

# Using Memes in the Language Classroom

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## Abstract

*Teaching vocabulary is a big challenge for teachers, and also a huge difficulty for students is to remember the vocabulary items. The main purpose of this study is to create an enjoyable learning and teaching environment to help students revise certain vocabulary items and make students have fun by being creative. In that, memes are trendy phenomena which are both entertaining and creative way of expressing one's feelings on one topic. In this study, memes were used for vocabulary revision. To see its effect on vocabulary recall, a quiz was conducted before and after the experiment. To determine its effect on students' opinions, a feedback form was also applied after the experiment. The results show that the use of memes affected the vocabulary recall of the Medicine students positively. Therefore, they could be used as one of the strategies to create an innovative learning and teaching process.*

**Keywords: Memes, Vocabulary, Language learning, Language teaching**

## Introduction

Over the past decade, technology has been developing at an overwhelming speed and it is often changing people's lives to make things easier and better for them. On the other hand, it has taken over control of people's lives. They cannot go through the day without having to text someone, watch videos, surf the internet or use any kind of tools and applications. It has settled in the center of people's lives; therefore, without it, they feel disconnected from the world. In an era when people's lives are surrounded by so much technology, no one can deny the need to integrate technology in the way people teach and learn. One way of integrating technology in language classrooms is by generating memes.

Memes are cultural composites - ideas, symbols, and practices - that spread in multiple forms through imitation and appropriation. The concept of a meme was first applied to evolutionary theory in the 1970s to explain how cultural information (i.e., norms, attitudes, values, and beliefs) spread from person to person by the biologist Richard Dawkins (1976).

The internet, with its immediate and infinite connectivity, enables memes to evolve faster and spread farther than ever before. Essentially, every new social network is another source of memes (Gleick, 2011). It is an activity, concept, catchphrase, or piece of media that spreads, often as mimicry or humorous purposes, from person to person via the internet. It may be just a word or phrase, sometimes including intentional misspellings or corrupted grammar. These small movements spread from person to person via social networks, blogs, direct email, or news sources. They may relate to various existing Internet cultures or subcultures, often created or spread on various websites.

An internet meme usually takes the form of an image, GIF, or video. A meme is defined “in our case” as an idea or image spread very quickly on the internet.

In language learning classes teaching and learning vocabulary has a significant importance since the number of new vocabulary is high in one lesson especially if you have to follow a coursebook or if the students are at low proficiency level. Teaching vocabulary means giving the word’s definition, doing exercises about it, understanding and using them in new contexts, teaching its synonyms and antonyms and so on. However, it is not over because learning and recalling these vocabulary items is as challenging for the students as they have to practice and recycle the newly-learned vocabulary items in order to recall them when needed.

In previous studies, memes were used for different purposes. In one study, memes and Instagram enhance students’ participation (Purnama, 2017). The participants of the study were 23 EFL students of Health College in the Malang. In their research, they used observation and questionnaires. Each group was asked to develop one meme based on the given topics that they had received during English classes. Each group was assigned to upload or post their meme creation in the appointed Instagram account. Results of the study showed that creating memes supports intrinsic, integrative and instrumental values which affect the students’ motivation. Namely, using memes supplied the actual process of learning the target language-intrinsic value; target language itself and its speaker-integrative value; and consequences and benefits of having learned the target language-instrumental value. These are the values and attitudes; as Dörnyei (2001) explained, “the most far-reaching consequences in motivating L2 learners can be achieved by promoting positive language-related values and attitudes.”

In another study (Davison, 2012), they defined a meme, brief history of the memes, early internet memes and at the same time, current internet memes. Also, some types of memes’ language examples were given.

The other study (Baysac, 2017) made use of psychological phenomenology aimed at describing the lived experiences of the teachers in using

humorous memes in the 21st century class of learners and how they face the challenges of using humorous memes in their classes. In conclusion, the teachers stated their experiences with those words as shown in the table:

| Statements of Teachers’ Experience  |
|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Arouse students’ attention</li> <li>• Appropriate the value of the course I teach</li> <li>• Promote global consciousness</li> <li>• It makes the class happy</li> <li>• Set the mood of the class</li> <li>• Determining the readiness of the students</li> <li>• Had their undivided attention</li> <li>• Could spark moments of laughter</li> <li>• Filter the affective domain</li> <li>• Sustainer of learning interest</li> <li>• Concretely visualize an idea or concept</li> <li>• Making the setting a very light atmosphere</li> </ul> |

As clearly stated, memes are great ways to have a positive atmosphere and grab the students’ attention throughout the lesson. In this study, memes were used as an in-class vocabulary revision activity. Students worked in pairs and created their memes with the given photos and target vocabulary items.

