EFL Teachers' Identity and Power in China: A Discursive Analysis of Their Humor

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Abstract

Previous studies examined the benefits of the use of humor in language classrooms, but none of them has queried a deep understanding of the role of humor from teachers' perspectives. This qualitative case study explored the perceptions of three Chinese secondary school English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers on the use of humor in a period of six months of research. It discussed Chinese EFL teachers' identity and proposed humor as a strategy that helps maintain or shift the power in the Chinese teaching context. The path of power shift proposed in this study can be applied to educational scenarios similar to Chinese secondary schools in which exam is oriented and the size of class is large.

Keywords: Chinese EFL teachers, identity, the use of humor, power shift

1. Introduction

Humor is a universal phenomenon, but the attitudes toward humor and the usage of humor vary in different cultures. It was manifested by many researchers that the humor differences in specific cultures should be explored and then could be contributed to humor knowledge. Rod A. Martin and Xiao-Dong Yue are pioneers of research on humor differences in Chinese culture. Martin and Chen (2007) researched to compare Chinese and Canadian participants by using the Humor Styles Questionnaire (HSQ) and Coping Humor Scale (CHS). The study found that the Chinese have lower uses of all four humor styles and Coping humor than Canadians, particularly aggressive humor. Jiang, Yue, and Lu (2011) found that Chinese students, compared with American students, held a more negative implicit attitude toward humor. They believed that humor had been valued since the era of Plato and Aristotle, as they both conceived that humor as a kind of natural expression could bring people positive emotions such as amusement, fun, and delight in Western society (Jiang et al., 2011). However, because of Confucianism, Chinese people have become increasingly cautious with humor so as to conform to social formality and social status.

Yue (2010) manifested that humor was not valued by the Chinese even though they all loved it, and humor was often regarded as the least important factor in the relation to creativity and the ideal Chinese personality (Yue, 2010). Westerners view humor as an ordinarily owned trait and a positive disposition for self-actualization. In contrast, the Chinese consider humor to be limited to humor professionals and less desirable for social interactions (Yue et al., 2016). Yue (2011) proposed that Chinese people have traditionally been ambivalent about humor. Chinese tend to value humor but consider themselves to lack humor. Chinese regard as being humorous is not associated with being orthodox Chinese. Chinese consider that humor is important but not for everyone. Yue believed that the Chinese ambivalence toward humor is largely due to an appreciation-despising complex about humor deep-rooted in Chinese culture (Yue, 2011). Chen, Watkins and Martin (2013) investigated the relationships between humor styles, individualism, collectivism, and facework in mainland China. The research instruments were administered to Chinese university students, and the results showed that uses of humor were broadly related to the properties of cultural values and facework.

Principally, collectivism, socialization for achievement, and high acceptance of power and authority are influentially characterized in Chinese culture (Rao, 2006). Thus, humor in China varies compared to humor in western culture. Previous research attested that the Chinese do not regard as positive an attitude toward humor as their Western counterparts do. This perception makes the Chinese less likely to use humor as a coping strategy than Westerners. Specifically, the apprehension-despising complex makes the Chinese have ambivalent attitudes

toward humor. However, it is necessary to notice that culture is not a stable construct. Globalization has brought big changes in culture and individuals' psychology. Caution should be taken when concluding cultural differences in humor from a common perspective. In this way, it may not be that precise to ponder cultural differences in humor by comparing distinctive nationalities or geographic areas (Jiang et al., 2019).

As a self-consistent small society, the classroom is deeply influenced by various external environments. This qualitative case study tried to explore the perceptions of three Chinese secondary school English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers on the use of humor, and to analyze the reasons for making humor a strategy in terms of teachers' identity and power in the Chinese teaching context.

2. Data Collection and Analysis

2.1 The Participants

For this study to proceed smoothly, the researcher applied to be an English teacher and eventually taught at this private secondary school from July 2021 to March 2022. In this study, the three Chinese secondary school EFL teachers were purposefully selected. Previous studies suggested that more experienced teachers have different performances compared to novice teachers (Kini & Podolsky, 2016; Podolsky et al., 2019; Tsui, 2009). Although there are no specific criteria for the definition of "experienced", distribution of years of teaching is commonly used as a measure. In this study, based on the previous research, we assumed that there are three distributions for years of teaching, which are novice teacher (0−3 teaching years), intermediate teacher (around 6 teaching years), and experienced teacher (above 10 teaching years). The participants in the study are, Mr. Zhong, a novice teacher with MA (3 teaching years); Ms. Jin, an intermediate teacher with BA (10 teaching years); Mr. Tao, an experienced teacher with BA (16 teaching years).

