



Revista Educação em Questão

ISSN: 1981-1802

eduquestao@ce.ufrn.br

Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Norte
Brasil

Boa Sorte, Paulo; do Carmo Andrade Santos, Jefferson
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Revista Educação em Questão, vol. 58, no. 55, 2020, January-March, pp. 1-19
Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Norte
Natal, Brasil

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21680/1981-1802.2020v58n55ID18439>

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Memes in English classes: exploring multiliteracy practices

Paulo Boa Sorte
Jefferson do Carmo Andrade Santos
Universidade Federal de Sergipe (Brasil)

Abstract

Memes have been constantly created and shared online, as they appear to be potential sources for portraying different realities. This paper aims at analyzing the use of memes in English classes through the Theory of Multiliteracies (LUKE, 2000; COPE; KALANTZIS, 2000, 2008; ROJO, 2012). Possibilities of working with this digital text, which go beyond the simple linguistic decoding, are pointed out throughout this paper. The research methodology is based on documentary research (LAVILLE; DIONE, 1999) as an extension of literature review (MACHI; McEVOY, 2009). A theoretical overview is presented on the initial conceptions of memes according to the writings of Dawkins (1976) and new readings on this kind of text (LUKE, 2000; COPE; KALANTZIS, 2008; ROJO, 2012; CALIXTO, 2018). As a result, we have pointed out memes as tools that are geared towards developing critical and reflective English classes.

Keywords: English Language classes. Memes. Multiliteracies. Digital technologies.

Memes em aulas de língua inglesa: explorando práticas de multiletramentos

Resumo

Os memes têm sido constantemente criados e compartilhados on-line como textos que retratam as mais distintas realidades, podendo propiciar diversas possibilidades no ensino de disciplinas escolares, como o Inglês. Este artigo tem o objetivo de analisar o uso de memes em aulas de Língua Inglesa por meio da Teoria dos Multiletramentos (LUKE, 2000; COPE; KALANTZIS, 2000, 2008; ROJO, 2012). A metodologia de pesquisa baseia-se em análise documental (LAVILLE; DIONE, 1999) como uma extensão da revisão da literatura (MACHI; McEVOY, 2009). Um panorama teórico é apresentado sobre as concepções iniciais dos memes de acordo com os escritos de Dawkins (1976) e novas leituras sobre esse tipo de texto (LUKE, 2000; COPE; KALANTZIS, 2008; ROJO, 2012; CALIXTO, 2018). Como resultado, apontamos os memes como ferramentas direcionadas à construção de aulas de Língua Inglesa com aspectos mais críticos e reflexivos.

Palavras-chave: Aula de Língua Inglesa. Memes. Multiletramentos. Tecnologias digitais.



Memes en clases de lengua inglesa: explorando las prácticas de multilateralidad

Resumen

Los memes se han desarrollado y compartido comúnmente como grandes potenciales para retratar diversas realidades. Este artículo tiene como objetivo analizar y discutir el uso de memes en clases de inglés a través de perspectivas basadas en la teoría de la multilateralidad (LUKE, 2000; COPE & KALANTZIS, 2000, 2008; ROJO, 2012). La metodología de investigación se basa en el análisis de documentos (LAVILLE; DIONE, 1999) como una extensión de la revisión de la literatura (MACHI; McEVOY, 2009). Se presenta una visión general teórica sobre las concepciones iniciales sobre los memes según los escritos de Dawkins (1976) y nuevas lecturas sobre este tipo de texto (LUKE, 2000; COPE; KALANTZIS, 2008; ROJO, 2012; CALIXTO, 2018). Como resultado, señalamos a los memes como herramientas destinadas a construir clases de inglés con aspectos más críticos y reflexivos. Palabras claves: Clase de idioma inglés. Memes. Multilateralidad. Tecnologías digitales.

