Internet Memes as Cultural Education Tools in L2 Teaching

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Abstract. The paper considers Internet memes as cultural education tools in L2 teaching. Normally considered as humorous and highly entertaining items in social networking communication, Internet memes can also be used to acquire social and cultural awareness in the context of secondary education. Internet memes have certain similarities with lexis and text. These properties define the algorithm for working with the memes: text-like qualities of memes state the structure of the algorithm and lexis-like qualities are responsible for its variable part. It makes it possible to combine teaching methods traditionally applied to lexis and text to Internet memes in L2 with information technology tools (meme generator programs), which results in a complex of classroom activities aimed at using Internet memes as education tools. Given the cultural capital of the Internet memes, the authors believe the efficiency of the aforementioned activities in teaching L2 students language and culture.

Introduction

Richard Dawkins defined the term “meme” in his studies of genetics and memetics as a cultural unit capable of propagating itself like a gene [1]. According to M. Dynel, “In internet users’ parlance, the label ‘Internet meme’ applies to any artifact (a film, spoof, rumor, picture, song, etc.) that appears on the Internet and produces countless derivatives by being imitated, remixed, and rapidly diffused by countless participants in technologically mediated communication” [2].

Being multimodal items, Internet memes demand a multimodal approach both to their study as semiotic units and to their application as educational tools. Multimodal communication and multimodal literacy now are highly discussed subjects in linguistics, pragmatics, social studies [3-5] with much emphasis on their cultural capital [6,7] and intertextuality [8-10], and in education [11-14].

The two major semiotic modalities of an Internet meme are image and written text [14]. One of the modes or both can convey social and/or cultural information at a time or this information can be derived from text-image interaction in a meme. Anyway, this cultural capital appears a valuable material ant tool for L2 learners to add to their cultural awareness and prepare them for intercultural and cross-cultural communication. Besides, being highly humorous Internet memes can make lessons more fun and represent important information in an amusing way.

In this paper, we aim at proving that Internet memes can and should be used as education tools that provide assistance to teaching language and culture in classroom activities to facilitate L2 teaching.

Material and methods

Being multimodal items, Internet memes as education tools require basic teaching methods traditionally applied to lexis and text to combine with information technology tools that allow to make new memes and their alterations.

Basic teaching methods applied to lexis being:
- looking up the word or expression in a dictionary;
- using a reference book for some cultural phenomenon;
- finding out similarities among synonyms;
finding out the etymology of the linguistic/non-linguistic unit.

Basic teaching methods applied to text being:
- pre-text activities;
- text activities;
- after-text activities.

When applied to Internet memes these basic teaching methods should be arranged and modified as follows:

a) **Text.** Internet memes are regarded as whole discourse units possessing text properties. Thus, the algorithm of each classroom activity involving memes is structured according to the sequence of basic text teaching methods.
   - Pre-text activities prepare students for working with the text.
   - Text activities check how well students understand the text and resolve any arising difficulties by provoking into thinking and finding answers.
   - After-text activities aim at making students apply new skills in similar discourse situations.

b) **Lexis.** Further analysis of Internet memes in the course of a classroom activity confirms their similarity to vocabulary units as components of a text. They are included in the text activity part of the algorithm:
   - looking up the word or expression in a dictionary;
   - using a reference book for some cultural phenomenon;
   - finding out similarities among synonyms;
   - finding out the etymology of the linguistic/non-linguistic unit.

As we have mentioned, text-like properties of the Internet memes are responsible for the structural organization of the algorithm. They define the sequence of activities—the stable unchanging part of the algorithm. Unlike text-like properties, lexis similarities of Internet memes outline the variable part of the algorithm—the order of vocabulary tasks. They may appear at any stage of the complex activity (from the pre-text to the after-text stage) in any combination relevant to the current activity.

**Results and discussion**

The current research has resulted in a number of classroom activities involving Internet memes transmitting cultural and socio-cultural information. In this paper we present some of them.

