

# Inevitable and Convenient yet Unrecognised: Internet Memes for the ESL Classroom

Mark Nicholas Glasford<sup>1</sup> & J. John Love Joy<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

Teachers are finding new ways to transform learning spaces, implement new texts and essentially cater to the growing needs of a technophile generation but have not found complete success in their endeavours. While there have been many suggestions to impact the learning process in the classroom, most teachers are unaware of a simple digital entity that plays a central focus in learner discourse. Visually and verbally succinct, memes have created a niche on the internet with a loyal user base of adolescents who create, share and comment on them. This article seeks to introduce memes in the classroom by providing a concise understanding of meme potential.

**Keywords:** adolescents; digital discourse; memes; innovative strategies

## INTRODUCTION

English as a language has seamlessly woven itself into the communicative patterns that have risen over time allowing it to become a standard medium of expression over the globe. English does not have the privilege of maintaining its exclusive charm of being the communicative medium of the upper class. The internet having played a pivotal role in this transition has also caused users to subconsciously intake the language without any previous instruction allowing users from various walks of life to gain access to not just information but also language acquisition. Users of English on the internet (inclusive of non-native speakers) are not staunch adherents of the language's many rules but somehow get a grasp of it. In creating an environment for users to actively partake in English, the internet has not just become a medium but also a facilitator for the language. The internet has therefore successfully helped discourse to switch from real-time to virtual.

This change in discourse has inadvertently led to the creation of unforeseen learner consequences, the most affected being learner discourse and the tools for instruction (texts/assessment methods). While most social

media platforms have created new ways of expression on the internet, an important piece of the communicative puzzle on the web is internet memes. These multifaceted modes of expression cannot be limited to just one aspect of information sharing as they are used to describe almost anything. In considering the placement of memes in the lifestyle of the learner, it must be noted that since there is overwhelming support for the use of such a medium on the internet, introducing them in the classroom would not be such a bad idea. However, apart from just considering memes as an additional activity in the classroom, the reality that memes can be transformed to not just support learner involvement but also act as a medium for smooth acquisition must be realised. To help both teachers and learners find common ground for interest, interaction and wholesome involvement in the classroom, this article proposes the introduction of internet memes in the ESL classroom.

## THE INEVITABLE PRESENCE OF MEMES

To understand the inescapable aspect of meme conversation in millennial discourse, the groundwork set by the internet for meme creation and the original idea of the meme must

---

<sup>1</sup> Ph.D. Research Scholar (Full Time), Department of English, St. Joseph's College (Autonomous), Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli. ☎ 0000-0001-9352-2075 ✉ marknicholasglasford@gmail.com

<sup>2</sup> Associate Professor, Department of English, St. Joseph's College (Autonomous), Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli ✉ Johnlovejoy\_en1@mail.sjctni.edu

first be discussed. Internet memes have gained prominence on the world's digital stage and their presence has found sustenance despite other digital paraphernalia. Before gaining such a poignant place on the internet, memes were introduced by Richard Dawkins in his seminal work 'The Selfish Gene' in 1976. Dawkins defines memes as "small cultural units of transmission, analogous to genes, that spread from person to person by copying or imitation" (Dawkins 1976). Dawkins' main idea was to introduce the notion that memes were conceptual entities sustained through time by the process of imitation.

From Dawkins to Blackmore, memes were associated with cultural archetypes often focusing on replication (of ideas, trends, fashion) through Darwinian selection. In 1994, Mike Godwin (1994) in an issue of *Wired* floated the idea of the internet meme as humorous entities (pictures/videos) on the internet that speak of a particular idea often through replication, ultimately setting a trend. A comprehensive understanding of an internet meme is proposed by Limor Shifman, who defines them as: "a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, which were created with awareness of each other, and were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users" (Shifman 2013, p.41).

This trend of humorous exchanges is not just the carrying-forward of jokes but is rather the sustenance of a cultural idea in an exclusive ethnic environment that caters to the insiders of said environment. With the advent of social media platforms, memes have permeated all forms of discourse eventually resulting in 'meme culture'. These microforms on the internet have an impact on the macrostructure of society by infiltrating mindsets and establishing styles that become shared social phenomena. Internet memes therefore have control over the nature and direction of online discourse. This in turn allows memes to function as the nexus of social lifestyle and thought among its users.

The internet has inadvertently supported the proliferation of internet memes as the ethos of

the internet is its prosumer mentality that causes users to be both producers and consumers of content. Having realised the undeniable presence of memes on the internet, its repercussions on millennial/ Gen Z discourse are also manifold. Here are some of the impacts: Having secured a place at the forefront of digital discourse, memes have infiltrated the lives of all users on the internet.

Memes are simple to create and share on the internet, thanks to the over usage of smartphones. Users only need a few editing skills that can be learnt and applied within minutes. With adolescent users being the most ardent creators and distributors of memes, their discourse is marked with an overwhelming use of memes. As memes comprise every aspect of human existence, the user's lifestyle (Gen Z/ millennials) shares a very huge part of its nature and content. Most of the memes produced online capture the essence of the daily situations of their users and become a virtual journal that records the progression of a user's lifestyle.

