

STORYTELLING THROUGH MEMES: UNFOLDING A MULTIMODAL NARRATIVE BY FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNERS

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Abstract:

This paper considers activities that develop the storytelling skills of foreign language learners. The scope activities take into account recent studies of multimodal narratives and rules of story grammar (Burgers, et al.; Ventola and Guijarro; Шмид; Mandler & Johnson; Eun Hee). The learning situations involve the use of Russian humorous memes about cats. The paper offers a brief analysis of narrative structures invoked by the memes. The task requires constructing a story about a make-believe world cued by the meme's image and caption. Personal and collective memories have given an impetus for these sense-making processes. The activities also aim to develop the critical thinking and visual literacy of language learners (Romero & Bobkina). Learners need to unravel different perspectives of stories and transform their narrative into a dialogue. The paper discusses pedagogical frameworks that can be adapted to storytelling practices and ensure active and autonomous engagement of learners in sense-making processes.

Keywords:

memes, multimodal narratives, visual literacy, task-based instructions

1. Introduction

Efficient communication in a foreign language requires, among many other things, producing an oral or written account of related events. This ability to generate a talk about interconnected episodes of human experience is called “storytelling”. The final product of storytelling is called “a narrative”. It is defined as at least two causally connected events in which an agent participates and attempts to fulfill his or her intentions (Попова 31; Burgers, et al. 61; Шмид13)

Methodologists of Russian as a Foreign Language (RFL) (Киндря, Куклина) show that there is a lack of attention to strategies of storytelling among Russian language teachers since storytelling has traditionally been covered in the general category of ‘speech development’.

Several methodological initiatives have been launched to fill this gap. Among them, was the creation of the website *Russian through Stories* (Maksimova) and the Facebook group *TPRS Storytelling/CI Teaching Russian*¹. However, illustrations of the techniques required for storytelling have often been borrowed from teaching languages other than Russian (e.g., a Spanish lesson for the enactment of words, semantics, or emotional responses by American students to the teacher’s statements in a Philadelphia College). The *Russian through Stories* website is a Russian introduction to Teaching Proficiency through Reading and Storytelling (Blaine & Seeley). The method uses translation, gestures, and personalized questions to familiarize learners with new vocabulary and grammatical structures that were utilized in a spoken class story and repeated in a class reading.

The FB group *TPRS Storytelling/CI Teaching Russian* usually posts stories for reading and listening and news for teachers. The websites suggest useful techniques and case studies but avoid issues pertinent to sense-making through narration and its realizations in Russian. TPRS’s main approach involves a question-and-answer technique combined with reading, listening, and augmenting existing narratives. However, *Russian through stories* does not pay special attention to visual sources of information triggering storytelling.

In this paper, we will try to link sense-making with personal and collective memories that often reside in both verbal and visual forms. The alignment of storytelling techniques with traditional pedagogical

¹ TPRS is the abbreviation of the method of Teaching Proficiency through Reading and Storytelling. CI usually stands for Comprehensible Input which is an element of TPRS.

frameworks that include task-based instructions, role play, and peer interactions will be also examined.

This paper looks at the stimulation of learners' purposeful participatory sense-making through the use of internet memes. The activity engages imaginative thinking, background knowledge, and previous experiences in an attempt to widen the scope of their linguistic and communicative capabilities in Russian. Both task-based instructions and language play have been brought together.

2. Pedagogical frameworks

The proposed learning situation synthesizes several pedagogical approaches—task-based instructions, language play, and peer interaction to facilitate learners' conscious search for meaning and relevant strategies in the process of narrative construction.

Task-based learning is a meaning-focused pedagogical tool that urges learners to use their own experience to overcome their linguistic and cultural knowledge deficit in a specific communicative situation (Lambert & Oliver). Recently, investigations elaborating on the benefits of task-based instructions in teaching and learning RFL (Nuss and Whitehead Martelle; Nuss and Martine) have become increasingly popular. The implementation of task-based language learning creates an opportunity to increase learners' autonomy by encouraging them to reflect on what, how, and why they internalize during the process of learning. Learners are placed into a situation when they consciously try to achieve the communicative goal by applying familiar mental models and routines.

Language play has also become a popular tool for foreign language teaching and learning. Tarone (32) emphasizes the entertaining functions of language play. Tarone and Broner (364) have defined language play as "instances where, due to the multifunctionality of discourse, utterances appear to function as both fun and rehearsal". Waring (195) argues that being playful can be accomplished by stepping outside one's present identity and enacting a different one. The activities that require stepping outside one's current situational identity are often called role-play situations. A comprehensive overview of role-play situations in teaching RFL has been offered by Mendelevich altogether with an interesting virtual implementation of role-play (Mendelevich).

