

THE IMPACT OF HUMOUR-INTEGRATED EXAMPLE SENTENCES ON EFL LEARNERS' VOCABULARY RETENTION AT A LANGUAGE CENTRE IN VIETNAM

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Received:	31/5/2025	Humour has been shown to offer various benefits in English language classrooms, yet it has received little attention in Vietnam, with few studies on humour-based teaching materials. This article examines the impact of humorous example sentences on pre-intermediate students' vocabulary retention at a language centre in Vietnam. Explanatory Sequential Mixed Methods were used; 58 students participated in a quasi-experimental study, with 10 from the experimental group joining focus group interviews. Quantitative results showed that humour-based example sentences improved vocabulary retention, as the experimental group's post-test mean (18.069) was higher than the control group's (16.759). Focus group data further supported these findings, with students expressing positive attitudes toward the method, noting it helped them remember vocabulary longer, increased engagement, and reduced classroom tension.
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TÁC ĐỘNG CỦA CÁC CÂU VÍ DỤ TÍCH HỢP YẾU TỐ HÀI HƯỚC ĐẾN KHẢ NĂNG GHI NHỚ TỪ VỰNG CỦA NGƯỜI HỌC TIẾNG ANH NHƯ MỘT NGOẠI NGỮ TẠI MỘT TRUNG TÂM NGÔN NGỮ Ở VIỆT NAM

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THÔNG TIN BÀI BÁO		TÓM TẮT
Ngày nhận bài:	31/5/2025	Hài hước đã được chứng minh mang lại nhiều lợi ích trong các lớp học tiếng Anh, tuy nhiên vấn đề này vẫn chưa nhận được nhiều sự chú ý tại Việt Nam, với rất ít nghiên cứu về tài liệu giảng dạy dựa trên yếu tố hài hước. Bài viết này xem xét tác động của các câu ví dụ hài hước đối với khả năng ghi nhớ từ vựng của sinh viên trình độ pre-intermediate tại một trung tâm ngôn ngữ ở Việt Nam. Phương pháp nghiên cứu hỗn hợp được sử dụng với thiết kế giải thích theo trình tự. 58 sinh viên tham gia nghiên cứu bán thí nghiệm, trong đó có 10 sinh viên từ nhóm thực nghiệm tham gia phỏng vấn nhóm tập trung. Kết quả định lượng cho thấy các câu ví dụ hài hước cải thiện khả năng ghi nhớ từ vựng, khi điểm trung bình bài kiểm tra sau của nhóm thực nghiệm (18,069) cao hơn nhóm đối chứng (16,759). Dữ liệu từ phỏng vấn nhóm tập trung càng củng cố thêm những kết quả này, khi sinh viên thể hiện thái độ tích cực đối với phương pháp này, cho rằng nó giúp họ nhớ từ vựng lâu hơn, tăng sự tham gia và động lực trong lớp, đồng thời giảm căng thẳng trong lớp học.
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1. Introduction

Research unequivocally emphasises the critical importance of vocabulary. Behlol and Kaini [1] asserted that vocabulary is an essential part of language. It is proposed that one can perform 80 percent of their speaking and writing English tasks if he or she know just 2000 high-frequency words [2], highlighting the immediate impact of vocabulary on communication and comprehension. Schmitt [3] added an advocative point that lexical knowledge is not only important to one's communicative capability but also to their second language acquisition. In the teaching of English as a Second Language (ESL) or English as a Foreign Language (EFL), the significance of vocabulary is also well confirmed, as Nation [4] asserted that teaching vocabulary is a vital step in the field, as it helps develop students' four macro-skills. Baumann et al. [5] also acknowledged a similar point, suggesting that the presence of lexical knowledge is the condition for all linguistic activities and practices to take place.

Realising its fundamental importance, educators have continuously been researching novel approaches to teach vocabulary more effectively in ESL and EFL classes. Throughout history, a plethora of vocabulary teaching approaches, methods, and techniques have been experimented with and applied due to their practical implications. These range from rote memorisation and repetition for basic comprehension [6] to context-based learning aimed at enhancing students' grasp of vocabulary in comprehensible contexts in the late 19th to early 20th centuries [7]. In the mid-20th century, interactive methods, including word games that promote playful attributes [8] and concept mapping [9] that allow students to visualise connections for greater comprehension, were introduced. More recently, Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) programs [10] have provided learners with personalised learning experiences and authentic materials. Regarding the context of Vietnam, there is almost no research reporting systematically what English teaching vocabulary strategies have been applied in this country and the rationale behind them [11]. A very few strategies used by Vietnamese EFL teachers are mentioned in the literature, and they are storytelling [12], songs [13], code-switching [14], and translation [12]. While certain vocabulary teaching strategies are still proven effective nowadays, scholars and educators continue to research and implement new ones for better vocabulary learning among learners of dissimilar learning styles. And humour in teaching in general and in teaching vocabulary in particular gradually receives more attention.

