

## Technology and humor: sample lessons to keep English learning functional during pandemic times

*Tecnologia e humor: exemplos de atividades para manter a aprendizagem de inglês funcional em tempos de pandemia*

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Recebido em: 27 de jan. de 2021.  
Aceito em: 04 de out. de 2021.

OLIVEIRA, Vanessa Cristiane Vanzan de. Technology and humor: sample lessons to keep English learning functional during pandemic times. *Entrepalavras*, Fortaleza, v. 11, n. 3, e2236, p. 188-210, set.-dez./2021. DOI: 10.22168/2237-6321-32236.

**Abstract:** One of the possible problems in teaching English in Brazil may be linked to students' lack of interest in online English classes. That demotivation may be linked to irrelevant content and an inadequate approach. When it comes to teenagers, it is known that technology plays a crucial role in their lives; however, some institutions and teachers have not mastered that tool yet. Nowadays, in pandemic times, technology has become essential. The outbreak of the virus has led to a tremendous growth of online teaching platforms. The pandemic of COVID-19 has transformed online teaching from a nice-to-have to a must-have. In light of Sperber and Wilson's Relevance Theory (1996) and recent multimodality studies and pragmatics (YUS, 2018, 2016; FORCEVILLE; CLARK, 2014; KONSTANTINEAS; VLACHOS, 2012, O'KEEFFE; CLANCY; ADOLPHS, 2011), this paper presents a didactic unit designed to provide teenage students (12 year-olds to 15 year-olds) with compelling topics in a relevant way in online classes. Being humor an inherently human trait which covers a whole range of communicative, social and psychological aspects of human behavior, it was used as a means to enhancing students' interest. The

central idea is to suggest tasks designed using humorous internet memes as well as technology; such as platforms and websites. Following the didactic unit, the author received positive feedback from the specific group of learners and noticed overall improvement of students' communicative abilities in the target language.

**Keywords:** Second Language Teaching. Technology-enhanced Language Learning. Humor. Relevance.

**Resumo:** Um dos possíveis problemas para ensinar inglês no Brasil pode estar relacionado à falta de interesse dos alunos nas aulas de inglês on-line. A desmotivação pode estar relacionada a conteúdos irrelevantes e a abordagens inadequadas. Quando falamos sobre adolescentes, sabe-se que a tecnologia desempenha um papel crucial em suas vidas; no entanto, algumas instituições e professores ainda não dominam essa ferramenta. Hoje em dia, em tempos de pandemia, a tecnologia tornou-se essencial. O surto do vírus levou a um grande crescimento das plataformas de ensino. A pandemia da COVID-19 transformou o ensino on-line de desejável para necessário. À luz da Teoria da Relevância de Sperber e Wilson (1996) e outros estudos recentes baseados em questões de multimodalidade e pragmática (YUS, 2018, 2016; FORCEVILLE; CLARK, 2014; KONSTANTINEAS; VLACHOS, 2012; O'KEEFFE; CLANCY; ADOLPHS, 2011), este artigo apresenta uma unidade didática projetada para fornecer a alunos adolescentes (de 12 a 15 anos) tópicos interessantes de uma maneira relevante. Sendo o humor um traço inerentemente humano que cobre uma ampla gama de aspectos comunicativos, sociais e psicológicos do comportamento humano, fez-se uso de discurso de humor como uma forma de aumentar o interesse dos alunos. A ideia central é sugerir tarefas projetadas que englobam memes de humor e tecnologia; assim como plataformas e sites. Ao utilizar a unidade didática, a autora obteve feedback positivo do grupo de alunos e percebeu uma melhora global no desenvolvimento da capacidade comunicativa dos alunos.

**Palavras-chave:** Ensino de Segunda Língua. Aprendizado Aprimorado por Tecnologia. Humor. Relevância.

## Introduction

English teachers in Brazil facing pandemic times have been struggling not only with a new format of teaching – online classes –, but with demotivated and inattentive learners in front of a camera. From a cognitive perspective, scholars have stated that motivated learners are more likely to learn effectively independently of what approach teachers use in class (RICHARDS; RODGERS, 2002; RICHARDS, 2020). Therefore, demotivation and inattentiveness need to be dealt with effectively, especially in this new scenario.