Introduction

The beginning of the Twenty-first Century was marked by the breakdown of barriers in telecommunication and the improvement of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT). We lived, in the first decade of the 2000's, the beginning of what would be called, later on, the revolution of smartphones, cell phones and tablets: the percentage of people owning cell phones increased, which was seen as a privileged social status at that time (LUCENA, 2016). At the end of the 2000's, the debate was geared towards the new settings and functions of cell phones out of making calls and sending/receiving text messages. The focus, then, was on the new using affordances, which were on table for cell phone users, especially concerning the use of the Internet. Other electronic devices, such as desktops and laptops, continued to advance technologically. However, cell phones might have been the devices that have provided the most changes in human life thanks to their ubiquity, i.e., mobility possibilities and Internet connectivity at any time and any place (SANTAELLA, 2010; 2013). They have evolved to smartphones, which brings, inside a single device, not only resources for making calls but also a computer, a TV, a clock, a camera, audio and video recorders, a compass, a scanner, a calculator, a dictionary, a map, mp3 player, and many other resources and applications.



Different types of Internet connection, previously restricted to mobile data of telephone and broadband companies, have also been expanded in Brazil. Besides, there has been an improvement in communication transmission modes, through optical fiber, which has been replacing the electrical wiring system. This way, wireless Internet has produced a phenomenon characterized by the increase of broadband companies. Nowadays, people are rarely disconnected from the Internet, once they can take advantage of wireless access points at home, in professional environments, and in educational institutions. Unfortunately, in Brazil, public schools still face problems of not having satisfactory Internet connection, and when it does, it is slow and/ or fails all the time.

In this sense, we point out that the expansion of Internet access has not been a universal phenomenon. People have not had equal access to Internet worldwide yet, especially in developing countries. The fact that technologies have made it possible for people to frame and change their social environment leads us to power relations (JANKS, 2014). In developed countries, there is access to fast, low-instability, and, in many cases, free of charge or low cost connections. On the other hand, in developing countries, such as Brazil, people still face the shortage of old and mechanical technologies, like drinking water, which has not been available to 35 million people, according to O Eco, a non-governmental organization (RODRIGUES, 2018).

When we think about the effects that the popularization of smartphones have had on people's lives – especially the ones who have access to digital technologies and the Internet – it is possible to highlight that they have resignified the way we communicate with one another nowadays. Telephone conversations have become more dynamic, and they occur not only via synchronic communication as in landline phones, but also through graphic texts, video calls, audio messages, photographs, images, texts, and sound editing. They may be represented through various formats, such as emojis and gifs.

The ways of communicating via smartphones with edited pictures combined with graphic texts have been called memes. Currently taken as funny and political messages that are shared on social media and instant messengers, the conceptual gist of memes is not related to the Internet era. Actually, it comes from the analogical times, i.e., proverbs, sayings, catchphrases, lullabies etc. Thus, memes are ideas, sentences, ways of acting and thinking that are passed on through generations. With the boost of digital technologies, writing and sharing memes became a daily practice of smartphone users. Essentially multimodal,



those texts can be disseminated through photographs, pictures, drawings, images, sounds etc., which might be edited or attached to other texts.

English teachers should think about the affordances and restrictions that the work with this kind of text may bring to their teaching practices in various contexts – from elementary through higher education levels – and in different fields of knowledge, not only in languages. Memes have designed forms of communication, agency, reading and writing of diverse groups, communities and cultures. Hence, Multiliteracy practices may be encouraged in educational spheres, that is, reading and writing practices materialized into various ways of representation, and directed towards the expression of multiple cultures, such as codes, gestures, symbols, images, sounds etc (LUKE, 2000; COPE; KALANTZIS, 2008; ROJO, 2012; BOA SORTE, 2018).

This paper aims to explore possibilities of teaching English through memes based on the Multiliteracy perspective. Firstly, we present an outline on the history of memes according to the studies of Dawkins (1976) and recent researches. Then, we assert the research methodology that was outlined to this study. Afterwards, we provide a discussion on the pedagogical potentials on the use of memes in English classes. Far from offering fixed models and techniques for teaching, we suggest that the uses of this kind of text should be based on The Critical Literacy Theory (SOUZA, 2011), which considers the importance of dealing with students' realities as well as with the chance of expanding to other realities.

