

## Mememes in the English Classroom

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### **Introduction**

Show me a picture, I remember better or a picture is worth thousand words is an often quoted saying. In the age of internet, it may have to be rephrased to "Allow me to create a picture or a memeto learn and remember better." Creativity is an important element while learning a language and or using the language to be explicit in expressing one's views and opinions. People learn quickly when they create. Creating an image is one of the best and powerful ways to demonstrate one's learning, understanding and applying the learnt language. It's a great way through which static information is shared in a dynamic manner.

Teaching English to gen X and gen Y students is interestingly challenging. These learners can be called as Digital Natives. The term Digital Natives can be defined as children or students who have grown up with internet in their life as an ever present medium that helps to play, present, perform and create virtual platforms that help them connect, network and collaborate with people across the globe. With access to the internet and web tools the current generation has the ability to recreate and reinvent both workplace and the society they live in. The change has already happened and is contagious. The only panacea for a teacher is to get used to it and agree that knowledge moves both ways and we need to do our best in order to make sure that no one, neither the teacher nor the student is left behind.

Digital natives are used to receive and send information really fast. They like to process information parallelly, multi-task and prefer graphics to a text. They are hyper and prefer to access information randomly. Digital natives prefer instant information, instant message, instant

recognition, instant gratification and several rewards all instantaneously. They function best when they are wired, interconnected with the internet.

There is one pertinent question that all teachers who use technology have to answer. Is access to internet synonymous to the usage of the internet? Definitely 'No.' Several researchers have begun to investigate and understand how different types of technology and technology supported practices influence young people's learning. For example, Kennedy et al in 2009 and Maton & Bennett in 2010 informed that most of the students use digital technologies for communicating and gathering information than use it for creative or gaming activities.

**Background of the study:** The present paper is based on research conducted in a private engineering college, an autonomous institution in Hyderabad. English is offered as a course for I.B.Tech students. In addition it is also offered to the students of II and III semester as a Sem End Examination with Continuous Internal Evaluation. As part of continuous internal evaluation, students complete several classroom based activities. In this context, during COVID-19 pandemic students were given a topic and were asked to create a meme. The focus of the activity is vocabulary and creativity. Teaching language also demands the use of authentic material in addition to the prescribed course books. Authentic materials help the students bridge the gap between the classroom and real world. Shepherd (2016: *ibid.*) mentions the advantage of using such authentic materials: "using authentic materials is a relatively easy and convenient way of improving not only your students' general skills, but also their confidence in a real situation."

## **Review of Literature**

Memes play a major role in creating interest in language learning and developing creativity. In the book *The Pragmatics of Internet Memes* edited by Chaouqun Xie (2022) discusses the growing popularity of internet memes. The popularity has increased so much that more attention is paid to understand the memes and also being used as a classroom activity.

1. Darwinian Creativity and Memetics (2011) by Maria Kronfeldner describes the power and beauty of memes. The study describes how memes allow us to understand how human beings live, language and creativity all come through the same replicator power.
2. Memes of Translation: (2016) The Spread of Ideas in Translation Theory revised edition by Andrew Chesterman explains how memes have been surviving from many generations, successfully being transmitted from one culture to another and have proved to be relevant and interesting to a wide range of audience.
3. Critical Memetic Literacies in English Education: How Do You Meme? by Leah Panther and Darren Crovitz (2023) introduces practical dimensions to the introduction of memes in language classroom. Memes come with new advocacy and creativity. This book throws light on how the educators can use memes to create and develop the language learning abilities and creativity among the learners.

There is a lot of research by several educators across the globe to understand how memes help in learning vocabulary and how the fun element in the memes help them to learn better in a joyful environment.

## **Research Questions**

The present paper is based on the following research questions

- How to engage students in an English classroom to learn language?
- What impact does memes have on the English Language Learning of engineering students?
- How memes reinforce language learning and develop creativity.

