ESZTERHÁZY KÁROLY KATOLIKUS EGYETEM

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THE MEME AS A POTENTIAL
INSTRUMENT OF LANGUAGE PEDAGOGY
IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF RUSSIAN SPEAKING SKILLS
OF SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS

Theses of doctoral (Ph.D.) dissertation

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1. Topic and structure of the dissertation

The aim of this doctoral dissertation is to examine how structured internet meme sequences can be used in foreign language teaching. The dissertation uses internet memes, referred to in the narrower professional field as image macros, to teach Russian conjugation with the aim of reducing the language anxiety of high school students learning Russian, a highly inflected second foreign language, for three hours a week (the basic number of hours specified by the NAT (Hungarian National Curriculum)), and with the aim of facilitate the acquisition of morphological elements and foreign language speech production.

The research questions and hypotheses are examined from the perspective of the following main areas: memetics; grammar as linguistic content to be conveyed; teaching speaking skills; criteria-based, standardized output regulations in secondary school second foreign language teaching; human factors in the study; learning theory characteristics of Generation Z and Generation Alpha.

The research questions are structured around three main lines of thought. To what extent do the easy-to-understand, structured meme tasks in the research facilitate the consolidation of correct grammar usage and the establishment and immediate retrieval of lexical units within a given topic? How can structured meme sequences be used to develop the elaboration of a given topic by facilitating speech production? Can teaching material structured with the given memes reduce students' language anxiety and increase their affective motivation?

The main hypotheses of the research are as follows:

1. We assume that students consider the acquisition of grammatical material learned through memes to be a motivating, supplementary learning aid that makes studying easier. We expect that structured, informal, humorous teaching material based on shared background knowledge will create a positive emotional learning environment, resulting in more effective lexical and grammatical storage and retrieval.

2. We assume that students' language stress and anxiety will be significantly reduced by the end of the learning process.

3. We also assume that the meme-assisted teaching material will facilitate the development of oral productive skills.

The dissertation is divided into eight chapters. After the introduction, we focus on the recipients of the tasks, the subjects of our investigation, the students, the children, as they are the primary components of the educational work carried out in public education. Our review of

the scientific literature covers their generational and learning theory characteristics. There are two reasons why students are targeted right at the beginning of the dissertation. On the one hand, thanks to the school- and public education-oriented approach of the Doctoral Program of Education Science at Eszterházy Károly Catholic University, the starting point of the dissertation is the exploration of the pedagogical situation offered by everyday teaching practice, and the primary protagonists of this are the students. On the other hand, as a reflection on this line of thought, we consider it appropriate to refer to *Otrel-Cass* (2024), who argues that an essential factor in pedagogical work is how students perceive this work, and that new pedagogical ideas of encouragement and care are needed to reshape existing methods and education. How can students meet the prescribed requirements through innovative memes, by evaluating their reflections on the learning process and on their own learning, thereby making pedagogical cooperation emphatic, two-way and dialogical? The third chapter examines the possibilities for teaching and creating grammar and oral production, which are the focus of the task sets, based on the output requirements of public education and foreign language teaching, such as the NAT framework. In the fourth chapter, we seek to explain how, in our dissertation, students can connect with the prescribed curriculum in a contemporary, 21st-century, innovative way through internet memes. We discuss the theoretical background of memetics, the characteristics of image macros, and their potential applicability in language teaching. The fifth chapter discusses the intercultural aspects of the use of memes in language teaching, illustrated with examples in Hungarian, Russian and English. The sixth and seventh chapters of the dissertation deal with the motivation and process of our research and provide a detailed description of the tasks, followed by a descriptive statistical, quantitative, and qualitative analysis of the results, answering our hypotheses. The summary chapter provides further incentives for possible future research.

The main value of the dissertation lies in the presentation of a new didactic method. In 2012, according to Merriam-Webster's dictionary, the word "meme" ranked 10th in the "Word of the year" competition, and its popularity has remained unbroken ever since, both at the user level and in scientific publications. Internet memes form the basis of an increasing number of publications in both higher and secondary education, and foreign language teaching is also increasingly drawing on their motivational potential. However, to our knowledge, apart from a few earlier publications by the author, there have been few publications on structured didactic teaching materials from a language teaching perspective, especially in relation to the teaching of Russian as a foreign language. The research, therefore, is not only relevant thanks to the genre of the language teaching tool used, but also to the fact that the population studied consists

of students who belong to the secondary school age group, who experience low exposure intensity and a relatively low number of teaching hours at school. To quote *Oszipova* (2018), a language teacher and textbook author, only three lessons per week pose an extraordinary pedagogical and language learning challenge in terms of developing speaking skills. We believe that the researcher's personal involvement is also one of the values of the research, as it is rooted in her own experiences and she attempts to find answers to real problems that exist in everyday pedagogical practice. The students were given a series of tasks that they could complete independently, in which they evaluated each other using student autonomy, thereby increasing language learners' self-reflection and learning awareness. Another value of the research is that it attempts to help overburdened colleagues working in the already Hungarian public education system by providing immediately applicable mini-lessons and lesson plans that they can use to make their lessons more colorful and more practice-oriented.

The expected results of the research include five sets of tasks for speech development that can be used in public education effectively. These tasks are rooted in 21st-century pop culture, and their effectiveness will be verified by the measurements included in the research. Qualitative and quantitative studies are expected to provide new information and concrete examples to support the validity of the term didactic memes', as well as to suggest ideas for further research.

