

Humor in British academic lectures and Chinese students' perceptions of it

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Abbreviations

LT laughter tag

HE humor episode

RR respondent's report form

1. Introduction

A growing number of studies have investigated humor in intercultural academic contexts (Bell, 2005, 2007a, 2007b; Davies, 2003). Davies' work "highlight[s] the apparently arbitrary nature of idiomatic expressions, the difficulty of coping with interaction in the new language, and the general powerlessness of the language learner in a world of native speakers" (ibid.: 1361). Yet Bell reassures us that, despite her non-native participants' limited abilities with respect to humor in a second language, misunderstandings based on humor are rare and do not appear to cause interactional difficulties. Such studies derive their data from conversations in academic contexts, yet it is important to acknowledge that an important part of the academic experience for international students does not take this form. In comparison with conversation, communication in lectures is mostly asymmetric and is far less interactive. In the lecture context, students have far fewer means of controlling and shaping their interaction, thus humor may play a greater role than it assumes in the conversational interactions observed by Bell. In this study I explore the under-examined phenomenon of humor in intercultural academic lectures. Specifically, I focus on the experience of Chinese students, a cohort that has come to compose the largest international audience in British lectures.

1.1 Humor as paradoxical face-work

This paper mainly concerns the interpersonal functions of humor, so I begin by reviewing studies of this topic. Many linguistic studies reveal that humor may be used to carry out aggressive or contentious acts which are potentially face-threatening (Brown and Levinson, 1987), while simultaneously performing in-group rapport building and expressing affection (Boxer and Cortés-Conde, 1997; Eggins and Slade, 1997; Norrick, 2003; Partington, 2006). In addition, humor generates laughter from the audience, and as shared laughter is acknowledged to enhance in-group intimacy (cf. Jefferson et al., 1987), the positive face of the group members is benefited.

Keltner et al. (2001:229) describe teasing as “an intentional provocation accompanied by playful markers that together comment on something of relevance to the target of the tease”. Teasing is first of all provocative - it poses a potential threat to the targeted person’s face if taken seriously. But teasing is also playful, and the playfulness is always marked. Much psychological and linguistic research has demonstrated that teasing is a way to display common values, and that rapport is built through sharing laughter and the message that the act of teasing communicates (Baxter, 1992; Eisenberg, 1986; Norrick, 1993). Teasing, therefore, is paradoxical:

Teasing criticizes yet compliments, attacks yet makes people closer, humiliates yet expresses affection.

Keltner et al. (2001)

Another typical example of humor playing paradoxical roles in interaction is self-deprecation. Jefferson (1984) describes how laughter defuses seriousness in talk about troubles. In the case in which a speaker has incidentally trapped himself/herself into an awkward situation, the use of humor to generate laughter may be a skillful way to divert attention, defuse tension and bring the face-threatening situation to an end. One may also deprecate oneself in situations without potential face-loss. In this case, a verbal attack targeted at oneself implies the opposite, and consequently improves the speaker’s face. Nesi (2012) gives an example of such self-deprecation in a university classroom: the lecturer makes fun of his/her long executive title in medical education in saying that the longer the title one has in a university, the less important one is (ibid.:85).

1.2 Stance and face work in humor

All language uses are evaluative; as Volosinov points out “[t]here is no such thing as a word without evaluative accent” (1973[1929]: 103). Humor is always evaluative: it invokes the speakers’ attitudes or stance towards certain objects, entities or propositions. Following Thompson, “evaluation” here is defined as “the indication of whether the speaker thinks that something (a person, thing, action, event, situation, idea, etc.) is good or bad”

(2013[1996]:80). The expression of evaluation, or stance¹, in humor is interpersonal and is often implicitly expressed, e.g. in teasing and irony, reflecting the speaker's and listeners' shared awareness of the implied meaning. Kotthoff argues that irony "is a way of communicating an evaluation gap" (ibid.); the evaluation assigns to the entity a value on a continuous scale between the positive and negative poles. Kotthoff further notes that irony very often alludes to in-group knowledge, so it "allows us to re-affirm the in-group relations among friends" (2003:1390).

Eggins and Slade (1997) and Partington (2006) are amongst the few researchers to investigate humor in conversation, and its relation to evaluation. Eggins and Slade claim that humor is a semantic resource, and that humor devices including teasing, telling dirty jokes and funny stories can be applied to negotiate attitudes and alignments. Analyzing "laughter-talk" from White House press briefings, Partington shows that, in the case of irony, evaluative markers at lexical, grammatical and textual levels are exploited to reverse an evaluation of something that is initially expected to be either positive or negative (2006:195-206).

Studies of language creativity, on the other hand, often have a strong focus on humor. Scholars in this field have foregrounded stance in their analysis; Maybin and Swann (2007), for example, propose a critical dimension to the analysis of creativity, arguing that creative language can be used to draw attention to evaluation taking place within the text and has "the potential for developed critique of social relations/positions and associated values" (ibid.: 513). Maybin and Swann use the example of reported speech to illustrate the critical properties of language creativity. In reported speech, we recycle other people's language, but endow the language with our own stance on top of that of the original speaker (also see Bakhtin, 1981[1935]; Tannen, 1989[2007]). A similar idea is elaborated in a recent paper by Park (2013) which argues that mimicry is a "stance-taking act" and is linguistic as well as social.