## **Creativity and Language Learning**

Creativity is one among the 21st century skills that the learners have to develop. Several neurologists and researchers have found that brain is driven by something new and different always. This unique feature of the brain can be exploited to develop creativity among the learners. Creativity also develops imagination to get novel and unique ideas. This

can be primarily one reason for the young generation to be connected with internet and digital media. Eugenia Loffredo and Manuela Perteghella claim that "creativity and translation share the same essential aspects so that the two together amplify pedagogical benefits".

### **Creativity through Technology**

Daniel Pink (2005) reminds us that the world needs highly creative people with strong interpersonal skills. He urges all the educators to educate the students in different ways that will help them in developing concept oriented skills, which will help them improve their abilities to detect patterns, connect diverse and dynamic ideas which are used to create something new and different. Thus, memes the most popular digital images are considered as a rich source of language learning and to develop creativity among the students.

Memes as a source of language learning: Richard Dawkins coined the word 'meme' in 1976. He defined meme as a gene that is used to explain, reproduce and transmit cultural values. Many researchers have argued debated and attempted to prove that the scope of memes is not limited to sociology, politics, culture, sociolinguistics, communication and music studies. The meme concept itself has now become something of a meme (Costall 1991), the popularity of which can also be partly evidenced by the simple fact that Oxford University Press published the 40th anniversary edition of *The Selfish Gene* in 2016. The popularity of the memes have been increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. Several memes on vaccines, online and offline classes have become viral on the social media platforms.

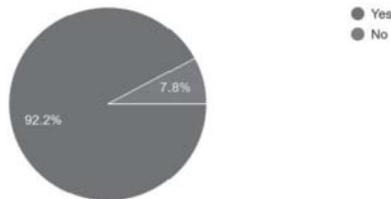
### **Methodology Adopted**

The researchers have circulated a google form with questions related to memes. 51 II year Engineering students have taken the survey. The survey has close ended and open ended questions. The students were given a topic- 'Online and Offline Classes' and were asked to create a meme and send the meme for the researchers to analyze both language and creativity among the students. The students were informed that plagiarized responses will not be considered for analysis.

**Findings and Analysis:** This paper attempts to present the analysis of the data by providing a pie chart for each question answered by the learners.

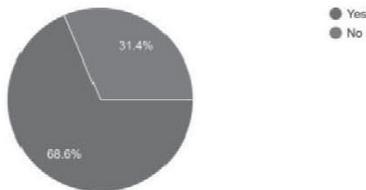
For the first fundamental question on the usage of memes, majority of the students said, yes. That indicates that the students are familiar with memes.

1. Do you read memes?  
51 responses



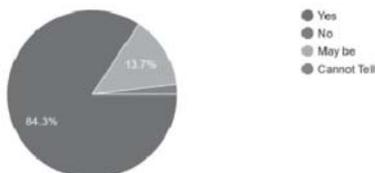
For the follow up question on have you created memes? Interestingly 68% of the students are aware of creating memes.

2. Have you created memes?  
51 responses



In an opinion-based question, memes enhance your creativity, the students' response is interesting. While most of them agreed, 13% of the students felt that memes may enhance creativity. Only 2% gave a neutral message. 84% of the students felt that memes help in enhancing creativity among the students.

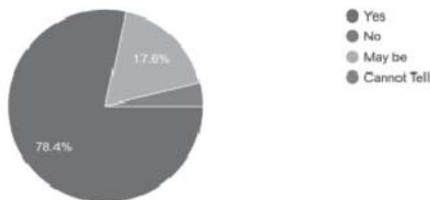
3. Memes enhance your creativity  
51 responses



The next question targets on vocabulary with the use of English language, there was a mixed opinion. Majority responded positively, while very few students said either may be or cannot tell. However, nobody has informed that they do not know the role of memes in vocabulary building.

