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Students' and Teachers' Perceptions of Using Memes in ESL Classrooms

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Students' and Teachers' Perceptions of Using Memes in ESL Classrooms

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Abstract

Using humor in the language classroom has proven to be an effective pedagogical teaching tool that builds rapport between students and teachers. It also reduces anxiety and affective filter as well as increases students' performance and willingness to communicate in class using their L2 (Azizinezhad & Hashemi, 2011; Banks, 2014; Soares, 2015). Previous studies used humor broadly starting from humorous comments in class to funny TV shows, movies, or songs. Some studies went further using funny memes in class and fewer studies went all the way making students create memes as part of their class requirements (Purnama, 2017). Results of previous studies demonstrated the efficiency of humor in increasing students' social competence and acquiring their L2 culture (Navera et al., 2019). Using the Immediacy framework, this study investigates the Egyptian university ESL teachers and students' perceptions of using memes in class. It also looks into the variables affecting these perceptions like proficiency and age. Results shed light on the positive and negative impacts students and teachers think memes have in class as well as the contexts and frequency in which they used memes in ESL classroom.

Keywords: memes, ESL teaching, perceptions and humor

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List of Tables

List of Figures

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction

Using humor in the language classroom has proven to be an effective pedagogical teaching tool that builds rapport between students and teachers. It also reduces anxiety and affective filter as well as increases students' performance and willingness to communicate in class using their L2 (Azizinezhad & Hashemi, 2011; Banks, 2014; Soares, 2015). Previous studies used humor broadly starting from humorous comments in class to funny TV shows, movies, or songs. Some studies went further using funny memes in class and fewer studies went all the way making students create memes as part of their class requirements (Purnama, 2017). Results of previous studies demonstrated the efficiency of humor in increasing students' social competence and acquiring their L2 culture (Navera et al., 2019).

Learning a second language is a daunting task for many learners whether they chose to acquire it independently or through classroom instruction. Krashen & Terrell (1983) mentioned that learning takes place and has its effect on language acquisition when a student's affective filter is low. This happens when the learner is motivated, has self-confidence, a good self-image, and a low level of anxiety. This is when humor comes in handy to help overcome students' discomfort, particularly beginners, in L2 classes. Research literature suggests that among the psychological benefits of humor are decreased anxiety and stress levels as well as increased motivation, and higher self-esteem (Fry, 1992; Martin & Dobbin, 1988). Multiple studies were conducted on the use of humor in classroom to build rapport between teachers and learners, to strengthen bonds between students and to maintain a positive, anxiety-free environment in class. Forman (2011) conducted a study on the effect of humorous language play in a Thai classroom. The affective results of humor in class showed that "there was a warm, responsive atmosphere in this lesson, with considerable smiling and laughter in evidence … It would appear that the

cathartic effect of humor may have reduced or even removed the particular anxiety which relates to foreign language learning" (p. 561). This would result in higher participation rate in class as well as students' willingness to communicate.

In addition to humor lowering the affective filter, it has been used as an efficient L2 teaching tool as it enhances sociolinguistic competence (Medgyes, 2002). Sociolinguistic competence refers to the extent a second language can be adequately used in different contexts to serve communicative functions like describing, narrating, persuading … etc. (Hadley, 1993). Throwing a joke in class or using a wordplay is not just simply exposing students to humor, but it teaches them the "social rules that regulate the use of humor" (Deneire, 1995, p.293-294). However, Davies (2003) argues that L2 learners would not develop the understanding of L2 humor sociolinguistics because normally, joking takes place under egalitarian conditions that the classroom lacks due to the power deferential between teacher and learners. Bell (2009) attempts to refute Davies' argument saying that if learners all over the world could become proficient and acquire L2 linguistic behaviors in classroom conditions, why can they not acquire L2 humor in classroom contexts? Therefore, humor is an asset in classroom to facilitate L2 culture learning.

A majority of literature has been conducted on humor in language classes. Multiple studies have used samples from Indonesian teachers and students (Purnama, 2017; Purnama et al., 2018; Ramadhika, 2020), while other studies addressing humor in ESL classes occurred in Australia, Asia, and The Middle East (Azizifard & Jalali, 2012; Chiang et al., 2016; Guzman & Arceo, 2019). To this day, no studies have been conducted on perceptions of using memes in a language classroom in Egypt. Egypt is a country rich in humor which had been displayed through Egyptians' appreciation of comedy (Dozio, 2017; Dozio, 202; Iskandar, 2019; Khachab,

2016; Shehata, 1992; Winegar, 2021). Conducting research in Egypt will present a unique perspective of the perceptions of using humor in the classroom.

Moreover, there is a gap in the research in studies that account for the students age as a variable in humor perceptions in language classes. Humor is a consistently evolving concept that has generational factors, cyclical attributes, and varies due to students and teachers' ages. Nahemow et al. (2013) mention in their book *Humor and Aging* that

> the problems that confront people at different points along the lifespan are a function of
> both internal development and external imposition. Older people may devote more
> attention to humor that relates to problems of intelligence and comprehension because of
> the widespread, although misplaced, fear of senility (p. 8)

Would this mean older people perceive humor differently? Can this account for different perceptions between teachers and students in classroom or between high school students and undergraduates? These questions contribute to age being a necessary variable in studies that focus on the use of humor in the classroom.

Also, due to Egypt's economic status and access to technology over the years, internet pop-culture literacy among different generations of Egyptians varies. It is, thus, important to consider another variable: teachers' internet pop-culture literacy and their acquaintance with social media trends and memes.

This study aims to find out the perceptions of students and teachers of using memes in ESL classrooms. Memes are rich visual materials that can be of great aid in classrooms as a contextual learning technique (Pranoto & Suprayogi, 2020). Yet, some teachers -and learners- perceive them as unprofessional in learning contexts and undermine the seriousness of second

language acquisition quest. Throughout my own personal experience as a teacher, I found memes to be a great warmup before sessions as well as attention grabbers. My students and I currently share relevant memes to our topic on collaborative boards. My students demonstrated instant results, identifying more with our topics, and feeling that the material taken was relevant to them and not abstractly taught but rather constructed in their minds.

Research Questions

1- What are the university students' and teachers' perceptions of memes in the ESL classroom?

2- What are the variables and contexts that affect the use of memes by teachers and students?

    A- What variables might encourage or discourage both students and teachers to use memes in class?

    B- In what contexts do teachers and students use memes in ESL classes?

Delimitations of the Study

The purpose of this study is to compare the perceptions of students and teachers from random private and public universities in Egypt regarding using memes inside ESL classroom. It also draws contrast between students and teachers' use of memes in class while taking into consideration the different functions of memes ESL classes. However, this study will not focus on the efficiency of using memes to improve language learning skills in the classroom.

Definition of Constructs

Sociolinguistic competence

Theoretical: It addresses the extent to which the second language can be used or understood appropriately in various contexts to convey specific communicative functions such as describing, narrating, persuading, eliciting information and the like (Hadley, 1993, p.6).

Operational: Behavior that reflects successful social functioning (Howes 1987 p.253)

Memes

- Meme is a term coined by Dawkins in 1976 comparing the role of genes as the mechanism of biological evolution to memes as the way of cultural evolution as both replicate, evolve and mutate to increase their chances of survival (Dawkins, 1976). Memes transmit cultural concepts and ideas by combining different types of media, including image and text.

- An image, video, piece of text, etc., typically humorous in nature that is copied and spread rapidly by internet users, often with slight variations' (Oxford Online Dictionary, 2018).

Humor

Theoretical: "Linguists, psychologists and anthropologists have taken humor to be an all-encompassing category covering any event or object that elicits laughter, amuses, or is felt to be funny (Attardo, 2010, p.4).

Operational: Any spoken, written, visual or performed action that the students or the teacher find funny or amusing in class, even if it is not inherently funny (Gonulal, 2018, p.142).

Perceptions

Theoretical: "What is subjectively experienced in a given social situation" (Hudson & Rosen, 1953).

In order for perception to occur, these defining attributes must be present: 1. Sensory awareness or cognition of the experience. 2. Personal experience. 3. Comprehension that can lead to a response (McDonald, 2011).

Operational: The thoughts, opinions, and beliefs that instructors hold based on their personal experiences; the term usually refers to how teachers conceptualize their professional activity and behavior, as well as their teaching practices and experiences (Oikonomou & Patsala, 2020).

Abbreviations

EFL = English as a foreign language

ESL = English as a second language

WLT = Willingness to communicate

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter aims to review existing literature on humor in ESL classes. The first section will discuss the theoretical framework of immediacy behaviors that include humor. The second will discuss humor and its definitions. The third section is concerned by the functions of humor in ESL classes and when it is used. The fourth section explores memes as an integral part of humor and the focus of this paper. Last but not the least, the fourth section reviews the literature on perceptions of teachers and students of using humor in ESL classrooms.

Theoretical Framework: Immediacy Behaviors

Mehrabian (1969) first conceptualized the immediacy construct to refer to the communication behaviors, *including humor*, which improve psychological closeness and interactions of people (Askildson, 2005). Although Mehrabian's first introduction of immediacy was not concerned with teaching pedagogies, the immediacy behaviors have been found to result in affective outcomes in the ESL classroom contexts. Andersen (1979) extended immediacy to the classroom and first introduced nonverbal immediacy to instructional communication, and Gorham (1988) expanded it to include verbal behaviors in instruction. Verbal immediacy includes communication behaviors like "calling students by names," "asking for students' feedback about the lessons", "referring to the class as we and our", and "engaging in conversations with students before and after class" (Seifu and Gebru, 2012, p. 80). It is operationalized as the use of verbal behaviors that increase perceptions of closeness between people. Nonverbal immediacy behaviors are defined as "communication behaviors that reduce physical and/or psychological distance between teachers and students" (Andersen, 1979, p. 543). These behaviors apply to physical gestures, eye contact, a relaxed body position, directing body position toward students, and smiling. Rapport building is a closely related term to immediacy

behaviors. Immediacy behaviors involve teachers interacting with students. If these interactions are positive, then students should feel more at ease in the classroom and enjoy the learning environment (Estepp & Roberts, 2015)

Anderson's (1979) investigation of immediacy and teacher's efficacy indicated that "student perceptions of teacher immediacy were positively correlated with 1) student affect, 2) student behavioral commitment, and 3) student cognitive learning" (Askildson, 2005). Gorham (1988) further examined the effect of immediacy on students' learning within a set of 20 verbal items, including an explicit entry for use of humor. He found out that the use of humor stimulates interest and reduces tension, aggression, and boredom. Gorham (1988) explained the relationship between immediacy and learning indicating that the immediacy variable is arousing which gains and keeps students' attention which is related to memory; therefore, cognitive learning.

