

A review of the relationships between humour, motivation, and self-esteem in ESL/EFL classrooms

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Abstract

Humour is a powerful tool that acts as a bridge between the teacher and students, breaking down barriers and creating a more relaxed atmosphere where learners feel comfortable taking risks with their language skills. Nevertheless, research on the relationship between humour, motivation, and self-esteem in ESL/EFL courses among language learners is scarce. The purpose of this review is to fill the gap in the literature through a synthesis and evaluation of the potential connections between humour, motivation, and self-esteem among language learners in ESL/EFL classrooms. The findings of the studies reviewed suggest that humour exerts a positive impact on learners' motivation to engage in the language learning process and their self-esteem. The results also indicate that humour can reduce anxiety, increase enjoyment, and promote a positive learning environment. Additionally, humour was found to increase confidence, improve social skills, and promote a more positive self-image among language learners. However, the results also showed that the relationship between humour, motivation, and self-esteem may not be consistent across all learners, highlighting the importance of considering individual differences when integrating humour into language learning. The findings of this review lend credence to the notion that humour plays a positive role in promoting motivation and self-esteem among language learners in ESL/EFL classroom. Future research is recommended to identify the best practices for incorporating humour in the language classroom.

Keywords: ESL, EFL, humour, language learning, motivation, self-esteem

Introduction

Humour includes various aspects that elicit laughter or provide entertainment. According to Şahin (2021), it serves several purposes: alleviating students' stress and anxiety, enhancing the learning process, offering corrective feedback, and helping students socialize. It includes not only the content that generates amusement but also the ability to perceive the lighter side of situations and individuals. This recognition of what is funny can vary greatly from person to person and is influenced by cultural context, personal experiences, and social dynamics (Tee et al., 2022). Humour has been widely recognized as a key factor in creating a positive and engaging learning environment, but its relationship with motivation and self-esteem among language learners remains largely under-explored. In psychology and education, humour has been widely explored as a means of enhancing motivation and self-esteem (Martin & Forn, 2018; Kim, 2021). Researchers have long recognized the potential of humour in various contexts, including its role as a pedagogical strategy, and the positive effects it can have on the psychological health and motivation of learners. When applied in second language acquisition, particularly in English as a Second Language (ESL) or English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, humour has been shown to significantly reduce anxiety among learners, making the challenging process of language learning more approachable and less intimidating (Bilokçuoğlu & Debreli, 2018; He & Haji-Othman, 2024; Mudra, 2024). Humour's ability to ease the emotional tension that often accompanies language learning makes it an effective tool for instructors aiming to create a supportive and engaging learning environment.

The impact of humour on language learning extends beyond reducing anxiety, as it has also been found to contribute to the creation of a positive and motivating classroom atmosphere. Research by Dörnyei (2001) and Richards (2020) underscores the importance of a motivating environment in language acquisition, and humour is identified as a key factor in fostering such an atmosphere. By enhancing students' mood and engagement, humour makes the learning process more enjoyable and increases the likelihood of success in language acquisition (MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012). Unlike traditional, more rigid language classrooms, humour introduces an element of enjoyment and spontaneity, which can make the process of learning a second or foreign language more dynamic and engaging (Heidari-Shahreza, 2021).

Additionally, the positive impact of humour on learning outcomes is evident in its ability to improve retention and facilitate understanding. Humour contributes to a relaxed educational setting, which in turn enhances lesson retention and facilitates vocabulary acquisition, particularly among students with low English proficiency (Zabidin et al., 2024). In this way, humour helps reduce the cognitive load often associated with learning a new language by providing moments of relief, allowing students to absorb and retain information more effectively. Consequently, humour plays a key role not only in improving the learning environment but also in enhancing learning outcomes, making it an essential tool for educators seeking to optimise student engagement and performance.

The relationship between humour, motivation, and self-esteem in language learning has also gained significant attention. Motivation is a crucial factor in second language acquisition, and research has shown that humour can enhance motivation by boosting learners' self-esteem and making them feel more confident in their abilities (Neff & Dewaele, 2022; Tariq & Khan, 2013; Tong & Tsung, 2020). Students who feel more positive about their learning experience, in part due to the use of humour, are more likely to persist in their efforts and ultimately succeed in mastering the language. This link between humour and self-esteem is particularly important in ESL/EFL contexts, where learners may be dealing with the stress of learning a new language in an environment where they may feel out of their comfort zone.

