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"Interesting but incongruous": Greek teacher attitudes towards teaching about humour within a critical literacy framework

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Abstract

The goal of this case study is to explore the attitudes of Greek secondary education teachers towards the teaching of humour within a critical literacy framework. This fieldwork-based research took place during and after 8 training seminars (218 participants), which aimed to familiarise educators with the critical teaching of humorous texts using an annotated database. After each seminar, participants answered questions eliciting their attitudes towards concepts and proposals introduced in the training sessions. This data (collected in two stages, immediately following the training and 15 months later) is complemented by fieldnotes from the discussions that took place during the training sessions. Our findings indicate a lack of familiarity with the theory, the sociopragmatic effects, and the teaching of humour. For many teachers, humour functions exclusively as a means of attracting students' interest. Participants evaluate the critical teaching of humour as interesting and innovative, but simultaneously express various concerns regarding its applicability, which can be attributed not only to practical difficulties, but also to long-standing biases regarding the purposes and standards of language education.

1. Introduction

Despite humour's prevalence across contexts and genres, the educational space often appears inhospitable to it. In education, humour is often met with conflicting emotions and resistance because it is perceived as aggressive, inappropriate, offensive, or even morally objectionable behaviour. Additionally, being viewed in opposition to seriousness, it may be considered undesirable and irrelevant to the serious and practical nature of the educational context, which is regarded as promoting "correct" and "ethical" behaviour (see among others Cook, 2000; Bell & Pomerantz, 2016, p. viii; Tsakona, 2013, pp. 283-296). This negative perception of humour reflects a strong Christian influence on educational philosophy, established before the 18th century, whereby humour was perceived as immoral, blasphemous, insincere, hostile, irresponsible behaviour, and eventually a vice (see Morreall, 2010; Tsakona, 2013, pp. 77-97 and the references therein). However, in recent years, there has been a broader cultural shift (Morreall, 2010, p. 1) from negative to positive attitudes towards humour, and specifically a playful turn in education and related research (Bell & Pomerantz, 2016, p. 5). Researchers and educators increasingly advocate for the introduction of humour in the classroom and emphasise the benefits that may arise from it.

One of the main goals of including humour as an object of language teaching would be to highlight the fact that humorous texts contain latent messages that are not meant exclusively for amusement, but perform significant sociopragmatic functions. Revealing these ideologically charged messages and their social, interactional (affiliative/disaffiliative), and interpersonal functions could be achieved through teaching humour within the framework of critical literacy. As an educational application of Critical Discourse Analysis (see Fairclough, 1992), critical literacy aims to enable speakers to understand how their own or others' views and values reflect and perpetuate social inequalities and stereotypes. Indeed, humorous texts often contain direct or indirect references to issues of inequality and stereotypes (see among others Tsami, 2018; Archakis & Tsakona, 2019; Tsakona, 2020, pp. 139-188, 2024, pp. 103-125, and references therein).

The present study is part of the project "Humour and Critical Literacy" (University of Kent) that was aimed at enhancing Greek educators' awareness of the potential of humour-centred critical literacy. For the purposes of the project, we created an interactive electronic platform (wiki) that includes a wealth of annotated humorous materials and teaching proposals for the critical exploitation of humour in teaching practice (mostly within the subject of language study)[1]. This platform and its dissemination through training seminars provided an opportunity to explore the opinions and attitudes of educators towards such teaching approaches. Our investigation concerns the experiences, positions, and reflections of educators who participated in our training seminars, linking them to the wider (and changing) framework of teaching ideologies and practices in Greek education.

After a brief overview of humour in education, alongside the goals of its incorporation within a critical literacy framework (Section 2), we provide necessary context regarding the Greek secondary school reality, its traditional values, and modern curricula (Section 3). We then proceed to present the methodology and results of our two surveys, one conducted at the end of training and one circulated online among participants 15 months later (Sections 4 and 5).

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[1] https://www.humor-literacy.eu/index-en.html

2. Humour and critical literacy in education

This section reviews and links two separate discussions regarding humour use in education: (a) utilising humour as a classroom management tool and (b) teaching about humour through humorous texts within a critical literacy framework. While separate, both relate to teacher attitudes towards humour in the classroom, which may range from considering humour entirely inappropriate for the educational context, to limiting humour to just interpersonal use rather than incorporating it in the curriculum; and from only including "high-brow" humorous texts, without any critical discussion, to including texts from all genres and backgrounds within a fully-developed critical literacy framework.

2.1. Humour and language teaching

When investigating language teaching and humour, two main trends are attested (see Bell, 2009; Bell & Pomerantz, 2016; Shively, 2013; Tsakona, 2020, pp. 139-148; Omer-Attali et al., 2024 and references therein). The most prominent so far involves teaching with humour, where humour is employed as a class management tool to attract students' interest, facilitate learning (e.g. learning linguistic forms, developing metalinguistic awareness), and enhance student experience at the social and psychological level (e.g. solidarity among students, pleasant and safe atmosphere). This use of humour, however, is not without risk, since the classroom dynamics may be such, that this practice results in misunderstandings or offence (e.g. through reproducing inequalities, or even bullying).

The second and, so far, less explored trend involves teaching *about* humour, through the exploitation of humorous texts. The most significant argument in favour of using humorous texts as teaching material pertains to the fact that humour is part of speakers' *communicative competence* (see among others Cook, 2000; Archakis & Tsakona, 2013; Shively, 2013; Tsakona, 2013, pp. 289-290, 2020, pp. 145-146, 2024, pp. 152-153; Ahn, 2016; Bell & Pomerantz, 2016). Communicative competence refers to speakers' ability to communicate effectively in diverse social situations (see also Hymes, 1972, p. 277). It therefore seems beneficial to expose students to everyday, authentic language use, familiarising them with how, when, and why humour is produced. Bell & Pomerantz (2016, p. viii) suggest that the use of humour in teaching could help students realise its rapport-building functions, while also providing opportunities to resist or critique social norms and conventions.

