

## Use of Memes, GIFs and Social Media Posts in Modern Language Learning: A Narrative Review

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### Abstract

This paper shall look at existing resources on the incorporation of Web2.0 platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp, the content (memes, GIFs, pun-driven images, etc.) and language (SMS lingo) used therein in modern language classrooms. Pedagogic approaches are changing with changing times-evidence of this change can be seen in the wide adaptation of visual literacy, particularly among Gen Z learners who find it easier to read a pictorial book or a shortened text further shortened to reach their minds that are accustomed to the colourful world of social media rather than regular paperbacks with text on either side of a paper. This paper explores the use of memes, GIFs, and other relatable social media content either for reference or as the primary input in language classrooms. The paper aims to highlight the tried and tested approaches used to make modern language education fun for learners. It serves as a good reservoir of ideas of meme-based activities and portrays the perspective of learners and teachers on their efficacy as a pedagogic strategy.

**Keywords:** Modern language learning, pedagogic approaches, Gen Z learners, visual literacy, social media

### 1. Introduction

#### 1.1. Multiliteracies in Language Education

Gee *et al.* (1996) expressed the significance of multiliteracies using a 'big L' and a 'small l.' They explained that the 'big L' in literacy represents meaning-making concerning the real world whereas, the 'small l' represents the processes involved in learning such as reading, listening, writing, or dealing with sounds and images. While the 'big L' pertains to aspects of the real world, the 'small l' signifies connections between various words, ideas, and symbols of literary practices. In other words, Gee *et al.* propelled that L/literacy is an umbrella term covering the multiple ways or patterns of being in the world and hence there are multiple literacies (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006) <sup>[9]</sup>.

Multiliteracy covers visual literacy which is nothing but the learners' ability to interpret images (visuals) and produce visually rich communications thereafter. Visual literacy enables learners to express thoughts, ideas, and emotions using images or signs (Burmark, 2002 as cited in Harrera, 2020). While visual literacy did not receive much attention some 3-4 decades ago, it is now an integral part of education, particularly, language education. This is because modern-day students have easy access to the internet and a vast of visual content available on the World Wide Web. These digital natives need to be taught using language, content, and contexts they are familiar with to retain their interest and encourage participation (Pulley, 2020) <sup>[13]</sup>.

Social media is a major part of the lives of present-day students and it is the primary medium through which they communicate and connect with their families, friends, and the world in general. Netizens come up with witty, current, and relatable content every day which takes mere seconds to go viral. This content circulates on social media platforms like

Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp which are frequently used by students. The content circulated in these social media platforms includes images, videos, memes, stickers, GIFs, and emojis, and is often the authentic creations of the platform users. In essence, social media platforms are examples of Web2.0 that allow participants to be content creators and not just passive consumers-the impacts of this can also be seen in education where a paradigm shift has taken place in how lessons are taught (Worley, 2011, as cited in Pulley, 2020) <sup>[13]</sup>.

#### 1.2. Memes-Origin to Present Day

The term *meme* was first coined by the biologist Richard Dawkins in 1976 to denote cultural parallels of biological genes that are transferred from one person to another and can be modified in transmission. The word meme is derived from the Greek word *mimetic* which means imitation and resembles the sound of the word *gene*. In essence, a meme is an idea or concept that becomes important enough for a larger population and therefore becomes a part of their cultural behaviors. The analogy between memes and genes denotes this very trait of transferability that is common to both.