2. Theoretical background of the research

The structure of the thesis and the order of the chapters reflect the author's learner-centered (*Hedge,* 2005) pedagogical approach: starting from the audience and inspirers of the teaching process, i.e., the students, it moves through the description of the criteria-oriented teaching material and pedagogical goals to the pedagogical experiment tool, the testing of a reform-oriented method, and then to the study of the results intended to support the hypotheses of the experiment.

2.1. The inspiration behind the exercises – language learners

Drawing upon some pedagogical and psychological literature (*Aczél,* 2023; *Pléh,* 2003, 2024; *Tari,* 2023; *Lannert,* 2023; *Gyarmathy,* 2011) and research (WHO 2024; Our Europe, Our Rights, Our Future 2021; ELTE 2002-2022), we summarize the affective, cognitive, and learning theory background characteristics of the current high school age group. The 'affective-effective' concept is the basic guiding principle of the tested task series, therefore we emphasize the role of emotions and socio-emotional well-being in the learning process (*Sahovszkij,* 2009;

Pentón Herrera and *Martinez-Alba,* 2021; *Mercer* and *Dörnyei,* 2021; *Pekrun* and *Linnenbrink-Garcia,* 2022). We examine the relationship between IQ and EQ and the aspects relevant to our paper using four theoretical frameworks: Gardner's seven-component model of intelligence (*Lebovits* and *Szmejkál,* 2013, pp. 13-14), Seligman and Adler's PERMA model (*Fehér* and *Fodor,* 2020), *Goleman*'s description of emotional intelligence (*Goleman,* 1995), and the personal energy management paradigm defined by Schwartz-Loehr (*Lebovits* and *Szmejkál,* 2013). Humor and the pedagogy of unexpected effects (*Miltner,* 2018; *Kanasina,* 2017a, 2017c; *Sztyepicsov,* 2023; *Medgyes,* 2002; *Harshavardhan, Wilson* and *Kumar,* 2019), which enable a combination of education and entertainment, a kind of edutainment, in the classroom are also examined.

Among the characteristics of learning theory, it is worth discussing in detail selective perception and biographical synthesis, autopoiesis and structural coupling, recursivity and circularity, viability, reframing, difference perception and tolerance, perturbation, as well as the concepts of reflexive learning in relation to language and second-order observation (*Feketéné,* 2002; *Rajnai,* 2025; *Singajev,* 2018; *Németh,* 2006; *Csoma,* 2006; *Cserné,* 2006), embedded in the context of constructive pedagogy (*Nahalka,* 1997). In our study, not only are efficiency (*Csoma,* 2006) and results expressed in numerical data important factors, but learning based on emotional foundations and student well-being, as assessed by the students themselves, are also crucial in terms of reducing language anxiety.

2.2. Content and skill elements of the research, the target level of L3

After discussing the recipients of the teaching-learning process, the criteria-oriented elements of the process, the most important content and skill elements of the curriculum, grammar as the linguistic content to be conveyed, the development of foreign language speaking skills, and the content regulators of these processes are addressed. In Hungary, the content regulators for the teaching of Russian as a second foreign language in secondary schools are currently as follows: Act CXC of 2011 on National Public Education; Government Decree 5/2020. (I. 31.) on the publication, introduction, and application of the National Core Curriculum, amending Government Decree 110/2012. (VI. 4.); Government Decree 110/2012. (VI. 4.) on the publication, introduction, and application of the National Core Curriculum; Government Decree 100/1997. (VI. 13.) on the regulation of the school-leaving examination; Ministry of Education Decree 40/2002. (V.24.) on the detailed requirements of the school-leaving (Matura) examination; the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) approved by the Council of Europe.

"Grammar is a pervasive phenomenon" (*Batstone,* 1994, p. 9), claims *Batstone,* whose idea is echoed by *Serianni* (2024) and *Scsukin* (2020).

It is not only present everywhere, but also at every stage and at every level of the language learning process. It also influences the design of curricula and lesson plans, as well as everyday classroom practice. Without grammar, language would be a chaotic collection of words and, to our understanding, if language learners viewed it as a helpful framework or a structure-giving, reliable guide, they would perceive it as a blessing rather than a curse. The task sheets created for this research are guided by *Scsukin*'s application-based grammar, and their aim is to ensure "the rapid acquisition of language structures used in communicative situations of practical significance" (*Scsukin,* 2020. p. 141) in such a way that learners "discover grammatical rules and meanings for themselves" (*Hall* and *Shepheard,* 1995, p. 8).

"Actual language proficiency is identified with speaking skills and their high level (*умение говорить*) (*Scsukin,* 2020, p. 253)," writes *Scsukin.* "When a skill becomes applicable in speech production, it becomes a speaking skill (*речевое умение*)" (*Scsukin,* 2020, p. 121). Language communication and linguistic expression are essential conditions for the development of grammatical skills and their integration into speech. At the same time, the development of speech skills is inconceivable without the development of both grammar and vocabulary, and thus grammar and vocabulary are closely intertwined. In order to facilitate speech production and oral text composition skills, the tasks used in the research also teach and practice lexical elements, the framework of which – as well as the criteria for grammatical elements and oral expressions – was determined in the spirit of the 2020 Hungarian Core Curriculum. Accordingly, the output requirement is CEFR level A2, which corresponds to the base level (*базовый уровень*) of the Russian State Standard (*Государственный Стандарт*): the selection of the oral topics and of the lexical units for the meme tasks is based on the Lexical Minimum (*лексический минимум*) for the Basic level (corresponding to CEFR level A2) of the Russian state regulations.