Gorham and Christophel (1990) posed the question if there is a relationship between the amount and/or type of humor used and the students' learning and if there is, does it vary depending on the overall immediacy of the teacher? To answer these questions, they gathered data from undergraduate students in two phases over three-to-four-week period. In the first phase, students filled out questionnaires reporting their teachers' immediacy behaviors as well as their cognitive and affective learning in class. Students were presented some immediacy behaviors to observe in class like: addressing student by name, asking questions and encouraging students to talk, using personal examples in class and looking at the class while talking. In phase two, the respondents had to observe their teacher and record her use of humor over five meetings. The researchers coded the humor incidents as follows: brief tendentious comments directed at: a student, a whole class, university, department, state, national events, or pop culture. Other incidents included personal anecdotes related or unrelated to the subject topic. The study

results indicated that the total number of humorous incidents recorded for each teacher was positively correlated with the frequency of the teacher's use of other verbal and non-verbal immediacy behaviors, and the overall use of verbal and nonverbal immediacy behaviors was highly correlated with learning outcomes.

On the same note, Wanzer & Frymier (1999) hypothesized that there will be a positive correlation between student perceptions of teacher's humor orientation and student learning. Their second hypothesis was that there will be a significant positive correlation between student perceptions of teacher's humor orientation and nonverbal immediacy. To prove their hypotheses, they had a sample of 314 students (124 males and 190 females) who were asked to report on 219 male instructors and 94 female instructors from 37 departments in five of the six colleges/schools in mid-sized Midwestern university. Students reported their teachers' non-verbal immediacy using the Nonverbal Immediacy Scale, which consists of 14 items (Richmond et al., 1987). They also self-report their learning using Gorham's (1988) affective learning scale as well as the Learning Indicators scale. The scale consists of eight items that reflect learning activities that students may engage in when involved in the learning process. The results indicated that student perceptions of instructors' humor were significantly and positively associated with student learning and there was a significant positive relationship between students' perceptions of teacher's humor and immediacy.

Humor

There has been a consensus in literature on how challenging it is to define humor; there are three theories that researchers agree are dominant in humor studies: the Relief Theory, the Superiority Theory, and the Incongruity Theory (Nilsen & Nilsen, 2019). The Relief theory considers humor as a relief to human tensions and in ESL context, it relieves the anxiety

produced due to L2 learners' unfamiliarity with the language. The Superiority theory stems from laughing at the misfortunes of others. The Incongruity theory describes humor as nonserious social incongruities that are amusing in some manner (Gervais & Wilson, 2005; Martin, 2007). This definition was later developed by Attardo (2010) stating that "Linguists, psychologists and anthropologists have taken humor to be an all-encompassing category covering any event or object that elicits laughter, amuses, or is felt to be funny" (p.4). A more recent and encompassing definition was theorized by Martin and Ford (2018) presents humor as "a broad, multifaceted term that represents anything that people say or do that others perceive as funny and tends to make them laugh, as well as the mental processes that go into both creating and perceiving such an amusing stimulus and also the emotional response of mirth involved in the enjoyment of it" (p.3). The researcher agrees with the last definition in ESL classes context as it includes the mental processes of creating and perceiving humorous incidents, which are highly indicative of the L2 learning happening.

Humor as a Linguistic Tool in ESL Classes

While humor is an efficient affective tool in general classrooms, it significantly helps with the acquisition of the linguistic, cultural, and discoursal aspects of the target language. Schmitz (2002) divided humor into three categories: universal humor, culture-based humor, and linguistic humor. He claims that elementary-level students can benefit from use of the universal humor, intermediate students will appreciate universal humor in addition to some types of culture-based jokes, while advanced students would understand and benefit from all three types. However, Bell (2002) refutes his claims saying that it is fallacious to attribute pre-determined types of humor as appropriate to certain proficiency levels. She supports her argument by

mentioning how one of her beginner students could produce a word-play joke (linguistic joke). The example she mentions is as follows:

I have just finished explaining the meaning of 'lethal' as in the movie title Lethal Weapon.

Hong responds with a pun:

> *Hong: We – we have two weapons in this class: bomb and gun.*
> *Ss: (Laughing)*

The 'weapons' that he refers to are actually quite similar to the names of two of the students in the class. Not only has he quickly and appropriately constructed L2 wordplay, but the immediate laughter from the rest of the class shows that he is not alone in appreciating this humor (although it is important to acknowledge that some students may have laughed along with the others without understanding) (Bell, 2002).

Another example Bell mentions regarding the inaccuracy of assigning certain humor categories to proficiency levels, is how one of her beginner students employed a pragmatic joke (which according to Shmitz (2002) is appreciated only by advanced students).

> *Nancy: If you want to work together, talk, make noise. Noise is good in my class. I like noise.*
> *Sang-Tae: All right. (Starts banging on desk, Ss laugh)* (Bell, 2002).

The use of humor in ESL classes has been a controversial topic. On one hand, some researchers viewed humor as a trivial topic to be studied while others found it harmful in ESL classes as it may hinder the students' ability to understand the material (Weaver et al., 1988; Bryant & Zillmann, 1984). Wanzer et al. (2010) elaborated on that by advancing the instructional humor processing theory which states that unless the students perceive and then resolve the incongruity in a humorous instructional message, they may experience confusion instead of

humor. Korobkin (1989) even found that humorous questions had negative effects on test takers and did not reduce anxiety as expected.

On a similar note, Bolkan et al. (2018) conducted a study on two groups: a group that was instructed through humorous examples and another that was instructed through standard ones. The lesson included reading passage explaining the difference between *self-efficacy* and *response-efficacy*. In the standard text the researchers used an example about smoking. While in the humorous text, they used an example about being attacked by a bear and having to sing it to prevent attack. Their sample consisted of 87 participants aged 18-24 years old. The bulk of both lessons was identical (as the instructional setting was writing) except for the examples. Then later both groups were tested on the material learned. The results confirmed the researchers' hypothesis that "students exposed to a lesson explained with humorous examples will perform worse on a test of retention and transfer compared with students exposed to an identical lesson explained with serious examples" (p. 148). This could be the case due to the memorability of humorous examples that detract the students' attention from the content of their lessons.

On the other hand, multiple researchers have advocated for the use of humor in ESL classes. Humor has been proved to make students sensitive to the structural and semantic differences between different languages (Nilsen 1989, Vega 1989), deliver the lecture material or other instructional presentations more effectively and help significantly with retaining information (Korobkin, 1989). Tunnisa et al., (2019) investigated the effect of humor in Indonesian classes by observing seven students and their teacher in Makassar English Course, Indonesia for a month. The researchers observed and recorded five classroom meetings (each class lasted for an hour and half). They later transcribed the meetings and identified the types of humor and the effect they have on students. In their results, they found that the teacher employed

humor as a communication strategy to reduce anxiety and boredom. This was reflected in the students' consistent attendance and motivation in class throughout the study.

Memes

Meme is a term coined by Dawkins in 1976 comparing the role of genes as the mechanism of biological evolution to memes as the way of cultural evolution as both replicate, evolve and mutate to increase their chances of survival (Dawkins, 1976). Memes transmit cultural concepts and ideas by combining different types of media, including image and text. Since memes have become a means of communication, they provide authentic contexts for language learning which motivate and engage students. There are multiple types of mems; some include pop-cultural references, some are linguistically humorous (including wordplay or puns or pragmatic failures), while others are offensive (attacking certain groups of people like "Karens"). The versatility of memes allows them to be a combination of any of the mentioned types. People can even create their own memes out of empty meme templates. Among the features of memes is their virality. Internet memes are shared extensively on social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram and Twitter which facilitates a universal understanding of some memes. Below in Figure 1 is a screenshot of an English Twitter User creating a meme using an Egyptian Old TV series meme template. The virality and resemiotization (acquiring new forms of meaning when they travel across contexts) of memes are what led researchers to believe they can be used in ESL classes. For the sake of this paper. Memes are divided into three categories: General memes, offensive memes, and educational/relevant memes.

Figure 1

Example of General Memes

Figure 1

Figure 2

Example of Offensive Memes

Fast food employee:
makes minor mistake
Me: "Oh, it's no probl-"

people named Karen:

I'm about to end this man's whole career

Figure 2

Figure 3

Example of Relevant/Educational Memes

What's the difference between a cat and a comma?

One has claws at the end of its paws, and one is a pause at the end of a clause.