2.2 Data Collection

Referring to previous studies and research questions, two main research instruments, Humor Observation Protocol and Humor Use Interview, were developed through formal observations and interviews. Informal observations and casual conversations are also used in the study, which are important components of qualitative research (Bazeley, 2013; Maxwell, 2013). A voice recording pen was used for recording the three teachers' classes and interviews. The recording pen offers the audio-to-text function for free through its software, which also supports transcribing in Chinese and English. The transcription accuracy is relatively high, except for some inaudible sounds, and each transcription maintains a good accuracy. Moreover, this study's transcription is not aimed to make verbatim transcription but denaturalized transcription (Mero-Jaffe, 2011), which is easy to read and feasible for data analysis under the research aims. To ensure the credibility of the transcripts, observational class, and interview transcripts will be checked by participants.

2.3 Data Analysis

To ensure the teachers respond to the interview conscientiously, the researcher spent much time with the teachers who were selected as subjects in the study. Moreover, permission from the administration of the selected schools and communication and cooperation with teachers are vital in the research. Before doing the formal survey, the researcher tells the administrators and teachers that neither the content of the research nor the research itself, including the interview, or observation, would affect the teachers' working in the school. Besides the formal observation protocol and semi-structured interview, research instruments are not only limited to formal observation and interview but also engaged in "watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions through informal and formal interviews, collecting documents and artefacts—in fact, gathering whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the emerging focus of inquiry" (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, as cited in Tsui, 2013). The teacher made a verbal utterance, known as "playful language" (Bell, 2012; Waring, 2013), and the students responded immediately with laughter. Satisfaction with both conditions is regarded as successful humor and will be represented as "@" in the humor excerpts.

3. Findings

3.1 Mr. Tao: I Use Humor but I Worry About Using too much

Participant 1: Mr. Tao (pseudonym)

Mr. Tao has been teaching English for sixteen years, which is longer than the other two teachers. After graduating from university, he worked in a company, engaged in marketing and sales, and had fewer opportunities to use English. Later, he went to Australia to study for a bachelor's degree because he liked English. After finishing his bachelor's degree, he returned to his hometown and began to teach English. He was teaching grades one and two and was the first teacher I contacted. The language he used in class was a mixture

of Chinese and English, but he answered the interview in English.

Mr. Tao emphasizes that the humor used in the class must be combined with the learning content. He told a few times in the interviews that humor must be related to what the teacher is going to teach. In his six observations, all humor was related to the teaching or at least was initiated from the perspective of English learning. Mr. Tao is the oldest and most experienced teacher among the three participants. He was more relaxed in the class even when the observer was sitting in the room. His gestures and facial expressions were more 'natural' when he was joking than other teachers. Mr. Tao used more humor than the other two participants and a great number of his humor was done in Chinese. His typical class procedure goes below. Mr. Tao will explain all the new words at first. He writes the phonetic symbols on the blackboard and carefully corrects the students' pronunciation. According to his statements, he particularly likes to teach oral English and pays special attention to the students' speaking practice. He also explains the meaning of words in detail and asks students to make sentences with new words. Then, his students will be asked to compile a dialogue based on new words and new phrases or new grammar. After students make up the dialogue, the teacher checks and revises it and uses the dialogue to do role-plays in groups.

Example 1:

> Teacher Mr. Tao: How are you, Andy?
>
> Andy: So so.
>
> Teacher Mr. Tao: I'm so so too. 我[I]也[also]so so.

Example 2:

> Teacher Mr. Tao: So what can Mr. Tao do? Can you give me any ideas? What can I do? What can Mr. Tao do? Mr. Tao is broke, he has no money and he has a lot of stress.
>
> Student A: He needs to see a doctor.
>
> Students: @.
>
> Teacher Mr. Tao: 立马去看医生，破产了就去看医生? [Go to the doctor right away, go to the doctor if you go bankrupt?]

