

Testing Memes as a Teaching Tool

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Abstract: In the age of technology, communication through emojis and stickers was replaced by memes and gifs in the blink of an eye. As teachers, the authors of this paper have asked themselves how these swift changes might affect our classes. If students communicate more and more through memes, would integrating them into our lessons lead to a better comprehension? To investigate this possibility, we built a concise grammar exercise involving two meme templates and had the students build two passive voice memes.

Keywords: teaching ESL; higher education; meme; passive voice

1. Introduction: What Is a Meme?

The objective of our paper is to investigate whether the introduction of a meme-based exercise would lead to an easier understanding of the passive voice. In order to do that, however, we first need to establish what makes a meme and provide an overview of how Internet memes can be used in education.

The term *meme* was first coined in 1976 so, surprisingly, it is not a 21st century concept. The name comes from the Greek *mimema* meaning to imitate and the work that introduced the term in popular culture was *The Selfish Gene* by the evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins. The purpose of the concept of *meme* was to act as a counterpart and partner to the older and much more well-known term of *gene*, by pointing out that humans are not just biology, or rather biology alone does not account for humanity's evolution. The best genes encode in them the best features for survival, but they alone cannot explain the existence of art, music, or chess (Blackmore 2000). Dawkins, and subsequent memeticists, purport that culture also

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seeks to replicate itself just like genes do, and it achieves this goal by ways of memes. Everything that makes up our culture is, thus, encoded in memes. Just like genes, religion, art, science, media, ideas also vie to perpetuate and propagate (Jenkins 2009).

By the 1990s, there was a field of study, memetics, analyzing the propagation of memes as put forth by Dawkins. However, it was not until the advent of the Web 2.0 and the generative networks deriving from it, that the ubiquitous products of contemporary popular culture and social media that we know today began to dominate.

The more widespread representation most 21st century Internet users envisage when they think of a meme is a highly adaptable image - but also a text or a video - usually humorous in nature, that can become wildly popular on social media platforms, in perfect illustration of Dawkins's definition of memes, only at a much higher rate of transmission.

One of the reasons these memes become viral is also due to photo and video editing tools becoming so readily available and user-friendly. They allow any and everybody to replicate, alter, and subsequently post images swiftly. So much so that in typical meme fashion, the original meme can evolve into something completely different.

It bears pointing out that meme-replication is not some chaotic modification of an image, or a sound, or a video. There are rules and a structure. Typically, there is an image that either comes with a slogan, or to which an anonymous internaut adds a message, helped by easy access to digital editing tools. Add to that the speed of transmission and you have a viral meme waiting to happen.

2. Integrating memes while teaching a visual generation.

Since we are dealing with an emerging field and with huge variety, memes are still hard to classify. They could be divided according to humor types (Taecharungroj & Nueangjamnong, 2015), cultural/scientific references, personalities from different domains, form/composition (image, text, sound) or topics. But most memes are probably a mixture, or multimodal texts (Domínguez Romero & Bobkina, 2017). Similarly, memes in language teaching can be classified according to what we are trying to teach (i.e., grammar, puns, punctuation, literary, pronunciation, spelling, or a combination).

Because by now memes are part and parcel of our students' lives, we thought about trying to incorporate them into our classes in order to spark interest in the subjects we teach. Working with memes in the classroom might prove difficult because, although there are certain composition landmarks that you can follow (the image, the structure of the message) many details are left to the teacher to establish. As Nguyen, Chambers and Abbott (2022) showed, "there are no practical guidelines for locating, selecting, and using memes to develop ESL learners' language skills and digital literacy competencies." They compiled a guide designed to assist educators in

meme selection and implementation when designing meme-based activities for ESL students.

Another potential risk is represented by the fact that the teacher cannot be too controlling of the situation since the students have a lot more freedom to create the memes (more autonomous type of classwork/assignment). At the same time, assessing the degree to which the task was completed successfully could also be an issue in the absence of clear guidelines and considering the subjectivity of humor.

Despite some potential educational challenges mentioned above, memes can reflect a continued conversation, an inside joke, or knowledge, between teacher and students and popular culture helping to forge a bond between the parties involved. Therefore, memes can be integrated in teaching as icebreakers (an easy way to capture the students' attention or make a reference to previously acquired knowledge), or as a means of breaking the monotony (of teaching grammar, for instance). They can be used in order to foster creativity and the participation of the participatory and visual generation when assigning tasks, giving feedback or checking for understanding. Hence, teachers can create/select appropriate memes to "explain the complex concepts in a simpler way" (Reddy et al. 2020) and to introduce new content (such as fictional characters or oeuvres, a grammatical issue, information about accents, stress, pronunciation, etc.) in a humorous and enjoyable way. "The most endearing quality of a meme is that it 'doesn't take itself seriously' " (Sood in Harshavardhan et al 2019). Yet humor can be "serious" and educative by "reducing the stress in the classroom, arresting the learner's attention and improving retention" (Harshavardhan et al 2019). Educators can even use memes to point out grammar mistakes or incorrect sentences in a funny way. Mastering a language is very much connected with being able to spot the subtleties and get the puns that are unique to that language.