4

A brief overview on the history of memes

Richard Dawkins, a British writer, was one of the first authors to define what has been called memes. The initial concept was broadly presented in the book entitled "The Selfish Gene", released in 1976 by the Oxford University Press. According to Dawkins, memes are small cultural units of propagation which diffuse from person to person through imitation or copy. Thus, everything that modifies our way of thinking and our behaviors linked to characteristics as longevity, fecundity, and fidelity of copy would fall into this categorization. Following this broad conception, memes are behaviors, architectural forms, sentences, clothes, and other sound and visual forms of expression, which might be reproduced and/or replied.



Currently, we have been focusing our attention on the evolution of memes into the digital era: the Internet memes. With smartphone sales growth along with facilitated Internet access, we have been experiencing an increasing diffusion of memes. Web 2.0, characterized by the possibility of content production on cybernetic spheres by any user, has made the creation of memes to expand and receive even greater variations. According to Calixto (2018), Brazil is responsible for producing this kind of narrative expression on cyberspace, which has been named as Internet memes. This phenomenon has made Brazil reach the status of “meme factory”, once millions of users produce inter-textual works based on celebrities, athletes, pets, movies, TV series, games and others (CALIXTO, 2018).

Internet memes are characterized by their rapid spread. Besides that, there is no recipe when it comes to meme production, though simplicity and adaptive potential to diverse contexts are key features to them. Another flagrant aspect is related to the fact that it can refer back to past references, such as songs, celebrities, and movie clips. Although memes seem to be simple examples of texts, they demand complex productive skills from authors, given that producing memes imply dealing with a set of sound and/or visual resources previously thought. Moreover, it can involve diverse meanings depending on the background knowledge of the person who reads them. In the next section, we present the research methodology chosen to carry out this study. Afterwards, we focus on general perspectives concerning the Theory of Multiliteracies and examples of Internet memes in English teaching.

Research methodology

We developed documentary research (LAVILLE; DIONE, 1999) as an extension of literature review (MACHI; McEVOY, 2009). The literature review based on those authors takes the inquiry step further because it selects a research interest and a research topic; then it reviews the literature. The steps are: 1) selecting a topic; 2) searching the literature that determines what information will be in the review, assembling, synthesizing, analyzing, surveying and critiquing the current understanding of the topic. We have decided to take those steps before and during the documentary analysis. Our choice is justified by the reason why there is no need to “[...] reinvent the literature review process” (MACHI; McEVOY, 2009, p. 1). It is also relevant to highlight that this type of literature review is the



representation of an accurate and thorough model of such a perspective of research methodology.

Documentary research, based on Laville, Dione (1999), focuses on sound and visual documents, such as songs, pictures, tapes, paintings, images and videos, which carry useful information, and can link information about humanity and society. In this research, we use, as documents, Internet memes that were searched online. Our choice is based on the need to having an extension of the literature review previously done.

Internet memes in English teaching

In this paper, we aim at analyzing the pedagogical potentials of memes in the teaching of English. We believe that English teaching ought to be connected with social issues in a general perspective once teaching practices should not be pushed far away from what happens in the world. Thus, we have based our analyses on the Theory of Multiliteracies (COPE; KALANTZIS, 2000, 2008). The core of this theory is related to possible ways of making meaning, which have been expanded and diversified over the last decade. Nowadays, texts are not only seen as graphic writing, but they are now represented by audios, images, spatial sphere, ways of behaving, and so forth. This phenomenon is particularly relevant in mass communication, especially on social media, that integrate with growing local diversity and global connectivity. Every day, people negotiate meanings and recognize differences through the events they get to know and live. By considering those events, people realize that local communities interconnect, in a global dimension, through working and living activities in communities.