Comprehension of implied stance requires knowledge of the sociocultural meaning or

¹ Various labels have been used in the studies of evaluation in language including modality, evidentiality, affect, and hedging. Detailed overviews of these terms and their definitions are included in Hunston and Thompson (2000), Partington (2006:195-7) and Martin and White (2005:38-40). "Evaluation" and "stance" are used interchangeably in this paper.

values it invokes. Repression-related humor is a typical example of humor that implies sociocultural values: under certain social norms, the individual's freedom is repressed; joking about the repression becomes an acceptable way to release the tension and awkwardness which may otherwise build up (Freud, 1928, 1960 [1905]). Raskin (1985:23) describes repression-related humor as "chafing at restraints". It is exemplified in jokes about sex and politics, which have different implications in different societies and at different periods of time. Understanding of stance in humor entails the speakers' and listeners' shared awareness of these sociocultural values, and hence may contribute to in-group positive face.

1.3 Humor in lectures

Humor in academic lectures has been widely studied, especially in the fields of communication studies and psychology in the US, and this has resulted in a variety of taxonomies of lecture humor types (e.g. Bryant et al., 1980; Frymier et al., 2008; Wanzer and Frymier, 1999; Wanzer et al., 2006). In the field of applied linguistics, Lee (2006) uses data from the Michigan Corpus of Spoken English (MICASE) to show that laughter is frequent in American academic speech, including lectures. He proceeds to speculate about how this might affect international students. None of the above studies adopts an intercultural approach, however, unlike Flowerdew and Miller (1996), who collected data from a Hong Kong university in which intercultural teaching took place. Flowerdew and Miller noticed discrepancies in the perceptions of humor between students and lecturers, with the potential for cross-cultural misunderstanding: "[l]ecturers, on the one hand, may be perceived by their students as lacking in human warmth, and students, on the other hand, may be perceived by their lecturers as unresponsive." (ibid.: 137).

The only published study of humor in a British academic context is Nesi (2012). Nesi draws data from the British Academic Spoken English (BASE) corpus to explore the forms and functions of laughter in lectures. The study evidences the prevalence of face-work humor in British lectures, as lecturers in BASE are found to tease their students frequently. Nesi also identifies "lecturer self-deprecation" to be a frequent type of humor in BASE, used to "signal modesty and approachability" and hence enhance rapport between students and

lecturers. In general, Nesi believes that lecturers provoke laughter in class to maintain social order, build rapport and release tension/anxiety.

Another interesting revelation by Nesi (2012) involves different practices of humor in lectures recorded in BASE and MICASE. Lecturers in the BASE corpus often allude to students as being heavy drinkers and party-lovers, but this image is not evoked by the lecturers in the laughter events in MICASE. She attributes this difference in part to the fact that the legal drinking age is higher in Michigan, where the American data was collected, but it also seems that there are differences in the widely-accepted “scripts” for student behavior in the two countries (Nesi 2012:84). Nesi argues that the use of humor in lectures is culture-specific, and calls for further academic attention to the implications of humor in intercultural teaching and learning.

1.4 Chinese students’ experiences of humor in Britain

Many British scholars have investigated and reported the difficulties Chinese students face in their daily and academic life (Cortazzi and Jin, 1997; Edwards and Ran, 2006; Edwards et al., 2007; Liu, 2009; Spencer-Oatey and Xiong, 2006). In these investigations, academic matters such as understanding lectures, adapting study skills and student-teacher relationships have been identified as the biggest source of difficulty for Chinese students. Another repeatedly reported issue regarding Chinese students in Britain is that they experience much less intercultural interaction with native speakers than they expect (Edwards and Ran, 2006; Gu, 2009; Robson and Turner, 2007; Spencer-Oatey and Xiong, 2006; Tian and Lowe, 2009).

Humor in English, on the other hand, is only mentioned in three investigations, and is done so only in passing. Tian and Lowe (2009) researched the experiences of Chinese students at a number of British universities, using mixed methods of data collection such as audio diaries, interviews and emails. They report one Chinese student describing his/her experience of not understanding humor in lectures and feeling alienated by this: “[i]n lectures, British students always told some jokes that we couldn’t understand. At that time I

felt as if I was watching TV. They were playing and I was watching” (ibid.:665). In another investigation, Liu (2009) conducted focus group discussions with Chinese students studying International Marketing Strategy at a British university. One participant remarked, on the subject of lectures, that Chinese students would not understand “the subtlety of [...] jokes” by their tutors, who should therefore not use humor and should stick with simple language (ibid.:36). Finally in Spencer-Oatey and Xiong’s (2006) study, the Chinese respondents were asked to rate the level of difficulty and importance of pre-set items of cultural adjustment. The respondents rated “understanding jokes and humor in English” as the most difficult item, although they did not consider this to be important compared to academic issues. Spencer-Oatey and Xiong do not explain why humor was regarded as difficult but relatively unimportant by the Chinese participants.

Despite being a recurring issue in students’ accounts of their overseas experience, Chinese students’ perceptions of humor in British academic contexts have yet to be systematically explored. Without such knowledge, it is hard to assess how such humor influences their life and study overseas. My research therefore aims to address this gap by eliciting, collecting and analyzing Chinese students’ accounts of humor in British academic lectures.

