

Interpreting and Creating Korean Memes: A Qualitative Case Study on Digital Literacy and Intercultural Competence among KFL Learners

SEUNGYEON LEE

0000-0002-6055-1416

*School of Languages, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences
University of Nottingham Malaysia
Selangor, Malaysia
Seungyeon.Lee@nottingham.edu.my*

ABSTRACT

The rise of digital communication has reshaped language learning, with internet memes emerging as a compelling medium for linguistic and cultural engagement. Far beyond humorous images, memes are multimodal texts that convey layered meanings and reflect contemporary social discourse. This study explores how memes function as both resources and challenges for intermediate Korean language learners: on one hand, memes provide exposure to colloquial expressions, slang, and cultural references from digital spaces such as social media applications, K-pop fandoms and other online communities, while on the other hand, their visual complexity and culturally specific content can hinder comprehension, revealing gaps in learners' sociocultural awareness. Using a qualitative case study design, this research analyzes learners' interactions with Korean memes, mostly their interpretation, discussion, and creation. This research investigates how university Korean language learners engage their social/digital media usage with their linguistic development and intercultural competence. The study highlights the need for deeper empirical inquiry into how learners process and respond to meme-based content, suggesting that memes hold valuable pedagogical potential when integrated thoughtfully into language education.

Keywords: Korean language learning, internet memes, intercultural competence, digital literacy, language acquisition

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INTRODUCTION

In an era where digital content is a central part of everyday communication, language learners increasingly encounter their target language through informal, user-generated media on various digital platforms. In particular, the integration of social media platforms into language learning has been shown to expand opportunities for practice, community building, and retention. For example, Ng (2018) demonstrates that Facebook groups provide learners with more opportunities to practice their target language and aid in the retention and recall of the language while simultaneously lowering affective barriers by offering a non-intimidating environment for interaction. In her research findings, she reveals that “text combined with images is a good method for recalling and retaining the language” (p. 53), which enhances students’ understanding of the image’s meaning and vocabulary. Similarly, Wen and Naim (2023) observe that modern learning tools like social media apps, subtitles, and short tales provide new approaches to enhancing vocabulary learning, suggesting that multimodal, short-form content expands both incidental and intentional lexical exposure. From this perspective, what memes provide is ‘situated’ vocabulary exposure where the text paired with visual images provides the necessary pragmatic context for learners to understand how a word is actually used in Korean discourse, rather than through isolated word-learning. This multimodal anchoring allows learners to move beyond literal definitions toward an understanding of the socio-cultural connotations. In this instance, it is clear that when text is anchored in visual or contextual cues, it supports deeper processing and recall.

As such, one can see how text-image pairings embedded in social networks promote vocabulary learning, pragmatic awareness, and cultural comprehension, particularly when learners engage with them actively as part of their digital practices. Korean internet memes exemplify this potential: circulating widely through the popularity of Korean popular culture, they invite learners to engage with Korean outside the boundaries of textbooks and classrooms, while simultaneously confronting them with the complexities of cultural humor and the context-specific meanings of words and phrases that may appear linguistically simple but are in fact culturally coded.

RESEARCH QUESTION

Building on this premise, this paper explores the implications of Korean memes for learners of Korean as a foreign language (KFL). Specifically, it investigates three central questions:

- RQ1: How do intermediate KFL learners navigate layers of meaning in Korean memes?
- RQ2: What factors contribute to learners’ misunderstanding of Korean memes?
- RQ3: How does the act of creating memes shape learners’ perceptions of the Korean language and culture?

Rather than treating memes solely as pedagogical tools, this study positions them as windows into learners’ evolving intercultural competence, pragmatic cultural awareness, and digital literacy. This research offers insights into how digital sources intersect with teaching and learning Korean as a foreign language.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Recent scholarship on memes has shifted away from dismissing them as superficial internet content and toward recognizing their cultural and communicative depth. Shifman (2014) argues that internet memes function not only as humorous artifacts but also as operative signs. For learners, this means memes do not merely require interpretation, but also invite performance, remix, and reproduction. Shifman further states that in an era marked by “network individualism,” people use memes to simultaneously express both their uniqueness and their connectivity, and uploaders become “both the meme’s medium and its message” (p.30). This resonates with a foundational claim in media studies: Marshall McLuhan’s oft-quoted aphorism, “the medium is the message” (McLuhan, 1964). In the context of this study’s first research question (RQ1), McLuhan’s theory argues that the characteristics and affordances of the communication medium shape social meanings as much as the content itself. Reading through this lens, a meme’s platform such as X (previously Twitter), Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and other online forums, and its technical possibilities for copying, editing, and distributing are not neutral containers; it actively conditions what a meme can signify and how learners are invited to participate, thereby testing their digital literacy – their capacity to navigate and evaluate the medium and its messages.