### Method

The study was conducted in March 2019 at Gazi University, College of Foreign Languages in Turkey. In the College of Foreign Languages, classes are organized according to the student’s scores in the placement test to have homogenous classes in the fall term. The classes are organized according to students’ departments (Engineering, Economics and Administrative Sciences, Architecture and Medicine). There were nearly 43 classes organized according to the students’ departments. Two Medicine classes with nearly forty students were chosen. They were 18 male and 20 female and their ages ranged from 17 to 20.

Before the experiment, all of the students studied English in the School for more than 5 months. Thus, the students had been exposed to the same amount of English. To assure the homogeneity of the two groups in terms of their general proficiency in English, classes’ general point of average was the same (83/100). For general English, Speak Out Intermediate books were being used.

### Data Collection

The instrument in this research is a quiz (15 questions - fill in the blank statements) Appendix 1 (the quiz). A poll of target vocabulary items was created from the two units which were covered the previous week and a quiz of 15 fill-in-blanks statements was designed to be used before and after the creating memes activity to check its effect on vocabulary recall. To find out about students' opinions, a feedback form was applied after the experiment Appendix 2 (feedback form).

Before the study a brief information about the memes was given to the students; also, some student and university life memes were shown as examples. The quiz was applied to the students as a pre-test to see if using memes is an effective way to recall. During the study, for vocabulary revision, target vocabulary items of Unit 9 and 10 were grouped into 3 sets. Students worked in pairs and were supposed to create a meme by using these sets of 3 words. The images were given by the instructors.

Since unit themes are a little bit abstract, the vocabulary items were hard to combine as well. So, the students had difficulty in developing a meme. However, they could all do it well with the help of pair work. In this case, students were given the image, an empty laminated paper and a board marker. It was not an internet meme because of an access problem to the internet.

Each group was given the image and 3 vocabulary items and the same amount of time. Guidance and help were supplied when needed.

Three vocabulary items related to the environment and a trendy meme photo were a challenge to complete. Still, the students both revised the vocabulary items and put them in a context and also use the words in the sentence, which requires higher thinking skills. If they made use of only 2 of the words (because of irrelevant content), it was welcomed too.

After completing their memes, they were supposed to share on Whatsapp to vote on the best. By doing so, the students were able to read and check all of their friends' memes. On voting, they were appreciated by their peer.

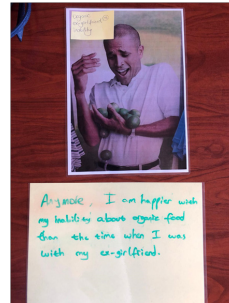


Figure 1

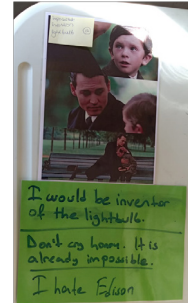


Figure 2

In Figures 1 & 2, it can be seen that all of the target 3 items were used. In Figure 2, it is also seen that the students changed the part of speech of one word- invention- and they used it as an inventor in the correct way.

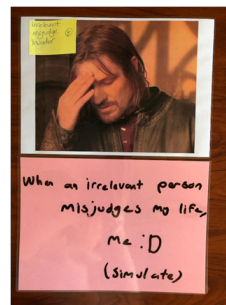


Figure 3

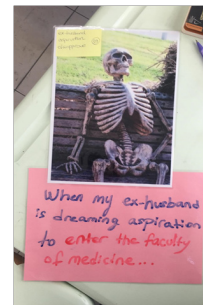
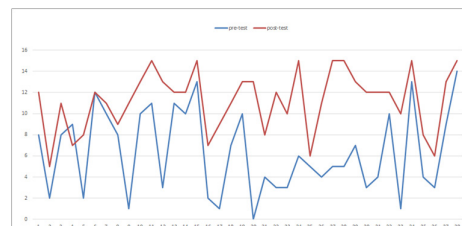


Figure 4

In Figures 3 & 4, the students used only two of the target items. However, they individualized their situation as content in Figure 4. Since they are Medicine students, they know how difficult to enter the faculty.

### Findings and Discussion

This chapter attempts to present the analysis of the data by providing a graph. In fig. 5, below blue line shows the pre-test results and the red line shows the post-test results. It can be concluded from the figure that there has been an increase in the post-quiz results of students compared to the pre-quiz results.