2.2. Critical literacy as a framework for teaching about humour

Critical literacy is premised on the assumptions that neither discourse nor our interpretations of it are neutral, and that discourse shapes our understandings of the worlds, others, and ourselves. By representing aspects of social reality, texts offer value-laden, ideological interpretations of it, whether their producers or recipients are aware of it or not. All texts include and presuppose specific ideologies and evaluations of social reality and thus position not only their producers but also their potential addressees in specific ways in terms of background knowledge and ideological standpoints. That is to say, critical literacy could allow speakers to detect the values and views texts bring to the surface or hide under the carpet, while understanding that projecting or silencing specific views may often perpetuate social inequalities and stereotypes (see among others Fairclough, 1992; Silvers et al., 2007; Curdt-Christiansen, 2010; Archakis & Tsakona, 2012, pp. 128-137; Janks et al., 2014; Fajardo, 2015; Tsakona, 2020, pp. 148-154, 2024, pp. 154-167).

A critical approach to texts reproducing social inequalities can not only raise students' *critical language awareness* (Fairclough, 2014, p. 238; Archakis & Tsakona, 2012, pp. 125-128), but can also contribute to eliminating such inequalities, if students are able to detect, reject,

and eventually refrain from perpetuating them through discourse. In other words, emphasis is placed on the *effects* texts and their critical interpretations may have in shaping social reality (Wallace, 2003, p. 42).

Critical literacy as an educational practice is based on the utilisation of material coming from students' social contexts, interests, and textual experiences (see among others Silvers et al., 2007; Janks et al., 2014; Fajardo, 2015). Within this framework, humorous texts are brought into the classroom and analysed not just in terms of their "mechanics" (i.e. the linguistic forms, strategies, and incongruities that make a text funny), but through the basic assumption that humour is never "innocent" or "just for fun": it may reinforce social inequality, normalise stereotypes while seemingly undermining them, and may disguise racist, sexist, classist, etc. content as "just a joke" (see Santa Ana, 2009; Weaver, 2016; Archakis & Tsakona, 2019; Tsakona, 2024, pp. 103-125 and references therein).

Here is a sample of questions through which humorous texts can be approached within a critical literacy teaching framework:

- For what reason/purpose is a humorous text created and who benefits from it?
- Why is humour deemed appropriate/inappropriate for certain genres/contexts?
- What are the consequences for someone who violates the "norms" of humour use?
- How are actions, persons, and situations represented to be perceived as humorous?
- What is projected as "incongruous" and what is projected as "normal" or at least "acceptable" within a specific humorous text?
- What makes a humorous text "successful"?
- Who is targeted through humour and why?
- Could a humorous text be constructed and function in a different manner and as non-humorous? (Tsakona, 2013, p. 302, 2020, p. 157).[2]

Of course, incorporating these within teaching practice presupposes finding space and compatibility within the existing curriculum, which can be challenging for teachers, facing both internal (personal, ideological) and external (practical) pressures.

3. The Greek secondary school reality: the role of schoolbooks and curricula in shaping teacher attitudes

In order to understand teacher attitudes towards critical literacy and towards the inclusion of humorous texts in their practice, we need to understand the educational and social-ideological context of modern Greek education. The Greek educational system has had many minor revisions and updates over the years, without, however, any radical reform. There is, therefore, a relative constancy in how the (mostly teacher-led) educational practice is perceived and performed. Some elements of the general educational context need to be highlighted first, before we proceed to discuss the place of humour in the modern curriculum.

3.1. The context of Greek education

The Greek educational system is a state-controlled, traditionally conservative framework. It was built on the premise of fostering a national and religious identity (Karakatsani & Fragkoulidou, 2023), with the latter being reflected in the combination of education and religious affairs under the same government ministry.

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[2] For critical literacy proposals on teaching about humour see Archakis & Tsakona (2012, pp. 155-163, 2013), Tsakona (2013, pp. 304-332, 2020, pp. 155-188, 2024, pp. 167-223), Janks et al. (2014, pp. 91-97), Gasteratou (2016), Tsami (2018).

There are two elements that have shaped the climate of secondary education in particular. First, there is a long-standing conflict between a strictly conservative approach to language, linked to the diglossic situation of past decades (from the foundation of the Greek state and until 1976; Frangoudaki, 1992) and the perception of continuity between Ancient and Modern Greek. Attempts at modernising the curriculum, viewing Modern Greek as an independent linguistic variety and questioning the teaching of Ancient Greek as a compulsory subject in secondary education, have been met with resistance from the more conservative layers of society, as well as from educators themselves (Kessareas, 2021). Unsurprisingly, changes in the curriculum such as including linguistically-informed metalanguage and texts from a variety of genres, have not had the desired uptake either (Koutsogiannis, 2017, pp. 134-135).

The second element shaping modern secondary education is its exam-oriented nature: the national university entry exam in year 12 has always been regarded as the most important event in a person's educational life and has carried a major social weight. The degree of importance placed on the entry exam trickles down to every grade of secondary education (3 *gymnasio* and 3 *lykeio* grades, corresponding to grades 7-12), resulting in constant examination through term-time short and long/revision tests and final exams at every grade. The direct result of this orientation is the teachers' strict adherence to the ministry-mandated curriculum and materials, with a near-constant pressure to cover all (and only) the topics that are included in examinations (see Koutsogiannis, 2017, pp. 93-94).

