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The Pedagogy of Multiliteracy and Multimodality through Memes

Gina B. Ugalingan [a, *], Gene Marie L. Flores [a], Leif Andrew B. Garinto [a], Ma. Joahna Mante-Estacio [a]

[a] De La Salle University-Manila, Philippines

Abstract

While the rise in social media use has facilitated the instantaneous exchange of ideas and has allowed for safe interaction during a global pandemic, this reliance on digital spaces has also led to a proliferation of misinformation and disinformation. This then calls for teachers to help students become digitally literate citizens who are able to read, analyze, and communicate critically. In light of this, many language education classrooms have incorporated lessons and assessments to raise students' social awareness and critical thinking. This pilot study looks into the multimodal output of university students in a general education English class to explore the application of knowledge processes of multiliteracies – experiencing, conceptualizing, analyzing, and applying (Kalantzis, Cope, 2013). A classroom activity that used memes was prepared by the researchers in order to teach logical fallacies in argumentation. It is argued that using memes to teach logical fallacies in argumentation encourages students to engage with multimodal resources. Upon careful analysis of gathered data, the following results are forwarded: memes generated by students are reflective of the multiliteracies employed in their conceptualization and execution, and the interaction between multiliteracies and multimodalities is instrumental in teaching and promoting critical thinking. Thus, this study reinforces that the multiliteracies framework is an aid for students to become critical thinkers.

Keywords: media literacy, media culture, multiliteracies, multimodal communication, digital literacy, memes.

1. Introduction

Studies on the use of digital media and communication technologies in language education have grown exponentially in recent years (Liang, Lim, 2020; Mills, 2010). While the use of technology in the classroom is not an entirely new concept, the emergence of social media and the growing use of it in the classroom unlocks greater pedagogical potentials for both teachers and students (Valdez, 2012; Ugalingan et al., 2020). The increasing use of social media in the classroom highlights the need for critical literacies to be incorporated into the pedagogical practices, in particular the ability of teachers to harness the potential of digital media and social networking in classroom instruction (Frechette, 2013; Mills, 2010). Different internet materials that were not available in the past are now part of the language communication online. Internet language would evolve and the initial internet situations he enumerated have already increased and improved to different versions, features and platforms (Crystal, 2006). At present, internet language has paved the way to different linguistic creativity (i.e., emoticons, gifs, memes, hashtags) that are not present in the traditional speaking and writing medium of communication. So, the trend of the pedagogical

* Corresponding author
E-mail addresses: gina.ugalingan@dlsu.edu.ph (G. Ugalingan)

practice to incorporate these online materials in classroom learning is a response to empower digital literate citizens online.

Digital developments in the 21st century have allowed the internet to share content rapidly from person to person, leading to the creation of a media environment suitable for Internet memes (Borszei, 2013; Wells, 2017). Defined as "a piece of culture, typically a joke, which gains influence through online transmission" (Davison, 2012: 122), memes are generated in multiple formats (including still images and video) and the relative ease of creating one enables people to quickly share them around websites (Borszei, 2013; Wells, 2017). The accessibility of memes, attributed to ease of production and reliance on popular culture, meant that there is an increasing use of it in the classroom particularly to gauge the ability of students to be both creative and critical learners (Navera et al., 2019; Wells, 2017).

In the Philippines, where 76 million people use the internet, all of whom with social media accounts (CNN..., 2019; Lalu, 2020), educators have since adapted to using digital media and social networking in classroom instruction more so during the COVID-19 pandemic that shifted face-to-face learning to online distance learning (Toquero, Talidong, 2020; Tria, 2020). However, the accessibility of the internet and its ability to quickly disseminate information have also resulted in the proliferation of misinformation in the form of fake news, memes, and other multimodal resources (Bradshaw, Howard, 2017; Navera et al., 2019). As such, the current online environment has since become a challenge for educators to equip their students with skills in critical inquiry due to the prevalence of post-factual sources of information (Mante-Estacio, Ugalingan, 2018; Navera et al., 2019). Educating the students to develop digital literacy is now a priority to be skilled as they communicate online. Providing classroom activities and space for this skill has been evident in the current curriculum. In particular, introducing students to logical fallacies through classroom activities emphasizes how they can apply critical thinking in various contexts inside and outside of the classroom (Mante-Estacio et al., 2019; Navera, et al., 2019).