The Theory of Multiliteracies points out, in this sense, to various ways of reading and analyzing the world, our own stances, texts, and their diverse forms of presentation and representation as well as social contexts – a perspective based on Paulo Freire's studies. The key idea is that texts are not finished when people read them, and readers have to be responsible for their own readings and interpretations (SOUZA, 2011). That being said, it is highlighted that we should analyze why we read the way we read or why we do not pay attention to certain details in a text rather than trying to find meanings and intentions employed by its author. Thus, readers go from a passive position to an active one, once they take over an attitude of authorship regarding the texts they get in contact with. Menezes de Souza (2011) says that readers should read by reading their own attitudes:



Critical literacy not only consists of reading but reading by analyzing our ideas and conceptions, being aware of how we read, how we make meaning. We should not think of reading as a transparent process: we read what one has written...we should always think: why did I understand it like that? Why do I think it this way? Where do my ideas and interpretations come from? (SOUZA, 2011, p. 296, our translation).

Among the types of memes, we can refer to those that have a flagrant political nature: the political memes. This type of meme has become genuine practices of writing and sharing on social media worldwide, especially during the elections. There has been a tendency to use political memes in post-election periods as a way of reaffirming political positions. Chagas (2018) delivers a brief contextualization concerning political memes in digital society:

Burroughs (2013) defines political memes as part of media ecology as well as an agonistic public sphere on the Internet. On the other hand, Lawrance (2015) refers to BokoHaram, a fundamentalist organization, as being a meme and describe the concept as tool of cultural reference which is capable of expressing fears and anxieties through repetition of mind images. The idea of mind images was originally presented by Dawkins (1976) but the current concept developed and has gotten attached to a digital perspective (CHAGAS, 2018, p. 8-9).

Political memes offer pedagogical possibilities for the teaching of English thanks to their analytical potential, which is one of the core aspects of the Theory of Multiliteracies. Images 1 and 2, hereafter, make reference to Donald Trump's slogan during the political campaign to the presidency of the United States, in 2016. The slogan "Let's make America great again" ended up by being used as basis for criticism towards Trump's government, after the elections. An example of such a discursive appropriation is presented below when the meme's authors resignified the slogan of the presidential campaign. Those memes ironically suggested that the act of "making America great again" could be summarized in building a wall that separates the United States from Mexico – which was one of Trump's campaign promises, massively criticized by part of the US's population and worldwide. In the first image, Trump appears to hold an authoritarian look towards the "development of America". In the second one, otherwise, that developmental resumption was represented by the construction of a wall, which would separate the US from Mexico. Taking into account that every detail on the meme



may be crucial for making meaning, it could be inferred that there was an intention to criticize Trump's ideological stances and governmental postures:

Image 1: Ironical meme on Trump's slogan



Source: memegenerator.net

Regarding the English teaching field, we could point that the aspects of linguistic decoding do not have to be the center of our classes. The pictures aforementioned could be explored through many questions: the possible reasons behind the selection of those specific pictures; potential analyses and interpretations of that meme; discursive appropriation by opposing political groups; the fact that discussion on party politics has been frequent even during non-election times; the places of speech presented in the memes as well as aspects concerning how we see or ignore all of the points listed above.

In order to expand the discussion on the same campaign slogan, image 2 shows two pictures covering the same content even though they were portrayed through different platforms. Sometimes, we are told that the events of the real world invade the virtual atmosphere. However, we have noticed that this phenomenon also happens the other way around: events from this assumed real world appear in cybernetic spheres, but they are presented to people through non-digital platforms, such as T-shirt prints, for instance.

Accordingly, teachers could deconstruct linear processes of interaction regarding what is considered to be real and virtual in an attempt to work on critical perspectives in English classes. Besides, teachers could also debate on the sales potential that those political discourses play in the economic world. By following this perspective, aspects of neoliberalism and its interference in many areas of expertise (ZACCHI, 2016) could be presented, analyzed and problematized in English classes.

Image 2: Memes through diverse platforms



Sources: me.me and teeshirtplace.

9

English classes do not have to deal specifically with political memes. The title of this paper suggests the use of memes through their various nuances considering that our theoretical basis is grounded on the perspectives of Multiliteracies. Taking into account a more (de)constructive path in English teaching, we may also focus on working with humorous memes. Among the choices commonly made to portray daily events of specific social contexts, meme creators use video clips, screenshots from TV series, movies, TV news, and, most frequently, cartoons.