In Andarab's [15] study, the researchers explored how humour-integrated pictures on Quizlet (an online application to assist vocabulary learning) affected students' retention of vocabulary in Turkey. Those students in the control group (CG) completed homework with vocabulary presented in a non-humorous context, while those in the experimental group (EG) did the same tasks but with vocabulary presented in humorous pictures on Quizlet. The results were really positive, in which the EG outperformed the CG in a post-test. In a similar study, Mahdiloo and Izadpanah [16] intended to identify the effects of humorous clips on learners' vocabulary retention and understanding. The results were congruent with the researcher's hypotheses, in which the learners from the EG significantly outperformed those in the CG in the post-test.

Vietnam, as a developing country, shares a plethora of similar challenges with other Asian countries, including time constraints in classrooms, crowded classrooms, focus on rote learning, product-oriented teaching, and strictly authoritarian classrooms [17]. As a result, the habit of implementing new teaching techniques, including humour, is not widely preferred and encouraged. Besides, Nguyen [18] found that among the very few studies inspecting the use of humour in EFL classes, there is almost no research conducted about this topic in Asian countries and even less in Vietnam, particularly. Probably, the use of humour in teaching is not a new idea here; however, it seems that this element in class is too obvious, which leads to the fact that there have been very few studies on this issue. This is exactly the research gap that the present study aimed to address.

The present study did not aim to explore the impact of humour in general in EFL classes, but specifically humour-enhanced teaching materials. To fulfil this aim, the following two research questions guided the current study:

1. *How do humour-integrated example sentences impact pre-intermediate students' vocabulary retention?*

2. *How do pre-intermediate students perceive the effects of humour-integrated example sentences on their vocabulary retention?*

The study examines these questions by adopting a quasi-experimental design, followed by focus group interviews to gather both quantitative and qualitative data. The results are discussed in terms of their implications for vocabulary teaching and student engagement in the EFL classroom.

2. Methodology

This current study followed the design of Sequential Explanatory Mixed Methods, which means quantitative data were collected and analysed before qualitative data [19]. The quantitative phase adopted a quasi-experimental design in which the students were divided into two groups: a control group and an experimental group. Then, in the following qualitative phase, the researcher arranged direct focus group interviews with some participants in the EG to explain the results yielded from the quantitative phase. Their thoughts and feelings from the interviews were supplementary evidence of the effects of humour-integrated example sentences on their vocabulary retention.

While other studies often use purely quantitative [20], [21] or purely qualitative methods [22], this study combined both to provide a comprehensive view of the effectiveness of humour-based teaching techniques. The choice of the mixed methods approach allowed for a deeper understanding by triangulating data from both phases, which offered a richer interpretation of the results. Compared to previous research, this approach allowed for a more holistic perspective on how humour affected students' vocabulary retention and their perceptions of the teaching method.

There were 58 students in my research study, participating in the study, and they belonged to four intact classes in which the teacher was also the researcher. All of them were non-English majors who took IELTS courses for different purposes. The CG consisted of 29 students from two classes, and so did the EG.

Vocabulary handouts for 6 weeks were provided to all the students, as they were the major research instrument and the treatment in the study. The aim of the present study was to discover the effects of humour-integrated example sentences upon learners' vocabulary retention, so the CG and EG were provided with different sorts of handouts. While the handouts for the CG contained non-humorous example sentences, those provided for the EG included humour-integrated example sentences, and all the example sentences were designed only by the researcher. Non-humorous example sentences for the CG were designed similarly to example sentences in other common textbooks and materials. However, with humour-integrated example sentences for the EG, the researcher used his sense of humour. Or else, the researcher sometimes collected available humorous example sentences from different sources and tailored them to design humour-integrated example sentences for the EG.

