










## ARTICLE

# Perspectives on Superiority Humor towards Grammatical Errors

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## ABSTRACT

Superiority humor has its primary intent—to highlight a sense of dominance or intellectual superiority over others. It shows implicit or explicit effort to enhance one's status by drawing attention to the perceived flaws, errors, or inadequacies of the target, thereby establishing a hierarchy and power dynamics. This is characterized by its function to elicit humor through highlighting disparities in knowledge, competence, or social standing, ultimately presenting a sense of superiority for both the perpetrator and the audience. This study explored the use of superiority humor in classrooms to address grammatical errors among college students. College students (n = 17) were purposively sampled through a preliminary

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online open-ended questionnaire. Narratives were collected from a one-on-one interview process. The findings revealed that superiority humor, when perceived as mocking or judgmental, acted as a barrier to learning, leading to fear, defensiveness, and reluctance to engage in discussions. Students also viewed sarcastic corrections as attempts to establish superiority, which undermined their confidence and discouraged them from taking risks in language use. Furthermore, humor that seemed excessive or irrelevant to the lesson was perceived as unprofessional, thereby diminishing the credibility of both instructors and the learning environment. In terms of emotional impact, students reported feelings of embarrassment, self-doubt, and heightened perfectionism, particularly when the superiority humor emphasized their mistakes. Such reactions often resulted in decreased participation and an overemphasis on error avoidance, which hindered language development and self-expression. While humor can be a valuable pedagogical tool, its misuse risks alienating learners and reinforcing power imbalances, which undermines effective language.

**Keywords:** Grammatical Errors; Grammar Learning; Language Learning; Social Interaction; Superiority Humor

## 1. Introduction

Language proficiency issues have a significant impact on students' academic achievements<sup>[1]</sup>. Numerous studies highlight that ineffective instructional methods, improper application of teaching philosophies, and an overreliance on the mother tongue<sup>[2, 3]</sup> are significant contributors to challenges in learning grammar. Learners of English as a second language are more prone to making grammatical and lexical errors when using the language<sup>[4]</sup>. The lack of appropriate teaching resources and insufficiently prepared English instructors further exacerbate grammatical difficulties<sup>[5]</sup>.

Teachers proposed the use of humor in teaching as it can be an effective tool for making grammatical concepts from English grammar, such as structural ambiguity, more accessible method to students<sup>[6]</sup>. Humor is an integral component of human communication, thus occupying an important role in language education. Humor is often cited as one of the essential qualities that educators should exhibit, given its widespread use in communication and teaching<sup>[7]</sup>, making it a natural tool for many instructors to incorporate into their classrooms.

Studies show that humor can improve instructor immediacy by bridging the psychological gap between students and instructors, making instructors seem more approachable and relatable<sup>[8, 9]</sup>. Although humor can yield numerous positive outcomes, its impact is contingent upon students perceiving it as genuinely entertaining. Cooper et al.<sup>[8]</sup> conducted a study across 25 college science courses and found that while humor contributed to increased students' sense of belonging, focus on course material, and relationships with

instructors, offensive humor had the opposite effect, reducing these factors. Humor is inherently subjective, as what one individual finds humorous, another may consider offensive. Most importantly, social identities and cultural backgrounds play a significant role in shaping how students perceive humor, especially when it pertains to sensitive issues related to social identity<sup>[10]</sup>.

Fundamentally, when humor is used aggressively to belittle others, as seen in the case of sexist humor, recipients generally respond with negative emotions and other adverse reactions toward the humor initiator, which likely damages relationships<sup>[11]</sup>. Positive interpersonal events, such as positive humor, are associated with positive emotions<sup>[12]</sup>, whereas negative interpersonal events, like sexist humor, are linked to negative emotions<sup>[11]</sup>. Research has shown that positive humor is positively correlated with workplace relationship outcomes, while negative humor has a negative effect on these outcomes<sup>[13]</sup>. For example, positive humor could increase willingness to collaborate<sup>[14]</sup>, while aggressive humor is associated with reduced cooperation<sup>[15]</sup>.

Humor in education remains an underexplored and relatively unestablished topic, despite its potential to influence various aspects of the learning environment. Although Cooper et al.<sup>[9]</sup> observed that students tended to feel more offended by jokes related to their identity group, their study mainly focused on social groups, rather than students' personal skills. Other studies<sup>[16, 17]</sup> primarily focused on the positive aspects of humor, but the negative effects of humor remain less explored. While humor is widely acknowledged as a tool for improving social interactions and mental well-being, its specific application and benefits in educational

settings have not been extensively researched.

## 2. Literature Review

Humor serves as a vital element in human interaction, strengthening social connections and enriching communication<sup>[18]</sup>. Numerous scholars have examined the practical implications of humor in daily life. For instance, humor can help alleviate stress and manage mental health challenges<sup>[19]</sup>. Similarly, Mauersberger et al.<sup>[20]</sup> investigated the influence of humor on social dynamics, revealing that shared laughter significantly enhances feelings of trust and interpersonal connection.