Richard Dawkins used the term meme for the very first time in his book *The Selfish Gene* and it was later used by Susan Blackmore in her book *The Meme Machine*. While Dawkins didn't coin the term meme to mean what it signifies today, a typical characteristic of all memes is that they always change a little when transferred from one person to another. Memes in social media imply images with connotations relevant to a particular group of people or community. Thus, the purpose and meaning of memes differ from group to group and convey human emotions, ideas or opinions. Today, memes have moved beyond the biological definition they were first introduced with-they are complex artefacts loaded with

popular references and cultural meanings (Zanette *et al.*, 2019) <sup>[17]</sup> and are ideal for pedagogical purposes as they inspire different perspectives and opinions among learners. American scientists Lumsden and Wilson coined a term called *culturgen* (culture+gene) a little before Dawkins came up with 'meme.' The term culturgen was synonymous with meme but did not receive much recognition because it was polysyllabic and not similar in sound to a known concept (the way meme relates to gene). Eventually, culturgen became the lesser-known concept, and 'meme' was widely known to explain the transmission of ideas from one mind to another.

### 1.3. Why do We Need to Incorporate Memes in ESL Classrooms?

The question of why to incorporate memes in ESL classrooms without acknowledging the massive social presence of today's learners. A 2018 survey by Pew Research Center shows that over 45% of adolescents spend most of their time on social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, or Snapchat. A Brazil-based study indicates that 79% of teenagers and young adults frequently use social media and instant messaging platforms including WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram. These young social media users are responsible for the creation of several memes that go viral every day. Any event worth mockery or that can be related to mundane life events is converted to memes (images with short written captions) instantly using any of the thousands of meme generating apps available on the device Play Store.

Creating memes has become so effortless and is literally a matter of just a few clicks on mobile devices. This interest of young learners in memes can be effectively leveraged by teachers to create engaging content relevant to the course material. Even if teachers do not attempt creating memes, they can make use of the vast expanse of internet memes and find the ones befitting the requirements of their classroom and use them as cues for brainstorming activities or even as independent speaking/writing activities. The use of memes promotes multiliteracy as it makes use of various forms of representation such as images, gifs, emoticons, sounds, symbols, gestures, and other codes (Sorte, 2018).

Teachers across the globe are already adopting these digital cultures and Shakespeare's Romeo-Juliet getting transformed into an SMS chat thread is a classic example of this new mode of teaching literature and language that has the potential to be adopted at a global level to make language education fun, interactive, relatable and interesting for modern-day learners.

The use of memes in language classrooms not only renders life into any discussion but also acquaints learners with the current happenings at a regional or global level. For, only those images or subjects get converted into memes that are widely known or have gone 'viral' and are 'trending.' Thus, memes are rightly called *an invitation to social interaction*.

### 1.4. Research Question and Approach to Research

Most of the content circulating on social media platforms today are memes and they receive the desired reaction from the target audience group. For instance, a meme from the TV show F.R.I.E.N.D.S which portrays the character Joey Tribbiani (played by Matt LeBlanc) saying 'Joey Doesn't Share Food' is a popular meme often loved and shared by the foodies on Instagram, or WhatsApp (as forwards, stickers or stories) to show that they resonate with the emotion of not preferring to share their food with anyone. Similarly, memes from various fields like medicine, politics, literature, finance,

etc. keep getting viral now and then and get shared further by like-minded consumers.

Since memes have a significant role in the content consumed online, it is a good proposition to explore their performance as resources within a classroom. Therefore, this paper tries to address the following research questions:

- i) Can memes be considered as input in ESL classrooms?
- ii) What are some activities in which memes can be used in ESL classrooms?
- iii) What are the perspectives of learners and teachers in the inclusion of memes in language classrooms?

An exploratory research design is adopted to find the answer to the research questions. A collection of relevant studies were procured from Google Scholar and were closely examined to identify the aspects of meme incorporation in language classrooms that make it an adaptable option. The perspectives of learners and teachers on such inclusion of memes in their lessons were also taken into consideration. Finally, the researcher put forth some suggestions of activities involving memes that can be adopted in language classrooms.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Common Definitions

The Oxford dictionary defines memes as images, videos, pieces of text, etc that are humorous in nature, copied and spread rapidly on the internet, mostly with slight variations added by internet users (OED 2001, online).

Memes come in varied tones and ranges, are multimodal representations of images with overlaid text and are designed to be distributed on a large scale (Beucher *et al.*, 2020) <sup>[20]</sup>.

