

## INTERNET MEMES AS A TOOL OF TEACHING FOREIGN LANGUAGES

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**Abstract.** *The rapid proliferation of digital communication has introduced internet memes as ubiquitous artefacts of contemporary online culture. Despite their informal origins, internet memes present distinctive pedagogical affordances for foreign language education. This article examines how internet memes function as multimodal teaching tools across key dimensions of language learning, including vocabulary acquisition, intercultural competence, motivation, and communicative creativity. Drawing on a systematic review of peer-reviewed studies and theoretical frameworks published between 2019 and 2025, this article analyses the linguistic, semiotic, and affective properties of internet memes and evaluates their integration into English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms. Findings indicate that meme-based instruction significantly enhances learner engagement and contextual vocabulary retention, while simultaneously fostering critical digital literacy and intercultural awareness. The article concludes by proposing a conceptual framework—the KarMeme Instructional Model—for principled meme integration in language pedagogy, and identifies directions for future empirical research.*

**Keywords:** *internet memes, foreign language teaching, multimodal learning, EFL/ESL, vocabulary acquisition, intercultural competence, digital literacy, learner motivation.*

**Annotatsiya.** *Raqamli kommunikatsiyaning jadal rivojlanishi internet memlarini zamonaviy onlayn madaniyatning keng tarqalgan fenomeniga aylantirdi. Norasmiy kelib chiqishiga qaramay, internet memlari chet tillarini o'qitishda o'ziga xos pedagogik imkoniyatlarga ega. Ushbu maqolada internet memlarining til o'rganishning asosiy yo'nalishlari, jumladan, lug'at boyligini o'zlashtirish, madaniyatlararo kompetensiyani rivojlantirish, motivatsiyani oshirish va kommunikativ ijodkorlikni shakllantirishdagi multimodal o'qitish vositasi sifatidagi funksiyalari tahlil qilinadi. 2019–2025-yillarda chop etilgan taqrizdan o'tgan ilmiy tadqiqotlar va nazariy yondashuvlarning tizimli tahliliga asoslanib, maqolada internet memlarining lingvistik, semiotik va affektiv xususiyatlari o'rganiladi hamda ularni ingliz tilini chet tili (EFL) va ikkinchi til (ESL) sifatida o'qitish jarayonlariga integratsiya qilish samaradorligi baholanadi. Tadqiqot natijalari memlarga asoslangan ta'lim o'quvchilarning darsga jalb etilganlik darajasini sezilarli ravishda oshirishi, lug'at birliklarini kontekst asosida uzoq muddat eslab qolishiga yordam berishi, shu bilan birga tanqidiy raqamli savodxonlik va madaniyatlararo xabardorlikni rivojlantirishini ko'rsatadi. Maqola til ta'limida memlardan maqsadli va samarali foydalanish uchun **KarMeme Instructional Modeli** deb nomlangan konseptual modelni taklif etadi hamda kelgusidagi empirik tadqiqotlar uchun istiqbolli yo'nalishlarni belgilaydi.*

**Kalit so'zlar:** *internet memlari, chet tillarini o'qitish, multimodal ta'lim, EFL/ESL, lug'at boyligini o'zlashtirish, madaniyatlararo kompetensiya, raqamli savodxonlik, o'quvchi motivatsiyasi.*

**Аннотация.** *Стремительное развитие цифровой коммуникации превратило интернет-мемы в один из наиболее распространённых феноменов современной онлайн-культуры. Несмотря на своё неформальное происхождение, интернет-мемы обладают значительным педагогическим потенциалом для обучения иностранным языкам. В данной статье рассматривается роль интернет-мемов как мультимодальных средств обучения в ключевых аспектах языкового образования, включая усвоение лексики, развитие межкультурной компетенции, повышение мотивации и формирование коммуникативной креативности. На основе систематического обзора рецензируемых исследований и теоретических концепций, опубликованных в период с 2019 по 2025 год, анализируются лингвистические, семиотические и аффективные характеристики интернет-мемов, а также оцениваются возможности их интеграции в процесс обучения английскому языку как иностранному (EFL) и как второму языку (ESL). Результаты исследования показывают, что обучение на основе мемов значительно повышает вовлечённость учащихся и*

способствует долговременному усвоению лексики в контексте, одновременно развивая критическую цифровую грамотность и межкультурную осведомлённость. В статье предлагается концептуальная модель **KarMeme Instructional Model** для целенаправленной интеграции мемов в языковую педагогику, а также определяются перспективные направления дальнейших эмпирических исследований.

