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From Memes to Narratives: Exploring Multimodal Digital Storytelling in ESL Classrooms through a Digital Humanities Lens

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Abstract: The growing influence of digital media has transformed language learning by introducing new forms of communication and meaning-making. This study explores the use of meme-based digital storytelling in an undergraduate ESL classroom through a Digital Humanities lens. Employing a hybrid framework that combines action research and multimodal analysis, the study examines how learners use memes and WhatsApp stickers to construct narratives and develop language skills. Conducted among thirty-five undergraduate students over four weeks, the research involved activities such as meme sequencing, caption writing, sticker-assisted dialogue creation, and collaborative storytelling. Data were collected through tests, questionnaires, classroom observations, learner narratives, and reflective responses. The findings suggest that multimodal storytelling enhances learner engagement, creativity, collaboration, vocabulary development, and narrative competence. The study further demonstrates how visual and textual resources work together in the construction of meaning, highlighting the role of digital literacy and participatory culture in contemporary ESL education.

Keywords: *Digital Humanities, Digital Storytelling, Memes, Multimodality, ESL Learning, Digital Literacy, Narrative Competence, Visual Culture*

Introduction

The rapid expansion of digital technologies has fundamentally transformed contemporary communication, reshaping how individuals create, share, and interpret meaning in everyday life. Communication is no longer confined to written or spoken language alone; instead, it increasingly occurs through multimodal forms that integrate text, images, emojis, stickers, videos, GIFs, and other visual resources. Social media platforms, instant messaging applications, and participatory digital environments have normalized these forms of interaction, making them an integral part of daily communication, particularly among younger generations. Consequently, literacy in the twenty-first century extends beyond the traditional abilities of reading and writing to include the capacity to navigate, interpret, and produce meaning across multiple semiotic modes. This shift presents both challenges and opportunities for English as a Second Language (ESL) education.

Learners today engage with language not only through textbooks and classroom discourse but also through digital cultures that shape their communicative practices outside formal educational settings. As educational institutions seek to prepare students for participation in an increasingly digital world, language pedagogy must respond to these changing communicative realities by incorporating forms of expression that learners encounter in their everyday lives. Among the most influential of these forms are internet memes, emojis, and messaging stickers, which combine visual and linguistic elements to communicate ideas, emotions, humour, and cultural meanings in concise yet powerful ways. Although often dismissed as informal or recreational, such digital artefacts possess significant communicative value and offer rich possibilities for language learning.

The educational relevance of these digital artefacts can be better understood through the perspectives of Digital Humanities and multimodality. Digital Humanities, an interdisciplinary field concerned with the interaction between digital technologies, culture, and human expression, encourages scholars to view digital texts as meaningful cultural productions rather than merely technological outputs. From this perspective, memes and other user-generated digital content can be understood as contemporary forms of cultural expression that reflect social values, collective experiences, and evolving modes of communication. At the same time, multimodality theory provides a framework for understanding how meaning is created through the interaction of multiple semiotic resources. According to Gunther Kress and Theovan Leeuwen, communication is inherently multimodal, with visual, linguistic, spatial, and other modes working together to construct meaning. This perspective challenges traditional views of language learning that privilege written text as the primary medium of communication. Instead, it highlights the importance of helping learners develop the ability to interpret and create multimodal texts. In educational contexts, digital storytelling has

emerged as a particularly effective pedagogical approach because it combines narrative construction with the creative use of diverse semiotic resources. Through digital storytelling, learners become active producers of meaning rather than passive recipients of information. They engage in selecting images, composing captions, organizing narratives, and negotiating meaning with peers, thereby developing linguistic competence alongside digital literacy and critical thinking skills.

A growing body of research suggests that digital storytelling can enhance learner motivation, creativity, collaboration, and language proficiency. Nevertheless, much of the existing scholarship has focused on multimedia presentations, video production, blogs, and other relatively conventional digital formats. Comparatively little attention has been devoted to meme-based storytelling and the pedagogical use of messaging applications such as WhatsApp, despite their widespread presence in the everyday communicative practices of students. This gap is particularly significant because memes and stickers encourage concise expression, cultural interpretation, humour, and creative meaning-making, all of which are closely connected to language development. Their integration into ESL classrooms has the potential to bridge the gap between formal learning environments and the digital cultures in which students actively participate. In response to this need, the present study investigates the use of meme-based digital storytelling in an undergraduate ESL classroom through a Digital Humanities lens. Employing a hybrid framework that combines action research and multimodal analysis, the study examines how learners use memes and WhatsApp stickers to construct narratives and develop language skills. Specifically, it seeks to evaluate the effectiveness of meme-based storytelling in enhancing narrative competence, explore how learners combine visual and linguistic resources to create meaning, and examine the perceptions of students about these innovative learning activities. By bringing everyday digital communication practices into formal language education, the study contributes to ongoing discussions on digital literacy, multimodal pedagogy, and the evolving role of Digital Humanities in contemporary ESL teaching and learning.