Image 3 is an Internet meme in which the Disney character, Donald Duck woke up in the middle of the night, and recalled a strange or awkward situation he had experienced in 2008. Apparently, that picture would not provide room for a critical analysis, once it focuses on a humorous aspect. On the other hand, depending on the approach towards that picture, teachers might ask the following potential questions: what are the possible reasons behind the choice of 2008 as a year for something awkward to happen? Does that time demarcation make sense to everyone? If it makes sense, how similar or different is it from you and your classmates' views? What meanings did you make after reading that meme? Do you think your meanings are legitimate?



Image 3: Exploring humorous memes

When you randomly remember
something awkward you did in 2008



Source: Pinterest

Memes are full of meanings. It is worth mentioning that, according to the Theory of Literacies, those meanings are not only portrayed by those who elaborate and share memes on web. Each person who reads a meme may have different perceptions on that specific situation. The metaphor of dissent, explored by Menezes de Souza (2011), is a possibility to be taken into the classroom whenever teachers aim at preparing students for the complexity of the contemporary world where digital media and the Internet help to boost the production and sharing of fake news. Menezes de Souza (2011) says that:

We need to realize that, depending on the place we read, we will understand X. Another person from another context might read the same image in another way. Therefore, there will always be conflicts of interpretation. Why did I understand it differently from that person? Why do I see it differently from them? (SOUZA, 2011, p. 297).

Given the fluidity and the potential of participatory culture on the web (JENKINS, 2010), users may edit, adapt and/or resignify memes before sharing them. Thus, as we have already mentioned, texts are not finished when they come to readers-authors. Memes continue to circulate in a creative process even after their first diffusion – and even when users do not edit them and just share to other users.

In order to illustrate this co-authoring aspect, we could recall situations when the same picture is used to represent various contexts. This is why different people see diverse possibilities for using that same image, even though some adaptations may be necessary. In image 4, the scenario is the same as the image 3. This time, Donald Duck is apparently prepared to sleep, plans to wake up early, and work out early in the morning. However, he ends up not being able to put his plan into action. This example presents us a remixing process (BUZATO; AL, 2013; BOA SORTE, 2018), given that the sequence of images was altered, and other meanings were portrayed:

Image 4: Resignifying Internet memes



Source: Funny captions

It might be necessary to discuss ethical issues as well as text appropriation on digital spheres when working with co-authoring and meaning making of memes in language teaching. It is crucial to invest in a constant exercise of self-questioning and self-problematization: why do I see that potential in that meme? Why do I understand that meme in a different way that my classmate does? Where do my readings and interpretations come from? Have I been ethical while using that meme to portray my realities and identities? (SOUZA, 2011).

The meme from image 5 produces humor effects in a context in which a woman takes a day off from work at the same day that her children do not have class at school. The woman says that that situation was not fair. The picture chosen to create this meme was apparently taken from a dramatic scene of a movie, given that the character seems to cry. It is possible to notice that the choices



for creating that meme were made to produce humor through a scene that was originally from a dramatic event. On the other hand, the relationship between the sentences and the image in this meme may produce different meanings depending on each reader-author.

Image 5: Dealing with social roles

When you have the day off from work
but your kids also have the day off from
school



Source: Bored Panda.com

The focus on a humorous aspect may be turned into an analysis of social roles. Despite having achieved several rights that assure women's dignity in society throughout the last decades, we still witness a tendency of standardizing the social roles that are played by women and men. Why has a woman been chosen to represent that situation? How does that choice reflect social patterns that still persist in society nowadays? Would it be interesting to have chosen a man rather than a woman? Would readers' reception be different? Would it generate new positioning by readers? Who could feel represented by that meme? Is there only one way of representing it? These are some of the questions that could be proposed by teachers in English classes while using that meme.