In his book *Memes in Digital Culture*, Limor Shifman defines memes as "content units that generate user-created derivatives in the form of remakes, parodies, or imitations." This is all to say that memes are texts that inspire the creation of subsequent texts which are more often than not, parodies of the original text.

### 2.2. What Constitutes Memes?

Memes typically contain an image juxtaposed with a text (which is usually modified during transmission). This text is called a caption and together with the image, it conveys funny, politically incorrect, ironic, or some grotesque message (Horta, 2015, as cited in Zanette *et al.*, 2019) <sup>[17]</sup>.

When memes got popular, the first platform to facilitate the creation of memes by meme enthusiasts was Know Your Meme (KYM). KYM created a community of meme enthusiasts who not just created memes but also gave explanations of their implications and origin. Eventually, platforms like Meme Generator (2009) made it possible for people without any knowledge of image editing skills to create authentic memes of their own based on popular and constituted image macros (Zanette *et al.*, 2019) <sup>[17]</sup>.

By nature, memes are funny images that are spoof-like and derisive in nature and have phrases that render them the much appreciated comedic effect. They can imply multiple things and speak a lot depending on what text is sandwiched in (Vargas, 2016) <sup>[16]</sup>. There are three primary items that constitute memes:

- **Emojis:** These are the picture characters or images minus the added phrases in a meme and allow us to add content.
- **Emoticons:** Typically, these are typographic displays of a facial representation and were frequently used in the first decade of the 21st century when the world was obsessing over text messages and used symbol

combinations like ':)' or ': (' to denote happy/sad smiley faces.

- **Emojis:** Emojis are pictures, photos, or texts converted to stickers on mobile applications like Emoji App and beautifully reflect human emotions and reactions to things. Teens these days communicate online, not with words but these Emojis and emojis.

**2.3. Characteristics of Memes Proposed by Dawkins**

Blackmore opines that one common trait of all successful memes is that they are all memorable. In addition, they tend to make a lasting impression on viewers of these memes are transmitted by ‘trustworthy others.’ For instance, if an English teacher was to ask her learners to watch more English movies to pick up new words and good use of the language and she did it using this meme (Figure 1), then learners will remember the tip for a longer duration. Visuals are known to enhance retention and understanding and the use of memes by someone as trustworthy as the English teacher herself makes things have a lasting imprint on learners’ minds.



Fig 1: (Meme Arsenal, n.d.)

This meme is an example of ‘Drakeposting’ which is a term that got popularised in 2015 after the release of the Canadian hip-hop artist Drake’s 2015 music video Hotline Bling. The meme was first created by the site 4chan to express one's disappointment regarding how something is done and to show the ideal way of doing the same thing (Blunt, 2022) [3]. Some other examples of the use of the Drake meme and its variations created during transmission can be seen in Figure 2 below.



Fig 2: (Compiled from various sources, using the Google Search keywords ‘Drake memes’)

The same Drake meme when accompanied by different texts holds different significance for various groups of people. While Figure 1 would be relatable to English learners, the first image in Figure 2 would hold emotional value for Indians who usually greet each other with a ‘Namaste’ instead of the western counterpart of handshakes. The same meme would also be pertinent to imply social distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic. The second Drake meme in Figure 2 would be relatable for millennials who often use the term LOL (Laugh out Loud) as a shield against any uninteresting, offending, or uncomfortable situations they find themselves in. Similarly, the third and the fourth memes in Figure 2 would be relatable to students and/or professionals struggling with deadlines. Thus, it can be said that the effective transmission of memes is dependent on human preferences, emotions, attention, and desires (Blackmore, 1999).

Richard Dawkins lists the primary characteristics of successful memes as fidelity, fecundity, and longevity. Fidelity is the characteristic of memes that makes them easy to copy while keeping them intact as they pass from mind to mind. It is the process of ensuring originality and innovation in ideas of memes as they spread from one internet user to another. Fecundity is the rate at which an idea, concept, or pattern is copied and spread. This means that the quicker a meme spreads, the more likely it is of capturing prolonged attention. Fecundity reflects the replicability and rate of distribution of memes.