Review of Literature

Digital Humanities has emerged as an interdisciplinary field that explores the relationship between digital technologies, culture, and human expression. Rather than viewing technology merely as a tool, Digital Humanities examines how digital environments influence the creation, circulation, and interpretation of knowledge. Scholars such as N. Katherine Hayles and Matthew K. Gold argue that digital technologies have transformed the ways individuals interact with texts and participate in knowledge production. Within educational contexts, this perspective has expanded traditional understandings of literacy by recognizing digital artefacts such as memes, social media posts, emojis, and stickers as meaningful cultural texts. As communication increasingly takes place through digital

platforms, language education must move beyond print-based approaches and engage with the digital cultures that shape learners' everyday experiences. For ESL classrooms, Digital Humanities offers a framework for integrating contemporary forms of communication into pedagogy, thereby making language learning more relevant, participatory, and connected to real-world practices.

The concept of multimodality provides an important theoretical foundation for understanding communication in digital environments. According to the social semiotic framework developed by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, meaning is constructed through the interaction of multiple semiotic resources, including language, images, colour, layout, sound, and gesture. Contemporary digital communication is inherently multimodal, as users frequently combine visual and linguistic elements to convey ideas and emotions. Internet memes exemplify this process by integrating images, captions, humour, and cultural references to generate meaning. Research in multimodal literacy suggests that learners increasingly encounter texts that require the simultaneous interpretation of visual and verbal information. For language learners, multimodal resources can function as scaffolds that support comprehension, creativity, and self-expression. Consequently, multimodal approaches have gained prominence in language education because they reflect authentic communicative practices and encourage learners to develop a broader range of literacy skills.

Digital storytelling has emerged as a widely used pedagogical approach that combines traditional narrative practices with digital technologies. Through the integration of text, images, audio, video, and other digital resources, digital storytelling enables learners to construct and share meaningful narratives. The approach is closely associated with constructivist and sociocultural theories of learning, particularly the work of Lev Vygotsky, who emphasized the role of social interaction and collaborative meaning-making in knowledge construction. Studies have shown that digital storytelling can enhance language proficiency, creativity, critical thinking, collaboration, and digital literacy. In ESL and EFL contexts, it has been linked to improvements in vocabulary development, writing skills, oral communication, and narrative competence. By engaging learners in authentic communicative tasks, digital storytelling encourages active participation and allows students to express themselves through multiple modes of representation. Its learner-centred nature also promotes confidence and motivation by providing alternatives to exclusively text-based forms of language production.

Drawing on Henry Jenkins' concept of participatory culture, memes can be viewed as user-generated cultural artefacts that are created, shared, and remixed within digital communities. In language education, memes can be used to support vocabulary learning, grammar instruction, creative writing, and classroom discussion. Because they require learners to interpret relationships between images, text, and cultural references. Memes encourage sophisticated meaning-making processes while

fostering visual literacy. However, despite growing interest in meme-based pedagogy, relatively few studies have examined memes as tools for digital storytelling, particularly in undergraduate ESL classrooms. Even fewer studies have investigated the combined use of memes and messaging-based visual resources such as WhatsApp stickers through a Digital Humanities perspective. This gap highlights the need for research that examines how learners transform digital artefacts into narratives, how multimodal resources contribute to meaning-making, and how such practices influence language development and engagement. The present study addresses this gap by exploring meme-based digital storytelling as a pedagogical strategy for enhancing narrative competence, multimodal literacy, and digital engagement among undergraduate ESL learners.

Methodology

This study employed a hybrid methodological framework combining action research, mixed-method inquiry, and multimodal analysis to investigate the effectiveness of meme-based digital storytelling in the undergraduate level. Grounded in a Digital Humanities perspective, the study viewed memes, WhatsApp stickers, and other digital artefacts as meaningful cultural texts that could support language learning and multimodal meaning-making. The research was conducted at Govinda Pai Memorial Government College, Manjeshwar, Kerala, through the Skill Club programme. Participants consisted of thirty-five second-semester B.Com. students (20 female and 15 male) from diverse linguistic backgrounds. Purposive sampling was employed because the participants regularly engaged with digital communication platforms such as WhatsApp and Instagram, making them suitable for a study on digital storytelling practices.