What causes students to be demotivated? According to Relevance Theory (SPERBER; WILSON, 1996), our minds face a range of stimuli; however, we automatically tend to pick out the stimulus that is likely to yield the most cognitive effects for the least processing effort (CLARK, 2013). Considering that and the new scenario of e-learning, this paper presents a didactic unit (henceforth DU) to be delivered to teenage students, with a low level of English proficiency, taking online

English classes. By following the DU, it is expected that students be motivated, so that teachers can overcome the enormous challenges faced nowadays. Furthermore, the tasks aim: to promote communicative practice of the target language; to enhance pragmatic competence – pragmalinguistics<sup>1</sup> and sociopragmatics<sup>2</sup>; to boost students' inferential abilities. To meet our goals, the DU presents the use of technologies, humorous internet memes, equivalence-in-meaning tasks, games, and roleplaying designed for the online learning environment. Students are presented to topics that seem to be worth their cognitive processing effort: internet memes.

The author followed the DU with 10 teenage students in 2020<sup>3</sup>. The DU is going to be presented in a list format; the reader should follow the sequence of tasks. The author presents the main and specific objectives, and, at the end of this paper, remarks and comments about students' performance will be discussed.

### **Theoretical Background**

When it comes to teaching a language, teachers are expected to rely on diverse aspects, which include pragmatic competencies in the target language (LEECH, 1983; THOMAS, 1983). Pragmatic competence involves pragmalinguistics and sociopragmatics. The former refers to knowledge about the many options to perform a pragmatic action, the latter refers to the knowledge of how to select the most appropriate option to achieve a specific communication goal in a specific context (O'KEEFFE; CLANCY; ADOLPHS, 2011). Thus, as we are dealing with language acquisition, a communication theory based on meaning, context, and utterance backs up this study: The Relevance Theory.

Based on Paul Grice's studies, Sperber and Wilson's Relevance Theory (henceforth RT) advocates that human communication is based on an ostensive-inferential model which explains the retrieving of utterances' meanings through a cognitive and inferential process. When an individual produces an ostensive stimulus, it means that they will get the intended attention; the assumption of relevance is created (GRICE, 1975; SPERBER; WILSON, 1996).

<sup>1</sup> Pragmalinguistics refers to the linguistic resources required by speech acts to achieve an intended pragmatic effect (LEECH, 1983).

<sup>2</sup> Sociopragmatics refers to the unique use of language through sociolinguistic elements mostly related to politeness and culture (LEECH, 1983).

<sup>3</sup> More details are addressed in the comments section.

The main idea underlying the Cognitive Principle of Relevance is that our perceptual systems are constantly trying to pick up the stimuli which are bound to be relevant; similarly, our background information is accessed in a relevance-driven way, retrieving relevant information in specific contexts, and our inferential systems are geared to the maximization of the cognitive effects (YUS, 2016, p. 9).

Background information connects with new information to result in cognitive effects. The greater the effect and the lesser the effort, the greater the relevance of an input (an utterance, a memory, an image). The relevance of the cognitive effect guarantees the cost of the processing, which consists of confirming and strengthening an assumption; denying and excluding an existing assumption and inferring, based on existing assumptions, and producing a new conclusion. The cognitive effects reached make difference to ones' representation of the world. Humans' perceptual systems have developed in ways that we tend to notice relevant stimuli around us; however, we cannot control that since it is carried out by specific cognitive systems and sub-systems which function in this way automatically and not under conscious control (WILSON; SPERBER, 2012).

In an attempt to deal with beginning English as a foreign language teenage students' inattentiveness and demotivation in online English classes during pandemic times, the author designed a DU based on one of the RT cognitive principles: humans pay attention to what is relevant and dismiss what is not worth the mental effort (YUS, 2016). Thus, discouraging meaningless activities is the first step to promote significant stimuli and input, and, as a result, achieve the established purpose: improve students' inferential abilities and linguistic competence.

Teachers should have in mind that adaptations need to be made to respect learners' profiles. Many are the pieces of evidence about students' performance being more positive when tasks are challenging, and when they allow interaction if compared to dull and boring activities done in solitude (PARIS; MCNAUGHTON, 2010; CHAPPELL, 2014; RICHARDS, 2020).

Taking into consideration our group of learners, the online environment, and relying on the cognitive concepts of RT, this paper describes a DU with relevant content. To this end, humor plays a crucial role. Humor can be seen as a pedagogical tool to encourage students' collaboration, create friendly and relaxed classroom atmospheres, and develop students' creativity (SENIOR, 2001; GENEVEK; MUSIJCHUK; MUSIICHUK, 2018; RICHARDS, 2020).

Humor processing is even more dependent on the addressee's inferential capacity than other types of non-humorous texts (GOLDNADEL; OLIVEIRA, 2007; YUS, 2016). According to Raskin (1985), the understanding of the sentences depends on the lexicon knowledge and one's knowledge about the world. The author states that the speaker and listener have presupposed, shared comprehensions. Raskin (1985) refers to these cognitive frameworks as scripts which are common sense cognitive structures in the mind. Humor would happen when the scripts are overlapped. The scripts contain the speaker's complete knowledge of the concept, and similar ones may be shared by speakers of the same language. Humor is evoked when a word or phrase at the end of the joke (punchline<sup>4</sup>) causes the audience to shift their understanding from the obvious script to a secondary script.