EFL learners need you to find the difference between these sounds in American English.
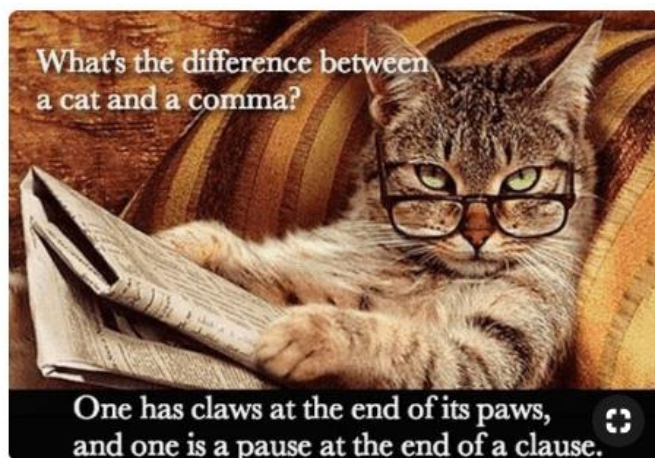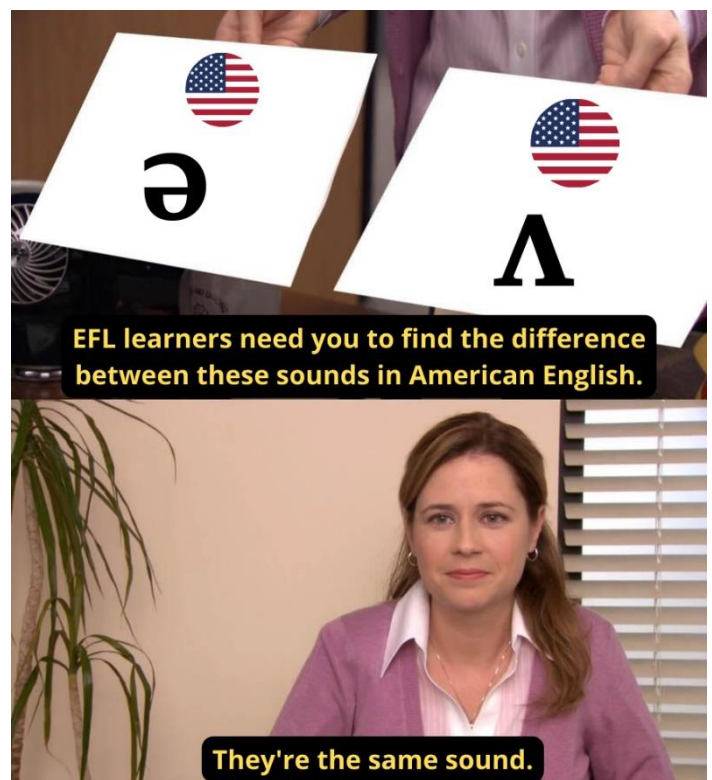
They're the same sound.

Figure 3

Multiple studies have investigated the use of memes in class. Purnama (2017) used memes and Instagram to enhance students' motivation in class. She had 23 EFL students at Health College in the regency area of Malang who are second semester students of health diploma degree and all of them are taking English as a compulsory subject. They speak Bahasa Indonesia as their first language. She asked her students to create memes and upload them on an Instagram account. She used a questionnaire at the beginning to elicit their general acquaintance of memes and social media, then a reflective questionnaire at the end. Participants were divided into groups and asked to create memes about topics they have already received during English classes. There are two topics: symptoms and caring for elderly. Each group should upload or post their meme(s) creation in the appointed Instagram account (@memes_project). The results showed that students were able to create 11 correct memes despite some grammatical inaccuracies. The reflective questionnaire displayed unanimous agreement that it was an enjoyable activity, and that social media should be integrated within ESL classes.

Purnama et al. (2018) wanted to promote students' motivation in classroom, so they asked 50 beginner students aging 19-21 years old to create only inoffensive memes in class. They wanted to test the students' command of the past tense, so their task was to create a meme and use a caption describing an event in the past. Students would later present their memes and engage in an online email-interview to give their feedback on the activity saying whether this task was easy, fun, confidence-boosting or interesting. The teachers graded the memes using the scale: correct, almost correct, incorrect. Their findings showed that 30.2% of the students perceived this task as fun and hoped it would be repeated next semester, while 20.9 viewed this task as confidence-boosting. 30.2% of the students said the task was interesting and 18.6 saw the task was easy.

Perceptions

Perception is a multifaceted concept. In the field of education, a teacher's perceptions are the thoughts, opinions, and beliefs that instructors hold based on their personal experiences; the term usually refers to how teachers conceptualize their professional activity and behavior, as well as their teaching practices and experiences (Oikonomou & Patsala, 2020). A learner's perception is associated with two targets: perceptions of themselves, and perceptions of the learning situation. Perceptions of themselves refers to the way students understand and make sense of themselves and their own learning (Wesely, 2012). The students' perception of the learning situation is defined as how students experience and understand aspects of the classroom, like instructor behaviors (including immediacy behaviors) (Brown, 2009).

Teachers' Perceptions of Humor

Neuliep (1991) investigated high school teachers' perceptions and use of humor in the classroom. Exactly 388 high school teachers from Brown County, Wisconsin responded to the questionnaire that was mailed to them. Neuliep used Gorham and Christophel's (1990) 13 humor categories in his questionnaire so that teacher can report their perceptions of using humor in class (appropriate/inappropriate). Then the teachers were asked to self-report if they use humor in class and how often. Finally, they were asked to mention their reasons for (not) using humor in class. Results indicated that teachers perceive all the humor items appropriate to use in the classroom. Additionally, among the top three reasons for using humor in the classroom were to put students at ease, to gain their attention, and to show that the teacher is human. Other reasons include but are not limited to helping students remember a point which agrees with Kelly and Gorham (1988).

White (2001) further investigates the perceptions of both teachers and students of using humor in class. He conducted a study involving 128 teachers from 12 public and private universities in Arkansas. A 13-item-questionnaire was developed by nine honor professors who were teaching at the time at Southern Arkansas University. The questionnaire is a Likert scale of agreement on some statements like: teachers use humor to handle embarrassing situations/control students/ motivate/provoke thinking … etc. The results revealed consensus on teachers using humor to relieve stress (50% agree) and gain attention (60% strongly agree). There was also a 46.4% consensus that teachers use humor to reinforce knowledge which goes in line with previous literature (Kelly and Gorham, 1988; Neuliep, 1991).

Additionally, Lovorn & Holaway (2015) studied the perceptions of teachers on using humor as a classroom teaching, interaction, and management tool. They collected data from 31 in-service teachers enrolled in a master's level education course at a major university. The data was collected over 15 weeks from an online discussion form to answer the following research questions: 1. What are teachers' perceptions of the use of humor as a teaching strategy? 2. What influences have led to teachers' various uses of humor as a teaching strategy 3. How, when, and why teachers use humor in the classroom? They used content analysis to find out that teachers agreed that humor can be an effective classroom management s it is used to capture students' attention and encourage them to attend the classes creating a positive stress-free environment which helps learning happen. When it comes to using humor in teaching, the participants agreed that humor increases the students' willingness to communicate and take risks in class. Moreover, teachers found that humor serves as a teaching aid as it increases content retention (agreeing with (Kelly and Gorham, 1988; Neuliep, 1991; White 2001)), helps connect students with the content as well as improves higher order thinking skills.

Students' Perceptions of Humor

Torok et al. (2004) surveyed 124 under graduates to investigate whether students' and professors' perceptions of humor use in classrooms were related. They hypothesized that both students and teachers would support the use of humor and that the amount of humor would positively correlate with students' perceptions of their instructors. The researchers used humor classifications mentioned in Bryant et al. (1979) in their students' surveys that consisted of Likert scales, rating scales, modified checklists, and open-ended questions. The surveys aimed to investigate the use of humor in general academic settings and whether students personally would incorporate humor into classroom instruction and tests. The results indicated that 73% of the students strongly agreed that they feel positively towards a professor who uses humor constructively. In addition, 59% of the students agreed that humor strengthens the sense of community in class and 40% said that they 'always' understood a concept better when the teacher incorporates humor while explaining it. It was apparent that students held positive perceptions of teachers' use of humor in class.

Regarding the relationship between the type of humor used in class and students' evaluation of the teachers, Bryant et al. (1980) found that instructors who told more funny stories and jokes in class received better overall evaluations and were rated as having better delivery of learning content in class. The reason could be that students do not necessarily expect instructional humor, so when instructors positively integrate appropriate humor in their classes, they violate expectations of their students leading to more positive overall teaching evaluations (Frymier and Weser, 2001). However, it is important to note that inappropriate and/or aggressive humor may harm student perceptions of an instructor as Gorham and Christophel (1990) found

the amount of negative or aggressive instructional humor was related inversely to instructor evaluations.

White (2001) further investigated the perceptions of both teachers and students of using humor in class. He had 206 students respond to the same survey he gave out to teachers which was a 13-item questionnaire that consisted of a Likert scale of agreement on some statements like: teachers use humor to handle embarrassing situations/control students/ motivate/provoke thinking … etc. His results indicated that 85% of the students had witnessed teachers use humor to relieve stress and gain their attention in class, while 80% perceived the teachers' use of humor in class as a tool of creating a healthy learning environment. Furthermore, 56% of the students agree/strongly agree that humor is used to provoke thinking in class. So not only do they perceive it as an effective tool in class but also a teaching aid that helps with invoking thoughts and enhancing learning and this is where the perceptions of students and teachers align.

The Relationship Between Immediacy Behaviors, Humor, Memes, and Perceptions

As aforementioned immediacy behaviors are essentially communication behaviors (including humor) that aim for psychological closeness (Askildson, 2005). They can be verbal or non-verbal behaviors. The concept of immediacy was introduced into teaching for affective purposes and thus, it eased off the use of humor in ESL classes. Using verbal and non-verbal humor in ESL classes turned out successful and yielded fruitful outcomes. As a result, memes were introduced in ESL classes as a means of a humorous communication between teachers and students. Memes are essentially non-verbal due to their visual nature; however, in case a person throws a meme reference in class, it becomes a verbal humorous act of communication. Therefore, it was important to know the teachers' perceptions (thoughts, opinions, and beliefs) and the students' perceptions of the learning situation which is defined as how students

20

experience and understand aspects of the classroom, like instructor behaviors (including immediacy behaviors).

