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MEMES AS POTENTIAL RESOURCES FOR SUPPORTING CRITICAL LITERACY TEACHING THROUGH LITERARY TEXTS IN THE EFL CLASSROOM

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Abstract: Memes have become an intrinsic part of digital culture. They impact the lives of young people around the world every day. However, the potential of memes for critical literacy education remains unexplored. This article discusses the possibility of using memes in the English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom to support the teaching of critical literacy through literary texts. It reviews the existing research literature in order to identify and analyze the features of memes that might promote critical literacy. An analysis of the identified features shows that multimodality, intertextuality and the participatory nature of memes are the features that might support teaching critical literacy through literary texts. However, the success of using memes for critical literacy education will depend on teachers' perception of their own role in the classroom.

Keywords: Memes. Critical Literacy. Critical Expressionism. Teaching English Literature. Teaching of English as a Foreign Language.

INTRODUCTION

Online memes are defined as the rapid propagation of contagious pieces of cultural information via the Internet (Lankshear & Knobel, 2007). Most memes are spread on social media platforms, which are accessed by billions of people worldwide on a daily basis. According to Digital 2023 July Global Statshot Report, in July 2023, 64.5 percent of the world population were Internet users, 60,6 percent of all people on planet Earth had social media identities and used the average of 6.7 social media platforms each month. The statistics suggest that social media might have a wide-reaching impact on people's online behaviors. However, this impact might go beyond people's experiences on social media and have a profound social, cultural and political effect on their lives (Burton, 2019).

Empirical research has investigated the

impact of Internet memes on social movements (Milner, 2013; Moussa, Benmessaoud & Douai, 2020), on civic engagement (Mihailidis, 2020; Zhang & Pinto, 2021), and on cultural politics (Burton, 2019). Some studies have addressed the use of memes in education for promoting digital literacy (Mihailidis, 2020) and critical media literacy (Harvey & Palese, 2018; Elmore & Coleman, 2019). However, very few studies have investigated the potential of memes for critical literacy education, and none have explored the use of memes to support teaching critical literacy through literature.

Critical literacy is a pedagogical approach that goes beyond teaching students the basic literacy skills of reading and writing. Freire and Macedo (1987) defined critical literacy as supporting students not only in their understanding of how textual meaning is constructed but also in becoming conscious of the political and economic context surrounding the text (cited in Bishop, 2014, p. 52). For Lankshear and McLaren (1993), critical literacy enables students to read "the world" more accurately, to interrogate the privileging of some social groups and the exclusion of others, and to question the mainstream narratives.

Poverty caused by unequal distribution of resources continues to confront human societies worldwide (UNDP, 2023) while people who "own nothing but their labor" are becoming increasingly susceptible to the discourses of dominant groups (Comber, 2014). In this situation, teachers must realize that they play an important role in developing communities of critically literate people who understand their social, political and economic conditions and are able to defend their rights.

This article seeks to explore the question: "How can meme making and sharing support promoting critical literacy through the use of literary texts in the EFL classroom?" To

answer this question, the research sought to identify common features of memes in the existing research literature. The data set for this study was generated by searching Google Scholar, JStore and Wiley repositories. Among the identified studies, eight articles on memes were selected and analyzed in order to identify the common features of memes. These features were then matched against the critical literacy concepts that have been pointed out as supporting critical literacy education (Morgan, 1997; Simpson & Walsh, 2015; Silva, Figueredo & Abreu, 2017; Amgott, 2018; McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2019; Silva, 2020; Hsieh & Cridland-Hughes, 2022; Kitaeva, Santos & Kezen, 2023). Subsequently, three features of memes that might help to promote critical literacy through literary texts were found. The article discusses the potential of these features for supporting critical literacy teaching through literature.

DEFINING CRITICAL LITERACY

Defining critical literacy can be a difficult task due to the existence of many pedagogical approaches and frameworks that reflect different historical, political and cultural contexts (Luke, 2012; Freebody, 2017; Foley, 2017). However, Luke's (2012) definition of critical literacy as "use of technologies of print and other media of communication to analyze, critique and transform the norms, rule systems, and practices governing the social fields of everyday life" (Luke, 2012, p. 5) reveals the three central tenets of critical literacy theory: (1) an engagement with text in its multiple formats, (2) a focus on ideology critique and cultural analysis, and (3) a commitment to the use of literacy for finding new ways to enact social justice.

