

INTEGRATION OF INTERNET MEMES WHEN TEACHING PHILOLOGICAL DISCIPLINES IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

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A rapid increase of available information affects students' perception of any message and formation of priorities; the period of concentration on one subject is reduced; students prefer concise vivid visual images. Internet memes become a part of students' daily communication and broadcast today's cultural and information realities. The aim of the study was to evaluate the effectiveness of Internet memes integration while mastering philological disciplines (for example, English) by Ukrainian students. The authors experimented to check the methodology proposed within one program unit. We conducted the experiment in the 2020-2021 academic year and involved 68 students and 5 teachers of Dnipro Academy of Continuing Education, Donetsk State University of Internal Affairs and Mykhailo Tuhan-Baranovskyi Donetsk National University of Economics and Trade. The authors conducted pre- and post-experimental surveys and informal interviews to compare academic achievements and provided a system of tasks integrating memes. Implementing the experiment, we clarified the dominant way of students' perception and processing of information and revealed the expediency of integrating memes into teaching English. The authors determined the dynamics of the levels of students' motivation to learn English through Internet memes integration and established quantitative values of the levels using the method of mathematical statistics. The conclusions emphasize the need to improve teachers' pedagogical skills, developed critical and creative thinking to integrate memes into educational activities. The authors stress the relevance of the further detailed study of the educational potential of memes in teaching not only philological disciplines but also other subjects of the curriculum.

Keywords: Internet meme; philological discipline; English; multicultural education; media-information literacy; motivation.

Introduction

The development of digital technologies and digital transformation of many branches of social activity form citizens' attitude to modern political parties and leaders, social changes and events, cultural aspects as well as influence their behaviour. 94 % of young people aged 14 to 25 are digital natives, i.e., active users of information and communication technologies (ICT), including the Internet and social networks (Eurostat, 2020). They can quickly find and process information and perform several tasks simultaneously, preferring gamification and interaction in the networks, which, in turn, significantly affect the way they perceive any information. The scientists (Kornuta, Pryhorovska & Potiomkina, 2017; Strutynska, 2020) have also concluded that modern adolescents (especially students of high education institutions) are characterized by “clip thinking”, i.e., the inability to concentrate for a long time on one task, the dominance of visual perception of information in short bright passages, etc.

In today's educational environment, applying Internet memes at the lessons of philological disciplines becomes relevant due to their authenticity and validity (following reality). The issues of memes and their role in society, their media function, and peculiarities of distribution were initially studied by Dawkins (2006), Rushkoff (2003), and Brodie (2009) who emphasized that memes contained the cultural information and could change the perception of local and global events. It should be mentioned that the term “meme” itself does not originate from the English word “memory” but from “memetics” (the theory of the evolution of cultural information).

The Internet has made the spread of memes highly popular due to their visibility, concision and memorability, and the term has integrated into the vocabulary of active users. The scientists (Shifman, 2013; Cannizzaro, 2016) explored the essence of an Internet meme as a component of digital culture and conducted a meme-oriented analysis of digital content. At the same time, Internet memes and digital media texts were considered viral and jointly remixed, modified, or transformed (Cannizzaro, 2016).

Nevertheless, the scientists (Boa Sorte, 2019; Elmore & Coleman, 2019; Dongqiang et al., 2020) aimed at presenting reflections on adopting Internet memes as possibilities for teaching in the context of digital

cultures or as an innovative pedagogy. The teaching strategies were grounded on classifications of memes analysis; remixing existing memes in order to investigate narratives of dominant ideologies, issues of race, age, gender and social backgrounds; and reading and writing political memes as instruments of manipulation.

Some scientists (Purnama, 2017; Sedliarova, Solovyeva & Nenasheva, 2020; Lara & Mendonça, 2020; Keno, 2020; Kayali & Aslı Altuntaş, 2021) studied how to incorporate Internet memes when teaching languages, social sciences and humanities within enjoyable learning and teaching environment, others analysed the variety of interpretations of memes on the Internet (Putra & Triyono, 2016) and conducted the experiment to explore whether the use of memes as visual forms of communication on the Internet could help students improve creative writing skills (Ramadhika, 2020). The scientists Reddy, Singh, Kapoor, and Churi (2020) made a numerical and statistical analysis, using memes even during testing, and proved the feasibility of their use in classroom activities.