The shift toward these digital forms signifies a broader change in how we perceive communication. As Kress (2010) observes, “the introduction of the concepts of *mode* and *multimodality* produces a challenge to hitherto settled notions of language” (p. 111). Language, together with multimodal means – which Kress identifies as socially shaped semiotic resources such as image, writing, layout, music, gesture, speech, moving image, soundtrack, and 3D objects – builds a strong vehicle in representation and communication for meaning: “multimodal production is now a ubiquitous fact of representation and communication” (p. 135). In this view, a meme is not just text with an illustration, but a multimodal ensemble in which the image and text work together to create full meaning. This perspective is vital for intercultural competence, as learners must move beyond literal translation to decode the socially shaped and culturally given semiotic resources in memes.

The participatory dimension of this multimodal engagement can be further illuminated through Stuart Hall’s (1980) encoding/decoding model. Hall conceptualizes communication as a process in which messages are encoded with particular meanings by producers and subsequently decoded by audiences, whose interpretations may align with the dominant-hegemonic idea, partial negotiation, or opposition to the intended reading. However, Hall’s model was formulated in the context of television broadcasting, and as Song (2025) argues, it requires updating for the digital platform age. Song proposes the DLAE framework – De/encoding, Lincoding, Affordecoding, and En/decoding – as a way to account for how meaning-making now occurs in environments where the boundaries between producers and audiences are blurred. De/encoding refers to the ways media in circulation often reinforces dominant-hegemonic ideologies through commodification processes; Lincoding highlights the algorithmic and connective functions that link users, texts, and platforms; Affordecoding draws attention to how users both interpret and make use of platform affordances whether by aligning with intended functions or subverting them; and En/decoding emphasizes that users are both consumers and producers of content (pp. 2-3). This framework is particularly relevant for meme-based learning, as learners are not only decoders of Korean memes but also participants in their circulation and re-creation, which appear on the screen via numerous shares by their connections and algorithms. Thus, it addresses RQ2

by allowing an investigation into where the decoding process breaks down: whether through a lack of “lincoding” connections or a failure to “affordecoding” the platform’s affordances.

Further, this reorientation resonates with recent research on Digital Multimodal Composition (DMC), which views that “[DMC] mobilizes and activates the semiotic resources available to learners in their meaning-making activities” (Yu et al., 2024, p. 12). This reinforces the claim that memes, as a type of DMC, serve as rich pedagogical artifacts, offering learners opportunities to navigate linguistic, pragmatic, and cultural dimensions of meaning simultaneously as active interpreters, consumers, and producers. This theoretical lens is critical for understanding why learners might interpret a meme in certain ways; at the same time, this links directly to RQ3, as the move from decoding existing memes to creating original ones provides a measurable display of a learner’s ability to utilize these digital and cultural codes themselves.

One fact to note is that Shifman’s definition of memes – Shifman distinguishes between the features that promote *virality*: content that people share widely, and those that promote *memeticity*: content that people imitate, adapt, or remake. Some factors overlap, such as simple packaging, humor or positive effect, and tools for user participation, others diverge. Viral success is associated with prestige, visibility, and the elicitation of strong emotions, echoing patterns found in traditional mass media. By contrast, memetic success depends more on a text’s creative potential, such as its capacity to be easily remixed or to present a puzzle that calls for user intervention (pp.94-97). This distinction sharpens our understanding of memes as not only objects of circulation but also as sites of production, where learners may either passively forward content or actively transform it. This highlights the dual role of memes: they operate both as vehicles of cultural transmission through viral sharing and as invitations for creative engagement via memetic remaking.

Although Shifman’s distinction between viral and memetic content is analytically valuable, the present study adopts the more general term *meme* to encompass both dimensions. This choice follows common usage in digital culture and education research, where learners’ engagements rarely separate sharing from remaking. In practice, learners encounter memes simultaneously as viral artifacts to be circulated and as memetic invitations to remix, parody, or adapt. Thus, while Shifman’s wide-ranging and detailed research distinguishes the two terms, the broader term “meme” is used throughout this paper to capture the hybridity of learners’ digital experiences.

Further, in KFL teaching and learning environments, the notion of the dominant-hegemonic is less straightforward than in mass media contexts. In this study, learners are interpreted as aligning with the intended cultural and humorous meanings of Korean memes, in which dominant codes reflect the norms, humor practices, and linguistic conventions of Korean digital culture. This lens is important for understanding how learners decode cultural factors. Still, it also highlights the tension between insider and outsider perspectives, as what counts as ‘dominant’ for native speakers may be partially reinterpreted, negotiated, or even resisted by foreign language learners. This study builds on that point by addressing the need to develop students’ digital literacy to not only interpret the text captions but also to comprehend the multimodal messages encoded in memes, which they encounter every day on social media.