For Attardo (1994) information in humorous discourse has to be implicit. Otherwise, the humorous effect is destroyed: explaining the punchline may cause the joke not to be humorous. For Jodłowiec (2015), the structure of the joke biases the addressee towards a specific conclusion, but the punchline reveals an unexpected interpretation; new conclusions are drawn. There is a rich cognitive overload since a plethora of assumptions become simultaneously evident in the addressee's mind. However, it does not contradict the founding principle of relevance, nor does humor itself. Humor processing includes predicting and manipulating the inferential methods used in the interpretation of coded input. These strategies are not significantly different from those used when interpreting non-humorous inputs because we are biologically endowed with a single ability to convert schematic stimuli into contextualized interpretations and do not have different cognitive abilities for processing different types of stimuli (YUS, 2016).

Besides the extra effort devoted to the understanding of humorous discourse, humor does not provide the addressee with much information. At this point, one would assume that humor is not worth the extra cognitive effort, since the relevance principle advocates for a balance between effort and effect. However, not only enjoyment in the incongruity-resolution, but also increased solidarity and group bonding are other positive cognitive effects that make humorous discourse understanding worth the processing. Moreover, humor is described as a human trait that covers communicative, social, and psychological aspects of human behavior; therefore, it is connected with culture (YUS, 2016).

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<sup>4</sup> Punchline is a sentence or phrase that concludes a joke; it breaks the addressee's expectation.

If humor is connected with culture, so are memes. Dawkins, in 1976, creates the neologism meme (DAWKINS, 1976).

[...] a noun that conveys the idea of a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation. 'Mimeme' comes from a suitable Greek root, but I want a monosyllable that sounds a bit like 'gene'. I hope my classicist friends will forgive me if I abbreviate mimeme to meme. If it is any consolation, it could alternatively be thought of as being related to 'memory', or to the French word *memê*. It should be pronounced to rhyme with 'cream' (DAWKINS, 1989, p. 192).

Dennett (1999) and Blackmore (2001) assume that memes stand for an act that goes from one person to another in a culture through ideas, symbols, practices, to name a few, which can be transferred from one generation to another through writing, speech, gestures, and rituals.

Your habit of driving on the left or right, eating beans on toast... You would do none of these things if someone else hadn't done them.... Imitation, unlike other forms of learning, is a kind of copying or replication. Other animals can be masters of learning, as when squirrels remember their hundreds of food stores.... Only by imitation are the fruits of the learning passed on from one animal to the next and humans are unrivalled when it comes to copying one another (BLACKMORE, 1999, p. 41).

Nowadays, we have internet memes, which stand for any idea or concept expressed in any kind of media and rapidly diffused by participants (DYNEL, 2016). When ideas or concepts are considered relatable, and usually humorous, by a great number of people, they are given the status of internet memes. They are a product of digital culture, and, therefore, many characteristics of this way of communication can be observed in this modality.

Internet memes can be defined as words or phrases, images, comics and videos, containing pop culture references in certain cases, which enter the public sphere of the Internet. They spread rapidly, they transform and depending on their success they are forgotten or become established as parts of that public sphere (KONSTANTINEAS; VLACHOS, 2012, p. 3).

As stated by the authors (KONSTANTINEAS; VLACHOS, 2012), besides the linguistic entry internet memes also present images or pictures. In terms of RT, according to Sperber and Wilson's theory, explicatures<sup>5</sup> are propositions. If they are propositions, they are the ones to be considered as

<sup>5</sup> Explicatures are ideas explicitly or literally communicated through sentences. They are the development of logical forms encoded by a sentence uttered (SPERBER; WILSON, 1996).

true or false, thus pictures would never have explicatures because they do not have a logical form. However, to Forceville and Clark (2014), pictures do generate explicatures as well as implicatures<sup>6</sup>. As pictures provide elements to reference attribution, enrichment, and disambiguation, they lead to conclusions. Therefore, pictures are not only an essential part of internet memes, but they also provide explicatures and implicatures that are part of the inferential processing.

The maker of a picture tries to be optimally relevant to her envisaged audience. Whether the picture is an illustration in a book, a political cartoon, an advertisement, or a hand-drawn map, its maker wants to attract the audience's attention (ostensive communication), convey information and/or attitudes (informative intention) and thus to have an effect on this audience at no unnecessary effort (communicative intention) (FORCEVILLE; CLARK, 2014, p. 9).

