RESEARCH PAPER

Meme Journalism: A New Pedagogical Tool for Teaching Language and Literature in ELT

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Abstract

Internet memes have become a routine vernacular for public meaning-making and political talk online, operating through remix, intertextuality, and multimodal design. Alongside this shift, news is increasingly encountered via platformed, visual-first environments (e.g., Instagram) and messaging apps (e.g., WhatsApp), where images circulate quickly and can be persuasive, ambiguous, or misleading. This paper coins and theorises meme journalism as an emergent "news–meme hybrid" genre and argues that it can function as a pedagogical tool for teaching language and literature in English Language Teaching (ELT), particularly for developing multimodal literacy, pragmatic inference, critical media literacy, and reader-response practices. The study adopts an integrative, research-synthesis approach: (a) concept-building from foundational meme scholarship and multimodality; (b) synthesis of ELT/CALL and classroom-based meme studies; and (c) a critical literacy-informed analysis of the pedagogical affordances and risks of news-like memes. Prior work suggests that memes can support vocabulary recall, multimodal composing, and critical/visual literacy when tasks are well-scaffolded and outcomes are explicit. Meme journalism extends these benefits by adding a "news literacy" dimension—foregrounding evaluation of evidence, source credibility, framing, and ideological positioning. Meme journalism pedagogy can be aligned with CEFR Companion Volume emphases on mediation and online interaction, but it requires careful ethical governance (misinformation, bias, and copyright) and teacher preparation in critical digital literacies.

Key Words: Internet Memes, News-Meme Hybrid, Multimodility, New Literacy, Digital Literacies

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Introduction

Digital culture has shifted how English users read, write, and argue in public. One salient development is the rise of the internet meme as a widely recognisable, participatory, and rapidly replicable form that people use to narrate events, perform stance, and circulate political commentary. In one influential definition, Limor Shifman conceptualises internet memes as groups of digital items that share features of content/form/stance and are created with awareness of each other through circulation and transformation online. Complementing this view, Patrick Davison frames memes as highly replicable and malleable cultural units, emphasising their "copy-and-change" affordances. Ryan Milner further argues that memetic media participates in shaping public conversations, not merely reflecting them.

At the same time, journalism itself has been transformed by platform logics and visual-first news distribution. Instagram news, for instance, has been studied as a site where news values, framing, and platform affordances interact, shaping what is presented as news and how audiences engage with it. Encrypted messaging systems such as WhatsApp are also central to contemporary information ecosystems, where images function as persuasive "packets" that can carry misinformation at scale. These converging shifts—memetic communication and platformed news—create an intersection where "news-like" meme formats circulate as commentary, explanation, and sometimes manipulation.

This paper defines that intersection as meme journalism: the use of meme genres and meme conventions (remix, irony, intertextuality, multimodal compression) to report on, frame, evaluate, or editorialise current events in ways that resemble journalistic functions (selection, summarisation, contextualisation, and stance). The research problem motivating this study is double-edged: ELT needs pedagogies that develop learners' 21st-century literacies for real-world English use, yet the contemporary media environment includes significant risks of disinformation and polarised framing, particularly in image-based and meme-based forms. Meme journalism is therefore positioned here as both (a) an authentic textual domain for language

development and (b) a critical literacy site requiring explicit instruction.

Within ELT, the use of digital media and multimodal composing has already been justified as necessary for contemporary communication, with calls for embedding digital literacies into language teaching and aligning tasks with learners' online communicative realities. A multiliteracies orientation explicitly argues for expanding literacy beyond print to account for changing communication channels and cultural diversity—conditions that define meme communication. Meanwhile, critical media literacy and news literacy frameworks emphasise habits of inquiry and source evaluation—capacities particularly relevant where memes can act simultaneously as humour, critique, and misinformation.

Objectives and questions: This paper aims to (1) coin and operationalise "meme journalism" as a genre-relevant construct; (2) synthesise scholarship on memes, multimodality, ELT digital pedagogy, and critical literacy; (3) propose classroom applications for language skills and literature teaching; (4) outline curriculum integration principles and ethical safeguards; and (5) propose a mixed-methods research design for evaluating effectiveness.

