seemed enthusiastic about the lesson during the warm-up activity. In their responses to the question “What are jokes good for,” the students gave the specific response, “jokes are used for bonding.” Additionally, some students were struggling to tell each other jokes because they could not think of a good joke to tell their partner. Furthermore, none of the students who told the other one a joke wanted to share any of the jokes with the researcher or the rest of the class. This may be due to the fact that many jokes are culture-bound and may not translate well in the classroom (Trachtenberg, 1979, p. 93).

During the pre-reading activity, the students’ enthusiasm seemed to have subsided, possibly due to the fact that they understood that they were going to be reading jokes rather than talking about them. Their wish to talk about jokes was further suggested during the while-reading activity, as two students explicitly said to the researcher that it would not be fun to read jokes. This statement, as well as little engagement in speaking, was repeated during the post-reading activity where few students wished to discuss the jokes or elaborate on any of them.

5 Discussion

This section discusses the study’s findings in relation to the previous research outlined in Section 2, highlighting the most notable results and examining how they align with or diverge from earlier observations. It also addresses the research questions and evaluates the extent to which they were effectively managed. Because Research Questions 1 and 2 proved difficult to address separately, they are addressed together within the same section.

5.1 Differences in Interpretation and Perceived Humor

Consistent with Bell's (2009) research, the students' responses were highly varied, with numerous categories emerging from the content analysis—likely reflecting differences in their experiences with the schemas underlying the jokes. A key pattern that emerged was that many students did not appear to understand the jokes; most struggled to derive and articulate the implicature in Question 3 across all jokes. This was evident in frequent responses such as "No," "I don't understand the joke," or "I don't know." These findings support Samatova and Kholmatov's (2024) observation that students often lack the schematic knowledge required to interpret jokes. They also reinforce Attardo's (1990) claim that deriving implicature is essential for accessing humor, as most students who failed to do so did not find the jokes funny.

Among those who successfully described the implicature, Joke 3, Joke 2, and Joke 1 were progressively easier to explain, in that order. Interestingly, the jokes were also perceived as funnier in the same sequence, supporting Martin's (2007) theory that humor is lost when a joke is either too easy or too difficult to interpret. In contrast, Yus's (2017b) claim that greater interpretive difficulty can enhance humor was not supported, as students frequently reported frustration when jokes were difficult to understand.

Another notable pattern was students' difficulty in suggesting improvements to the jokes. The category *"No specific answer"* was prominent across Question 4 for all jokes. This finding illustrates Bell's (2011) position that L2 learners not only struggle to interpret humor but also face challenges in engaging with and employing it. It also aligns with Trachtenberg's (1979) argument that jokes relying on highly specific schemas may pose problems for L2 learners. Bell's (2011) claim that jokes depend on specific language use and cultural knowledge is further supported by the prominence of this category in Tables 24 and 25, where most students failed to describe the implicature or propose improvements. For instance, the cultural knowledge embedded in Joke 5—that the buyer's partner is portrayed as so unattractive that he must turn off the lights before engaging in intercourse—may have been too specific for most students to grasp, even if they possessed some schematic knowledge related to sexual themes.

The study also examined potential differences in interpretation between male and female students, in line with Martin's (2002) research, which suggests that males are more likely to engage with detrimental forms of humor, particularly aggressive humor. In this study, the

only jokes males rated as funny were Joke 3 and Joke 5. However, since females also rated these jokes as the funniest, it is difficult to determine whether aggressive humor appeals more to males than females based on the current results. It should also be noted that females were overrepresented among the participants, which limits the reliability of the data. A more balanced sample would be necessary to draw firmer conclusions.

5.2 Students' Opinions on the Lesson

The results in Table 26 are generally positive, with most students reporting that they enjoyed the lesson. However, the responses in Table 27 were less detailed, as many students provided very brief answers to the question *"What did you learn in this lesson?"* Two students stated that the lesson was "funny" or "humorous," five indicated that they had learned new vocabulary, and four responded that they had "learned about jokes." These answers suggest that the instruction in microskills may have been effective to some extent.

In contrast, seven students gave "no specific answer," while three simply wrote "nothing." This indicates that students who did not understand the jokes, or did not find them funny, may have felt that they gained little from the lesson.