There are two main types of repetition strategies: repeating the teacher's own words or the students' words. Mr. Tao mostly repeats what the students say, especially when it is expected that the student's language may have a humorous effect. In Example 1, when Andy answered "so so", the low emotional "domain" was activated. According to the teacher's normal response, it should be to ask him "why" or "what happened (which caused your low mood)". At this time, based on the communicative function, teachers will express their concerns and even want to change the low mood of students by lecturing, so they fall into routine operations. Mr. Tao did not ask questions or try to change the emotional state of the students but adopted an empathy strategy. Repetition is used to reinforce the humorous effect made by students that are expected to achieve. In Example 2, Student A's words already had a humorous effect, and some students had already laughed. Mr. Tao took a repetition strategy to reinforce this effect. There are two functions, one is to give students who did not hear the opportunity to listen to it again, and the other is that the teacher's expression and voice are more exaggerated than the first time, thereby causing more laughter.

Mr. Tao is the type of teacher who initially uses jokes to make students laugh or relax. He is also the only one who used canned jokes, even though the canned jokes were not funny. Compared to the other two teachers' cautions, he did not care much about whether it was funny. If it was perceived as not funny by his students, he would not care and keep doing his humor. He said, "I don't like to use too much humor, because I have to complete the teaching task." He was worried about using too much humor would affect his teaching plan. He once told me that when he was starting his teaching career, he tried his best to make class vivid through activities and playful language. However, several students complained to his superior that the class was too "relaxing" to learn much knowledge. Since then, this incident has hit him hard and caused his attitude towards humor today. As the only teacher returning from studying in an English-speaking country, Australia, he has learned the latest English teaching methods and concepts, but he has contradicted the reality.

3.2 Ms. Jin: I Want to Use Humor but Don't Know How to Use It

Participant 2: Ms. Jin (pseudonym)

Ms. Jin is the only female among the three participants. The researcher asked four female teachers, but the other three refused to participate in the study. One day during a break between classes, I walked down the stairs after

class and met her and we chatted. I asked her if she would participate in my research. Unexpectedly, she readily agreed. She said her class was welcome to come and listen anytime. She is teaching grade two and grade three. She is a hard-working teacher and mainly uses English in class and explains many language points to students, mainly vocabulary and grammar.

Ms. Jin teaches English very carefully and prepares lessons well. Whenever the researcher goes to the office, it can't fail to see her preparing lessons in front of the computer. As one of the participants who used the least humor, she told the researcher many times that she wanted to use humor even though she thought she had not much sense of humor. She followed the rigorous rules in class, implemented the teaching plan step by step, and paid great attention to whether students understood new words or new grammar. Ms. Jin first reviews the content learned from yesterday. She usually uses the keywords to recall what they have learned. She writes the article's keywords on the blackboard and leads the students to recall and repeat the articles they have learned without looking at the book. Next, she will teach a new article by explaining the words and the text and asking students to make sentences. In the process of interpreting the article, knowledge related to the text will be inserted, and students will be asked based on these relevant questions. Finally, she will let students do role-plays or speaking practices.

Example 3:

Teacher Ms. Jin: 我就是抵制不住诱惑。[I just can't resist the temptation.] This is the temptation of something. Can you resist the temptation?

Student A: Yes.

Teacher Ms. Jin: Oh really? So like—

Student B: No, he can't.

Teacher Ms. Jin: Can you resist the temptation of delicious food?

Student C: He is a foodie.

Students: @.

Teacher Ms. Jin: How can you resist the temptation of delicious food? I don't think you can.

Students: @.

Teacher Ms. Jin: So can anybody resist the temptation of delicious food?

In Example 3, Ms. Jin repeated "resist the temptation" five times, four times in English and one time in Chinese. This expression is new knowledge in the textbook, and Ms. Jin's main purpose is to stimulate students' attention through repetition. The word "temptation" is more abstract for secondary school students. At this time, Ms. Jin used a figurative expression to bring "the temptation of food" into the discussion category. When the student said that he was a foodie, the humorous effect had already been produced, and Ms. Jin repeated it to strengthen the effect.

Ms. Jin seldom used humor, but she feels that she still likes to use humor. She was always focusing on teaching, even in her interactions with students. She asked them questions and encouraged them to say the answers. It was rarely seen for her to initiate humor, so most of her humor was passive and initiated and inspired by students or "surroundings" as she said. As she mentioned in the interview, she said she is not confident enough to use humor and will decide whether to use humor or not according to the mood of the students or the atmosphere of the "surroundings". For example, she said that when a researcher was sitting in the classroom or the students were serious, she might feel uncomfortable, which could reduce the use of humor. She said that her teacher used a more traditional teaching method when she was in school and achieved good results. In summation, she seldom thinks about humor and usually follows the syllabus, and focuses on improving students' English knowledge, such as vocabulary and grammar.

