Consolidating foreign language grammar through memes: An innovative practice in the university classroom

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Introduction

Mixed results regarding perception of grammar learning / teaching:

- One of the most **difficult areas** to acquire (DeKeyser, 2005)

- Seen as **tedious** by FL learners (Al-Mekhlafi & Nagaratman, 2011; Andrews, 2003; Jean & Simard, 2011)

- Can even be the cause of withdrawal from FL classes (Vakili & Mohammed, 2020)

- General **reluctance** to be taught by practitioners (Gartland & Smolkin, 2015)

BUT…

- **Positive attitudes** towards grammar learning (Loewen et al., 2009; Schulz, 1996, 2001)

- **Essential** to succeed (Thu, 2009) and **helpful** in FL learning (Schulz, 1996, 2001)

- Perceived more positively at advanced rather than beginner levels (Etherington, 2006)

Grammar teaching

- Traditional grammar teaching has mainly followed an **explicit approach**. (Pawlak, 2021)

- **Presentation – Practice – Production** (PPP): understanding the grammar point, practicing it using drills and exercises, for later communicative use has been the norm for years. (Larsen-Freeman, 2009)

  - Leading to failure of applying grammar knowledge when communicating

  - Little connection between class practice and authentic communicative situations

- Other forms of instruction (e.g., focus on form, non-interventionist) less popular in EFL contexts and more difficult to incidentally learn grammar from them.

- However, better grammar learning if **contextualised** (Morelli, 2003) and more **innovative** ways of teaching grammar should be considered. (Pawlak, 2021)

Just-in-Time Teaching (JiTT)

- **Flipped learning approach** consisting in four phases:

  1. At-home guided learning (study guide, study materials, quizzes); need to get familiar with concepts
  2. At-home diagnostic questionnaire to reflect upon learning, pointing out difficulties and mastered features
  3. Teacher revision of answers and preparation of future tailored lesson based on students' responses
  4. In-class lesson to address students' difficulties, offer feedback and solve doubts

  (Novak et al., 1999; Novak, 2011)

- **Flexible**, promotes **engagement**, learner-centred, boosts participation and motivation.

- Proved **useful** in a wide array of disciplines and contexts, especially in **tertiary education**. (Simkins & Maier, 2010)

- Virtually **not implemented in the FL classroom**: very few exceptions with promising results. (Edwards et al., 2006; Abreu & Knouse, 2014)

Memes

- Informal multimodal genre with visual and written input and a humorous intent which spreads rapidly. (Dawkins, 1976)

- Seen as a tool to develop **multiliteracies** (Procházka, 2014) and promote **digital communicative competence**. (Ruan & Medwell, 2020)

- Positive effects on increasing students' **engagement** and **participation** in the classroom (Vasudevan et al., 2010; Baysac, 2017; Purnama, 2017) and intrinsic, integrative and instrumental **motivation**. (Purnama et al., 2017)

- Very limited research available with memes in the FL classroom: **promising results** on vocabulary recall. (Kayali & Altuntas, 2021)

ONE DOES NOT SIMPLY

DEFINE A 'MEME'