In addition to motivation and self-esteem, humour has been shown to foster a sense of community and belonging among learners, which can further enhance their language learning experience. By integrating humour into lessons, teachers create a more interactive and inclusive classroom atmosphere that encourages collaboration and positive peer interactions. This, in turn, enhances students' motivation to participate in the learning process and fosters a more supportive learning community (Richards, 2022). When students feel like they are part of a supportive and engaging classroom environment, they are more likely to take risks in using the language, which is a key component of language learning.

While much of the existing research on humour in language learning has focused on EFL contexts, there is a growing need for more studies that explore the use of humour in ESL settings. The existing literature often fails to provide a comprehensive framework for understanding how humour can be effectively integrated into ESL classrooms, and the cultural differences between learners in these contexts may further complicate the use of humour as a pedagogical tool (Tong & Tsung, 2020; Weisi & Mohammadi, 2023). Different cultural backgrounds can influence how humour is perceived and understood, which means that the potential for miscommunication or misunderstanding increases in diverse ESL classrooms. Therefore, instructors must exercise caution when using humour and ensure that it is culturally appropriate and contextually relevant. Likewise, humour can be adapted to different cultural contexts and language learning environments to examine how humour can be used effectively with learners from diverse cultural backgrounds, as well as how its use may vary across different ESL/EFL settings.

The relationship between humour, self-esteem, and motivation remains an area of interest for both psychologists and educators, and ongoing research is needed to better understand how these factors interact and affect language learning outcomes. While studies have shown that high levels of self-esteem are associated with increased motivation and improved language learning results (Basco & Han, 2016; Moyano et al., 2020), the exact nature of this relationship remains unclear. This is particularly true in the context of ESL/EFL learning, where self-esteem and motivation may fluctuate as learners navigate the challenges of acquiring a new language. A deeper understanding of how humour influences these variables could lead to more effective teaching practices and help instructors better support their students' language learning journeys. Moreover, there has been a growing awareness of the role that humour plays in shaping learners' psychological well-being (Joudi & Ayoub, 2024). Humour is increasingly seen as a tool that can enhance the psychological well-being of language learners, boost their confidence, and improve their overall motivation to learn.

However, despite this growing interest, a thorough analysis of how humour, motivation, and self-esteem interact in ESL/EFL classrooms is still lacking. Therefore, this review aims to synthesize the existing research on the relationship between humour, motivation, and self-esteem among language learners in ESL/EFL classrooms, identify gaps in the current research and suggest directions for future research; and provide practical implications for language teachers and learners in ESL/EFL classrooms.

Methodology

Research design

The purpose of this review paper is to analyse the current research on the relationship between humour, motivation, and self-esteem in ESL/EFL classrooms qualitatively. The review employed a systematic approach, including a comprehensive search of relevant databases and a critical evaluation of the quality and relevance of the selected studies in academic journals, books, and conference proceedings.

A combination of purposeful and random sampling techniques was used to identify a representative sample of relevant literature. The purposeful sampling technique was applied when searching for literature using specific keywords such as “humour,” “motivation,” “self-esteem,” and “ESL/EFL learners”. The search was conducted in databases such as ENRC, PsychINFO, ProQuest, Google Scholar, and Web of Science. The purpose of selecting these databases—PsychINFO, ProQuest, Google Scholar, ENRC, and Web of Science—was to guarantee a careful examination of the body of research on the connection between humour, motivation, and self-worth in language learners. Language learning is the primary focus of ENRC, an educational specialty. Relevant features are covered by PsychINFO (McKibbin et al., 2006) and ProQuest, which emphasise psychology and multidisciplinary material, respectively (Behrend, 2019). Google Scholar, an interdisciplinary site, promotes inclusion, while Web of Science's citation indexing makes it easier to find significant research outputs (Haddaway et al., 2015; Mikki, 2009).