When it comes to the study of texts in humanities subjects (primarily language and literature, but also history, civic education, and religious studies), the aforementioned factors lead to an overwhelming prevalence of the "high" versus "low" distinction, with the focus falling almost exclusively on the former category. The curriculum-approved texts come from high-prestige sources that are considered classic in their category. Even in the subject of modern literature, there is very little inclusion of recent texts, which are still picked on criteria of formality and acclaim. There is a limited variety of genres and a restricted range of registers, with very little room for innovation (see Archakis & Tsakona, 2012, pp. 119-122; Koutsogiannis, 2017, pp. 103, 123).

It is finally worth noting that the composition of the Greek classroom has changed over the last few decades: being a lot less homogeneous and more multicultural, it poses additional challenges to teachers who respond to different language needs of students who are L2 speakers of Greek, while also navigating potential tensions arising from diverse cultural backgrounds, aggravated by outdated curricula. Additional social and ideological tensions have also been more prevalent in classroom dynamics since the height of the economic crisis in the 2010s. This appears to reinforce a teacher-centred and rather authoritative approach, which is deemed as more effective in managing classroom dynamics (see Section 5).

3.2. Humour and the Greek curriculum

School textbooks and curriculum guidelines are not just technical texts through which school knowledge is organised, but they also constitute ideological and political texts through which "valid" knowledge is determined, along with the ways in which it should be disseminated, i.e. the "appropriate" and "correct" teaching practices (Philippou, 2005, p. 357; Reppas 2007, p. 17). From this perspective, textbooks and curriculum guidelines can influence the perceptions and beliefs of those involved in the teaching process. Specifically, educators, following the guidelines of the curricula and textbooks, often shape attitudes towards various teaching approaches, such as critical literacy, and towards various communicative phenomena, such as humour.

The examination of Greek language textbooks reveals that they mainly contain texts of "serious" themes, while humorous excerpts are often excluded from the curriculum (Damaschi-

Mikrou, 2004, p. 8). Illustrative of this general trend are language textbooks, which do not have a specific section for teaching humour as a linguistic phenomenon, nor do they include the teaching of various humorous genres. In instances where humour is mentioned, it is mainly studied through written texts, particularly through literary texts from older eras, which may not correspond to the daily extracurricular reality of students (see Archakis & Tsakona, 2012, pp. 121-122; Manolidis et al., n.d., pp. 141-168). At the same time, these textbooks include activities for producing humorous discourse, without any prior relevant theoretical discussion regarding what is humour and how it works (Tsolakis et al., n.d., pp. 144, 169-170). In any attempt to define and specify humour systematically, what is routinely ignored is the linguistic approach to humour, which would reveal the cognitive, contextual, and social presuppositions of humour. Emphasis is instead placed on the negative sociopragmatic functions of humour as a persuasive tool for emotionally stimulating the audience (Tsolakis et al., n.d., pp. 38, 46), as well as a means of "critique", "protest", and "subversion" (Tsolakis et al., n.d., p. 258). On the other hand, positive aspects of humour, such as creating social bonds and enhancing solidarity among conversationalists, seem to be systematically silenced (see also Archakis & Tsakona, 2012, p. 122). It therefore seems that the approach to humour in Greek language textbooks is at least oversimplified, if not biased.

Emphasis on the development of students' critical literacy and the utilisation of their extracurricular interests is at the core of the educational process in the curriculum proposed for the compulsory education by the "New School" in 2011 (Ministry of Education, 2011a, 2011b). Since 2019, the critical dimension of language education began to extend to the lykeio grades (Law 4911/2019; grades 10-12), although there is no specific reference to a critical approach to the phenomenon of humour. The teaching objectives are limited to ensuring that students are able "to utilise [humour] as a strategy for interpersonal communication and to [use it] to achieve specific communicative goals" (Law 4911/2019, p. 56080). In the same vein, the new curricula, which concern both primary (see Law 684/2023) and secondary education (see Law 685/2023), focus, according to their objectives, "on the development of practices of functional and critical literacy," (see Law 685/2023, p. 6368) without any reference to the linguistic analysis of humour.

The arguably vague suggestions presented to educators regarding critical literacy mean that no training or prior exposure is available to them, that would allow to properly incorporate these into their teaching practice (see also Tsiplakou, 2015, pp. 188-191, 194-197). Even when there is some willingness and initiative to do so, the exam-oriented nature of teaching planning does not leave enough time for lengthy open discussions where students would exchange their interpretations and deconstruct texts, as expected within the framework of critical literacy. When it comes to utilising humorous texts in particular, educators may view bringing extracurricular (and therefore "unapproved"/unofficial) materials into the classroom as a risk not only of deviating from the curriculum, but also of bringing into the classroom dynamics potentially controversial subjects that could lead to conflict among students, loss of classroom control, and ultimately to the devaluation of the language subject (see also Maroniti & Stamou, 2014; Tsami, 2018; pp. 104-108).

4. Methodology: mixed methods approach

Based on the above overview, we formulate the following research hypotheses: (a) educators will have a cautious attitude toward both humour and the pedagogical use of critical literacy; (b) educators will have a negative attitude towards the pedagogical use of humorous texts that are part of students' extracurricular daily reality; (c) educators will have greater reservations towards the combined application of humour within the framework of critical literacy than

towards its individual and independent pedagogical application. If there is any shift in their caution towards this, the training process will have played a decisive role.

For the purposes of the wider project where the present research is rooted, we created an electronic platform with diverse humorous material and related teaching proposals (see footnote 1). This is an interactive platform that includes, besides information about humour, humorous texts categorised by theme (marriage, relationships, language, ethnic origin, professions, age groups, religion, political issues, etc.), genre (jokes, comics, cartoons, memes, oral conversations, online articles, etc.), and mode (monomodal, multimodal). The platform is addressed to educators of all levels, and the analyses provided concern the structural and functional characteristics of the texts under consideration, their cultural and intertextual allusions, and the ideologies identified in them. Indicative teaching activities are provided, while educators have the opportunity to upload their own material and communicate for the exchange of teaching experiences.