In the context of language education, humor can be an effective strategy for cultivating a positive learning atmosphere. Deneire<sup>[21]</sup> was among the first to emphasize the necessity for language educators to consider both the advantages and drawbacks of incorporating humor into classroom settings, particularly in terms of its impact on learners' intercultural competence development. As a pedagogical tool, humor helps reduce classroom anxiety and fosters a supportive environment<sup>[22]</sup>. When students feel entertained and at ease, they are more likely to engage actively in discussions, which can enhance information retention and strengthen their connection to the subject matter<sup>[23]</sup>.

However, using humor in learning can pose a significant threat to students. For example, the inherent power disparity between teachers and students presents a significant obstacle to the effective use of humor in academic settings. When teachers misuse their authority to demean, ridicule, or disparage students, it can exert a profoundly detrimental effect on students' attitudes toward learning<sup>[24]</sup>. Studies that focus solely on the lecturer's perspective often overlook this power imbalance. Hellman<sup>[25]</sup> asserts that educators may occasionally engage in what could be considered verbal abuse, with some students willingly positioning themselves as the targets of such remarks. While some teachers expressed a general willingness to employ teasing humor with students, they emphasized that such interactions were only appropriate once a trusting pedagogical relationship had been established, ensuring that the humor was perceived as harmless<sup>[26]</sup>.

The superiority theory of humor posits that amusement arises from a sense of dominance or relative superiority over the object of humor, often through ridicule or the recognition

of another's flaws or misfortunes<sup>[27, 28]</sup>. Monro<sup>[29]</sup> asserts that the laughter perceives the target of humor as inferior by some standard, while Dadlez<sup>[30]</sup> aligns superiority humor with ridicule and the enjoyment of pinpointing others' weaknesses. Bicknell<sup>[31]</sup> further notes the inherent malice in much humor, as laughter often stems from the misfortune of others presented in an amusing rather than empathetic manner. Hence, this study proposed superiority humor as a type of humor characterized by amusement derived from a sense of superiority over others, typically in response to other people's errors or shortcomings. In the context of grammar, this form of humor often arises when individuals highlight or correct another person's grammatical mistakes<sup>[32]</sup>, frequently accompanied by an implicit or explicit display of intellectual confidence<sup>[33]</sup>. Although the superiority theory is frequently criticized as an overly narrow or essentialist framework, it remains a valuable lens for understanding the emotive underpinnings of humor within specific contexts<sup>[33]</sup>, including applications in learning dynamics.

For students, an insufficient understanding of grammar presents significant challenges in its accurate application during spoken communication<sup>[34]</sup>. When individuals have not thoroughly studied or practiced grammatical concepts, they are likely to face difficulties in applying them correctly. Likewise, limited exposure to the target language can hinder the development of grammatical proficiency<sup>[35]</sup>. Additionally, speaking in a foreign language often provokes anxiety or self-consciousness, which can adversely affect grammatical precision<sup>[36]</sup>. The fear of making mistakes or feelings of nervousness may lead to hesitation or the avoidance of complex sentence structures, resulting in simplified or erroneous grammar usage<sup>[37]</sup>. Differences in grammatical structures, word order, or verb tenses between the native and target languages frequently result in errors in grammar application<sup>[38]</sup>. Without sufficient opportunities for speaking practice and constructive feedback, students may struggle to apply grammatical rules accurately. A lack of regular practice can lead to fossilized errors, where incorrect grammatical patterns become deeply ingrained and difficult to correct, while also causing students to feel anxious when asked to use grammar appropriately.

However, there is still limited understanding about the effects of superiority humor on students' learning outcomes, emotional well-being, and overall classroom engagement.

While some types of humor are beneficial and promote psychological well-being, others reflect less favorable and potentially harmful patterns of social interaction<sup>[39]</sup>. Some also use humor to highlight power dynamics, wherein gender-based humor in online contexts reinforces linguistic patterns that perpetuate biases against women and the Lesbian-Gay-Bisexual-Transgender (LGBT) community, conveying both implicit and explicit stereotypes that portray these groups as weak, passive, or easily dominated<sup>[40]</sup>. Consequently, humor can function as hate speech<sup>[40]</sup> directed at individuals or groups perceived as inferior due to inherent identity traits or demographic characteristics<sup>[41]</sup>, causing marginalization and stigmatization of the targeted individuals or communities<sup>[42]</sup>.

Hence, it is equally important to explore how superiority humor is common in classroom settings, examine its social implications, and analyze its influence on the learning process. Understanding the various ways the superiority humor impacts student engagement, classroom dynamics, and teacher-student relationships can provide valuable insights into its role as a pedagogical tool. Lastly, investigating how different types of superiority humor affect cognitive, emotional, and social aspects of learning can shed light on its potential to enhance or hinder academic performance and overall well-being.