Research Gap and Research Statement

So far, studies have explored the perceptions of using humor (including all its types) in ESL classes, yet a few studies focused on the perceptions of using memes and even fewer studied investigated the Egyptian context. The present study investigates the perceptions of both teachers and students on using memes in ESL classrooms, with particular emphasis on the discrepancies between both. It aims to understand the variables that affect these perceptions like proficiency for instance. Is proficiency a determining variable in the teacher's decision to use memes in an Egyptian ESL class or not? Does the type of meme matter? Does the medium of sharing memes affect Egyptian students' and teachers' perceptions? The present study also intends to address a further gap by contributing to the small number of studies conducted on this topic in the Middle East, specifically in Egypt.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Research on using humor in ESL context has focused on two aspects: direct effects of humor like information retention and indirect affective effects of humor that, in turn, impact learning. Since this study is looking into the indirect affective effects of humor, the study will be following the *immediacy behaviors* framework. Mehrabian (1969) first introduced the immediacy construct to refer to the communication behaviors, including humor, that improve psychological closeness and interactions of people (Askildson, 2005).

This comparative exploratory study employed a mixed methodology format where a perception questionnaire on using memes in class was sent to students and teachers in different Egyptian public and private universities including Ain Shams University, The American University in Cairo, The German University of Cairo, The Arab Academy for Science and Technology, The German International University, Misr International University and Cairo University. The questionnaires included multiple-choice, Likert-scale and open-ended questions, which were quantitatively and qualitatively analyzed. Then, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with these professors to gain insight into their opinions of using memes in their classrooms. Participants were chosen out of convenience and based on snowball sampling. Students were reached through universities' social media groups regardless of their proficiency level because they self-reported it in their survey.

Participants

The teachers' survey received 26 responses from a wide range of experience ESL teachers as shown in figure 4. They teach ESL for all majors including Languages, Medicine, Dentistry, Law … etc. Five teachers who expressed their willingness to be further communicated

for interviews in the survey were part of semi-structured Zoom interviews. Their experience ranged from two to more than 15 years of teaching.

Figure 4

Teachers' Experience
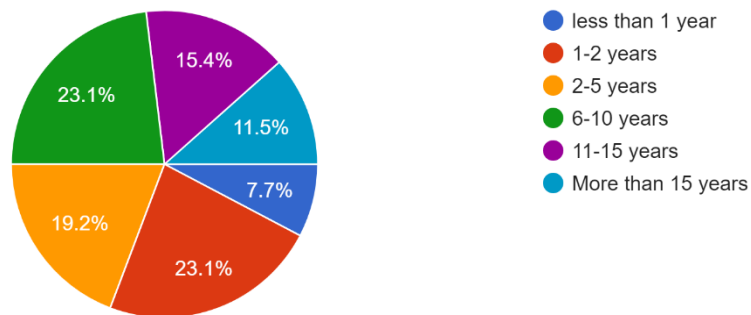
The students' survey received 84 responses (28 Males, 56 Females) from all majors including Languages, Arts, Engineering, Medicine, Law, Dentistry, Business, Mass Communication, Computer Science, Pharmacy and Journalism. Participants must have at least been enrolled in an English course in order to take part in the study. About 48.2% were graduate students, 19.3% were juniors, 15.7% were seniors, 8.4% were freshmen and 8.4% were sophomores.

Figure 5

Students' Year Groups
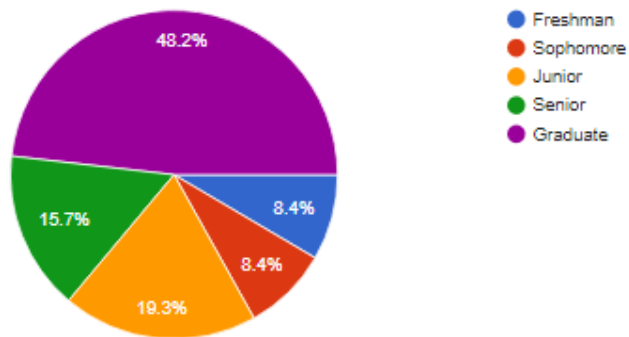
Figure 5

Data Collection and Analysis

The questionnaires included multiple-choice, Likert-scale and open-ended questions, which were quantitatively and qualitatively analyzed. Then, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with these professors to gain insight into their opinions of using memes in their classrooms. Participants were chosen out of convenience and based on snowball sampling. Students were reached through universities' social media groups regardless of their proficiency level because they self-reported it in their survey.

This study used descriptive statistics and content analysis to analyze the collected data. Descriptive statistics is sufficient to answer the quantitative questions, while content analysis is appropriate for narrative data that is largely contextual and collected in an electronic format. The interviews were be conducted via Zoom application and transcribed by Otter.ai website. Then thematic analysis was used to find themes answering the research questions: perceptions, functions, and contexts of using memes in class.

Instruments

24

Unfortunately, due to the gap in literature on perceptions of using memes in ESL classes, there were no ready questionnaires to adapt so new ones were formulated. The student questionnaire consists of 24 item questions while the teachers' questionnaire includes 29 items divided into four sections addressing the three research questions. Questionnaire questions aim to explore to what extent Egyptian teacher's and students' perceptions align with the immediacy behaviors framework. The questions tackle the students' and teachers' opinion of using memes in class and what they think the effect of using memes in ESL classrooms is. However, the interview questions were adapted from Lovorn & Holaway (2015) and modified to fit the study.

For my research questions I needed first to know the perceptions of students and teachers regarding using memes in class. My questionnaire included approval scale questions for both students (appendix B) and teachers (appendix C) about using memes in class whether by the first or the latter. There were also checkbox questions about the suitable type of memes to use in class to accommodate to different perceptions. Memes are divided into two types for the sake of this study: general memes as well as educational and/or relevant memes. There was separate questions addressing both types of memes including approval and frequency five-point Likert scales; to accurately determine students' and teachers' perceptions of using each type of memes in class. To gain deeper insights on teachers' perceptions of using memes, follow-up interviews were conducted with teachers with discussion questions (appendix c) like:

1. What are your perceptions of the use of memes as a teaching strategy?
2. What influences have led you to explore memes as a teaching strategy?

The second research question tackled the influences that might encourage/discourage students or teachers to use memes in ESL classrooms. Multiple questions were allocated to answer this one by exploring some variables like proficiency levels, students and teachers'

25

backgrounds and the age gap between teachers and students. Agreement and frequency Likert scales as well as checkbox questions were used to collect quantitative data. This questionnaire section probed into the influence of memes in class by asking if they help in establishing rapport or increase willingness to communicate in class.

The last question aims to explore the different contexts where students and teachers use memes in ESL classes and the reasons behind it, so frequency scales were used to determine if meme references are used inside class or memes are sent in online groups or used in assignments and presentations. Both samples were asked about their acquaintance with technology-mediated learning and if the teachers/students' response in (online) class is influential on the way of using memes. Teachers were asked in the follow-up interview questions like: Briefly describe how and when you use memes in your classroom.

Procedures

The survey is designed through Google Forms on Google Drive website. It was piloted on a total of 12 students to ensure that all the questions are clear. The survey was posted on the researcher's personal Facebook page. The teachers' survey was sent privately to professors on WhatsApp and received 21 responses by being forwarded between professors. At the end of the questionnaire, teachers were asked to include their email account details, assuming that they were interested in being interviewed. Then both surveys were edited after piloting and were posted again on social media platforms for two weeks. The interviews took place online via ZOOM. The interview lasted from 20-25 minutes. Five interviews were conducted with teachers in English with each instructor interviewed on one occasion only. The answers were transcribed via Otter.ai website and recorded on the researcher's laptop. Regarding ethical standards of research, the consent form was attached at the beginning of the students' and the teachers'

26

survey. This form stipulated that if respondents were reluctant to complete the survey, they could quit anytime.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The current study investigated the perceptions of both students and teachers regarding using memes in class. The study also explored the variables that may encourage or discourage teachers and students to use memes in ESL classrooms as well as the contexts where students and teachers use memes in class if they do. This chapter presents the data obtained from the surveys and interviews in light of the following research questions:

1. What are the university students' and teachers' perceptions of memes in the ESL classroom?

2. What are the variables and contexts that affect the use of memes by teachers and students?

    A. What variables might encourage or discourage both students and teachers to use memes in class?

    B. In what contexts do teachers and students use memes in ESL classes?

In order to address these research questions, both qualitative and quantitative methods were utilized. 84 students and 26 teachers completed two surveys measuring their perceptions towards using memes in class. In addition, five in-depth interviews were conducted with language teachers to gain insight into their experiences with using memes in ESL classrooms.

RQ#1: What are the university students and teachers' perceptions of memes in the ESL classroom?

The survey included a set of Likert scale questions addressed to answer this research question. The questions in the teachers' survey slightly differed from the ones in the students'

survey as it included more questions about what type of memes they would allow in class due to the nature of the teachers' authoritative role in class.

Teachers' Perceptions

This section included some approval scale question in addition to questions inquiring about the types of memes approved in class by the teachers.

Table 1

Teachers' Perceptions of Using Memes in Class

Teachers Perceptions Questions (n=26)	Mean	Std Deviation
1-How much do you approve of professors using memes in English class?	4	0.9
2- What type of memes do you think are suitable to use in English classes?	2.5	0.60
3- Which type of memes gain the best response in your class?	2.2	0.89
4- On the scale from 1 to 5, how much do you approve of students using memes in English class?	3.5	1.2
5- What types of memes used by students would you approve in class?	2.7	0.4

Table 1

Table 1 presents different perception questions. Question 1 shows that teachers on average approve of professors using memes in class (M=4, SD=0.9) and leaning to approve of students using memes in class as well (M=3.5, SD=1.2).