Paulo Freire, who is known as the initiator of critical literacy theory and practice, advocated dialogical problem-solving education which might enable people to

critically perceive their existence in the world (Freire, 2021). He condemned the "banking" model of education in which the teacher is the depositor who deposits tokens in the minds of passive students, which they patiently receive and memorize. Freire's theory and his extraordinary experience in teaching literacy to hundreds of peasants in the rural areas of Angicos in the north-east of Brazil have inspired generations of critical literacy advocates (Luke, 2012).

Since Freire began his work in the 1960s, critical literacy has been transformed through its engagement with postcolonial, poststructural, feminist, and critical race theory (Luke, 2012). It has been suggested that one of the strongest influences on critical literacy was the poststructuralist critique of Freire's dialectical technique of binary opposition (oppressor/oppressed, dialogue/monologue, teacher/learner) (Morgan, 1997; Cervetti, Pardales & Damico, 2001), which was seen by poststructuralists as having the potential to obscure the complexity of discourse (Luke, 2012). Poststructuralists also argued against the validity of any definitive interpretation of texts (Morgan, 1997; Cervetti et al., 2001; Luke, 2012). Cervetti et al. (2001) noted that from the poststructural perspective, statements are judged as true or false according to the logic of a specific discursive system, and that the criteria used to make judgements depend on unequal arrangements of power rather than facts. Texts are seen as ideological constructions that portray the world in particular ways in order to produce and maintain these arrangements of power. By adopting the poststructuralist models of discourse that focus on ways in which ideology shapes representations of reality in texts, critical literacy developed new methods of critique (Cervetti et al., 2001).

It is important to point out that critical literacy is essentially different from critical

reading. Cervetti et al. (2001) argued that although critical reading and critical literacy do have similarities (both position students as active readers, both focus on higher level analytic skills), in critical reading knowledge is obtained through sensory experience and rational thought. Reality is seen as knowable and serves as a referent for interpretation, and detecting the author's intentions is the foundation for text interpretation. Critical literacy, on the other hand, views knowledge as ideological and based on the rules and norms of a specific discursive community. Thus, reality cannot be known definitely and textual meaning is always multiple, culturally situated, and constructed within specific arrangements of power. The ultimate goal of critical literacy is not the development of analytic skills but that of critical consciousness (Cervetti et al., 2001).

This definition of critical literacy raises important questions about existing approaches and pedagogical models of reading instruction in schools.

CRITICAL LITERACY, LITERATURE AND CRITICAL EXPRESSIONISM

Teaching literature from the critical literacy perspective is a relatively unexplored field, though some studies have suggested that reading and discussing literary texts and engaging in dialogical practices in the language classrooms might expand students' critical consciousness and promote social action (Rozansky & Santos, 2015; Silva, Figueredo & Abreu, 2017; Silva, 2020; Butler & Boyd, 2022). Leland, Lewison and Harste (2018) defined literary texts as cultural resources which are used in the classroom for critical enquiry. From their perspective, responding to literature critically means understanding who the history benefits and who it disadvantages, seeing topics raised in the text from multiple

perspectives and questioning commonplace ideas. It also involves taking some kind of social action to promote social justice (Leland et al., 2018).

Responding to literature critically by taking social action (Leland et al., 2018) resonates with McLaughlin and DeVogd (2019) concept of critical expressionism, the type of expanded critical response to texts in critical literacy that encompasses different modes of expression, including the arts and multimodal texts. Responding critically through multiple modes to carefully selected texts that explore identities and multiple perspectives, problematize individual and group actions and promote change might provide students with opportunities to elucidate their own ideas for taking social action. The goal of critical expressionism, McLaughlin and DeVogd (2019) suggest, is to liberate the innovative thinking of critical readers.