2.3. Memes and language pedagogy

Richard Dawkins introduced the concept of memes in 1976, using the analogy between memes and genes. According to his view, cultural transmission is analogous to genetic transmission, and the memes floating in the soup of human culture carry the idea of being a unit of cultural transmission, or imitation. He believes that, like genes, memes move from body to body, from brain to brain, and if they are successful, they multiply (*Dawkins,* 2005). A review of the literature on the history of memetics (*Blackmore,* 2001; *Dennett,* 1998; *Shifman,* 2013;

Miltner, 2018; *Veszelszki,* 2013; *Gleick,* 2013) and questions regarding the definition of memes and internet memes in English, Hungarian, and Russian literature (*Lankshear* and *Knobel,* 2018; *Davison,* 2012; *Börzsei,* 2013; *Veszelszki,* 2013; *Glazkova,* 2019; *Agafonova,* 2022; *Molnár, Szűts* and *Törteli,* 2017; *Izgarseva,* 2020; *Kanasina,* 2017b, 2017c; *Shifman,* 2013) can help us attempt to develop our own language teaching meme application tailored-made to active language learners. Both in lay and scientific usage, there is an overlap in the use of the terms meme and image macro. In our paper, we will use the terms meme, image macro, internet meme and digital construction to refer to multimodal, humorous content spread on the internet, consisting of one (or more) visual element(s) and one (or more) textual element(s) (captions) appearing on them. This functional application, guided by the principle of meaningful tasks, can range from the playful learning and teaching of linguistic content and skills to the incorporation of target language cultural elements, lacunae, or realia (untranslatable expressions) (*Sahverdova,* 2024; *Alefienko* and *Korina,* 2011). (*Gee,* 2004; *Zinovjeva,* 2013, 2015; *Kanasina,* 2016) The so-called affinity space can also be realized through the use of memes in both offline and online learning organization methods.

Language learning, like communication, is multisensory in nature (*Bárdos,* 2000); the visual nature of memes may accelerate and simplify the perception and processing of information, compensate for the lack of nonverbal communicative elements, and represent the emotive elements of the communicative situation and the text caption (*Golovanova* and *Csaszovszkij,* 2015), thus facilitating emotional engagement with the subject matter and hopefully increasing the effectiveness of learning. In memes, the textual part is typically short and concise; in those with double or triple captions, the upper part describes the situation, while the lower part functions as the punchline of a joke (*Zenner* and *Geeraerst,* 2018). The most popular memes are those that convey the maximum amount of information and require minimal time to process and understand. *Solohov* (2019, p. 174) treats the text part of memes as a "separate entity," based on the assumption that in the cultural context where they have meaning, they can be interpreted even without the image(s). If we consider them to be fixed structures, idiomatic, independent texts with precedential value, then – although they are more prone to change (*Segev, Nissenbaum, Stolero* and *Shifman,* 2015) – they can still be freely used for language development: the visual part can evoke in the learner the appropriate wording of a film excerpt they have already seen or a book they have already read in their native language or in English (the language associated with the reading/viewing experience), and from this background knowledge, the (no longer completely) unknown subtitles can be deciphered. In summary, we quote Afanasova, who points out that (*Afanaszova,* 2016) subtitles do indeed

contain simple texts and sentences that are easy for schoolchildren to understand, with colloquial, often slang expressions that, due to their interesting and motivating effect, can make words, expressions, and grammatical forms easy (or easier) to remember.

Petrucco (2022) considers memes to be playful educational tools, didactic mediators (*mediatore didattico*), and *Yevgenyevna* speaks directly about linguistic memes. (These are "memes that have linguistic meaning and their own systematic variations in syntax, lexicon, and spelling" (*Yevgenyevna,* 2022, p. 2).) In our thesis, we propose introducing the concept of pedagogical memes because public education deals not only with didactics but also with pedagogy, as the National Public Education Act states. Memes are not only carriers of visual or textual information, but also represent moral, aesthetic, and educational values through their combined meaning. They explicitly represent eternal human values and therefore, as intercultural media content, can also be tools for secondary acculturation (*Bárdos,* 2002).

3. Research Methodology

The research is based on real-life educational situations arising from the author's personal experience as a language teacher and pedagogical problems encountered in everyday teaching, and it involves developing and testing a model for solving such problems. The effectiveness of this model is assessed through students' self-reflections, through the marking of their productive skills, and their teachers' reflections. We must emphasize that we do not wish to measure objective effectiveness or objective student achievement, but rather to describe the effectiveness and achievement perceived by the respondents, as well as their state of well-being in the classroom based on their self-reflection, using quantitative and qualitative methods.

After a relatively dormant period of around twenty to thirty years following the change of regime, Russian has once again become an optional and popular second foreign language subject in Hungarian public education, with a wider reach than in previous years. However, the reality is that students usually learn this highly inflected language as a second foreign language (L3) during their secondary school studies, after English being their first foreign language (L2) in primary school, and this, in our experience, creates a new pedagogical and methodological situation compared to when learners used to encountered Russian as a first foreign language (L2). We could also say that a set of morphological elements that is easier to learn and requires less memorization naturally provides a stronger sense of linguistic success in the constant approximation of the language learning process, and this matters a lot to a generation that has grown up in a world of instant results and immediate feedback (Steigervald, 2023; *Tari,* 2023). However, the vast majority of students begin learning an inflected language (Germanic,

Romance or Slavic languages) at the age of 14 as their L3, so they have to contend with the fact that even approaching their level of proficiency in English requires more time and energy (including memorization and rote learning) than they are used to, most likely with delayed linguistic success as compared to English language achievement.