### 3. Methods

#### 3.1. Research Design

This paper explored the perceptions of college students about the emergence of superiority humor towards grammatical errors. Exploratory studies describe topics that are either insufficiently examined or undergoing rapid development<sup>[43, 44]</sup>. It prioritizes flexibility and open-ended methods, allowing scholars to gain a preliminary understanding of a phenomenon without the constraints of fixed hypotheses or narrowly defined variables<sup>[44]</sup>. Such flexibility is crucial for exploring emerging trends in social, psychological, or technological domains, as it aids in uncovering patterns, themes, and participant perspectives that might otherwise remain unexamined<sup>[45, 46]</sup>. Commonly employing qualitative approaches such as interviews and open-ended questionnaires<sup>[47]</sup>, exploratory studies produce rich contextual data that contribute to an initial understanding of the subject<sup>[48–50]</sup>. Although

these studies are occasionally critiqued for lacking rigorous scientific precision, their structured yet adaptable framework provides essential groundwork, paving the way for the development of more targeted and robust research designs in the future<sup>[51]</sup>. This paper answered one main question: *how superiority humor is being used in social contexts?* This study aims to shed light on the prevalence of superiority humor and its impact on social interactions. The findings shall be used in further assessment of the detrimental effects of superiority humor in language learning.

#### 3.2. Participants and Sampling

Exploratory design emphasizes depth and specificity over broad generalizability, which accounts for its reliance on relatively small sample sizes<sup>[43, 52]</sup>. Smaller sample sizes facilitate detailed analysis of key variables and their interactions within a defined context, allowing researchers to explore a phenomenon comprehensively<sup>[50, 53, 54]</sup>. Hence, it was reasonable for this study to have 17 participants, particularly college students who experienced superiority humor in response to their grammatical errors. Exploratory research often employs qualitative methods, such as phenomenological studies, case studies, and narrative analyses, which utilize purposive, non-random sampling to ensure data relevance and contextual richness<sup>[55, 56]</sup>.

Participant selection in this study involved an online purposive sampling process<sup>[57]</sup> conducted via open-ended questionnaires distributed through Google Forms. Five primary selection criteria were applied: (1) participants were between 18 and 24 years old, (2) actively enrolled as college students during the research period, (3) had completed at least one semester in English subject, (4) experienced superiority humor during class discussion or social interaction, and (5) demonstrated willingness to participate in open-ended interviews. Of the 157 respondents who completed the questionnaires, 17 participants were chosen for interviews. This targeted sampling approach ensured that participants' insights closely aligned with the objectives, thereby enhancing the relevance and reliability of the findings<sup>[58, 59]</sup>.

#### 3.3. Instrumentation

A semi-structured interview guide was developed to gather the interview responses using thematic questions.

Exploratory research often employed semi-structured interviews instead of rigidly designed questionnaires to provide the flexibility required for an in-depth analysis of participants' perspectives and the identification of emerging themes<sup>[43, 60, 61]</sup>. These interviews facilitated the expression of detailed responses, enabling a comprehensive exploration of participants' beliefs and viewpoints<sup>[62, 63]</sup>. Such flexibility was particularly essential in this study, as the interview process followed a loosely structured framework, allowing researchers to probe unexpected themes as they arose during the discussions<sup>[64]</sup>. The development of the semi-structured interview guide began with a clear identification of the ob-

jectives and a comprehensive review of relevant background literature, which provided the basis for formulating the interview questions<sup>[65]</sup>. Researchers initially developed a set of open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed, narrative responses, ensuring the guide encouraged participants to express their thoughts clearly and fully<sup>[66]</sup>. This preliminary version of the guide underwent pilot testing to evaluate the clarity and relevance of the questions based on participant and expert feedback, resulting in further changes to the instrument to ensure effective data collection<sup>[67, 68]</sup>. **Table 1** presents the final interview guide used in the data collection process.

**Table 1.** Final interview guide for data collection.

Objectives	Interview Questions
To examine how individuals perceive the use of superiority humor when addressing grammatical errors in various social contexts.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. How do you feel when people use humor to point out grammatical errors in conversations or online interactions? Can you provide specific examples?</li> <li>2. In your opinion, how does the use of humor around grammatical mistakes vary in formal versus informal social settings?</li> <li>3. Do you think superiority humor in response to grammatical errors serves a constructive purpose, or does it create barriers in communication? Why?</li> </ol>
To explore the psychological and emotional impacts of superiority humor on individuals who commit grammatical errors.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. How do you typically feel when someone points out your grammatical mistakes in a humorous or sarcastic way? How do you usually respond?</li> <li>2. Can you recall a situation where being the subject of grammatical humor affected your confidence in communication or learning? How did it influence you?</li> <li>3. Do you think being laughed at for grammatical errors discourages you from improving your language skills? Why do you think so?</li> </ol>