As memes offer such scope for talking about things that users care about in a way they care about, their value as immediate and effective dispensers of expression is elevated. A social media behaviour survey conducted by Daily Insight in 2019 stated that 75% of 13-36-year-olds (and 79% of 13-17-year-olds) share memes; with 55% of 13-35-year-olds sending memes every week—while 30% send them every day (YPULSE 2019). These statistics point out that the main consumers of memes are users aged from 13 to 17 and these users can be categorised as young adolescents. Having understood the expanse of meme proliferation and its inevitable presence, bringing them into the classroom would only strengthen the ties between teachers and students as memes would instigate genuine interest and interaction in the classroom.

## **THE CONVENIENT STRUCTURE OF MEMES**

Having established the unavoidable presence of memes in the lives of learners, the second reason why memes should be favoured for use in the classroom is their design and function. Of the many reasons that support meme

proliferation on the internet, meme design and function surpass others.

Internet memes are versatile on two accounts: design and function. Unlike other mediums of expression, memes provide immediate comprehension and reciprocate instant appreciation from their consumers. The structure of internet memes cannot be condensed into one format. Memes in the past used to feature image macros that had stock characters. These static pictures with captions continue to stay relevant. Today's memes feature GIFs (Graphics Interchange Format) that support both static and animated images. Along with them, screenshots, photobombs, supercuts and snowclones are all part of the meme family. Most internet memes have a caption and a corresponding visual that is set to describe a particular situation, event or happening.

Internet memes comprise the same bones but not the same faces, just like the ones who engineered them. In other words, a meme can be replicated by anyone on the internet and the same idea can be expressed with different visuals and different captions; in certain cases, the same caption can be used for another visual and vice versa (Davidson, 2012). Ideas that are relevant, humorous and templatable allow them to remain successful as memes. The lifespan of a meme can be measured through its various mutations and replications that continue to feature in other memes. This extreme flexibility allows memes to be mediums of almost any form of expression and most times can be a direct expression of thought. Internet memes are therefore a combination of "postmodern frivolity, extremely amplified pop culture intertextuality and self-reflexivity, and aesthetically pleasing forms of repetition". (Nooney & Portwood-Stacer, 2012).

Memes that get replicated or shared often are those that have managed to create a trend or successfully imitate their predecessor without losing their sense of originality. It is repetition with a difference, imitation within a structure. This repetition is reminiscent of a matryoshka Russian doll where each meme fits perfectly

within the next one but is only individual in appearance as in the case of the meme. With the ability to arrive at infinite possibilities, memes act as a medium that encapsulates all forms of expression.

The structure of memes can be clearly understood by their three major features (Shifman, 2013) content, form and stance. The first one corresponds to the data that is present in the specific text, referencing both the ideas and ideologies conveyed by it. The second feature describes the physical incarnation of the message which includes both visual and audio forms. The last one refers to the information "memes convey about their communication". In other words, how communicators position themselves concerning the text, its linguistic codes, the addressees, and other potential speakers. Just as content and form are memetic, the stance also holds the potential for imitation as in the recreation of the text, creators can choose to either imitate certain aspects or take a completely different approach to the idea.

The written text in a meme is concise, sharp and limited due to space and humour. Brevity is the only way humour will maintain its essence and this is a chief reason for internet memes to have abbreviations and one-liners. Figures of speech like puns, paradoxes, onomatopoeia and enjambment are used at times in the formation of captions on the memes.

The visuals that are used in the memes are ingrained in the consciousness of the users thereby allowing them to share their past experiences and knowledge without placing much effort. Malleability and simplicity in both design and function allow memes to have an extreme level of ease for application. These factors can allow memes to act as the medium through which the text can be simplified to suit any content and context in the lesson plan. With memes having such a capacity for transcending form and matter, it is befitting that such a medium be brought into the classroom for learners to indulge in a comfortable expressive environment.

## THE UNRECOGNISED POTENTIAL OF MEMES

With their presence and functional design, memes have left a sustaining impact on learner discourse. Apart from these two factors, the potential of memes in the classroom is immense but has not been recognised due to the blind assumption that they are a mischievous product of teenage minds on the internet. Nevertheless, some of the ways that memes can help in the acquisition process have been identified and are as follows:

- **Lowers the affective filter:** Humour, relative contexts and the very act of Instagramming (socialising on Instagram) are the threads on which the garment of a meme is created. These actions when brought into the classroom would keep the learners highly motivated and less anxious as they are inclined to believe that they are doing an act that is banned from the classroom and would act as an effective means of lowering the affective filter (Harshavardhan et al., 2019).
- **Creates a space for recognising a joke:** Understanding humour is an intrinsic part of identifying the level of acquisition of a learner. Jokes come in the advanced spectrum of language learning as they are coded and require a previous reference. If students can understand memes in a fraction of a second, it shows that they have already dabbled in the cognitive process of acquiring those references and building such knowledge. Most teachers also find it hard to share a joke and not end up explaining it. The application of memes would allow the teacher to test the learner and build a framework that can capture the learner's referential knowledge.
- **Creates a natural space for context understanding/ application:** An internet meme adheres to a specific context that relates to a particular audience. With the implication of the context being so indispensable for the meaning of the meme, creators must inevitably have the capacity to understand and create contexts. In the case of creating a context for a language task, teachers have to go to great lengths to make the context accessible to the students but if memes are to be introduced, the students will be able to arrive at the context naturally and therefore be able to even consolidate data from other contexts for easy language acquisition (Purnama et al., 2018).
- **Allows for inducing visual literacy:** Verbal literacy is not the only skill that learners need today as digitization has helped the current generation of learners to make the transition to being individuals with the capacity to live in any space and situation across the globe. Visual literacy has become a necessity as the information age has catapulted the use of image-based discourse (pie charts, flowsheets, diagrams, posters, etc.) for speedy interpretation of meaning. While textbooks are filled with paraphernalia of different mediums, the placement of a meme in the classroom will change the course of the perception of the students as memes are visually succinct thus enabling teachers to access more data and students enjoying the process (Huang, 2016).
- **Increases critical thinking:** As memes are an expression of everyday life and the people who experience it, there have been a ton of memes that portray many social and political issues (Rintel, 2013). The depictions of such issues have shown that students can analyse and evaluate events for themselves. To be able to make a stand, the students must be able to find evidence that supports such causes. To arrive at such a position shows that students have the capacity for critical thinking. Memes can be used in the classroom to inculcate critical thinking among students.
- **Memes as concept frameworks:** As mentioned earlier, memes are versatile as they can capture the essence of an idea in a very succinct way. As memes can generate ideas in a very subtle way that can be understood, appreciated and remembered by an individual, memes can be considered as concept frameworks whose structure can be used by the teacher to explain any idea to the students (Hansen & Wilson, 2023). This is inclusive of all areas of study.

■ **Meme literacy as a means of measuring social awareness and linguistic proficiency:** As users continue to participate in online culture the meme continues to find sustenance in their discourse (McCulloch, 2019). This trait of constant affiliation can be used to measure the progress of a user on the web and this in turn can be used to uncover the level of social awareness of the individual. The type of memes that users create and distribute can also be used to create a map that details their ability to understand the linguistic data of the meme. When applied in the classroom this task can be used to display the linguistic proficiency of the learners based on their use and comprehension of memes detailing their transition from simple to complex memes.

## CONCLUSION

While teachers may be a bit sceptical about using memes in the classroom due to their language insensitivity, this careless use of language can be addressed only in the authoritative space of a classroom. If realised, memes would offer a whole new perspective to the learning process and would enable teachers to make that transitional change for their classes to be more authentic and interactive. Over time memes can be considered as potential material for lesson planning and curriculum development but for now, they have to be introduced in the classroom as they offer a whole new dimension to learning and language acquisition.

## REFERENCES

- Dawkins, R. (1976). *The selfish gene*. Oxford University Press.
- Davison, P. (2012). The language of internet memes. In M. Mandiberg (Ed.), *The social media reader* (pp. 120–134). NYU Press. Retrieved May 10, 2021, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt16gzq5m.13>
- Godwin, M. (1994, October 1). Meme, counter-meme. *WIRED*. <https://www.wired.com/1994/10/godwin-if-2/>
- Harshavardhan, V., Wilson, D. D., & Kumar, M. V. (2019). Humour discourse in internet memes: An aid in ESL classrooms. *Asia Pacific Media Educator*, 29(1), 41–53. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1326365X19842023>
- Hansen, J. M., & Wilson, P. (2023). Increasing student engagement using ‘meme-based’ exercise innovation. *Marketing Education Review*, 33(2), 113–117. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10528008.2022.2159436>
- Huang, Z. (2016). An empirical study on the application of memetics to the teaching of college English writing. *SHS Web of Conferences*, 25.
- McCulloch, G. (2019). *Because internet: Understanding the new rules of language*. Riverhead Books.
- Nooney, L., & Portwood-Stacer, L. (2014). One does not simply: An introduction to the special issue on internet memes. *Journal of Visual Culture*, 13(3), 248–252. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470412914551351>
- Purnama, A. D., Desiarti, E. M., Aflahah, N. A., & Ekaningrum, V. C. (2018). Utilizing memes to promote students’ motivation in language classrooms. *Let: Linguistics, Literature and English Teaching Journal*, 7(2), 134–153. <https://doi.org/10.18592/let.v7i2.1946>
- Rintel, S. (2013). Crisis memes: The importance of templatability to internet culture and freedom of expression. *Australian Journal of Popular Culture*, 2(2). Intellect Limited.
- Shifman, L. (2013). *Memes in digital culture*. The MIT Press.
- Ypulse. (2019, March 5). 3 stats that show what memes mean to Gen Z & Millennials. *Daily Insight Article*. <https://www.ypulse.com/article/2019/03/05/3-stats-that-show-what-memes-mean-to-gen-z-millennials/>