**Task 1**

1.a What American symbols do you know?
1.b Look at the picture and say what you know about the man in it.
Is he a historical figure or a fictional character?
What national symbols do you see in it?
What does his dress and his gesture tell you about?
Look up “Uncle Sam” in a dictionary of language and culture as reference or google it (fig. 1).
What other texts has ever been used with this image at wartime?

![Image of Uncle Sam meme]

Figure 1. *Uncle Sam* meme.
1.c Work with your partner.
Change the second part of the sentence making up about ten rules how to behave in the classroom. Compare your sentences, choose the best ones and create new memes using a meme generator program.
1.d Make a presentation of the memes describing decent behavior in the classroom.

Task 2
2.a Look at the meme with four seasons of the year (fig. 2).
Why does the winter has such an image in it? What does it allude to?

Figure 2. Winter’s coming meme 1.

2.b What do all these memes have in common (fig. 3-8)?

Figure 3. Winter’s coming meme 2.
Figure 4. Winter’s coming meme 3.
Figure 5. Winter’s coming meme 4.
Figure 6. Winter’s coming meme 5.
2.c What is the origin of all these memes?
2.d Which of them are used in advertising?
2.e Why do you think the ‘Winter is coming’ meme is so popular?
2.f Which of the memes resulted as memes contamination (the visual part comes from one meme and the text from another)?
2.g Make new ‘Winter is coming’ memes that could be used in advertising (use a meme generator program).

The Internet memes presented here are all based on intertextuality phenomenon, which is intrinsic to any cultural phenomenon.

The Uncle Sam meme in task 1 has quite a long history. The image refers to a symbol of the United States of America since 1812. It has been used at war times as a motivation poster. It has a serious cultural capital in the American culture. This item is no doubt a must in the cultural education for any learners of English who want to understand American English and American culture.

Winter is coming meme must be known to any man living today as far as the story it refers to is very popular producing an immediate humorous effect on the recipient. In case somebody has not seen The Game of Thrones or has not read the book, the memes and the activities in task 2 are sure to make the L2 learners of English to find out where the images and the text come from. One must know this meme to have common cultural bond with other social networking users.

The meme in figure 8 is an example of memes contamination which is a complex image-text association and interaction.

Every example using Internet memes as education tools presented in the paper is arranged according to the same teaching algorithm consisting of three stages, which is based on the structural similarities of the Internet memes to the text:

- pre-text activities (questions like “What American symbols do you know?” in 1a before studying the Uncle Sam symbol; “Why does the winter has such an image? What does it allude to?” before studying the chain of Winter is coming variants in 2a);
- text activities (analyzing the man’s clothing, gesture, facial expression and the written text of the Uncle Sam meme in 1b; questions in 2b-f);
- after-text activities (changing the second part of the phrase “I want you to study English or get out of class”; making up good behavior rules; creating the meme alterations using meme generator programs available in the Net; making meme presentations).

The variable part of the algorithm is based on lexis teaching methods applied to the memes. They are incorporated in the three stages described above (looking up the word or expression in a dictionary – “Look up “Uncle Sam” in a dictionary of language and culture as reference” as in 1b; using a reference book for some cultural phenomenon as in 1b, 2c; finding out similarities among synonyms as in 2b; finding out the etymology of the linguistic/non-linguistic unit, etc.).

Conclusions

The Internet meme functions as a humorous and highly entertaining discourse unit in social networking communication and contains what can be referred to as ‘social capital’. It is regarded as a
fact of Internet-mediated environment with its participatory culture quite a new material for classroom environment, which may give rise to some doubts as to its application for educational purposes.

However, practice shows that careful selection and a relevant approach to these multimodal texts appear effective in teaching language and culture in an L2 classroom. Since memes have common features with lexis and text we apply traditional teaching methods in a new context. We suggest an algorithm comprising modified teaching methods traditionally applied either to text or lexis since Internet memes have similarities to both. And the digital nature of memes accounts for using meme generator programs as a new educational tool. We consider that further research is necessary to cover more cultural background for greater L2 proficiency.

References