3.3 Mr. Zhong: I Want to Use English Humor but Worry About My English Proficiency

Participant 3: Mr. Zhong (pseudonym)

Mr. Zhong is the youngest and the only one with a master's degree among the three teachers. Not many teachers in this private secondary school have a master's degree, and he is one of them. Mr. Zhong is a headteacher, which means he is responsible for many student affairs, such as morning reading and school activities. Therefore, he is also the busiest teacher among the three participants. In his interviews, he was more interested in research topics than the other two teachers. However, like other participants, the use of humor is a familiar but not deeply researched topic for them.

Mr. Zhong mainly used humor in games or activities that could easily induce funny interactions in which he often bantered with his students. He is the youngest teacher in the study, and he has a lot in common with his students. Slowly, he built good relationships with them. So he often teases or makes friendly insults to his students. For instance, one student said, "I was looking for an apartment, but the boss, um, she is weird." Mr. Zhong said, "Why? Why is she weird?" The student did not know what to say, and then Mr. Zhong said: "She likes you?" He knew that he had a rapport with students, so he used this type of humor often. Some of his students call him the king of cold humor. Mr. Zhong will let his students do an activity at the beginning, such as a word solitaire game, a sentence solitaire game, and tell stories. He will let each student engage in the activity. This activity often costs him half an hour. When lecturing a new text, instead of explaining the words first, he will let the students listen to the tape of the text and answer the questions based on the audio. Then, Mr. Zhong asks the students to read the text, and he may correct their pronunciation or explain the new words. At last, the students will do a role-play or retell the text after the lecture.

Example 4:

> Teacher Mr. Zhong asked student A to make a sentence with the who clause.

> Student A: I have a daughter who likes to sleep.

> Teacher Mr. Zhong: Is your daughter Jane?

Example 5:

> Teacher Mr. Zhong: Why is it called hope? Because marriage is a second chance for women. 不要骂我，我是说古代。[Don't scold me, I mean ancient times.]

Banter strategy refers to taking students off guard with uncharacteristic responses from teachers during conversations. Teachers could say something oppositely or unusually with their prepared intention in this strategy. Among the three teachers, the one who uses the most is Mr. Zhong. In Example 4, Student A also wanted to make a joke because according to the common cognitive basis (none of the students present were married and had no children), this sentence was invalid and violated the quality principle in the cooperation principle. Mr. Zhong recognized and followed the trend and made fun of Jane because he recalled that student Jane always talked about she likes to sleep.

Polysemous and homophone are two categories of puns. It is necessary to separate the two strategies because the specific methods of using the two strategies are different. In addition, both of their strategies were related to interpretation in Chinese, and no puns on English vocabulary were used. In Example 5, the word "hope chest" is new in the textbook, although it no longer appears in real life. Interestingly, both Mr. Tao and Mr. Zhong have adopted humorous strategies to allow students to deepen their memory of vocabulary. The researchers asked them if they knew where the word came from, and they said they did not. According to their guesses and the meaning of the word hope, they associate it with the saying that women hope to change their fate through marriage. The difference is that Mr. Zhong said one more sentence in order not to offend people with different views because this saying declined women's sense of independence. The two teachers compared "hope chest" (marriage) to "hope", which is a bit of irony and makes people smile.

In the interview, Mr. Zhong told the researcher that he is not a person who uses humor in real life. He said he is shy and not talkative with strangers. Interestingly, three participants regarded themselves as introverts. They all said they were not very humorous in daily life. Mr. Zhong said that if he prepared the lesson well, he could use more humor. "If you are not ready, you will care more about the teaching content", he said. He wanted to use more English humor in class, but he doubted his English proficiency and language authenticity. He said, "I am not sure if native speakers would make jokes like that." "I always feel that my humor is inauthentic, a little bit of Chinglish." Even though he is a master's degree holder majoring in English education, he said that during his postgraduate studies, he was mainly taught by Chinese teachers, teaching theoretical knowledge such as literature, linguistics, and pedagogy. "A foreign teacher teaches an oral English class, but it is an elective class once a week." He recalled that there were many students in a class, and the class was noisy and had almost no gain. Mr. Zhong wanted to produce more humor, but he had never lived in an English-speaking country and was rarely involved in a "joke conversation" with native speakers, so that may be why he worried that his language and "jokes" were not authentic enough.