The Ukrainian scientists (Dziubina, 2016; Poda, 2017; Vityuk et al., 2021) explored Internet memes as a phenomenon of modern digital culture and emphasised that the main characteristics of memes could include information saturation (the presence of a concise and short phrase understandable for students, question, aphorism, etc.), emotional colour (usually humorous nature of the text), unusual and easy perception of the idea (filling the idea with a new atypical content through words play, metaphor, figurative the meaning of words, etc., i.e., the meaning of the phrase is unstable).

Summarizing the above researches, we have identified the following functions of Internet memes:

1) representative: reproduction of the characteristics and properties of a certain idea, which can express the opinion of a particular person and/or community with appropriate emphasis on the necessary information message and its change;

2) communicative: reaction to a discussion situation, creation of a special language space, understandable to a certain group;

3) manipulative: the ability to advocate certain ideas, to form and influence people's opinions, to change attitudes toward events;

4) creative: reproduction of modern events and interesting phenomena in a creative format using online tools and constructors (for example, Canva, Iloveimg, Meme Generator, Crello, Mr-mem, Meme arsenal, Risovach, Makeameme.org, etc.).

Thus, accelerating the pace of life and constantly increasing the flow of available information, changing needs, values, and priorities of students, especially their perception of any message, require adaptation of the educational process and education system in general: the study and application of new forms and methods of information dissemination that it would be noticeable to students and effectively remembered by them. One of such methods is incorporating Internet memes, which, among other things, are a part of modern students' daily communication and broadcast both cultural and informational realities of today. The phenomenon of Internet memes has already been studied from many aspects, but the peculiarities of their integration into the process of teaching philological disciplines in higher education institutions in order to increase students' motivation to learn languages remains relevant.

Therefore, **the aim** of the article is to present the educational potential of Internet memes in teaching philological disciplines (for example, English) in higher education institutions.

To achieve this goal, we have outlined the following tasks:

1) to analyse the effectiveness of using memes as a means of forming students' foreign language communicative competence, multicultural education and media-information literacy;

2) to determine the level of students' motivation to learn philological disciplines (for example, English) through the integration of memes into educational activities.

Methods

Research Design

To conduct a comprehensive study on the integration of Internet memes the following methods we used the mixed research design based on quantitative (pedagogical experiment; tests to compare academic achievements; measuring variables; hypothesis testing) and qualitative (oral interview before and after the experiment; informal interviews; observation of participants in the learning process; comparison and generalization of pedagogical experience on the research problem; analysis of the data collected in a statistically valid manner, e.g., via the method of mathematical statistics to establish quantitative values of the level of students' motivation to learn English through the integration of memes into educational activities).

Participants

68 students of the Communal Institution of Higher Education “Dnipro Academy of Continuing Education” of the Dnipropetrovsk Regional Council”, Donetsk State University of Internal Affairs and Mykhailo Tuhon-Baranovskyi Donetsk National University of Economics and Trade were involved in the experimental activity in the 2020-2021 academic year. All the students participated in the experiment at all stages of it. The authors decided to trace the dynamics of their motivation to learn the English language through integrating Internet memes while teaching and to compare the results at the ascertaining and control stages.

To conduct the pedagogical experiment, we got support from 5 teachers of the English language who delivered classes and workshops to the students in the high educational institutions mentioned above.

Instruments and Procedure

In order to study the possibilities of using memes in educational activities, we decided to choose classes of English as a philological discipline. The pedagogical experiment was conducted to investigate the influence of their integration on students' motivation to learn English.

At the ascertaining stage of the pedagogical experiment on the integration of memes into teaching English, the students were interviewed about the general expediency of using memes in educational activities, the way the students perceived and processed information in general; and we also conducted individual interviews and questionnaires among the teachers.

The survey among the students consisted of the following questions:

1. What is an easier and more effective way for you to perceive information?
2. What do you think a meme is?
3. What functions does a meme perform, in your point of view?
4. What are the most important features of memes, in your point of view?
5. Can Internet memes be used as a tool for teaching philological disciplines (for example, English)?

These surveys and interviews aimed at developing methods of integrating memes in the process of teaching philological disciplines (i.e., English) and determining the necessary tools.