**Ключевые слова:** интернет-мемы, обучение иностранным языкам, мультимодальное обучение, EFL/ESL, усвоение лексики, межкультурная компетенция, цифровая грамотность, мотивация обучающихся.

**Introduction.** The digital revolution has fundamentally transformed the landscape of human communication, giving rise to new genres of discourse that blur the boundary between the linguistic and the visual (Shifman, 2014). Among these emergent forms, internet memes have emerged as one of the most pervasive and culturally resonant units of digital communication. Defined by Shifman (2014, p. 41) as “groups of digital content units that share common characteristics, are created with awareness of each other, and are circulated, imitated, and transformed via the Internet”, memes occupy a unique semiotic space that combines text, image, sound, and cultural reference into compact, highly mobile artefacts.

In recent years, researchers in applied linguistics and language pedagogy have begun to explore the instructional potential of internet memes, recognising that their multimodal nature, humour, and cultural embeddedness make them particularly well suited for language learning environments (Topal, 2025; Han & Smith, 2023; Altukruni, 2022). At the same time, the meme's inherent link to digital communities and participatory culture aligns with broader trends in communicative language teaching, which emphasise authentic language use, learner agency, and intercultural communication (Byram & Kramersch, 2008).

Despite the growing body of empirical evidence supporting meme-based instruction, there remains a lack of synthesising frameworks that explain how and why memes work as pedagogical tools, and under what conditions their use is most effective. The present article addresses this gap by conducting a critical review of the literature, identifying the key mechanisms through which internet memes support foreign language learning, and proposing a structured model for their classroom integration.

The article is organised according to the IMRAD structure. Following a description of the methodology, the results section analyses the major pedagogical functions of internet memes under four thematic headings: vocabulary and linguistic awareness, motivation and affective engagement, intercultural competence, and multimodal literacy. The discussion section synthesises these findings and introduces the KarMeme Model. The article concludes with implications for teacher education and directions for future research.

**Methods.** This article draws on a systematic review of scholarly literature published between 2014 and 2025. Sources were identified through searches across Google Scholar, ERIC, Scopus, and ResearchGate, using terms such as “internet memes and language teaching”, “memes in EFL/ESL classroom”, “memes vocabulary acquisition”,

“multimodal memes in pedagogy”, and “digital humour in foreign language”. The review was limited to peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, and edited volumes in English; grey literature, blog posts, and non-peer-reviewed conference abstracts were not considered.

Sources were selected based on their relevance to two broad concerns: the theoretical nature of internet memes as a semiotic form, and their application in language education contexts. The analysis is organized around four recurring themes in the literature — the linguistic and semiotic properties of memes; vocabulary and grammar instruction; motivation and affective dimensions; and intercultural and digital literacy development. The theoretical frameworks of edusemiotics (Topal, 2025), ecological perspectives on meme use (Han & Smith, 2023), and discursive meme analysis (Wiggins, 2019) informed the interpretation throughout.

It should be noted that the field is relatively young and the empirical base, while growing, is not yet sufficient for meta-analytical synthesis. The present review is therefore interpretive and conceptual in character, aiming to identify patterns, tensions, and gaps across existing scholarship rather than to produce statistical aggregations.

## Results.

### **Linguistic Properties of Internet Memes and Their Pedagogical Relevance.**

Internet memes are quintessentially multimodal artefacts. In the typology developed by Topal (2025), memes operate as multimodal sign systems in which linguistic signs (written text, slang, idiomatic expressions) interact with paralinguistic and visual signs (facial expressions, iconic imagery, typographic choices) to produce layered, context-dependent meaning. This semiotic complexity, which might appear to be an obstacle for learners, is precisely what makes memes rich pedagogical material.

