

Meme-Based L2 Pedagogy: Authentic Engagement in a Changing Digital Landscape

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Abstract:

This paper explores how internet memes – multimodal, user-generated, and socially grounded digital artefacts – can contribute to foreign language (L2) instruction, with a focus on Russian, by fostering authentic engagement and meaningful participation in an evolving digital landscape. The purpose of this paper is two-fold: to demonstrate key pedagogical functions of memes in higher education and to examine how meme-based L2 pedagogy responds to emerging challenges and affordances of digital technologies, including generative AI. Rooted in the everyday digital communicative practices of today's learners, memes are perceived by them as relevant, engaging, and personally meaningful. Their familiarity encourages emotional investment and active meaning-making, supporting authentic engagement grounded in learners' sense of relevance and participation (Pinner, 2014) within a context of shifting learner identities and evolving expectations in higher education.

Drawing on a qualitative classroom-based approach, combining classroom interventions in universities in France and the UK, classroom observation, analysis of learner-produced and AI-generated memes, pre- and post-intervention surveys, and learner feedback, the paper demonstrates how memes serve three key pedagogical functions: (a) motivational tools that capture attention and spark dialogue through humour and relatability; (b) linguistic resources that expose learners to authentic, contemporary, and colloquial Russian, reflecting the emphasis on colloquial language in current L2 Russian instruction (Kaltseis & Stadler, 2023), and supporting learners' development of sociolinguistic competence; and (c) socially grounded texts that reflect shared experiences and cultural references, fostering intercultural understanding (Shifman, 2014; Milner, 2016; Denisova, 2019) and collaborative meaning-making.

In the age of AI, memes also highlight what remains uniquely human in digital creativity. Unlike algorithmically generated content, memes rely on shared social knowledge, humour, and collective authorship. Their meaning emerges from interaction rather than prediction, making them less amenable to automation and therefore particularly relevant for AI-aware assessment practices. By engaging learners in the creation and interpretation of memes, educators can support the development of digital literacy, creativity, and critical awareness, including critical AI literacy (Pribble, 2024).

Keywords: Internet memes, meme-based pedagogy, L2 Russian, multimodal digital discourse, AI and language learning

Strands: education, second and foreign languages, culture