The intervention followed the action research cycle of planning, action, observation, and reflection over a period of four weeks. A series of activities, including meme sequencing and story reconstruction, caption writing, sticker-assisted dialogue creation, and narrative writing based on visual prompts, was designed to enhance narrative competence, vocabulary development, creativity, and collaborative learning. These tasks made learners to interpret and create multimodal texts by combining visual and linguistic resources in narrative construction. Data were collected through pre-tests and post-tests, classroom observations, learner-generated narratives, reflective responses, and a perception questionnaire. The pre-test and post-test assessed narrative competence and vocabulary usage, while observations and reflections provided insights into learner engagement, creativity, collaboration, and attitudes towards the activities.

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, including mean scores, percentages, and standard deviations, to identify changes in learner performance and perceptions. Qualitative data from observations, narratives, and reflections were examined through thematic

analysis to identify recurring patterns related to engagement, creativity, collaborative learning, and digital literacy. Selected learner narratives were further analyzed using a multimodal framework informed by the social semiotic theories of Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, focusing on the interaction between visual and linguistic elements in meaning-making.

Findings and Discussion

The findings are discussed in relation to three objectives: enhancing narrative competence, exploring multimodal meaning-making, and understanding learners' perceptions of meme-based digital storytelling. Both quantitative and qualitative data indicate that the integration of memes and WhatsApp stickers contributed positively to language learning, learner engagement, creativity, and digital literacy development.

A comparison of pre-test and post-test scores revealed a substantial improvement in learners' narrative competence. The mean score increased from 54.6 in the pre-test to 72.8 in the post-test, representing a gain of 18.2 points. Students demonstrated noticeable progress in narrative organization, vocabulary usage, coherence, and creative expression. The reduction in standard deviation further suggests greater consistency in learner performance following the intervention. These findings indicate that meme-based storytelling provided effective scaffolding for narrative construction. Visual prompts helped learners generate ideas and organize events more easily, reducing the cognitive demands often associated with conventional writing tasks. This observation supports the argument that multimodal resources facilitate language learning by providing contextual and visual support for meaning-making. From a social semiotic perspective, communication occurs through the interaction of multiple modes rather than language alone. The findings therefore reinforce the multimodal theories of Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, who emphasize that meaning emerges through the coordinated use of linguistic and visual resources. In the present study, learners used memes not merely as illustrations but as narrative stimuli that guided story development and encouraged richer language production.

One of the most significant outcomes of the intervention was the high level of learner engagement. Classroom observations revealed that students who were generally reluctant to participate in traditional writing activities became actively involved when memes and stickers were introduced. Learners enthusiastically discussed possible interpretations of visual prompts, exchanged ideas with peers, and frequently continued discussions beyond the allotted classroom time. Reflective responses further confirmed this pattern. The learners noted that visual prompts helped to generate ideas quickly and reduced anxiety about writing. Such responses suggest that multimodal storytelling created a more accessible and enjoyable learning environment. The popularity of memes and digital visual culture among young adults may explain this increased engagement. Because learners were already familiar

with these forms of communication outside the classroom, they perceived the activities as authentic and relevant rather than purely academic exercises. This finding aligns with Digital Humanities scholarship, which emphasizes the importance of engaging with contemporary digital cultures as legitimate sites of meaning-making and knowledge production. By incorporating familiar digital artefacts into formal learning, the study successfully bridged the gap between everyday communicative practices and classroom-based language learning.

The intervention also fostered considerable creativity in narrative construction. Analysis of learner-generated narratives revealed that students frequently transformed simple visual prompts into imaginative and coherent stories. Rather than describing the images literally, they expanded them into narratives involving personal experiences, fictional adventures, social issues, and emotional journeys. A meme depicting a confused student standing outside a locked classroom, for example, inspired narratives involving unexpected discoveries, campus adventures, and personal growth. Similarly, sticker sequences were transformed into stories addressing friendship, workplace ethics, and social relationships. These findings suggest that memes can function as powerful narrative triggers that stimulate imagination and encourage learners to move beyond formulaic writing. Digital storytelling research has consistently highlighted the relationship between multimodal composition and creative expression, and the present findings support this view. By providing visual cues while leaving interpretive possibilities open, memes encouraged learners to construct original meanings and experiment with language in creative ways. The activities therefore promoted not only linguistic development but also higher-order thinking skills associated with interpretation, inference, and narrative design.

Another important finding concerns the collaborative nature of multimodal storytelling. Throughout the intervention, learners engaged in extensive peer interaction while interpreting memes, negotiating meanings, and constructing narratives. Observation notes revealed frequent discussions regarding alternative interpretations of visual prompts and possible narrative developments. Students often assisted one another in selecting vocabulary, refining storylines, and clarifying meanings. Such interactions demonstrate that learning occurred through social participation rather than individual effort alone. This finding resonates strongly with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which emphasizes the role of social interaction in cognitive development. According to Vygotsky, learning is facilitated through collaborative activities in which individuals construct knowledge collectively. The storytelling tasks created opportunities for learners to negotiate meaning, share perspectives, and support language development. Furthermore, the collaborative interpretation of memes reflects Henry Jenkins' concept of participatory culture, where knowledge is produced collectively through interaction, discussion, and

shared creativity. The classroom effectively became a participatory learning community in which students acted as active producers rather than passive recipients of knowledge.