Wiggins (2019) demonstrated that meme comprehension requires simultaneous decoding of intertextual references, irony, and cultural context—cognitive processes that closely mirror the inferential demands of authentic language use. In language classrooms, exposure to such texts encourages learners to move beyond surface-level decoding toward the kind of pragmatic and sociolinguistic competence that is central to communicative language teaching (Kayali & Altuntas, 2021).

The language embedded in memes is often colloquial, idiomatic, and register-specific, making it highly representative of authentic contemporary usage. As noted in a multimodal teaching study (Mukherjee and Mukherjee, 2025), memes expose learners to colloquial and metaphorical language while prompting them to analyse tone, register, and cultural meaning—tasks that align directly with higher-order linguistic competencies.

**Vocabulary Acquisition and Grammar Instruction.** The most extensively researched application of internet memes in language teaching concerns vocabulary acquisition. Kayali and Altuntas (2021) conducted a quasi-experimental study with medicine majors learning English, finding that students who received meme-based

vocabulary instruction demonstrated significantly higher recall scores compared to those taught through conventional methods. The authors attributed this effect to the emotional salience and contextual richness of meme-based presentation, consistent with the dual-coding theory proposed by Paivio (1986), which holds that information encoded in both verbal and visual form is more durably retained.

The humour and visual memorability of meme content may also support vocabulary retention beyond initial exposure. Unlike decontextualised word lists, memes embed lexical items within emotionally resonant and culturally familiar situations, which may reduce the rate at which new vocabulary is forgotten.

Kalyuzhna et al. (2023) explored the use of memes for grammar instruction in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) contexts, demonstrating that memes could be designed to highlight grammatical patterns in ways that were immediately meaningful and contextually anchored. Their participants reported higher perceived relevance of the grammar points introduced through memes compared to those introduced through traditional textbook exercises.

**Motivation, Humour, and Affective Engagement.** A consistent finding across the reviewed literature is the positive relationship between meme-based instruction and learner motivation. Neff and Dewaele (2023) examined the broader role of humour strategies in foreign language classrooms, concluding that humour reduces affective barriers to participation, lowers learner anxiety, and creates the psychological safety necessary for risk-taking in language use. Internet memes, as a culturally legitimised form of digital humour, carry these affordances in a format that is already familiar and positively associated for most contemporary learners.

This is supported by Mukherjee and Mukherjee (2025), who found that meme-based humour created a more relaxed classroom atmosphere in which learners were more willing to take communicative risks and engage actively in language production. Taken together, these findings suggest that the motivational value of memes is not incidental — it is rooted in well-documented connections between positive affect, reduced anxiety, and willingness to communicate, all of which are recognised preconditions for successful language acquisition.

Importantly, the motivational benefits of memes are not limited to the consumption of pre-made content. Several studies highlighted the value of student-generated meme creation as a productive language task. When learners are asked to create memes in the target language—combining appropriate vocabulary, grammatical structures, and cultural references—they engage in meaningful, purposeful writing that integrates multiple language skills simultaneously (Altukruni, 2022; Petrucco, 2023).

**Intercultural Competence and Digital Literacy.** Perhaps the most theoretically significant finding emerging from the reviewed literature concerns the role of internet memes in developing intercultural communicative competence. Memes are inherently

cultural artefacts: their meaning depends on shared cultural knowledge, collective memory, and community-specific frames of reference (Wiggins, 2019). Decoding a meme therefore requires not merely linguistic competence but cultural competence—the ability to navigate the cultural presuppositions embedded in the text.

Topal (2025) formalised this observation within an edusemiotic framework, arguing that meme comprehension and production constitute genuine acts of intercultural meaning-making. In classrooms characterised by linguistic and cultural diversity, memes can serve as productive sites for exploring both the commonalities and divergences between learners' cultural backgrounds. The multimodal teaching study (Mukherjee and Mukherjee, 2025) reported that students who engaged in meme-based activities discovered both similarities and differences across cultural contexts through the exchange of idiomatic expressions embedded in memes.

At the same time, the use of memes raises important critical literacy questions. As Wiggins (2019) noted, memes are frequently deployed as vehicles for ideological positioning, and their surface humour can mask discriminatory or exclusionary content. Responsible meme-based pedagogy must therefore include explicit instruction in critical meme analysis, training learners to interrogate the ideological assumptions, representational choices, and power dynamics encoded in memetic content. This dimension of meme-based teaching aligns closely with the broader project of critical digital literacy education (Lotherington & Bradley, 2024).