From the interviews and casual conversations, it is found that the three participants all have a positive attitude toward humor in language teaching. They reported that they wanted to use more humor in class even though they are introverts in daily life. They all agreed that humor use could benefit language learning, especially indirect benefits such as easing the tension and making the atmosphere vivid. Even though they would like to use humor

in class, they are ambivalent about its use, as indicated in the study of Yue (2011).

4. Discussion

4.1 Discussion on the Identity

The root of language teacher identity can be traced to self and identity theories in social psychology (Sang, 2020). Language teacher identity encompasses an L2 teacher's understanding of the meaning of being a language teacher and his/her professional role of working as a language teacher (Miller, 2009). Although two male teachers used this strategy more and one female teacher used it less, the teacher identity involved the teachers' roles and navigated their philosophies or practices of using humor. The three teachers' teaching methods and methods of using humor are different, but they all emphasize the importance of completing teaching tasks. Completing the teaching task according to the syllabus is the top priority for them. Teachers hope they can improve students' grades in the end because the goal of having good scores is obvious in secondary school. Teachers always keep in mind that the core task is teaching, and any methods that could benefit teaching can become a teaching strategy, including humor. No matter whether it is to "use humor to explain the word-formation and the rules of spelling" or "use humor to kill boring", it can be explained that they constructed and defended their identity as an English teacher.

Chinese society values the profession of teachers very seriously, and everyone has high expectations for teachers. Teachers must be able to teach knowledge and serve as moral role models for students. Among them, teaching knowledge is the top priority of teachers. Confucianism has always influenced the identity and conceptual construction of teachers' identities (Zhang & Liu, 2014). Confucius, the founder of Confucianism, is also a teacher. The famous writer Han Yu from Tang Dynasty once said that the duty of a teacher is to preach, teach, and solve puzzles. Therefore, Chinese teachers who teach English naturally put the teaching of English knowledge first. When the researcher got along with the three teachers day and night, they often told that the teacher's main task was to teach English knowledge to the syllabus. Their thoughts are inseparable from their long-term identity as a teacher; naturally, this perception also affects their use of humor.

The examination-oriented education system also deeply influences the construction of teacher identity. From elementary school to middle school, from middle school to university, Chinese students need to take competitive exams (Liu & Ren, 2021). No one wants to fall behind in the competition because this will affect their future. The exams often test less commonly used or relatively remote language knowledge, such as phonetics and grammar. Under the influence of the test, the teacher will focus on the test. Teachers will use more grammatical translation methods and ignore the training of language communication skills. Most Chinese students have done well in reading and listening but have poor oral English. Because two very important exams, the middle school exam and NCEE (Gaokao), do not test oral English. In short, whether a traditional teacher imparts knowledge or a teacher who is influenced by test orientation, it will affect his use of humor. They will use humor if they feel that humor can be incorporated into teaching strategies and have an effect, such as creating a relaxed atmosphere.

The perception of three teachers towards humor is ambivalent as the findings indicated. Yue (2011) proposed that Chinese people have traditionally been ambivalent about humor. For instance, he argued, the Chinese tend to value humor but consider themselves to lack humor; Chinese regard being humorous as not associated with being orthodox Chinese; Chinese consider that humor is important but not for everyone. Although three teachers are ambivalent in this study, the specific circumstances and reasons are different. Even though the humor was not funny as Mr. Tao thought, he still tried to crack jokes in his class. Ms. Jin has not used as much humor as other teachers did, but she wanted to use humor and believed that humor could benefit teaching. Mr. Zhong has begun researching humor because he wanted to improve his humor skills and be more effective in English teaching. Their judgment was mostly based on whether their use of humor achieved the aims related to the roles of humor as perceived by the three teachers: humor as a teaching strategy that can create a more relaxing environment for learning. As Askildson (2005) regarded, humor has been shown to lower the affective filter and stimulate prosocial behaviors, which could be necessary for success within a communicative context in which effectiveness is particularly relevant to the communicative classroom. Three teachers believed that the effectiveness of humor lies in the reduced tension, improved approachability of teachers, and increased levels of interest as result of humor usage by the teacher (Askildson, 2005).