The guiding principle of this research is also the everyday pedagogical situation that has been experienced for years, namely how and in what ways it would be possible to help students learning Russian and increase the effectiveness of pedagogical processes (not only in joint reflections but also based on the results of criterion-oriented evaluation). In addition, efforts should be made to increase students' self-efficacy by ensuring that, in contrast to the relatively rapid development of productive skills experienced in English, they are able to correctly assess their Russian language performance and its development in the context of peer and self-assessment. It should be noted that although Hungarian students speak a similarly complex, agglutinative native language, they perceive the learning of a foreign language and their native language as two distinct processes. As scientific literature confirms, when learning a second foreign language, language learners do not compare it with the characteristics and learning mechanisms of their mother tongue (L1), but with their first foreign language (L2) (*Huszthy* and *Éry,* 2015).

In the practical part of the research, after testing a set of linguistically structured meme tasks in secondary schools, both qualitative and quantitative tools were used to answer the research questions and hypotheses. The sampling was access-based and expert-based: a population that was special in several respects participated in the study (secondary school students in Hungary who were learning Russian as L3 following non-specialized curricula and were not native Russian speakers).

After working through the tasks in class with minimal guidance from teachers, we collected qualitative and quantitative data using Google questionnaires that we had created ourselves, and which were then processed using SPSS software. In order to achieve triangulation, participating teachers answered structured written interview questions during the process.

In the summary table of the empirical part of the dissertation, the first column contains a description of the research tool, that is the task series. The second column presents the recipients of the study, the students, and the third column presents the activities of the teachers participating in the research. These three columns form a space-time unit through the completion of the task series.

Task sets	Follow-up questionnaires for students	Structured written interview for teachers during the course
- self-made, structured task sheets focusing on Russian grammar, using memes known from pop culture universes that are currently very popular among secondary school students - grammatical topics are linked to A2-level lexical knowledge related to them in terms of teaching methodology - transforming grammatical and lexical elements into speech	-Google-based questionnaires developed in-house: short, thematic questionnaires after each task sheet and a summary-type final questionnaire - Focus: students reflecting upon their own language performance: grammatical and lexical retrieval, depth of content; reflecting on memes. Main topics: A) Emotions evoked in students by the tasks; B) Memorization of grammatical elements; C) Speech production; D) Knowledge of memes and their adaptability when learning L3	- proprietary Google-based structured written interview - Focus: A) the strengths of the task sheets; B) the limitations, the potential deficiencies of the task sheets and elements that may be improved; C) noteworthy phenomena observed in the linguistic behavior of the students.

Summary table of the empirical part of the dissertation (author's own source)

In our research, we created and used a series of instantly applicable, so-called "instant bag" tasks (depending on the group, one task sheet can be completed in one or two lessons), following the psychological and cognitive tendencies typical of today's high school students. The task sheets do not seek to teach complete grammar or oral topics, but they merely help students achieve a certain level of verbal production at level A2. They do not aim to teach complete grammatical or verbal topics, but merely to help students achieve a certain level of verbal production at A2 level by practicing the essential grammatical elements and lexical content of the topic. A total of five sets of tasks were prepared, which the students worked on individually, in pairs, or in groups of three. Being aware of the heavy workload of secondary school teachers, we wished to create worksheets that also provide significant opportunities for horizontal learning among students, allowing teachers to view the task sheets as ready-made tools that facilitate their work as well. Each set of tasks consists of the following parts: a title slide with the grammatical material and mini-topic, as well as a prompt question to the topic; meme examples with the given grammatical items in Russian and Hungarian; a presentation of the grammatical rule; lexical exercises necessary for the given oral production, aided by visual stimuli (pairing exercises) and solutions; oral production with the help of the visuality of memes created by the author. We expected students to deliver a monologue of least ten sentences independently on the topic defined by the task sheet, by working in pairs and by evaluating each other on the attached score sheet; afterwards, students were invited to complete the three-question online questionnaire at the end of the task. (We expect students to say 10 sentences coherently because this is also the requirement of the Base Level of the Russian State Standard). We believe that this type of oral expression forms a transition in the typology of oral exams between thematic monologues (we expect participants to use vocabulary related to a given topic) and independent topic development generated by visual stimuli (they could use the author's own memes and visual stimuli) (*Bárdos,* 2025).

Oral performance was assessed by students observing and evaluating each other (peer assessment), and this has two advantages. One is that it aims to strengthen students' autonomy and responsibility as language learners and their active attention to each other, all of which are soft skills necessary in the 21st century. Another positive aspect of the scoring sheet is the additive scoring system (*Underhill,* 1987. p. 101), which is not widely used in Hungarian public education. In this system, we do not deduct points from a maximum score for mistakes, but reward every correct or even partially acceptable element, and give extra points for elements that are in excess of the expectations. The emphasis was on the correctness of the new grammatical element, but every additional sentence-expanding element was also worth a point.

Our goal with this evaluation system was to reduce students' fear of speaking task or oral exams. After completing each set of tasks, the students filled out our own Google questionnaires (five short questionnaires and one final questionnaire), and the teachers provided brief written feedback in a Google questionnaire that could be opened multiple times.