Language and culture are linked in many levels, especially when we look at formulaic language, idioms, etc. Students with a low level of English proficiency usually do not know idioms. However, they create and/or share internet memes on social media platforms.

Having this in mind, the author will present and describe tasks designed for teenagers in a beginning English proficiency level. The activities are incorporated in a DU (HURTADO-ALBIR, 2005; DELGADO, 2012), which is based on tasks that foster students' autonomy, peer collaboration and responsibility for their own learning. The tasks intend to portray students' interests and background knowledge and experience, consisting of topics somehow related to their everyday lives. When students understand that what is being presented is worth their attention, they experience an ostensive stimulus, which is crucial for putting together different pieces of information in order to make appropriate inferences in the target language. In the next section, the reader will find the DU.

### **Didactic Unit**

Having success in teaching English during pandemic times is definitely not an easy task. Teachers need to revise approaches and techniques, set realistic objectives, and leave their comfort zone, so as to meet the established goals. With the purpose of addressing these difficulties, the author presents the DU.

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<sup>6</sup> Implicatures are any proposition communicated by an utterance that is not an explicature. They suggest or imply an idea that is not literally communicated. Implicatures are drawn based on information that is not part of the proposition (SPERBER; WILSON, 1996).

The outbreak of the virus has led to a tremendous growth of online teaching platforms. Teachers have, since then, replaced several aspects of the traditional foreign language classes with updated ones, such as collaborative platforms, social media, online games, etc. Students, especially the ones born in technological era, might benefit from methodologies that embrace the use of technology. Nonetheless, it is common to read and hear teachers' complaints about how demotivated and inattentive students are in front of their cameras/computers.

The DU contains information about general and specific objectives, material used, time length, and the tasks. It presents internet memes, since they are part of students' lives and, thus, potentially meaningful. Moreover, it contains lessons that form a sequence of graded activities and skills, quite similar to the structure of a project-based lesson. To facilitate reading of the DU, the tasks are presented in order (task 1, task 2, etc.) as in a list, and comments follow them subsequently. At the end of the DU, the reader will find some theoretical and critical comments on the choice of tasks made.

**General objectives:** to provide students with opportunities to practice equivalence-in-meaning tasks of internet memes; to analyze meaning within contextualization; to compare English and Portuguese; to enhance students' inferential abilities in order to improve their abilities in English.

**Specific objectives:** to practice expressing opinions about memes and their relation to students' lives; to use creativity to create posters; to roleplay.

**Teaching point:** vocabulary related to the internet (chunks, collocations, idioms, abbreviations).

**Material used:** online board, data show, Canva website, Instagram.

**Time:** five classes, about one and a half hours each.

**Evaluation:** the teacher evaluates students' progress throughout the classes based on their individual differences. If necessary, feedback after classes can be provided by one-on-one conference. The teacher can create a test on Google forms<sup>7</sup> to check students' overall understanding of the topics presented.

<sup>7</sup> Google Forms is a survey administration software included as part of the free Google Docs Editors suite offered by Google.



First Class

**General objectives:** to improve students' communicative collaboration in class; to promote interaction.

**Specific objectives:** students should be able to understand and summarize the meanings of memes and internet memes in English.

**Teaching point:** the definition of memes and internet meme.

**Material used:** online board, data show.

**Time:** one hour.

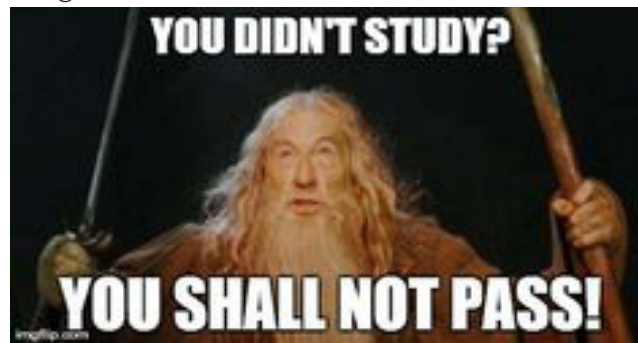
Task 1: ask students if they know the meaning of memes. Present students with a definition of the term meme and internet meme. Ask two volunteers to read them out loud.

Definition of meme: a noun that conveys the idea of a unit of cultural transmission. It should be pronounced to rhyme with "cream".

Definition of internet meme: any idea or concept expressed in any kind of media and rapidly diffused by participants.

Show students a slide presentation with some memes about teachers' life. Image 1 shows an example of a meme related to teachers' life and image 2 presents an example for the topic students' life.