One of the examples of critical expressionism in McLaughlin and DeVogd study is the students' response to E. Bunting's award-winning book *Smoky Nights* that chronicles riots in Los Angeles. The book describes how the riots affected families from different racial backgrounds and how their shared experience helped them overcome their differences. In response to the book, students made multidimensional box sculptures. They used different colors to represent separate lives of the families before the riots (black and white), during the riots (bright colors), and after the riots (pastel colors). Subsequently, the students took action by creating a digital collage that made connections between different cultures. By responding to the text with the arts, students examined multiple viewpoints, focused on sociopolitical issues, and took action to promote social justice (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2019). This example shows how engaging in the collaborative production of cultural artifacts in response

to literature might help students to engage in critical reflection on important social issues and to act upon their reality.

The next section of this article discusses the features of memes that might help to promote critical literacy through literary texts.

MEMES AS MULTIMODAL INTERTEXTUAL PARTICIPATORY RESOURCES

The concept of the meme goes back to *The Selfish Genes* (1976), a book written by the geneticist Richard Dawkins. Dawkins described genes as self-copying molecules, or replicators, whose survival is determined by degrees of their longevity, fecundity and fidelity, with the most successful genes being favored by natural selection to survive through many generations. He suggested that memes are cultural equivalents of genes: they are replicators, or units of cultural transmission, which propagate by leaping from brain to brain via imitation, and, much like genes, they are selected for on the basis of longevity, fecundity and copying fidelity. Dawkins' examples of memes included tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions and ways of making things (Dawkins, 2016).

Dawkins' theory has received mixed responses including the criticism for overlooking the moral ambivalence of memes (Schrempf, 2009) and for overemphasizing the role of natural selection over the role of conscious choice and assimilated experience in the evolution of human culture (Oring, 2014). However, this theory has raised important issues regarding the nature of memes and their social and cultural potential.

Lankshear and Knobel (2007) used Dawkins' ideas to analyze the contemporary category of online memes, which they described as "the rapid uptake and spread of a particular idea presented as a written text, image, language 'move', or some other unit of

cultural 'stuff' " (Lankshear & Knobel, 2007, p. 202), and to define their role as a form of social participation and as a new literacy practice. In their discussion of online memes, Lankshear and Knobel (2007) distinguished between Literacy with a "Big L", which refers to making meaning related to the Freirean concept of *being in the world*, and literacy with a "small l", which describes the processes of reading, viewing, listening, writing, i.e. using symbols and words in the context of a larger pattern of Literacy practices, of being in the world. For example, producing a meme involves the literacy practices that are invested in the multimodal dimensions of generating a text, using software to produce and fix in place layers of images, adding sound etc. Hence, producing and distributing a meme requires a range of technical skills and competencies. Meanwhile, Literacy practices are associated with meaning making, identity making and social significance-making through interaction and social participation due to the collaborative nature of memes (Lankshear and Knobel 2007, p. 220). Lankshear and Knobel (2007) also emphasized that studying online memes that promote social critique might help educators to move away from literacy practices and bring about positive social change through social participation.

Recent research in the fields of critical literacy, media literacy and digital literacy studies has analyzed meming practices of online communities, with some research developed around the ways memes shape one's participation in communities by uniting people with shared interests, backgrounds and beliefs and providing them with a means to express group membership and identity (Jeffries, 2018; Burton, 2019); memes as a tactical social action in the struggle for social justice, cultural and political resistance (Moussa et al., 2020); rhetorical analysis of memes for promoting critical media literacy

in the classroom (Harvey & Palese, 2018; Elmore & Coleman, 2019); the potential of memes for promoting civic engagement of young people (Mihalidis, 2020; Zhang & Pinto, 2021). Four of these studies have analyzed classroom applications of memes (Harvey & Palese, 2018; Elmore & Coleman, 2019; Mihailidis, 2020; Zhang & Pinto, 2021). However, only two of the studies (Harvey & Palese, 2019; Mihailidis, 2020) have discussed meme making in the classroom context.

Harvey and Palese (2019) introduced rhetorical analysis in the classroom by asking students guiding questions that might help them to discern the relationship between the intended audience and the purpose of a particular meme. After practicing these skills analyzing Internet memes, students applied them to produce memes of their own. However, the focus of the activity was not the students' critical expression, but rather their ability to reproduce the traits of successful memes that they had discovered through their rhetorical analysis. This type of classroom procedure is congruent with Cervetti et al.'s (2001) concept of critical reading, which relies on sensory and rational experience of the world and development of higher levels of textual interpretation, in contrast to critical literacy, in which students are encouraged not only to read critically but also to take social action for social transformation (Cervetti et al., 2001).