2. Methods

This study triangulates new data with an existing data set, the BASE corpus.

2.1 The BASE data

The BASE corpus² contains 160 lectures distributed evenly across four disciplinary

² BASE was developed at the Universities of Warwick and Reading under the directorship of Hilary Nesi and Paul Thompson. Corpus development was assisted by funding from BALEAP, EURALEX, the British Academy and the Arts and Humanities Research Council. The corpus is available from the Oxford Text Archive <http://ota.ox.ac.uk/hearders/2525.xml>. See also www.coventry.ac.uk/base.

groups: Arts and Humanities, Social Sciences, Physical Sciences, and Life and Medical Sciences. Ninety-five BASE lectures are video recorded and 65 are audio recorded; all the recordings have been transcribed. In the transcripts, repeated (iterated) laughter is tagged as “laughter” and non-iterated laughter is tagged as “laugh”. The mark-up also distinguishes the producer(s) of the laughter, i.e. the lecturer, one or more member(s) of the audience, and the lecturer together with some of the audience (Nesi, 2012); the majority of “laughter” tags are shared by the lecturer and/or students, whereas almost all “laugh” is produced by individual lecturers. With the purpose to identify humor that had more likely been recognized by the audience, initially, “laughter” tags (LTs) in the BASE transcripts were regarded as cues of humor in my study. Using WordSmith 5.0, 1114 LTs were located in the 160 lectures in BASE. These LTs are spread unevenly across the lectures: the top ten lectures contain over 40% of the overall LTs, but the majority of lectures have only one to five LTs each. An approximately equal number of samples were obtained from both groups of lectures, i.e. the top ten lectures and those with one to five LTs, making the final total 327 LTs in 58 lectures.

Of course, laughter is not always the result of humor. Glenn (2003) identifies many other stimuli for laughter, including socializing, nervousness, and embarrassment. To identify LTs that are mostly likely to be humor-related, I undertook a detailed review of the contexts in which they occurred, referring to the transcripts and the relevant video recordings, where available. In addition, following scholars such as Attardo (2003, 2005, 2008) and Widdowson (2008), who stress pragmatics in the analysis of humor, this study regards the violation of Grice’s (1975) maxims as an indication of humorous intent. Through close analysis I was able to identify LTs which were very likely to be humor related. By combining adjacent LTs together with their contexts, 157 episodes were obtained. These are referred to in this paper as “humor episodes” (HEs).

BASE provided a large amount of lecture data for initial scrutiny for the purpose of this study. In the 157 HEs I identified, there are frequent instances of the lecturer teasing the students, joking about a third party, or self-deprecating. These types of humor are also discussed in Nesi (2012). Furthermore, story-telling is also frequent in the HEs and has important interpersonal functions (see Alsop et al. 2013 for an in-depth review of story-telling in a corpus of engineering lectures). These four types of humor are the focus in the

remaining parts of the paper.

2.2 Additional lecture data

As Adolphs and Carter (2007) point out, a full understanding of recorded communication would require knowledge of both verbal and non-verbal elements such as facial expressions, gestures, postures, and the layout of the recorded setting. Non-verbal elements are undoubtedly important to the understanding of humor in communication. However, as Adolphs and Carter also point out, capturing and defining non-verbal features are immensely complex. BASE was not originally developed for investigations of humor, so its limitations in my study were evident. The BASE transcripts record a certain number of non-verbal events, but they are sometimes incomplete. Some of the speech surrounding LTs was marked as unintelligible, and in places the lack of non-verbal information made it impossible to tell whether LTs were humor-related or not. Moreover, only 95 out of the 160 lectures in BASE have video recordings, so problems of interpreting non-verbal elements remain for the majority of the data. Another shortcoming of BASE is the inadequate participant information. The BASE headers provide background information including the name and gender of the lecturer, the subject and department of the lecture, and the type and number of the audience. However, the participants' ages, ethnicities, and educational backgrounds, and information about the degree of intimacy between participants, considered as variables of humor in Hay (1995), are missing.

For the purposes of my study, I therefore carried out further data collection. Thirteen hours of academic lectures were audio-recorded in two university departments. The lectures were delivered by seven lecturers, three in an applied linguistics department and four in a business school. Table 1 is a summary of the lectures. Students in the first four lectures were predominantly international, whereas there were far more native/EU than international students in the other lectures. There were at least two Chinese students in the audience in each lecture.

	Lecturer	Module	No. of students	Student level
1	Andy	Applied linguistics	20+	MA ⁱ
2	Andy	Spoken English	30	MA

Lecturer	Module	No. of students	Student level
3 Amy	Psychology of language classroom practices	100	MA
4 John	Introduction to ELT	60	MA
5 Deep	Asian Business & Global Challenge	28	PG ⁱⁱ
6 Eric	International Business	14	UG ⁱⁱⁱ
7 Eric	International Business	300	UG
8 Lynn	Marketing Communication	48	MBA ^{iv} , MSc ^v
9 Paul	International Marketing	12	MBA, MSc

Table 1 Additional lectures recorded by the researcher

ⁱMA- Master; ⁱⁱPG- postgraduate; ⁱⁱⁱUG- undergraduate; ^{iv}MBA- Master of Business Administration; ^vMSc- Master of science