Image 1 - Internet meme "The Lord of the Rings"



Source: [encurtador.com.br/qDLMW](http://encurtador.com.br/qDLMW) (2021).

Image 2 – Internet meme “Your grades”

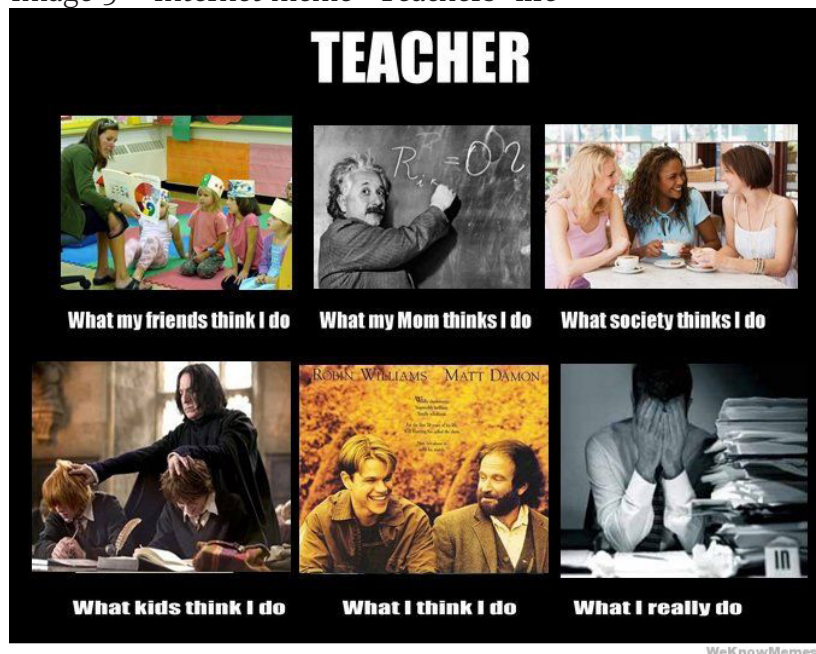
When you think ur doing good in school so far and then see ur grades



Source: [encurtador.com.br/qBKM2](http://encurtador.com.br/qBKM2) (2021).

Image 3 shows another example of a meme related to the topic teachers' life.

Image 3 – Internet meme “Teachers’ life”



Source: [encurtador.com.br/iEHU9](http://encurtador.com.br/iEHU9) (2021).

After that, check the doubts as a group (if necessary, provide students with the corresponding translation of each meme). Show students some funny memes about students' life.

Task 2: check if they can relate to the images/situations presented. Students are encouraged to give their opinions about it in English or in Portuguese (English will be the preferred language, but Portuguese can be accepted, too). In case students do not feel comfortable speaking in English, the teacher should stimulate it.

The first class aims to promote interaction among students, who are invited to make comments about the memes presented by relating them to their lives and school. The internet memes are supposed to trigger students' inferential thinking.

### Second Class

**General objectives:** to promote group collaboration; to promote creativity.

**Specific objectives:** students should learn how to create dialogues in English to express their opinions about their experiences as English learners.

**Teaching point:** the creation of dialogues in English in a creative way.

**Material used:** online board, data show.

**Time:** one hour.

Task 3: ask students to explain with their own words what memes and internet memes are.

Task 4: students, in groups<sup>8</sup>, receive some images of memes, and they have to create sentences or dialogues to express their opinions about their routine as English learners.

Elicit some of students' ideas on the online board. The teacher should encourage students' use of idioms and phrases related to topic.

### Third Class

**General objectives:** to promote group collaboration; to enhance students' understating on the relationship between language and culture.

**Specific objectives:** students should learn idioms related to their experience as English learners.

**Teaching point:** idioms.

**Material used:** online board, data show, Canva website, Instagram, imgflip.

**Time:** one and a half hours.

<sup>8</sup> The Zoom platform allows you to split meetings in separate sessions. The meeting host can choose to split the participants of the meeting into these separate sessions automatically or manually. The host can switch between sessions at any time.

Task 5: students, in small groups, create and share their sentences or dialogues in English.

Task 6: students create posters on Canva<sup>9</sup> website, using internet memes images and the sentences or dialogues they had created as a group.

Task 7: students present their posters to the whole group and, after that, they post their posters on an Instagram<sup>10</sup> account created specifically for the group of students.

Task 8: students give their opinions about the posters created in class. Each group posts comments on the posts.

Students in groups are given some internet memes to create sentences/dialogues to express their routine with school/classes. After that, students have to come up with ideas related to the same topic, school, to create their own memes. As a last activity, some of students' ideas are written on the online board to motivate the whole group. Image 5, known as "Chapolin Sincero", shows an example of one of the memes students would be provided to create sentences or dialogues about the topic proposed.