#### 4. Memes help in Vocabulary building

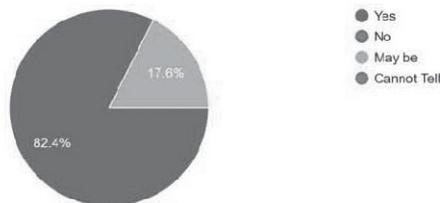
51 responses



The next question is framed to understand the role of memes in creating interest, majority of the students responded positively and very few answered as 'maybe'.

#### 5. Memes create interest in language learning

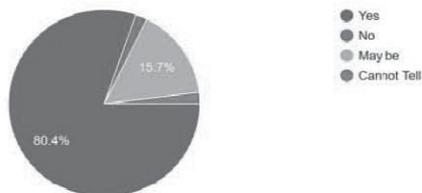
51 responses



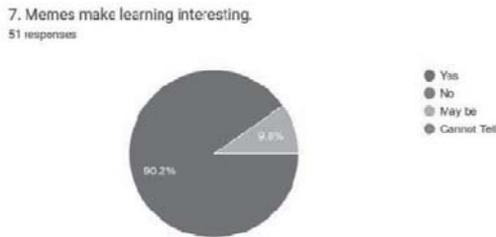
The sixth question is created to understand the role of memes in understanding contemporary situations through memes. Majority of the students responded positively.

#### 6. Contemporary situations can better be understood through memes

51 responses



The seventh question is based on their interest. 90% of the participants said yes.

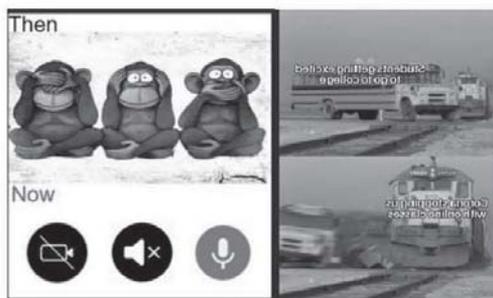


The last question was an open ended question. It was based on their learning experience while creating the meme. Majority of the students answered that their ability to communicate and interpret increased, their creativity was also developed.

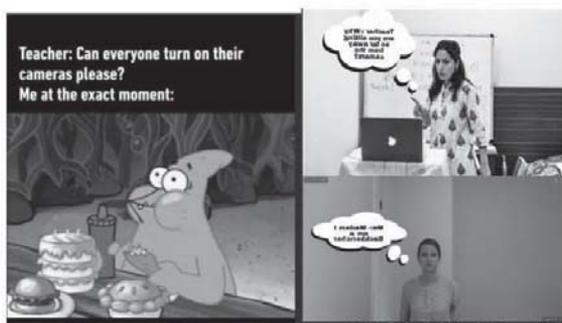
Thus, after carefully analyzing the responses given by the students it is evident that memes enhance language learning and creativity. They provide abundant language learning opportunities and can be considered as authentic material in teaching and learning a language. Further, the students had joy of learning, which will definitely help them in retaining their interest in language learning.

### Sample Memes

The study was conducted with 51 students. Adding all are a major chunk of memes is difficult keeping in view the space. Hence a few



Picture-1&2 Culture Differences



Picture-2&3 Humour

carefully selected memes that describe culture change and humour are given as samples. To summarize

### **Memes helped the students to**

- Engage themselves in a joyful learning atmosphere
- Learn the language through authentic material
- Develop creativity
- Developed visualizing an idea or a concept into meaningful expression

### **For teachers using memes has helped them**

- Arouse students' attention
- Increased participation
- Promoted global consciousness
- Sustained learning interest

### **Limitations of the Study**

Focus was only on creativity and did not consider vocabulary

Action research was conducted only to a few students of engineering

### **Future Scope**

- Memes can be used to build vocabulary
- Can exploit memes in teaching training sessions

## Conclusion

Originality, flexibility and novelty are the chief characteristics of a meme. Cannizzaro believes that information cannot be shared or learnt in isolation from its context. Hence it is a systemically connected and not an atom. What distinguishes memes from jokes or cartoons is the rapidly growing communication around them. Memes are either written on different themes or for the same theme. Hence the boundaries are limitless.

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