The third characteristic of memes is longevity and, as the name suggests, longevity talks about how long a meme survives. In a world where new memes get created by the second, the longevity of a meme speaks a lot about the rate at which it is copied and spread. Later, a fourth characteristic of susceptibility was added to this list. Susceptibility is nothing but the relevance of a meme in current times, locations, or with respect to a particular event. Whether a meme is relatable to people, well-connected to existing memes, and meets the values and interests of the people is what covers the susceptibility aspect.

**2.4. Types of Memes Cited in Zinkanell’s Thesis**

Some of the common types of memes described in Zinkanell’s thesis include:

- **Reaction:** KYM defines reaction memes as all those memes which are created to depict an emotion felt in response to something already said or done. Reaction memes can be equated with emoticons which are usually very emotive and communicative and express emotions, opinions, or attitudes displayed by the creator or sender.
- **Image Macros:** Image macros refers to a set of stylistic rules used for adding text to images. These texts can be inserted into the images or used as the title or caption of the images using readily available editing software. These editing software make the creation of image macros hassle-free and accessible to all (Davison, 2012 as cited Zinkanell, 2020) [18].
- **Stock Characters:** Stock characters in memes, much like their meaning in literature, are unidimensional characters that can be reduced to a handful of general traits. Stock characters in meme culture can take on human or animal forms to convey a particular meaning closely linked to the identity and this meaning is usually something that has remained fixed for a long time.
- **GIFS:** GIF (which stands for Graphics Interchange Format) is a popular type of meme that contains animated imagery. It does not include still images like image

macro but rather displays multiple images at a quick pace at once. There is movement, variation in color, rapid appearance and disappearance of text, etc. GIFs can also include small narratives (similar to comics) in one single file. They are a quite popular medium of expression used online.

- **Rage Comics:** Rage comics are similar to stock characters and include rage faces that represent a particular emotion, behaviour, or reaction. are amateur webcomics. However, a unique characteristic of rage comics is that instead of putting forth ideas in a humorous way, they reflect real-life and genuinely felt emotions (Shifman, 2014 as cited in Zinkanell, 2020) <sup>[18]</sup>.

## 2.5. Shifman's Categories of Meme Analysis Cited in Sorte's Work

Limor Shifman provides three categories on memes analysis (Shifman, 2013) <sup>[15]</sup>. These include:

- **Content:** The content of memes refers to the specific ideas or ideologies incorporated in the text. For instance, the "Due Tomorrow/Do tomorrow" in the third Drake meme in Figure 2 refers to the idea of procrastination and meeting deadlines reflected in the textual content of the meme.
- **Form:** Form refers to how the message is composed in a meme. This can include audios, videos, animation, etc. The form of a meme helps us distinguish an offensive meme from a humorous one, a witty meme from a genre-specific one, and so on.
- **Stance:** Stance is nothing but the participation structure or the manner in which a meme creator wishes to express his/her thoughts. Stance represents the way users position themselves in relation to a text or the origin of a particular meme (Shifman, 2013) <sup>[15]</sup>. For instance, the Drake meme represented above has been Indianized by certain users by replacing Drake's face with that of the Bollywood actor Irfan Khan (Figure 3). Such re-creation of texts and images in memes highlights the addressers' stance.