Students are encouraged to use the website imgflip<sup>11</sup>, which is a platform where users are able to find templates or images and create and share internet memes. However, the teacher can select specific memes, as the one in 5.

Image 5 - Internet meme "Chapolin Sincero"



Source: [encurtador.com.br/fhq7](https://encurtador.com.br/fhq7) (2021).

<sup>9</sup> The Canva is a graphic design platform used to create social media graphics, presentations, posters, documents and other visual content. Canva's website is <https://www.canva.com/>

<sup>10</sup> Instagram is a social media platform that emphasizes photo and video sharing via its mobile app.

<sup>11</sup> Website <https://imgflip.com/>

Students should work on their dialogues/sentences in English; equivalence-in-meaning exercises are accepted, since the students in the group are beginners.

Image 6 – Internet meme “Rindo de Nervoso”



Source: author's (2020).

In order to illustrate that, image 6 shows the meme “Rindo de Nervoso”. It contains phrases that should be translated into English. A possible translation for “faz uma piada ruim” is “makes a bad joke”. However, “does a bad joke” is not accepted. For “puxa-saco” there are a few options; i) flatterer, ii) sycophant, iii) toady, iv) bootlicker, etc. However, “pull-sack student”, which is a literal translation, is not accepted. This is an excellent opportunity to highlight the relationship between language and culture. Students have to decide on the best equivalent so the meme keeps its humorous constraints in the target language as well. For “puxa-saco”, the teacher indicates which of the possible equivalents is the most appropriate for the meme genre. Considering the example, (iv) would be a better option than (ii), for instance.

After their presentations, students post their posters on the Instagram account of the group. To finish, students share opinions about classmates' memes and posters by reflecting on the messages the groups intended to present, activating assumptions students might not have had before. As it somehow activates their background knowledge, becoming relevant, they would make an effort and infer the message. Comments on the Instagram account would be stimulated. The teacher could provide hashtags, for instance, if the group posts the poster on a Wednesday or on a Friday, they could use #humpday<sup>12</sup> or #Friyay<sup>13</sup>.

<sup>12</sup> According to the merriam-webster online dictionary, Hump day is Wednesday regarded as the middle point of the workweek.

<sup>13</sup> Friyay is a connection of the word Friday and YAY. It is very popular on Instagram.

### Fourth Class

**General objectives:** to promote creativity and group collaboration; to enhance students' inferential capacity.

**Specific objectives:** students should be able to translate and adapt ideas expressed through idioms and sentences into the target language.

**Teaching point:** translation and adaptation of ideas into the target language.

**Material used:** online board, data show.

**Time:** one and a half hours.

Divide the class into two separate sessions. Send the same internet meme (in English) to one student in each of the groups. Ask that student to write a translation (in Portuguese) in the chat box. Teacher copies and pastes the translation to the other students; one student in each group.

Task 9: the students who received the translation (in Portuguese) translate the sentence into English; from now on students do not receive the images anymore. They send their versions to the teacher individually in the chat box.

Task 10: teacher copies and pastes students' translations (in English) to other two students; one student in each group. Other two students translate the sentence back from English to Portuguese.

Task 11: Finally, the teacher shows everyone the original internet meme without any lexical entry. Teacher elicits the last translation version created on the online board. Students will think about the sentences (in Portuguese) and create a final English version (there will be two versions) as a group. The first students who received the meme are the judges. They are allowed to make 3 comments on their peers' versions. The first group to finish and send the sentence in the chat box in a satisfactory<sup>14</sup> version gets points. Check the sentences on the board after both groups have finished. Continue the same way with other memes.

### Fifth Class

**General objectives:** to promote communicative practice; to promote group collaboration and creativity.

<sup>14</sup> By satisfactory, the author means not a literal version, but a version that shows pragmatic comprehension ability; understanding of implied meaning.

**Specific objectives:** students should use the idioms and chunks of language studied in a satisfactory way.

**Teaching point:** idioms in use.

**Material used:** online board, Instagram.

**Time:** one and a half hours.

Students in groups receive more internet memes.

Task 12: they discuss the meaning of the memes; check their doubts as a group.

Task 13: they create a short dialogue to present to the whole group. It is supposed to be a play. Students should record themselves and post their videos on the Instagram account.

Wrap-up task: after presenting the play to the whole group, students present the image of the internet meme they received. Other students give their opinions about the group's play. They should post online comments as well.

As for the discussion of the lesson plan shown above (DU), the author will make use of a few concepts of RT (SPERBER; WILSON, 1996).