According to three teachers, they all claimed they were introverts, but they used humor to some extent and wanted to produce more humor. Yue (2011) believed that the Chinese ambivalence toward humor is largely due to an appreciation-despising complex about humor that is deep-rooted in Chinese culture (Yue, 2011). Mr. Tao emphasizes that the humor used in the class must be combined with the learning content. In his six observations,

all humor was related to the teaching or at least was initiated from the perspective of English learning. He did not care much about whether it was funny, as long as he thought it was related to the teaching. Unlike Mr. Tao, the other two teachers had not tried some canned jokes related to English knowledge, and they used humor in terms of the surroundings where it usually happened spontaneously. Berk (1996) argued that classroom humor is frequently a random act that occurs spontaneously rather than being used intentionally to achieve specific learning outcomes. What Ms. Jin and Mr. Zhong did was in line with Berk's argument since their main purpose was to make students relaxed, and then they would be more likely to take in and retain information. Ms. Jin did not use humor much as she claimed during the observed class, but it was notable that she believed that she used humor at least once in teaching. Mr. Zhong said that if he prepared the lesson well, he could use more humor. "If you are not ready, you will care more about the teaching content", he said. Mr. Zhong believed that the teacher who used humor had prepared lessons well so students would learn in the well-prepared lesson. Mr. Zhong has been influenced by the CLT approach, and he believes that as an English teacher, the jokes and language in class should both be delivered in English. He was worried about the authenticity of his language while telling jokes. He did not study abroad, which could be the source of his insecurity.

Ms. Jin followed the traditional idea of teaching, and she took teaching seriously. Traditionally, Chinese teachers and students take their teaching and learning quite seriously because education has always been regarded as an important way of making a living and pursuing a superior position in Chinese society. Due to the examination system, teaching and learning emphasize repetition, reviewing, and rote memory, which is traditionally dominated by a teacher-centered, book-centered approach (Rao, 2006). There is little student initiative and student-student interaction (Hu, 2002; Rao, 1996). Most Chinese teachers are in favor of traditional pedagogical approaches like the grammar-translation method and audio-lingual method that offer teachers maximum control and opportunity to transmit knowledge (Barnard et al., 2002; Hu, 2002; Wen & Clément, 2003). However, with the promotion of the CLT approach, the Chinese curriculum and students are changing (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996a, 1996b). Mr. Tao, the only teacher who came back from studying in Australia, had learned the latest English teaching methods and ideology and wanted to use it in his teaching, but he found that the educational context in China is different from that in the West. Rao (2002) said, "most people in China take learning seriously" and they could associate humor in class with entertainment exclusively. Therefore, students could be skeptical or wary of a too "relaxed" atmosphere. Many students need serious teachers to supervise their studies to get good grades in exams, given that they are all under pressure to get into good schools. In conclusion, we can see that teachers' ambivalent attitude toward humor mainly comes from two aspects, Chinese culture, and Chinese education.

4.2 Discussion on the Power Shift

Scholars in the related area agreed that the teacher-student relationship is a hierarchy formed because of maintaining teachers' authority and the discipline of students in the classroom (Rao, 2006). Even though the harmonious relationship between teacher and student has been improved (Liu, 2015; Zhang et al., 2013), the power distance led from the hierarchy has always been stable. Chinese students are regarded as obedient in Chinses culture and education (Lyu, 2020; Ma, 2021). This study proposed that the two obvious reasons for "authority and obedience" are the Chinese exam system and the large class size. The previous only focused on the students' performance in examinations, which often offer one chance for students to succeed or fail. The latter makes school administrators prescribe mass-specific rules to manage the class. The researcher observed the strictness of the school authorities on every aspect of students' behavior while doing the study on the research site. This school is adopting strict regulations to manage students, which puts students under pressure. For instance, they used prizes or honors to award the whole class and punish the whole class because of students' "inappropriate" behavior such as being late, talking in class, littering in the classroom, and keeping boys' hair long. The punishment toward the whole class makes teachers and students fear of being "humiliated" in front of everyone.