Seeking to promote this educational tool, we conducted 8 training seminars for 218 secondary education teachers during the school year 2018-2019 in Achaia, Aetolia-Acarnania, and Attica.[3] The seminars were approved by the local Secondary Education Directorates and provided participants with a participation certificate. Each seminar lasted 3 hours and involved 2-3 members of the research team at a time. These seminars were conducted with the aim of familiarising educators with the critical teaching of humorous texts using our electronic platform. They consisted of two parts: first, an introduction to theoretical approaches to humour and critical literacy; and second, practical exercises on the platform's affordances. Special emphasis was placed, among other things, on educators' ability not only to utilise the platform's material but also to develop their own teaching material based on humorous texts suggested by their students.

We designed a questionnaire which was disseminated at the end of each training session and aimed at exploring teachers' attitudes towards the contents of the session. We use the term "attitudes," here, to refer to the identification and interpretation of stable and recurring patterns reflected in individuals' social behaviour in response to specific stimuli from their environment (Baker, 1992, pp. 10-11; Sammut, 2020, pp. 97-98; see also Tzortzatou, 2021, p. 49). The questionnaire was anonymous and consisted of a total of 23 open- and closed-ended questions. Closed-ended questions explored whether educators had any previous training, experience, and/or knowledge regarding the proposed teaching approach. Also, in the closed-ended questions, there were scaling or hierarchy questions, where educators were asked to evaluate the teaching proposal and attribute to it the characteristics "Interesting", "Difficult", "Innovative", "Indifferent", "Compatible with the current school framework" and "Feasible" on a five-point scale. In similar scaling questions, educators were also asked to specify whether they intended to use humour and/or critical literacy in their future teaching. We specifically picked a mix of positively and negatively charged notions, to avoid bias and allow participants to pick their answers more carefully and consciously.

As for the open-ended questions, educators were asked to describe their previous training experiences, justify the teaching practices they follow, and identify the negative and positive aspects of teaching humour within the framework of critical literacy. These answers will be analysed qualitatively, in conjunction with the fieldnotes that were collected by the researchers during the sessions. The fieldnotes concern stances and evaluations that were expressed by the participants during the training sessions. It is worth noting that several of the training sessions included lengthy discussions, sometimes in argumentative tone, when participants who were particularly resistant to the perceived informality of the materials were present. This gave us a

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[3] Ethical approval for this research project was granted by the University of Kent (approval received: 1 March 2018).

wealth of notes and insights in the mentality of our participants, which are essential for fully interpreting our results.

Fifteen months after the conclusion of the training sessions and the completion of the initial questionnaires, we approached the participants with one more short online survey. The survey's purpose was to determine whether the teachers would report having changed their classroom humour practices and/or having incorporated any of the training session's elements in their practice (using the platform as a tool, using humorous texts independently of the critical literacy framework, using critical literacy as a framework regardless of text choice, and using humorous texts within a critical literacy framework). Even though all original participants were invited to fill this in, only 68 (31 per cent of the original sample) responded, a sample that will be analysed with the caution of participation bias, i.e. a self-selected sample that, by choosing to answer the follow-up survey, already demonstrates a higher level of interest in the topic than the non-respondents.

5. Results

The results (quantitative and qualitative) of the two surveys are presented below, broken down according to the different survey sections.

5.1. Familiarity with methods relating to teaching with/about humour and critical literacy

To begin with, we were interested in any prior experience of our participants with teaching methods relating to teaching with/about humour and critical literacy. The answers provided in this section are instances of self-reporting, which is, of course, more of an indicator of predisposition and willingness to explore the discussed methods rather than a precise depiction of teaching practice.

Starting with humour, even though the overwhelming majority of participants (95 per cent) indicated that they had not previously received any training relating to employing humour in their teaching practice, most of them (58.7 per cent) also indicated that they do use humour in their classes. When it comes to the specific ways in which they employ humour, most of the participants did not proceed to elaborate within the relevant open-ended question ("in what ways do you employ humour in your teaching?"), thus providing limited qualitative data.

We interpreted this relatively low response rate as a sign that the participants considered the answer self-evident (employing humour, to them, presumably meant "being humorous"), thus not deeming it worthy of further exemplification. This would be consistent with the attested lack of formal training in teaching with/about humour, which entails a possible lack of awareness of the various technical aspects of teaching with/about humour (e.g. teaching about styles, types, and mechanisms of humour). It is also worth noting that our interactions with the participants during the training sessions (recorded in our fieldnotes) revealed instances where these questions were taken rather personally, being perceived as doubting the participants' own sense of humour (*"we do have a sense of humour, you know!"*).

Within the answers provided to the open-ended question regarding the use of humour in the classroom, we were able to detect some patterns:

(i)   using humour as a means of drawing students' attention and/or maintaining order in the classroom (*"dialogue with students, relaxation after an intense teaching process"* / *"reference to humorous events, aiming at stimulation, motivation, and participation of the students"* / *"[change in] mood and breaking the monotony of the lesson*[4]*"*);

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[4] Direct quotes from the questionnaire translated from Greek by the authors are marked in italics.

(ii)   teaching humorous texts which are either prescribed within the curriculum[5] or are considered compatible with/come from similar sources as the prescribed texts (*"teaching Ancient Greek Texts through comics"* / *"utilising Ancient Texts, such as The Clouds by Aristophanes, for Philosophy Instruction"*);

(iii)   using humour outside the teaching hour/classroom (*"at the end of the teaching hour"*).