Together, these studies suggest that memes occupy a unique position at the intersection of digital literacy, cultural fluency, and linguistic performance.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Despite the growing presence of internet memes in learners' everyday digital environments, little is known about how Korean as a foreign language (KFL) learners interpret, engage with, and learn from such content. Previous research has begun to address certain approaches: Lee (2025) examined meme translation, emphasizing how learners engage in localization and transcreation to adapt culturally embedded humor for new audiences. In contrast, Ryu et al. (2022) focused on meme production, showing that creating memes allowed KFL learners to demonstrate linguistic accuracy, cultural knowledge, and humor through multimodal design. However, a significant research gap remains: existing studies focus on the creation or the accuracy of translation but rarely investigate the cultural friction that occurs during the interpretation of existing memes. Furthermore, while Bell (2009) emphasizes that humor is a vital tool for social bonding in a second language (L2), there is little empirical evidence on how KFL learners handle the specific misunderstanding that arises from culturally dense Korean digital humor. This study fills that gap by analyzing both the interpretation and the production of memes among university-level KFL learners. As memes require learners to move beyond surface-level comprehension and to engage with the symbolic, pragmatic, and rhetorical dimensions of language, this study responds to that challenge by investigating learners' navigation in real-world online meme interactions, their interpretation of (un)familiar or culturally dense online memes, and their perception of Korean language and culture through the act of creating memes.

METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH DESIGN

The present study investigates meme-focused presentations by eight KFL learners in a university to examine how they de/encode and interpret existing memes, negotiate cultural and linguistic meanings, and experiment with creating their own. Given the small group and bounded classroom context, this project was designed as a qualitative case study, which emphasizes multiple data sources and contextually situated analysis (Duff, 2007, p. 22). At the same time, the small and relatively homogeneous participant pool constrains generalizability, so the findings should be taken as indicative rather than conclusive. In line with the characteristics of qualitative case study research (Duff, 2007; Merriam, 2015), the focus of the inquiry was on meaning-making within a bounded system, the Korean language classroom in a university setting. The research activities took place during the Spring semester of the 2024-2025 academic year in the Korean 2B module. The core activities were integrated into the Speaking Task component, which accounts for 30% of the final course grade.

PARTICIPANTS

The study involved eight undergraduate students enrolled in a Korean language course at a British university in Malaysia¹. The participants were between 19 and 22 years old (19 = 1, 20 = 1, 21 = 4, 22 = 2). The group was predominantly female (n = 7), with one male student. In terms of

¹ This research was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Nottingham Malaysia, on 21st April 2025.

nationality, the cohort comprised three Mainland Chinese students, one Sri Lankan student, one Bruneian student, and three Malaysian students.

Seven of the participants were majoring in International Communications Studies, for whom the Korean language module is a core subject, while one participant was a Computer Science student taking it as an elective module. The core students have studied Korean continuously from their first year, with 5 contact hours per week (12 weeks per semester; 2 semesters per academic year), and they will continue learning Korean in their final year to complete their core credit for their degree program. In contrast, the elective student had joined the course in the second year, receiving four contact hours per week – elective students do not have the requirement of consecutive credits.

INSTRUMENTS AND PROCEDURES

The primary research instrument was a three-part meme task integrated into the course curriculum. For this assignment, students were asked to:

1. Select three Korean memes they understood and could apply in use,
2. Select three Korean memes they could not understand, and
3. Create three original memes in Korean, based on their exposure, knowledge, and understanding.

The research procedure followed a chronological sequence to ensure data triangulation. First, students completed an online pre-presentation survey via Microsoft Forms to establish their digital backgrounds and social media habits. Subsequently, they presented their memes individually in Korean during class. These sessions served as a site for exploring the students' digital practices and the specific challenges they faced when handling culturally coded Korean memes. Following the presentations, all eight respondents were asked to complete a post-presentation survey via Microsoft Forms. This allowed for immediate reflection on the peer discussions and instructor-led explanations provided during the sessions. Finally, additional qualitative insights were gathered through Q&A interactions between the instructor-researcher and each participant. This multi-step process ensured that the findings were informed by both the students' output and their interpretations. (The full questionnaires are provided in Appendix A and B).

DATA ANALYSIS

In this study, three sources of data were analyzed: (1) student presentations of memes in class, (2) pre- and post-presentation questionnaires administered via Microsoft Forms, and (3) the follow-up Q&A conversations between the instructor-researcher and students. The analysis will mark respondents from S1 to S8.

A thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was then used to categorize questionnaire responses and to trace patterns in how learners comprehended, misunderstood, and created memes. The Q&A sessions were analyzed as interactional data that offered insight into learners' reasoning processes and meaning negotiation in real time. As Duff (2007) notes, qualitative research emphasizes the analysis of observable phenomena in naturally occurring contexts, such as classrooms and testing sessions (p. 37). While some questionnaire items, such as the question on hours of social media use, generated categorical or frequency-type responses, these were not subjected to statistical analysis; instead, they served as descriptive context for the thematic analysis. In line with the characteristics of qualitative case study research (Duff, 2007;

Merriam, 2015), the focus of the inquiry was on meaning-making within a bounded system – the Korean language classroom in a university setting. The analysis was inductive and interpretive, with the instructor-researcher as the primary instrument of data collection and interpretation, and the end product aimed to provide a descriptive account of how KFL learners interpret, engage with, and create Korean memes.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

SOCIAL MEDIA USE AND MEME SELECTION PATTERNS

In the pre-presentation questionnaire, students were first asked to indicate their daily social media usage in a single-response item. Two students reported using social media for ‘2 to 4 hours’ per day, while the remaining six indicated usage exceeding four hours daily. Specifically, three students selected the category of ‘4–6 hours,’ and three reported ‘more than 6 hours.’ In a subsequent multiple-response item, students were asked where they sourced memes for the task. Most participants (n = 7) reported using social media platforms such as X (previously Twitter), Instagram, and TikTok. In addition, three students selected Korean websites and forums such as Naver, DCInside, and Pann; one mentioned Pinterest, and another cited translated meme pages on Facebook and Reddit. The next multiple-response question asked why they chose particular memes. The selected items were ‘they were funny’ (n = 5), ‘I found them relatable’ (n = 4), ‘I saw them frequently online’ (n = 4), and ‘I wanted to learn more about Korean culture’ (n = 2). These findings suggest that students’ engagement with Korean memes is strongly shaped by their everyday digital practices and affective motivations, such as humor and relatability, with little motivation for explicit cultural learning goals. This highlights the importance of considering how informal media consumption mediates learners’ decoding of memes and sets the stage for examining their comprehension, misinterpretation, and creative adaptation in the following sections.

THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF COMPREHENDED MEMES

The first three memes from the students’ presentations were the ones they understood and could apply in their digital lives. The open-ended responses were categorized into themes, revealing four broad thematic patterns: relatability & emotional resonance, media references, affective & cute animals, and multimodal figurative metaphors.

Table 1

Thematic Categorization of Memes Understood

Theme	Key concepts from Students’ responses
Relatability & Emotional Resonance	Overwork, fatigue (S3,S4,S5,S7) Laziness, avoidance (S7,S8) Sadness/overwhelm (S1, S5)
K-pop Culture & Media References	K-pop media & BTS (S2) Variety shows (S5,S7) Historical/modern drama quotes (S2,S3,S5)

Affective & Cute Characters	Hamster, Pengsoo (penguin character), Loopy (pink beaver character), Bear, Rabbit (S4, S5, S8)
Multimodal Figurative Metaphor	Pun/contextual identification (S8)

These categories reflect both how learners decode meme messages and how prior exposure, familiarity, or lack thereof helped/hindered their understanding of the memes. The memes that students viewed relatable were often decoded successfully because the imagery and captions were direct and personally resonant. Students were able to adapt these memes to their own contexts with ease, effectively ‘lincoding’ them into their daily digital lives by utilizing the familiar codes of their online interactions. Memes containing media references required prior knowledge of Korean pop culture; when students had this background, understanding was fluid, but without it, decoding was partial or relied on guesswork. A notable example is the globally circulated **괜찮아** (*gwenchana*) guy meme, featuring a humorous gesture that conveys the meaning “it’s okay.” While its widespread circulation has made the meme recognizable beyond Korea, its deeper resonance lies in its uptake within K-pop fandoms, where idols frequently reproduce the phrase and gesture to reassure audiences.

Figure 1

Memes students understand & apply in their digital activity.



This illustrates how certain memes overlap both global media culture and Korean cultural codes, with comprehension hinging on the interplay of shared intertextual knowledge and localized cultural practices. Memes with multimodal figurative metaphor posed double-sided challenges – for example, one student drew on her awareness of Korean practices such as the shortening of university names, which in meme form can become a pun. In this playful meme depicts a rabbit character lying on a bed, being asked which is the most desirable **대학** (*daehak*, university) to go to, to which the answer is: a **침대** (*chimdae*, bed), humorously recasting the ideal place to go is her bed to sleep.

Figure 2

Understandable multimodal figurative metaphor meme (red circle as emphasis added)



The humor works precisely because abbreviating university names is a familiar convention in Korean conversations, as seen in widely used forms such as 홍대 (Hongdae, Hongik University) or 이대 (Ewha Womans University). However, without strong cultural anchoring or linguistic knowledge, interpretations of multimodal figurative metaphor may vary, showing the limits of de/encoding process. This becomes more frequent in the next section.

THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF MISUNDERSTOOD MEMES

The second three memes from the students' presentations were those that they misunderstood or could not understand their meanings. The open-ended responses were categorized into themes, revealing three broad thematic patterns: multimodal figurative metaphor, K-pop culture and media as contextual references, and cultural & social references. There was one response (S1) whose descriptions of her memes repeated those from the previous section – this may be due to her confusion and/or limited language skills. Thus, the response from S1 was excluded, leaving the responses from S2 to S8 below.

Table 2

Thematic Categorization of Memes Misunderstood

Theme	Key concepts from Students' responses
Multimodal Figurative Metaphor	Homophones & puns (S2, S6, S8)
K-pop Culture & Media References	Variety show & Drama origins (S2, S4, S5) Global media in the Korean context (S4, S6)
Cultural References	Critique, or Confirmation of Korean work/life culture (S3, S7)

The most persistent challenge can be found in the multimodal figurative metaphor category, where the memes S2, S4, and S8 were presented. As shown in Figure 3, the memes that students cannot connect to the visual image and captions pose an error in the students' de/encoding process,

unless they search them on websites. From S2 and S4 responses, they mentioned how they try to grasp the meaning of ‘사딸라’ (*sa ddalla*, four dollars) meme:

S2: Then when I did some research about this meme I found out that it became a meme because it sounds similar to asking someone to buy you something

S4: In the original scene, the meaning is 4 dollar because the character is bargaining with some foreigner. But because of the Konglish accent, the scene seems very absurd and funny. And because the accent sounds similar to "buy it for me", people use it in different context. But still, I saw someone using it in some very random context and I don't understand it.

Figure 3

Multimodal figurative metaphor – ‘사딸라’ (red circle as emphasis added)



This struggle with homophones and puns as a source of misunderstanding is closely tied to the lack of contextual grounding evident in S4's response. Such difficulties also appeared in multimodal figurative metaphor memes, such as a horse being carried upside down, life/boiled egg, or the ice metaphor, which were interpreted literally or affectively but missed their intended humor. In these cases, learners' decodings often flatten playful ambiguity into literal or philosophical reflection, reducing humorous factors, resulting in a misunderstanding of the intended meanings of such memes, as shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4

Multimodal figurative metaphor – homophones and puns



From the following multiple-response question, asking ‘what made these memes difficult to understand,’ it can be confirmed that the most common challenge students faced was understanding Korean words and slang alongside cultural references. The option ‘I didn’t understand some of the Korean words/slang’ was selected seven times, while ‘I didn’t recognize the cultural reference’ appeared five times. Additionally, the option ‘the image or visual didn’t help me understand’ was chosen three times, which confirms that the multimodal figurative metaphor is a challenge for students when the text’s meaning is multilayered and contextualized, even though the text is simple and/or understandable. In the meantime, one student chose ‘other’ as a response, describing that memes are easier to understand due to their simplicity – it can be deduced that this student’s connectedness to the K-pop culture and fandom activity confirms the idea of lincoding, that the student is active on the digital platform, connecting the contents that appear through the platform’s algorithm to other users by sharing, liking and reposting in an active digital activity – beyond the decoding/encoding role of the receiver. From the next multiple-response question, it is evident that students primarily relied on online searches and contextual guessing. The option ‘I searched online (Google, Naver, dictionaries)’ was chosen seven times, ‘I guessed based on context’ was chosen 6 times. There was one selection of ‘I asked a Korean native speaker,’ and another selected ‘other,’ explaining that one referred to posts by fans who translate Korean content for non-Korean speakers on Twitter. Notably, no student chose the option ‘I didn’t try to find the meaning,’ which emphasizes their active efforts to interpret and make sense of the memes they encounter.

THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF STUDENT-CREATED MEMES

The second three memes from the students’ presentations were those that they misunderstood or could not understand their meanings. The open-ended responses were categorized into themes, revealing four broad thematic patterns: emotional & reflective expression, cultural & social references, K-pop culture & media references, identity & relationship references. There was one response (S1) whose descriptions overlap with the first and second selections of memes – this may be due to her confusion and/or limited language skills. Thus, the response of S1 was excluded, making the following from the reactions of S2 to S8.