Since I attended the lectures and communicated with the lecturers and some of the students, much more participant information was obtained. I also had the opportunities to observe the level of intimacy between these participants, which might influence how they perceived humor in the lectures. Furthermore, on-site notes were taken to record brief information of what I perceived to be instances of humor including those that did not generate audible responses from the students. Such information involved mainly non-verbal elements, e.g. the lecturer's facial expressions, body movements, and gestural deixis referring to the PowerPoint presentation, handouts or someone in the audience; paralinguistic such as the lecturer's whistling and the audience's laughter was also noted; so were prosodic features such as a change of accents. When listening to the audio recordings of the lectures, more paralinguistic and prosodic cues of humor were noticed. Some instances such as irony entail violation of Grice's Maxims but no obvious non-verbal, paralinguistic or prosodic cues of humor. In these cases, my knowledge of the context helped to identify the lecturer's intent to be humorous. In total, 171 HEs were identified and transcribed in these lectures. Teasing, joking about a third party, self-deprecation and story-telling emerged again as the most common types of humor.

2.3 Audio playback, interviews and group discussions

To create the materials for my research I identified 10 HEs, taken from five of the lectures I recorded myself, which represented common types of humor in both BASE and my own data. Four of these HEs triggered audible laughter from the audience (see HEs with asterisks in Table 2), whereas the other six did not. Chinese students were recruited from the lectures I recorded to take part in some playback and discussion sessions. In each of these sessions, the participants listened to two or more selected extracts from the lecture(s) they had attended (see Table 2). After each extract, they were asked to write down their answers individually on a respondent's report form (an "RR" form, see Appendix B). The questions on the RR forms were primarily designed to elicit the participants' accounts of humor. After the playback and completion of RR forms, the participants were interviewed. Before the interviews, groups of participants were permitted to discuss amongst themselves the answers they had given on the RR forms.

Extract	Lecturer	Discipline	Group (no. of participants)								
			A (6)	B (5)	C (6)	D (4)	E (2)	F (5)	G (2)		
1*	Story-telling	Amy	Applied linguistics	✓	✓						
2	Teasing	Amy	Applied linguistics	✓	✓						
3*	Teasing	Andy	Applied linguistics	✓	✓						
4*	Self-deprecation	Andy	Applied linguistics	✓	✓						
5	Joking about someone; Story-telling	John	Applied linguistics	✓	✓						
6	Joking about someone; Story-telling	Eric	Business			✓					
7	Teasing	Eric	Business			✓					
8*	Self-deprecation	Eric	Business				✓	✓	✓		

Extract		Lecturer	Discipline	Group						
				(no. of participants)						
				A	B	C	D	E	F	G
				(6)	(5)	(6)	(4)	(2)	(5)	(2)
9	Joking about someone	Eric	Business				✓	✓	✓	✓
10	Self-deprecation	Eric	Business				✓	✓	✓	✓

Table 2 HEs and groups in the playback and discussion sessions

* HEs with laughter

The lecturers, who all spoke English as their first language, were interviewed individually about the same HEs their Chinese students commented on. Additional data was collected from eight non-Chinese informants with high English proficiency, who were also students in the five lectures from which the HEs in Table 2 were taken.

All interviews and discussions were audio recorded and transcribed; talks with students were conducted in Chinese apart from those with Groups A and B³. As for the RR form, the students often mixed English and Chinese in their answers. All data collected in Chinese was translated into English by me. Content analysis of the transcripts and the RR form data was carried out using Atlas.ti.

3. Results and analysis

Table 3 summarizes the student participants' answers in response to the question in the RR form "did you notice any instances of humor in what the lecturer said or did". As can be seen, HEs which triggered a laughter response (marked with asterisks) were much more likely to be recognized as humor by the participants, indicating that they responded to laughter as a cue when identifying humor. One exception was Extract 8. I will discuss this extract further in the analysis. Most participants did not identify humor in HEs without laughter. I will also analyze two of these HEs, i.e. Extracts 2 and 6.

³ The participants in Groups A and B insisted on using English throughout the playback and discussion session so as to practice the language.

	Total no.	No. of participants who noticed humor	%
1* Story-telling	11	11	100%
2 Teasing	11	1	9%
3* Teasing	11	11	100%
4* Self-deprecation	11	11	100%
5 Joking about someone; Story-telling	11	1	9%
6 Joking about someone; Story-telling	6	3	50%
7 Teasing	6	0	0%
8* Self-deprecation	11	6	55%
9 Joking about someone	13	3	23%
10 Self-deprecation	13	0	0%

Table 3 No. and percentage of participants who noticed humor in the extracts

* HEs with laughter

3.1 Teasing the students

In the example below from a postgraduate lecture, Amy is explaining the concept of motivation in language learning, and giving examples of various new skills that the students need to develop for the master's course. The students had recently been given the topics of their course assignments.

Extract 2 – looking forward to assignments

- 1 Amy: So they⁴ need to have developed that metacognitive capacity that ability to think
2 about how to learn and how to continue developing their skills, cuz i think all
3 of you, probably having come here to <name of university> to start your MAs here
4 are experiencing that because all of you are very proficient users of English, but
5 clearly, taking this MA course here means that you are having to engage with
6 perhaps some new vocabulary, as you take the different modules like psychology

⁴ Amy was referring to advanced language learners here.