What we therefore infer from these answers is the view that humour is acceptable as either a means of classroom management or as an ancillary tool that can only exist alongside traditional and "respectable" means of formal instruction, the latter being framed as a serious, planned, and goal-oriented process.

Moving on to the question of familiarity with critical literacy, a considerable number of participants indicated that they had previously received some training relating to this teaching framework (25 per cent), while a mere 5 per cent of participants had received training relating to humour. This can be viewed as the result of recent changes in the curriculum and the formal guidelines issued by the Greek Ministry of Education, starting with the "New School" curriculum of 2011. These make explicit reference to the goal of developing the students' critical literacy skills and have therefore led to initiatives of familiarisation with this framework. An even higher number (albeit still a minority) of participants (39.6 per cent) indicated that they already employ critical literacy in their teaching practice.

Considering the two questions of practice (humour and critical literacy) together, we found a correlation between employing humour and employing critical literacy ($p < 0.004$[6]). Less than a third of all participants (28.12 per cent) indicated that they use both humour and the critical literacy framework in their teaching, while the rest use only one or neither of the two (humour only 29.7 per cent, critical literacy only 11.5 per cent, neither 30.7 per cent). Table 1 shows the frequencies for all combinations.

Table 1. Use of critical literacy and use of humour in prior practice

		Use of critical literacy		
		YES	NO	Total
Use of humor	YES	54 (28.12%)	57 (29.7%)	111 (57.8%)
	NO	22 (11.5%)	59 (30.7%)	81 (42.2%)
	Total	76 (39.6%)	116 (60.4%)	192

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[5] There is a section on laughter in the textbook for Modern Greek Language that is taught in the first grade of lykeio (year 10 of 12).

[6] Pearson's Chi-squared test with Yates' continuity correction.

The most noteworthy finding here is that (self-reporting as) employing critical literacy is a stronger predictor of (self-reporting as) employing humour than the other way round: only about half (54/111) of the participants who use humour in their teaching also use critical literacy, whereas most participants who use critical literacy also use humour in their teaching practices (54/76). This can be linked to the more technical/sophisticated nature of the notion "critical literacy", which requires a conscious openness towards less traditional teaching practices. Such an openness also allows for a positive attitude towards the use of humour (in various forms). Conversely, the positivity towards humour can have various motivations, some of which are not necessarily compatible with a less rigid, less teacher-centred approach to teaching.

5.2. Evaluation of the teaching proposal presented in the training seminar

The central part of our questionnaire collected the participants' evaluations towards our teaching proposal. Participants were asked to provide ratings on a 5-point Likert scale including the labels "not at all", "a little", "to some extent", "much", "very much".
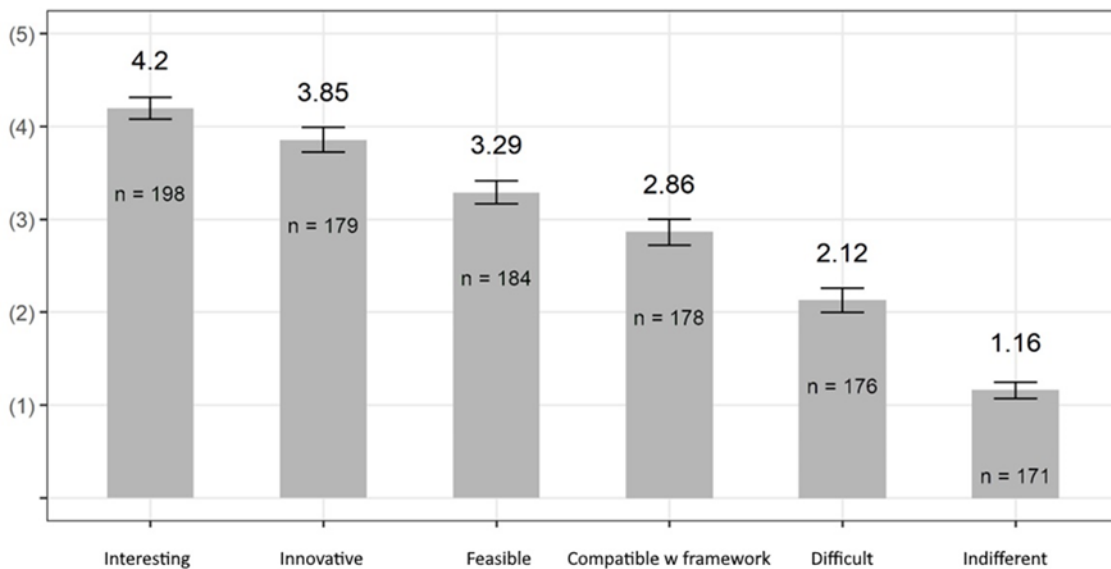

Figure 1. Evaluation towards the use of humorous texts within a critical literacy framework

Figure 1 shows that evaluations such as *interesting, innovative*, and *feasible* exhibit higher means compared to evaluations such as *compatible, difficult,* and *indifferent*. Specifically, educators appear to consider the teaching utilisation of humour within the framework of critical literacy to be very interesting.

Below, we provide in parentheses some excerpts from educators' responses to open-ended questions, where they evaluate the teaching utilisation of humour within the framework of critical literacy as:

(i)   effective in preparing students as future citizens (*"Responds to the goals of education. Education will be experiential, preparing students to adapt and face reality in the future"*);

(ii)   enhancing student-centred teaching (*"Interesting student-centred teaching"*);

(iii)   promoting the participation of all students regardless of their performance in formal education subjects (*"Participation of students at all levels"*);

(iv)   contributing to students' awareness that specific stereotypes and ideologies are reproduced and promoted through humour (*"Develops students' critical thinking /*

Development of critical thinking skills / Students identify the ideologies conveyed in a text").

