

# Memes to Foster L2 Speaking and Writing

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**Abstract**—Memes are the new social media language and they increasingly exercise their potency of effecting intense discourses among younger audience. In this dimension, they are seen as interesting resources of communication that can promote L2 learning. English Language Acquisition (ELA) has always been a challenge for vernacular-medium Indian students. The study took 177 student participants (with vernacular-medium background) pursuing UG programmes that had English as the medium of instruction. The research objective was to bring out the significance of employing memes to bridge the gap the learners find on their way to manage all their courses in English language. This empirical, questionnaire-based-survey addressed the research objectives: Explication of the notion of employing memes as informal materials; Demonstration of the use of memes for the development of L2 competencies; and Analysis of Learners' perceptions/attitudes towards the use of memes in Second Language Acquisition (SLA). It revealed the areas that had seen significant improvement in speaking, writing, grammar, and vocabulary.

**Index Terms**—memes, L2, Second Language Acquisition (SLA), speaking, writing

## I. INTRODUCTION

“Recent explorations in L2 pedagogy signal a shift away from the conventional concept of method toward a postmethod condition” Kumaravadivelu (1994). He (1994) also declares that “it can reshape classroom research and motivates a search for an open-minded, coherent framework based on current theoretical, empirical, and pedagogical insights that will enable teachers to theorize from practice and practice what they theorize.”

The current postmethod scenario and internet affordances have led the language teaching practitioners to the discussion on the use of media materials, particularly, culture-specific materials. “Learners have already been socialised into the schematic knowledge associated with their mother tongue: they are initiated into their culture in the very process of language learning” (Widdowson, 1990, p. 110). It is perhaps a more sensible approach in modern language learning methods that the employment of social media is made effectively accessible. In particular, ELT has been noticeably rendering a good support system with the integration of social media over the years. YouTube, Facebook, WhatsApp, Wikis, Blogs, TedTalks and Forums are becoming commonplace in language learning and are increasingly used in formal and informal pedagogical means. Drotner (2018) remarks that “young people live in an increasingly complex media culture and their digital practices are now one of the key areas of identity performance and creative learning.” The ubiquitous character of smartphones with just economical internet service has revolutionized the life of common Indian youth. Agrawal (2018) believes that technology can allow new and innovative solutions – now smartphones have democratized everything in India and have changed the old thought of technology’s inability to reach out to India’s poor for their expensiveness and inaccessibility.

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In digital era, memes are the new social media language and they increasingly exercise their potency of effecting intense discourses among younger audience. “They enable participants to simultaneously construct their individuality and their affiliation with a larger community: circulating a self-made video or a Photoshopped image allows people express their uniqueness, identifying them as digitally literate, sophisticated, and creative; at the same time, the text they upload relates to a common and widely shared memetic video, image or formula” (Graham & Dutton, 2019, p. 47). In Indian social media, memes occupy a very large space particularly as a comment in the world of political, social and cultural criticism. Rather than being simple whimsical creations of bored teenagers, they are modes of expression and hold significant economic, social and political power (Graham & Dutton, 2019). Memes are used to expose a budding content that swiftly attains fame or notoriety in the world of internet (Bauckhage, 2011). In current times, internet memes have remarkably amplified public interest and this act has resulted in the emergence of a reasonable number of websites and communities (Bauckhage, 2011). Laughter and fun or pun apart, going with the witty statements: ‘a picture is worth a thousand words’ and Shakespeare’s ‘brevity is the soul of wit’, it can even be reckoned as the most thought-provoking media tool. Certainly, words find their place in the memes, but it is often the appropriateness of the pictures which completes the objective of transporting the intended message to the readers.

In these dimensions, it becomes necessary to look at memes as interesting resources of communication that can greatly promote L2 learning. Ståhla and Kaihovirta (2019) consider that “the drive to communicate can sometimes manifest itself in interaction with and through images.” It is currently possible to say that “Interest-based Language Teaching (IBLT) has constructive results on L2 learning and it improves the path and nature of the learning by developing learners’ interest and providing scope for more customized, controlled and desired learning” (Asgari et al., 2019, p. 70). They further suggest that using interest-based instructional materials, learners’ individual or group characteristics should be deeply measured and the materials should also be considered by institutes, teachers, curriculum designers and educational policy makers in language teaching or education. With the understanding of meme as an opinion-sharing product, its use for academic performance in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) should definitely be taken into consideration.