The advantages of a role-play situation can be summarised as follows: "Role-play situations challenge students to bring together and

use the grammatical forms, formulaic utterances, cultural protocols, and communication strategies they have learned” (Henry). Cook, while developing ideas of language play, also emphasized that free play with language “broadens [s] the range of permitted interactional patterns in the classroom” (Cook 199). Cook’s insight was further elaborated in the claim that the language play “transforms the reality and makes [learners] feel as though they are more than they actually are through fantasy, pretence, disguise.” (Csikzentmihalyi)

In designing the storytelling situation, we pursue the realization of the language play through (a) the creation of imaginary worlds; and (b) through experiments with language, e.g., the manipulation of sound patterns and the foregrounding of words’ connotations (see about choosing a name for the cat and the characters in Conclusions). The latter involves spontaneous and relatively free play.

When learners try to step outside their own identity and create a new world, some rules can be introduced as well as samples to demonstrate what can be accepted as a final product of learners’ activity in real-life situations. In this way, the teacher structures and restrains the learners’ imagination though the target language is still perceived by learners as a means of entertainment.

If teachers wish to maximize the positive effects of role play such as collaboration and competitiveness it is advisable to put purposeful efforts into building a platform for communication between students where they can play with language, negotiate meanings, experiment with forms, and produce different types of oral and written texts (Philp et al.; Pastushenkov).

In our design of the storytelling situation, we rely on the transformative power of a learner’s imagination that assists in removing cognitive constraints and breaches gaps in language deficiencies.

3. Reading memes

The selection of humorous teaching materials contributes to the enhancing communicative skills of learners and their motivation. Learners usually appreciate entertaining strategies and try to be engaged in playful talks when they recognize amusing content (Heidari-Shahreza). Memes with viral jokes have been increasingly used as a pedagogical tool in foreign language classrooms (Kayali and Altunas; Harshavardhan, et al.; Baysac).

Reportedly, memes produce multiple positive effects such as

arousing students' attention, promoting global consciousness, reducing anxiety and stress, sustaining learners' interest, and concretely visualizing ideas and concepts (Kayali and Altunas 256; Baysac 273–274). In foreign language learning, memes have been used as an aid in familiarising students with grammatical nuances, slang, euphemisms, and interlanguages (Harshavardhan, et al.) and as a tool stimulating vocabulary retention and recall (Kayali & Altunas). At the same time, it has been found that learners often process multimodal texts on a superficial level and experience difficulties with the identification of memes' intentions (Romero & Bobkina).

Russian online cat memes available through different social media platforms present optimal educational content for introducing learners to storytelling conventions. Reportedly, “cats” has been the most popular search category on the internet (Moss; Podhovnik). The attraction to felines goes back 10,000 years when the first paintings of cats appeared in caves. There is a long tradition of assigning human thoughts, emotions, and activities to cats. Anthropomorphic cats resembling humans are featured prominently in literature and folk tales. In the 19th century, Harry Pointer took photos of cats mimicking human activities and attributed witticisms to them. Contemporary creators of memes draw on this tradition and proliferate the cat content among other internet users fascinated with cats' habits and alleged wisdom.

Cat memes usually represent talking cats who share their insight, frustration, and desires with the internet viewers. Since a meme is often understood as a hybrid form of storytelling that consists of an image and caption (Harshavardhan, et al. 48; Vasquez & Aslan 113), the meme's message emerges as an amalgamation of visual and textual information (Ventola & Guijarro; Romero & Bobkina) that can be elaborated with a different degree of precision and stretching. The content of memes is expandable since they can evoke intertextual links intentionally or unintentionally. Memes are often defined as “virally transmitted cultural artifacts with socially shared norms and values” (Shifman; Kayali & Altunas). Originally, the concept of meme was applied by a biologist Richard Dawkins to explain how cultural information was spread in society (Dawkins).

Cat memes often invoke interactions of animals with humans and also convey sentiments consonant with well-known literary texts, such as “Puss in Boots” by Charles Perrault, “Alice in Wonderland” by Lewis Carroll, Gogol's “May Night, or the “Drowned Maiden”, Bulgakov's “Master and Margarita” and many others (Nikolajeva). Contrary to

beliefs that “memes draw primarily on films and TV series, especially dialogues uttered by prominent characters” (Harshavardhan, Wilson, & Kumar et al.), cat memes are not based on an intentional allusion. Nevertheless, users of memes may draw parallels between the content of memes and popular sentiments, traditions, and personal observations.