As purposeful sampling is a technique that involves selecting individuals or items based on specific criteria to achieve a specific purpose (Suri, 2011), first the articles related to humour, motivation, and self-esteem in ESL/EFL classrooms were identified. To ensure an impartial and representative selection of peer-reviewed articles published in English during between 2012 and 2022, the study employed a random sampling method. By using this method, the chance of introducing systematic biases that could affect our sample's representativeness is reduced. The methodology is in line with accepted research best practices, which strengthens the study's validity and applicability (Martino et al., 2018).

The systematic approach in selecting and evaluating the sources includes the use of predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria (Fink, 2019). The inclusion criteria for the articles were: (a) the study must be conducted in ESL/EFL classrooms, (b) the study must investigate the relationship between at least any two variables of humour, motivation, and self-esteem, and (c) the study must be published in English. The methodology section of the studies selected was carefully analyzed to evaluate the validity and reliability of the research designs used. The data collection methods, such as surveys, interviews, or observation, were also noted, as well as the sample size, participants' age and language proficiency level, and any potential sources of bias, as suggested by Booth et al. (2016). The results of the studies were synthesized and compared to determine the consistency and validity of the findings (Cooper, 2015). The limitations of the studies were also critically evaluated, and areas for future research were identified.

Findings and discussion

After a thorough examination of the 45 related articles, several noteworthy patterns emerged, providing insight into the complex interplay among humour, motivation, self-esteem, and other facets of psychology and well-being in education settings. A summary of the main findings, emphasizing the effects of humour on engagement, motivation, positive emotion, self-esteem, memory, and general well-being in learning environments is presented. Also, this review confirms that humour plays as a powerful stress and anxiety reliever while admitting that individual and cultural differences may have an impact on the engagement of humour. Moreover, the contribution of humour to the development of creative and critical thinking skills is explored, with particular attention to its use in language learning. Despite these benefits, there are some drawbacks to integrating humour in language learning environments are also covered.

Humour can enhance motivation, self-esteem, and positive emotion

According to Bell (2017), defining a distinct role for humour in education has proved to be difficult; nevertheless, it appears to offer notable advantages in the emotional domain. Bell (2017) further adds that humour frequently arises in interactions among peers, and beyond enhancing awareness and retention of second language (L2) structures and functions, it fosters a conversational environment that is both engaging and challenging. Humour enhances the learner's motivation, which is a crucial aspect of language learning success (Dornyei & Skehan, 2003). Previous studies have provided evidence for a positive relationship between humour and motivation as well as self-esteem among ESL/EFL learners (e.g., Wagner, & Urios-Aparisi, 2011; Eysenck et al., 2007). Incorporating humour in language instruction has been shown to increase motivation and boost self-esteem in language learners but the degree of effectiveness might vary among individuals. Azizinezhad and Hashemi (2011)

stated that the use of humour in the language classroom was positively associated with students' motivation. Kim and Park (2017) and Ellis (1997) found that humour helps language learners feel more confident about themselves. The positive effects of humour on language learning is attributed to its ability to create a positive emotional state and foster a relaxed and enjoyable learning environment (Kavandi & Kavandi, 2016; Kim & Park, 2017).

Moreover, motivation is a crucial factor in language learning, as it affects a learner's persistence, and achievement. Humour can positively impact language learning outcomes by increasing learners' motivation and self-esteem by adopting various approaches. The variations among individuals in acquiring a second language can be referred to as "the correlational challenge." The variations among individuals in acquiring a second language can be referred to as "the correlational challenge." Specifically, differences in factors such as foreign language aptitude and motivation have proven to be the most reliable indicators of success in learning a second language (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015). Shabani's (2012) study indicated that there exists a strong relationship between foreign language anxiety and the apprehension of being negatively evaluated by others. This means that individuals who experience anxiety in speaking a foreign language often fear how they will be judged by their peers or instructors. "Fear of negative evaluation" (Ahadzadeh et al., 2018) could also have a negative impact on self-esteem. This could consequently impact learners' emotions and motivation negatively.