When it comes to the types of memes, they think are suitable in class and would allow in class there were 4 options (1= All types of memes, 2=Educational/Relevant memes only, 3= Inoffensive memes only, whether educational and relevant or not, 4=No memes at all should be used). Teachers were leaning to using educational/relevant memes in class (M= 2.5, SD=

0.60) and that's almost the same type of memes they would allow students to use in class (M=2.7, SD=0.4).

Students' Perceptions of Using Memes in Class

This section aimed to find out students' response to teachers using memes in class and what might affect their reactions. It also aimed to understand what types of memes students think are suitable to use in class.

Table 2

Students' Perceptions of Using Memes in Class

Students Perception Questions (n=84)	Mean	Std. Dev.
1- How would you respond if your English professor used memes in class?	4.4	0.69
2-What type of memes do you think are suitable to use in English classes?	1.9	0.64

Table 2

On average, students are inclined to teachers using memes in class as they almost strongly approve it (M=4.4, SD=0.69). Most students also agree that educational and relevant memes only should be used in class.

About 79.7% of the students agreed that memes have a positive effect on class when asked about the kind of effect memes leave in class, while 17.4 % view the effect of memes as neutral in class and 2.9% think memes have negative effect in class.

Figure 6

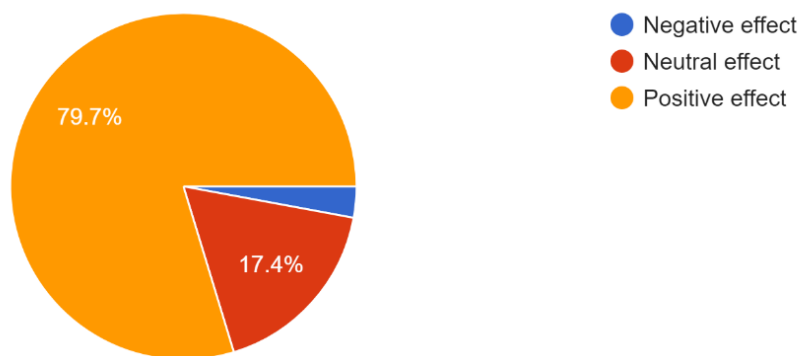*Students' Perception of the Memes' Effect on Class*

Figure 6

When asked why the students thought memes have positive, negative, or neutral effect on the class, these were their responses: the positive responses fell into few categories: a) class engagement and rapport, b) fun and anxiety-free environment, c) productivity and learning, and information retention. 58 students reported positive effects of memes in class.

Table 3

Students' Perception of the Positive Effect of Memes in ESL Classrooms

A) Class engagement and rapport	B) Fun, anxiety-free environment	C) Productivity and learning	D) Information retention
"Makes students react positively"	"It lifts up the students' spirits, changes the mood in class"	"Good and refreshing vibes which in my opinion lead to more concentration and excitement towards what we are learning."	"It can be really helpful as a tool for reminding people of the content, and in general it breaks the monotony and adds some visual highlights to the presentation"
"They make the class funny and engaging"	"Ice breakers to ease tension and break barrier between the professor and the students"	"Memes help most in breaking the ice and refreshing the attention and focus regardless of their relevance"	"It makes the relevant point more memorable and it engages us as students to focus more the more we find the content interesting or gripping."
"Break the ice between students and teachers, Encourage all to be involved in the class discussion	"More interaction, less stress"	"Make a link between the subject of the course and the general daily life"	"You can memorize it easily"

when it's a funny and flexible environment"			
"It makes us feel comfortable, it encourages us to be engaged in the lecture, and it changes the vibes from stressing, if it is, to relaxing."	"Makes it more fun for students"	"Makes u more productive"	"They can help us retain information for longer."
"Funny and keeps you engaged in class since you're amused"	"It makes the educational process more fun"	"It makes us students feel less restrained and more open and enthusiastic to learn in new ways."	

Table 3

However, not all students concurred on the positive effects of memes, some students mentioned negative effects as well. Among the negative effects mentioned were possible distractions, classroom management can be affected, offensive memes. There were nine responses overall mentioning negative effects of memes.

Table 4

Students' Perceptions of the Negative Effect of Memes in ESL Classrooms

A) Distractions	B) Classroom management	C) Offensive memes
"Too many memes can be distracting"	"Miss control/more memes consider as misleading"	"There's a negative effect when the meme is offensive or overdone. Consideration is key really."
"Potential distraction."	"Less discipline"	"Sometimes professors may share some inappropriate memes and make the session very uncomfortable."
"Losing topic seriousness"	"Can sometimes make the class go off script."	

Table 4

1- **RQ#2: What are the variables and contexts that affect the use of memes by teachers and students?**

2A) What influences might encourage or discourage both students and teachers to use memes in class?

The influences that might encourage or discourage teachers from using memes in class differ completely from those of the students. There are multiple variables that may affect teachers' tendencies to use memes in ESL classes.

1- **Influences that Might Encourage or Discourage Teachers to Use Memes in Class**
A) Students' Year Group/Age

The students' age is a crucial variable that might influence the teachers' decision to use memes in class or not. The results indicated that 55% of the teachers do not consider students' year group before using memes in class while 45% do.

Figure 7

Percentage of Teachers Who Consider Students' Ages Before Using Memes in Class
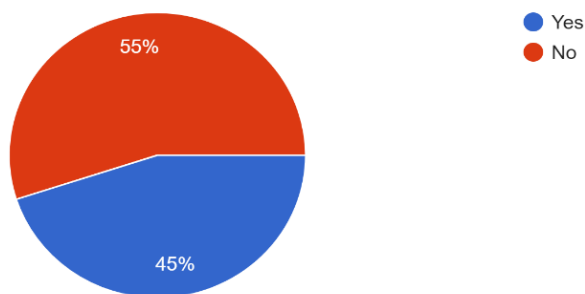
Legend:
- Yes
- No

55%

45%

Figure 7

When asked why or why not the students' year group is considered some teachers agreed that it makes no difference to consider students' age/year group before using memes as they are all from the same background (Egyptian) and they are aware of the same memes. Some teachers said they already use very general memes that are relevant to the students' culture, therefore no need to consider their age. On the other hand, the teachers who consider the students' age before sending memes justified that saying that sometimes older students react less responsively than younger ones. This was later affirmed by a teacher in the interviews who said that she gets this reaction when she uses memes in graduate classes: "*Is this serious? Are you seriously using a meme in a graduate class?*" - Teacher 5

Table 5

Reasons for Teachers (not) Considering Age Before Using Memes in Class

Yes, I consider students' age	No, I don't consider students' age
"Because sharing irrelevant or inappropriate memes would not be good because I share this with them in the first place to engage them, let them know that I am close to them, and that it is ok to have fun."	"It doesn't matter as long as it serves my purpose."
"Because depending on their age, we can use memes they are more likely to have interacted with on the internet. Some memes	"I usually use general memes, prob from Egyptian movies. I either codeswitch to

are relevant and educational, but older and therefore, I don't want to lose their attention and move from the topic to actually explaining the meme reference."	express an idea or make them relate to the meme. Or I use a very well-known meme in English. I try to include everybody in the memes."
"Because I do not want to offend anyone, or make anyone feel singled out if they do not get the meme or its reference."	"Because I'm selective with memes"
"Older students aren't as responsive as freshman students"	"All my students belong more or less to the same age group. I try to consider their generation's familiarity with a meme in general, but I don't believe it'd particularly make a difference in different year groups."
"As each age group needs to be approached differently."	It is a way of culture and society relevant ideas; therefore, students' year is not important
"It depends on their familiarity with the topics"	As all college students belong to the same age group and are exposed to the same social media platforms; so they always get them and laugh. They find them relevant -whatever they are- and react positively

Table 5

B) Students' Proficiency Levels

Students' proficiency level is an important variable that may encourage or discourage teachers to use memes in class. 60% of the teachers reported that they consider the students' proficiency levels before using memes while 40% reported that they do not.

Figure 8

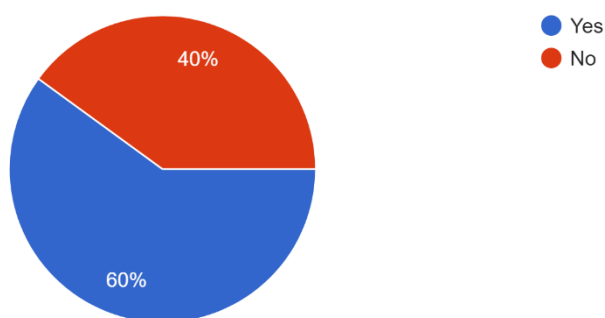*Percentage of Teachers Who Consider Proficiency Levels Before Using Memes*

When asked why they considered the students' proficiency levels (or not), teachers' answers

varied yet included the themes of interaction with the memes, pop-culture literacy and

sociolinguistic competence. The reasons are summarized in the table below.