At the formative stage, the pedagogical experiment was implemented through the activities in synchronous mode (i.e., studying the topics “Mass Media” and “Internet” at the classes of English and processing visual materials (memes) as well as lexical and grammatical material for classroom activities) and asynchronous mode (i.e., homework done by the students). The new language input on the topics defined was introduced and activated by the teachers during class activities. The students exercised materials with the visual support of memes within the following lexical range: the Internet, modern means of communication and information, communication on the Internet, social networks in the life of modern young people. Introducing rules and structures of the sentences within the following grammatical range (the use of Gerund, Participle I, the First and the Second Conditionals and sentences with the construction ‘What if..?’, Modals of Deduction) was also updated and developed.

We should mention that educational activities with Internet memes incorporated when teaching English were built on the principle of “from simple to complex”, i.e. there were involved thinking skills in both lower and higher-order: skills which help to remember certain facts; to understand the meaning of educational materials; to promote using the information in a new (but worked out typical) situation; to determine the relationship between the studied material; to develop information evaluation skills; to create a new intellectual product based on the processed material. When teaching philological disciplines, especially any foreign language, we took into consideration the fact that knowledge and understanding of lexical and grammatical material should be the basis before students could be able to pursue agenda and produce their ideas and opinions through a foreign language. Depending on the level of students' language and speech training, lesson objectives and expected learning outcomes, a teacher was allowed to use various forms of work with the integration of Internet memes.

Consider an example of the integration of memes (created via meme generators imgflip.com) that was used, among others, when teaching English during the formative stage of the experiment. It should be noted that the teachers were offered certain forms and methods of integrating memes into an English class but each decided which of them were appropriate for working with a particular group, depending on the students' psychological characteristics, language and speech training. For instance, the students were asked to analyse the meme “Expanding Brain” created via memes generator imgflip.com which consists of a text part with lexical and grammatical structures of the topic (becoming aware of daily media impact; learning specific skills of critical thinking; creating personal media responsibility; sharing insights on media literacy with friends) and a creolized part, which depicts the brain that achieves greater enlightenment at each new stage

of learning. Integrating a certain meme into the educational process, the students were offered the following forms and methods of work:

1. Brainstorming (warming-up).
 - In small groups complete the chart “Reasons to consume information sensibly”. Summarize your ideas.
 - Answer the questions and elicit the information: Is it essential to check the source of information? Why (not)? In what way do media influence people? What do people need to improve their level of media literacy? etc.
2. Lexical exercises to activate and consolidate the material.
 - Underline keywords and give or choose their definitions (for example, media literacy is...).
 - Put the phrases of the meme into chronological order.
 - Match the picture with the phrase; fill in the gaps (becoming aware of... media...; learning specific skills of ...; creating ... media...; sharing insights on... with friends) with the words and phrases “daily impact”, “media literacy”, “critical thinking”, “personal responsibility”.
 - Do the crossword puzzle. The answers are the words from the text of the meme.
3. Control of understanding the lexical and grammatical features of the meme.
 - Complete the phrase with the correct word without looking at the text of the meme.
 - Paraphrase the text by transforming the phrases with Participle I into sentences with verbs in Present Simple, for example: “becoming aware of daily media impact” could be paraphrased as “when you become aware of daily media impact”, etc.
 - Define the form of the verbs in the text or the function of the underlined words (for example: when analysing the phrase “becoming aware of daily media impact”, the students are supposed to define “becoming” as a gerund that acts as a subject in the sentence, and so on).
4. Development of search and creative skills.
 - Find out the origins of the meme and socio-cultural features by analysing informational articles on the Internet.
 - Find memes with similar grammatical structures online.
 - Think about the continuation of the phrase.
 - Make up two sentences, using a word with “-ing” form as Gerund and as Participle I: sharing insights on media literacy with friends (for example: Sharing insights on media literacy with friends benefits them in the future. Sharing insights on media literacy with friends, I help them create consume information wisely).
 - Using the text of the meme, find another picture on the Internet to illustrate it.
 - Think of another text for this meme to illustrate its meaning connected with media literacy.
5. Development of speech and language competencies.
 - To improve written skills, the teachers prepared their students for essay writing (e.g., What should we do to consume information wisely? How can we create personal media responsibility?) and also suggested them to create a cinquain (e.g., they transformed the meaning of the meme into a cinquain, a five-lined poem).
 - In order to develop oral speech, the students were invited to participate in the discussion “To be or not to be media literate?” based on the method of “Six thinking hats”, which involves the presentation (oral coverage) of group work from different points of view, as well as contributes to the formation of students’ critical thinking. United into mini-groups, the students looked for the answer to their questions:
 - a. What do you know about daily media impact/specific skills of critical thinking/personal media responsibility/media literacy?
 - b. What emotions do you have about media literacy? What does your intuition tell you?
 - c. Is it essential to be media literate? What are the possible problems/difficulties/challenges? What should you pay attention to?
 - d. What are the advantages of being media literate? What is the value? Can media literacy be implemented or developed?
 - e. What creative ideas are there to overcome the difficulties with media literacy? What are the possible alternatives?
 - f. What is on the agenda? What are the conclusions and the goals? What steps should we take to develop and improve the level of media literacy?
6. Project activity.