Logically learners with high self-esteem are more confident and motivated, while those with low self-esteem often tend to lack motivation and have a negative attitude towards language learning. Furthermore, emotions play a crucial role in facilitating language learning by enriching the experience. The imagination has a positive and expansive effect, enhancing the overall process of acquiring a new language (MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012). Positive self-esteem (Rubio, 2021), could play a crucial role in shaping learners' motivation and language learning success. Rubio (2021) explains the concept of self-esteem, discusses its influence on learning, and gives educators valuable recommendations for applying self-esteem principles to improve language teaching effectiveness. There is a positive relationship between elevated self-esteem and successful outcomes in language learning, suggesting that individuals who possess greater self-confidence and belief in their abilities are more likely to achieve better results in acquiring a new language (Dörnyei, 2014). This implies that when learners have a strong sense of self-worth and confidence in their capacity to master a language, they are often more motivated, resilient, and engaged, which ultimately enhances their learning experience. Essentially, fostering a belief in one's ability to learn can play a pivotal role in achieving language learning goals and overcoming challenges associated with the process.

Overall, the literature suggests that the relationship between humour, motivation, and self-esteem in language learning is complex and may be influenced by cultural and individual differences, as well as the type of humour used.

Humour enhances engagement and memory

There has been an increasing recognition of the significance of humour and play in the context of L2 learning and teaching. In fact, educators have been encouraged for quite some time to incorporate aspects of humour and playful activities into their language instruction (Reddington, 2015). Integrating these elements can create a more engaging and enjoyable learning environment, which not only helps to alleviate the stress often associated with learning a new language but also promotes greater retention of language concepts. By leveraging humour and play, teachers can foster a more dynamic classroom atmosphere, encouraging students to actively participate and communicate without the fear of making mistakes. This approach can enhance motivation and build a positive rapport between students and teachers, ultimately leading to improved language acquisition outcomes. AbdAli et al. (2016) conducted a survey among 100 EFL learners to examine the effects of humour on their English learning. The study found that fifth-year preparatory school students in Basra have a high preference for teachers' use of humour during lessons, which significantly impacting their motivation and engagement, with male students showing a more positive attitude towards humour than female students. The implication is that incorporating humour into teaching can enhance student learning experiences and performance, suggesting that educators should consider adopting a more light-hearted approach in their instructional methods. Also, it has been found that humour can increase motivation and engagement among language learners. Moreover, according to Martin (2022), the use of self-deprecation by lecturers plays a crucial role in fostering a comfortable and safe learning environment.

Likewise, Aboudan (2009) explored the role of humour in language learning context. The study reported that humour is a highly effective tool in creating a positive classroom atmosphere for second language learning. Approximately 80% of students reported that humour enhances their attention during lessons, while 71% noted that it aids in understanding difficult material. The study confirms that humour helps to reduce tension, improve classroom climate, and strengthen student-teacher relationships, ultimately leading to a more enjoyable and effective learning experience. The implication of this research suggests that language teachers should actively incorporate humour into their teaching strategies to foster motivation and improve student learning outcomes. By using humour, along with encouragement and praise, educators can create a more inviting and conducive

environment for language acquisition. Wagner and Urios-Aparisi (2011) highlight humour as a complex and multifaceted element that plays a significant role in world language classrooms. By adopting a multi-dimensional approach to study humour's production, comprehension, and pedagogical functions, educators can uncover its benefits in language learning. Their study also emphasizes the need for further research, including standardized coding and conversation analysis, to deepen understanding of humour's role in language education. Therefore, educators should be encouraged to recognize and harness the power of humour in their teaching strategies. Ongoing research will contribute to developing coherent frameworks and practices that can effectively incorporate humour, enhancing both the learning experience and instructional methods in world language education. Moreover, Neff and Dewaele (2022) found that how teachers behave in the classroom can impact students' enjoyment of learning a foreign language and their motivation and attitude toward learning. They reported that when teachers frequently use the foreign language and make jokes, students tend to enjoy the class more and feel more motivated. However, if a teacher rarely jokes, students' enjoyment can decrease over time. Interestingly, the study didn't find that these teacher behaviours had a significant effect on students' anxiety about learning a foreign language. They concluded that teachers can enhance students' enjoyment and motivation in learning a foreign language by being engaging and humorous to cultivate a positive and interactive learning environment. This is achieved by integrating humour to establish a relaxed, stress-free atmosphere, encourage student participation, and enhance language learning.

Humour can promote well-being in educational settings

Humour has long been considered a unique feature of human communication and has been shown to have a positive impact on individuals' psychological well-being.