A final justification concerns authenticity and transfer. State-of-the-art discussion of authentic materials notes persistent debates over what counts as "authentic" and how authenticity relates to learners' real communicative needs; nonetheless, authentic materials are widely argued to support engagement with meaning in context. Because meme journalism is already a common discourse form in many learners' media diets, it is positioned here as a high-transfer "authentic" domain—provided pedagogy makes its discourse constraints and ideological stakes visible.

Roadmap: The next section synthesises foundational and recent scholarship on meme linguistics, multimodal literacy, ELT digital pedagogy, and news/media literacy, then integrates these into a multi-lens framework (multimodality, sociocultural learning, and critical discourse analysis). The paper then defines meme journalism (evolution, platforms, linguistic features), proposes pedagogical rationales and applications for language skills and literature study, considers curriculum integration and ethics, outlines a research design proposal, and closes with a discussion and conclusion.

Literature review and theoretical framework

This section reviews research relevant to meme journalism pedagogy in ELT and consolidates it into a theoretical framework combining multimodality, sociocultural learning, and critical discourse analysis (CDA), with supporting perspectives from participatory culture and genre theory.

Linguistics and discourse of internet memes: Meme scholarship consistently treats memes as more than jokes: they are cultural artefacts whose meanings depend on circulation, iteration, and shared interpretive frames. In Shifman's account, memes differ conceptually from merely viral items because the memetic process involves variation and user-driven transformation. Davison highlights replicability and malleability as core to meme form, implying that memetic texts are designed for re-uptake and adaptation rather than stable authorship. Milner's account of memetic media emphasises how networked participants collectively produce and transform media snippets that become part of public discourse.

A central linguistic feature relevant to ELT is intertextuality—memes often presuppose prior texts (popular culture, political events, earlier memes) and generate humour or critique by layering references. Cross-border and cross-language meme circulation further demonstrates that meaning is reconstructed through localisation, translation, and code-mixing, underscoring the need for pedagogy that deals with cultural and pragmatic inference rather than literal decoding. Research on cross-language memes shows that bilingual elements themselves can be meaningful resources, shaping perceptions at semantic and pragmatic levels. Studies of code-switching in memes (e.g., English–Spanish or other bilingual contexts) indicate that switching is not random "error" but can index identity, voice, and community alignment, which can be pedagogically leveraged for register and stance work.

Multimodal literacy and social semiotics in language learning: Memes are prototypically multimodal. Social semiotic approaches to multimodality conceptualise meaning as made through coordinated modes (image, writing, layout, typography, gesture, sound in video memes), not through language alone. Gunther Kress argues that contemporary communication increasingly relies on ensembles of modes and that literacy must include design choices, modal affordances, and meaning-making beyond the verbal. In visual grammar work, Theo van Leeuwen and Kress treat images as structured semiotic resources that can be "read," implying that meme interpretation can be taught as systematic meaning-making rather than intuitive consumption.

The multiliteracies tradition provides an educational rationale for bringing such texts into classrooms: the

New London Group explicitly links changing communication channels and cultural diversity to an expanded view of literacy and pedagogy. Within L2 education, digital multimodal composing (DMC) has been framed as a legitimate domain of language learning—including design activity, multimodal orchestration, and assessment considerations. These perspectives legitimise meme creation and analysis not as "extra" activities but as contemporary literacy practices that can be aligned with language outcomes when assessment and scaffolding are explicit.

Digital media and ELT pedagogy: ELT technology scholarship has long argued that digital tools and online genres shape authentic language use and therefore should inform pedagogy. Gavin Dudeney and Nicky Hockly provide teacher-facing methodology for integrating technology and digital literacies into English teaching, supporting the general premise that digitally mediated genres can be taught with purposeful task design. Robert Godwin-Jones emphasises that evolving technologies change available resources and learner practices, requiring teachers to select tools and tasks in light of research and learner needs rather than novelty alone.