The findings also demonstrate the development of multimodal and digital literacy skills. Learners showed increasing awareness of the relationship between images, captions, humour, symbolism, and audience interpretation. Reflective responses indicated that many students began to recognize memes as meaningful communicative texts rather than merely sources of entertainment. Several learners observed that they had learned how a single image could generate multiple interpretations depending on context and accompanying text. This growing awareness suggests the development of critical multimodal literacy, a skill that is increasingly important in digitally mediated societies. The multimodal analysis of learner narratives further revealed that meaning emerged through the interaction of visual and linguistic elements. In one activity, learners were presented with a meme depicting surprise and a celebratory WhatsApp sticker. Most participants constructed narratives involving unexpected success, personal achievement, or humorous misunderstandings. The visual prompts provided emotional and contextual cues, while the written narratives supplied characterization, sequencing, and resolution. Meaning was therefore generated through the combination of modes rather than through text or image independently. Such findings strongly support the multimodal framework which views communication as a process of integrating multiple semiotic resources.

From a broader Digital Humanities perspective, the study highlights the educational value of everyday digital artefacts. Memes and WhatsApp stickers are often dismissed as informal or recreational forms of communication; however, the findings demonstrate their potential as cultural texts capable of supporting language learning, creativity, and critical literacy. By transforming digital artefacts into narrative resources, learners engaged in practices that mirror contemporary forms of digital communication and content creation. The study therefore reinforces the view that literacy in the twenty-first century extends beyond conventional reading and writing to include the interpretation and production of multimodal digital texts.

Overall, the findings suggest that meme-based digital storytelling can function as an effective pedagogical strategy for enhancing narrative competence, fostering creativity and collaboration, and developing multimodal literacy in ESL classrooms. The integration of digital cultural practices into language education not only improves linguistic outcomes but also prepares learners to participate more critically and effectively in contemporary digital environments. The significance of the findings extends beyond language learning outcomes. The memes and WhatsApp stickers employed in the intervention functioned as cultural artefacts embedded within contemporary digital communication

practices. Learners did not simply consume these texts; they interpreted, adapted, and transformed them into narratives, thereby participating in processes of digital cultural production. Such activities reflect a central concern of Digital Humanities: understanding how individuals create and negotiate meaning within digitally mediated environments. By engaging with memes as cultural texts rather than merely instructional materials, students developed awareness of how humour, symbolism, context, and shared cultural knowledge contribute to communication. The classroom thus became a space where learners participated in the interpretive and creative practices that characterize contemporary digital culture.

Conclusion

The rapid expansion of digital communication technologies has transformed contemporary literacy practices, challenging educators to rethink traditional approaches to language teaching and learning. Situated within the frameworks of Digital Humanities and multimodality, this study investigated the pedagogical potential of meme-based digital storytelling in an undergraduate ESL classroom. By integrating internet memes and WhatsApp stickers into narrative activities, the research explored how learners engaged with multimodal resources to construct meaning, develop language skills, and participate in digitally mediated forms of communication.

The findings demonstrate that meme-based digital storytelling can serve as an effective pedagogical strategy for enhancing narrative competence, vocabulary development, creativity, and learner engagement. The use of visual prompts enabled learners to generate ideas more confidently, organize narratives more effectively, and participate actively in collaborative meaning-making processes. Moreover, the integration of memes and stickers encouraged students to move beyond conventional writing practices by combining visual and linguistic resources to create coherent and imaginative narratives. These outcomes support multimodal theories of communication, which emphasize that meaning emerges through the interaction of multiple semiotic modes rather than through language alone.

The study also contributes to the growing intersection between Digital Humanities and language education by highlighting the educational value of everyday digital artefacts. Memes and WhatsApp stickers, often regarded as informal forms of online communication, emerged as meaningful cultural texts capable of fostering critical thinking, creativity, and digital literacy. Their use in the classroom demonstrates how digital cultural practices can be transformed into productive learning experiences that connect academic learning with the lived realities of learners. Although the study was limited to a relatively short intervention period, it offers valuable insights into the role of multimodal storytelling in contemporary ESL pedagogy. Future research may explore similar interventions across

diverse educational settings and learner populations. As literacy practices continue to evolve in response to digital culture, language education must increasingly embrace multimodal and participatory approaches that prepare learners for meaningful communication in the twenty-first century.

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