Moreover, humour can help to build positive relationships between students and teachers, which can increase student's self-esteem and confidence. It is important to note that teachers play an essential role in creating a humorous atmosphere in the classroom. In addition, teachers can use humour to help students through sensitive or difficult subjects, making language learning more pleasurable for them.

Humour is deemed effective for creating a relaxed and enjoyable classroom atmosphere, engaging learners, promoting motivation, and enhancing language learning outcomes (e.g., Kim & Park, 2017). Abdullah and Akhter (2015) discussed the use of humour in a language classroom. It was reported that humour is deemed to be useful in fostering a fun and stress-free teaching environment, motivating students, and improving language learning outcomes.

Additionally, Gonulal (2018) investigated the use of humour in EFL classrooms, focusing on the use of puns, jokes, and entertaining stories to help students learn new vocabulary. Turkish college-level EFL students had a largely positive attitude towards the use of humour in English language classrooms, recognizing it as an effective pedagogical tool. The students believed that humour could enhance their attentiveness, attention span, confidence, and the bond between teachers and students (Gonulal, 2018). Therefore, incorporating humour into EFL instruction could improve the learning environment and help students overcome affective barriers. This might be particularly beneficial in settings where communicative-oriented teaching methods are still developing, as humour can create a more engaging and supportive atmosphere for language acquisition.

Overall, the findings from previous research highlight the critical role that humour plays in language learning. It also shows that humour could dramatically reduce stress and anxiety, which in turn promotes a more positive and productive learning environment. Additionally, humour has been shown to boost motivation and engagement.

Humour can be moderated by cultural and individual differences

Studies have suggested that the effects of humour on motivation and self-esteem may be moderated by cultural and individual differences. According to Yue et al. (2016) humour is perceived and valued differently across Western and Eastern cultures. Specifically, Westerners tend to view humour as a common and positive trait, while Eastern participants, particularly from Chinese culture, see humour as more exclusive to humourists and associated with controversial aspects. Hong Kong participants, when primed with Western culture, rated humour more positively than when primed with Chinese culture, and another indicating that Canadians place greater importance on humour and expect it from ordinary individuals, unlike their Chinese counterparts who reserve expectations of humour for comedians (Yue et al., 2016). This highlights the role cultural context plays in shaping humour perceptions and its significance in social interactions. Understanding these differences can enhance cross-cultural communications and improve relational dynamics, particularly in multicultural contexts. Additionally, educators and communicators may need to tailor their approaches to humour based on cultural backgrounds to avoid misunderstandings. However, the study also acknowledges its limitations, suggesting that further research is necessary to fully comprehend the complex interplay of culture and humour. In ESL/EFL classrooms, where

the study population is diverse and multi-cultural, it is important to consider these cultural differences in the use and perception of humour in language learning.

As pointed out by Salmee and Arif (2019) humour and its effects on motivation and self-esteem vary among different cultural groups in ESL/EFL classrooms, hence, humour can be culturally specific, and what is considered humorous in one culture may not be in another. Therefore, humour can be a powerful strategy for improving learning outcomes, fostering intercultural understanding, and establishing a positive relationship between students and teachers who come from diverse backgrounds.

The subtle effects of humour represent the potential of humour in aiding language acquisition depends on the cultural context and personal preferences of the diverse student populations in ESL/EFL classrooms.

Humour can promote critical thinking and creative skills

There are several social and cognitive benefits to adding humour into language acquisition which improves creativity and critical thinking abilities, less stress and anxiety, and increased drive and involvement that help to create a more pleasant and engaging learning environment.