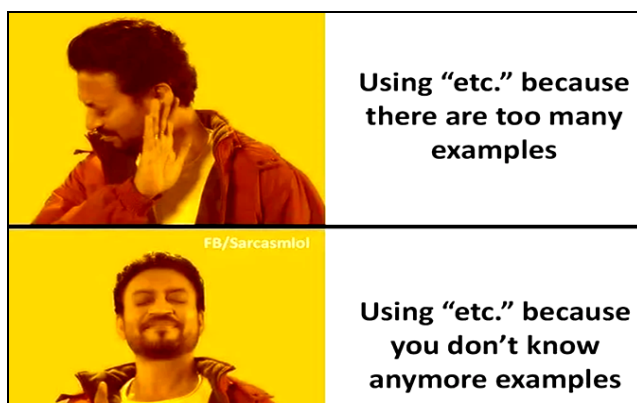


Fig 3: (9GAG, 2020)

## 3. Methodology and Tools

This paper adopts a qualitative approach to research wherein around 10-15 different resources were consulted and closely examined before reaching the conclusions presented. It is a narrative review of the aspects of memetics discussed by the likes of Dawkins, Shifman, Blackmore, Vargas, Hartman, etc. over the years in their research work and takes up an exploratory approach.

This is a work of advanced literature review that takes place by selecting a research area and topic of interest and then reviewing the literature available for the same. It involves the review, assembling, synthesis, analysis, survey, and critique of the researcher's current understanding of the topic.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. Learning and Artistic Response

One of the major findings of the paper is linked to the fundamentals of learning and the role of learners' creative response to the input provided. Learning is perceived as "a social phenomenon constituted in the experienced, lived-in world, through legitimate peripheral participation in ongoing social practice..." (Harrera, 2020). When applied to the learning of a language, this definition of learning would imply that learning is a social practice that enables learners to be well-versed in the target language by providing them with enough opportunities to internalise the language and use it in their interactions with people in the context they live in. An age-old and time-tested way of gauging learners' understanding of concepts, or fluency and accuracy (in the case of language learning) is asking them to create something out of the knowledge they have received (the highest level of Bloom's Taxonomy).

In meme culture, this process of synthesizing and re-inventing existing memes is known as artistic response. Harrera mentions that the process of engaging with memes and developing their communicative competence in ESL classrooms is a part of learning via artistic response. Artistic response could include all forms of representation like sculpture, painting, music, dance, drama, etc. While working with learners who are digital natives (and hence more reachable via digital pedagogical tools), asking them to engage with the content and form of memes and express their perspective on the same by (re)creating something (artistic response) is an effective form of teaching language, or any other subject for that matter (Hartman *et al.*, 2021) <sup>[6]</sup>.

### 4.2. Memes as Input

In her paper titled *Memes: Creative Technological Strategy for ESL Learners*, Reena Garg mentions examples of the use of memes to teach grammar, vocabulary and even in the pre-reading segment of a lesson.

Yet another innovative use of memes as input has been listed in McBride & Mahiri's paper (2018) <sup>[11]</sup> where they mention using memes to teach literary devices like satire, personification, and foreshadowing using memes.

### 4.3. Memes as Output

Not only can teachers engage learners in creating memes, but they can also design activities revolving around memes. For instance, in the study undertaken by Hartman *et al*, 2021 [6], they conducted an activity called the ‘Perspective Meme Project’ which relied heavily on the popular KYM meme “What People Think I Do/What I Really Do” (Figure 4, for sample).

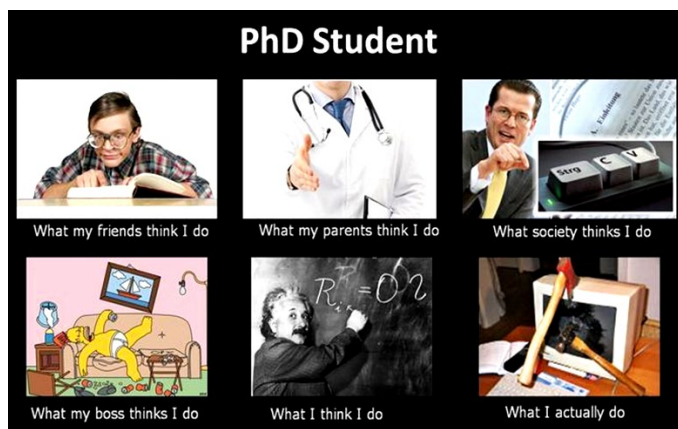


Fig 4: (KYM, 2018)