Referring to the text of the meme define your level of media literacy and develop your program of individual work aimed at improving your critical thinking skills and media literacy overall. Visualize it.

Thus, by integrating this meme when teaching the topic “Mass Media: the Internet”, the teacher was able to clearly demonstrate not only the use of key lexical and grammatical units but also the basic steps of media literacy and issues related to multicultural education.

However, defined forms and methods are not stable for each individual educational environment: the teachers had the opportunity to change the order of exercises, to choose other agreed memes based on the students’ characteristics and preferences, to vary the exercises for homework.

At the control stage of the experiment, a repeated survey was conducted among the teachers to find out quantitative and qualitative changes in the students’ motivation to learn English. The dynamics of the levels of the students’ motivation to learn English through the integration of memes into the educational process has been analysed and generalized; the quantitative values have been established using the method of mathematical statistics.

Results

At the ascertaining stage of the pedagogical experiment, it was found that 16.1% of the students thought it easier to perceive information through listening (they are auditory learners), i.e. a teacher’s oral explanations were important to them; 25% of the students were visuals, i.e. they memorized information that contained certain images; 26.8% of the students were kinaesthetic learners, for whom the physical activity was quite important and who were able to learn best when combining movement, coordination, rhythm, emotional response and physical comfort; 32.1% of the students did not have a clear form of perception of information, i.e. they tended to combine visual images with sound and/or emotional component, that is why it would be advisable to take into account the combination of different forms and methods of introducing and practising lexical and grammatical material.

Almost unanimously, the students defined a meme as an amusing recognizable picture with a funny (even hilarious) text that is generally etched in memory. This was an obvious result, since the students are active users of the Internet and social networks, so they are familiar with memes as a phenomenon of digital culture and use them in their daily communication both in the virtual space and in personal interaction.

Regarding the functions performed by memes, the following answers were most often heard: entertaining (52%), informative (23%), advertising (37%), political (49%), other (19%). However, all the students agreed that the main purpose of a meme might be to attract and retain the audience’s attention.

Important characteristics of memes for the students were a familiar and acceptable context, easy to understand text (i.e., written in simple words), humorous nature, and cute aesthetic look. However, most of the students still found uncertainty about the possibility of using memes while teaching any subject (67%), philological disciplines (including English) were not an exception.

At the ascertaining stage of the experiment, this survey among the students was conducted in order to identify the general feasibility of using memes in educational activities, the way the students perceive and process information in general. In addition, we held individual interviews and questionnaires with the teachers as well, since the purpose was to determine the level of their students’ motivation to learn English. Summarizing the answers provided by the teachers, we obtained the following results: according to the teachers’ observations, 27 students (39.7%) had a low level of motivation, i.e. they did not show much desire to participate at the course, they periodically did homework on the subject, had a low level of language and speech competences (level A1: the students were able to build elementary sentences to meet specific needs and interact at a simple level); 24 students (35.3%) showed a medium level of motivation, i.e. they were more interested in activities during the lesson, partially but on a regular basis doing homework, had a mediocre level of language and speech competence (level A2: the students could understand isolated phrases and widely used expressions necessary for everyday communication and converse in simple and ordinary situations); 17 students (25%) had a high level of motivation, i.e. students were interested in activities during the lesson, fully regularly did homework on the subject, had a sufficient level of language and speech competence (level B1: the students could understand the basic content of clear normative speech and were able to simply and coherently speak on topics of personal interest or familiar ones).