### *Results and discussion*

As this DU was used by the author, we shall consider that comments and results are based on the author's perceptions as an English teacher and linguist researcher with the specified group of learners. The internet memes were chosen based on students' comments and observations on memes previously shared with the teacher.

The DU was used in 2020. The group of teenagers was composed of 10 students, 7 female and 3 male students. Four of them were 13 years old, four were 14 years old, and two of them were 12 years old. Having taken a previous online placement test (Oxford English Level test)<sup>15</sup>, students' proficiency level was considered A2<sup>16</sup> according to CEFR<sup>17</sup>. The classes were taught via the Zoom platform.

Overall, the author noticed that:

<sup>15</sup> Available at <https://www.oxfordonlineenglish.com/english-level-test/listening>

<sup>16</sup> Students were interviewed. They answered questions that A2 students are supposed to be able to answer.

<sup>17</sup> The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment is a guideline used to describe achievements of learners of foreign languages The reference levels are A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, C2.

- i) students were motivated to learn more about memes and internet memes;
- ii) they were more participative;
- iii) they felt enthusiastic about creating their own memes in English;
- iv) they would share their own points of view in English;
- v) they were more creative;
- vi) all of them felt more confident in speaking before the group.

Students' feedback was extremely positive. They asked for more tasks with internet memes. All students had their cameras and microphones on during English classes. They were collaborative with each other as well. In the beginning, a few students were not feeling confident enough to share their assumptions or make comments in English. However, after the first class, they overcame their shyness and felt more confident to share their ideas.

The relevance concept is based on the relation between effort and effect. By producing an ostensive stimulus, the communicator encourages the audience to presume that the message is relevant enough to be worth processing (JODŁOWIEC, 2015). As new pieces of information are somehow connected to background information, the process results in positive cognitive effects. The relevance of a positive cognitive effect guarantees the cost of the processing. Therefore, taking that into account, the tasks suggested intend to portray students' interests and background experience, consisting of a theme that is likely to be of their interest, using humorous discourse as a strategy to create the presumption of relevance. In the case of the DU, the themes memes and school life are very important because they bring the student closer to the English classes.

Despite the fact that we are addressing online classes, and students are physically distant, it is possible and necessary to come up with activities that allow socializing. What is more, there is evidence about students' performances being more positive when the activities provided allow for interaction (PARIS; MCNAUGHTON, 2010; CHAPPELL, 2014).

In the DU, students had the opportunity to improve their linguistic overall competence by being exposed to diverse ways of dealing with what is presented to them. When they did not understand



memes, they tried to infer their meanings by sharing their thoughts and asking questions.

Teenagers are not only familiar with social media platforms and internet memes, but they are also users of Twitter, Facebook, Tiktok, etc. Considering the specific group of learners and the RT principals, the DU was designed to provide learners with proper topics in a relevant approach - using humorous internet memes that also work as ostensive stimuli. The idea is that students connect it with their background knowledge, thus creating a relevant input when the process of activating assumptions would be activated by the new information (the linguistic stimulus) to obtain effects that would justify the effort.

With the new information, which is the unfamiliar English words/phrases, students would make an effort to achieve utterance comprehension and profit from positive cognitive effect: the understanding of the linguistic stimulus and the humorous effect. Image 6 is an example:

Image 6 – Internet meme “Your grades”

When you think ur doing good in school so far and then see ur grades



Source: [encurtador.com.br/qBKM2](http://encurtador.com.br/qBKM2) (2021).

The images may provide them with evidence for the inferential processing. As there is a sequence, it is possible to infer that in the first image the person is happy and posing for a photo at the beach. However, in the second image the same person was swept out to the sea by a wave. Even if students do not know the phrases, the sequence of images allows the reader to establish coherence, which helps in the inferential processing of conclusions.

In terms of explicature and implicature of the internet meme:

- (1) Lexical entry: When u think ur doing good in school so far and then see ur grades.
- (2) Two images: in the first, the person is happy and posing for a photo at the beach. In the second, the same person is swept out to the sea by a wave.

$S_1$ : one may be wrong about their grades.

$S_2$ : there is a sequence.

$S_3$ : the sequence of images shows us that in the second image the person is not as comfortable or happy as in the first.

$S_4$ : one may think that their grades are better than they actually are before they see them.

Deduction: students usually think they are doing better at school than they actually do. Students become aware of that fact when they see their grades.

( $S_1$ ) is an explicature and ( $S_2$ ), ( $S_3$ ) and ( $S_4$ ) are implicatures.

