Using Memes in an Online Classroom

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This Make-a-Meme activity is designed for VIPKid's teen learners who communicate at an intermediate or upper-intermediate level; the activity uses memes to facilitate communication and collaboration. The objectives of this activity include using language creatively and responsibly with a focus on fluency-building. Learners will be able to create memes, determine group favorites, and use age- and level-appropriate language and imagery to engage and collaborate in an online learning environment.

Pre-Activity

Learners will review existing memes and discuss content and meaning, how memes are created, and which memes are the learners' favorites. As necessary, learners will be trained on how to add text to images, including how to change fonts and text direction.

Activity

After the pre-task, learners will submit images (without text) they think are suitable for turning into memes within the group. For our purposes, we will assume a group of 15 learners is participating. This means 15 images will be collected for memes.

The teacher will ensure appropriacy of the images and arrange them in an online gallery that allows learners to interact with the image and type their own text to turn the image into a meme. Learners should choose at least three images to write text to in order to create a meme. The settings on the gallery should allow learners to see other entries only after learners have completed their three minimum memes; all entries will be anonymous to learners, but the teacher will be able to see who has contributed and in what capacity. This way the teacher can make sure that all images are turned in to memes.

Once learners have submitted their responses, the teacher can make all of the gallery entry memes visible to learners. The group may meet again to discuss the memes (depending on needs of the learners and the practicality of getting the group together synchronously). Ultimately, learners will upvote the memes they like the best. Learners will be given the option to (anonymously) comment on the memes. These comments can include suggestions on how to refine the text on the meme. At the end of the activity, the teacher can reveal the top three memes according to the group.

At any point during the activity, the teacher should be available as a springboard for learner ideas or for those who are unsure of how to get started.

Post-Activity

There are a number of post-activities that learners can do, depending on the content generated in the Make-a-Meme activity, and the teacher can determine the direction of post-activities after seeing submissions and how learners interact with the task. The post-activity should include some element of reflection. Options include having learners reflect on the collaboration with their classmates (how they struggled/thrived in the different steps of the activity) or having learners reflect on what the memes say or reveal about their group. Learners may also choose to share the memes on social media or on the VIPKid platform with other learners outside the class.

Background and Theory

This task is grounded in Online Collaborative Learning (OCL) Theory and the three strategies of constructing knowledge: idea generating, idea organizing, and intellectual convergence (Harasim, 2012).

Idea generating involves "divergent thinking within a group" (Harasim, 2012, p. 93). This is an important part of any activity because it allows learners who have different ideas to contribute to the group and refine their viewpoints based on listening to others. This also provides the group the opportunity to share individual ideas and then determine which of those ideas transfer to the group at large. The Make-a-Meme activity includes idea generating in the form of learners brainstorming and sharing ideas about what a meme is, as well as what makes a successful meme (and "successful" may look different to different groups of learners).

Organizing ideas likely looks different in a group of young learners trying to communicate in English than it does for a group of adults engaging in discussions and readings, but even the Make-a-Meme activity provides opportunities for "[l]earners [] to organize, analyze and filter the range of ideas by agreeing or disagreeing with some of the ideas presented, elaborating, expanding, or rejecting others" (p. 96). The teacher may need to take more of an active role as a facilitator and ask questions of the group to help them get their ideas locked down. In the Make-a-Meme activity, learners will organize ideas both independently as they choose an image that lends itself to a meme, and collaboratively, as they engage with other images and upvote the memes that resonate with them. The fact that learners can contribute anonymously allows for learners to potentially take more risks and not be so worried about making mistakes, a common issue with teen language learners.

Finally, intellectual convergence allows learners to come together with a "shared understanding" (p. 93) and form some conclusion that either unifies the group or demonstrates where there are discrepancies. Make-a-Meme allows for intellectual convergence because the finished product involves memes that no single individual created. Although there will be some memes that are class favorites, even the memes that do not get upvoted by the group will have

served a valuable role (you cannot upvote all of the memes, so there is some level of negotiation that happens as learners choose how to vote).

The Role of Technology

Technology is critical to Make-a-Meme, especially with this age group and the kinds of difficulties learners face. Tee language learners typically feel more self-conscious about offering up ideas for fear of judgment from peers. In a traditional classroom, even if learners try to have some element of anonymity, other classmates can usually find out pretty quickly who contributed and how. By using technology and an online forum, learners get to maintain anonymity until the end of the task, and even the final choices in the Make-a-Meme activity are a product of collaboration.

The use of technology in this activity, too, allows learners to participate in and create something that reflects the kinds of sites they already engage with outside class. There is a real-world connection, both in the content being produced (memes are very popular right now), in how learners create memes (there are a number of meme generators available online), and in the way that learners can determine which ones they like (upvoting is very common on sites like reddit).

Conclusion

Make-a-Meme has the potential to be a great activity for intermediate and upper-intermediate language learners looking to creatively extend language and work on fluency-building. Learners have the chance to collaborate and create something without feeling the pressure of being judged by peers in real-time. Then they can feel proud of their work and show it off outside class.

Make-a-Meme Rubric

1: Criterion not met

2: Criterion partially met

3: Criterion adequately met

4: Criterion substantially met

5: Criterion fully met

Pre-Activity	
The learner…	
participates in a group discussion about memes.	
shares knowledge about memes with the group.	
Activity	
The learner…	
submits an appropriate image.	
meets all deadlines associated with activity.	
uses language that is level-appropriate.	
uses language that supports the image.	
contributes content for at least three images.	
comments appropriately on at least three completed memes.	
votes for their favorite memes.	
Post-Activity	
The learner…	
shares at least one class meme on at least one forum outside class.	

References

Harasim, L. (2012). Online Collaborative Learning (OCL) Theory. Learning Theory and Online Technologies. Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 79-107.