Table 6

Reasons for (not) Considering Students' Proficiency Levels

Yes, I consider their proficiency levels	No, I don't consider their proficiency levels
"Because some memes *contain difficult or culture specific words.*"	"I use memes that are suitable to their cognitive skills."
"Their level of *awareness and understanding* of the meme might depend on their proficiency level"	"Because most of the memes are in Arabic."
"Arabic and English meme cultures differ greatly. I've noticed that a lot of my students whose proficiency levels are quite *low are much more familiar with the ones circulating in Arabic online spaces than English ones.*"	"It's rarely related to English level and always related to their knowledge *of pop culture*"
"I do consider this because they might not understand the text written on the meme and therefore the meme won't serve its purpose."	"As their language proficiency never dictated the way you *uphold your classroom's standards*"
"We do not want to *waste class time* explaining the meanings and grammar of the memes."	"I don't see it relevant tbh. A meme is *relevance to a movie or an event* .. if u know it, u know it. It's not something that's related to proficiency at all."
"Because I always try to find memes that can be understood by the students in the class in which I plan to use the meme. *I may use a meme in the*	Memes' languages are usually colloquial and simple. They don't require a certain language level & if it happens and there's a new word; it'd

students' L1 too in a monolingual class."	be a really good opportunity to introduce this word to them and enhance their language.
"To be able to *interact* with the meme"	

Table 6

C) Other Influences that May Encourage or Discourage Teachers to Use Memes in Class

After the follow-up interviews, other variables emerged that are worth considering. A teacher who used to teach in a public university brought up the students' socioeconomic status and accessibility to pop-culture saying:

"We're not of the same background., and so sometimes, to be completely honest with you, I didn't use memes back then in my classrooms, because you don't know where they come from. You don't know what social media access they have, and you don't know if they will be able or not be able to understand the reference you're using. And thus, that's problematic because instead of using the time to work on your class, you're going to use the time to work on explaining the memes." – Teacher 4

So, teacher 4 touched on an important issue that may force teachers to be cautious when using memes in class to avoid any students' exclusion.

Classroom management is a key variable that was mentioned during the interviews as well. It is one of the influences that may discourage teachers to use memes in class as some of them reported that:

"*the only disadvantage is that students considered this meme as an invitation to start speaking and to start even having side talks, and to make even more comics and so on… Some of them did not usually consider it as part of the class. I'm not just getting it to make fun of something or to amuse you."* – Teacher 5

37

Another teacher complained about classroom management as well but due to a different problem which is that students start resorting to Arabic (their L1) whenever they see a meme, regardless of the meme language.

"I didn't use them as much because then, because ... whenever I used them, I would notice that they would start speaking in Arabic. It didn't even have to do with whether the meme was originally from like an Arabic movie or from an English joke. No, even if it was in English, even if it was from Friends for example, they would start speaking Arabic. So, I stopped using them in except in some very, very limited contexts. And of course, in the classes where I know they would not resort to Arabic" – Teacher 4

Another variable that popped during interviews was rapport building which encouraged most teachers to use memes in class. A teacher mentioned that her motive to use memes was:

"it [using memes] creates this sort of not only a relationship, but more familiarity and more comfort in the classroom when they feel like this isn't just a teacher-student relationship, but this is also a person who understands our references understands where we come from shares our experiences, is on the same social media platforms as we are. So, this kind of creates this sort of familiarity between the students and the teachers lightens up the class." – Teacher 3

Teacher 5 also agreed with teacher 3 saying that using memes in class "*connects you as much as possible to the young adults.*" So, rapport building is one of the biggest influences that may encourage teachers to use memes in class.

So, to sum up the influences that may encourage or discourage teachers from using memes:

Figure 9
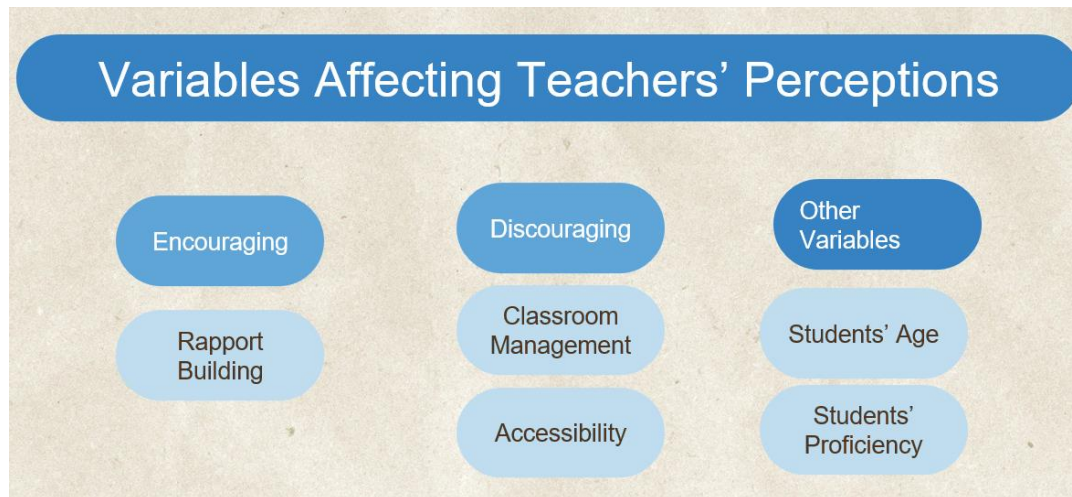
Figure 9

2) Influences that Might Encourage or Discourage Students to Use Memes in Class

Among the variables that might encourage or discourage students to reference memes in class or in their presentations were: the professor's age, gender, social media presence, sense of humor as well as the other students' proficiency levels.

First, 94.2% of the students said that they would be motivated to use memes in class if they think their professor has a high sense of humor.

Figure 10

Percentage of Students Who Would Use Memes If Their Professor Has a Sense of Humor
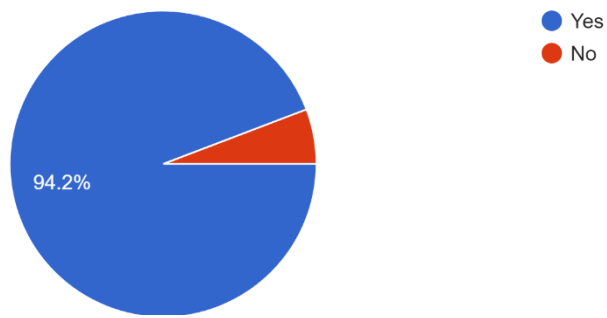
Figure 10

Students could select more than one variable that they consider before they used memes in class. The most prominent variable was the professor's sense of humor (54%). It was followed by the professor's age (52%), then the professor's social media presence (31.9%). The fourth and fifth variables were very close yet 'my colleagues proficiency level' (24.6%) came before 'my professor's gender (23.2%). However, 10% of the students saw that they did not have to consider anything at all before using memes in class.

Figure 11

List of Variables That Students Consider Before Using Memes in Class

Figure 11

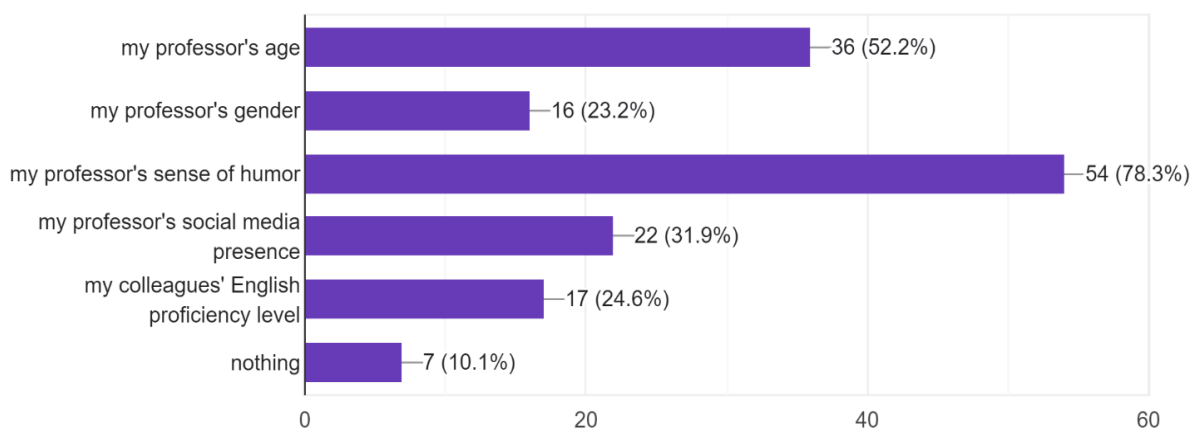When further asked about what would motivate the students to use memes in class, the influences that might encourage them became clearer. The results showed that 75% of the students would become more inclined to use memes if their professor has a general sense of humor. While 58% think that if the age gap is small between them and their professors, they would be more willing to use memes in class. About 53.6% of students agreed that if the professors include memes in their presentations/explanation, they would be encouraged to include memes themselves. Finally, 9% think that they would be more motivated to use memes in class if their professor is the same gender as them.

Since students could add their own motivations to use memes in class, one student mentioned that he/she would use memes in class "if the meme is good enough, can really cement my point and make it unforgettable. It can also make it a little more fun." Another student mentioned that the relevancy of the jokes determines whether he/she will use memes or not. The last one said he/she would be encouraged to use memes if the professor demanded it.

Figure 12

Students' Motivators to Use Memes in Class

The age gap between me and…	40 (58%)
My professor is the same gend…	9 (13%)
My professor includes memes i…	37 (53.6%)
My professor has a general se…	52 (75.4%)
If it's good enough, it can really…	1 (1.4%)
relevancy of the jokes	1 (1.4%)
i dont use memes in class	1 (1.4%)
The request from the teachers t…	1 (1.4%)
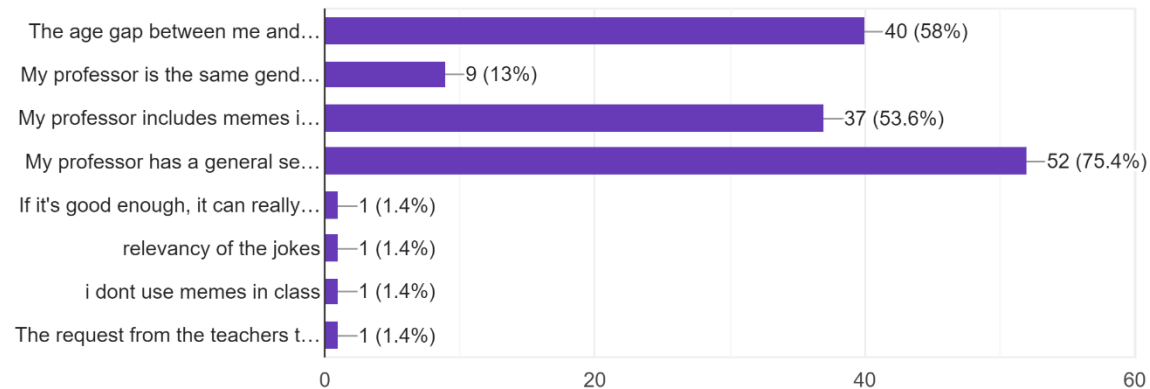
Figure 12

RQ#2: B) In what different contexts do teachers and students use memes in ESL classes?