The use of humour can also improve critical thinking and creativity skills, as learners are encouraged to actively engage with the language and find solutions to problems in a relaxed manner. Oshima (2018) highlights the significance of humour in fostering creative thinking and challenging accepted norms, drawing a parallel to intercultural understanding and communication. The study emphasises that humour helps deconstruct social and cultural expectations, acts as a social lubricant, and can alleviate inter-ethnic tensions, as evidenced by the use of ethnic jokes in diverse societies like Hawaii (Oshima, 2018). Emphasising humour in educational and social contexts can enhance cultural understanding, improve relationships, and encourage innovative thinking, suggesting its value in both personal development and broader intercultural interactions. Humour often relies on wordplay, sarcasm, or other forms of linguistic nuance that may be difficult for language learners to understand. Furthermore, according to Kim and Park (2017), humour reduced students' anxiety and sparked interest in learning the language, strengthened positive relationships between teachers and students while fostering camaraderie among learners, and helped manage student behaviour or provided explanations for learners' difficulties in understanding spoken language. Additionally, the type of humour used in language learning is also a crucial factor in its effectiveness (Bell, 2017; Yue et al., 2016). These comprise positive humour, self-deprecating humour, situational humour, irony as well as aggressive humour. Machlev and Karlin (2017) found that the use of relevant/appropriate humour in college classrooms positively correlates with increased student interest in course material, while the use of non-relevant humour negatively impacts student interest. This implies that instructors should prioritize using relevant and appropriate humour as a teaching strategy to enhance student engagement and interest in course content, while minimizing non-relevant humour that may detract from educational focus. Sultana et al. (2019) used interviews to investigate the experiences of EFL students with humour in the language classroom through a qualitative study. The results showed that the use of aggressive humour, which is defined as sarcastic or mocking humour, may be interpreted as unwelcoming or inappropriate in language learning environments. This could have negative effects on students' motivation, participation, and anxiety levels.

Challenges of using humour in language learning

The use of humour in language learning among ESL/EFL learners is not without challenges. It is also essential to recognise the drawbacks of using humour in ESL/EFL classrooms, as not all forms of humour is regarded as amusing. Understanding the contextual significance of humour is crucial (Xia et al., 2023). Culturally insensitive remarks made through humour may adversely affect students (Davis, 2022) by leading to discomfort or cause students to feel marginalized due to insufficient sensitivity (Farnia & Mohammadi, 2021). Furthermore, inappropriate use of humour may disrupt the class by diverting attention from the primary focus of English language learning (Weisi & Mohammadi, 2023). It is therefore important for teachers to be culturally sensitive and aware of the cultural backgrounds of their students when using humour in the language classroom. For example, as stated by Yue et al. (2016), culturally specific humour may not be understood by learners from different cultural backgrounds. According to Yue et al. (2016), westerners perceive humour a shared characteristic that contributes positively to personal growth. In contrast, the Chinese view humour as a trait predominantly associated with comedy professionals and generally less favourable for social interactions. Humour can sometimes be perceived as offensive, leading to decreased motivation and self-esteem (Miczo, 2019).

According to Alatalo and Poutiainen (2016), the use of humour in language learning has the potential to enhance motivation and self-esteem, as well as language acquisition and cognitive development. Although using humour in language instruction has many advantages, such as increased motivation and self-esteem, there are also drawbacks. These include cultural misunderstandings, perceived offensiveness, distraction, linguistic complexity, and the possibility of being viewed as unprofessional. As such, educators must handle humour with

cultural sensitivity and pedagogical discernment. one of the best humour genres for establishing rapport with students and fostering a supportive learning environment is self-deprecating humour.

The studies reviewed showed a positive relationship between humour and motivation in foreign language learning. Humour was found to have a significant impact on learners' motivation and their willingness to engage in the language learning process. Humour was seen to reduce anxiety, increase enjoyment, and promote a positive learning environment. Additionally, the studies found that humour also had a positive effect on learners' self-esteem. Humour was seen to increase confidence, improve social skills, and promote a more positive self-image. The findings suggested that humour can help foreign language learners feel more comfortable in social situations and promote a more positive attitude towards the language learning process. However, the relationship between humour and motivation may not be consistent across all learners and some learners may not find humour as effective in promoting motivation and self-esteem. This highlights the importance of individual differences in the impact of humour on language learning. As for teachers, by recognizing their own humour styles, teachers can gain a deeper understanding of how to leverage the advantages that humour brings to the language classroom (Andarab & Mutlu, 2019).

In summary, appropriate humour has generally a positive effect on learners' self-esteem, helping to increase confidence, improve social skills, and promote a more positive self-image. However, the relationship between humour, motivation, and self-esteem may not be consistent across all learners, highlighting the importance of considering individual differences when integrating humour into language learning. Language educators in the ESL/EFL context can benefit from incorporating humour into their teaching practices. Educators can use humour to create a more positive and enjoyable learning environment, which can in turn help to increase motivation and self-esteem among foreign language learners.