Critical media literacy and news literacy: Meme journalism pedagogy must be grounded in critical frameworks because memes can function as persuasion, satire, critique, or disinformation. Media literacy education (MLE) principles underscore that literacy includes both analysis and expression across media forms and that learners should become mindful creators and consumers. Renee Hobbs frames digital and media literacy as essential for participation in contemporary environments, reinforcing the educational need to address how learners interpret and share media. News literacy frameworks specify competencies for recognising credible information, distinguishing news from other content, and resisting exploitation by misinformation. Research on "lateral reading" shows that expert fact-checkers evaluate sources by consulting multiple tabs and external corroboration rather than staying within a single text—an approach that can be directly adapted to meme journalism analysis tasks.

Empirical and classroom-based meme pedagogy studies: Studies specific to language education increasingly suggest that memes can support learning when integrated for clear purposes. A classroom study using memes for vocabulary revision reported improved vocabulary recall and positive learner perceptions, suggesting an affective and mnemonic benefit when memes are aligned with specific lexical outcomes. Research in Thinking Skills and Creativity examining memes in EFL/ESL university contexts frames memes as resources for developing learners as reflective viewers and thinkers in digital environments, aligning meme work with critical and visual literacy development. Work on meme creation for language learning argues that designing memes can support agency, intercultural communication, and specific language points (e.g., idiomatic expression), reinforcing that production tasks can be aligned with measurable linguistic targets. Assessment-focused research proposes rubric-based evaluation of L2 meme creation from a genre and multimodality perspective, supporting the claim that meme work can be assessed systematically rather than treated as informal "fun."

There is also emerging work explicitly connecting memes to critical inquiry in ESL settings. A TESOL-focused article on using memes to teach critical inquiry indicates that meme analysis can be structured as a critical literacy practice, not only as language play.

Gaps addressed by this paper: Despite growing interest, three gaps remain. First, much meme pedagogy literature treats memes as general digital artefacts rather than specifying a subgenre that foregrounds news discourse and information credibility. Second, research often focuses either on language outcomes (e.g., vocabulary recall) or on multimodal/digital literacies, but less frequently integrates these with news literacy competencies such as lateral reading, credibility judgements, and framing analysis—competencies crucial in meme-like information environments and particularly salient on WhatsApp and Instagram. Third, literature pedagogy using memes exists but is often separated from journalism/media literacy, limiting opportunities to combine canonical texts with contemporary discourse practices (e.g., satire, allegory, propaganda critique).

Theoretical framework (integrated):

(1) Multimodality theory provides constructs for describing how meme journalism meanings arise from modal orchestration (image + caption + layout + platform affordances).

(2) Sociocultural theory (SCT) frames meme interpretation and production as mediated social activity within learners' Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), where scaffolding and peer collaboration help learners internalise new discourse practices, including stance-taking and pragmatic inference.

(3) Critical discourse analysis (CDA) treats meme journalism as discourse embedded in power relations, ideology, and social reproduction—particularly

relevant where meme forms blur entertainment with persuasion or misinformation.

Two supporting lenses strengthen the framework. Participatory culture accounts foreground how learners are not only consumers but also producers and distributors of media, aligning with meme creation tasks and critical reflection on sharing practices. Genre theory conceptualises meme journalism as a stabilising but evolving set of conventions for accomplishing recurrent social actions, supporting explicit teaching of genre moves (e.g., headline-like compression, stance markers, evidence cues) and allowing CEFR-aligned progression from comprehension to production.

Defining meme journalism

Coining and justifying the term: This paper uses meme journalism as an analytic construct for a family of digital texts that (a) use meme conventions (remixability, intertextual reference, multimodal compression, performative stance) and (b) perform journalistic-like functions such as reporting, summarising, contextualising, or framing ongoing events, often within platformed news ecosystems. The construct is necessary because "meme" alone includes purely interpersonal humour and non-news microgenres, while "digital journalism" alone may omit vernacular participatory forms that increasingly mediate how audiences encounter and discuss events.