A) Teachers

On average, teachers reported that they sometimes use memes in class (M=3.14, SD= 0.8).

They also noted that they would prefer if students used memes sometimes (M=3.2,

SD=1.04).

Table 7

How Teachers Use Memes in Class

How Teachers Use Memes in Class	Mean	Std. Deviation
How frequently do you use memes in English classes?	3.14	0.8
How frequently would you like students to use memes in English classes?	3.2	1.04

Table 7

The results show that 65% of the teachers who responded to the survey use meme references in class, while 60% use memes in their presentations and/or assignments. 55% of the teachers send relevant/educational memes in the class online groups, and 20% send general memes in the class groups.
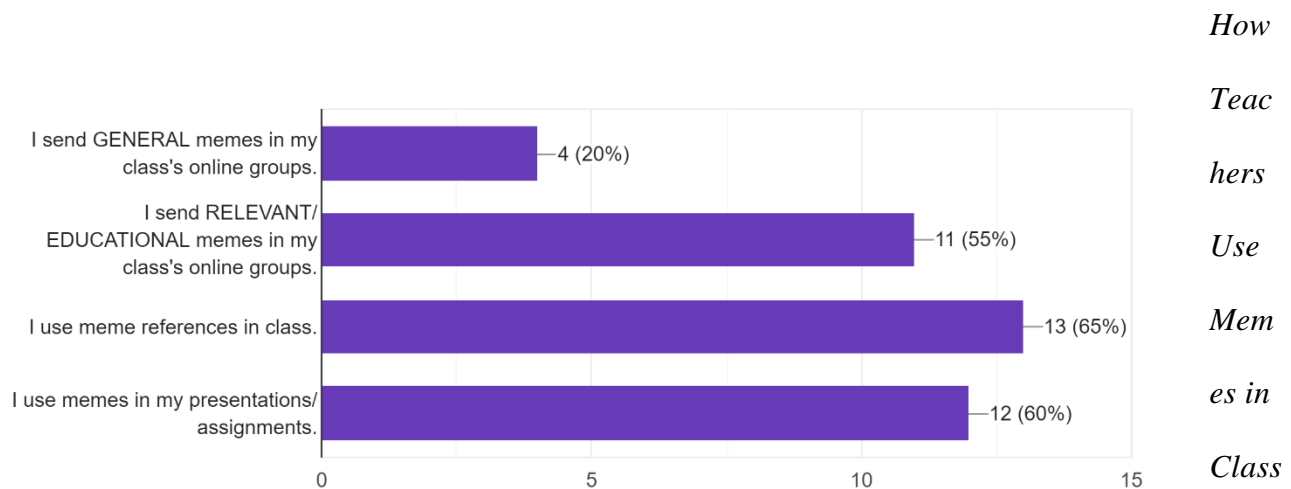
Figure 13

How Teachers Use Memes in Class

Figure 13

During the follow-up interviews, teachers elaborated on how they use memes in class. One teacher said she modified the meme to suit her curriculum which means she mostly uses relevant/educational memes.

> *"I try to photoshop it to include some of the content that we have or to be in relation to the content we have in class." -*Teacher 4

Another teacher mentioned that she likes to use memes in the beginning of the class as a comic relief. Sometimes she also uses oral meme references in class, yet her use of memes peaked during COVID when classes were online.

> *"I use them at the beginning as a kind of comic relief"* – Teacher 5

"I used to use verbal means things which people used to say… and of course, with moving to online teaching during the COVID in particular, and the subsequent semesters where most of our classes were given online. Yes, I think I made a lot of a lot of memes the use of a lot of memes during classes." – Teacher 5

Another teacher mentioned that when using English memes, she tests first of the students know the series/movie she is referring to before using the meme to ensure students will not be confused.

"But in English, I just, like make sure that they actually know the series or the movie or anything like that. So I can't say that I've faced problems. I even sometimes use friend series, especially when like leading of the class or something. So I kinda test if they understand before I use more." – Teacher 1

Teachers were also asked what contexts would they like students to use memes in class and they responded as follows: 71% of the teachers would like students to use meme references in class or use memes in presentations. 42.9% of the teachers would rather students send memes in the class online group. 23.8% would not mind if students use memes in their assignments, while 14.3% prefer if students do not use memes at all.

Figure 14

How Teachers Would Like Students To Use Memes in Class
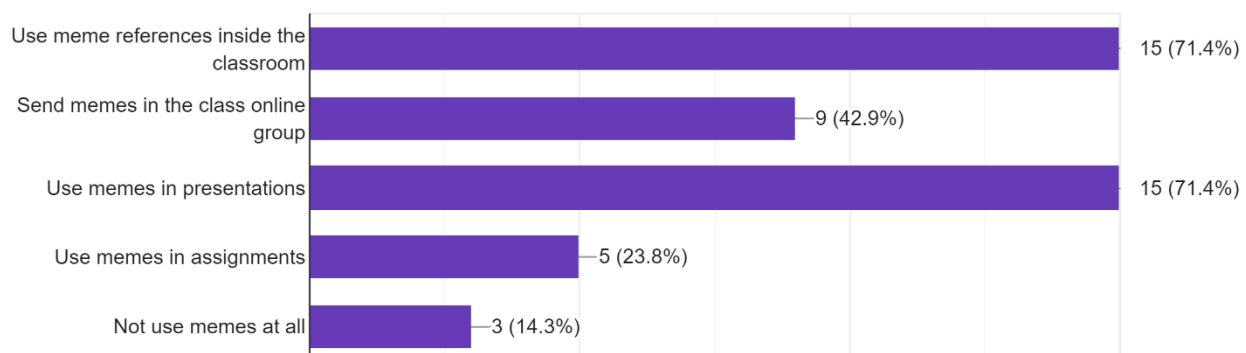

Figure 14

B) Students

Students were asked to choose on a frequency Likert scale how frequently they use memes in ESL classes. On average students rarely use memes in ESL classes.

Table 8

How Frequently Students Use Memes in Class

Students (n=81)	Mean	Std. Dev.
How frequently do you use memes in English classes?	2.1	1.1

Table 8

Students were then asked to choose all that applies to how they use memes in class. The options provided were: I send GENERAL memes in my class's social media groups, I send RELEVANT/EDUCATIONAL memes in my class's social media groups. I use meme references in class, I use memes in my presentations/assignments, or I don't use memes at all.

Figure 15

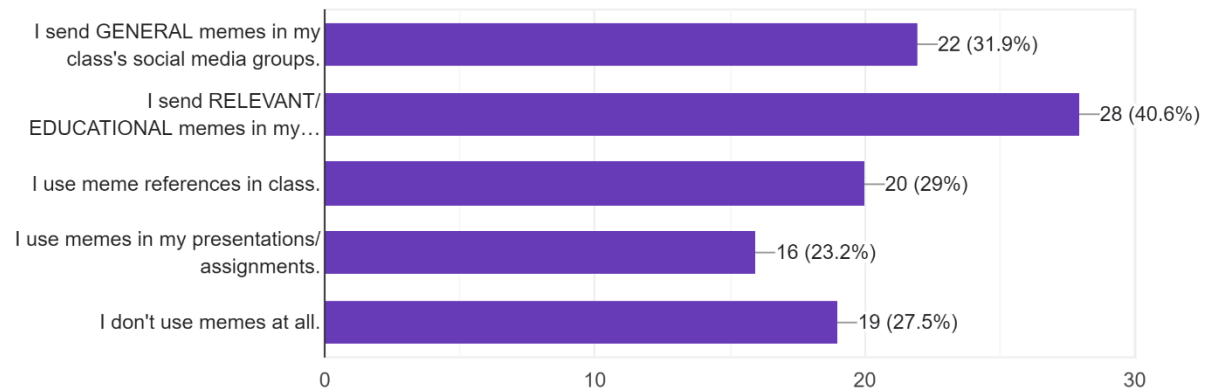*How Students Use Memes in Class*

Figure 15

40% of the respondents send only relevant and educational memes in their class's social

media group. 31% of the students send general memes in their class's social media groups,

while 29% prefer to use meme references in class. 23.2% reported that they use memes in

their presentations or assignments. However, 27.5% said they do not use memes at all in class.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This chapter provides a discussion of the results in addition to linking the results to current literature. It also presents the implications, limitations of this study and recommendations for future research.

RQ#1: What are the university students and teachers' perceptions of memes in the ESL classroom?

The results show that both teachers and students share positive perceptions about using memes in class. Teachers would approve of students using memes in class and students would react positively resulting in psychological closeness. There were minor differences in the type of memes approved to be used in class. While teachers viewed any inoffensive memes as appropriate to use in class, students thought only relevant/educational memes can be used in class. This could be due to the feeling students have that teachers would not allow the use of any irrelevant memes which coincides with Davies' argument (2003) that the power deferential in class between students and teachers hinders the normal joking that takes place under egalitarian conditions.