For instance, the series of memes about Natasha and her restless cats gained popularity in Russia since 2009 (Брудер; АНИМИННЫЙ автор; Ющук). In this series, the young woman owns several cats who make decisions for her and run daily chores. The history of the meme with Natasha began in the social media group ‘Catism’[котизм]. Then, sayings of Natasha’s cat/s have been attributed to all relevant and topical events. At the time of the pandemic, the memes about Natasha and her cats found a new life. The busy cats who bossed their mistress around and demanded attention created a source of infinite amusement for Russians during periods of self-isolation and lockdowns. At the same time, Natasha’s cat/s continued a long literary tradition presenting a trickster-cat that attempts to assist his owner with cunning and wit.

Reading multimodal and intertextual messages of memes also means using one’s background knowledge and personal experience. The processing of the meme’s content is finalized in a narrative construction. The comprehension and appreciation of the narrative largely depend on the ability of the narrator to follow conventions of story grammar (Mandler and Johnson; Шмид 145-186) even though it is frequently a subconscious practice.

4. Conventions of story grammar

It can be suggested that familiarisation with the rules and concepts of story grammar is useful for teachers working on the introduction of foreign language learners to storytelling skills. For instance, the teacher should be aware of differences between the story and other types of texts such as expository texts that represent non-fiction. Expository texts are used in teaching and for making instructions. They also impart information to the reader. The language in expository texts is precise and determined by the subject that needs to be examined. Whereas stories or narratives are chronologically organized texts linearising sequences of events (Fountas).

Most of the definitions of the narrative include “at least one character, who experiences at least one event” (Burgers, et al. 61; de Graaf, et al.; Popova). An event has been defined as a transition from

one state to another temporally and causally connected state (Burgers, et al.61; de Graaf, et al. 90; Popova 21; Шмид 13). The easiest way to identify story segments for Russian speakers would be through verbal phrases, e.g., *кот гнался за мышью* [the cat was chasing a mouse], *кот поднял шум* [the cat made a noise], *мужчина бросил сапог* [the man threw a boot], and *собака залаяла на кота* [the dog started barking at the cat].² If we know the results of these actions, we can present a mini-narrative such as *кот разбил кувшин, потому что гнался за мышью* [the can broke a jar because he ran after a mouse]. An event as a transition from one state to another is grammatically linked to perfective verbs, however, Russian has other resources to convey temporal and aspect nuances of experienced actions.

There are different ways of breaking the story down into segments. For example, it is possible to select temporal boundaries, e.g., *когда люди спали, кот погнался за мышью* [when people were sleeping, the cat chased a mouse], *пока кот говорил с летучей мышью, женщина убирала в пещере* [while the cat was talking to a bat, the woman was cleaning in the cave]. Another way of segmentation involves speculation about a character's intention or reasons for actions and outcomes, e.g., "the cat was in the cave because the woman promised him milk" or "the woman promised to give milk to the cat and he decided to stay with humans". The very basic segmentation requires a list of actions, such as "the cat chased a mouse, then he broke a dish, then the man woke up and threw his boot at the cat, then the cat left and complained to the bat."

Characters experience events in a certain place and time termed the setting. The setting starts with a state, which is either an external state of affairs (such as the position of objects in the spatial setting) or an internal state of affairs (e.g., the specific moods and intentions of agents). The connection of events has been governed by cause-and-effect relations or action and reaction that bring together characters and their activities. The term "causal" has been applied to the reasons for events that include both actions and emotional states, e.g. *Он был в ярости и потому бросил свой сапог в кота* [He was angry and because of this he threw his boot at the cat] or *Кот поднял шум и потому его хозяин бросил в кота свой сапог* [The cat made a noise and because of this his owner threw his boot at the cat]. A storyteller has to introduce the character/s, their intention/s, subsequent actions, and

² Examples illustrate events in Kipling's story "The Cat That Walked by Himself"

the ultimate result which is interpreted as a success/failure or further plans of the character.

All internet memes with feline content include a cat as one of the characters. It is suggested that other characters can be “borrowed” from the well-known story by Rudyard Kipling “The Cat That Walked by Himself” where Kipling examines relations between humans and their pets. Contemporary memes continue developing the same subject. As in the book, cats from social media interact with their owners, i.e., families that could be represented by the mother, the father, and by children.

In Kipling’s story, the man and the dog “resist” the cat’s “charms” whereas the woman and the child are fascinated by the cat. A similar confrontation and collaboration between the characters often pose the main collision of contemporary cat memes (Брудер; Анонимный автор; Ющук).

It is interesting to play with viewpoints encoded in narratives as the story can be seen through the eyes of different characters or an outsider. Specific attitudes, assumptions, values, and perceptions that are brought by the narrator are called “perspectives” (de Graaf, et al.99; Шмид 109-145). Different agents can give irreconcilable versions of the same story as they activate dissimilar assumptions and pursue non-identical goals. The man in Kipling’s story perceives the cat as a nuisance making noise and creating mayhem whereas the woman eventually sees the cat as a rescuer and a useful companion for the child.