After marking the tests, including the pre-test and post-test, the scores of all the participants were tabulated and numerically analysed in Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 22 for Windows. The mean scores of the CG and EG in the pre-test and the post-test were first calculated, and then the Independent Samples Test was used to confirm whether there was any significant difference in the mean scores between the CG and EG in these tests. Concerning the qualitative phase, answers from the 10 interviewees were recorded by the researcher's phone and saved in recording files. Then, these recordings were transcribed, and the data were put into different categorisations according to themes and sub-themes.

3. Findings and discussion

3.1. Results from the experiment

3.1.1. Pre-test

Table 1. Mean scores of the pre-test: Group statistics

Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Error Mean
EG	29	14.690	3.694	0.686
CG	29	14.931	3.644	0.677

Both the EG and the CG were subjected to a pre-test to confirm homogeneity when the study began. The results in Table 1 showed that the mean score in both groups in the pre-test was almost similar, with the EG being a little lower at 14.690 (SD = 3.694) and the CG being at 14.931 (SD = 3.644).

Table 2. Results of the Independent Samples Test of the pre-test

	F	Sig.	Df	Sig.(2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std.Error Difference
Equal variances assumed	0.001	0.973	56	0.803	-0.241	0.964
Equal variances not assumed			55.989	0.803	-0.241	0.964

After the mean score analysis, the researcher continued to use the Independent Samples Test to see whether the participants in the two groups had the same English vocabulary competency or not. It was found that although the mean score of the CG was slightly higher than that of the EG (see Table 1), data in Table 2 showed that there were no significant statistical differences in the vocabulary proficiency scores of the EG and CG at the outset of the research ($p = 0.803$, $p > 0.05$), implying that the participants in both groups were at the same level of vocabulary capacity when the research started.

3.1.2. Post-test

Table 3. Mean scores of the post-test: Group statistics

Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Error Mean
EG	29	18.069	2.069	0.384
CG	29	16.759	2.099	0.390

After collecting the test paper and marking it, the researcher continued to compare the results of the EG and the CG. The results were demonstrated in Table 3. It can be clearly seen from Table 3 above that, unlike the pre-test analysis, there was a difference in the mean score of the two groups in the post-test. In particular, the mean score of the EG was 18.069 (SD = 2.069), which was higher than that of the CG, at 16.759 (SD = 2.099). While in the pre-test, the EG's mean score was lower, the opposite was true in the post-test.

To achieve the purpose of the present study, the researcher carried on utilising the Independent Samples Test to see whether the difference in the mean scores of the post-test results of the two groups, shown in Table 4, was statistically significant. It has already been clear from Table 4 that the mean score of the EG was higher, and the result obtained from Table 4 further confirms that this was a significant difference ($p = 0.020$, $p < 0.05$). It can be concluded here that the students in the EG outperformed their counterparts in the CG in terms of vocabulary learning and retention. Thus, these results positively answered the first research question, which explores whether humour-integrated example sentences had an impact on EFL pre-intermediate students' vocabulary retention. In another sense, the implementation of humour-integrated example sentences really led to a better performance of vocabulary retention among EFL students. This result was within the hypotheses expected by the researcher after reviewing the preceding literature and conducting the present research.

Table 4. Results of the Independent Samples Test of the post-test

	F	Sig.	Df	Sig.(2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std.Error Difference
Equal variances assumed	0.011	0.917	56	0.020	-1.310	0.547
Equal variances not assumed			55.989	0.020	-1.310	0.547

The results of the present study were in alignment with two studies reviewed earlier. Andarab [15] aimed to explore whether humour-integrated pictures on Quizlet improved Turkish students' vocabulary retention, and the results revealed that the EG also outperformed after eight weeks of treatment. Another study reviewed in this section was done by Mahdiloo and Izadpanah [16], which confirmed the positive impact of humorous clips on Iranian students' vocabulary retention and yielded the expected results. These two studies employed humour as the treatment, and the results were all positive, which was similar to the results of the present study. However, how humour was utilized was different among these studies. While the present study used humour in example sentences, other researchers used humour in visual aids and clips. These differences perhaps led to dissimilar experiences among learners, but the results were all positive.

Besides the aforementioned studies, there was still a great deal of other research collecting similar positive results of humour on students' vocabulary learning in different contexts and nations. Experimenting with humorous contexts on vocabulary acquisition and retention, Ghaffari and Mohamadi [21] concluded that the implementation of the treatment resulted in significantly better student performance. Before Ghaffari and Mohamadi [21], Aria and Tracey [23] also conducted a study using humorous contexts and collected a similar result in which the scores of the post-test revealed that the EG outperformed the CG. Instead of incorporating humour into short example sentences like the present research, Aria and Tracey [23] instilled humour into longer texts. Employing humour in short narrative texts, Zabidin [24] also yielded expected positive results upon EFL learners' word comprehension and retention, although the effect was concluded to be not so clear.