Almost all students concurred on the positive effects of memes on class. They mentioned how it influences the class engagement, builds rapport between students and their teacher, reduces affective filter, and helps with information retention. These are all typical effects of immediacy behaviors (including humor and memes) on students' learning as explained by Gorham and Christophel (1990). Students reporting these positive effects goes in line with Anderson's study (1979) that indicated student perceptions of teacher immediacy were positively correlated with 1) student affect, 2) student behavioral commitment, and 3) student cognitive

learning" (Askildson, 2005). In fact, the effect of humor on the information retention was a debatable topic as Bolkan et al. (2018) argued that humor had negative effects on memory retention as students remember the humorous examples more than the actual information. Korobkin (1989) argued that humor helps with information retention which agrees with this study's results according to both students and teachers.

Students who mentioned that using memes "makes the relevant point more memorable, and it engages us as students to focus more the more we find the content interesting or gripping," are reminiscent of Torok et al. (2004) whose study indicated that students 'always' understood a concept better when the teacher incorporates humor while explaining it.

However, both students and teachers had concerns about the negative effects of memes. They both agreed on how it may lead to losing class control sometimes. Few students mentioned that too many memes could be distracting. This possible outcome was referred to before by the instructional humor processing theory which states that unless the students perceive and then resolve the incongruity in a humorous instructional message, they may experience confusion instead of humor (Wanzer et al., 2010).

RQ#2: How would university students and teachers like to use memes in ESL classes?

2A) What influences might encourage or discourage both students and teachers to use memes in class?

Teachers

There was some controversy regarding considering students' age before using memes in class where 55% of the teachers reported they do not view age as a determining factor in using memes in class because they use popular memes that anyone would know and understand

regardless of their age. Some teachers agreed that students' age matters when it comes to using memes in class for many reasons. Teachers also mentioned that they get more positive responses from younger students than older ones (graduates for instance) as they think the professor is not taking the class seriously. This could also account for the students' negative effects mentioned previously.

Moreover, the majority of the teachers (60%) reported that they consider the students' proficiency levels before using memes in class due to the different levels of sociolinguistic and communicative competences of students. One teacher mentioned she is keen on using memes in class to enhance students' proficiency in the first place:

"Competence in language has different levels... communicative competence has to do with understanding the workings of language in general, and of course, humor is part and parcel of any linguistic ability. It is even a criterion for measuring how children have reached a certain level of linguistic competence... This is part of the culture of the target language, whatever the language that is to be learned. ... if memes are a way of raising this awareness of the importance of humor, they should be used" – Teacher 5

This resonates with Nilsen (1989) and Vega's (1989) studies which state that humor has been proved to make students sensitive to the structural and semantic differences between different languages. Teacher reported that another reason why proficiency level is crucial in class is the risk of students not getting the meme, thus creating confusion or spending much time explaining the meme itself rather than moving on with the session.

On the other hand, 40% of the teachers use memes in class regardless of the students' proficiency levels. Part of their reasoning was they are using memes in the students' L1 which

does not require proficiency to understand. They use memes within the same culture or popular movies in their L1 (Arabic). Some teachers did not mind taking the time of their class explaining a new word/concept in the meme to students as it is part of the language acquisition process anyway. While another teacher mentioned that the students' proficiency levels should not dictate the classroom standards and expectations of your students. This recalls Krashen's input hypothesis that states that we acquire language better when we are exposed to comprehensible input: language that contains structures that are a bit beyond our current level of competence (i + 1) (Krashen & Terrell, 1983).

Students

The majority of the students agreed that they would be more motivated to use memes in class if their professor had a general sense of humor and used memes in class. This reaffirms that students may need the professor to initiate using memes in class to feel that they are allowed to do so. A great factor that also motivates students to use memes is the small age gap between them and the teacher. This could be due to their belief that a younger teacher would be more acquainted with their sense of humor and would have more social media presence. One of the teachers mentioned that she uses memes to send this exact message to students:

"It is your way to say that. I know what's happening around, I know what makes them laugh, I know that trend nowadays." – Teacher 3

So, students sometimes need this affirmation to start using memes in their presentations or use meme references in class. The professor's gender turned out to be one of the influences that may encourage/discourage students to use memes in class. Apparently, students feel an affinity with

professors of the same gender that makes them comfortable enough to joke with using meme references in class.

RQ#2: B) In what different contexts do teachers and students use memes in ESL classes?

A. **Teachers**

Teachers reported they use memes "sometimes" on the frequency scales and that is the same frequency they would like their students to use memes in class. Also, most teachers (65%) preferred using meme references in class. This could be due to how spontaneous this may happen as opposed to using memes in a presentation which would entail preparing it beforehand. One teacher mentioned that she photoshops the memes to suit the content she is teaching which shows how dedicated some teachers are to using humor in class.

Students, on the other hand, use memes in class less frequently than teachers despite all the positive effects they mentioned about using memes. This could go back to the lack of one of the motivations mentioned that would encourage them like the professor's sense of humor, professor's use of memes or a small age gap. Most students also reported that when they use memes in class, they only use relevant/educational ones as they think this is the most appropriate type of memes to be used in class.

Implications of the Study

There are extensive practical implications to this study with respect to the various stakeholders who will benefit from its results. These include teachers, program directors, Teacher Education Programs, and professional development sessions.

Teachers

This study aimed first and foremost to explore the gap between teachers' perceptions of using memes in class and students'. First, the study offers a string rationale that showcases the importance of using memes in class and its effect on the students. Not only does it do that, it also provides insights into students' perceptions towards using memes in class whether by them or the teachers.

The study also presents teachers with variables to consider before using memes in class like students' proficiency levels, age or the type of meme used. It is like a mental checklist teachers have to ask themselves before using memes in class. It also elaborates on the students' motivators and demotivators to use memes in class, so teachers can set an inviting atmosphere in class where students feel free to share memes.

The interviews also provide deeper insights from other teachers who use memes. They recount what influenced them to use memes and the problems they have faced. They mention the benefits they encountered through using memes in class.

Teacher Education Programs and Professional Development Sessions

Teacher educational programs and professional development sessions tend to prioritize teaching methods while forgetting about interpersonal relations and rapport in class. This study could encourage them to integrate adding humor in class and memes specifically into their curriculums. It is important to prepare novice teachers to be acquainted and updated with the latest comics and memes as that would be a great rapport management tool in class.

Professional development could use the results of this study to raise awareness of in-service teachers about the effects of using humor and memes in class on rapport building, information retention and students' affect.

Program Directors

The results of this study could inform the decision of program directors about integrating courses that allow students to utilize memes as part of the class due to their many benefits. The results may also help program directors consider teachers' social media presence, acquaintance with pop-culture and willingness to integrate humor and memes in class before new hirings. The study may also provide a broader understanding of the perceptions and needs of both students and teachers within this particular context. This suggests that the area of integrating humor and memes in class could be incorporated into the feedback teachers receive from their program directors.

Limitations of the Study

Due to time constraints, this study only explores the perceptions of teachers' and students' of using memes in class without delving into tangible effects of memes on students' engagement, affect and retention.

Recommendations for Future Research

For future researchers studying the same topic, it is recommended to conduct multiple classroom observations and obtain natural data from teachers who use memes in class. The data may help elaborate the effects of memes on rapport building as well as students' engagement, affect and retention.

It is also recommended that researchers investigate the challenges confronting teachers while attempting to use memes in class like classroom management or confusion. In-depth interviews with the students could be conducted to investigate the reason behind their reactions.

Exploring the effect of using different types of memes in class can offer an area for further investigation. Researchers may also try to find out the most efficient way to use memes as well as the effect of using memes on information retention in class to yield better results.

Conclusion

This study attempted to study the perceptions of teachers and students regarding using memes in class as well as how and when both teachers and students used memes. The study aimed to bridge the gap between teachers and students' perspectives and to raise awareness regarding the linguistic and affective importance of using memes in classrooms.

Teachers and students filled in surveys and follow-up interviews were conducted with the teachers to gain further insight. The results show that both teachers and students react positively to using memes in class. Using memes has helped teachers with rapport building and reducing affective filter in class. While it helped students be at ease in class and engage better with the content and the teacher.

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Appendices

Appendix A: IRB Approval Letter

THE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY IN CAIRO
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

Case# 2022-2023-053

To: Fadwa Youssef
Atta Gebril
Sara Tarek

From: Heba Kotb Chair of the IRB
Date 5th November 2022
Re: IRB approval

This is to inform you that I reviewed your revised research proposal entitled

"Students and Teachers' Perceptions of Using Memes in ESL/EFL Classrooms"

It required consultation with the IRB under the "expedited" category. As you are aware, there were minor revisions to the original proposal, but your new version addresses these concerns successfully. Your proposal uses appropriate procedures to minimize risks to human subjects and that adequate provision was made for confidentiality and data anonymity of participants in any published record. I believe you will also make adequate provision for obtaining informed consent of the participants.

This approval letter was issued under the assumption that you have not started data collection for your research project. Any data collected before receiving this letter could not be used since this is a violation of the IRB policy.

Please note that IRB approval does not automatically ensure approval by CAPMAS, an Egyptian government agency responsible for approving some types of off-campus research. CAPMAS issues are handled at AUC by the office of the University Counsellor. The IRB is not in a position to offer any opinion on CAPMAS issues, and takes no responsibility for obtaining CAPMAS approval.

This approval is valid for only one year. In case you have not finished data collection within a year, you need to apply for an extension.

Thank you and good luck.

H. Kotb

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Appendix B: Students' Survey

https://forms.gle/uTfevgAKrquwSpdWA

Appendix C: Teachers' Survey

https://forms.gle/D4LSc3gxHUzY1hof7

Appendix D: Discussion Prompts

1. What are your perceptions of the use of memes as a teaching strategy?

2. What influences have led you to explore memes as a teaching strategy?

3. Briefly describe how, when, and why you use memes in your classroom.

4. Do you feel you have a responsibility to help students develop sense of humor or enable their learning though memes? Why or why not?

5. Describe any barriers, resistances, or other challenges you have encountered or observed regarding the use of memes strategies in the classroom. To what do you attribute these challenges?