Distinguishing meme journalism from viral content, satire, and propaganda:

Meme journalism is not reducible to "going viral." Shifman's distinction between memetic and viral success clarifies that meme journalism often operates through iterative variation and communal re-uptake rather than singular high-reach dissemination. It also differs from satire as a sole category: while meme journalism may include satire, its defining feature is its relationship to news discourse practices (selection, framing, evidential cues, topicality) rather than humour alone. Finally, meme journalism must be distinguished from propaganda and disinformation. Frameworks on information disorder differentiate mis-, dis-, and mal-information and highlight how media environments enable rapid spread and manipulation. Where meme journalism is used manipulatively, it can become a vector for disinformation, particularly when images are decoupled from verification and circulated within closed messaging spaces.

Evolution from image macros to news–meme hybrids: Early mainstream meme forms such as image macros (e.g., Advice Animals) illustrate an internal meme "grammar" where a stable template is paired with variable text to create iterated meaning. Over time, meme genres have diversified; genre analysis work frames memes as an evolving memescape with stages from spreadable media to emergent memes and stabilised meme forms. In contemporary platforms, hybridisation occurs as meme conventions are applied to journalistic content: screenshots of headlines with reaction images, infographic-like slides summarising stories, or "explainers" framed as shareable jokes or moral commentary, often optimised for mobile feeds.

Platforms and affordances: Meme journalism is platform-shaped. On Instagram, news presentation frequently relies on visual packaging and platform affordances; empirical research has examined international news on Instagram through news values, implying that Instagram is not merely a distribution channel but a shaping environment. On X (Twitter), sharing affordances such as retweets and quote tweets enable layered entextualisation—users recontextualise prior posts, add stance, and create nested memetic exchanges, which closely resembles how meme journalism can accrete commentary around "news objects." On WhatsApp, images circulate within groups and channels where verification can be weak and where image-based misinformation has been observed at scale, making WhatsApp a critical site for teaching "meme journalism literacy" as part of ELT critical literacy. On Reddit, meme circulation is organised through subreddit communities, and research has examined time-sensitive meme discourse on Reddit, indicating that meme meaning is community-indexed and contextually anchored.

Linguistic and discourse features relevant to ELT: Meme journalism is linguistically "small" but pragmatically "dense." First, intertextuality is foundational: memes presuppose shared knowledge and often compress whole narratives into a recognisable template plus a minimal caption. Second, irony and stance are central. Cyberpragmatic and multimodal approaches describe memes as cycles of visual–verbal jokes where humorous meaning relies on contextual inference and cultural knowledge. Third, cross-language resources and code-switching appear frequently in meme practices and can index identity and community; empirical work on English–Spanish codeswitching in memes analyses how mixed forms contribute to enregisterment and collective identity construction. Fourth, meme journalism often involves register shifting (e.g., headline-like formal phrasing juxtaposed with colloquial reaction language), which can be used for teaching pragmatics and sociolinguistic appropriateness.

Meme journalism pedagogy for language skills

This section first provides a pedagogical rationale (engagement, affective factors, inferencing, humour), then translates that rationale into language-skill applications: reading/vocabulary, writing, speaking/listening, grammar in context, and pragmatics/discourse.

Rationale: engagement and authentic relevance: Meme work is frequently justified through relevance to learners' digital lives and the multiliteracies argument that literacy must address contemporary modes and participatory practices. In language education, digital literacies scholarship emphasises that teachers can and should integrate these literacies into language classes, positioning meme journalism as a plausible authentic-materials domain when tasks are tied to objectives. Empirical work in EFL settings suggests that memes may support motivation and vocabulary outcomes when used deliberately.

Lowering affective barriers and the role of humour: Stephen Krashen argues within the Input Hypothesis tradition that affective factors can filter learners' access to input; pedagogies that reduce anxiety can support acquisition conditions. Humour scholarship in L2 classrooms cautions against simplistic "humour helps" claims but supports the pedagogical value of addressing humour as pragmatically complex language-in-use. Interaction-focused analyses describe humour as a "safe house" that can enable experimentation with identity and complex language use, suggesting a plausible socio-affective pathway for meme tasks when class norms are carefully managed.

Meme decoding as inferential reading: Meme comprehension requires learners to infer implicatures, recover presuppositions, and interpret stance—skills aligning with pragmatic competence and critical reading. On news-like memes, inferencing expands to credibility and framing: learners must ask what is being claimed, on what evidence, and with what ideological slant—skills aligned with news literacy and lateral reading frameworks.