The second pedagogical example (Mihalidis, 2020) discusses the potential of creating political memes in the classroom. Although the students in the study displayed reluctant engagement with digital media and negativity towards social networks and their role in civic dialogue, they found creating memes entertaining. Mihailidis (2020) argues that memes have the potential for civic expression and building strong civic cultures.

Multimodality is one of the features of

memes that has been identified in the research literature (Milner, 2013; Harvey & Palese, 2018; Moussa, Benmessaoud & Douai, 2020). According to Kress (2010), “[m]ode is a socially shaped and culturally given semiotic resource for making meaning” (Kress, 2010, p. 79). Different modes (image, writing, music, spoken word) offer different ways of engaging with the world and distinctive ways of representing the world (Kress, 2010). Multimodality is the mix of interdependent semiotic modes that form what Kress calls “multimodal ensembles”, which enable readers/listeners/viewers to interact with the text by choosing different levels of engagement with different modes and create their own meanings (Kress, 2010).

The critical literacy research on multimodality has found that students are encouraged in their interpretations when they are exposed to multimodal texts (Simpson & Walsh, 2015). It has also concluded that multimodal projects that link critical and digital literacies provide students with skills to question multiple viewpoints and promote social justice locally and globally (Amgott, 2018). For Hsieh and Cridland-Hughes (2022), enacting critical literacy through multimodal practices might help to promote a response to community social issues within a classroom community.

Memes have been described as multimodal resources that mix verbal text, visuals and hashtags in a process of imitation and adaptation (Milner, 2013) and convey meaning through the interplay of distinct modes (Moussa, Benmessaoud & Douai, 2020). Harvey and Palese (2018) distinguished three types of memes: Image macros, exploitables and memetic videos. Each of these types of memes mixes different modes in specific ways: image macros mix image and text; exploitables mix different images to create a new image; memetic videos are adapted from other videos

(Harvey & Palese, 2018). By choosing to create one of these types of memes, students can emphasize a specific mode or mix of modes that offers opportunities to make meaning in distinct ways. In this sense, creating memes could promote multiple viewpoints on social justice issues raised by discussions around a literary text.

Intertextuality has been identified as another feature of successful memes (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006; Harvey & Palese, 2018; Moussa, Benmessaoud & Douai, 2020). The concept of intertextuality is based on Bakhtin's (2016) suggestion that all utterances have a dialogic element and that discourses are always related to other discourses. Fairclough (2003, p. 17) defined intertextuality of a text as "a presence within it of elements of other texts", which potentially establishes a dialogical relationship between these texts. It also involves recontextualization, "a move from one context to another" (Fairclough, 2003, p. 41). Fairclough distinguished two kinds of intertextuality: manifest intertextuality and interdiscursivity (Fairclough, 2003).

Manifest intertextuality refers to incorporating other texts through quotation, paraphrase, irony etc. (Fairclough, 2003). This kind of intertextuality could open opportunities for recontextualization of a literary text in a meme by integrating into it elements of students' reality. The characters, the plot, the dialogues from the text might be used by the students to create memes that express a critique of their own social, political and cultural contexts. It can be argued that many characters from literary texts have become memes in themselves (A. A. Milne's Winnie-the-Pooh, Charles Dickens' Oliver Twist, Jane Austen's Mr. Darcy, Pinocchio, Tolkien's Gollum and Frodo, J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter etc.). The students, therefore, could engage in a recontextualization of some of these characters by creating memes that

express a critique of their own reality in a humorous way.

Critical literacy research has also shown that linking a literary text to the students' context encourages the students to reflect on their reality and enhances their participation in critical literacy practices (Silva et al., 2017; Silva, 2020). Thus, creating memes that recontextualize a literary text and incorporate new texts that reveal student's critical consciousness might open opportunities for promoting critical literacy in the classroom.