Table 3

Thematic Categorization of Memes Created

Theme	Key concepts from Students’ responses
Emotional & Reflective Expression	Reactional (S2, S3) Overwhelm, exhaustion, and stress (S4, S6, S8)
Cultural & Social References	Stereotype (S5) Experiences in everyday life (S5, S7)
K-pop Culture & Media References	Idol visuals for self-expression (S6) Drama scenes – Reply 1988, Squid Game (S5, S7)
Identity & Relationship References	Self positioning in peer/family dynamics (S2, S3, S8, S7)

This section highlights that most of the memes created by the students or remixed from existing formats were strongly self-referential. The dominant themes included emotional and reflective expression, cultural and social commentary, and references to identity and relationships. In practice, memes serve as a way for students to translate private feelings into recognizable, shareable forms. Rather than functioning only as jokes, these artifacts operated as affective scripts, allowing learners to externalize irritation, exhaustion, or humor in ways that were culturally legible. Through this process, students not only expressed their own emotions but also positioned themselves in relation to peers, family, and broader social dynamics, demonstrating how meme-making can mediate both personal reflection and social critique.

At the same time, K-pop and Korean media references were consistently prominent in students' repertoire, highlighting their role as semiotic anchors in meme culture.

Figure 5

Memes created – strong Korean pop culture references



The use of imagery from the global hit *Squid Game* (오징어게임, *ojingeo geim*) to represent school pressures illustrates how familiar cultural texts were repurposed for self-expression. Likewise, reaction memes featuring idols such as EXO's Sehun, Seventeen's S.Coup, or drama scenes reveal how learners drew on recognizable figures to encode emotional or social responses. These practices indicate that students did not rely on generic internet templates but instead drew meaning from a distinctly Korean digital media sphere. In this way, meme-making links language learning with the affective and participatory practices of transnational fandom, embedding linguistic engagement within broader cultural networks.

EVALUATION THROUGH POST-PRESENTATION SURVEY

All eight respondents were asked to complete the post-presentation survey, which consisted of 11 questions. The majority of respondents reported that their understanding of Korean memes improved after the presentation sessions, especially with the teacher's explanations in the original contexts. Most respondents also stated that peer explanations and teacher corrections helped clarify misunderstandings, and that visual context combined with linguistic explanation improved comprehension. Similarly, most respondents reported a better understanding of the explanations of the terms in the cultural context. However, one student replied 'no' to a question if they understood classmates' memes, and the student reported that the usage of vocabulary and slang within cultural context made it challenging, to an open-end question '*if No, what was the part that made you misunderstand your classmates' memes.*' This suggests that the vocabulary gaps are a barrier to understanding memes, and cultural context knowledge is essential for comprehension

for some of the memes that require cultural knowledge, be it related to K-pop, global media, social atmosphere, and more. Students needed help distinguishing between literal and cultural meanings. To the question of ‘*would you use these memes in other languages as well - do you think it would work,*’ one respondent specifically reported that it will not, because the respondent finds that most of the memes are culturally heavy, and the wordplay will not be taken as the same as in other languages. While most respondents recognized that some Korean memes are translatable, particularly visual ones with expressions, wordplay, and cultural context, others noted that these elements would pose significant translation challenges.

The data reveal that students find memes as a useful source where students can gain a deeper appreciation for Korean cultural nuances, though vocabulary and cultural knowledge remain ongoing challenges.

SYNTHESIS OF KEY FINDINGS

The analysis of students’ meme selections of what they understand, misunderstand, and create reveals how KFL learners navigate Korean digital media with cultural contexts through affect, cultural knowledge, multimodality, and digital practice.

MEMES AS AFFECTIVE SCRIPTS FOR EMOTIONAL REGULATION

One recurrent pattern was the use of memes as tools for emotional regulation. Bell (2009) points out that many learners express a desire to understand and use humor in the target language, associating it with social belonging and communicative competence. She notes that “students often express discouragement with respect to the use and understanding of L2 humor,” and that humor can function as a “knowledge test” they feel they regularly fail (p. 249). In this sense, students’ ability to recognize certain forms of coded humor is one factor to consider when teaching and learning memes in the target language. Indeed, students consistently drew on digital humor to externalize their irritation, exhaustion, stress, or sadness, transforming private feelings into recognizable, culturally legible forms. In this sense, memes operated as affective scripts, supporting Bell’s (2009) claim that humor and affect in L2 contexts are bound up with communicative belonging. Their presentation in class further highlighted this function, as memes became shared points of reflection and self-expression within the learning community.

CULTURAL ANCHORING AND THE CONSTRAINTS OF MULTIMODALITY

It is clear that comprehension hinged on cultural anchoring. Students who could locate a meme within specific Korean contexts, whether through familiarity with K-pop idols, drama dialogues, or everyday stereotypes, were able to decode meaning effectively, while others found such memes blurry. This highlights cultural knowledge as a central component of meme literacy and aligns with Hall’s (1980) and Song’s (2025) frameworks: decoding entails more than linguistic competence and requires learners to navigate socio-cultural codes. Difficulties were most evident when memes relied on multimodal metaphors, puns, or wordplay, such as layered meanings in expressions. Without shared intertextual knowledge, students often fell back on literal interpretations or oppositional readings, reframing humor only superficially. These moments illustrate the limits of de/encoding when cultural resources are lacking and reveal the double-edged nature of multimodality. While images can scaffold understanding, they can also obscure meaning when the text-image relation is culturally specific.