Students relate to memes, so they can come in handy for visual storytelling or other types of assignments, too. Moreover, memes are suitable for giving and asking for feedback, vocabulary revision (Kayali, N. K. & Aslı Altuntaş, 2021) and as an assessment method. Another good reason to introduce memes in different lessons is that they can be remixed and allow for imaginative reinterpretation and endless innovation.

Memes can be used for teaching and practicing any school subject; in the language classroom they can promote language acquisition by means of multimodal texts (Domínguez Romero & Bobkina, 2017).

3. Our classroom experience: Active to passive voice memes.

Because working with memes is still an unregulated field that demands a lot of effort from both the teacher and the students, we selected a narrow grammar niche to test the effectiveness of this untraditional method.

First of all, both authors selected a group in their respective specialties (first year Translation Studies for Andreea Pele, and second- and third-year students who

had chosen the transversal discipline *Learning English with Technology* for Ramona Bran) and then we decided on the passive voice as our target lesson. We both went through the traditional process of teaching and practicing before introducing the first meme-based exercise. Several others followed before we provided our students with two templates and the task of active to passive transformation. A week later both our groups turned in their homework digitally on the two platforms used by the two universities: the Virtual Campus of UPT and Google Classrooms preferred by the West University. There were 17 responses from the Translation Studies students and 17 from the *Learning English with Technology* students. The students in Translation studies also received a follow-up traditional exercise in the exam to check, tentatively, if the use of a visual, immersive exercise provided any better understanding of the active to passive voice transformation.



Figure 1 Original homework template 1 for passive voice



Figure 2 Original homework template 2 for passive voice

The homework consisted of adding text to the two templates in order to create a passive voice meme. The first one illustrates an important transformation that occurs with the doer and their agency once the sentence undergoes the process of passivization. It relies heavily on the implicature behind the two pictures, the size of the crocodile versus the smallness and cuteness of the cat, to convey a similar message about the significance of the subject in the active sentence as opposed to that of the agent in the passive sentence.

The second template's weight resides in the humor of the third picture accompanied by the prompt of the inner voice. This time, the purpose of the passive to active transformation itself was secondary to the direct invitation to humor.

The results were as expected: some understood the assignment, some did not, some homework was correct, some was not. However, what we did notice was how in true meme fashion, the meme evolved.



Figure 3 A student's passive voice homework in accordance with Template 1

The figure above is an example of a properly done homework, of what we expected, but what made it stand out is the intertextuality with other memes that populate social media, or rather that populated social media at the end of April - beginning of May 2022. At first glance the sentence does not seem to make sense, but at the time the homework was assigned, "Kill John Lennon" was a very popular sound on Tiktok that numerous users played to their cats while recording their pets' hilarious reaction. This is a strong argument in favor of memes being a continuing conversation because this student knew from class that their teacher had a Tiktok account so she must have come across a video of a cat reacting to this sound.

Another example of proper grammatical solution combined with out-of-the-box thinking is Figure 4, below, mixing and remixing the two templates by taking the character from the second template, modifying it, and adding the structure of the first. Again, it is the mark of a continuing conversation based on the assumption that the teacher knows who the famous person in the template is, that it is him in both instances: one where his energy is closer to that of the cat in the original template, the other where it is implied that he is more like the crocodile.



Figure 4 Homework example combining Template 1 and Template 2

The Translation Studies students also received an active to passive follow-up exercise to check if the meme assignment helped them better recall and put in practice the theory of active to passive transformation. The exercise consisted of 4 sentences out of which only 3 could undergo the change, each sentence was awarded 0.5 points, so the maximum score was 2. Out of the 17 who turned in the homework, 8 achieved a maximum score, 5 had a score of 1.5, 3 had a score of 1, whereas one student scored only 0.5 points. This leads us to conclude that the prospects for implementing this on a larger scale and more consistently are promising.

4. Conclusion: limits and future work

There are obviously pitfalls to using memes in lessons, such as copyright issues, ethical issues, meme generators have preloaded images that might be inappropriate (foul language, cultural insensitivity, sexual references, etc.); there is the risk that memes propagate stereotypes, discrimination, or offensive statements. Moreover, as Boyle (2022) points out, memes could be a source of misinformation, particularly in the absence of robust digital media literacy, and critical thinking skills. So, according to Harvey and Palese (2018), if educators are mindful of these perils, they might employ memes as vehicles to enhance their students' "critical mimetic literacy." At the same time, when introducing memes or meme-based tasks in education, teachers need to be careful with the selection and with providing clear guidelines.

Finally, using varied pedagogical methods is a constant recommendation. While memes cannot become an exclusive teaching tool, they can be integrated successfully into the classroom, especially when dealing with a complicated subject (i.e. the passive voice). The purpose of eliciting more participation from students is met and they get more easily engaged in solving the task(s), provided that the students are "in tune" with the cultural references. Therefore, we contend that teaching with memes promotes learning and creativity. Naturally, this leads to an opening up of the

classroom by acknowledging visual media as a communication and teaching tool for students who are today's meme-natives.

Internet memes have shown potential for language teaching and learning, but it is necessary to experience working with them more consistently in order to gather a solid and relevant corpus of information that we can build on.

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