Another feature of memes related to intertextuality is that of interdiscursivity (Moussa, Benmessaoud & Douai, 2020), which is a mix of genres and discourses upon which the text draws (Fairclough, 2003). It can be argued that creating and sharing memes might contribute to eliciting a range of discourses that reflect students' analysis of social events and practices and thereby elucidate the students' ideas on taking social action.

Finally, the research has discussed the participatory nature of memes (Lankshear & Knobel, 2007; Harvey & Palese, 2018; Burton, 2019; Mihailidis, 2020, Moussa, Benmessaoud & Douai, 2020). Wenger (1998) used the term *participation* to refer to the experience of living in terms of membership in social communities and of social action. Harvey and Palese's (2018) research showed that Internet memes of any type could shape one's participation in communities by uniting people with shared interests and backgrounds and enabling them to express group identity, while Burton (2019) insisted that "the purpose of memes is to maintain communities and establish shared experiences and ideologies" (Burton, 2019, p. 9). According to Burton (2019), by actively creating and editing media, community members engage in social participation.

These studies show that creating memes as a critical response to relevant social issues

raised by literary texts might create a space for students to engage in social participation as members of a community. However, the research has also shown that some students might choose not to engage or engage reluctantly in meme making. Mihailidis (2020) discussed experiences of teachers facilitating groups of students who collectively created memes about current political issues deploying humor to highlight injustices, although some of the students avoided political issues and resorted to trolling classmates, which the author referred to as “playful resistance”. Other attitudes displayed by the students were described as “civic negativity” and “reluctant engagement” (Mihailidis, 2019, p. 15).

Mihailidis’ (2020) study echoes Morgan’s (1997) concerns about student engagement in the critical literacy classroom. Morgan (1997) argued that students may not want to share their teacher’s beliefs and practices and may not want to appropriate the knowledge imparted on them. Freirean emancipation, according to Morgan (1997), is to be effected not simply by the teacher’s demonstrations of analysis and critique but through teacher–student dialogue. Only through dialogue students learn to raise their voices in criticizing their conditions “as they know them to be, not as they have been told these must be” (Morgan, 1997, p. 15). In contrast, hierarchical relationships between teachers and students that reify the “banking knowledge” might shut down students’ participation (Morgan, 1997; Amgott, 2018).

To prevent this, critical literacy teachers must give up control of classroom discourse by repositioning themselves as members of a community of learners and story-tellers, thereby creating dialogic environments in which critical literacy could emerge (Hsieh & Cridland-Hughes, 2022).

We have seen, then, that memes are multimodal intertextual participatory

resources that could be used in the EFL classroom for promoting critical responses to literary texts. The features of memes discussed in this section are shown in Table 1.

Features	Authors
Multimodality	Milner (2013) Harvey & Palese (2018) Elmore & Coleman (2019) Moussa et al. (2020)
Intertextuality	Lankshear & Knobel (2007) Harvey & Palese (2018) Moussa et al. (2020)
Participation	Lankshear & Knobel (2007) Harvey & Palese (2018) Burton (2019) Mihailidis (2020) Moussa et al. (2020) Zhang & Pinto (2021)

Table 1. Features of memes that might support promoting critical literacy through literary texts.

FINAL REMARKS

This research has shown that memes might serve as resources for promoting critical literacy through literary texts in the EFL classroom. Three features of memes that might support critical literacy have been identified in the research literature: multimodality, intertextuality and their participatory nature. Multimodality of memes might provide students with flexible resources to express their critique of social injustices shown in a literary text. Multimodality might also help to link critical and digital literacies that could provide students with skills to question multiple viewpoints and enact social justice. Intertextuality of memes could contribute to integrating representations of student reality into memes and help to elicit a range of discourses that reflect different analyses of social events and practices and thereby elucidate social action. Finally, the participatory nature of memes might help to engage students in social participation and promote social action related to the issues raised in discussions about a literary text.

However, the success of memes as resources for promoting critical literacy through literature will depend on the levels of student engagement in the classroom, which might be inhibited by the traditional teacher-student hierarchy where the teacher has control over classroom discourse.

This research has identified very few

studies on creating memes in the classroom for supporting critical literacy and no studies on creating memes that use literary texts. Further empirical research is needed to validate the use of memes as resources for promoting critical literacy through literature in the EFL classroom.

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