In this project, a perspective meme activity was administered to learners as a post-reading activity after reading a novel. They were made to practice symbolic thinking by filling in blank templates of the meme shown in Figure 4 for each of the characters in the novel. This practice not only demonstrates the creative utilisation of memes in language classrooms but also enables learners to do a detailed reading of the text and think critically (Hartman *et al.*, 2021) [6]. This is just one example of memes as output, language teachers can experiment with a variety of memes to hone learners’ LSRW, vocabulary, and grammar skills (a few suggestions are listed in section 5.1).

### 5. Significance of the Study

#### 5.1. Possible Meme-Based Activities for ESL Classrooms

A common point emphasized in all studies considered for this paper is that memes can be an excellent pedagogical tool, especially for the learners of today and tomorrow as they are frequently engaged with social media platforms and already exposed to memes. These learners rely on memes, gifs, stickers, emoticons, or emojis to express everything from fondness to frustration. Exploiting their mode of communication to communicate language with them has proven to be effective across all the studies we have looked at. This answers the first research question raised in this paper: *Can memes be considered as input in ESL classrooms?* Following are some aspects where memes can be incorporated in ESL classrooms. These points do not make an exhaustive list and innovative ideas to address the second research question (*What are some activities in which memes can be used in ESL classrooms?*) can emerge every day if enough thought is in.

**Vocabulary:** Teaching word meanings, synonyms and antonyms using memes is an effective pedagogic strategy as the visuals and the humor attached to memes make it easier for learners to remember the terms and their appropriate usage (Figure 5, for sample).



Fig 5: (Daily Vocab, 2013; Vince Kotchian, 2021)

**Idioms and Phrases:** Illustrations and memes are a great way to make learners understand the contextual use of idioms and phrases (Figure 6, for sample). In this way, learning idioms and phrases becomes fun and if planned well, memes can also be used as prompts in practice exercises to enable learners to recall the correct idioms.

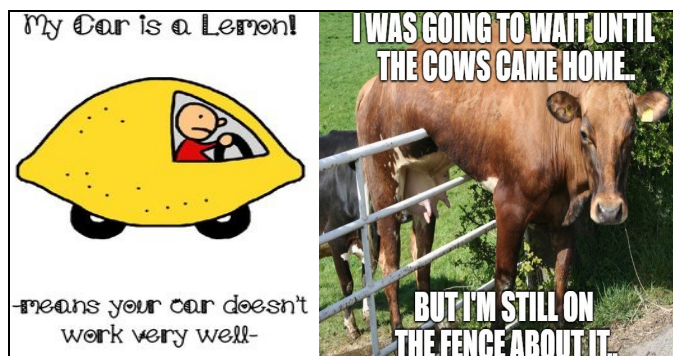


Fig 6: (Teachers Pay Teachers, n.d.; Obmig, 2019)

**Speaking and Writing Activities:** Using memes, extracts from social media posts and other such media, teachers can introduce a variety of speaking activities (debates, extempore, think-alouds, discussions, etc.) and writing activities (diary entries, letters, social media post captions, essay, letter to the editor, etc.) revolving around current topics and social issues which not just develop learners’ language skills but sensitise them and create better citizens (Figure 7, for sample).

