Culturally Responsive Vocabulary Instruction through Memes: Integrating Digital Culture into EFL Classrooms in Indonesia

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Abstract

Learners in the digital age demand culturally relevant, multimodal, and socially grounded instructional methodologies for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction. Traditional vocabulary education frequently fails to interest digital natives who are already engaged in internet culture. The purpose of this research is to create and assess a vocabulary teaching technique based on digital memes within the context of Culturally Responsive Teaching. The study adopted a Classroom Action Research (CAR) design that was carried out in two cycles. The data were gathered by pretest, posttest, delayed posttest, classroom observations, student reflective journals, and semi-structured interviews. The key research variable is the effectiveness of vocabulary education using digital memes, which is measured both statistically and qualitatively. The study found a substantial improvement in vocabulary mastery ($M = 76.97$) compared to the pretest ($M = 55.34$), with $t(28) = -41.273$, $p < .001$, and a strong effect size (Cohen's $d = -7.664$). The delayed posttest ($M = 74.31$) confirmed long-term vocabulary retention. According to qualitative research, using memes increased student engagement, inventiveness, and emotional connection to the topic, as well as fostering cultural relevance and reflective learning. The findings suggest incorporating digital culture into language training as a strategy of promoting inclusive and context-sensitive EFL pedagogy.

Keywords: vocabulary instruction, digital memes, EFL learning, culturally responsive teaching, digital natives.

Introduction

Over the last two decades, the rapid progress of digital technology has drastically revolutionised the educational scene, particularly English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction. Students who are digital natives are not only familiar with technology, but also immersed in a visual and interactive cultural ecosystem that influences how they communicate, study, and shape their identities. As a result, traditional instructional approaches that do not address students' digital reality are frequently regarded as irrelevant (Ning & Ismail, 2024). This generates a pressing demand for contextualised, inclusive, and culturally based learning methodologies.

The internet meme is a multimodal style of communication that combines text, visuals, symbols, and cultural allusions to convey message quickly, simply, and frequently amusingly. Memes, which Dawkins first proposed in the context of cultural evolution, have grown into potent social expression tools that embody collective identity and online community dynamics. The visual, intertextual, and communicative properties of memes provide significant educational potential in language learning activities(Amanda et al., 2024; Kayali & Altuntaş, 2021).

Language acquisition relies heavily on vocabulary. Reading comprehension, oral and writing creation, and participation in academic discourse all suffer from a lack of vocabulary knowledge. Traditional vocabulary education approaches, such as rote memorisation and structural exercises, are frequently considered as boring by students (Amanda et al., 2024; Kartika et al., 2024). In contrast, studies demonstrate that using memes in vocabulary acquisition can boost student engagement, motivation, and long-term retention (Aladdin, 2021; Amanda et al., 2024). Memes, in addition to linguistic outcomes, help to promote pragmatic competence, cultural knowledge, and critical and creative thinking skills.

Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) provides an adequate theoretical foundation for incorporating memes into language training. CRT emphasises the significance of linking learning materials to students' cultural experiences in order to build inclusive and meaningful learning environments (Hidayati et al., 2024; Vonti et al., 2025). In this setting, carefully selected memes might assist educators in connecting linguistic content with students' life experiences, so increasing their sense of belonging and learning efficacy. However, there are ethical problems that must be addressed. Some digital content contains prejudices, cultural biases, or offensive symbolism that, if not critically scrutinised, may impede educational objectives(Pandya & Joshi, 2022; Tanase, 2022). Educators must so serve as culturally sensitive curators who are aware of representation ethics and cultural diversity (Boukmakh & Hadjailia, 2023).

Memes, in addition to serving as visual aids, can also be used to create meaning and reflect critically. Meme creation activities based on specific terminology or social issues allow students to communicate their beliefs, humour, and cultural viewpoints (Boukmakh & Hadjailia, 2023; Yuliantari & Huda, 2023). These practices support the development of 21st-century competencies such as digital literacy, multicultural communication, and cooperation. Preliminary observations in an English and Culture class in Indonesia revealed that students responded positively when vocabulary instruction was linked to memes familiar to them in their digital environment, including local memes that involve translanguaging between English, Indonesian, and regional languages (Im & Park, 2025).

While previous research has often focused on the entertainment or motivational aspects of meme use, this study takes a different approach by designing and implementing a structured vocabulary teaching strategy based on Culturally Responsive Teaching principles (Kong et al.,

2022; Krasnoff, 2016; Murray, 2021; Vonti et al., 2025). This technique seeks to promote not only language mastery but also pupils' cultural understanding, ethical sensitivity, and digital competence.