## II. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

English Language Acquisition (ELA) has always been a challenge especially for the vernacular-medium Indian students studying English as a second language. According to DeSousa (2018), “university is the first place in which students from regional language-medium schools and English-medium school will necessarily meet in the classroom.” Agrawal (2018) expresses that English is a great divider in Indian education – when the subjects are studied in most-spoken Indian languages, it becomes difficult when the vernacular-medium students apply for graduate schools for which the tests are conducted in English. In such situations, they have to relearn all the technical terms and concepts in the foreign language. It is very obvious in many parts of India that L1 learners from regional language medium schools studying undergraduate programmes find it difficult to obtain knowledge and skills in English language which is inevitable for their professional and academic growth. Speaking English fluently is the safest guarantee for white-collar work in modern India (Agrawal, 2018). The irony is that though the regional language medium students study English as a second language for many years, yet, a sizeable population is found to be struggling with the demonstration or expression of reasonable amount of communication skills at college level. Ramanathan (2005) registers that students schooled in vernacular-medium find themselves utterly disadvantaged at the tertiary level because their English proficiency at the end of higher secondary is usually reckoned to be insufficient for college-level work. The situation becomes even worse when they need to write exams of all their subjects in English. So, it is a common problem that two sets of students arrive at the college scene (Ramanathan, 2005). Some good number of bright students with excellent knowledge in other subjects, discontinue from studies or become diffident eventually as they are unable to demonstrate their subject knowledge with their cursory English - in instances when vernacular-medium students sit with English-medium students for their college degree courses, they face the arduous task of not only conversing in the class in English but also to write the state-mandated examinations in English. On many occasions, this embarrassing assignment turns out to be unachievable for many vernacular-medium students with low-salaried parents and many of them even drop out of the education system during and after college (Ramanathan, 2005). Also, these are due to the fact that they did not study other subjects in English language and there was not much scope in school for practicing or developing their language proficiency. LaDousa (2018) admits that language-medium students build an inferiority complex and fall silent. In these severe circumstances, the college level teachers engage such students in ‘gap-bridging’ activities to prepare them for employment and other life opportunities.

## III. METHODOLOGY

### A. Participants

In connection with the aforesaid scenario, the study included 177 first-year student participants who had studied up to their higher secondary in their regional language medium and pursuing various undergraduate professional degrees in the medium of English at Vellore Institute of Technology, Tamil Nadu, India. The participants were from diverse linguistic backgrounds; 83 from Tamil medium, 44 from Telugu medium, 27 from Hindi medium, 12 from Malayalam

medium, 7 from Bengali medium and 4 from Kannada medium. The study also included 4 professors of English who helped in conducting the study. The institute was the right stage for the experiment as English was used as the lingua franca in its multicultural and heterogeneous set up.

### *B. The Study Period*

The study compiled the data that were collected for three academic years, i.e., from 2016-17 to 2018-19 to study the participatory involvement of students and obtain the legitimate results on the effective use of memes as materials for L2 speaking and writing in classrooms. At the end of their semesters, the participants responded to the survey questions and the required data were collected accordingly.

### *C. Research Objectives*

The primary research objective was to bring out the significance of employing memes to bridge the gap that the learners find on their way to manage all their courses in English language. In view of this, the study addressed the following questions through the findings of an empirical, questionnaire-based survey:

- 1 To explicate the notion of employing memes as informal materials to improve learners' confidence in learning English language;
- 2 To demonstrate the use of memes for the development of speaking and writing competencies in L2 classrooms; and
- 3 To analyse learners' perceptions/attitudes towards the use of memes in Second Language Acquisition.

### *D. Rationale for the Selection of Memes*

The notion of utilising memes in English language classrooms fundamentally adopts the psychological interpretations of William Glasser's 'Choice Theory.' Glasser (1998) primarily speaks of four fundamental human psychological needs: Belonging or Connecting, Power or Competence, Freedom, and Fun.