Reading and vocabulary through meme journalism

Reading work with meme journalism should treat memes as short, high-context texts rather than as mere captions. Research suggesting memes can improve vocabulary recall supports using memes as retrieval practice prompts, provided lexical targets are explicit and assessed. Additionally, memes' intertextuality can be used to teach neologisms, slang, and discourse keywords that circulate in public talk, while simultaneously distinguishing informal registers from academic writing.

A practical reading sequence for B1–B2 might involve: learners first identify literal content (who/what/where), then infer stance (approval, sarcasm, outrage), and finally connect the meme to an external news report through guided lateral reading questions. Such sequencing operationalises a move from text-internal interpretation to cross-text verification, reflecting how expert evaluators read online.

Writing through meme journalism

Writing tasks can leverage meme creation as a form of digital multimodal composing, aligning with DMC perspectives that treat design and modal orchestration as part of communicative competence. EFL research on meme creation for teaching idioms suggests that production tasks can be targeted: learners can design meme captions that demonstrate idiomatic meaning in context, thus translating figurative language into pragmatic usage. Genre-oriented assessment research supports using rubrics that evaluate both language and multimodal fit (caption concision, template–message coherence, audience orientation), enabling transparent grading.

Original illustrative example of meme journalism (Example 1): "Headline–Reaction Verification Meme" A teacher prepares a meme-like slide with (a) a screenshot-style headline box reading "BREAKING: City announces 4-day workweek trial for public offices" and (b) a reaction image captioned "Sources? Context? Budget?" Learners are told the "headline" may be real or fabricated. They must:

1) rewrite the headline into a neutral, information-complete lead sentence;

2) conduct lateral reading (open web search, locate at least two independent sources) and record source credibility cues;

3) produce a short, formal paragraph summarising confirmed facts and noting uncertainty.

This task targets headline language, nominal groups, modality/hedging ("reportedly," "according to"), and source evaluation in a single integrated activity aligned with news literacy standards.

Speaking and listening through meme journalism

Meme journalism discussions can support speaking interaction by prompting learners to justify interpretations ("What makes you think it is ironic?") and to negotiate meaning collaboratively, which aligns with sociocultural views of learning through mediated interaction and scaffolding. These discussions can be structured as evidence-based mini-debates: learners present competing readings (satire vs propaganda vs legitimate commentary) and defend them with multimodal evidence (image composition, lexical

markers, intertextual reference) and external verification.

CEFR Companion Volume additions regarding online interaction and mediation further support designing tasks where learners summarise and relay information between sources or participants—activities naturally suited to meme journalism where short-form content is recontextualised.

Grammar in context via meme journalism

Grammar teaching can benefit from meme journalism because many news-meme captions foreground modality, evaluation, and compression—features central to advanced grammar-in-discourse. CDA-informed pedagogy suggests that grammar choices can realise ideological stance (e.g., agent deletion, passive voice, modality), making grammar instruction consequential rather than decontextualised. Teachers can design micro-analyses where learners identify how tense and aspect construct newsworthiness (present tense "breaking" framing), how modality expresses certainty/uncertainty ("might," "must"), and how ellipsis and nominalisation compress complex claims into headline-like fragments.

Pragmatics and discourse: implicature, register, and stance

Pragmatics is arguably the most natural fit. Meme understanding routinely requires implicature-like inference, as meanings exceed literal wording. Twitter-focused pragmatics research highlights how platform affordances enable nested memetic posts and commentary layers, suggesting classroom value in analysing how stance accumulates across reposts and quote-tweets. In multilingual contexts, code-switching research shows that mixing languages in memes can index identity and community belonging, which can be used to teach register, audience design, and sociolinguistic meaning.

Original illustrative example of meme journalism (Example 2): "Two-Voices News-Meme Dialogue"

Learners receive a two-panel "news-meme" storyboard. Panel A is a simplified infographic-like claim: "Inflation falls to 3.2%—'Everything is fine!'" Panel B is a contrasting personal-cost image with caption: "My groceries: +20% though." Learners:

- identify the two "voices" (institutional vs lived experience);
- underline evaluative language and discourse markers;
- rewrite Panel A as a neutral report with source attribution and time frame;
- write a short response paragraph that maintains respectful register while challenging the framing, citing at least one verified source.