Stories about cats can be either realistic or fantastical. The realistic stories reflect on cat characters and behaviour discerned from experience and real events whereas the fantastical stories construct impossible events and relations. Since cat memes introduce “talking cats”, the stories resemble fables or tales that “use animals that talk or behave like humans as characters, to convey a moral” (Lucarevski).

As there can be many shy learners who are afraid to express their thoughts some templates can be prepared in advance to assist them. A template also emerges in interactions that aim at unpacking content of a pre-existed story available in audio and video formats. Each meme that was discussed and enacted from different perspectives also provides a template that encapsulates a network of concepts and strategies for further use.

Teachers must guide their students about the structure of the narrative. Students have to incorporate the following elements into their stories: 1) Identification of characters (a cat and different family members like in Kipling’s story, or a sole owner who is often named

Natahsa and her friend); 2) External settings (a flat, a room, a cave); 3) Internal settings (I/she/he was tired, I/she/he wished to be helpful, I/she/he was hungry); 4) Intentions of characters; 5) Culmination or clashes of interests; 6) Resolution of the conflict (particular types of consolation for the cat, father, child or Natasha) or plans for future actions. It is also useful to mention the characters' motivation (affection, love, self-serving activities, a desire to manage everyday chores, a desire to please the cat or owners, and a desire to control others). The learners should pay attention to the sequence of actions not only but also provide psychological ground for the story.

5. Stages in the learning situation

The interpretation of the meme in the RFL classroom involves several stages. The first part of the activity is the pre-task teacher-led discussion, during which the instructor runs a conversation about pets, cats' characters, and relations between humans and domesticated animals. A list of useful words pops up during the discussion (see glossaries for characterization of cats and cats' activities in the Pre-task teacher-led discussion section). After that, the teacher can formulate storytelling tasks and criteria for assessing their fulfillment.

The next stage involves peer-group interaction with the goal of preparing a narrative and highlighting a certain perspective in experiencing these events. In the penultimate stage of the activity, one group of students presents their stories to the class while the other group is listening and providing feedback. After the first presentation, the groups swap roles. The final stage of the activity is dedicated to a discussion of the performances and an evaluation of students' contributions. As an explicit form of attention to the language, this stage is often called a language-related episode (Pastushenkov), language focus (Littlemore & Low) or post-task.

At the final stage of the activity, the teacher allows students to evaluate the performance of another group. For this purpose, she or he can develop a system of points to award for group presentations.

A task-based approach engages students in a series of meaning-focused and contextualized communicative tasks that lead them to achieve a well-defined communicative goal (Bygate; Chong & Reinders). This goal is comparable to real-life activities, e.g., sharing an experience with friends, entertaining guests, presenting a talk about amusing encounters, and the like.

6. Grammatical competence

Students show the best performance when they reach an upper intermediate level and know all the cases, tenses, and aspects of verbs. However, it is possible to play the game with the narrative reconstruction, when they know only nominative, accusative, and prepositional cases and have mastered cause and effect relations in complex sentences with the conjunction *потому что* [because]. In this instance, a story can be created with only a couple of sentences. In the simplified version of the narrative and role play, students use only the present tense or only the past tense whereas in the full version of the play, learners should create sequences of events by using the past and present tenses of verbs and distinguish between aspects. The teacher has to guide students on how to achieve coherence through the use of tenses and aspects, conjunctions, the naming of the main characters, and proper descriptions of actions.

Ideally, students should know the conjunctions of cause and purposes, such as *потому что* [because], *из-за того что* [because of], *поэтому* [therefore, that is why] and *чтобы* [in order to, so that]. It is also desirable that learners are aware of how to parse sentences and be able to identify at least, subjects, objects, verbs, and predicates. Knowledge of time markers such as *тогда* [then], *потом* [after], *до того* [before that], is a must.

The mastering of storytelling techniques is reified in proper uses of tenses and aspects of verbs and, therefore, the development of narrative skills relies on grammatical competence (Lee). Some verbs of perfect aspect are repetitively used to highlight an instant discovery – *увидеть* [to see], *услышать* [to learn, to hear], *узнать* [to learn, to discover], *почувствовать* [to sense, to recognize]. A group of verbs of motion in the perfect tense can make a vignette of the narrative -- *прибежать* [to rush, to come running], *появиться* [to come, to appear], *приехать* [to arrive]. In the story, verbs denote a process, repetitive actions, they may refer to the beginning of actions or show a result.