This research has three main goals. First, create and implement a culturally responsive meme-based vocabulary education technique adapted to the needs of EFL learners in Indonesia. Second, assess the strategy's effectiveness in enhancing students' motivation, active involvement, vocabulary retention, and comprehension of digital culture. Third, provide inclusive and ethical instructional principles for utilising memes as teaching material.

This research is expected to provide a practical model for contextual and digital vocabulary instruction in EFL classrooms, empirical data based on classroom practice in Indonesia, and pedagogical guidelines for incorporating digital media in a critical, culturally sensitive, and socially relevant manner. As a result, this work makes both theoretical and practical contributions to language instruction innovation in the digital era.

Literature Review
Vocabulary Instruction in the EFL Context

Vocabulary is an essential component of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) acquisition, helping students acquire the four main language skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Traditional vocabulary teaching approaches, which focus on word-list memorisation or structure repetition, have long been criticised for missing contextual relevance and being incompatible with the features of digital native learners (Bal, 2019; Sumartono, 2023).

The quest for more contextualised and engaging teaching tactics has prompted the development of multimodal vocabulary learning approaches. Helmi, (2023) discovered in a quasi-experimental study in Indonesia that including visual, auditory, and interactive aspects into vocabulary education dramatically improved student recall and motivation compared to traditional techniques. Eisenmann & Summer, (2020), Pachuashvili, (2021) and Unsworth & Mills, (2020) support these findings, arguing that multimodal media provide richer cognitive cues through dual coding theory, supporting long-term memory processing.

Higher education institutions have reported similar results. According to Zhou et al., (2025) and Ning & Ismail, (2024), a three-stage technique that includes text, audio, visuals, and interactive assignments greatly promotes involvement and vocabulary acquisition among Chinese EFL university students. Meanwhile, smartphone applications that combine visuals and audio, such as DuoCards, have helped students improve their digital literacy and learning autonomy (Ilmi & Dewi, 2022).

Although multimodal techniques have been shown to be beneficial, the majority of available studies focus solely on learning outcomes such as recall or motivation without incorporating them into a more holistic, contextualised pedagogical framework. As a result, this study frames memes as multimodal representations that must be carefully integrated into the framework of Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) in order to generate vocabulary education that is not only visually appealing but also socially and culturally meaningful.

Pedagogical, Cultural, and Ethical Potential of Memes in Vocabulary Instruction

Memes, as part of digital culture, have grown into a form of communication that mixes verbal, visual, and symbolic aspects in a brief and expressive manner. Memes provide unique

educational opportunities in EFL due to their ability to convey meaning through authentic social and cultural contexts (Sharma et al., 2023). Memes convey vocabulary in more dynamic forms, including as idioms, informal expressions, and unique grammatical structures that are frequently omitted from textbooks (Shabitah & Hartono, 2020). This contributes to students' pragmatic competency and helps them grasp how terminology is employed in real-world communicative contexts. Furthermore, when students create memes based on learning material, they engage in meaning-making processes that include cultural interpretation, critical thinking, and linguistic creativity (Usmeldi & Amini, 2022).

Amanda et al., (2024) discovered that when language was delivered in the form of memes, learners were better able to recall and comprehend it. Learning felt more relevant and pleasant because the format was similar to what they consumed on a regular basis. Im & Park, (2025) suggest that memes are communal emblems of digital culture, allowing students to explore identity, social values, and humour within their groups. In academic settings, student interaction with memes, both comprehending and creating them, promotes multimodal literacy and digital abilities. Calvo et al., (2025) discovered that using memes in teacher education promotes identity exploration and critical expression. This implies that memes serve not just as educational tools, but also as platforms for cultural research and the development of 21st-century skills.

Nonetheless, using memes in education presents ethical concerns. Many memes circulating online contains prejudices, cultural biases, or content that contradicts inclusive educational objectives (Ayyaz et al., 2022). This necessitates that the instructor takes an active role as a culturally aware content creator. Petrucco, (2023) emphasises the significance of giving explicit instructions and assessment rubrics when utilising memes as learning assignments in order to ensure that learning objectives are reached while minimising ethical risk. The incorporation of memes into vocabulary instruction must thus be supported with a critical awareness of cultural representation and student diversity.

Principles of Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) in the EFL Context

Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) is a pedagogical technique that incorporates students' cultural experiences, values, and identities into curriculum development and instruction. Gay, (2002), Kong et al., (2022), and Vonti et al., (2025) argue that training that is culturally appropriate produces a more inclusive, meaningful, and empowered learning environment. CRT is becoming more relevant in EFL situations due to the prevalence of instructional resources generated from Western cultures, which frequently fail to reflect students' local social and cultural realities. This gap may result in emotional and cognitive distance in the learning process. CRT bridges the gap between students' worlds and learning content by offering culturally relevant materials and promoting active engagement in meaning-making.