As internet memes are replicated and/or altered, and then transmitted to other users, it is possible that students have seen and shared the specific memes before. “Inferring memes is context-dependent in the determination of the relationship between text and image yielding explicatures and implicatures” (YUS, 2018, p. 6). The role of images is, besides functioning as ostensive stimuli, to provide useful clues for the inferential stages.

Another example is the internet meme “Chapolin Sincero” which represents what people think, but do not dare to say. This specific meme was chosen because one of the students had previously mentioned and shared a “Chapolin Sincero” meme with the whole group, so the author thought it could be relevant. Thus, with that internet meme, students can come up with sentences/dialogues about something that people usually avoid talking about under the class topic.

Schaffner (1998) states that translation tasks may increase vocabulary, improve knowledge about language organization and consolidate grammar structures that were previously presented in class. In addition, as students have to find out ways to keep the intended message in English, they deal with sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic aspects as well. These aspects of the language should be addressed since the beginning of the learning process of the target language. Learners should get in touch with activities that focus on

diversified characteristics such as politeness, appropriateness, and cultural information. However, according to Vallenga (2004), there is significant lack of information about these topics on textbooks. Corroborating Vallenga (2004), O’Keeffe, Clancy and Adolphs (2011) state that if the textbooks offer specific input on meaning in context and on speakers’ intentions, pragmatic inaccuracies could be prevented from happening, even if students are low-proficiency learners.

These aspects are the ones addressed during the game proposed in the fourth class. Students have the opportunity to work with form and meaning, since they have to translate the memes into Portuguese and into English, working with critical thinking about differences and similarities between both languages and pragmatic appropriateness. It corroborates the beliefs stated by Cook (2010) and Laviosa (2014), who propose a methodology that should reconnect traditional approaches with communicative and functional ones, in order to promote linguistic competence by means of equivalence-in-meaning tasks.

In the last class of DU, students get some images of internet memes without any linguistic entry. Based on the images, they should talk about images’ possible interpretations. They use the same images to create a short play to be performed. The play should be related to the internet meme(s) received and the topic of the DU, school, study routine, needs and perceptions as students. Students would have some time to come up with ideas and present them to the teacher. As homework assignment, they should record their lines and post their videos on the Instagram account of the group. After the presentations, the whole group give their opinions about the play, and post comments on the Instagram account. The play is supposed to motivate students to create and simulate dialogues as well as motivate other students to check their understanding of what is presented.

### **Final remarks**

With the new scenario imposed by the pandemic, online English classes have become the norm. The COVID-19 outbreak has led to a tremendous growth of online teaching, which is a must-have nowadays. However, complaints about demotivated and inattentive students are a frequently discussed topic. By relying on the authors who address the teaching of a foreign language and translation tasks (LAVIOSA, 2014; DELGADO, 2012; COOK, 2010; RICHARDS;

RODGERS, 2002), RT (SPERBER; WILSON, 1996), recent studies linking multimodality and relevance (YUS, 2018; FORCEVILLE; CLARK, 2014; YUS, 2011; GOLDNADEL; OLIVEIRA, 2007), pragmatics (O'KEEFFE; CLANCY; ADOLPHS, 2011; VALLENGA, 2004; LEECH, 1983; YULE, 1996), and considering that many studies concerning teaching pragmatic features are usually designed for high-proficiency learners, the author designed an example of a DU in an attempt to solve these problems English teachers in Brazil may be facing nowadays in online classes.

As stated, students' performances are more positive when tasks are interesting, challenging, and when they allow for interaction. Even though students are physically distant, many online platforms and websites can be used to make interaction possible. Therefore, to meet our goals, a DU was designed using humor as a means to enhance students' interest. The central idea was to suggest tasks designed with humorous internet memes as well as technology.

Some of the benefits observed were: (i) relevant content, the topic connects with their everyday lives; (ii) familiar aspects of informal spoken and online language are addressed; (iii) creative online classroom atmosphere; (iv) dynamic equivalence-in-meaning tasks; (v) enriching exchange of opinions; (vi) gradual confidence in speaking before an audience; (vii) overall improvement of students' communicative skills; (viii) students' awareness about the relationship between language and culture; (ix) students' improvement of their skills in drawing conclusions.

The idea of designing the DU presented above is to offer students potentially meaningful classes, and we expect that motivation arises when teachers use this lesson plan, adapted to their specific groups' interests.

Becoming aware of the issues to be improved as an English teacher in Brazil during pandemic times is a tremendous challenge. Teachers need to find ways to promote interaction and boost students' confidence; showing them that it is possible to learn English and that online English classes do not need to be demotivating. It is also important for language teachers to be aware of how their attitude and approach can positively influence their students' perception and understanding of the learning process itself.

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