7 and text and discourse and so on you are, meaning a lot of new language new
8 concepts or different definitions of familiar terms and so on, so you are having to
9 continue to develop your knowledge of English language, and clearly also you are
10 having to do a lot more reading perhaps some you used to and also when it comes
11 to the module assignment which i know you are looking forward to writing so much,
12 clearly you know you'll clearly need some of the- will need to develop your
13 academic writing skills, so there is a sense in which all of us all of you are still
14 continuing to develop your skills and continue learning in response to these changing
15 needs and circumstances now that you are here doing an MA in the UK

Amy1-HE03

In L#11, Amy presents a positive judgment of the students' attitude towards the assignments. This judgment is inconsistent with the knowledge that all the participants probably share, that the students are actually worried about the assignments and do not enjoy writing them. Such inconsistency signals that Amy has violated the maxim of quality (be truthful) (Grice 1975). Furthermore, her use of "so much" intensifies her claim. The listener is expected to infer the opposite meaning to what is literally said, an example of irony. At the same time, Amy is teasing the students by reminding them of something they may not enjoy but cannot avoid doing.

However, teasing and the use of irony can also be rapport-building, because comprehension of the ironic meaning entails the speaker's and listeners' shared awareness of it. In the interview, Amy explained why she used this type of humor in her teaching:

I know with a lot of students the assignment is very much in their minds at the moment [...] So I think that possibly was an example of where I was trying to be slightly humorous, urm but also I think you know one of the reasons why I'd like to inject that sort of humor is because I think it's always important to try to connect what I am talking about with their own experiences

Amy emphasizes her attempt to bond with the students by connecting with what is 'in their minds' and "their own experiences". The humor had the potential to enhance group solidarity if it was recognized and appreciated by the students.

Eleven Chinese students from Amy's lecture commented on this extract. However, only one of them noticed the presence of humor.

Yan: She said we're eager to do assignment, which is totally opposite to the truth.

Yan recognized the ironic judgment and considered it to be humor. Most participants, despite being able to recount what Amy said in the extract, including her mention of the module assignments, overlooked the use of irony. This might be attributed to the fact that there were no obvious paralinguistic cues, e.g. laughter. As such, Amy's humorous attempt to bond with the students, or at least those students who participated in my research, fell flat. The participants' face, however, did not seem to have been threatened and most participants appreciated Amy's use of examples familiar to them. Interestingly, Yan thought that Amy had joked about the assignment "too often", and it was "not funny anymore", although she was not offended by this. In contrast, in the example below, the humor was recognized but had the effect of marginalizing those participants who did not fully comprehend it.

3.2 Self-deprecation

This extract comes from the beginning of a lecture on international business taught by Eric. Carla is his colleague.

Extract 8 – good news and better news

- 1 Eric: Some of you might have been thinking it was Carla this morning on, Economics,
- 2 well the good news is, you get Carla next week, and the better news is, ready for
- 3 the- i will listen for the cheers, this is the last formal lecture you get from me on this
- 4 subject
- 5 SF⁵: woo-hoo::
- 6 Eric: You cheered
- 7 SL: [<laughter>
- 8 SF: [(inaudible)
- 9 Eric: Oh dear <clears throat>
- 10 S?: (inaudible)

⁵ "S" stands for a single student; "SS" stands for multiple students; "SL" stands for multiple students together with the lecturer; "SF" stands for one female student.

- 11 Eric: black mark? you're joking, that's twenty percent off her essay
12 SF: [oh::
13 SS: [<laughter>
14 Eric: <laugh> # five percent for optimism <laugh> right okay

Eric2-HE02

In this extract, Eric delivers two main messages – Carla is teaching next week, and this is his last lecture. He introduces these messages as “good news” and even “better news”. Why they are good news is not clearly explained – that is, the maxim of manner (be clear and brief) (Grice 1975) is violated. But through the juxtaposition of his exit with a new lecturer's arrival, one can infer that Eric is suggesting that the students do not like his lectures. This is a self-deprecating evaluation of his level of popularity with the students. The self-deprecation signals the introduction of a “play frame” (Bateson, 1953). This means that the speaker frames and signals his talk as play and hence not serious. Eric then invites the students to participate in the play frame in L#3. This is immediately picked up by one British student, SF, who responds by cheering. This triggers laughter from the audience. Soon afterwards, other students join in. The audience's active participation and laughter indicate that they are enjoying the game. Eric's account of this extract in the interview stressed its playfulness:

Laugh at me, urm, it's towards the end, there's a sense of relief that it's done, there's a sense of release of tension [...] they can laugh at me it doesn't matter, they will be happy about that ... it's playing a game, it's just playing a game.

Eric invites the students to laugh at him, subverting, at least temporarily, his authority. The self-deprecation does not necessarily undermine Eric's face, as it is after all a game (and one which he initiated). Nevertheless, Eric's humor is not risk free. Students who cannot perceive his self-deprecation or the play frame that underlies it will be excluded from the game.