A notable finding was that students did not enjoy reading the jokes and expressed a preference for oral delivery. This aligns with Frymier et al.'s (2008) theory that individuals enter situations with expectations of appropriate behavior, and when those expectations are contradicted, confusion results. Students appeared to anticipate a more speaking-oriented lesson, but this expectation was disrupted when they were required to read instead. Several students—particularly in relation to Joke 4—commented that the text was "too long" and expressed a preference for shorter jokes, suggesting limited motivation to engage with longer jokes in written form. As noted in Section 4.1, one student explicitly stated that the joke was too long and refused to read it. This preference for brevity is further reflected in Table 20, where six students reported favoring shorter jokes. Additionally, the repetitive and predictable structure of the jokes may have further reduced students' motivation, particularly when engaging with the longer jokes, though further testing would be required to confirm this interpretation.

Although this outcome was not anticipated, it resonates with OECD's findings from the latest PISA study, which report declining reading comprehension skills among Swedish students (OECD, 2023). While this study did not specifically target reading comprehension, the results nonetheless suggest an apparent lack of motivation toward reading in school contexts.

Considering that some students reported enjoying the lesson while others did not, it remains debatable whether the lesson, in its current form, successfully fostered a relaxed and safe learning environment (Bell, 2009; Trachtenberg, 1979).

6 Conclusion

The aim of the study was to contribute to humor research by implementing a classroom lesson and examining students' levels of pragmatic competence, their perceptions of jokes and their opinions on a lesson centered on reading canned jokes as well as answering questions on a questionnaire. The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. To what extent do Year 2 upper secondary English students interpret the same jokes differently? If there are differences in their interpretations, what causes the interpretations to be different?
2. To what extent do Year 2 upper secondary English students find different jokes funny? If there are differences in their perceptions, what are possible causes for these?
3. What are the upper secondary students' attitudes to the English lesson that incorporated jokes?

The questionnaire responses were analyzed using content analysis to identify recurring categories of answers among the participants. The findings revealed that most students struggled to interpret the implicatures in the jokes, likely due to limited schematic and cultural knowledge rather than deficiencies in vocabulary. The results also indicated that jokes requiring a moderate level of interpretive effort were perceived as the funniest. Furthermore, the analysis revealed a lack of motivation to engage with longer texts and a clear preference for shorter ones.

Overall, these findings contribute to humor research by highlighting the varying levels of students' pragmatic competence and by detailing the probable reasons underlying their interpretations, as well as the challenges they face in engaging with humor in the L2 classroom. They also shed light on students' attitudes toward a lesson structured around reading canned jokes.

6.1 Study Limitations

The schemas required for the jokes in the study were assumed to be universal—such as shopping, hunting, drinking, and sex. However, the latter two may not have been appropriate for the age of the participants, thus limiting the students' access to the required schemas necessary to derive the implicature. Since there was only a lack of pragmatic understanding indicated, the teaching of microskills may have helped the students to understand the vocabulary in the jokes, but not to resolve the incongruity.

It was indicated that students thought the jokes were too long and they would have preferred to tell each other jokes orally instead of reading them, likely due to a lack of motivation for engaging with lengthy jokes in the written form. From the lesson observations, it would seem that students began the lesson expecting oral delivery of jokes, but these expectations were contradicted when they were required to read them instead. Given that humor often occurs spontaneously in natural conversation (Bell, 2009, p. 243) and that there is a predominant preference for oral joke delivery (Shershow, 2021, p. 248), having the students read the jokes in a classroom setting may have been an ineffective method of delivery. More detailed responses might have been elicited if the lesson had aligned with students' expectations, for example, by presenting the jokes orally and focusing on speaking rather than reading and writing.

6.2 Implications for Future Research

The findings presented above suggest that the use of canned jokes may not be optimally implemented in the manner adopted in this study, particularly when used solely as reading material. Future research may benefit from incorporating canned jokes into a more speaker-oriented lesson format, preferably in smaller groups, as managing a large number of speakers can be challenging. Alternatively, using shorter jokes may help sustain engagement and maintain students' motivation. Careful consideration should also be given to joke selection to avoid language that relies on highly specific background knowledge (Trachtenberg, 1979), as appears to have been the case with Joke 5.