This study aims to address this challenge by using the concept of multiliteracies, particularly the four components of multiliteracy pedagogy, in a classroom activity that uses memes in order to teach logical fallacies in argumentation. Because the multiliteracies approach to pedagogy emphasizes that "language and other modes of meaning are dynamic representational resources" that are constantly remade by users for various cultural purposes (The New..., 1996: 64), the researchers believe that this approach is applicable in teaching argumentation through the creation of memes since they are familiar with these online materials.

2. Materials and methods

The pilot study focused on the memes produced by the participants as part of their requirement in their Purposive Communication class, an English core subject offered to undergraduate students in the Philippines. The memes were a reaction to logical fallacies identified in some references used by students in writing their problem-solution essays. To further document and describe the process and student experience of meme-making, they were tasked to provide journal entries. For this preliminary study, three sample memes were chosen to discuss the components of multiliteracy.

3. Discussion

Now, more than ever, the role of media education in developing the multiliteracy skills of learners is not only apt but one of the cores to ensure effective learning. The pedagogy of using different forms of materials, aside from plain text, like TV and movie clips (Bonsignori, 2018; Currie, Kelly, 2021; O'Halloran et al., 2017; Rothoni, 2017; Zhang et al., 2019) in teaching English in ESP classes, has supported the literature that the use of multimodal resources provide the authentic model of how communication takes place in real life. For instance in Hongkong, it is reported that media education pedagogy is advocated in early childhood education programs (Cheung, 2017). While in Russia, a study of 30 university students showed that foreign language communicative competence is achieved through media education focusing on the main components like media knowledge, media abilities and media attitudes (Khlyzova, 2019).

The advocacy of media literacy in the teaching pedagogy of integrating online media materials in classroom learning has been revolutionized. With the ease and access of technology, the integration of relevant online materials like memes in language learning has become indispensable (Dominguez Romero, Bobkina, 2021; Grundlingh, 2017). Students are found to be

more engaging and participative when they are given the opportunity to share what they believe or feel. A recent study (Cannon et al., 2020) supports that learners have rights to express their identity as they are part of the digital environment.

In addition, utilizing relevant online materials to promote critical social literacy found in media also allows students to have a safe space to voice their opinions (Currie, Kelly, 2021). Learners engage in social-related issues while learning specific language skills like providing evidence and facts as they participate in classroom discussions.

Also, with the current dilemma of misinformation, another skill that students hone when media materials are incorporated in the classroom discussion is their ability to think critically (O'Halloran et al., 2017). Materials found in media provide a suitable environment for learners to realize their ability to recognize the differences of facts and opinion. For example, a study during Covid-19 pandemic supports that media literacy is crucial to enable students to solve problems (Lebid, Shevchenko, 2020).

Using memes to teach logical fallacies in argumentation encourages students to engage with multimodal resources. Instead of the traditional writing or speaking activities, multiliteracy pedagogy encourages multimodality in learning, because the approach understands that learners use different modes (written, oral, audio, visual, spatial, tactile, and gestural) in order to create meaning (Kalantzis, Cope, 2013). This provides more opportunities for students to be acquainted with different learning materials to improve their communication skills. To facilitate this meaning-making process, the multiliteracies approach uses four knowledge processes: experiencing, conceptualizing, analyzing, and applying (Kalantzis, Cope, 2013; The New..., 1996). As such, by using memes as a teaching tool, students are able to use different modalities and their own cultural contexts in order to learn about logical fallacies in argumentation, which they can use to navigate through an increasingly post-truth society.

4. Results

To achieve the purpose of the study, each of the four knowledge processes of the multiliteracy pedagogy will be discussed vis-a-vis specific aspects of the students' memes. By doing so, the researchers are highlighting the individual knowledge process, but they also acknowledge that the four components are interrelated rather than discrete processes. This way, the components of the pedagogy practice are made clearer to the readers.