### 3.4. Data Collection

Narrative data were collected from participants to examine their experiences and perceptions related to superiority humor. A structured yet flexible approach was implemented to facilitate the collection of detailed accounts while actively engaging with participants' narratives. The data collection started with a clear definition of the research objectives and the selection of participants based on specific inclusion criteria to ensure the sample accurately represented the phenomenon under investigation<sup>[69]</sup>. Before conducting the interviews, the researchers provided a comprehensive overview of the purpose, confidentiality measures, and the intended use of the data to ensure transparency and trust<sup>[70]</sup> and to encourage participants to share their experiences openly<sup>[71]</sup>.

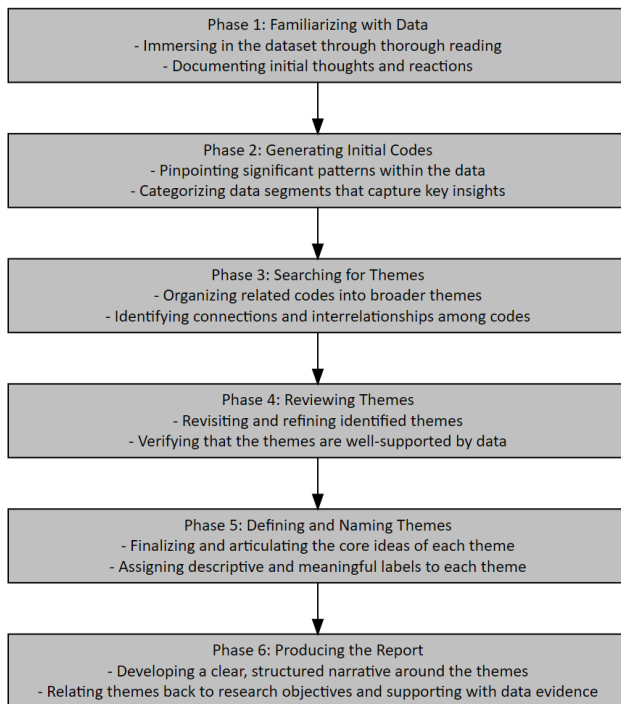
The interviews were conducted conversationally, as this approach often promotes a natural flow of discussion and

generates rich, descriptive data<sup>[72, 73]</sup>. Despite the informal tone, the interviews followed a carefully developed guide containing thematic questions aligned with the study's objectives<sup>[74]</sup>. These questions directed the conversation toward key areas of interest, while follow-up probes were employed to clarify responses, explore meanings further, and enrich the collected data<sup>[63]</sup>. Participants were encouraged to use the language in which they felt most comfortable during the interviews. The entire data collection process was recorded using mobile devices, and detailed notes were documented and systematically organized in an Excel spreadsheet.

### 3.5. Data Analysis

The interview data were analyzed to identify recurring themes using reflexive thematic analysis. This method, following a structured framework with flexibility, enabled

the recognition and interpretation of patterns within qualitative data. Reflexive thematic analysis is widely used in exploratory studies to gain a comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences, beliefs, and behaviors<sup>[75]</sup>. The approach helped uncover core themes by coding the data in a way that progressed from basic descriptions to more nuanced interpretations<sup>[76–78]</sup>. With an emphasis on reflexivity, reflexive thematic analysis acknowledges the researcher's role in shaping the findings, ensuring that the results remain closely tied to the research context<sup>[79, 80]</sup>. Furthermore, with the inductive method, where themes and codes emerge directly from the data, this reflexive thematic analysis minimizes the impact of prior assumptions and focuses on uncovering meanings that genuinely reflect participants' lived realities<sup>[75]</sup>. This bottom-up process allows for the natural emergence of themes from the data, making it particularly beneficial for exploratory research, as it does not impose preconceived notions<sup>[81, 82]</sup>. Reflexive thematic analysis, as described by Braun and Clarke<sup>[83]</sup>, involves six iterative steps as shown in **Figure 1**: becoming familiar with the data, creating initial codes, identifying themes, reviewing themes, defining and labeling the themes, and ultimately composing the final report. These steps ensured a thorough interaction with the data, allowing the themes to develop naturally through continuous engagement and refinement<sup>[75]</sup>.



**Figure 1.** Workflow of the data analysis process.

## 4. Results

### Objective 1: To Examine How Individuals Perceive the Use of Superiority Humor When Addressing Grammatical Errors in Academic Contexts.