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Appendix 1: Lesson Plan

Primary goal of the lesson: For students to practice reading skills while reading jokes.
Secondary goal of the lesson: For students to practice speaking skills while talking about jokes.

Aim	Procedure	Resources	Focus	Stage/Time
For Ss to activate their schemata about jokes. For Ss to practice their speaking skills by talking about jokes.	T asks Ss if they can define what a joke is, explain what jokes are good for and if they can say whether it is useful to know any jokes. Ss try to answer the questions. Ss are asked to think of a joke and then tell each other jokes in pairs. Subsequently, Ss are asked to share some of the jokes they told each other with T. T listens and encourages Ss to reflect on why they thought the jokes were funny or not. T notes down any words Ss mispronounce or use incorrectly, then writes them on the whiteboard and clarifies their	White board Pen and paper	T-S S-S S-T T-S	Warm-up activity, speaking practice Time: 10 minutes Total: 0:10

	meaning and pronunciation.			
For Ss to learn the vocabulary necessary for the upcoming reading activity.	T writes a list of words occurring in the jokes the Ss are about to read on the whiteboard, one at a time, that Ss are assumed to be unfamiliar with and asks the Ss about whether they know them. T explains the meaning of the words the Ss do not know and Ss listen.	A list of vocabulary items and their definitions (Appendix 2) Whiteboard	T-S S-T T-S	Pre-reading activity Time: 10 minutes Total: 0:20
For Ss to practice pronunciation of the words dealt with in the previous stage in unison.	T conducts an oral drill with Ss using the words written on the whiteboard. T provides a model, and Ss repeat.	An exercise comprising vocabulary that was introduced in the previous stage.	T-S	Pronunciation drill Time: 2 minutes Total: 0:22
For Ss to practice reading skills by reading jokes.	Ss are given a compendium containing jokes and a questionnaire. Ss read the jokes and answer the questions individually. When they are done, T collects the	A compendium with jokes (Appendix 3) A questionnaire (Appendix 4)	T-S	While-reading activity 25 minutes Total: 0:47

	compendiums and questionnaires.			
For Ss to practice speaking about the jokes they have read.	Ss are asked to share with T and the class which joke they found the funniest or the least funny in the compendium and give reasons for their choice. Ss give their opinions during a whole-class discussion. T leads the discussion and motivates Ss to participate. T once again gives the Ss feedback regarding mispronunciation or words the use incorrectly.	An oral exercise comprising the jokes that Ss read in the previous stage (Appendix 3)	T-S S-S S-T T-S	Post-reading activity 9 minutes Total: 0:56
For Ss to further practice the vocabulary in the jokes.	T asks Ss to define the vocabulary items listed on the whiteboard and Ss try to answer. T makes corrections as needed.	An exercise comprising the vocabulary items introduced in stage 2 (Appendix 2)	T-S S-T T-S	Controlled practice 4 minutes Total: 1:00

Appendix 2: Pre-Reading Activity

Pre-reading – Vocabulary in the jokes

Joke 1:

Flippers – in this case, the flipper-like feet of a penguin.

Cashier – the person you pay when you buy something at a store.

Joke 2:

High-rise hotel – a hotel in a tall building with many floors.

Patron – a customer, or a person who goes to, for example, a hotel and pays for their service.

Chug – to drink something quickly, in one go.

Intrigued – to be curious about or interested in something.

Joke 3:

Hunter – a person who looks for animals and shoots them for food or sport.

Glazed over – when someone's eyes look shiny or empty because they are not paying attention spaced out.

Freak out – to become very scared.

Operator – the person answering the call when you dial 112.

Rustling – a sound e.g., the sound your clothes make when you are moving.

Joke 4:

Tapeworm – a long, thin worm that comes from e.g., drinking dirty water. To get rid of it, it must be treated with medicine.

Reluctant - when you feel unsure about doing something.

Treatment – for example, getting medicine from a doctor to cure a disease.

Joke 5:

Pharmacy – a where you go to buy medicine or other health-related products.

Appendix 3: Joke Compendium

Joke Compendium

Joke 1 – the Penguin Joke

A penguin walks into a store and asks the cashier:
"Do you have any grapes?"
The cashier replies, *"No."*
The penguin leaves the store.