7. Pre-task teacher-led discussion

It is advisable to start the teacher-led discussion from an exchange about the cat's enigma, and why people are so affectionate towards felines. The characterization of cats may rely on the following vocabulary that has to be activated during the discussion about cats of learners and their friends: *мягкие* [soft], *пушистые* [fluffy],

милые [cute], *ловкие* [agile], *проворные* [dextrous], *независимые* [independent], *корыстные* [self-serving], *себялюбивые* [selfish], *хитрые* [sly], *умные* [intelligent].

It is also helpful to have a list of words describing cats' main activities: *прыгать* [to jump/leap], *ловить/поймать* [to catch], *мешать* [to disturb/interfere], *охотиться* [to hunt], *урчать/мурлыкать* [to purr], *мяукать* [to meow], *фыркать* [to snort], *шипеть* [to hiss], *шуметь* [to make noise], *сворачивается в клубок* [to curl up into a ball], *разозлить* [to make angry], and *наказывать* [to punish], *бегать за кем-либо* [to chase someone, to run], *ловить* [to catch], *мышь* [a mouse], *бабочка* [a butterfly], *моль* [a moth]. The teacher can introduce the lexis in a number of ways, e.g., through questions, through pictures or just by distributing a list of words and prompting their translation. Generally, teachers adhere to their own ways for vocabulary introduction.

The discussion may evolve around cats in cultural and literary traditions and superstitions. In Ancient Egypt, Japan, and some Asian countries, venerating cats brings good luck and fortune to their owners. Some meme images can be reminiscent of the mischievous grin of the Cheshire cat who was in a habit of puzzling or annoying his interlocutors. Cat memes may bring connections across different stories and subjects.

The questions for discussion may include:

- *У Вас/ знакомых был/есть кот?* [Do you/your friends have/had a cat?]
- *Что он делает? Какой у него характер?* [What does he do? What is his character like?]
- *Как к нему относятся дома? знакомые?* [How do you treat him at home? What about your friends?]
- *Его любят? Его терпят?* [Is he loved? Has he been tolerated?]
- *Кого Вам напоминает кот на картинке?* [Who does the cat on the picture/s remind you?]
- *Кота Бегемота? Чеширского кота? Манеки-неко?* [Behemoth cat? The Cheshire cat? Maneki-neko (A Japanese beckoning cat)]
- *Почему?* [Why?]
- *Что Вы читали о котах?* [What did you read about cats?]
- *Какие традиции / предрассудки связаны с котами?* [What traditions / superstitions involve cats?]

8. Unpacking a pre-existing story

It can be suggested for learners to watch the Soviet animated cartoons *Кот, который гулял сам по себе* ‘The Cat That Walked by Himself’ based on Kipling’s story.³ The animation of Kipling’s tales of the Soviet time made them one of the best companions for children. The cartoons *Слоненок* [The Elephant Child], *Рикки Тикки Тави* [Rikki Tikki Tavi], *Кот, который гулял сам по себе* [The cat that walked by himself] and *Маугли* [Mowgli, based on the Jungle Books] were greatly admired by Soviet and later Russian children, as the stories encouraged imagination and opened to them a new adventurous world where the characters had penetrating voices of famous Soviet actors⁴. Familiarisation with this thrilling world may bring to learners a valuable experience and captivating impressions.

Students watch it at home in full or at least from the 17.45 minute until the end in the class to understand the conflict between the man, the dog, and the cat. The teacher may ask students to reconstruct this part of the story (to present sequences of actions). A sample of the narrative can be found in Table 2.

³ The Russian animation of the tale “The Cat That Walked by Himself” can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ix66VKwPPu4> и (date of access 2025/06/03).

⁴ Rudyard Kipling was always popular in Russia and the Soviet Union even though he was linked with British imperialism and colonialism and denounced by prominent Communists. Publication of Kipling’s books in Russia was supported by famous writers like Ivan Bunin and Alexandr Kuprin. In addition to this, well-known poets and children’s writers like Samuil Marshak and Korney Chukovsky contributed to a proliferation of Russian versions of Kipling’s tales and poems.

Table 2. A reconstruction of final segments in the animated version of “The Cat That Walked by Himself”.

A story in Russian	Translation
Эта история о конфликте между людьми и самолюбивым котом.	This story is about a conflict between humans and a self-centred cat.
Мужчина разрешил коту жить в его семье с условиями. Он сказал коту: «Если ты будешь плохо ловить мышей или будешь беспокоить меня, то я брошу в тебя сапогом».	The man allowed the cat to live in his family but under some conditions. He said to the cat: “If you are bad at catching mice or disturbing me, I will throw a boot at you.”
Ночью, когда все спали, прибежала мышь. Кот хотел ее поймать. К несчастью, кот перевернул посуду и поднял шум.	When everyone slept at night, the mouse ran in. The cat wished to catch it. Unfortunately, the cat overturned dishes and made a noise.
Из-за этого мужчина бросил в кота сапог, а собака начала лаять и преследовать кота.	Because of this, the man threw a boot at the cat whereas the dog began barking and chasing the cat.
Кот убежал из пещеры, спрятался на дереве и пожаловался летучей мыши.	The cat ran away from the cave, hid in a tree, and complained to the bat.
Женщина ласково попросила кота вернуться, но кот отказался, потому что он любил свободу и не любил ограничения.	The Woman kindly asked the cat to return, but the cat refused because he loved freedom and did not like restrictions