Experiencing

For learning to be more meaningful and effective, students must be able to make connections between concepts learned and concepts lived. The students are well-versed with the online environment that they casually use memes in their online communication. Teachers need to tap students' interests like the digital environment as a bridge to introduce classroom concepts. This is in line with the knowledge process of experiencing, which highlights the importance of context in learning (Cope, Kalantzis, 2009). When the students were tasked to evaluate materials to find erroneous arguments, the knowledge and understanding of logical fallacies learned in the classroom were then connected and applied into various texts. As much of lived experiences also occur in the digital space, digital content such as memes became the ideal application of lived concepts.

One specific student output highlighting the process of experiencing is a meme regarding the logical fallacies surrounding mental health. The student, Luna, identified the fallacy of false cause and applied this to religious sentiment regarding depression and suicide. In recent years, as the number of suicide cases rises, the discussion on how to protect one's mental health has gained attention. Both experts and non-experts express their two cents on the matter. Among these, there are individuals who claim that those who attempt to end their lives do not have a strong sense of faith.

In the Philippines, a country where religion is given emphasis, it is not unusual to know that decision-making among many Filipinos is guided by their religion. However, oftentimes, even the causes and solutions to problems are explained through the lens of religion, which leads to fallacious statements with religious undertones.

Luna presented her observation and experiences on how some Filipinos associate suicide attempts with a lack of faith in God. In her journal, she explained her view on the matter as she referred to an online news article about a person who was diagnosed with a borderline obsessive-compulsive personality disorder. This person felt dejected after receiving negative comments from some people who claim that the disorder is due to the individual's lack of faith in God. Citing scientific notions learned in school, Luna explained that mental disorders are medical and

psychological problems that are not matters of faith and prayer. Through her meme, she also expressed her frustration over people who are closed-minded on this matter and attempted to discuss why committing suicide does not mean losing contact with God. Luna utilized a meme that would best capture her understanding of why such responses were flawed. She presented herself as the girl assisting the other girl in the wheelchair who symbolizes those who believe the fallacy. According to her, *"I want to just throw them off because of the frustration I feel about their response."*

This reaction is perfectly depicted in the meme based on one of the scenes from the animated series *Heidi, Girl of the Alps*. In the first frame, Heidi is seen pushing Clara on her wheelchair while she shares with her the diagnosis regarding the mental health of an individual named Maria. Clara then responds that Maria's condition is due to her lack of faith in God and that this can be solved if she prays. The second frame visualizes the strong reaction of the student as represented by Heidi's act of throwing Clara off the cliff.

From this, the intermingling between classroom experience (logical fallacies) and social ideologies (regarding mental health) reinforces the idea of "pedagogical weaving" (Cope, Kalantzis, 2009: 185) between concepts learned and concepts lived.

Conceptualizing

Conceptualizing involves active student participation in understanding and developing ideas, and then transforming them into something concrete. Learners piece concepts together into frameworks and models, and in this case, multimodal outputs in the form of memes.

One output exhibiting this knowledge process is Michelle's meme regarding education during the pandemic. Due to the threat of the coronavirus, the educational sector had to make crucial decisions regarding the conduct of classes. While others suggested that online distance learning (ODL) should be the main mode of instruction, some suggested the implementation of 'academic freeze' in which classes will be paused indefinitely while the Philippines deals with the containment of the virus. This idea was nominated when numerous concerns regarding the proposed ODL, including but not limited to the poor internet connection, insufficient financial resources to procure the necessary technology and gadgets and pay for tuition, and lack of sufficient knowledge about online teaching pedagogy, were pointed out. As a response to those who opposed the shift to online learning, Department of Education (DepEd) Secretary Leonor Briones said that schools could not really be 100 % ready, and should people wait for that time to come, the situation would worsen (Ramos, 2020). She added that "education cannot wait" so everyone should accept that ODL would be the mode of instruction (Magsino, 2020).