4. Results

A total of 110 students participated in the research. Of these, 54 completed the final questionnaire, so their data, as well as the data from the sample of participants who completed the short thematic questionnaires and scoring sheets, can be seen here. The sample consists of 12 tenth-graders, 23 eleventh-graders, and 19 twelfth-graders, with a total gender distribution of 24 women and 30 men.

The native language of all 54 members of the sample is Hungarian. Apart from Hungarian, only one student had knowledge of another language, Turkish.

(During the research, we also formulated hypotheses and research questions, which we marked with the letters H and Q and numbers.)

4.1. Descriptive statistics

Q1-H1: In the demographic section, we were curious about the students' goals with regard to the Russian language. We had assumed that the students were planning to be active in online games and social media, and this assumption was confirmed by a total of 25 respondents. The goal of "using the language at work," which was indicated by 10 respondents, just missed the imaginary podium. In light of statistics showing a nationwide decline in the number of language exam takers in Hungary, it is particularly encouraging that many students plan to take their high school final exams and language exams (at levels A2, B1, B2, C2) in Russian, and that 13% of respondents would like to continue their Russian language studies at university.

Q2-H2: In the meme knowledge panel of the final questionnaire, we were wanted to find out on which platforms participants most often encounter memes. Based on our previous research and our experience working with high school students, we had supposed that TikTok or Instagram would rank first, while Viber and Facebook would rank last.

Our assumption was only partially confirmed. The first three categories stand out: TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook. The least frequently used platforms are Discord, Viber, and Pinterest. Our assumption was confirmed as far as TikTok, Instagram, and Viber, are concerned but,

surprisingly, Pinterest, which is often referenced in online and print media (and is one of the most common results for meme searches), ranks near the bottom. Although we had believed that Facebook was more of a platform for elderly users, it still made it onto the podium. It is noteworthy and extremely surprising for an observer accustomed to the Gutenberg galaxy that none of the students surveyed encounter memes in print. This confirms the literature's description of memes as typically spreading online. At the same time, we hypothesize that the representation of memes in printed teaching materials and print media may indeed (still) seem negligible.

Q3-H3: The next question on the meme panel focused on the form in which participants encounter memes. We were curious to know whether they were passive, receptive users or already prosumers, i.e., those who actively create and share memes. We had assumed that there would be more receptive users than active agents among the participants. Our assumption proved to be correct, as 64.81% read and view memes on some platform, while 35.19% participate in meme culture as active agents, i.e., they share or even create them (35 and 19 respondents, respectively).

Q4-Q5: We examined whether positive feelings were present during the meme-based lessons and to what extent they were present (Q4), as well as the extent of negative feelings or their absence (Q5). The categories of feelings were based on the literature (*Fehér* and *Fodor,* 2020; *Petrucco,* 2022; *Molnár* and *Péter-Szarka*, 2017; *Fodor, Kovács* and *Somkövi*, 2018) and on our own previous survey questionnaires.

Q4: The questionnaires gave similar results about seven positive characteristics: the meme tasks were motivating, humorous, made it easier for them to learn the material, relieved tension, gave them a sense of connection with others, allowed them to be creative, and enabled them to learn from their peers. There is no significant difference in the frequency of 'yes' answers, but the top three categories with the most 'yes' answers are as follows: "they made it easier for me to learn the material" (N = 46), "they relieved tension" (N = 45), and "they were motivating" (N = 43). It should be noted that the scores for the other positive attributes are also quite high, ranging from 37 to 41 yes answers. These are extremely significant results from the perspective of our research, as the primary objectives of the tasks were to facilitate the acquisition of the curriculum and relieve tension and language anxiety, and this was achieved in the given sample.

Q5: Our research question regarding the negative characteristics of the meme-based tasks was to identify the factors that could potentially prevent these tasks from achieving their goals as facilitators of improving learning and speaking skills. Participants could rate the following six negative characteristics with yes/no binary answers: fatigue, the participant did not understand the meme, the task was too easy, the task was too difficult, the task set was boring, it was not useful for their Russian language development. The most prominent category in terms of 'yes' answers was "I did not understand the meme" (N = 22), followed by "fatigue" and "the task was too easy" with 15 yes answers each. The results confirm our expectations, as global and local background knowledge is essential for understanding memes, so this result was in line with our expectations. Similarly, the feeling that the task was too easy was also predictable to a certain extent, as the participating students were at quite different stages and levels of language learning, so for some of them (N = 15) either the task or the expected oral production goal did not present the level of difficulty they had expected. This is related to the feeling that the tasks were too difficult, which was indicated by 9 respondents. However, these two data points also show that the majority of respondents found the tasks to be of medium difficulty, which means that they roughly reflect a normal bell-curve distribution.

From the perspective of our research, it is particularly significant that only 16.7% of respondents found the tasks boring, and only 9.3% stated that the tasks were not useful for their Russian language development. These are extremely encouraging findings, as they mean that such a high number of learners believe that these exercises improve their language development more effectively than if they had not encountered them.

H4: We would like to focus on students' feelings of fatigue. Based on data from our previous research, we assumed that the 'fatigue' category would finish at the top of the imaginary podium, and as task writers, we hoped that negative traits would generally receive low scores. We include this condition among the measured values because it appeared with a prominent value in our previous research (*Kocsis*, 2024a, 2024b, 2024d) on the samples at that time. Our expectation was confirmed; although 'fatigue' now "only" ranks second, we maintain our suggestion that this fact may call for further research.

4.2. Quantitative results

We formulated several hypotheses that we wanted to verify with calculations.