The teacher should explain the cause-and-effect sequences in the story. The story portrays the dynamics of interactions between pets and humans. The set of characters in Kipling’s story is no different from many sets of characters offered by memes. Even if some characters are not presented visually, we draw an inference about their presence and

the overall impact on the storyline. The final incidents in the cartoons portray the outcome of the bargain between the cat and the man. The cat violated the conditions of living in the human “residence” and therefore, the cat was punished by the man and the dog. As the cat does not follow rules and does what pleases him, he chooses freedom and often dominates in relations with humans. Humans fail to tame cats fully and that is why relations between cats and humans are unpredictable.

9. Teamwork: A modern “reinterpretation” of Kipling’s story

Meme 1 consists of the visual portrayal of an unhappy cat involved in an act of self-admiration⁵. In the original meme (see Fig.1), he studies himself in the mirror and exclaims *Батюшки! И такую красоту...тапком!* “Good grief! What a beauty and... [was hit] by a slipper”. The original caption contains a colloquial truncated expression *батюшки-светы* used for conveying strong surprise or indignation. The list of synonymous expressions may include “*Люди добрые! Мама родная! Боже мой!*”. Some English counterparts can be offered “Good grievance! Good heavens! O, my Goodness! Holy cow!” It also contains an elliptical verb that can be reconstructed as *ударили/ напали/ бросили/ швырнули* [hit with/ assaulted with/ threw at with/ hurled with]. Alternatively, the teacher can adjust the caption to make it more readable for learners.

The story was introduced to the viewer at the moment when the cat had been already hit by a slipper and had expressed his indignation with this “brutal action” directed at the “incredibly handsome creature”. The students have to reconstruct previous events in the story which may resemble grievances of the Cat from Kipling’s tale who was hit by a boot for making noise and disturbing people during their time of rest. The task is formulated in following ways: *Расскажите историю кота на картинке от имени папы / ребенка / кота или мамы. Почему кот расстроен?* [Tell us the story of the cat shown in the image on behalf of the father, child, cat, or the mother]. At least 3 groups of learners or teams can be involved.

The familiarisation with the meme (see Image 1) involves drawing students’ attention to concepts that were visualized in the

⁵ The original meme is at <https://gigi.click/picture/batkipk-i-takuu-krasotu-tapkom-MTE1Mjc4Nw> (date of access 2022/11/13)

cat's expression and posture, e.g., *самолюбование* “self-admiration”, *неповиновение* “defiance”, *обида* “resentment”. Then, the teacher suggests to students an exploration of events that led to the emotional state. The image presents a dramatic outcome that has been preceded by several episodes. These episodes need to be reconstructed.

Fig.1 Punishment without crime.



The Cat's perspective may result in the story as follows in Table 3.

Table 3. The story of the cat from meme 1.

A story in Russian	Translation
Наказание без преступления	Punishment without crime
Здравствуйте! Я кот, меня зовут Васька. Я хочу рассказать о моем несправедливом хозяине. Я очень полезный в хозяйстве кот и потому всегда ловлю мышей, мух и тараканов.	Hello! I am a cat, my name is Vaska. I want to talk about my unfair master. I am a very useful cat in the household and therefore I always catch mice, flies, and cockroaches.
Сегодня утром я увидел в гостиной моль и решил ее поймать. Моль в доме—это нехорошо. Когда я прыгнул за молью, я случайно задел книги на полке. Книги упали, моль улетела. Хозяин спал в спальне и проснулся. Он прибежал злой и увидел книги на полу. Я был рядом. Хозяин не понял, что случилось. Он кинул в меня тапок. Мне было очень больно и обидно. Во-первых, я хотел быть полезным. Во-вторых, я очень красивый, а тапками можно испортить мою красоту. Хозяин наказал меня несправедливо! Он должен попросить прощения и купить мне рыбу на обед.	This morning I saw a moth in the living room and decided to catch it. A moth in a house is not good. When I leaped at the moth, I accidentally knocked the books on the shelf. The books fell, the moth flew away. The owner was asleep in the bedroom and woke up. He ran in angrily and saw books on the floor. I was there. The owner did not understand what had happened. He threw a slipper at me. I was very hurt and embarrassed. First, I wanted to be helpful. Secondly, I am very beautiful, and slippers can spoil my beauty. The master punished me unfairly. He should apologize and buy me fish for dinner.