THE ROLE OF DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT BEYOND CULTURAL PROXIMITY

Students also drew on everyday digital practices to fill in gaps in understanding. Online searches, fan-translated posts, and platform affordances such as recommendation threads become common strategies for negotiating meaning. This demonstrates how meme literacy is inseparable from broader digital literacy and supports Song's (2025) notions of lincoding and affordecoding, as learners mobilize both algorithmic systems and user networks to interpret content. The algorithms and networks of social media reinforce students' particular interest in certain ideas, in this case, Korean memes. Crucially, the findings challenge assumptions about cultural proximity – even though about one-third of the respondents are from a country geographically and historically closer to South Korea, those students did not demonstrate privileged access to Korean cultural codes compared with their classmates from Southeast Asia. Instead, it was students' digital engagement, personal interest in Korean popular culture, and the networks they cultivated online that enhanced comprehension of the memes. Understanding was thus driven more by active participation in digital practices than by geographic, historical, or cultural closeness.

MEME CREATION AS A SITE OF INTERCULTURAL NEGOTIATION

The task of meme creation revealed yet another layer of engagement. Students blended emotional expression, social critique, and references to K-pop or media to produce new artifacts, re-encoding Korean cultural codes while inserting their own perspectives and humor. Such creative acts functioned as sites of intercultural negotiation by showing how production also retroactively deepens comprehension. Many students reported that attempting to design a meme clarified their understanding of meme logic and heightened their sensitivity to cultural nuance. Finally, students' reflections present the boundaries of meme translatability. While visual cues were often perceived as universally accessible, wordplay and culturally saturated humor resisted transfer. This reinforces Shifman's (2014) claim that humor resides not only in content but in the cultural and linguistic structures shaping it; and for the success of memes, simplicity is one of the key factors. For KFL learners, these boundaries mark both challenges and opportunities: memes highlight the limits of literal and simple translation while also motivating learners to engage more deeply with Korean cultural codes.

CONCLUSION

Taken together, these findings suggest that Korean memes are more than casual digital content. They emerge as pedagogically rich, affectively resonant, and culturally situated texts that demand learners to navigate language, culture, and digital practice simultaneously. For educators in Korean language classrooms, this highlights both the opportunities and the challenges: comprehension of memes does not necessarily correlate with linguistic simplicity, as even short captions or familiar vocabulary may remain vague in understanding without adequate cultural anchoring.

The findings present the need for explicit explanation of cultural contexts, humor traditions, and intertextual references that inform meme circulation. At the same time, the recurrent presence of K-pop, drama dialogues, and digital fandom practices in students' interpretations suggests that integrating learners' popular culture interests can foster deeper engagement and provide an accessible entry point into more complex cultural codes. By examining how students understood,

misunderstood, and created memes, this study shows how meme literacy intertwines with broader competencies in intercultural communication and digital participation, offering educators a pathway to harness digital humor not only as a linguistic exercise but also as a means of cultivating digital literacy, cultural awareness, and communicative belonging.

Future research should expand both the size and diversity of participant groups to enable cross-cultural comparison and broader insights. Longitudinal or mixed-method designs could also trace how learners' meme interpretation and production evolve over time, or compare the experiences of different KFL learner generations. Such work would deepen our understanding of how digital artifacts, such as memes, contribute to language learning, intercultural competence, and digital literacy in the digital age.

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APPENDIX A (PRE PRESENTATION SURVEY)

Korean Meme

This questionnaire is designed to elicit detailed responses from the intermediate level students in the Korean module about how they find, understand, and create memes in Korean. The 8 students are asked to come up with 9 memes: 3 that (they think) they understand well and use them in daily life, 3 that they cannot understand so they guess the meanings of, and 3 that they create using their knowledge in Korean language and culture.

* Required

* This form will record your name, please fill your name.