The experiment was carried out following certain methods. The teachers created a group of the class students in WhatsApp and Facebook where all the learners were added as active members. The teachers invited all types of memes from the learners and received a decent amount of responses. The students were gradually asked to interpret the message used in the memes. The learners voluntarily participated in the activity and the responses were overwhelming. At times, there were clarifications and attempts of providing the clear definition observed through the interference of other participants' texts. Not surprisingly, the practice, over time, made the participants significantly became more communicative with the professors. Moreover, the method elicited more appropriate responses from the group members and instilled a good amount of confidence in the learners that intrinsically made them compete with other learners in the group in the form of oral presentation. They were even willing to take risks in their presentation as they felt they had familiar content in their hands. The professors that took part in the experiment did not interrupt the oral presentation for any feedback for the genuine reason that it would impede the flow. But at the end of the task, the presenters were given formative feedbacks. With clear demonstration of the appropriate ways of presentation and specific feedback from the instructors, the learners could improve their performance in their subsequent attempts. Despite the interference, the learners enjoyed the activity and exhibited the desire to learn more.

The learners were pleased with the tasks as they were given the liberty to make their own choices. Therefore, they enjoyed the ownership of the decision-making process. They invested their effort in the work productivity as this option gave a space for respecting their voice in the classroom. Above all, the fun element added more flavour into the activity. The professors opined that good humor and enthusiasm predominantly stimulated the participation, inquisitiveness, motivation and interest of the learners and they were very helpful in discovering the fertile areas in which the learners generally excel in.

### *E. Sections of the Study*

The first section vividly talks of the ways in which the material was used. It also identifies the areas that could gain improvement with the use of memes and gives certain examples of the matters involved in memes. The second section finds out the innovative idea of using memes in English language learning classroom. In general, it surveys how the learners find the role of memes as materials in the classroom and how helpful they are in attaining various linguistic competencies. Section three lists out, in order, the types of memes that are generally preferred by young learners. Final section detects the areas of the language (speaking and writing) that are improved by the use of memes.

### *F. The Activities*

Two types of memes were used in the experiment: picture memes and video memes. The activities were also designed in consideration of honing speaking and writing competencies. The students were, at first, very much enthused to take part in the activity when the teacher announced the material that was to be used in the tasks. Later, students were split into groups according to their first language (L1). The popular memes from the pertinent linguistic and cultural background were displayed to the students and they were assigned the task of describing (in oral and written form) the depicted content to the other group members in detail. It was mainly about the relevance and importance of the use of pictures and wordings that feature in the memes. The pictures, being often from the familiar medium like cinema,

cricket or politics, the students were self-propelled to respond to the task. In India, memes are created for passing comments on the cultural, social and political activities. “Memes act as sensitive indicators of public opinion, trending themes and collective identities, they promote and oppose propaganda, they entertain, inform and educate” (Denisova, 2019). The memes used in the activities widely had pictures from the movie scenes as movies are being the most popular and one of the most influential consumed medium of entertainment in India. In addition, such memes are quite popular among college-going youth as they easily communicate the intended reactions of the public, general audience, and communities.

Indeed, the description of memes majorly housed simple present tense in the oral presentation. Though the sentences started with simple present, they shifted to past or future tenses every now and then. When descriptive language was used in writing exercise, the performer was compelled to provide the listener with the background of the content or the idea projected. Naturally, several grammatical and verbal components were reasonably used in the presentation, viz. present continuous, present perfect, present perfect continuous, simple past, past continuous, past perfect, simple future, future continuous, direct and indirect speeches, and vocabulary. The task also gave ample scope for the instructors to teach the aforementioned segments of language.

The memes chosen for the activity had their elements and matter imported from everyday talks. For instance, the routine activity of resuming our works on Mondays, the victory of Indian Cricket Team in recent series, the implementation of new rule or regulation by the government bodies, general comparison of past with present, etc. The observations validated that the exercise could gradually metamorphose into a more formal learning act; enjoying the inventive humour or wit or sarcasm in the depiction apart, the learners were able to or try to treat the content in a presentable language. Accordingly, it consumed the regular qualities of a detailed presentation. It was much more evident in descriptive writing which naturally demands formality.

#### IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The following Likert scale questions were included in the questionnaire and issued to the respondents primarily to arrive at an understanding of the receipt of learning materials:

TABLE 1

S No	Question	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1	I welcome the novel idea of using memes in English language classroom.	47%	52%	1%	-	-
2	Memes stimulate my interest towards learning English language.	51%	46%	3%	-	-
3	Memes help me to initiate my communication with others.	47%	48%	5%	-	-
4	I can feel that I am given a space to voice my opinion when I share my thoughts about memes.	41%	36%	20%	3%	
5	I find it practically easy to orally describe or express my views about the content in the memes.	52%	46%	2%	-	-
6	I find it practically easy to describe the content of the meme in written form.	38%	43%	16%	3%	-
7	In discussions on the impact of social media, memes should be given preference as they are virally transmitted.	32%	31%	24%	12%	1%

The responses in Table 1 indicate that most of the learners welcome the novel approach and agree that the memes trigger their interest in English language learning and help them communicate with others. Also, while most of the learners find the use of memes relatively easier for speaking and writing, some are neutral when it comes to descriptive writing and a very few disagreeing it. But, it is clear that memes are significantly helpful in developing their speaking and writing skills.

##### A. Memes - Popular Among Young Learners

To know about the types of memes that naturally elicit responses for the assignments, the participants were asked to arrange them in order of their own preference. Following graphical chart presents the order:

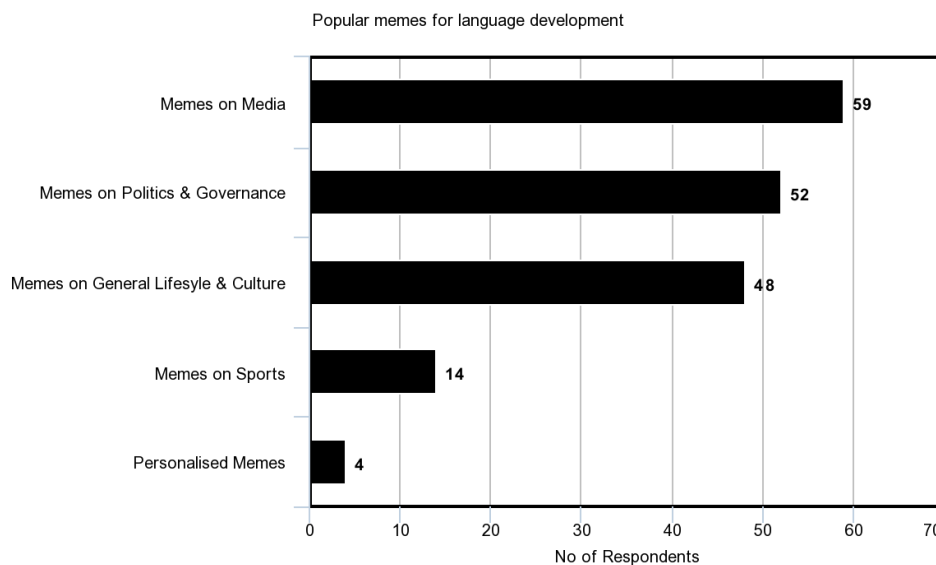


Figure 1

As we can see, Figure 1 presents media memes to be the most popular with 59 responses closely followed by memes on politics and governance with 52 responses and memes on general lifestyle and culture with 48 responses. Memes on sports and personalized memes received 14 and 4 responses respectively. It also implies that popularity of memes is another major factor in prompting interest in the practitioners of the language.