When we have a look at the feedback form to understand student's ideas about the activity, the results were again promising. We originated the feedback form in 4 categories: 'What is your opinion about using memes in the classroom?', 'Have memes helped you to remember words better?', 'Do you find creating memes enjoyable?' and 'Would you like to have this kind of classroom activity for another topic?'

Regarding the first question on the feedback form related to the students' opinions, they found the memes in the classroom use, good, fun, interesting, enjoyable, beneficial and efficient. They expressed that it has so many benefits. They stated that they enjoyed the activity. They said it was an enjoyable activity and it helped them to learn how to use some words.

The second question on the feedback form asks whether the memes have helped them to remember words better. Most of the students stated that using photo images and colorful cards to write their memes on made them more memorable, that forming sentences with the given words helped them to remember those words more easily, and that before the memes, it was difficult for them to remember the vocabulary items. Still, after doing the memes activity, they learned the words. In conclusion, they said they found this method useful.

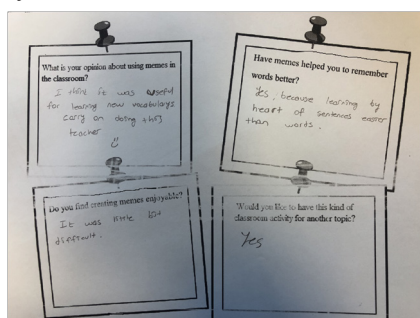


Figure 6

As it is clear in Figure 6 that the students want their teacher to carry on doing this.

Using memes in the classroom made them help to learn more effectively. It helped them remember words better.

In the third part asking, "Do you find creating memes enjoyable?" again, students said, "yes, of course. When I did it, I had lots of fun." Although the

activity was a bit hard to do for them, it was pretty good. They asserted that they also enjoyed while reading the memes produced by the other groups in their class.

The last question was about whether the students would enjoy doing this kind of classroom activity for another topic. The students certified that they would love to try this kind of activity more because they learn better. At the same time, they have fun in the classroom and that it is a much more effective method than studying traditionally and learning words by heart; however, they stated that they found it a bit difficult as it requires production.

All in all, this study reached its aim in creating a fun and beneficial teaching and learning environment. Students who were subject to this study were all willing to participate in the activity. In their groups, they were enthusiastic about creating the best meme among the others because when they created their memes, they shared them on the classroom WhatsApp group and the best meme was chosen. They reflected these in a positive way on their feedback forms.

## Conclusion

This study seeks to facilitate the language learning process, especially by incorporating images, vocabulary items and written text, namely memes. The result, as is expected, shows that the use of memes affected the vocabulary recall of the Medicine students who study at the College of Foreign Languages positively. There are many positive effects of employing memes for language students to be more creative and engaged in language learning. First of all, using memes in vocabulary revision activities promotes the students' proficiency level. The students scored higher in the post-test, having been conducted memes in the classroom. Secondly, the students became more interested in the activity by images. They tried to come up with contexts and use the target words in the right way. Last but not least, memes created a positive teaching and learning environment, which helped the students cast aside the burden of learning a new language and concentrate solely on the learning task.

Creating memes for vocabulary revision itself was an effective and fun activity for students. After

generating their memes with the given words on the given images, sharing them on the classroom WhatsApp group to select the best meme of the classroom was even more challenging, engaging and joyous. However, they were really honest while selecting the best meme. They did not vote for their memes to be selected. They voted for the meme they liked most.

The results of this study overlapped with the study by Purnama (2017) in that, in our case, students shared the memes on a classroom WhatsApp group and were voted by their friends to choose the best meme in the classroom. When they got voted by their friends, it affected their motivation in a constructive way.

**Suggestions**

Since we are teaching digital natives, who perform and rely almost all of their activities on technology, as Prensky (2001) stated, we should be integrating technology into our classes. Purnama (2017) used memes and Instagram to enhance students’ participation. She used two groups as participants and they were supposed to develop one meme based on the given topics and upload or post their memes in the appointed account.

Baysac (2017) emphasized that with the advent of e-technology, teachers are fast exploiting humorous memes to spice up their lectures. In our study, due to some physical drawbacks, we preferred a non-technological method of using memes. However, a meme can take the form of an image, GIF, or video. Thus, there are some websites and tools on the internet that can be used to generate memes. Videos can be used as a form of creating memes, as well.