Eleven Chinese students, divided into three groups, responded to this extract. Six of them noticed the humor and showed good comprehension of what was said. However, their accounts of the humor did not include any explicit mention of self-deprecation. I asked Group D what the good news Eric spoke of was, and why he had presented it as good news. Their answers are reproduced below:

- 1⁶ Bee: I think he is saying the opposite, actually for students, it is not good news to have the last lecture, but he puts it as good news, so I feel
- 2 R⁷: you think he's saying the opposite [...]
- 3 Bee: Yes
- 4 R: why did he say it's good news?
- 5 Bee: cuz- <laugh>
- 6 Alin: Cuz students don't like having lectures, then we heard it's the last lecture, I don't think it's good news
- 7 Bee: yeah, from students' perspective, having more lectures is not a bad thing
- (Group D)

Interestingly, Alin and Bee believed that what Eric meant by “good news” was that the students would have no more lectures. This was different from what Eric intended to imply, and also diverged from the message received by the non-Chinese informants, as expressed in their answers to the same questions (Tom is British and Arni is Danish):

Tom: good news we won't have to see him again right? it was a joke, a self-deprecating joke at the fact that we wouldn't want to see him again, so we would be pleased with that news

Arni: but he's right, you know

<laughter>

The self-deprecation, identified by Eric himself and the informants, was missing from Alin and Bee's interpretations of “the good news”. According to them, Eric suggested that the students did not like lectures. If taken seriously, this could be an attack on the students' face by indicating that they are lazy. In this way, the butt of the humor was shifted from Eric to the students, although neither Bee nor Alin believed that Eric was speaking seriously.

Group F had similar problems interpreting Eric's meaning. Their comments, as shown below, suggest that misidentification of the butt of the face act can be detrimental to rapport. The participants in this group had evident difficulty in understanding the audio extract. One member, Gao, appeared to understand very little of it. Nevertheless, he still detected humor in it due to the laughter – “there must be humor ... because many people are laughing”.

⁶ The numbers represent speaking turns, which are referred to as 'T' hereafter.

⁷ “R” refers to the researcher.

Later, he attributed his incomprehension to unfamiliarity with “British humor”:

8 Gao: I really know nothing about British humor, what did he say in the first one?

Later, I asked the group the same questions: what was the good news Eric spoke of, and why did he say it was good news? Below is part of their discussion.

9 Fei: good news means this is the last lecture

10 Fan: yeah, he’s telling us this is the last lesson

11 Han: you call that good news? <laugh>

12 Fan: then he puts you off by saying this is not the last lecture, someone else’s going to teach us

13 [...]

14 R: why is it good news?

15 Fei: because to us students, this is his last lecture, maybe he thinks we would see it as good news

16 Gao: maybe he thinks students don’t like having lessons, if this is the last lecture[...] for example, it’s the last lecture, if one does not want to have lectures, then you have no more, that gives you a hope, then he gives you a set-back, something like that

(Group F)

Fei, Fan, and Gao conjectured that Eric believed that the students did not like having lectures. This coincided with the opinions of Alin and Bee, and turned the target of Eric’s evaluation to the students. The following interview extracts elucidate what the group thought about the evaluation they had just constructed.

17 R: he said it’s good news, do you think so?

18 Fan: of course not

19 Gao: of course not

20 R: why?

21 [...]

22 Jun: no lectures means exams are coming

23 [...]

24 R: do you think the lecturer himself thinks it’s good news?

25 Gao: with regards to the lecturer, I think because the British people are generally lazier, and if he doesn’t need to work

- 26 Fan: no money
 27 Fei: pretty good
 28 Gao: they don't get paid according to working time, otherwise they all work twenty four hours[...]
 29 Jun: he doesn't depend on these to make money from you Chinese people (inaudible)
 (Group F)

Group F unanimously rejected the idea that having no more lectures was good news for them. When I proceeded to ask them if the lecturer thought it was good news (T24), Gao's response surprised me as he made a somewhat derogatory claim about British people. He thought that Eric liked the idea of having no more lectures to teach, and assumed that the students liked it too, whereas Gao himself would have preferred to have more lectures. In this way, Gao constructed a situation in which the lecturer and he held opposing opinions. Other participants, including Fan, Fei and Jun, immediately bought into Gao's interpretation. Eric considered his humor to be "playing a game", whereas the Chinese participants interpreted it as an antagonistic encounter. Later, I asked Group F to comment on Eric's humor in general:

- 30 Gao: actually sometimes we just don't know if he's being humorous or not
 31 Fan: yeah
 32 Fei: don't understand it
 33 Fan: everyone's laughing, and we laugh <laughter>
 34 R: sometimes you don't understand it right?
 35 Fan: cuz he's laughing there himself, we just watch him laugh
 36 Gao: and if you're with a crowd of foreigners, and everyone's laughing, you can only follow and laugh
 37 <laughter>

(Group F)

The students' discussion at T30-37 expresses their experience of being excluded from humor in lectures, and of feeling the need to laugh alongside others (T33 and 36). Group F's discussion, as shown above, indicates a sense of alienation – they do not understand British humor (T8); they think British people are generally lazy(T25); they do not think that the lecturer wishes to teach them even though the Chinese students want more lectures (T17-29); they laugh along with the foreigners without understanding the humor (T30-37). It

seems clear that what the lecturer believed to be rapport-building self-deprecation actually had the opposite effect, at least for the Chinese students.