The story is a modification of events in the cave when the Cat attempted to catch a mouse.

Actions similar to events in the cave have been projected onto the story.

The man's perspective is offered as follows in Table 4

Table 4. The man's story of the Meme 1.

A story in Russian	Translation
Воспитание кота	Educating the cat
Здравствуйте! Меня зовут Иван Иванович. Я живу в квартире с женой и сыном. У нас есть кот Вася. Я хочу рассказать, как я решил воспитывать кота. Вчера я работал допоздна над статьей. Я оставил свои книги и бумаги в гостиной. Я устал, но рано утром услышал страшный шум. Я побежал в гостиную и увидел все книги и манускрипт на полу, а рядом кота, который умывался. Он ехидно на меня посмотрел. Похоже, что он радовался тому, что сделал такой беспорядок. Я очень расстроился. Снял тапок и швырнул в кота. Он убежал с мяуканьем в ванную. Я уверен, что кота нужно учить. Он должен знать, что прыгать на стол и сбрасывать бумаги и книги на пол нельзя.	Hello! My name is Ivan Ivanovich. I live in an apartment with my wife and son. We have a cat named Vaska. I worked late yesterday on an article. I left my books and papers in the living room. I was tired, but early in the morning, I heard a terrible noise. I ran into the living room and saw all the books and the manuscript were on the floor, and the cat was sitting nearby and was washing himself. He slyly looked at me. He seemed to rejoice that he had made such a mess. I got very upset. I took off my slipper and threw it at the cat. He ran meowing into the bathroom. I am sure that the cat needs to be taught. He should learn that it is unacceptable to jump on the table and dump papers and books on the floor.

The Child's perspective is provided in Table 5.

Table 5. The Child's story of the meme 1.

A story in Russian	Translation
Примирение	Reconciliation
Здравствуйте! Меня зовут Саша. Мне 8 лет. У меня есть кот Васька. Я хочу рассказать о том, что произошло сегодня утром. Я играл в компьютерную игру в спальне, когда я услышал страшный шум. Я прибежал в гостиную. Книги и бумаги валялись на полу. Рядом безобидно сидел Васька. Папа стоял злой и кричал на Ваську. Потом он снял тапок и швырнул им в моего котика. Мне было жалко Ваську. Книги и бумаги можно собрать, а Васька может обидеться и уйти на улицу. Его может забрать другая семья. Он ведь очень красивый. Поэтому я принес колбаску в ванную, где сидел расстроенный Вася. Я не хочу жить без Васьки.	Hello! My name is Sasha. I am 8. I have a cat Vaska. I want to talk about what happened this morning. I was playing a computer game in the bedroom when I heard a terrible noise. I rushed into the living room. Books and papers were laid on the floor. Vaska sat harmlessly nearby. Dad stood angrily and shouted at Vaska. Then he took off his slipper and threw it at my cat. I felt sorry for Vaska. Books and papers can be collected, but Vaska may be offended and go away in the street. Another family can take him. He is very handsome indeed. So, I brought a sausage to the bathroom, where Vasya sat upset. I don't want to live without Vaska.

The monologue is to be turned into a dialogue engaging several characters. After the presentation of their perspective on the story, each group or student can be given a different role to present a different perspective in the dialogue. For instance, the group that presented the cat's perspective can speak on behalf of the father, the father can voice opinions of the son. The remarks should be consistent with the perspectives given in a narrative.

A possible unfolding of the conversation between the cat, the father, and the son is provided below.

Table 5. Dialogue of characters acting in Meme 1.

A story in Russian	Translation
Папа: Что за шум? Кто мешает мне спать? Почему мои бумаги и книги на полу? (Обращается к коту) Это ты хулиганил?	Dad: What's the noise? Who disturbs me when I am asleep? Why are my papers and books on the floor? (Turns to the cat) Have you misbehaved?
Кот: Я хотел поймать моль! Я делал полезную работу. Я прыгнул и упал. Книги и бумаги тоже упали!	Cat: I wanted to catch a moth! I was doing a useful work. I jumped and fell. Books and papers fell too!
Ребенок: Папа, не сердись. Мы все уберем.	Child: Dad, don't be angry. We'll put everything in order.
Папа: Как я узнаю, где первая страница, а где последняя, если Вы будете все собирать? Кот все испортил! Брысь! Я тебя сейчас тапком!	Dad: How do I know where the first page is and where is the last one if you are going to gather everything? The cat ruined everything! Scat! I'll hit you with this slipper!
Кот: Мяу! Ты не имеешь права бить такого красивого, умного и полезного кота! Я очень обижен!	Cat: Meow! You have no right to beat such a beautiful, smart and useful cat! I am very offended!