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**Appendix 1A**

**Fill in the Blanks with the Words from the Box (There is one extra)**

|               |                |            |
|---------------|----------------|------------|
| mispronounce  | charismatic    | era        |
| irrational    | reusable       | misjudged  |
| revolution    | fortnight      | inability  |
| insulated     | underestimated | irrelevant |
| disobeying    | protect        | harmful    |
| inappropriate |                |            |

- The influence of the media should never be \_\_\_\_\_.
- I thought he wasn’t going to support me, but I \_\_\_\_\_ him.
- David’s clothes were wholly \_\_\_\_\_ for such a formal occasion.
- Mustafa Kemal Atatürk has been the most \_\_\_\_\_ leader ever.
- I know it is quite \_\_\_\_\_, but I am frightened of butterflies.
- Sophie is a rebellious girl. She has a tendency of \_\_\_\_\_ rules.
- We spent a \_\_\_\_\_ with my ex-wife in İstanbul two years ago. However, it wasn’t enough to see all the beautiful sights in the city.
- You can have your house \_\_\_\_\_ against heat loss by having the windows double-glazed.
- These documents are pretty \_\_\_\_\_ to the present investigation.
- The ex-prime Minister used to \_\_\_\_\_ some words although he was very talented at giving speeches.

11. This group of chemicals is known to be \_\_\_\_\_ to people with asthma.
12. In the past there were no disposable nappies. Women used to wash their babies' \_\_\_\_\_ nappies.
13. The fall of the Berlin wall marked the end of an \_\_\_\_\_.
14. In the last decade marketing underwent a \_\_\_\_\_. There has been a great change.
15. My ex-boss' \_\_\_\_\_ to accept new ideas was the main cause of the company's failure.
6. He is regarded as one of the most \_\_\_\_\_ film directors of his generation.
7. It is important to encourage children's dreams and \_\_\_\_\_.
8. Russian conquest and \_\_\_\_\_ of Siberia gathered force by the middle of the eighteenth century.
9. Having the baby was a \_\_\_\_\_ in their lives.
10. The survey showed that 32 percent of respondents approve, 54 percent \_\_\_\_\_, and the rest are undecided.
11. Before the \_\_\_\_\_ of the light bulb, you had to watch plays during the day when it was light outside.
12. After 30 years in \_\_\_\_\_, our local member of parliament is retiring next year.
13. She does aerobics four times a week in her \_\_\_\_\_ to achieve the perfect body.
14. Some said her work was \_\_\_\_\_ because only God could create such beauty.
15. What is considered \_\_\_\_\_ in one country may be standard business practice in another.

### Answer Key

|                   |                  |
|-------------------|------------------|
| 1. underestimated | 9. irrelevant    |
| 2. misjudged      | 10. mispronounce |
| 3. inappropriate  | 11. harmful      |
| 4. charismatic    | 12. reusable     |
| 5. irrational     | 13. era          |
| 6. disobeying     | 14. revolution   |
| 7. fortnight      | 15. inability    |
| 8. insulated      |                  |

### Appendix 1B

**Fill in the Blanks with the Words from the Box (There is one extra)**

|                  |             |               |
|------------------|-------------|---------------|
| divine           | invisible   | overestimate  |
| misunderstanding | unethical   | decade        |
| spread           | quest       | disapprove    |
| politics         | on standby  | invention     |
| colonisation     | influential | turning point |
| aspiration       |             |               |

1. The benefits of nuclear technology, she said, had been grossly \_\_\_\_\_.
2. These bacteria are \_\_\_\_\_ unless viewed with a microscope.
3. His ridiculous comments showed a complete \_\_\_\_\_ of the situation.
4. The \_\_\_\_\_ of the disease in the last few years has been alarming.
5. Environmental awareness has increased dramatically over the past \_\_\_\_\_.

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### Answer Key

|                     |                  |
|---------------------|------------------|
| 1. overestimated    | 9. turning point |
| 2. invisible        | 10. disapprove   |
| 3. misunderstanding | 11. invention    |
| 4. spread           | 12. politics     |
| 5. decade           | 13. quest        |
| 6. influential      | 14. divine       |
| 7. aspirations      | 15. unethical    |
| 8. colonization     |                  |

### Appendix 2

#### Feedback Form

1. What is your opinion about using memes in the classroom?
2. Have memes helped you to remember words better?
3. Do you find creating memes enjoyable?
4. Would you like to have this kind of classroom activity for another topic?