A increasing body of empirical data supports CRT's efficacy. In Indonesia, Hidayati et al. (2024) discovered that including local cultural content into English language training improved student involvement and critical awareness. Similarly, Yuliantari & Huda, (2023) found that using local texts and circumstances in EFL education increased student motivation and connection to the learning materials. Kong et al., (2022) conducted an international study that found that EFL teachers in rural China who used CRT principles increased intercultural communication and emotional ties with students. It was also proven that CRT is beneficial in Indonesian higher education by boosting student participation, material relevance, and learning meaningfulness.

In accordance with these findings, this study employs CRT as a theoretical foundation for creating a meme-based vocabulary education technique. This technique is supposed to produce language learning that is not only linguistically competent, but also culturally and socially appropriate.

Integrating CRT and Meme-Based Instruction into Classroom Action Research (CAR)

Classroom Action Research (CAR) is a systematic and reflective way to designing and evaluating educational practices directly in the classroom. CAR enables teachers to adapt instructional strategies to learners' changing needs through iterative steps of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting (Kemmis et al., 2014).

CRT integration into CAR has been investigated in a variety of scenarios. Hidayati et al., (2024) found that integrating CRT through problem-based learning models promoted critical thinking and student participation in high school. In a further investigation, Kartika et al. (2024) used CAR to execute mobile-assisted vocabulary training, resulting in significant improvements in vocabulary knowledge and student engagement. As of now, there has been little research that explicitly incorporates Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) and meme-based media into Classroom Action Research (CAR) designs in Indonesian EFL higher education environments. Nonetheless, the multimodal and contextual character of memes has a high potential to complement CRT principles, particularly in matching instructional content with students' social and cultural realities (Hidayati et al., 2024; Kong et al., 2022).

This research aims to close this gap. The study intends to investigate not just instructional effectiveness, but also culturally meaningful and digitally relevant learning processes, by building and analysing a meme-based vocabulary training strategy using a CAR framework based on CRT principles. This strategy aims to promote EFL education that is more contextualised, reflective, and responsive to the requirements of today's learners.

Research Methods

This study used a Classroom Action Research (CAR) strategy based on reflective and participatory practices to improve the efficacy of meme-based vocabulary learning in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom. This study's framework follows Kemmis et al., (2014) cyclical model, which Godínez Martínez, (2022) adapted for higher education situations. CAR was chosen because it allows teachers to immediately test, change, and reflect on teaching practices via iterative phases of preparation, activity, observation, and reflection.

The study was carried out at a private college in Indonesia with 29 first-year students enrolled in the English Language and Culture programme. Participants were chosen specifically based on relevant traits such as active social media use, expertise with consuming and generating digital memes, and beginner to intermediate English language levels. To ensure confidentiality and follow research ethics, the identities of both the institution and the subjects were kept anonymously.

To acquire a complete understanding of the instructional intervention, a mixed-methods approach was used. Pre- and post-tests were used to acquire quantitative data on increases in students' vocabulary knowledge before and after the technique was implemented. Classroom observations were made to record the dynamics of student interaction and participation during instructional sessions. After each action cycle, reflective journals were gathered to capture

students' learning experiences and perceived meanings of meme-based vocabulary training (Calvo et al., 2025; Godínez Martínez, 2022; Tu et al., 2023). Furthermore, semi-structured interviews with chosen students were undertaken to acquire a better understanding of their impressions of the effectiveness and cultural significance of utilising memes in language acquisition (Han & Smith, 2023; Wilson & Lengeling, 2021; Zhang et al., 2025).

The investigation was carried out in two phases. The initial cycle teaches vocabulary using chosen visual presentations and internet memes. Students collaborated in small groups to discuss the meanings of the memes before creating new memes using the vocabulary they learnt. The second round focused on memes that mirrored local cultural values and translanguaging techniques, drawing on the reflection findings from the first cycle. During this stage, instruction was geared towards connecting language issues with digital cultural awareness. Descriptive statistics, such as mean scores and percentage increases, were used to analyse quantitative data. To discover and categorise significant topics such as learning motivation, student involvement, language creativity, and cultural contextual awareness, qualitative data were analysed thematically using phases of open and axial coding (Hidayat, N., Ilahi, L. K., Najiatun, & Arifah, H. K. N., 2024).