This survey of the teachers was conducted to develop methods for integrating memes while teaching English and determining the necessary tools, which should be implemented at the formative stage.

At the control stage of the experiment, the results of the repeated survey with the teachers testified quantitative and qualitative changes in the students’ motivation to learn English. The dynamics of the levels of the students’ motivation to learn English through the integration of memes into the educational process

was analysed and generalized; the quantitative values were established using the method of mathematical statistics (Table 1).

Table 1. *The dynamics of the levels of the students' motivation to learn English through the integration of memes in the educational process*

Levels	The ascertaining stage		The control stage		Dynamics
	students	%	students	%	%
Low	27	39.7	23	33.8	- 5.9
Medium	24	35.3	25	36.8	+ 1.5
High	17	25	20	29.4	+ 4.4

Analysing the data in Table 1, we observe positive dynamics in the levels of the students' motivation to learn English, which can be explained by their interest in non-standard forms and methods of teaching, the proximity of visual support of lexical and grammatical material to their realities and interests.

Discussions

The results of the study allow us to conclude about gradual changes in the levels of the students' motivation to learn English due to the use of non-standard forms and methods of introduction, actualization, and processing of lexical and grammatical material, in particular, through the integration of memes. According to the teachers' opinion, the forms and methods of memes integration into the educational process did not significantly affect the level of the students' language and speech competencies, as the experimental period was relatively short but had a positive effect on their interest and involvement in the work process as well as completeness and correctness of home tasks: memes were one of the effective tools to attract and retain students' attention. The teachers also noted the prospects of using the forms and methods of memes integration into educational activities not only in terms of teaching English but also in the development of the students' media literacy and multicultural education, as all these components are easily combined and complementary.

As for the students' observations, the level of their motivation to learn philological disciplines (especially, English) increased due to the unexpected integration of topical and satirical memes into educational activities. Previously it had already been reported that for high school students or university students, memes should reveal social satire, social protest, cultural issues, political comedy, or other complex issues of today to involve them into educational activities and strengthen their intrinsic learning motivation (Keno, 2020).

Our results are in good agreement with other studies (Boa Sorte, 2019; Dongqiang et al., 2020) which have shown that memes can be adapted into various contexts and subjects to catch students' attention while educational activities. That is why in our study we have analysed the peculiarities of integrating memes in terms of teaching English, promoting students' multicultural education and media literacy.

The results have shown that by using memes in foreign language classes, the teachers had the opportunity to practice and consolidate individual words or phrases, constant expressions or catchphrases, jokes or repatie (conversation characterized by quick, witty comments or answers), grammatical constructions, remarks or some parts of a dialogue. When studying certain lexical items and/or figures of speech, the pictures with memes offered to the students also contained comparisons, metaphors, allegories, antitheses, etc., which students had to determine. We have also proved that in foreign language classes memes could be used to introduce students to a foreign language environment (as warming up), to adjust to work and activate the acquired knowledge of vocabulary and grammar, to introduce new material during the main part of a lesson, to apply initially and independently their knowledge in standard situations, to develop students' creative and critical thinking, to integrate aspects of multicultural and media literacy, to relieve tension in the final part of the lesson during reflection, etc. This is noted by other researchers as well (Ramadhika, 2019). Moreover, we should mention that the results of this study overlapped with the research by Kayali and Aslı Altuntaş (2021), in our case, students' target vocabulary increased due to memorable phrases used when creating memes and the students managed to overcome difficulties with learning new lexical items and their application in practice.

The results of our study evidenced that memes allowed updating students' background knowledge and promoting their multicultural education, as it turned out, memes could reflect and reproduce cultural features and phenomena of the past and present. We realised that an adequate understanding of culture (by both meme creators and meme consumers) was crucial in determining whether the use of any meme would be

successful or fail (Nieuburt, 2021). That is why we adapted memes information content to local realities (i.e., misunderstanding of certain cultural concepts or lexical items can affect communication) and supplemented by images of famous people, events, works of art etc., taking into account other scientists' experience (Putra & Trijono, 2016; Nakaznyj & Kyrpa 2016).