3.3 Joking and story-telling

In the example below, Eric tells a story about his cousin's experience of doing business in China, which involved going to a karaoke bar. In the first half of the story, Eric described a business negotiation which seemed to have failed, but which led to a successful outcome, to his cousin's surprise. Eric then flags up the start of what he calls "the better part of the story".

Extract 6 – an Englishman in a karaoke bar

1 Eric: the better part of the story is the manager the boss came to him afterwards shook
2 his hand, and he thought he said, okay, and he said yes my # cousin yes and the boss
3 said tonight, actually he hadn't said okay, what he actually said was karaoke
4 <laugh>, and my cousin had just agreed to spend a night in a Chinese karaoke bar
5 (I pushed) he said he will not tell me what he'd sung cuz he said he can't remember,
6 and I believe him he probably couldn't remember he said it was a very good evening
7 <laugh> and it's a way of doing business, which was different to that which he'd
8 used to, he left with very fond memory he likes the place very much and he had a
9 lot of fun with the people once the deal was done he <laughing voice>got on</> but
10 to begin with he was completely thrown

Eric1-HE03

In this "better part of the story", Eric's cousin misheard the word "karaoke" and ended up spending a night in a Chinese karaoke bar. The switch from "okay" to "karaoke" is incongruous; this should be comprehensible to the Chinese audience. Eric then makes an evaluative aside (Labov, 1972) – "he will not tell me what he'd sung cuz he said he can't remember, and I believe him he probably couldn't remember" (L#5-6). Why his cousin could not remember what he had sung and how this remark relates to the story are implicit information. This ambiguous remark violates the maxim of manner (be clear and brief), and together with Eric's laugh provides an indication that this is intended to be humorous. What Eric is implying is open to interpretation. Eric provided his own interpretation:

You should know my cousin and the idea of him in a Chinese karaoke bar is quite amusing in itself [...] that would require an understanding of English culture, um he comes from a very close east-end family east end of London family, they are not the most cosmopolitan, and it would be a challenge to him, it will be a challenge to anybody really, but it would be a challenge to him [...]

The idea of this Englishman being dragged around to a Chinese karaoke bar and getting terribly drunk, and probably getting laughed at quite a lot is one that is easier to remember

From Eric's perspective, he is joking about his cousin by alluding to the incongruity of an east-end Englishman singing, drinking and embarrassing himself in a Chinese karaoke bar. This reflects a general attitude to karaoke in Britain - based on personal observation. Karaoke singing is usually associated with embarrassment, and takes place in pubs or restaurants where people make themselves drunk so as to be brave enough to sing. As such, what Eric's cousin did in the Chinese karaoke bar was amusing. One British informant in this lecture, Derek, told me what he saw as humor in this extract.

Derek: the actual story when you think about it, it happens to a lot of people, I think it's quite funny, because it's misunderstanding, which is an innocent thing that happens [...]

R: do you feel the misunderstanding between okay and karaoke particularly funny?

Derek: no, it could have been any words, it wasn't the fact but it was funny because you know, the story, you know you imagine he wasn't expecting he would be going to sing, you imagine it all in your head even though he didn't tell you exactly what happened, you can imagine what happened, it would have been quite funny

R: so what would you imagine what's happening

Derek: well you can imagine they probably got drunk, and then they probably made fools of themselves, and he was probably singing, but you wouldn't have expected him to have done it in the first instance

Derek commented that the misunderstanding between the two parties in the story was funny, but what was funnier was the imagery arising from the story – the idea of people getting drunk and making fools of themselves in a karaoke bar. His second point was almost identical to Eric's account above.

The Chinese attitude to karaoke is, however, very different. In urban China, karaoke is a very popular entertainment; people enjoy singing in karaoke bars, and they may drink

alcohol to enhance their enjoyment. Eric's stance in the story may therefore be especially problematic to Chinese students as they do not usually associate karaoke with embarrassment. Without this association, the humorous nature of the Englishman's experience in a Chinese karaoke bar will fall flat for Chinese students.

Six Chinese students took part in a playback of this extract and a discussion session. Half of them did not notice humor in the extract. The ones who did notice humor made the comments below:

- 1 Eli then the foreigner thinks, oh, it's a deal? what he said was not tonight okay, karaoke tonight, then they go to sing and are very happy, eventually it's not a deal you know, you've got to know this if you're doing business, Chinese people like singing karaoke, right? the foreigner thinks he's okay, actually he's not okay
- 2 [...]
- 3 May: the first one is humorous, it's misunderstanding, right? [...] I think the first one is quite funny
- 4 R: why?
- 5 May because he misunderstands it, then they go to karaoke, it's quite funny, he's laughing as well when he's telling the story

(Group C)

Here and elsewhere in the session, May and Eli were asked to explain the humor in Eric's story. They always stressed the misunderstanding; the embarrassing situation was never mentioned by them or other Chinese students.

4. Discussion

Analysis of the HEs reveals that humor is a means of enhancing self-image, tackling potential face loss, mitigating FTAs, and increasing solidarity with students. Teasing targeted at others and oneself is ubiquitous in the data. This type of humor "bites" and "bonds" at the same time (Boxer and Cortés-Conde, 1997). The interpersonal functions of humor are also salient in that humor draws attention to stance. Stance in humor is often implicitly expressed, and reflects the speaker's and listeners' shared awareness of the

implied meaning. Moreover, as stance in humor often reflects sociocultural values, e.g. the sociocultural connotations of karaoke in Extract 6, it also indicates the speaker's and listeners' shared awareness of and/or conformity to these values. In this sense, understanding stance in humor may contribute to in-group solidarity.