The validity of the data was established by comparing classroom observations, student reflective journals, and semi-structured interviews (Sudirman et al., 2021). Member checking was used to improve interpretive validity by providing participants with summaries of the data analysis to validate and clarify their intended interpretations. In addition, peer debriefing with other instructors was used to collaboratively evaluate the thematic coding process, lowering potential subjectivity and increasing analytical transparency (Fitria, 2023).

The entire study process was guided by ethical social inquiry principles. Informed consent forms provided participants with complete and accurate information about the study's purpose and methods. Confidentiality was scrupulously maintained, and participation was purely voluntary, with no academic implications. This strategy guaranteed that the study process was not only in terms of methodology sound, but also ethically and socially acceptable.

Results and Discussion
Vocabulary Acquisition Improvement: Quantitative Findings

Vocabulary mastery was tested in 29 undergraduate students at three stages: pretest, posttest, and delayed posttest, to assess the efficiency of digital meme-based vocabulary education in the EFL environment. A paired samples t-test was used to analyse the data, which revealed a substantial improvement in students' vocabulary performance after the intervention.

The mean pretest score was 55.34 (SD = 4.59), which rose to 76.97 (SD = 4.92) in the posttest. The gain of -21.62 was statistically significant, with $t(28) = -41.273$, $p < .001$ and a strong effect size (Cohen's d = -7.664). The significant connection between scores ($r = 0.826$, $p < .001$) suggests steady and meaningful growth in language learning. These results indicate that meme-based education significantly improved immediate vocabulary learning outcomes.

Interestingly, there was a 2.66-point mean difference between the posttest (M = 76.97) and the delayed posttest (M = 74.31). The decrease in number was statistically significant ($t(28) = 6.382$, $p < .001$), with a substantial effect size (Cohen's d = 1.185) and a good correlation ($r = 0.912$). This suggests that, while some natural attrition occurred, the majority of the acquired vocabulary was preserved over time.

The intervention was effective, as evidenced by a significant mean difference of -18.97 (t(28) = -26.466, p <.001), a substantial effect size (Cohen's d = -4.915), and a strong correlation (r = 0.719) between the pretest and delayed posttest. Thus, meme-based vocabulary education resulted in not just rapid benefits but also improved medium-term retention.

Student Engagement and Participation

Classroom investigations across two action cycles showed a gradual rise in student participation. During the first cycle, students actively participated in group discussions to analyse curated memes, examining the lexical content, humour, and cultural nuances embedded in the visual texts. The second cycle showed increased interest, especially when students were given the flexibility to design their own memes. At this point, they started connecting terminology to personal experiences, local expressions, and real-world social activities in digital media.

The results suggest that students were internalising vocabulary through social representation methods they were familiar with and actively participated in, rather of memorising it. From a social linguistics standpoint, memes served as visual discourses inside the digital ecosystem, allowing students to correlate language with their identity, cultural affiliation, and everyday communication practices. This is consistent with the ideas of multimodal literacies, which position students as active meaning-makers Petrucco, (2023) bolstering the argument that contextualised learning improves both cognitive and emotive engagement.

Student Reflections on Meme-Based Learning

Learner reflection is critical in language training that emphasises contextualisation and active engagement in order to comprehend how meaning is socially and personally produced during the learning process. This study's reflective journals examined students' perceptions of digital meme-based vocabulary training. These insights shed light on how learners not only assimilated linguistic material but also applied it to their digital life experiences.

Three major themes emerged from a thematic examination of the reflective journals. First, students found the learning experience pleasurable while also intellectually interesting, as they were challenged to master language via non-traditional media. Second, the use of strong visual and amusing aspects aided vocabulary acquisition. Third, students found the learning materials relevant because they were based on their real-life digital surroundings. Several students claimed that they could easily remember words like embarrassing, cringe, or spill the tea since they were presented in contextualised memes similar to the stuff they see on social media.

The results obtained are consistent with those reported by Calicchio et al., (2023) who found that incorporating digital content such as memes into language instruction improves pragmatic competence, emotional engagement, and learning motivation using informal, multimodal approaches. likewise, Amanda et al., (2024) discovered that using memes in vocabulary education increased student involvement and contextual knowledge of new words, as evidenced by interviews and reflections. Aedo & Millafilo, (2022) shown in Chile that popular culture media, such as memes, improved vocabulary retention and pragmatic awareness through multimodal texts based on students' social realities. According to Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT), the relationship between vocabulary, life experiences, and student cultural practices promotes an inclusive, relevant, and socially reflective learning environment.

As a result, students' perspectives on meme-based learning demonstrate not only verbal comprehension but also profound social, emotive, and cultural engagement. This technique allowed students to create meaning from their digital experiences, enhancing the connection between language, identity, and the learning community.