Although educators in our sample characterise the teaching proposal as interesting (mean = 4.2) and innovative (mean = 3.85), they also appear to believe that such a teaching proposal has low feasibility and low compatibility with the current educational framework. Problematic points for the critical teaching utilisation of humour identified by educators include:

(i)   time constraints for completing the curriculum and the traditional exam-oriented philosophy of the current school framework ("*Difficulty adapting to a specific time and learning framework within the limits of school curricula*" / "*Lack of time to cover the curriculum*" / "*Curriculum constraints*" / "*Exam-oriented system - lack of time - traditional teaching methods*");

(ii)   the pedagogical and "aesthetic" inappropriateness of humorous material ("*Texts may be inappropriate, they do not match the aesthetics of the lesson*" / "*I have reservations about the texts to be taught*").

Educators thus seem to prioritise the completion of the curriculum and students' preparation for exams, while they are not convinced that humorous texts from students' social daily lives could be the subject of language teaching.

Looking for correlations between the rated evaluative notions, we found that there is a positive correlation between ratings of the positively-charged notions "interesting" and "innovative" ($t = 0.406$, $p < 0.0001$), while there is no correlation between "interesting" and "difficult". Conversely, there is a positive correlation between "interesting" and "feasible" ($t = 0.339$, $p < 0.05$) and between "interesting" and "compatible with the current framework" ($t = 0.173$, $p = 0.009$). Moreover, there is an intriguing positive correlation between "innovative" ratings and "difficult" ratings ($t = 0.166$, $p = 0.009$), even though there is no correlation between "innovative" and "feasible". This indicates that, although the notions of difficulty and feasibility are almost semantically opposite, they are not perceived as directly opposite by the participants. In other words, difficulty is likely seen as a broader term, considering all kinds of boundaries (including, for example, the educator's understanding of the framework), while feasibility has to do with applicability within the given educational circumstances. Finally, when it comes to compatibility with the current framework, its ratings were also found to positively correlate with feasibility ($t = 0.43$, $p < 0.0001$), while there was no correlation with ratings of innovativeness, again, showing that "interesting" and "innovative" are treated differently by the participants, since compatibility only correlated with the former and not the latter.

5.3.   Intention to apply the practices discussed in the training session

Figure 2 shows the participants' intention of incorporating the proposals of the training session into their teaching practice.
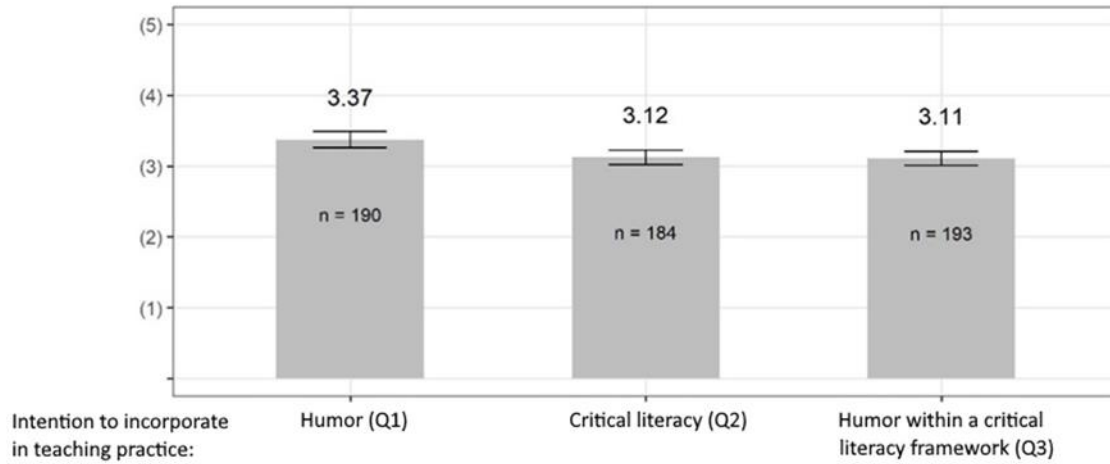
Figure 2. Intention to incorporate humour, critical literacy, and humour within a critical literacy framework in teaching practice

It was found that educators appear more willing to incorporate humour in their teaching practice than to make instructional use of the critical literacy framework[7]. This may be attributed to the fact that 57.8 per cent of educators report already using humour in their teaching (Table 1). In this context, the positions of educators regarding the pros and cons of using humour in the language lesson are particularly significant. Referring to the advantages, they seem to perceive humour more as a classroom management tool (see Section 2.1) and an enhancer of learning outcomes rather than an object of instruction:

(i)   attracts students' attention and interest and enhances their participation in the lesson (*"Stimulates students' interest" / "I find it quite interesting and it is an alternative approach for breaking the monotony of the lesson"*);

(ii)   makes the teaching process more enjoyable and interesting (*"The lesson becomes more attractive" / "Enjoyable teaching process" / "Makes the lesson more understandable, more interesting, more enjoyable" / "More accessible and enjoyable lesson"*);

(iii)   enhances social relationships among students (*"Enhances students' cooperation" / "Develops students' acceptance, socialisation, creates a positive atmosphere among classmates"*);

(iv)   improves interpersonal relationships between students and teachers (*"Direct contact between students and teachers" / "Improvement of student-teacher interpersonal relationships"*);

(v)   contributes to the balance and reduction of children's anxiety *("Students become happier" / "Combats anxiety" / "Relaxation of students"*).

These opinions are rather interesting, especially considering that the training did not address such issues at all. Despite the emphasis on the critical approach to the sociopragmatic functions of humour, particularly regarding stereotypes and social discrimination, educators do not mention these at all. This may mean that the use of humour to improve classroom conditions and learning outcomes is deemed more useful, feasible, and perhaps more effective and attractive by educators than teaching what humour is, how it functions in communication, and how we can detect its ideologically charged content.