1. What is your major and program? (i.e. Film and TV in International Communications) *

2. What is your age? (i.e. 19) *

3. What year are you in? (i.e. Year 2 , Year 1 ...) *

4. What is your nationality? *

5. How many hours do you use social media a day? *

- 1-2 hours
- 2-4 hours
- 4-6 hours
- more than 6 hours
- Other

Section 2

Meme Discovery & Selection

6. Where did you find the memes for this activity? (Select all that apply) *

- Social media (X (previously Twitter), Instagram, TikTok, etc.)
- Korean websites/forums (Naver, DCInside, Pann, etc.)
- Translated meme pages (Facebook, Reddit, etc.)
- Other

7. Why did you choose these memes? (Select all that apply) *

- I found them relatable.
- They were funny.
- I wanted to learn more about Korean culture.
- I saw them frequently online.
- Other

8. Did you recognize the meme format from previous exposure? *

- Yes, I've seen this type of meme before.
- No, this meme format was new to me.
- Other

Section 3

Understanding

9. Explain the **first** meme, and how you understood : (please be specific. i.e. In this meme, there is an male idol / picture of kitty etc., and he/she/it is doing .. and the text is written) *

10. Explain the **second** meme: (please be specific. i.e. In this meme, there is an male idol / picture of kitty etc., and he/she/it is doing .. and the text is written ...) *

11. Explain the **third** meme: (please be specific. i.e. In this meme, there is an male idol / picture of kitty etc., and he/she/it is doing .. and the text is written ...) *

12. What helped you understand these memes? (Select all that apply) *

- I already knew the Korean words/phrases used.
- The visual/image context made it clear.
- I recognized the cultural reference.
- Someone explained it to me before.
- Other

Memes you didn't understand well

13. Explain the **first** meme, and describe what you think the memes means: (please be specific. i.e. In this meme, there is an male idol / picture of kitty etc., and he/she/it is doing .. and the text is written ..., and I thought... but ...) *

14. Explain the **second** meme, and describe what you think the memes means: (please be specific. i.e. In this meme, there is an male idol / picture of kitty etc., and he/she/it is doing .. and the text is written ..., and I thought... but ...) *

15. Explain the **third** meme, and describe what you think the memes means: (please be specific. i.e. In this meme, there is an male idol / picture of kitty etc., and he/she/it is doing .. and the text is written ..., and I thought... but ...) *

*

16. What made these memes difficult to understand? (Select all that apply)

- I didn't understand some of the Korean words/slang.
- I didn't recognize the cultural reference.
- The image or visual didn't help me understand.
- Other

17. How did you try to figure out their meanings? (Select all that apply) *

- I searched online (Google, Naver, dictionaries).
- I asked a Korean native speaker.
- I guessed based on context.
- I didn't try to find the meaning.

Memes creation

18. Describe the **first** meme you created and explain their intended meaning. (please be specific. i.e. This meme is/has ... he/she/It is ... what I made is ...) *

19. Describe the **second** meme you created and explain their intended meaning. (please be specific. i.e. This meme is/has ... he/she/It is ... what I made is ...) *

20. Describe the **third** meme you created and explain their intended meaning. (please be specific. i.e. This meme is/has ... he/she/It is ... what I made is ...) *

21. What inspired your meme ideas? (Select all that apply) *

- A Korean meme format I've seen before.
- A wordplay/pun in Korean.
- A cultural reference.
- My own personal experience with learning Korean.
- Other

22. Did you find it difficult to create memes in Korean? *

- It was easy.
- Somewhat difficult
- Very difficult

23. Why easy or why difficult? Please be specific, write in sentences. *

Learning impact of Memes

24. Did analyzing memes help improve your understanding of Korean language and culture? *

- Yes, a lot!
- Yes, Somewhat.
- No, Somewhat.
- No, not at all.

25. Which aspect of Korean language was most challenging in the memes? *

- Slang and internet abbreviations
- Formal vs. informal speech differences
- Cultural references and humor
- Other

26. Do you think memes should be used as part of Korean language learning? Why or why not? Please be specific, write in sentences. *

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APPENDIX B (POST PRESENTATION SURVEY)

After the presentation - A few more questions!

This is to understand how the class could understand the presentations of memes

* Required

* This form will record your name, please fill your name.

1. After the presentation of your memes, were your understanding/misunderstanding/creation of the memes all met/agreed/explained with and by the teacher/classmates? *

Yes

No

2. Please describe how your understanding/misunderstanding/creation of memes were satisfied/or not satisfied. Be specific. (i.e. cultural background is not understood, text/vocab/grammar still difficult etc) *

3. After the presentation, could you understand the classmates' memes? *

Yes

No

4. If Yes, was it helpful for expanding your own perspective/understanding of Korean? Please describe. *

5. If No, what was the part that made you misunderstand your classmates' memes? Please be specific *



6. Would you use these memes in other languages as well - do you think it would work? *

Yes

No

7. Why do you think it will work? *

8. Why do you think it will not work? *

9. Did you use any AI assistance for creating the memes? *

Yes

No

10. Which AI assistance did you have? Please write all. (i.e. Google translation, ChatGPT, CoPilot etc.)

*

11. What was the part that needed the assistance? (Select all that apply) *

Korean Text creation

Image creation

Cultural understanding

Korean grammar rules