Learner Perceptions: Insights from Interviews

Further research indicated that the meme-based vocabulary method assisted pupils in understanding previously difficult idioms and informal expressions. The student tweeted, *"Idioms are usually confusing, but when you explain 'spill the tea' with a meme, I get it right away because I see that a lot on TikTok."* Students remarked that the meme-creation process gave them the freedom to express their opinions, values, and identities (Najiatun, Wulandari, N., Hidayat, N., Arifah, H. K. N., Khan, H. A. U., & Rohmayati, N. S., 2025).

As a sociolinguistic perspective, this shows that memes were used not only as linguistic tools, but also as medium for expressing identity and social agency. Students were not just creating writings, but also placing themselves and negotiating meanings within their digital cultural networks. Calvo et al., (2025) discovered that learners' participation in meme formation increased identity reflection, cultural awareness, and critical expression in language acquisition.

Discussion: Integrating Culture, Language, and Digital Literacies

Overall, the data suggest that employing memes in vocabulary education is a pedagogical method that combines language, culture, and technology to create meaningful and inclusive learning experiences. Students became more cognitively, affectively, and socially engaged as they viewed familiar and culturally relevant material.

This approach combines principles of multimodal literacies, constructivist learning, and Culturally Responsive Teaching. It is based on the sociolinguistic concept that language is inextricably linked to users' social circumstances and identities. Memes improve vocabulary comprehension while also allowing for meaning negotiation, value reflection, and identity expression in a democratic learning setting.

In any case, the efficiency of this method varies depending on the context. Students' digital literacy levels, instructors' cultural sensitivity, and careful topic selection are all crucial to success. Because not all students have equal access to digital culture, scaffolding and explicit advice are required to ensure that the learning process is inclusive and ethical.

Finally, meme-based vocabulary instruction is not just appropriate for tech-integrated campuses, but it may also be used in other educational contexts to bridge the gap between academic language and cultural practices of students. This method allows students to acquire languages while managing their social identities in a reflective and representational learning environment.

Conclusions and Practical Implication

This study found that digital meme-based vocabulary training greatly improves EFL students' lexical acquisition. Quantitative outcomes demonstrated a significant rise in scores between the pretest (M = 55.34) and posttest (M = 76.97), with a large effect size (Cohen's d = -7.664). Even in the delayed posttest administered two weeks following the intervention, the mean score remained high (M = 74.31), demonstrating robust medium-term language retention. This

progress was not only statistically significant, but also constant, as evidenced by classroom observations, reflective diaries, and in-depth interviews.

Students displayed significant levels of emotional and cognitive engagement throughout the learning process. Meme analysis and production activities not only encouraged active engagement, but also facilitated identity expression, cultural interpretation, and personal meaning-making, all of which are strongly related to their daily social behaviours in digital media. These findings are consistent with the concepts of Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT), which emphasises learners' identities, experiences, and sociocultural origins as the foundation for inclusive and effective learning. In this environment, memes served as digital social discourse that connected academic language to students' actual realities, acting not only as visual aids but also as tools for identity negotiation and self-expression.

The pedagogical implications of these findings are essential for the development of language teaching methodologies in the digital age. First, EFL teachers are encouraged to incorporate culturally relevant digital representations that are connected with their students' social contexts as part of a multimodal and contextual learning strategy. Second, instructional designs that incorporate meaning-making activities, such as meme generation assignments, are helpful in encouraging language internalisation via introspective, creative, and participative routes. Third, teacher education programs must improve media literacy, digital pedagogical competency, and ethical-cultural sensitivity in order to promote responsible use of digital content.

This work contributes to the field of EFL instruction by combining constructivist, multimodal, and sociolinguistic approaches into a cohesive strategy. Meme-based learning has been found to increase academic achievements while also providing an inclusive, reflective, and socially relevant learning environment. This technique is an empowering educational practice within the context of critical pedagogy, since it fosters language awareness, cultural understanding, and places for identity articulation within learning communities.

However, the effectiveness of this strategy is context-dependent. Students' digital literacy skills, the teacher's role as a reflective facilitator, and the careful curation of content are all important aspects in successful implementation. As a result, replicating this technique needs careful attention to institutional characteristics, learner profiles, and local socio-cultural dynamics.

To summarise, the use of memes in EFL vocabulary training is a pedagogically critical and responsive method that combines language, culture, and students' digital identities to provide an authentic, democratic, and meaningful learning experience. This technique represents a new orientation for language education: one that is adaptable, learner-centred, and future-oriented.

Acknowledgement

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