The next day, the penguin returns and asks the same question:
"Do you have any grapes?"
"No!" the cashier replies, a little annoyed.
The penguin leaves again.

On the third day, the penguin walks in once more and asks:
"Do you have any grapes?"
The cashier, now frustrated, says,
"No! And if you come in here asking for grapes again, I'll nail your flippers to the floor!"
The penguin leaves.

On the fourth day, the penguin enters the store, but this time, it doesn't ask for grapes.
"Got any nails?" the penguin asks.
"No," replies the cashier, his frustration fading.
"Got any grapes?" the penguin asks!

Joke 2 – the Businessman Joke

A man on a business trip checks into a high-rise hotel, where the bar is located on the top floor. After settling into his room, he heads upstairs to get a drink.

There is only one other patron in the bar, a man. The businessman orders a drink and then watches in surprise as the other man quickly eats an orange, chugs his beer, and jumps out the window.

A minute later, the man returns. The businessman is shocked as he watches the man eat an orange, chug his beer and then jump out the window again.

When the man returns a third time, the businessman is intrigued and decides he can do this too. He eats an orange, chugs his beer, and then jumps out the window to his death.

The bartender turns to the man and says:
"You know, Superman, you're a real jerk when you're drunk."

Joke 3 – the Two Hunters Joke

Two hunters are out in the woods when, suddenly, one of them collapses. He does not seem to be breathing, and his eyes are glazed over. He is just lying there on the ground.

The other hunter freaks out, pulls out his phone, calls 911, and urgently says:
"My friend is dead! He collapsed! He's not breathing! I don't know what to do. What do I do?"

The 911 operator responds:
"Calm down, I can help. First, we need to make sure he's really dead."

The hunter becomes quiet. The operator can hear nothing but the rustling sounds of his movement. After a moment, the operator asks:
"Sir, are you still there?"

Suddenly, a loud gunshot rings out. The hunter picks up the phone again and says,
"Okay, he's definitely dead. Now what?"

Joke 4 – the Tapeworm Joke

A man went to the doctor to get a tapeworm removed. The doctor said,
"I know exactly what to do. Come back next week and bring me a lemon cookie and an apple."

The man did as he was instructed. He brought the doctor an apple and a lemon cookie, and the doctor told him to drop his pants and bend over. First, he shoved the apple up

the man’s butt, waited a minute, and then he also shoved the lemon cookie up the man’s butt.
"Alright, you're done," said the doctor. "Come back again next week with an apple and a lemon cookie."

The man was confused but again did as he was instructed. During the next visit, he gave the apple and the lemon cookie to the doctor, who told the man to drop his pants and bend over. Again, he shoved the apple up the man's butt and waited for a minute. Then he shoved the lemon cookie up the man’s butt and then told him he was finished but to come back next week with the same items. The man began looking noticeably frustrated.

The next week the man, reluctantly showed up with the apple and the lemon cookie and the doctor did the exact same thing. When the doctor was finished, the man said:
“Hold up, this treatment is NOT working. The tapeworm is still in there and if I am perfectly honest, I am getting pretty fed up with shoving apples and lemon cookies up my ass!”

The doctor said:
"Not to worry, next week will be your final treatment. Next time, bring me an apple and a hammer."

The man glared at him, obviously worried that the doctor was going to shove that hammer up his butt. But the next week came, and the man did as he was told once again. The doctor told him to drop his pants. He inserted the apple and waited a minute. And then he waited another minute.

During the third minute, the little tapeworm stuck his little head out of the man's butt and said:
"Hey, where is my lemon cookie?"

Before the worm could finish its sentence properly, the doctor had smashed its head in with the hammer.

Joke 5 – the Condom Joke

A man walks into the local pharmacy. There, he picks up a pack of condoms and walks up to the cashier, who says:

“That will be $5.56.”

The man pays, and the cashier asks:

“Would you like a bag?”

The man responds:

“No thanks, I’ll turn off the lights.”