This paper explored college students' perceptions of superiority humor when addressing grammatical errors in various social contexts. These perceptions were categorized into three major themes: humor as a learning barrier, sense of superiority, and unprofessional/unacademic interaction. The students expressed how humor, when perceived as mocking or judgmental, hindered their ability to engage and learn. Such humor instilled fear and hesitation, particularly in academic or formal settings, discouraging students from seeking help or participating in discussions. They also mentioned how sarcastic corrections often led to feelings of defensiveness and inferiority. The students described how humor, when used insensitively, reinforced negative self-perceptions, making it difficult for them to accept feedback and undermining their confidence in their language use. Lastly, they perceived that such humor not only distracted from learning but also diminished the credibility of instructors and classmates, leading them to view the correction of grammatical errors as less important or overly casual.

#### Theme 1: Learning Barrier

Students believed that using humor when correcting grammatical errors often resulted in negative emotional responses, which impeded learning. Participants described feeling *judged* rather than supported, which cultivated a *fear of speaking* and a reluctance to participate in conversations. This fear was particularly evident in academic settings, where individuals already felt *nervous* about their language abilities.

“The way my grammar mistakes were mocked made me feel judged rather than helped. It created a fear of speaking up, even in informal conversations. Humor can be constructive, but when it feels like a personal attack, it shuts down learning.”

Humor, when perceived as a *personal attack* or *sarcasm*, discouraged individuals from seeking clarification or assistance. Instead of fostering a supportive learning environment, such humor contributed to feelings of *embarrassment*

and diminished the participants' willingness to engage in discussions.

"I already feel nervous about my grammar, so when someone corrects me with sarcasm, it makes me feel judged. Even if they're right, I tend to shut down and avoid asking for help because I don't want to feel embarrassed again."

When their grammatical mistakes were highlighted through humor, it further heightened their *fear of evaluation* and reinforced their hesitancy to communicate openly. This dynamic demonstrated that humor, although potentially useful in certain contexts, could hinder language development when not employed with sensitivity and care.

"I always focus on my grammar and I think using correct grammar is very important when speaking in English. Sometimes because of my bad grammar, I don't want to speak in the class, I am afraid that the teacher won't understand and will evaluate me."

### Theme 2: Superiority

College students believed that sarcastic corrections often evoked *defensiveness*, as they perceived the feedback as an attempt to establish *superiority* rather than provide constructive guidance. This perception diminished the effectiveness of the feedback and hindered the learning process.

Humor perceived as *mockery* reinforced feelings of *inferiority* and heightened participants' *self-consciousness*. For individuals already grappling with low confidence in their language skills, such interactions exacerbated their fear of being judged as *incompetent*. This resulted in an avoidance of risks, such as practicing their language skills or seeking clarification, ultimately stifling their opportunities for improvement.

"When I get corrected sarcastically, my first reaction is to get defensive. It feels like they're trying to act superior rather than help me learn. Later, I might think about the feedback and try to learn from it, but the sarcasm definitely makes it harder to listen in the moment."

Humor created a perception of being viewed as *inferior* or *incompetent*, which further eroded their willingness

to engage in language practice. Consequently, students became *discouraged* from taking risks, such as attempting to communicate despite potential errors, thereby limiting their opportunities for growth and learning from their mistakes.

"If a student is already struggling with their confidence in language use, being laughed at can reinforce negative feelings and make them self-conscious. They may feel that others view them as inferior or not competent enough, which can discourage them from taking risks and learning from their mistakes."

### Theme 3: Unprofessional

The use of humor in grammatical corrections was often perceived as *unprofessional* and *unacademic* when it became excessive, *irrelevant to the lesson*, or repetitive. Some participants felt that such humor *detracted from the seriousness* of the learning environment, leading to doubts about the instructor's focus on teaching.

"For those of us who experienced this humor when getting grammatical errors think that sometimes excessive or inappropriate humor, especially when unrelated to the lesson, leads us to view the instructor as unprofessional."

"Sometimes the jokes are so random, and it makes me question if the teacher is really focused on teaching or just trying to entertain us."

"For me, using humor can sometimes be unacademic. I feel that humor is unnecessary."

The *randomness of jokes* further contributed to the perception that the teacher prioritized *entertainment over instruction*. Additionally, when humorous corrections were repeated, it caused a sense of *mockery* rather than constructive feedback, ultimately diminishing the credibility of the learning process.

"Honestly, grammar correction with humor can make the whole thing feel less formal, like it's not important. That's why I think it's unacademic."

"When teachers use humor in corrections, it's fine at first, but when they keep bringing up

the same mistake as a joke, it starts to feel like they're mocking you."

## Objective 2: To Explore the Psychological and Emotional Impacts of Superiority Humor on Individuals Who Commit Grammatical Errors.