Under these circumstances, teachers' use of humor would be different from humor used in daily life. In daily life, we could crack jokes to please people or shorten the relationship distance, and we also could deal with our anxieties through humor. We even could make fun of others through irony or sarcasm. Nevertheless, teachers use humor in class because of the power shift. In every class, teachers and students both realize their status unconsciously, the teacher as an authority and the students as subordinates. From the analysis of the humor excerpts under the speech act theory and cooperative principles in the previous section, teachers, as an initiated role, can "level the playing field" to an extent by signaling inferiority via moderate violations. As long as these violations remain explicit and moderate, the perceived social status gap maintained by the superior will start to shrink, and the inferior will gain a social advantage in the situation. In this sense, we call it a "power shift". Ms.

Jin seemed to select to maintain the power distance. She said, "Schools and parents alike pursue grades. Although English teaching makes them interested and learn knowledge at the same time, but knowledge is not enough without training, and requires a lot of training and memory. (I need to) push them to memorize words and recite texts. Students are very lazy and love to play. If the knowledge points are not practiced repeatedly, the exam will be over."

The other two teachers used slightly different strategies. Mr. Tao focused on the words rote learning, and he seemed to have confidence in the examination. He said, "Words are king. If you can memorize 3000 words, the test score is at least passing. A class has many students, most of whom require a lot of training. Poor students need to be tough, and good students need humor, but most of them are intermediate. They (intermediate students) need training, and they need to be relaxed, but not too relaxed." Mr. Zhong told a story when asked about his teaching experiences. He said, "When I first started working, I asked my students, do you like English? They said they didn't like it. I asked again why you didn't like it. They said they didn't like it because they didn't like it. Some also said, 'I do not know what is the use of learning English?' This problem has troubled me for a long time, and I have used many methods to make them like English. Later I found out that they would be very interested as long as I was chatting and not teaching in class. They like listening to stories and dislike textbooks."

All three teachers adhere to the traditional Chinese education concept of "strict teachers make good apprentices". For teachers, using humor means "putting down the shelf" (a Chinese idiom that means get off your high horse) but "putting down the shelf" threatens the teacher's authority. Therefore, when to "put on the shelf" and when to "put down the shelf" is a very difficult thing to figure out. Teachers often say that if they teach texts to students, the students in the classroom will be quiet, but if the atmosphere is active, the classroom will become a wet market, which cannot be controlled. The examination system and large-sized classes make both schools and teachers have to maintain their authority so that students are trained in obedience. This repeated training is boring and resistant to teenagers in the rebellious period. For the above reasons, teachers' language in the classroom is mostly instructional. Some teachers may want to change, and some want to maintain the status quo.
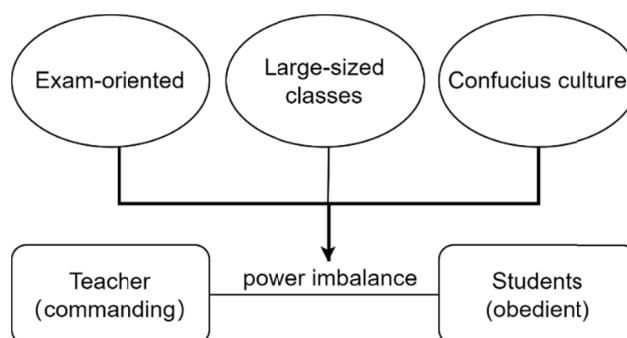

Figure 1. Power imbalance between Chinese teachers and students

Concerning the unequal status between teachers and students in Chinese classes, this study used critical discourse analysis, which is suitable for describing power relations (Fairclough, 2013). It found that humor is one of the agents in the power shift. In the fourth chapter, this study analyzed teachers' humor through discourse analysis. This research proposes that there are three paths for power shift, the power shift of knowledge, e.g., the teacher narrating examples from life rather than abstract theoretical knowledge, or the teacher explaining the knowledge that students are already familiar with; the power shift of emotion, for example, teacher body language, such as kind gestures, smiling expressions, paying attention, making students feel cared for; the power shift of language, teachers using everyday language, using buzzword from online or the language that is popular among students.
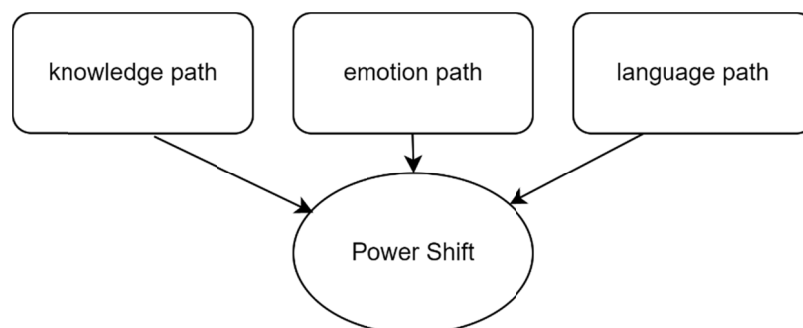
Figure 2. Three paths to power shift