H5: We assumed – based on our years of experience – that boys understand memes better and know more memes than girls.

To test this hypothesis, we used a chi-square test, which showed that this effect is significant ($\chi2(1) = 5.54$, $p < 0.05$). Accordingly, our hypothesis was confirmed, as the understanding of memes is not independent of gender; more precisely, in this sample, boys did indeed understand memes to a greater extent. This is an interesting highlight of our research, as none of our previous studies have been able to confirm this pedagogic intuition of ours.

H6: We wanted to test the relationship between the gender of respondents and memes with another experiment. We thought that during the research there would be gender differences between respondents in terms of how they encounter internet memes, namely we believed that we would see a shift towards boys actively using memes (creating and sharing, prosumers), and that this would also affect their understanding of memes.

Our hypothesis was partially confirmed, as we found a higher proportion of creators among boys, while the number of those who encounter memes "passively" is higher among both genders. However, we did not find a significant correlation between gender, the two categories of meme usage habits, and meme comprehension ($\chi2(1) = 1.97$, $p > 0.05$).

H7: We assumed that those who see and read memes are more likely to have problems deciphering the memes in the task than those who actively participate in the meme universe, by not only seeing them but also by sharing and even creating them. However, the hypothesis testing procedure for this was not significant ($\chi2(1) = 0.63$, $p > 0.05$). Based on this, we cannot claim that active use of memes helps to improve their understanding in a given context. Consequently, other background variables should be sought to explain why some people understand the memes in the task series better than their peers.

H8: We supposed that there is a positive correlation between students' end-of-year grades and their self-reported success in completing the meme tasks. It was expected that better grades (5, outstanding 5 with a praise) will be associated with a higher level of feeling success in completing the tasks. The grade variable contains the students' final grades in Russian from the last completed school year, which can be measured on a scale of 2 to 6, with a value of 6 given

to those who received a commendable 5 at the end of the school year (there were no failing grades). The median and mode of the sample in terms of grades is 4, with a standard deviation of 1.08. The sense of success based on self-assessment was measured on a 10-point Likert scale after each completed meme task.

These two variables are ordinal, so we used Spearman's correlation coefficient to test the hypothesis. We found a moderate, positive, significant correlation between students' grades and their feeling of success in the present tense, first person singular exercise series ($r_s(37) = 0.43$, $p < 0.05$), and the success rate of the compound future tense exercise series ($r_s(37) = 0.43$, $p < 0.05$). This means that students with better end-of-schoolyear grades felt more successful in their performance in the above two sets of exercises, which we consider a very good result, as the median success values range between 7 and 7.5–8 on large sample sizes of N=44 and N=76.

Q6-H9: We were curious to see how much the feeling of motivation was related to how successful the participants felt they were in completing the tasks.

Our assumption was that students who found the meme tasks motivating would rate themselves as more successful in completing the individual tests. However, we did not find a significant difference in the subjectively assessed level of success in any of the tasks based on whether the students found the meme tasks motivating or not (present tense third person singular: $U = 83$, $Z = -0.53$, $p > 0.05$; present tense first person singular: $U = 89$, $Z = -0.86$, $p > 0.05$; past tense: $U = 143$, $Z = -1.11$, $p > 0.05$; imperative mood: $U = 65$, $Z = -1.36$, $p > 0.05$; future tense: $U = 105$, $Z = -0.67$, $p > 0.05$).

Let us now turn to our findings related to the questionnaires and scoring sheets for the small, individual task sets.

Q7: We examined the participants' responses to the following questions on a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 10 on a total of five bar charts; in other words, we looked for the medians of the responses to the short, thematic questionnaires related to each set of meme tasks:

1. Please indicate how successful you felt you were in completing the meme task. (Sense of success)

2. Please indicate how much this meme task made it easier for you to apply [the given grammar]. (Grammar)

3. Please indicate how much this meme task made it easier for you to practice the related vocabulary! (Vocabulary)

4. Please indicate how much this meme task series helped you explain this topic (at A2 level, at least 10 sentences)! (Explanation)

The median values for all four aspects of each set of tasks range from 7 to 7.5 to 8, indicating that participants rate the positive impact of the tasks on Russian language learning quite high.

Q8: The numerical results expressed in scores provide interesting information for language teachers. The data show that most respondents completed the set of exercises practicing the compound future tense (N = 70), followed by the set of exercises practicing the present tense first person singular (N = 67), and then the present tense third person singular (N = 65). Sixty people completed the past tense exercises, while the least number, 53 people, completed the imperative exercises. The highest average score was achieved in the future tense explanation section (M = 40.91), and the lowest in the imperative vocabulary section (M = 17.57). The high scores are extremely encouraging for the task designer teacher, especially the grammar scores, which range from 18.14 to 19.61 on average, as from this we can conclude that, on average, the acquisition, application and reproduction of the linguistic content to be conveyed has been successful.

H10: We assumed that a higher proportion of students would score 6 points or above on the Likert scale in the evaluation questionnaire with regard to the grammar and expression components than below 6 points. This means that they believe that the meme-based exercises helped them in these areas of language learning more than if they had not received this type of learning aid.

Based on the results of the two most frequently completed short questionnaires (N = 76 and N = 69) (8 being the median Likert scale value in each case), we can say that we were able to confirm our hypothesis.

H11: We assumed that those who scored higher on the grammar component in each task series felt more successful in completing the meme task series.