This targets stance, discourse markers, quantification language, and respectful disagreement norms—core pragmatic competencies for advanced ELT.

Meme journalism pedagogy for teaching literature

Meme journalism can support literature teaching by connecting canonical themes—power, ideology, satire, irony, dystopia, public morality—to contemporary discourse practices that learners already recognise, thereby bridging "classic" texts and everyday media.

Literary memes and reader-response: Reader-response traditions emphasise that meaning is co-constructed by reader and text, with readers adopting stances and drawing on experience as interpretive resources. Meme adaptations can be treated as contemporary reader responses: learners interpret a text, select a perspective or theme, and redesign it into an artefact oriented to an imagined audience. Studies of memes in literature studies classrooms argue for the generative potential of meme formats as classroom practices, suggesting that memes can support discussion of narrative, voice, and interpretive heterogeneity.

Teaching satire, allegory, and irony through meme journalism: Memes operate heavily through irony and stance, making them suitable for teaching literary irony and satire, provided teachers explicitly teach the interpretive cues (context mismatch, voice contrast, overstatement, and intertextual parody). Because meme journalism links these cues to current events, it can also support teaching allegory and propaganda critique through comparative framing: how does a literary text represent ideology, and how do contemporary meme-like news artefacts do similar work?

Canonical texts as meme journalism anchors: Canonical works are regularly taught in ELT literature components, but learners can experience them as remote. Meme adaptation tasks can function as entry points to character motivation and theme recognition. Conceptual work on using memes in literature classrooms suggests that memes can foster active learner engagement with themes and character qualities. Importantly, such tasks should not be framed as replacing close reading, but as a scaffold that leads into close reading by externalising interpretation and enabling peer discussion.

Proposed lesson sequence (case study design): "Animal Farm, propaganda, and news-meme frames"

A feasible upper-secondary or university ELT literature sequence (B2–C1) can integrate a political allegory text (e.g., Orwell's Animal Farm) with meme journalism analysis to teach satire, ideology, and discourse stance. CDA provides a rationale for

analysing how language and representation reproduce or challenge power relations, which aligns with Orwell's thematic concerns and with contemporary meme-like political discourse.

Sequence outline (briefly narrated rather than enumerated): learners first read selected excerpts and identify propaganda-like rhetorical moves (slogans, scapegoating, agent deletion). They then analyse a curated set of neutral, non-partisan "issue-based" news memes (e.g., on public policy debates, not party politics), focusing on framing and evidentiality cues. Learners practise lateral reading to confirm claims, then produce two outputs: (a) a short analytical paragraph linking one meme's framing move to a propaganda move in the novel, and (b) a student-created "meme journalism" explainer that summarises a chapter's event as if it were a news update, with explicit stance markers and a short "sources/uncertainty" note.

This sequence aims to keep humour subordinate to analysis: humour is treated as an interpretive mechanism (irony, exaggeration) rather than a distraction, consistent with L2 humour scholarship cautioning teachers to teach humour as pragmatic work.

Curriculum and syllabus integration

Embedding meme journalism into ELT syllabi can be justified through a multiliteracies stance and through CEFR Companion Volume emphases on mediation and online interaction, which legitimise tasks where learners relay, summarise, and evaluate information in digital environments. Using CEFR levels B1–C2, meme journalism tasks can be sequenced from comprehension-focused work (B1–B2: identify stance and gist; explain cultural references with support) to analysis and production (C1–C2: critique framing and evidence; create multi-voice explainers with careful register and sourcing).

A principled sequencing approach would treat meme journalism as a genre progression: learners first build template literacy (what typical meme formats signal), then stance literacy (how evaluation is encoded), then credibility literacy (how to check claims), and finally production literacy (how to design responsible meme journalism that signals uncertainty and avoids dehumanising stereotypes).

Teacher preparation and training are essential. Digital literacies work aimed at language teachers argues that teachers need explicit support to integrate new literacies into language classes. UNESCO's media and information literacy (MIL) agenda similarly frames critical engagement with information and navigation of disinformation as educational imperatives, implying that ELT teacher education should incorporate these competencies when adopting meme journalism pedagogy.