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[7] Welch Two Sample t-test (Q1-Q2: $p < 0.007$, Q2-Q3: $p < 0.004$, Q1-Q3: $p < 0.166$)

At the same time, participants also pointed out perceived disadvantages and risks of using humour in the classroom:

(i) limits concentration, discipline, and class control ("*Difficulty in controlling the class*" / "*The balance of the class is lost considering it as a 'joke'*" / "*Noise in the class*" / "*Problems with students' discipline*" / "*There is a risk that students will be led to inappropriate behaviour within the classroom*");

(ii) reinforces possible negative attitudes of parents ("*Tarnishes the image of the always and necessarily strict, serious, educated teacher, especially in the ears of parents who hear what their students/children tell them*" / "*Parents' lack of information how students will convey it at home*");

(iii) there is a risk of humour targeting the educator and/or the children in the class (*"Risk of trivialisation*" / "*Attention needs to be paid not to offend some students with particular sensitivities*").

Given that, at least for some of the educators, the above disadvantages can outweigh the positive effects, we can understand their reluctance in going one step further, i.e. from the casual classroom management use to the actual instructional use and critical analysis.

Returning to the statistical analysis of the findings, our final investigation examined correlations between attitudes (Figure 1) and intentions (Figure 2). When it comes to incorporating humour in classroom practice, we found a positive correlation with "interesting" ratings for our teaching proposal (t = 0.351[8], p<0.0001) and a weak positive correlation with "innovative" ratings (t = 0.199, p = 0.003). Similarly, we found a positive correlation between the intention to incorporate humour teaching within a critical literacy framework and both "interesting" and "innovative" ratings (t = 0.351, p < 0.0001 for "interesting" and t = 0.199, p = 0.003, i.e. a weak correlation, for "innovative").

When it comes to the intention of applying critical literacy as a general educational framework, on the other hand, we did not find any such correlation, which may indicate that the participants felt more at ease with the use of humour (both within the critical literacy framework and independently of it) than with the use of critical literacy as a more general educational framework. This coincides with the qualitative findings discussed above, as far as the disadvantages of using humour in the classroom are concerned (e.g. lack of students' discipline, parents' negative attitudes, educator's and students' stigmatisation in class). At the same time, the lack of correlation between intention to incorporate elements of the training session and any of the feasibility and difficulty ratings may indicate that the participants' answers regarding intentions may have been more *in principle*, or in theory, indicating their attitude towards the elements of the training, rather than an actual plan to put these into practice. This kind of distinction is what we were trying to probe further when we circulated the follow-up survey reported below.

5.4. Follow-up survey: changes in practice as a result of the training sessions

The follow-up survey that was circulated 15 months after the completion of the training sessions was completed by 68 participants. The first question concerned their level of engagement with the online platform that we created and presented to them during training, with answers on an ordered list of "not at all"; "a little (visited but not used for teaching purposes)"; "fairly (some usage for teaching purposes)"; "a lot (often used for teaching purposes)"; "continuously (used regularly for teaching purposes)". Nearly half of the participants (48.5 per cent) picked the option that indicates slight use ("a little"), while 25 per cent responded that they have never actually used the platform since. The rest (26.5 per cent) indicated a fair use, while no one picked the two highest use options ("a lot" and "continuously"). It is important to note that this self-

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[8] Kendall's rank correlation tau

selected group of participants included attitudes that tended to be more extreme (either on the positive or on the negative side) than the average observed in the initial questionnaires.

Table 2 indicates the participants' answers regarding any changes in teaching practice that they implemented as a result of the training sessions:

Table 2. Participants' reported change in educational practices 15 months later

	Changed the way they use humour in classroom interaction	Used humorous texts in their teaching	Used critical literacy as a teaching framework	Used humorous texts within a critical literacy framework
YES %	69.1	88.2	86.6	79.1
NO %	30.9	11.8	13.4	20.9

Contrarily to what the relatively low usage of the online platform may predict, the positive responses regarding change are rather high. Participants were also asked to self-report (providing ratings on a scale from 1-5) on their usage of each of the relevant elements (classroom humour, humorous texts, critical literacy, humour within critical literacy) before versus after the training session (see Table 3).

Table 3. Participants' "before" and "after" ratings regarding their reported practices of humour and critical literacy

	"Before" Mean (SD)	"After" Mean (SD)	t (pair-wise t-test)	p value
Humour in classroom interaction	2.96 (0.98)	3.42 (0.86)	2.86	0.005
Humorous texts in teaching	2.38 (0.63)	2.92 (0.76)	6.32	< 0.0001
Critical Literacy	2.69 (0.92)	3.03 (0.91)	5.38	< 0.0001
Humorous texts within a critical literacy framework	2.26 (0.77)	2.77 (0.91)	6.55	<0.0001

The self-reported changes implemented by this group of participants were, therefore, significant on all counts. The use of humour in classroom interaction, which was the category that was not directly related to the training session and more closely related to the teachers' self-identification, was the measure that had the smallest change, while also starting with the highest rating. The other three measures displayed patterns that were more or less similar to each other. The most notable difference between this follow-up and the original test is the reported use of critical literacy as a general educational framework: even though the original test had displayed the lowest values in terms of intentions to implement, this group of participants gave this option the highest ratings in terms of actual implementation. One explanation for this is that, within the self-selected group, there were more participants with higher awareness regarding critical literacy and more positive attitudes towards it than the wider participant group. This means that the observed pattern made sense as a case of a more generalised application of the wider critical literacy framework.