We found a significant correlation in one of the five meme task series (rs(12) = 0.71, p = 0.05). The score achieved on the "Present tense, third person singular – Jobs" task series positively predicts the result of the related success assessment. In other words, students who felt more successful in this task series also received higher scores as a result.

H12: We assumed that those who achieved higher scores in the topic explanation component of each task series would find the meme task series more helpful in this area.

The hypothesis testing correlation calculation showed a slight, positive, significant correlation in the case of the present tense first-person-focused meme task series ($rs(55) = 0.35$, $p < 0.05$). For the other topics, we found no significant correlation between the variable pairs (present third person singular: $rs(50) = 0.26$, $p > 0.05$; past tense: $rs(46) = 0.22$, $p > 0.05$; future tense: $rs(41) = 0.16$, $p > 0.05$; imperative: $rs(35) = 0.24$, $p > 0.05$). Based on this, we can say that the perception of the meme-based task sheets as being effective in topic elaboration can only be predicted by the results of the scoring system in the case of the present tense first person singular block.

Q9: We investigated whether there were differences in the scores achieved by individual students depending on whether they felt that the given set of tasks made it easier for them to learn grammar and vocabulary and to explain, elaborate on the topic.

The explicit purpose of the tasks was to facilitate the understanding and oral application of the learning material and grammatical elements. A total of 54 responses were received to the question of whether the meme task facilitated the students' acquisition of the teaching material. Of these, 46 answered 'yes' and 8 answered 'no'. However, we found no significant difference in the level of performance in the tasks between those for whom the meme-based tasks made it easier to learn the material and those for whom they did not.

H13: We assumed that participants who felt that the meme task had a stress-relieving effect would be more likely to say that it made learning grammar easier for them, and would therefore achieve higher scores in the verb column of the additive score sheets.

We found no significant difference between the variables examined, so the results achieved on the score sheets are not influenced by the extent to which students felt that the task set relieved tension.

However, we also examined the stress-relieving effect of the task sheets in terms of the extent to which the following effects were observed for each topic:

To what extent did the meme task set make it easier for students to...

1. ...use the given grammatical forms?
2. ...practice the vocabulary related to the given topic?
3. ...explain the given topic?

H14: Our hypothesis was that students who experienced a stress-relieving effect (N = 45) felt the positive effect mainly in the application of grammatical forms.

We used Friedman's test for each task to test our hypothesis. We found no significant difference between the subscales in the present tense third person singular ($\chi^2(2) = 0.28$, p > 0.05), the present tense first person singular ($\chi^2(2) = 1.57$, p > 0.05), the imperative ($\chi^2(2) = 1.29$, p > 0.05), or the future tense ($\chi^2(2) = 0.46$, p > 0.05). However, we found a significant difference between the past tense tasks ($\chi^2(2) = 11.2$, p < 0.01). We used Wilcoxon tests to determine which of the three subscales caused the significance, using Bonferroni correction (α = 0.017). The comparison of the expression-grammar and expression-vocabulary subscales showed no difference (p > 0.017). However, the difference between grammar and vocabulary proved to be significant (Z = -2.82, p < 0.01, r = 0.46). Based on the rankings, it can also be specified that there were 3 individuals who scored higher on the vocabulary subscale, while 20 scored higher on the grammar subscale, and 15 scored equally on both, meaning they did not contribute to the significance of the test. According to this, we partially supported our hypothesis with a series of memes practicing the past tense, the students who perceived the stress-relieving effect of the task series performed better on the grammar task.

4.3. Qualitative results

In the qualitative section of the final questionnaire, participants also evaluated the positive and negative characteristics of the tasks with their own written responses.

Among the positive characteristics, the categories that formed the main hypotheses of our research appeared with outstanding frequency: reduction of language anxiety, easier grammar acquisition (16 people); humor (14 people); communication, and the opportunity to connect with peers (11 people). The explicit goals of the meme tasks included facilitating the development of students' speaking skills and their understanding of grammatical elements. As expected, grammar as linguistic content to be conveyed received high scores in the table in Figure 64, and four participants highlighted the ice-breaking nature of the tasks.

Thirty-six students did not express any negative opinions or point out any shortcomings; in fact, some of them even wrote again that the tasks were "correct" and that they did not feel that anything was missing. Among those who expressed negative opinions, three students felt that there was a certain lack of humor and time; two participants encouraged the use of more current memes and the use of memes in voice messages. However, in our opinion, the

suggestions encouraging the use of more memes may be based on a wide range of subjective interpretations and definitions of memes.

Twelve participants wrote suggestions on how to remedy the areas they perceived as deficiencies. The students mentioned the following suggestions: using more humorous memes that are more relevant to the topic and vocabulary (4 people); allowing more time for the tasks (2 people); creating a bilingual glossary (1 person); using images from other films as well (1 person); reducing the amount of vocabulary or extending the time needed to learn words (1 person); teaching lexical and grammatical knowledge in separate lessons (1 person); making the tasks even more schematic (1 person). One participant made an incomprehensible suggestion.

Teachers emphasized that the exercises provided a nice change as compared to the textbook, the content of the pictures was appropriate for the age of the students, and because the students were familiar with the stories and characters, they paid more attention to the exercises. The task sheets were reported to playfully help students to learn grammar rules and provide a good example of how to link topics and grammatical phenomena. All colleagues emphasized that the students began to speak boldly and confidently, probably helped by the projected images and texts. The colleagues conducting the survey reported several cases where high school students who had previously been reserved and reluctant to speak Russian expressed themselves in increasingly fluent monologues including whole sentences after the second, third, and fourth sets of tasks. It is gratifying that the colleagues' observations are completely consistent with the author's experiences during the pilot process. Only one colleague mentioned the negative aspect that, since they had been working on meme tasks for several days, some students showed signs of boredom by the end.