Ethical and critical considerations

Ethical risk is not peripheral; it defines the pedagogy. Information disorder frameworks argue that mis-, dis-, and mal-information proliferate in digitally connected environments, and meme-like images can be especially potent due to emotional salience and rapid shareability. Empirical research on WhatsApp in India documents misinformation in the form of images at scale, reinforcing that an ELT meme journalism unit must include verification practices (source checking, reverse image search where feasible, and corroboration).

Political bias and ideological conflict also matter. Studies of political memes and fake news discourses on Instagram argue that meme spaces can become weaponised and adversarial, suggesting that classroom meme selection must avoid targeting vulnerable groups and must emphasise respectful critique and ethical participation.

Copyright and permissions require explicit teacher guidance. Creative Commons licensing guidance clarifies reuse conditions (attribution, non-commercial restrictions, no-derivatives constraints), providing a practical pathway for sourcing lawful images (e.g., CC-licensed photographs) and modelling ethical remix practices. In classroom contexts, teachers can prioritise student-generated visuals or CC-licensed assets and teach attribution as part of digital literacy rather than assuming informal online reuse is acceptable.

Finally, inclusivity and cultural sensitivity are critical. Because memes often rely on insider knowledge and can reproduce stereotypes, selection criteria should prioritise interpretability, avoid demeaning humour, and include opportunities for learners to explain local cultural references rather than privileging only Anglophone meme canons.

Research design proposal

Because the present paper is conceptual, it proposes empirical validation via a mixed-methods design consistent with established mixed methods guidance. A quasi-experimental pretest–posttest design with comparison groups can test whether meme journalism pedagogy improves (a) vocabulary retention, (b) reading comprehension/inference, and (c) news media literacy measures compared with a conventional news-text instruction unit.

A sensible design would run over 6–8 weeks in two intact classes at similar proficiency (e.g., B2 university

EFL). One class receives a meme journalism unit integrating lateral reading, multimodal analysis, and meme-based writing; the comparison class uses print/digital news articles without meme forms but covers the same topics and target vocabulary. Threats to validity common in quasi-experiments (selection effects, history, contamination) should be addressed following classic experimental design cautions and through transparent reporting of implementation fidelity.

Proposed instruments: vocabulary and reading tests can be constructed around unit targets, while news media literacy can be measured using validated scales developed for critical news literacy. Learner perception surveys can capture engagement and perceived relevance, complementing outcome data. Classroom observation checklists can document interaction patterns, scaffolding moves, and learner participation, supporting qualitative interpretation of why outcomes occurred.

A parallel practitioner-focused action research variant is also appropriate in ELT, given established action research traditions that empower teachers to investigate local pedagogical questions iteratively.

Conclusion

This paper has theorised meme journalism as a news–meme hybrid genre located at the intersection of participatory digital culture and platformed news discourse. Drawing on multimodality theory, sociocultural theory, and critical discourse analysis, it has argued that meme journalism can function as a pedagogical tool in ELT by supporting multimodal literacy, pragmatic inferencing, grammar-in-discourse, and critical/news literacy competencies. Classroom applications were proposed for language skills and literature teaching, alongside two illustrative meme journalism activities designed to integrate source evaluation, stance analysis, and genre-appropriate production.

The research questions posed in the Introduction can be answered as follows: meme journalism can be defined as a multimodal, intertextual, stance-driven genre that performs journalistic-like functions through memetic conventions; its pedagogical value is supported by scholarship on multimodal literacies, digital pedagogy, humour/pragmatics, and critical media/news literacy; and its successful adoption depends on curriculum alignment (e.g., CEFR mediation and online interaction), teacher preparation, and explicit ethical safeguards against misinformation, bias, and copyright violations.

Future empirical work should prioritise mixed-methods evaluation of outcomes (vocabulary, reading comprehension, news media literacy) and process data (classroom interaction, learner reflections) to determine not only whether meme journalism pedagogy works, but for whom, under what conditions, and with what ethical trade-offs.

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