Limitations of the reviewed literature

Some of the studies reviewed in this paper have several limitations that should be considered when generalising their results to different contexts. One of the main limitations is the small sample size used in a few of the studies, which limits their generalizability to a larger population. Another limitation is the use of self-reported measures, which are subject to various sources of bias, such as social desirability bias and recall bias. For example, participants may have been motivated to report higher levels of self-esteem or motivation than they have, to present themselves in a positive light. Additionally, the use of cross-sectional designs in most of the studies limits the ability to establish causal relationships between the variables of interest.

Further research with larger and more diverse samples, as well as using experimental designs, is needed to confirm and extend these findings. Moreover, there is a need to examine the specific ways in which humour can be used effectively to promote language learning, motivation, and self-esteem among ESL/EFL learners. The review suggests that future research in this area could focus on the development and testing of humour-based language teaching interventions in ESL/EFL classrooms. This could provide insights into the effectiveness of such interventions in promoting motivation and self-esteem among language learners in the country.

Conclusions and recommendations

In this review paper, we reviewed the existing literature on the relationship between humour, motivation, and self-esteem in ESL/EFL contexts and identified the areas for further investigation. This review provided insights into the potential benefits of incorporating humour into language learning, as well as its potential limitations and challenges. It can be concluded that the relationship between humour, motivation, and self-esteem in language learning in ESL/EFL classrooms is complex and multi-faceted. It is a promising area for further research, as it has the potential to inform language teaching practice and enhance learner motivation and self-esteem in the language classroom. The findings suggested that humour generally has a positive impact on motivation and self-esteem in language learning. Therefore, by gaining a deeper understanding of the role that humour plays in language learning, educators and language learners can develop more effective and enjoyable learning experiences. Language teachers should consider individual learner differences and cultural contexts when incorporating humour in the language classroom to enhance learner motivation and self-esteem.

The reviewed studies highlighted the need to be mindful of the cultural and individual differences among students, as well as the limitations of self-reported measures of motivation and self-esteem. The implications of these findings for language teachers and educational policymakers are significant. Language teachers should consider incorporating humour into their teaching practices to enhance students' motivation and self-esteem. Moreover, educational policymakers can recognize the importance of humour in language education and provide adequate resources and support for teachers to effectively incorporate humour. The use of humour in language education has its challenges. Language teachers must exercise caution when incorporating humour and should be mindful of cultural differences among their students. While the reviewed studies provide evidence for a positive

relationship between humour, motivation, and self-esteem among language learners in ESL/EFL context, there is a need for further research to explore this relationship in more depth.

Future research could aim to explore the use of humour in different language learning contexts, such as online language learning, to better understand its impact on motivation and self-esteem. Future research could explore the impact of different types of humour, such as verbal and nonverbal humour, on motivation and self-esteem in language learning, as well as the role of learner personality and cultural background in shaping the relationship between humour, motivation, and self-esteem. Additionally, studies could also investigate the role of individual differences, such as language proficiency and personality, in the impact of humour on language learning. This information will provide language educators with a more comprehensive understanding of how humour can be effectively integrated into language teaching practices to promote motivation and self-esteem among language learners in ESL/EFL classrooms. Moreover, it would be valuable to investigate the effects of using humour in different language skills, such as speaking and writing, and in different language teaching contexts, such as formal and informal language instruction. These research avenues have the potential to contribute to a more nuanced and evidence-based understanding of the relationship between humour, motivation, and self-esteem in language learning.

In measuring the relationship between humour, motivation, and self-esteem among language learners in ESL/EFL contexts quantitative studies play the key role in understanding the magnitude of the relationship and identifying specific ways in which humour can be used to promote motivation and self-esteem. However, qualitative research, such as case studies to follow learners individually over time to understand how humour is associated with language learning, could also provide insights into the subjective experiences of learners and how humour affects their language learning process. Also, longitudinal studies on these variables might be useful in providing insights into how these factors exert a long-term impact on classroom learning.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest for this review paper.

Author contribution

The authors distribute all the tasks contributing to the completion of this review paper. Kam-Fong Lee: conceptualization, data collection, formal analysis, writing –review & editing. Mansour Amini: conceptualization, data curation, validation, writing –original draft, approved the final version of the manuscript.

Data availability statement

Data will be made available upon request.

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