There were significant psychological and emotional impacts of *superiority humor* on individuals who commit grammatical errors. College students expressed feelings of *embarrassment*, *self-doubt*, and *perfectionism* as a result of humor that emphasized their mistakes. In particular, *sarcasm* and *public corrections* often led to a sense of humiliation, which diminished their confidence and affected their willingness to engage in learning activities. Many individuals reported feeling as though their mistakes were being used to elevate others, rather than to foster learning, which contributed to a sense of being *undermined*. On the other hand, some participants noted that such experiences, while uncomfortable, could drive them to work harder, turning moments of embarrassment into personal challenges. The findings also suggested that repeated instances of *mockery* or *sarcasm* led to increased *self-doubt*, as students became overly cautious in their language use, which could potentially hinder their progress. Furthermore, the pressure to avoid mistakes fueled a sense of *perfectionism*, where individuals became preoccupied with correcting their errors at the cost of creativity and self-expression.

### Theme 1: Embarrassment

The students believed that *embarrassment* was a significant emotional response to the use of *sarcasm* in grammar corrections. They reported feeling *small* or *undermined* when their mistakes were highlighted through humor, particularly when the humor appeared to be aimed at making the other person feel superior. Such experiences did not facilitate learning; instead, they created feelings of humiliation and discomfort.

"Sarcasm can be funny when it's light and constructive, but it often felt like my mistakes were being highlighted just to make the other person feel smarter. It didn't help me learn; it made me feel small."

"I feel embarrassed when my mistakes are pointed out in a sarcastic way, especially in

front of others."

"When humor targets individuals' mistakes, it can lead to feelings of embarrassment or upset."

Many individuals expressed a sense of being *disadvantaged* or *dismissed*, especially when these corrections occurred in public settings, which further exacerbated their *self-consciousness* and reduced their willingness to participate in future discussions. This emotional reaction was often linked to a decline in confidence, as students felt that their *efforts* were not genuinely acknowledged but were instead met with ridicule.

"Some of the students have reported that when teachers use humor to correct their mistakes, it undermines their confidence. For instance, a student mentioned feeling discouraged when their efforts were met with sarcastic remarks, leading them to participate less in class discussions."

However, some individuals noted that such moments of *embarrassment* could, over time, be transformed into personal motivation. They reported using these instances to improve their grammatical skills, indicating a potential for *resilience* and self-improvement despite the emotional setbacks.

"Feeling underestimated may drive me to work harder on mastering grammar rules, turning moments of embarrassment into personal challenges."

### Theme 2: Self-Doubt

Humor appeared to exacerbate existing insecurities, especially for students who were already uncertain about their language skills. The *fear of ridicule* led to a heightened sense of self-consciousness, causing individuals to become overly critical of their abilities. This self-awareness often spiraled into a cycle of *excessive editing* and hesitation, which impeded their natural language expression.

"Public correction with humor can make students question their abilities, leading to self-doubt, especially if they are already unsure about their language skills."



“Some students might become overly focused on avoiding mistakes, which can lead to excessive editing, slowed progress, or reluctance to experiment with language.”

Students reported that after receiving sarcastic corrections, they frequently questioned their *competence* and felt increasingly apprehensive about participating in discussions or producing written work. This shift toward *overthinking* was characterized by a reluctance to experiment with language, as students feared further mistakes would lead to embarrassment or ridicule. The focus on avoiding errors became counterproductive, as it not only slowed their progress but also diminished their confidence in their ability to communicate effectively.

“After a sarcastic comment about my grammar, I start to question everything I write.”

“I’ve become so self-conscious about grammar since that one time the teacher made fun of my mistake.”

### Theme 3: Perfectionism

The use of humor, particularly sarcasm, in correcting grammatical errors often led to a heightened sense of *perfectionism* among students. The mockery resulted in increased *anxiety*, causing individuals to scrutinize their language use excessively. This constant *pressure* to avoid mistakes transformed the learning process into a stressful experience rather than a productive or creative one. As students became more focused on perfecting their grammar, they reported feeling unable to express themselves freely without the fear of *ridicule*.

“When I speak, I hesitate and think twice about every word because I’m worried about being ridiculed again. It’s hard to just speak without worrying about messing up.”

“I become obsessed with making sure I don’t make the same mistake again, but it just makes me more anxious about my language skills.”

“After being mocked a few times, I felt this constant pressure to proofread everything obsessively.”

In addition, the desire to avoid repeating mistakes led to obsessive behaviors, such as *over-proofreading* and an

excessive focus on accuracy. This shift in mindset diminished students’ willingness to engage in language learning as a dynamic process, as they increasingly prioritized correctness over creative expression. The emphasis on *flaws* rather than improvement caused a sense of *self-consciousness* and hindered the development of a more fluid and confident approach to language use.

“It turned writing into something stressful instead of a space for creative expression. The sarcasm felt less like a teaching moment and more like someone showing off at my expense.”

“I misspelled ‘receive’ in a group project, and a teammate jokingly corrected me with exaggerated emphasis. It stung, but I used it as motivation to double-check my grammar. I realized people often focus on flaws, so I worked harder on accuracy.”