Appendix 4: Questionnaire

Questionnaire

Please answer the following question by checking one of the boxes:

Are you:

Male	Female

Please rate **each joke** in the compendium from 1-5 on the scale below, where 1 is the least funny option and 5 is the funniest option:

	1 – Not funny at all	2 – Very little funny	3 – Funny	4 – Quite funny	5 – Extremely funny
1. The **Penguin** joke					
2. The **Businessman** joke					
3. The **Two Hunters** joke					
4. The **Tapeworm** joke					
5. The **Condom** joke					

Joke 1 - the Penguin joke:

1. Did you find the joke funny or not?

2. Depending on your previous answer, why did you/did you not find the joke funny?

3. Is there any hidden meaning that makes the joke funny? If so, what is the meaning?

4. How could the joke be improved for you to find it funny, or for you to appreciate it more?

Joke 2 – the Businessman joke:

1. Did you find the joke funny or not?

2. Depending on your previous answer, why did you/did you not find the joke funny?

3. Is there any hidden meaning that makes the joke funny? If so, what is the meaning?

4. How could the joke be improved for you to find it funny, or for you to appreciate it more?

Joke 3 – the Two Hunters joke:

1. Did you find the joke funny or not?

2. Depending on your previous answer, why did you/did you not find the joke funny?

3. Is there any hidden meaning that makes the joke funny? If so, what is the meaning?

4. How could the joke be improved for you to find it funny, or for you to appreciate it more?

Joke 4 – the Tapeworm joke:

1. Did you find the joke funny or not?

2. Depending on your previous answer, why did you/did you not find the joke funny?

3. Is there any hidden meaning that makes the joke funny? If so, what is the meaning?

4. How could the joke be improved for you to find it funny, or for you to appreciate it more?

Joke 5 – the Condom Joke:

1. Did you find the joke funny or not?

2. Depending on your previous answer, why did you/did you not find the joke funny?

3. Is there any hidden meaning that makes the joke funny? If so, what is the meaning?

4. How could the joke be improved for you to find it funny, or for you to appreciate it more?

What did you think of the lesson centered on jokes?

1. I didn't like it at all	2. I didn't like it much	3. I thought it was alright	4. I liked it	5. I loved it!

5. What did you learn in this lesson?

Appendix 5: Form of Consent

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Information about personal data processing as part of the study assignment in Independent Project at Södertörn University

Information to participants

You have been asked to participate in the study about a lesson based on jokes. The study is being conducted as part of my education in Ämneslärarprogrammet med inriktning gymnasieskola at Södertörn University.

Under the GDPR (2016/679), Södertörn University is the personal data controller when personal data is processed as part of a study assignment. This document provides information about how your personal data will be processed as part of this study.

Personal data that will be processed

For the purpose of this study, your personal data that will be collected and processed are:

- Gender

Note: some of the jokes used in this study may be considered offensive to some people.

The purpose of the study and personal data processing

The study is based on teaching language by using jokes. This entails participants reading jokes in a compendium and then answer questions in a survey.

The purpose of the study is to collect data regarding a study on how jokes can be used to teach language. The personal data listed above may contain useful data regarding the research.

The lesson will be conducted in the classroom and is estimated to take 30-60 minutes.

What is the legal basis for processing personal data?

The legal basis for processing your personal data is your informed consent. You may recall your consent at any time, without stating a reason. However, recalling your consent does not affect the processing that occurred prior to it being recalled.

How will personal data be stored and secured during work on the assignment

Your personal data will be stored on paper until the study assignment is completed and graded as a pass. After this, your

personal data will be deleted. Your gender will not be included in the results.

Your rights under the GDPR

Södertörn University is the data controller for processing your personal data. Under the GDPR, you are entitled to access your personal data that is being processed in the study (extract from the register) and, where necessary, have erroneous personal data corrected. You may also request that information about you is erased and that the processing of your personal data is limited.

If you wish to use any of these rights or recall your consent, you should contact the relevant student or their supervisor. Their contact details are provided below.

Complaints

If you have questions or complaints about how your personal data is processed, you are welcome to contact Södertörn University's data protection officer via dataskydd@sh.se. You are also entitled to make a complaint to the Swedish Authority for Privacy Protection (IMY) if you are unhappy with the university's personal data processing. IMY can be emailed at imy@imy.se or you can call them at +46 (0)8 657 6100.

The person responsible for the study

Jonatan Flodin

Student

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