Upon assessing Secretary Briones' statements, Michelle concluded that they are guilty of the either/or fallacy. She explained in her journal entry that "it is wrong to think that there are only two ways to tackle the issue." As a student who is directly affected by this issue, she mentioned in her journal that she faced the dilemma of either continuing her education despite the financial issues or risk being delayed by at least one school year. This point was clearly illustrated through different modalities present in her generated meme. She made use of the "Daily Struggle" template where a visibly confused and nervous man, who represents the Filipino students as per her caption, has to choose one button out of the two contradicting options.

For her, the real issue is how education can proceed amidst the pandemic. Her concept of the problem involved the realization that it is not about whether learning should continue during the pandemic, but what adjustments are needed to make ODL effective. She acknowledged that the educational system is far from ready, but in considering viable choices, DepEd should have "more options than these two oversimplified outcomes and their options should consider [the student's] background, [family] income and preparedness for the coming school year." Michelle's meme illustrates the knowledge process of conceptualization as she formed an understanding of both the ideas of academic freeze and ODL. She was able to connect them and realize the possible effects of being presented with merely two options.

Analyzing

Analyzing, that is the ability to evaluate perspectives, interests, and motives, is considered a quality of powerful learning (Cope, Kalantzis, 2009). When a learner is able to look through his own and other people's interests, and motives, the processing goes back and forth from his previous experiences to new ones, and from prior to recent conceptualizations.

The K12 educational program in the Philippines aims to enable Filipinos to learn skills that will meet local and global standards (Manaog, 2020). Before this, the Philippines is one of only

three countries in the world with a 10-year basic education program (Gripal, 2016; Rappler, 2013). However, the expenses to be incurred in adding two years and the unpreparedness of the schools to teach the new subjects among other issues made some stakeholders question whether the expected good results outweigh the problems the K12 program would bring.

With this background, the third meme attempted to correct a fallacy that the reform merely provides 'cheap labor' for the country's economic oligarchs and makes education for the poor complicated to attain. The statement is in reference to the program's goal of making learners job-ready after finishing Senior High School (Grade 12).

As someone who is a product of the K12 program, Caleb argued that the reform has good intentions to make Filipino students competitive in the global job market. It can be inferred that his analysis is grounded in his own experiences which could have been positive; that is why he expressed a positive concept of the program. The fallacy was found in a news article quoting a student leader who is against the program. The student leader claimed that the K12 program is exploiting the poor Filipinos who could not afford the expenses of the additional two years. In his journal, Caleb explained that this idea is not supported by data but is "a mere use of polemics". This is another proof that Caleb indeed analyzed the issue not just from a single perspective, but considered seeing it from a different lens before making a decision. Lastly, to further show balance in his analysis, he acknowledged that the government has not been implementing the program efficiently despite its commendable goals. In fact, his analysis pointed to this as the real problem.

One meme, used the Crowder "Change My Mind" meme. In this image, a man is situated in a public space where he sits comfortably, appears confident with his views, and awaits to challenge anyone to prove he is wrong. Also, the two main arguments which are written on the white material perfectly conveys the entire message of the meme. Although the first argument or the upper message could have been shortened to a phrase, it still expresses his correction of the logical fallacy. Also, "*Change my mind*" written in bold, capital letters ensures readers will not miss it, and indicates that the student is challenging anyone to make him reconsider his stand.

Applying

The report on the three components of multiliteracy pedagogy so far shows that the students are aware of various socio-political issues. This last component focuses on how the various logical fallacies were identified, analyzed, and corrected by the students through the memes. Doing so, it could be seen how multiliteracy was applied creatively through the memes that will complete the analysis of the memes using a multiliteracy and multimodality framework.

In their journals, the students reported the different steps that they undertook to produce the required outputs. These steps may be grouped into three major stages. The first one involved the different acts they did to identify a logical fallacy. For some, this was difficult because they had to read their references several times to identify fallacies. Moreover, since their references were mostly scholarly journals, finding fallacies was not that easy. What some of them did was to resort to their online news articles where they found fallacies from personalities' statements. Their next step was to identify the type of fallacy. This step is likewise challenging for some because it entailed reviewing the various types of fallacies discussed in class.