Humor could happen in these three paths to power shifts. Hay (2000) argued that humor assumes three main functions in conversation: solidarity, power and psychological needs (Hay, 2000). In this respect, this study proposed humor as a strategy that helps maintain or shift the power in the Chinese teaching context. However, it is difficult for teachers who just use their intuition to produce humor or crack jokes at their will. First, they need to know humor theories as introduced, such as incongruity theory and General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) (Attardo & Raskin, 1991; Bell & Pomerantz, 2016; Brock, 2017). Then, they need to put theories into practice. It is not to say every teacher should study humor, as humor is not a mandatory toolkit for teachers' teaching. However, for those who are willing to use it, we proposed some measures such as metacognitive strategies (e.g., determination to use humor, having prior knowledge of humor).

As Karlberg (2005) argued, the ways we think and talk about a subject influence and reflect how we act concerning that subject (Karlberg, 2005). In this study, Chinese EFL teachers unconsciously or consciously realized the unequal social status in the class, and they can choose to maintain the status quo or change power dynamics. When they are trying to change, humor can happen in the three paths. Then power may "move down" from teachers to students. During the three paths, the "knowledge path" and "language path" are the main means to power shift, which are reflected in discourse analysis. Here are two examples of the "knowledge path" and "language path".

    Teacher Mr. Tao: What do you think of the food in the canteen?

    Student:我觉得吧— [I think—]

    Teacher Mr. Tao: 我不要你觉得，我要我觉得。[I don't want you to think, I want me to think.]

    Students: @.

"I don't want you to think, I want me to think" is a buzzword, which was said by a celebrity on a TV reality show and finally became a buzzword. It would be used to make fun of people who do not care about other people's feelings. Teacher Tao has noticed that the students also like to joke around with this Internet catchphrase. So he used this "language" directly, which has shortened the distance between teachers and students and produced a humorous effect, which is one of the manifestations of the "language path". As for the "knowledge path", all three teachers used more or less "plain knowledge" that students are familiar with. Here is an excerpt from Ms. Jin.

    Teacher Ms. Jin: This is Bolt (Ms. Jin points to the picture), he can finish 100 meters in 10 seconds. How long do you think you can finish 100 meters?

    Students: @.

When teaching sports topics, she found famous sprinters and put the photo in her PowerPoint, and asked the question, "How long do you think you can finish 100 meters?" which easily reminded students of running on their own. The students thought that Bolt ran very fast, and they ran slowly, which formed a contrast and made the students laugh and achieved a humorous effect.

Discourse is always connected with desire and power (Fairclough, 2013; Rudvin, 2005). In education, teachers usually control communicative events and hence control educational discourse (Li et al., 2018; van Dijk, 2013). This study proposed humor as a strategy that helps maintain or shift the power in the Chinese teaching context. The path of power shift proposed in this study can be applied to educational scenarios similar to Chinese secondary schools in which exam is oriented and the size of class is large.

5. Conclusion

The research is a small-scale qualitative case study, which has certain limitations, such as not examining students' attitudes and emotions toward teachers' use of humor from the perspective of students. Many language teachers may consider humor to be a useful teaching tool, and researchers have demonstrated that humor has multiple functions and benefits in language learning. However, it is concluded that teachers' attitudes toward the use of humor are ambivalent. The identity of teachers is influenced by factors such as Confucian culture, examination orientation, and large-sized class teaching, which also affects their use of humor. On the one hand, they want to use humor to enliven the classroom atmosphere. On the other hand, using humor may disrupt classroom order. This study proposes that when Chinese EFL teachers use humor, the unequal power relationship in the classroom is tilted, and the teacher-student relationship is relaxed and harmonious. When Chinese EFL teachers choose not to use humor, it is beneficial to maintain the unequal relationship to keep classroom order.

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