**Discussion.** The results of this review converge on a coherent picture: internet memes, when used purposefully and critically, constitute a genuinely productive pedagogical resource for foreign language education. Their multimodal composition supports dual-encoding and contextual vocabulary retention; their humour and cultural currency lower affective barriers and sustain engagement; and their intercultural complexity provides rich material for the development of pragmatic and sociolinguistic competence.

At the same time, the evidence also points to conditions and limitations that must be acknowledged. First, the effectiveness of meme-based instruction appears to be highly context-dependent. Memes are culturally specific, and a meme that is immediately legible to learners in one context may be opaque or even offensive in another. Teachers must therefore exercise careful curation, selecting or designing memes that are culturally appropriate, linguistically accessible at the target proficiency level, and aligned with the specific learning objectives of the lesson (Kayali & Altuntas, 2021; Topal, 2025).

Second, while student-generated meme creation has been identified as a particularly valuable productive task, it presupposes a degree of digital literacy and creative confidence that cannot be assumed across all learner populations. Teacher training programmes must therefore include explicit preparation for meme-based pedagogy, equipping educators not only with the technical skills to source and create memes but also

with the theoretical understanding needed to integrate them responsibly into the curriculum (Mukherjee and Mukherjee, 2025).

**The KarMeme Model.** Drawing on the literature reviewed, this article proposes the KarMeme Model as a working framework for integrating memes into foreign language teaching in a more principled way. The model is organized around four broad phases, each targeting a distinct dimension of meme-based learning.

*In the first phase, Exposure and Noticing,* learners encounter curated memes in the target language. The teacher draws attention to relevant lexical items, grammatical structures, register, and cultural references — guiding observation rather than leaving interpretation entirely open.

*The second phase, Analysis and Discussion,* invites learners to collaboratively unpack the meme: its layered meaning, cultural assumptions, and the context that makes it work. Alongside linguistic development, this phase encourages a degree of critical reflection on the content itself.

*In the third phase, Adaptation and Creation,* learners produce their own memes in the target language. This gives them the opportunity to apply target vocabulary and structures in ways that feel personally relevant, while also exercising creative judgment.

*The fourth phase, Reflection and Evaluation,* closes the cycle. Learners and teachers revisit the memes produced, considering their linguistic choices, cultural implications, and where relevant, their ethical dimensions. This step aims to consolidate learning and encourage learners to think about their own process.

This four-phase sequence integrates receptive and productive skills, addresses both the linguistic and intercultural dimensions of language competence, and embeds critical literacy throughout. It is intended as a flexible framework that can be adapted to diverse educational contexts, learner levels, and target languages.

**Conclusion.** This article has examined internet memes as a multimodal pedagogical tool for foreign language education, drawing on a systematic review of empirical and theoretical literature published between 2014 and 2025. The evidence reviewed demonstrates that memes offer significant affordances across several dimensions of language learning: they support contextual vocabulary acquisition through dual-coding; they reduce affective barriers to participation through humour; they provide rich material for the development of intercultural communicative competence; and they create opportunities for critical digital literacy education.

The proposed KarMeme Model provides a structured approach for translating these affordances into coherent classroom practice, moving learners from passive exposure through critical analysis to creative production and metacognitive reflection. While the model is conceptual in character, it draws directly on the patterns of effective meme use identified across the reviewed studies and offers a starting point for future curriculum design and empirical validation.

Several directions for future research emerge from this review. Longitudinal studies are needed to assess the durability of meme-assisted vocabulary gains over time. Comparative studies across different language pairs and learner backgrounds would help establish the boundary conditions of meme-based pedagogy. And controlled experimental designs would allow more confident causal claims about the specific mechanisms through which memes support language learning. As digital communication continues to evolve, the study of memes in language education will remain both timely and necessary.

In conclusion, internet memes are far more than ephemeral entertainment. Understood semiotically, linguistically, and culturally, they represent a uniquely contemporary form of multimodal discourse whose pedagogical potential for foreign language teaching is substantial, generative, and still largely untapped.

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