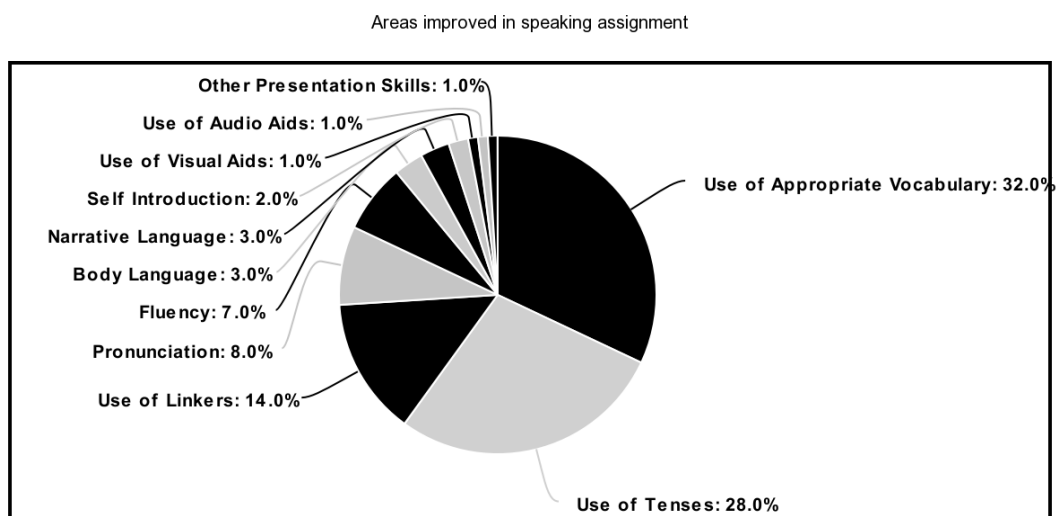


Figure 2

### B. How Helpful Was the Task in Speaking?

When the presenters were asked to speak about the picture or video meme, the first necessity was to use appropriate words to convey the intended meaning. For instance, if the meme were about ridiculing a politician for not fulfilling the election promises, the presenter, then, was expected to use the accurate words such as, campaign, promises, fulfillment, delivery, candidate, and failure. This made the presenter to look for proper vocabulary. If not, the instructor helped the presenters with the right words that can be used in the context. Likewise, the use of tenses was much needed to express the ideas. There was a definite need for knowing the distinction among present, past, and future tenses. Though the presenters could not use many linkers, the instructors could introduce some of those connectors to the performers. It was also witnessed that, over time, due to the increase in the number of presentations, the presenter could achieve a significant growth in fluency, pronunciation, punctuation, spelling, and the use of narrative language. At the end of the presentations, the instructors could also insist on the use of suitable body language. On top of these, the task made the presenter become efficient in using the audio and visual aids, such as, microphones, speakers, charts, black and white boards, maps, pictures, models, LCD projectors, flash-cards, computers, and print materials.