Far from suggesting models or techniques for teaching, our perspective is that memes should be used in classes through practices of Critical Literacies. Taking our readings of image 5 into account, we mention the following affordances: a discussion on the large percentage of women who work outside their homes; women who are responsible for bringing up their children on their own; women who are the only responsible for house chores. The main intention of that woman could be the opportunity to manage domestic duties that are under her responsibility rather than having the chance to take care of herself. Thus, we may start by questioning our attitudes towards technologies and texts as well as analyzing



other people's attitudes. It could be based on the following questions: where do I stand when I use memes on social media? Which audiences do my discourses favor or disfavor? Do I try to be critical and conscious when it comes to my posts and other people's posts? Am I aware of the scope and validity of my posts in the development of other people's social background? What do I understand as being critical? (JANKS, 2014).

Final remarks

We began this paper by giving a brief introduction on the conceptions of memes, taking Dawkin's definition (1976) as a starting point. According to him, aspects of longevity, fecundity, and copy fidelity characterize memes. Then we discussed the presence of those aspects in the context of a large web of digital production: the Internet memes. Those cultural artifacts widespread in our digital era portray TV series, songs, movies, celebrities as well as non-famous people who get known through a simple sentence or action, and so forth. Thus, according to Calixto (2018), Brazil is one of the greatest centers of meme production, a characteristic that has given this country the title of "meme factory".

The use of Internet memes in English classes gives us many possibilities to re-read diverse aspects of social reality. Regardless of the content, from humorous to political texts, teachers have to manage classes towards the problematization of contents presented in memes, and provide students with opportunities of self-reflection. Thus, teachers' role is essential to the establishment of critical stances.

Among the analyses we have engaged in, we highlighted two Internet memes concerning the current President of the United States, Donald Trump. His campaign slogan entitled "Let's make America great again" and his proposal of building a wall to separate the United States from Mexico were taken by opposite sides as a way of mocking the president's attitudes and decisions. Both the campaign slogan and the construction of the USA/Mexico wall have been two of the most criticized aspects by the USA's population. The use of those memes in English classes can provide critical analyses and discussions on political issues, appropriation and resignification of discourses as well as the establishment of various ways of reading in classroom.



In an attempt to illustrate diverse uses of Internet memes, we showed two examples of humorous memes based on the Disney character, Donald Duck. Both memes have the same picture basis, but some aspects of the images are disposed in a different way, which ends up recalling processes of remixing. By analyzing those examples, we could realize that the primary authors perceived different potentials regarding the images, which is certainly concerned with their living experiences, for instance: the humorous aspect towards the lack of motivation to work out and awkward memories from the past. Those two examples could be used to discuss the conflicts between appropriation and authoring in the current context of digital cultures.

The last example showed a woman asserting that it was unfair to have a day off from work when her children do not have to go to school. A priori, the humorous aspect is flagrant, once the character seems to cry for something unusual. However, a careful and detailed analysis may enable teachers to deal with social roles that are commonly associated with women in the present society: various women work outside their houses, look after their children, and end up being solely responsible for household chores. Therefore, those points could explain the reasons why she claimed that in the meme.

Given the aspects presented above, it is possible to state that teachers should look for the origins and relevance of the memes they work with. By adopting this analytical posture, they will be able to contextualize the changes that those texts passed through to have the formats they present nowadays. Thus, we point out that planning classes is a necessary task.

To sum up, we defend that the use of memes should be planned by teachers based on critical perspectives. There is no use bringing memes into the classroom if this practice does not make sense to teachers and students. Therefore, we highlight that the uses of memes should be conscious and meaningful in order to enhance critical teaching practices. Both teachers and students have to develop stances based on reflection, meaning and critique.



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Prof. Dr. Paulo Boa Sorte

Universidade Federal de Sergipe (Brasil)

Departamento de Letras Estrangeiras

Programa de Pós-Graduação em Educação

Grupo de Pesquisa Letramentos em Inglês: língua, literatura, cultura

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0785-5998>

E-mail: pauloboasorte1@gmail.com

Mestrando Jefferson do Carmo Andrade Santos

Universidade Federal de Sergipe (Brasil)

Programa de Pós-Graduação em Educação

Grupo de Pesquisa Letramentos em Inglês: língua, literatura, cultura

ORCID : <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3299-0948>

E-mail: jeffersonandrade06@hotmail.com

Recebido 7 ago. 2019

Aceito 11 out. 2019