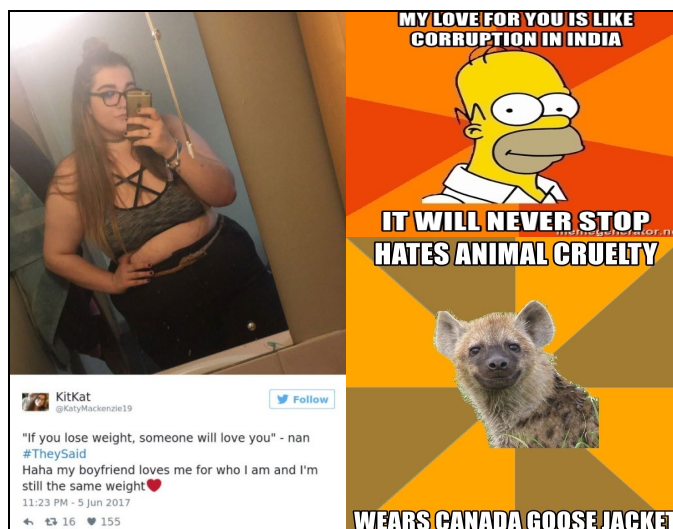


Fig 7: (Vaičiulaitytė, 2020; Homer Advice, n.d.)

## 5.2. Teachers' and Students' Perspective

Teachers who used memes to teach in their language classes reported to have developed a stronger rapport with their students Glazier (2016). The teachers reasoned that their students finally felt like they could communicate with their teachers on a one-on-one level, since they could understand and incorporate the kind of content they consume or create everyday on social media. On the same lines, some teachers reported that using memes in the language classes helped *humanise* the teacher (Downes, 2021) [4]. Further, the teachers preferred using memes because of multiple strategies advantages like-the ability to introduce complex information and language structures in a low-risk, humorous and familiar manner. With memes in their toolbox, teachers reportedly felt more confident as they could always play around with a few words in a meme's textual content and customise it to meet the needs of their lesson-the innate simplicity of memes attracted more teachers to use them (Hartman *et al.*, 2021) [6]. Teachers also found the memes to arouse learners' attention by setting the mood for the class. The learners felt happy at the end of the class and were interested all throughout. The teachers opined that memes promote a global consciousness and help learners visualize constructs better (Kayali & Altuntas, 2021) [8].

Across the studies considered for this paper, the learners' response to the use of memes in language classrooms has been consistently positive. The learners claimed to have liked the usage of memes mainly because they added an interactive element to whatever discussion or activity they were having in class. They also mentioned the memes used were relatable and personally relevant almost all the time which made the class more engaging. Further, they highlighted that memes provided them with the opportunity to be creative and express their individual opinions on topics that made them feel heard and appreciated.

This answers our third research question (*What are the perspectives of learners and teachers in the inclusion of memes in language classrooms?*) and shows that both teachers and learners who experienced the use of memes in language classrooms feel optimistic about their use and would like to see more meme-based activities in future.

## 6. Limitations and Scope for Future Research

### 6.1. Limitations

The biggest limitation or disadvantage of including meme-based activities in the language curriculum is that these activities are not suitable for visually impaired learners. The inclusion of memes in the language curriculum is an example of promoting visual literacy and that is certainly not something catering to the needs of these specially-abled children. Another major limitation of this paper is that it is applicable or effective only with those learners who are accustomed to the used memes or at least are active on social media. The research assumes that all learners of present times use social media and memes to communicate. However, there surely are exceptions and the results of including memes in the curriculum will probably not be the same for these exceptional cases.

Yet another limitation could be the age group. The use of memes would not make sense for very young learners and even if the context is explained to them, they might still not be able to make the most of the learning objective associated with such a meme-based activity. The factor of culture and regional acceptability forms the next limitation in the implementation of a meme-based curriculum in ESL

classrooms as learners' guardians in certain more restrictive and conservative regions of the world may not be ready to expose their learners to internet-based or even socially and politically sensitive content.

### 6.2. Ideas for Further Research

The world is known to progress forward and the popularity of memes, GIFs, and social media is sure to remain intact, if anything, it will only increase (Downes, 2021) [4]. ESL and EFL instructors will greatly benefit from the inclusion of memes in their curriculum. Therefore, future research can explore possible meme-based activities for language classrooms and help in designing activities suitable for all levels, and age groups of learners. Future research can also conduct assessments to measure the progress (if any) of language learners upon the implementation of a meme-based syllabus.

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