3.2. Results from the interviews

As mentioned in the Methodology section, 10 students were selected by a simple sampling technique to attend focus group interviews. During the interview, all the students were given a pseudonym for identity security, and their fake names were coded as P and a number.

3.2.1. Students' reactions

Increased interest

One of the most repeated reactions among the students was that the technique succeeded in arousing interest among the students, hence helping them overcome or avoid boredom in class. P3 said, "For me, when I learn in this way, I don't get bored when I learn vocabulary."

One student compared this technique with those conventional ones he had used before to explain why the current technique led to improved interest levels in him. P5 shared that "For me, when I read these sentences, I initially feel really interested. Because I have always read in books and then looked up in the dictionary. I have never studied any method that has such a practical example."

This finding was quite within the expectations of the researcher and aligned with previous studies. Eighty-six percent of the students in Nguyen's study [25] confirmed that humour increased their interest in a foreign language class, and up to 99 percent of the students in Tran's study [26] shared that their interest in learning a foreign language was increased with the presence of humour.

Increased curiosity and excitement

Another prominent reaction from the students' answers was curiosity. Curiosity was triggered among the students, probably because they knew that they were going to experience

something that they had never seen before. P1 said, “The thing I like about this method is newness. When I am exposed to something new, I become curious, so I am eager to learn”.

From P1’s perspective, it can be seen that her curiosity stemmed from the fact that she knew she would see something for the first time and something brand new. She also shared that being exposed to anything for the first time could make her curious and excited to explore the content.

Another student shared that the fact that the materials were humorous somehow matched the personality traits of most students in her class, including her; therefore, she became more eager to discover the content of the handouts. She sensed the similarity between her character and the learning materials.

“With humorous people like us who have studied with each other from the beginning to the end, when I heard the teacher say that those words would be explained in a humorous way, when I heard it, it made me feel happy. My brain told me that this was going to be so fun, so I felt excited when I began reading it.” (P6)

“Curious, excited, and motivated to read it.” (Interviewer)

“Yes.” (P6)

Upon hearing that the materials were laced with humour, certain students were curious to explore the content of the vocabulary handout, while others were excited to see why the content was announced as humorous by their teacher. These affective factors somehow aroused interest among the students, hence contributing to an effective lesson lead-in activity, an important component of a good lesson. Regarding curiosity in teaching vocabulary, Aria and Tracey [23] asserted it was crucial for students to understand a word and feel curious to learn that word at the same time. This may lead to a lifelong passion for vocabulary learning as well as language learning.

To sum up, the reactions of the interviewees towards the humour-integrated example sentences were really positive. These materials boosted the students’ interest, curiosity, and excitement in learning vocabulary, and the experimental teaching technique was preferred. Therefore, the students perhaps stayed more persistent in their vocabulary learning journey without giving up as easily as they might have in the past. This means that the students might spend more time learning the targeted words in and after class, resulting in an increase in their retention of the targeted words. These findings offered further explanations for the results collected in the quantitative phase of this present study.

4. Conclusion

The present study aimed to explore the effects of humour-integrated example sentences on pre-intermediate students’ vocabulary retention. The results of the post-test revealed that teaching vocabulary with humour-integrated example sentences made a significant difference between the EG and CG. Specifically, the mean score of the EG (18.069) was higher than that of the CG (16.759), which indicated better vocabulary retention in the experimental group. This confirms that the implementation of humour in example sentences resulted in improved vocabulary progress among the pre-intermediate learners.

The findings from the qualitative data, which included interviews with 10 participants, further demonstrated why humour-integrated example sentences were found to have a positive effect on the students’ vocabulary retention. Specifically, the students explicitly shared their positive attitudes toward learning vocabulary with humorous example sentences, with most participants reporting that this method helped them memorize vocabulary more effectively, increased their engagement in class, and reduced classroom tension.

In comparison with previous studies in the Vietnamese context, this research offers new insights by applying humour-based techniques to enhance vocabulary retention. Unlike other studies, this research has highlighted how humour can be adapted for language learning in Vietnam, where such teaching methods are less commonly explored.

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