The Chinese participants evidently differed from their lecturers in the way they accounted for the face acts and stance expressed in many HEs. On occasion, irony was simply overlooked (Extract 2). In other examples, the students noticed face work but mistook its target (Extract 8), or noticed humor but perceived differently the stance expressed (Extract 6). There was evidence of detrimental impacts caused by misunderstanding face act humor in lectures. For instance, when commenting on Extract 8, the Chinese participants constructed opposition between themselves (as Chinese students) and the lecturer and the local students (as foreigners). This reflects a more general issue - The Chinese participants seemed to have a negative attitude towards the faculty. In fact, I was informed by several staff and students during the fieldwork of on-going tension between the faculty and the Chinese students concerning the latter's weak academic performance. A few of the staff raised with me the issue of the Chinese students' poor English proficiency, and their being inactive in lectures and seminars, while many of my Chinese participants complained about a lack of support from the department.

Nevertheless, the lecturer participants in this department were either unaware of the gap between their use of humor and the Chinese students' perceptions of this, or were aware of the problems but insensitive to their students' needs. These departmental issues may be associated with the Chinese students' incomprehension of humorous episodes such as those in Extract 8, but incomprehension could also be a symptom of wider dissatisfaction with the department, and the belief that lecturers representing the department would feel negatively towards them. In this case, the Chinese students' perceptions would need to be taken into account when addressing more general teaching and learning issues in this particular department.

5. Implications

This study explores the under-examined phenomenon of humor in intercultural academic lectures. A number of scholars have studied humor in conversations in academic contexts between native and non-native speakers of English. They provide evidence of its benefits and potential pitfalls, and call for further attention to humor in academic contexts. My study concerns lectures, which are more asymmetric and less interactive than conversations. Only a small body of work (Flowerdew and Miller, 1995; Nesi, 2012) has qualitatively investigated humor in intercultural lectures. In this respect, the study contributes to achieving a fuller picture of how humor plays a role in intercultural contexts.

The Chinese students in my study had many comprehension problems and were sometimes even unaware of the humor in the British lectures. The humor, according to my analysis and the lecturers' accounts, was used to manage rapport. In this respect it was important to the students in terms of both their study and their socialization. Further studies should be carried out to investigate international students' understanding of humor in British lectures. Some lecturers in my study expressed their awareness that international students had different needs in lectures, and Eric, commenting on Extract 5, could even describe how he had taken his Chinese students' needs into account in his use of humor. However, there were still evident gaps between the Chinese students' perceptions and the lecturers' intentions.

The number of international students studying in British universities has increased steadily in recent years, but various studies show that tangible expansion of the number of international students has not led to intangible changes in terms of intercultural understanding or exchanges of knowledge (Robson and Turner, 2007; Toyoshima, 2007). My findings are in line with those of these studies. On the one hand, my Chinese participants had evident difficulty understanding their lecturers' humor, and subsequently felt alienated. On the other hand, the British lecturers were either unaware of the Chinese students' problems, or were aware of the problems but insensitive to their students' needs. Cultural allusions were made with little explanation, and business examples were predominately British or European. If intercultural exchange is considered as part of the

international agenda of UK higher education, humor will be an important topic to consider, as a vital component in ensuring that face work in this context is successfully performed.

Finally, it should be stressed that the findings of this study do not suggest that humor should be avoided in British lectures or other academic contexts when international students are present. Humor plays important interpersonal roles in everyday life. In my analysis, there are examples of shared humor and enhanced rapport between lecturers and students. Humor is an inevitable part of human life, and its understanding should be openly talked about. It may therefore be reasonable to suggest that incomprehension of humor in intercultural academic contexts should be treated not just as a problem, but also a topic for conversation and negotiation.

Appendix A. Transcription conventions

(inaudible)	Inaudible recording
(text)	Uncertain transcription
<movement> text </>	start and finish of kinesic movements and other nonverbal events
<laugh>	non-iterated laughter
<laughter>	Iterated laughter
[text	Overlapping speech
#	Hesitation or filler sounds
<name>	Anonymous name of a person or organization
text-	Truncated words
:	prolonged sound
<laughing/angry/mimicking another's voice> text </>	speaker changes vocal quality
[...]	content omitted
?	rise of tone at the end of a question
,	brief pause (in lecture data); punctuation comma (in transcripts of Interview and group discussions

Appendix B. Respondent's report form

Name:		
Age:		
Gender:		
Nationality:		
Degree and subject of study:		
Duration you have been in Britain:	Year(s)	Month(s)

Audio extract no.

Please briefly summarize what the lecturer said in the audio extract:

Did you notice any instances of humor in what the lecturer said or did? Yes No

If yes, please answer the following questions; if no, you don't need to write anything.

Did you feel that the humor was spontaneous or planned? Spontaneous Planned

Very Slightly Not

How funny did you find the humor? funny funny funny

Can you explain what was humorous?

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