## 5. Discussion

Humor has been a significant subject of inquiry across different fields of psychology, involving both theoretical and applied investigations. In the context of individual differences in humor, researchers have proposed various theoretical models, characterizing humor either as specific behavioral tendencies associated with humor<sup>[84]</sup> or as the diverse functions that humor fulfills<sup>[85]</sup>. Following Martin<sup>[85]</sup>, this paper examines the function of humor as a marker of superiority for grammatical errors within the classroom setting.

Theories link humor to effective problem-solving, positive interactions, and minimizing psychological gaps. For example, Wanzer and Frymier<sup>[86]</sup> highlighted the significant role of humor in learning, explaining that its effectiveness lies in its ability to capture and maintain students’ attention. They examined the relationship between instructors’ use of humor and its effect on student learning, emphasizing that humor can develop a comfortable learning environment, sustain student focus, and humanize the teacher. Contrary to this, the analysis in this paper revealed that the extensive use of humor could give rise to a superiority system, leading to the establishment of a hierarchical dynamic within the learning environment. This system often caused students who were subjected to the superiority humor to perceive themselves as

being positioned lower in terms of competence, particularly in comparison to those delivering the humor.

Humor, in general, is highly context-dependent, and its effectiveness varies with location, which presents challenges in academic settings where humorous exchanges are uncommon<sup>[85]</sup>. While audiences in comedy clubs or live shows attend voluntarily and expect humor<sup>[87]</sup>, students in lectures or seminars are not similarly primed for comedic content. This paper observed that college students were somehow hesitant about the application of humor in education settings, especially when it comes to correcting grammar. One student believed that using humor “...*can be constructive, but when it feels like a personal attack, it shuts down learning.*” The environment significantly influences the reception of humor: in a comedy club, controversial or dark humor may be anticipated, but in a lecture, where such boundaries are not predefined, jokes can easily fail. For example, a joke about cancer might be acceptable in a club but entirely inappropriate in a hospital, demonstrating how the setting establishes the parameters for humor<sup>[85]</sup>. This explains why college students displayed pessimism about the use of humor in classrooms, as it can cause learning barriers, superiority, and unacademic interactions. In academic settings, students generally do not expect teachers to engage in humor, especially humor that could be perceived as inappropriate, unprofessional, or irrelevant to the lesson. This is because students often view teachers as authority figures whose primary role is to maintain a structured, respectful, and intellectually focused learning environment.

Teachers who attempt to incorporate superior humor risk offending or alienating their students by using inappropriate examples. Poorly selected anecdotes or illustrative materials may create the impression that the lecturer holds biased views, such as sexism or racism, or reinforce harmful stereotypes about certain groups<sup>[24]</sup>. In an academic setting, teachers using superiority humor in correcting grammar could cause students “*to feel like they’re mocking you.*” In addition, an overreliance on humor as a teaching strategy can undermine the lecturer’s credibility, leading to perceptions of unprofessionalism or a lack of seriousness in their role<sup>[85]</sup>. Some students perceived the use of humor in correcting grammar as indicative of unprofessionalism and an ineffective teaching approach, particularly as it appeared to target less proficient students disproportionately. Participants noted

that such humor undermined the seriousness of the learning environment and raised doubts about the instructor’s commitment to effective teaching. Repetitive corrections using superiority humor in grammar were perceived as mockery rather than constructive statements, diminishing the formal tone of the classroom and the credibility of the instructional process.

Further, Chavez and Prado<sup>[88]</sup> found that inequality has undeniably permeated the social media space, driven in part by the normalization and widespread tolerance of sexist humor, which perpetuates discriminatory attitudes. A similar phenomenon could arise in classrooms when humor is used to correct grammatical errors, as it may evoke a sense of inferiority among the affected students, which hinders effective learning opportunities. In classrooms, the use of superiority humor to correct grammatical errors may unintentionally reinforce power imbalances, such as positioning teachers as superior and students as subordinate. Such interactions could diminish students’ confidence, evoke feelings of inferiority, and lead to a disengagement from the learning process.