Finally, another notable finding of the follow-up survey is that a small number of participants responded in order to specifically express negative attitudes towards the training sessions as a whole. This was observed in the answers of some of the participants, who specifically picked "never" in the question regarding the use of the online platform. Those participants provided lower-than-average scores in the "after-the-training" portion of the questions, in some cases even indicating that they now use these methods even less than they used to before training. Two of those participants also took the opportunity to elaborate on their negative evaluations within the only open-ended question of the survey (a question regarding other training received since, which most participants left blank, and which was unrelated to evaluating the training). It is worth quoting one of them in full:

> These are leading questions and there is no space for me to express my negative evaluation. Therefore, I inform you that not only did [the training] not benefit me at all, but I find myself in disagreement with both the content of the website in many respects and the way in which it was presented by the organisers. I have no other space to express my extremely negative evaluation of what I attended.

This is indicative of the strong resistance and negative evaluations (a minority, albeit a very vocal one) that we encountered during some of the training sessions. It is certainly representative of the portion of participants who found the idea of introducing everyday, non-literary, "low-brow" texts into the classroom borderline offensive, while also considering the discussion of ideologies, biases, stereotypes, etc. inappropriate for a classroom setting. The latter criticism was on a couple of occasions (as recorded in our fieldnotes) paired with the perception that the approach is "too political" and "borders indoctrination".

6. Discussion and conclusions

This study approached the attitudes of educators regarding the teaching of humour through the lens of critical literacy. Previous research has shown mixed attitudes of teachers regarding incorporating critical literacy in their practice (Gutiérrez, 2015; Fajardo, 2015), where teachers express positive evaluations towards the (potential) outcomes of this framework, but are simultaneously apprehensive regarding day-to-day practicalities and applicability in various types of classrooms (e.g. in a foreign language classroom, teachers worry that it is only applicable to advanced learners; Gutiérrez, 2015). Simultaneously, more positive stances, compared to the past, have been reported when it comes to the incorporation of humour in the classroom. Our findings were in line with our expectations regarding the teachers' reception: a mostly positive evaluation in terms of interest and innovation, combined with reservations regarding feasibility and compatibility with the curriculum and current educational context.

In terms of prior knowledge, our participants showed limited prior familiarity with the theory, sociopragmatic functions, and pedagogical utilisation of humour. On the one hand, educators seem to perceive humour more as a tool for improving classroom climate and engaging students' interest rather than as a means of cultivating critical literacy, especially critical awareness of humour. Teaching humour critically appears to be a somewhat new concept for educators, who had not previously reflected on its advantages. When it comes to critical literacy, our participants showed some familiarity, which can be linked to the presence of the term in top-down initiatives. Participants who filled-in the follow-up survey reported an increase in practice for all three elements of our training sessions: teaching about humour/using humorous texts, using critical literacy as a framework, and teaching humorous texts within a critical literacy framework. This, however, concerned a self-selected sample (about 1/3 of the

original participants) who reported having some prior knowledge. There is therefore a lot of room for further dissemination and discussion of such practices with educators.

What was, however, even more interesting and perhaps surprising to observe, was the degree of ideological charge of teacher attitudes, which in turn, especially when expressed out loud during sessions, was conducive to identity projection and positioning (Sosa & Gomez, 2012). Teachers who placed emphasis on the tension between innovativeness and feasibility tended to position themselves as open and receptive to the proposed framework and against the practical limitations of the classroom (i.e. time constraints, exam-orientation, pressure to follow the curriculum, parent intervention). These were the teachers who showed more enthusiastic support towards the entire project (also engaging with the project's online/social media presence), simultaneously appearing critical towards current educational practices and towards their more conservative colleagues. On the other hand, teachers who placed more emphasis on the incompatibility with the curriculum tended to have a more negative overall stance. These participants brought up issues of appropriateness and "incongruity", being specifically against the inclusion of "low-brow" texts in their teaching practice. Interestingly, another element arising in their feedback was a requirement of "ideological neutrality of the teacher": they expressed the opinion that addressing the social and ideological issues of humorous texts forces the teacher to take a (political) stance, something which they deemed undesirable. In the ensuing debates between participants, those who were in favour of the project's goals brought up the counterargument that teaching practice is already political, as it exists within a given ideological framework and value system that is mandated by the curriculum's educational goals. These tensions arising during the workshops are reflective of the well-documented divide between conservative and progressive approaches to education, which are deeply rooted in the Greek system.

In all, we have shown that educators' attitudes are significantly shaped by institutional factors and entrenched teaching practices, such as the use of high-prestige texts, protection of the educator's authority (teacher-centred model), classroom seriousness, and emphasis on knowledge transmission rather than the development of students' critical thinking. Additionally, the preference for the ideological "neutrality" of the teaching process, so as not to affect the composition and dynamics of the class, plays a decisive role. Regardless of whether teachers had a positive or negative attitude towards critical literacy, they agreed that touching upon sensitive ideological and social issues with their students could "get them in trouble" with students, parents, and school authorities. This is indicative of the relatively conservative nature of Greek schools, which only in principle (and not in practice) recognise the enhancement of critical thinking as an educational goal. For the critical literacy framework (and the teaching of humorous texts within it) to become established practice there are still multiple barriers and factors of resistance that need to be overcome.

Ending on a positive note, our results show a recognition of the interest and innovativeness of our teaching proposal, even if this attitude does not necessarily translate into active engagement with the specific teaching practice. At the same time, the fact that educators seem to appreciate humour as a means of increasing student engagement constitutes a good starting point for expanding related goals and methods, ultimately leading to the use of humour as a teaching subject and fostering students' critical awareness around it. The training seminars provided a ground for exchange of teaching practices and experiences, along with reflective discussion on everyday language phenomena and their teaching, which is at the heart of critical literacy practices and goals.

Acknowledgements

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