10. Conclusions

This chapter familiarises teachers with the use of memes for organizing storytelling in RFL classrooms. Storytelling requires grammatical competence, developed vocabulary, a sense of coherence and appropriateness let alone the application of persuasive strategies. The offered learning situation creates a relaxed classroom atmosphere allowing learners to forget about the challenges, and express themselves most articulately in order to enhance the score of their team in the competition. The humorous content of the memes has been adopted as

a storytelling vehicle whose remarkable ability to motivate learners and enhance retention of information cannot be underestimated.

Some techniques of learners' engagement are similar with main principles of Teaching Proficiency through the Reading and Storytelling method. For instance, the answer-and-question approach has been used as an instrument guiding the narration. However, in our situation, the answer-and-question approach was used for vocabulary activation rather than as a means of storyline formation. Another similarity lies in repetitions of lexical and grammatical constructions for forging narrative abilities. In the offered context, the technique is implemented through learners' exposure to several interrelated themes that were instantiated through (a) visuals, (b) verbalisation of personal recollections, (c) unravelling a pre-existed story, (d) changes of perspective and (e) dialogical transformations. The case study provided in this chapter places reliance on participatory sense-making rather than mechanical repetitions and internalization of blocks offered by the teacher.

A combination of several procedures has been used to expand the communicative repertoire of the learners: (a) cyclic manifestation of compatible content that was realized in different audio and visual forms; (b) teamwork in constructing the storyline and (c) subsequent group analysis of successes and failures of their peers.

Activation of visual perception and interpretation of images create an opportunity to enhance visual literacy which becomes a prominent mode of sense-making in the digitalized environment (Romero & Bobkina) and is understood as summarisation and interpretation of visual messages and design elements. The unfolding of the story through the detection and verbalization of concepts that were instantiated in a visual form, such as "resentment", "defiance", and "manipulation" reinforces situational and contextual sense-making strategies. The abstract concepts visualized were explained to learners and, subsequently, by learners in terms of agents' actions and reactions to them.

The semi-fictional world of interactions between pets and humans is a perfect milieu for language immersion as it presents an abundance of humorous episodes, linear but energetic development of the storyline, and an opportunity to substantiate evaluative judgments.

Traditionally, Russian methodologists considered intercultural education and communication to be the main approach for vocabulary development and text comprehension (Berdichevsky & Golubeva). Indeed, this teaching approach is effective since it unfolds connections between different experiences and cultural protocols that motivate

semantic processes. Internet memes offer layers of meaning to their viewers even if the memes do not derive from scenes in films, lines of songs, and sayings by politicians. The memes' messages resonate with literary traditions or folk beliefs and provide interesting topics for pre-task discussions.

The narratives constructed by learners imitate fables and can be further utilized for psychological reflections about narcissistic personalities, sources of amusement, and manipulations. Hence, storytelling is well-fitted for the enhancement of critical thinking defined as "a self-guided, self-disciplined process of actively conceptualizing, applying, analysing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication" (A'Beckett; Paul). Eventually, post-task discussions of meme-based narratives can be directed toward critical assessment of characters and constituents of their viewpoints.

A few comments should be made in relation to possible amendments to the original plans. If we deal with a low number of students then we can give individual tasks instead of collective assignments. The task can be simplified if learners have a low level of language competence and struggle. For instance, it is possible to show cat memes and ask learners to give names to the cats, and to explain the connection between the cats and their names via descriptions of their personalities and activities. In this way, students play with the sounds and semantics of the name. The names can be either selected from literary texts, such as Cheshire Cat ("Alice in Wonderland"), Behemoth ("Master and Margarita"), Tom [Sawyer] / Huck [Finn], Maneki-Neko, or from the Russian name stock for cats, such as Oorsik, Koozya, Murzik, Murka, Basya, Nyusya and the like.

It is useful for teachers to consider whether they want to use role play with memes as an instrument for stimulation of learners' motivation, responsiveness, and retention or if they wish to pursue the development of the learners' storytelling skills. If the teachers consider the latter, then they have to include several sessions with similar content since students do not acquire the network of ideas in one day. It usually takes at least two sessions to build sufficient confidence but for making progress in story-telling the teacher has to conduct repetitive, systematic activities that recycle the previously suggested input.

The cycle of sessions about scheming and self-serving cats can be finalized in discussions either about relations between people and cats or about techniques of manipulation and sweet bullies.

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Appendix. Cat Memes for storytelling practices.

Fig.2 The neglected cat.



Fig.3 Crime and punishment



Fig.4 The household manager.



Fig.5 A lecture about hygiene by Natasha's cats