Although several studies have supported the use of humor as an instructional strategy<sup>[18, 89]</sup>, this paper cautions against its excessive use in classroom settings. Humor styles may serve as mediators in the relationship between cognitive and interpersonal vulnerability factors and psychological issues, including emotional distress, dysfunction, or challenges in interpersonal relationships<sup>[90–92]</sup>. When students were exposed to superiority humor about their grammatical errors, it caused them to be “...*overly focused on avoiding mistakes, which can lead to excessive editing, slowed progress, or reluctance to experiment with language.*” The preoccupation with avoiding errors can lead to excessive proofreading, hindering the flow of work and slowing progress. At the same time, the fear of ridicule discourages students from experimenting with language, limiting their opportunities for growth and exploration. Previous studies also demonstrated that specific humor styles mediated the connection between early maladaptive schemas—core beliefs about oneself and others—and symptoms of depression<sup>[39]</sup>. Consequently, maladaptive thinking was observed among college students who experienced superiority humor, including self-doubt, perfectionism, and over-proofreading, which primarily led to counterproductive behaviors in learning. Superiority humor that targets students’ weaknesses or reinforces negative

self-perceptions can amplify maladaptive thinking patterns, particularly in environments where individuals are already vulnerable to self-doubt and perfectionism. Among college students, exposure to such humor, especially when directed at their academic performance or personal characteristics, has been linked to increased self-consciousness and a heightened fear of failure. This heightened sensitivity often manifests in counterproductive behaviors, such as over-proofreading assignments to an excessive degree, procrastinating due to fear of criticism, or disengaging from class participation to avoid potential ridicule. Such behaviors not only hinder academic performance but also contribute to a cycle of negative self-evaluation, where students internalize perceived inadequacies and struggle to maintain confidence in their abilities.

## 6. Conclusion

The study investigated college students' perceptions of superiority humor when addressing grammatical errors in academic contexts. Firstly, students identified superiority humor as a significant barrier to learning, particularly when it was perceived as mocking or judgmental. They reported that such humor often induced fear and hesitation, especially in academic settings, discouraging them from seeking help or engaging in discussions. The humor, when sarcastic, made students feel defensive, inferior, and self-conscious, which in turn hindered their ability to accept constructive feedback and diminished their confidence. Furthermore, students viewed the use of superiority humor in grammatical corrections as unprofessional and unacademic when it was excessive or irrelevant, thereby reducing the credibility of instructors and distracting from the learning process. The psychological impacts of such humor were also profound, leading to feelings of embarrassment, self-doubt, and perfectionism. Participants frequently experienced humiliation when their mistakes were highlighted through sarcasm, particularly in public settings, which undermined their confidence and discouraged them from participating. Many students became overly critical of their abilities, engaging in excessive proofreading and developing a reluctance to experiment with language. Similarly, the pressure to avoid mistakes often resulted in a heightened sense of perfectionism, turning the learning process into a stressful and rigid experience rather than a

dynamic and creative one.

Some limitations needed to be considered. Firstly, the sample size was relatively small and predominantly focused on college students, which restricts the generalizability of the findings to broader populations, such as high school learners or adult professionals in non-academic contexts. The methods primarily relied on self-reported perceptions and qualitative responses, which may be influenced by subjective biases or recall inaccuracies. The quality of the data collected may also be influenced by social desirability bias, where participants may underreport their discomfort with humor to align with perceived expectations. Consequently, the analysis predominantly utilized thematic frameworks that may lack the quantitative rigor necessary to establish causality or robust correlations. The findings were context-dependent, as they were derived from specific academic settings, which affected their applicability to different educational environments or informal learning spaces. In terms of applications, the findings were primarily theoretical and may require further empirical validation to inform effective practical teaching strategies or institutional policies. The potential for cross-cultural differences in superiority humor was not explored, emphasizing the need for multicultural or global educational contexts. Future studies could address these limitations by incorporating larger, more diverse samples, employing mixed-methods approaches, and examining the long-term effects of superiority humor on academic and psychological outcomes.

## Author Contributions

Conceptualization, H.G.A., A.C.E., M.T.L.E., J.B.Q., P.J.E.S., N.V.A.C., N.U.S., M.A.A.H., F.M.L. and J.V.C.; methodology, H.G.A., A.C.E., M.T.L.E., J.B.Q., P.J.E.S., N.V.A.C., N.U.S., M.A.A.H., F.M.L. and J.V.C.; software, H.G.A., A.C.E., M.T.L.E., J.B.Q., P.J.E.S., N.V.A.C., N.U.S., M.A.A.H., F.M.L. and J.V.C.; validation, H.G.A., A.C.E., M.T.L.E., J.B.Q., P.J.E.S., N.V.A.C., N.U.S., M.A.A.H., F.M.L. and J.V.C.; formal analysis, H.G.A., A.C.E., M.T.L.E., J.B.Q., P.J.E.S., N.V.A.C., N.U.S., M.A.A.H., F.M.L. and J.V.C.; investigation, H.G.A., A.C.E., M.T.L.E., J.B.Q., P.J.E.S., N.V.A.C., N.U.S., M.A.A.H., F.M.L. and J.V.C.; resources, H.G.A., A.C.E., M.T.L.E., J.B.Q., P.J.E.S., N.V.A.C., N.U.S., M.A.A.H., F.M.L. and J.V.C.; data cu-

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## Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

## Data Availability Statement

The data from this study will not be made publicly available to protect the confidentiality and privacy rights of the participants.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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