Overall, we can say that the exercises have succeeded in improving speaking skills and in making it easier for learners to remember grammatical elements, as well as in making the learning process less stressful, more enjoyable, and more humorous, based on the written feedback from the test sample.

5. Conclusion, limitations and future potential of the research

In our paper, we examined whether and how effectively internet image macros can be used to teach Russian as a second foreign language in Hungarian secondary school groups with the minimum number of lessons defined by the Hungarian National Curriculum. Our focus was on grammar as the linguistic content to be conveyed and the development of speaking skills as a simplex skill.

The novelty of this thesis lies in the fact that, although there is already a significant body of literature on the didactic applications of image macros, we are not aware of any other work that deals with the use of thematically structured, specially selected memes for teaching Russian grammar and developing speaking skills, or with measuring the effectiveness of such a learning process. Similarly, an increasing number of publications are appearing on the use of the affective and humorous properties of memes for teaching purposes, but in our paper we used them specifically for the purpose of reducing language anxiety and creating a positive learning environment, with systematically followed quantitative and qualitative measurements, which yielded the following results in the sample studied.

We were able to prove the following hypotheses:

a) Based on the students' self-reflections, meme-based tasks greatly contribute to facilitating the acquisition of the learning material and to reducing their language anxiety (based on descriptive statistics and the participants' textual evaluations).

b) meme-based tasks confirm the perception of 'interesting' and 'useful tasks' on the dual dichotomy of 'interesting – boring' and 'useful for me – not useful for me';

c) we were able to demonstrate a correlation between students' end-of-year grades in Russian and their self-reported sense of success;

d) the task sets completed by the largest number of students (third person singular and first person singular) show a correlation between grammar and topic elaboration scores and the values given on the Likert scale of self-reflection, i.e., students perceive that the meme task series help them master grammar and topic explanation;

e) among the participants' goals related to the Russian language, use in online activities ranks high;

f) the participants' meme activity is more user-oriented than creative;

g) the feeling of fatigue is particularly significant among students in the sample studied;

h) there is a slight positive correlation between higher scores for topic elaboration and enhancing topic development in the task sheets.

i) knowledge and understanding of memes is not independent of gender; boys are more widely familiar with memes;

j) the written responses of the participating students and their teachers further confirmed that the tasks promote learning grammar, improving speaking skills, and are interesting and humorous.

Our assumptions were partially confirmed:

a) with regard to meme usage interfaces;

b) with regard to the correlation between higher grammar scores and feelings of success.

No significant correlation was found between:

a) the use of memes as active agents and the understanding of memes;

b) the motivational nature of the tasks and the students' sense of success.

Our study is not a controlled study, which is justified by two factors. On the one hand, due to the predictably low number of potential participants, we did not attempt to create a control group (or groups) for fear that we would not have enough data to obtain evaluable results from the calculations. On the other hand, we did not consider it justified because we were interested in the feelings perceived by the participants. We are convinced that the positive feelings experienced by students during a classroom task can promote the effectiveness of the process. In the 21st century, we consider the conscious development of reflection and self-reflection as soft skills in students to be an essential element of student self-efficacy, and in this context, we regard steps taken to develop autonomous student personalities as important.

Among the limitations of the research, we must mention the many different influences that come together in educational and pedagogical research (individual and community dynamics, the Hawthorne-effect, the sociocultural background of the participants, the personality of the teacher, the general ethos of the institution, the motivating effect of the new activity, and the magnitude of the intervention dose), which do not allow for laboratory-accurate results to be obtained, but from which we can nevertheless draw conclusions about trends.

Our quantitative and qualitative investigations have also pointed to possible future directions for research. Based on participant feedback, we identified an existing need among researchers, which goes beyond the scope of this paper, for memes to be audible; we believe this aspiration can be realized using various new media techniques. The introduction of Russian local memes in the form of structured tasks has also been crystallized as a research goal for some time, as it can be an excellent and effective way to introduce and implement lexical lacunae (lexical lacuna, lacunar elements) and expressions without equivalence (*Sahverdova,* 2024; *Alefienko* and *Korina,* 2011) as culture-specific linguistic elements in language lessons. All of this fits into our daily pedagogical practice as a motivating future plan.

Another future possibility is a longitudinal follow-up study conducted at specific intervals, using not only oral but also written tests, and even teacher assessments. However, the

limitations of such a cohort study include the account of potential dropouts and data loss, high time and cost requirements, the completion of participants' secondary school studies, and the possibility that students' motivation to learn a second foreign language – and their individual goals in this regard – may vary greatly as their studies progress.

In our paper, starting from the audience of teaching, the students, and touching upon diachronic aspects, we followed the four internal levels of language pedagogy, from the mediation of linguistic content and foreign language skill development to the innovative design and application of teaching materials, and finally, to the assessment of foreign language skills (*Bárdos,* 2004, pp. 76-77). According to *Szűcs*, the internet is "one of the most important manifestations of new visuality" (2003); *Solohov* (2019) suggests that memes may emerge as a new artistic form of the future, as an independent branch of art. By incorporating internet memes into canonical artistic discourse, it will be possible to create an even more multimodal pedagogical framework in which language pedagogy will, we expect, also find its rightful place.

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