The second stage involved generating the memes. The students first searched for available memes on the web. From these, they choose the ones which they thought can be modified best to fit their intended meme message. There were students who also researched the background of the memes to check if they were related to their intended message. The next step was to compose the captions of the memes. The students were aware that it should be catchy and direct to the point. For some, they had to edit their statement a number of times until they were satisfied. There were those who tried to combine some Filipino and English words to see if the message became clearer and more natural. There were those who wrote that even the type of font mattered, so they tried several kinds before choosing what they thought was the best. The last thing they did was to check if the picture and the statement matched. There were students who evaluated if the words and pictures pointed to the message they wanted to put across which was meant to correct the fallacy.

The third category is evaluating whether the output qualifies as a meme. For the students, a meme should contain humor or sarcasm to attract the attention of the readers. Some reported that they asked the opinion of other people (siblings, friends) if their meme indeed delivered their intended message, while there were those who evaluated the meme on their own.

All the students expressed their enjoyment and challenge in doing the meme activity. According to some, creating the meme was a good follow-up to the essay writing activity where the

concept of logical fallacies was introduced to them. Furthermore, there were those who believe that preparing the meme challenged their creativity as the task involved visualizing how the serious message could be presented in a humorous or sarcastic manner using visuals. However, there are students who expressed that they were unable to do their best as they were only given a short time to do the meme.

5. Conclusion

Overall, the results show that the concepts of multiliteracy and multimodality are important in teaching logical fallacies. Moreover, the convergence of the two allowed the meme-creation activity to become real, challenging, and creative for the learners. Indeed, as Luke et al. (2004, in Cope, Kalantzis, 2009) have explained, the multiliteracy-multimodality framework weaves different pedagogical actions which can target many skills and knowledge for the students to practice and develop. It can be seen from the learners' memes that the four criteria (experiencing, conceptualizing, analyzing, and applying) are truly related to one another as one builds upon the previous stage. This means when a learner spends enough time to tap his or her schema, a well-thought of concept is most likely to be created which is then used to analyze the topic that ends up with applying the learned concept creatively.

For the next phase of this pilot study, some learnings and suggestions will be implemented to improve the procedure and gather relevant results. First, students should be given more time for them to undergo the process to produce a relevant and creative output. Since the initial study only allotted asynchronous sessions to accomplish the meme output, the next phase will designate synchronous sessions to monitor the progress and guide the students if they have questions or issues that need to be addressed. Second, guided worksheets on different stages of the meme output will also be useful as students report what they have accomplished with the corresponding dates. These data might provide critical evidence on students' challenges that are critical in the research results. Third is to provide additional activity of presenting their meme outputs in the class to receive feedback from the other learners. This is a productive activity as students learn from each other aside from the teacher's feedback. This activity will also allow students to incorporate possible suggestions on how to improve their work before final submission. Last is to provide a pre– and post– self-report questionnaire about their perception towards multimodal outputs. This will provide the quantitative data about students' opinion in using memes as classroom outputs. Possible correlations on related variables will provide more information. The results of this questionnaire will also guide teachers in the direction of future classroom activities.

As teachers continue to search for creative activities and tasks to engage learners, this study supports the utilization of online materials that are fun and familiar to the experiences of the learners. Since students are considered to be digital natives, they will realize that internet materials like memes have a space in their classroom learning. This is an opportunity to appreciate that what they learn inside the classroom is relevant and applicable in their real life. Students' active participation and engagement in their learning process should be valued so that their learning becomes more meaningful and relevant. The ultimate goal is for our students to develop awareness that they have the critical skills to examine, analyze and even question the information that they read, watch or hear online. Students' digital literacy should be prioritized as they become responsible digital citizens.

With the success in using the framework to teach logical fallacies, the researchers suggest that the framework be used in teaching other related topics/lessons such as how to express counter-arguments and refutations logically and clearly and personalizing learned concepts.

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