Moreover, it should be stressed that memes could contain a number of meanings, including hidden ones, and form a stereotypical perception of the event or phenomena, or people in general, etc. Therefore, using memes at the classes, the teachers encouraged the students to discern contexts, critically analyse information, draw conclusions on the basic idea through the analysis of text media messages and their illustrative design (available logos, cultural markers, recognizable symbols, etc.), which would possibly prevent the thoughtless spread of potential fakes and media viruses in the future. It also promotes the development of critical thinking as a basis of media literacy (Naidonova & Sliusarevskiy, 2016; Elmore & Coleman, 2019).

Furthermore, our findings on the role of Internet memes during the educational process also correlate with the conclusions of some scientists (Reddy, Singh, Kapoor, & Churi, 2020) who affirm that memes are not able to make the subject absolutely easy to understand. Memes are supposed to be rather supplementary tools combined with other pedagogical approaches, forms and methods.

We consider it is essential to outline the benefits of teaching philological disciplines (for example, English) applying a number of forms and methods of memes integration. The main advantage is that students' overall motivation to learn any philological discipline (for example, a foreign language) increases. Also, we observe that the students' vocabulary is formed and activated, and practice of grammatical structures is improved since the students are involved into the activities at the lesson and while doing home tasks. Incorporating forms and methods of memes integration to teach philological disciplines (especially English) provokes the students' creative and critical thinking skills as well as lays the ground for their media-information literacy and multicultural education and develops "learning by doing" habit.

However, some limitations in the research should also be acknowledged. First of all, we did not observe significant changes of the level of the students' language and speech competencies as experimental period was relatively short. Implementing this study during a longer period would also be beneficial. Secondly, the teachers had chosen specific tasks with Internet memes (among proposed) to teach their students depending on their interests, psychological characteristics, language and speech training, that is why we were not able to develop a single and multipurpose script to deliver classes with memes integration. Integrating a certain set of tasks when teaching definite topics could benefit future research in this area. Despite these limitations, the students were satisfied with the performing non-standard tasks to master a foreign language. According to the obtained results, the level of their motivation to learn philological disciplines through the integration of memes into educational activities has increased.

Conclusions

Regarding the rapid flow of information and in the dominance of the network space, Internet memes are not only a part of students' daily communication but also convey the cultural and information realities of today.

Exploring the phenomenon of Internet memes, the article identifies the main characteristics and functions of memes, analyses ways to integrate memes in teaching philological disciplines (for example, English): as a means of forming students' foreign language communicative competence, multicultural education and media literacy. The methods of their integration into philological disciplines (for example, English) teaching are presented, the peculiarities of creation and/or selection and use of Internet memes in the educational process of high education institutions are emphasized. The influence of Internet memes on students' concentration, perception and memorization of informational messages is analysed.

Implementing a pedagogical experiment, the dominant way of perception and processing of information by the students was clarified and the expediency of integrating Internet memes into teaching English was revealed. The positive dynamics of the levels of the students' general motivation to learn English through the use of forms and methods of work with memes in educational activities has been experimentally confirmed: quantitative values of the levels have been established using the method of mathematical statistics.

However, it is worth emphasizing the advisability of integrating Internet memes, keeping in mind the boundary between entertainment content and education. Memes can be seen as additional aids to other pedagogical tools, such as video-based learning, flipped classroom, and so on. Of course, integration into the educational process and the creation of a successful (from a didactic point of view) meme requires from a teacher not only perfect mastery of the subject and pedagogical skills but also developed critical and creative thinking, awareness of their students' interests, the realities in which they live, taking into account the rapidity of memes popularity and their constant updating (therefore a teacher should update the templates and examples of memes prepared for a lesson at least once a year). We do not rule out the possibility of

irrational use of Internet memes in classroom activities: using meme resources, it is necessary to take into account students' psychological characteristics, their language and speech training, clearly formulate goals, objectives and expected results or learning outcomes, avoid ambiguous or provocative situations, and shifting the emphasis from educational activities to entertainment. In our opinion, the expediency and educational potential of Internet memes in teaching both philological and non-philological disciplines require detailed and in-depth study.

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