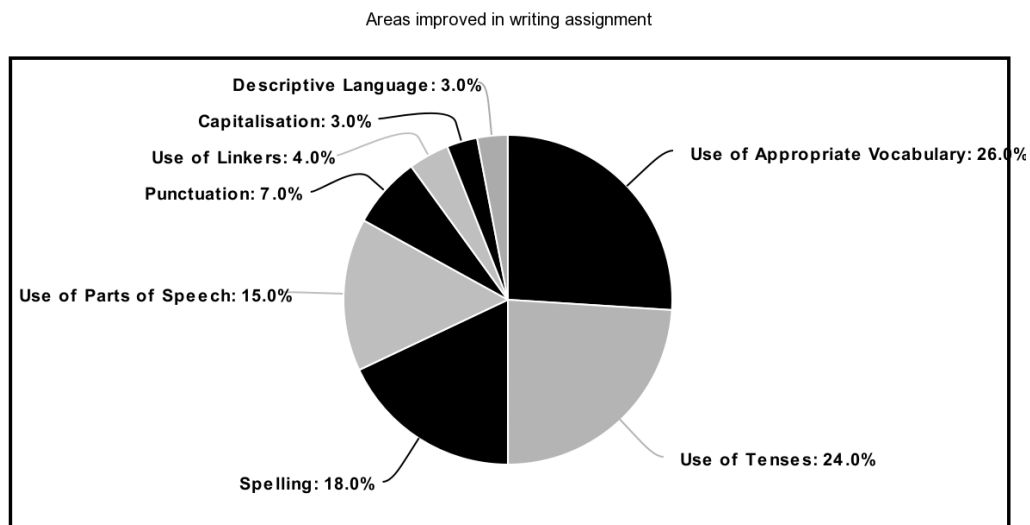


Figure 3

### C. How Helpful Was the Task in Writing?

When the presenters were asked to write about the picture or video meme, as mentioned earlier, there was an obvious need for using the appropriate vocabulary, tenses, and spelling. The writing task stressed upon knowing the differences in the use of parts of speech. Also, the exercise demanded the proper use of punctuation marks and phrases and words as linkers. Capitalisation was another segment that the learners could benefit from doing the task. Above all, the learners were well informed of the styles and operations of the language that is generally used in descriptions.

Figure 2, Figure 3, and their ensuing descriptions vividly reveal the areas that had seen significant amount of improvement through the tasks in the domains of speaking and writing. It can also be observed that the learners furthered their understanding and expertise in the areas of grammar and vocabulary, the two profoundly essential fields in the realm of ELA. These results were obtained with the help of the professors who taught beginner-level English courses to these learners. They were very impressed of the natural involvement of the learners in these gap-bridging activities.

The following observations were extrapolated from the responses of the professors:

- It is a common scenario that many students from language-medium background struggle to enhance their communicative competence which is predominantly measured by the use of English language. The major reason for this predicament is that such students join college degree programs having studied all their school subjects in their first language.
- The influence of L1 drastically interferes in the acquisition of L2.
- The use of memes in the classrooms makes the students more participatory and enthusiastic
- Students themselves volunteer to accomplish the tasks on memes.
- The use of memes offers more room for the teachers to teach descriptive language and grammar items such as parts of speech, tense, direct and indirect speech, and voices.
- The entire exercise functions as an integral language learning tool and gives bright hope for the teachers to base students' understanding on the operations of English language.
- Students' opinions on the role of memes in English classrooms had unanimous reflections:
- The notion of having memes in ELT gives the English Language Learners (ELL) a familiarity with the language that clears away the foreignness of the language.
- There is not much pain or strain involved in completing the tasks as they naturally fuel learners' interest levels.
- The performances give a good number of opportunities to demonstrate and share their critical perspectives.

### D. Limitations of the Study

As memes (used as tools of communication) emerge from different cultural backgrounds, the instructor is not anticipated to be aware of the reliability of the information shared about the content all the time. Nonetheless, the objective, having its base chiefly focusing informal or incidental learning, might sometimes be considered as a constraint. But, in a formal or structured learning point of view, memes shall be collected from one specific linguistic culture in order to have a more organised learning and understanding upon the content used for giving comments.

## V. CONCLUSION

Graham and Dutton (2019) utter that internet memes celebrate egalitarianism and they endorse the idea of freedom of expression where "participants of social-media-based discourse are expected to vocalize their thoughts and opinions

regardless of their sociocultural status, political affiliation, or gender” (p. 54). They also advocate that the freedom of expression is intrinsically related to the emotive, speaker-centered, communicative function. Hence, this experimental study is primarily fuelled by the utilisation of the above-suggested macro strategy to provide the learners with more space for a smooth initiation of their communication in the target language. The focus of this research was on L2 speaking and writing activities of the first-year undergraduate students from regional language medium schools in India. Considering learners’ association with memes in their everyday conversation, it was brought to use in an academic setting at the beginner-level. The responses and voluntary participation of the learners reveal that the experiment content was more learner-friendly and it pleasingly resulted in stress-free learning. It was also observed that the memes threw off their feeling of inertia and were pivotal in initiating their communication and improving their speaking and writing mechanics in second language. Furthermore, the exercise was objectively helpful in bridging the linguistic gap that the learners found on their way of communication and with strenuous practice, the learners could perform to the level of fairly-average students at the end of the academic years. Therefore, the findings of this study are also largely recommended for the attention of English language teachers who are in view of improving the L2 competencies of undergraduate-level students from various regional language medium schools. This might render a great academic help to a sizable population of underprivileged students who encounter all their college courses for the first time in English.

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