Aim and participants

Objective

The aim of the present study is to determine students' perception of memes as a tool to **consolidate grammar knowledge** in the FL university classroom
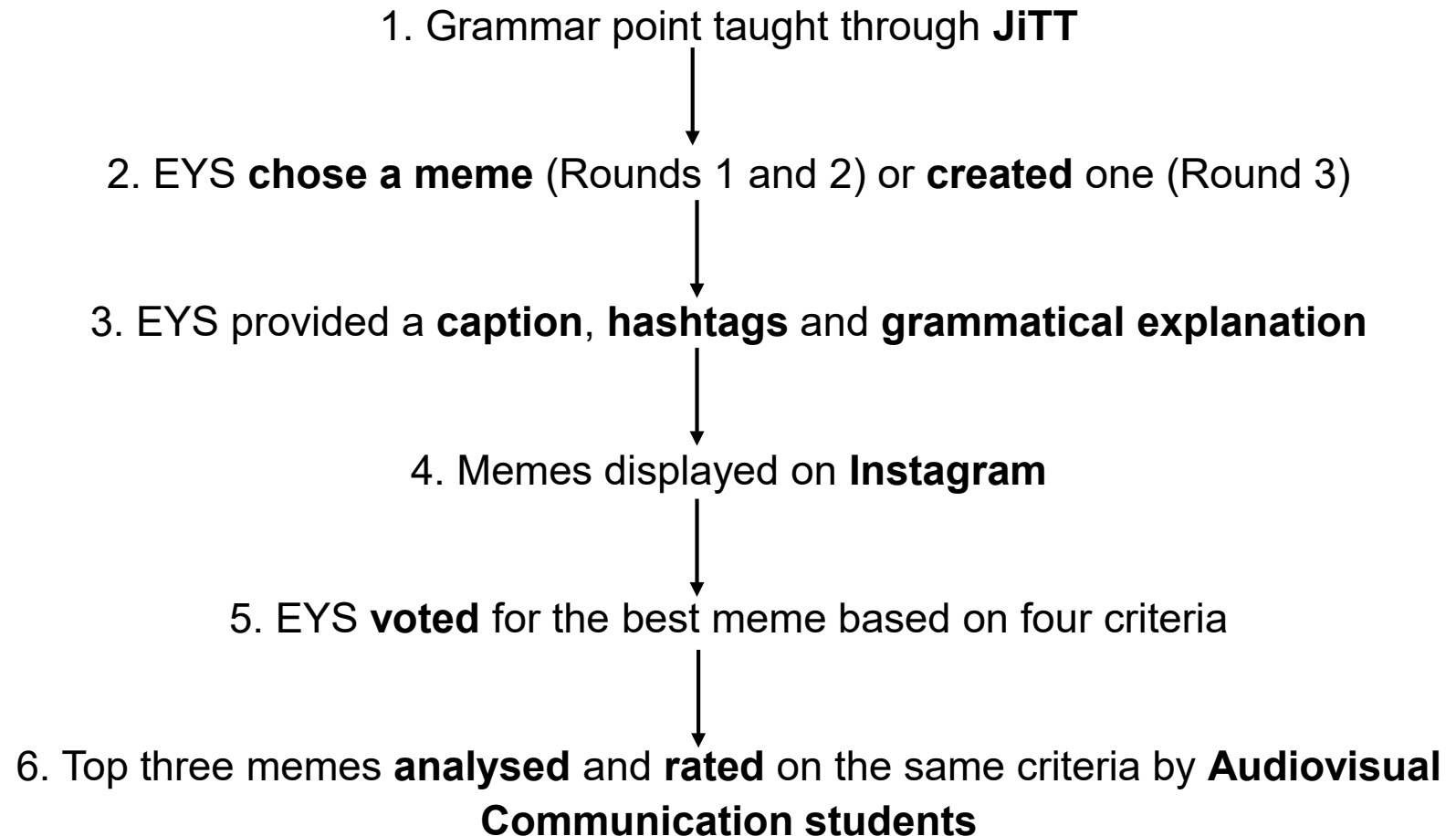
Participants

- **41 Early Years students** (EYS) attending a compulsory EFL course

    First-year students, proficiency ranging from A2 to C1, mean level: A2-B1

    Groups of four / five students → 9 groups in total

- **16 Audiovisual Communication students** as "expert raters"

    Third-year students, proficiency ranging from B1 to C1, mean level: B2

    Working in pairs → 8 pairs in total

Methodology

The gamified project was divided into **three rounds**, in each of which:

1. Grammar point taught through **JiTT**

2. EYS **chose a meme** (Rounds 1 and 2) or **created** one (Round 3)

3. EYS provided a **caption**, **hashtags** and **grammatical explanation**

4. Memes displayed on **Instagram**

5. EYS **voted** for the best meme based on four criteria

6. Top three memes **analysed** and **rated** on the same criteria by **Audiovisual Communication students**
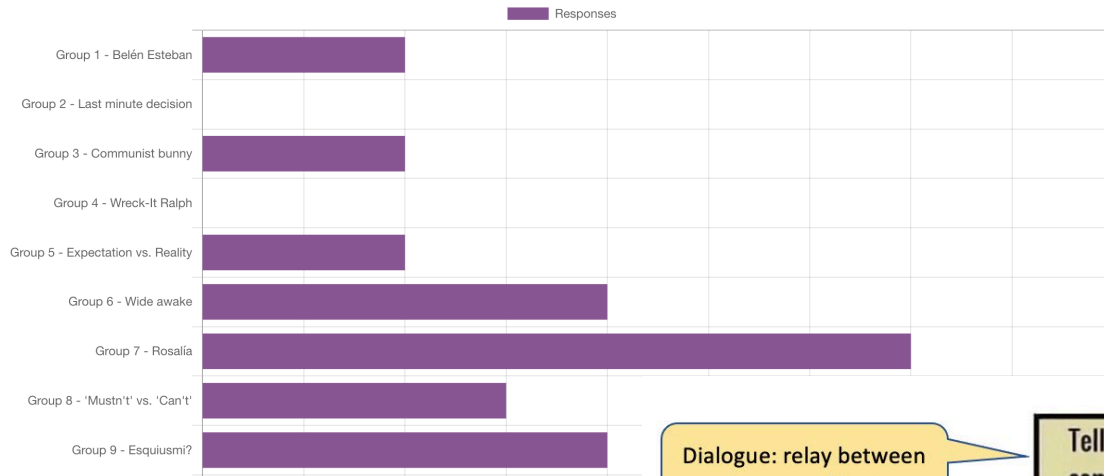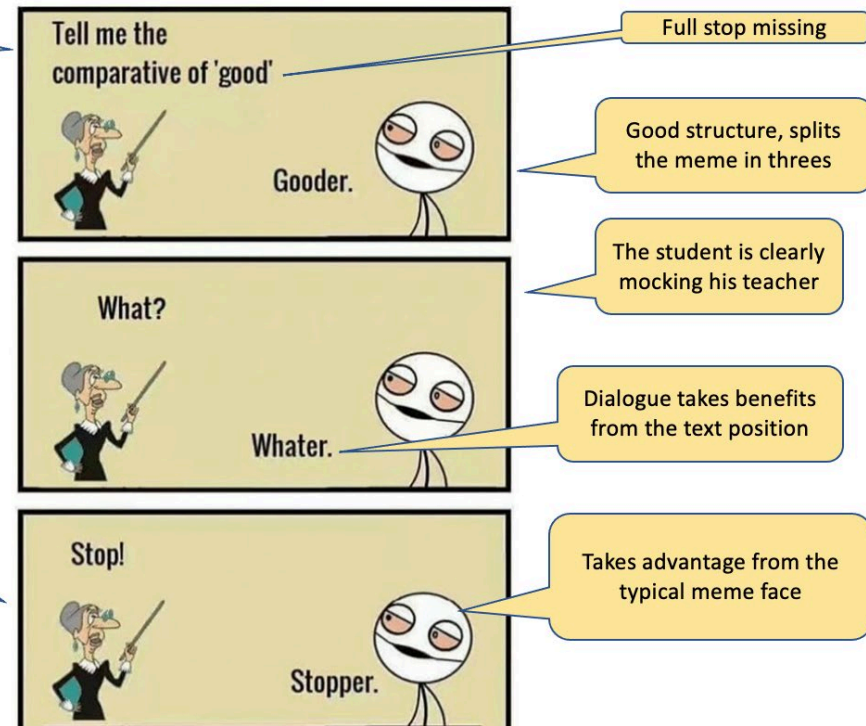
Memes & Instagram

Memes & Instagram

Voting and analysis

Voting on Moodle

Analysis and feedback by Audiovisual Communication students

Voting and analysis

Identification with the meme, as students

Gimme A meme

gimmeamemeub2122 Round 2! Group 1 - When the student laughs at the teacher

Title not really funny with little humor intent

Source: https://www.google.com/url?sa=i&url=https%3A%2F%2Fme.me%2Fi%2Ftell-me-the-comparative-of-good-gooder-what-whater-stop-10098992&psig=AOvVaw1DVZNJbboHtXuD09bfWaVN&ust=1637059308290000&source=images&cd=vfe&ved=0CAsQjRxqFwoTCJCe76aXmvQCFQAAAAAdAAAAABAD

Correct source, possibility to shorten the URL

#comparatives #fail #failer #funnier #meme #englishhumor #leplea2122

Very conventional with little humor intent

No capital letters used in hashtags

Grammatical explanation: The teacher is asking for the comparative of 'good' and the student answers that it is 'gooder'. According to the general rule, to form comparatives we should add '-er' at the end, but in this case the answer should be 'better', because it's an irregular form. The teacher asks him what he is saying, because that's not the answer and he keeps adding '-er' to all the things the teacher says. Moreover, in case 'gooder' was correct, it should be written with double 'd', because, in English, when we add suffixes to words ending in consonant, vowel and consonant, you have to duplicate the consonant.

Wrong gramatical explanation: gooder is correct!

Whatter shoud have double <t> too.

Analysis and feedback by Audiovisual Communication students

Questionnaire

After Round 3, EYS answered a **questionnaire** enquiring about grammar learning and memes, among others.

Please select the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements:

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
The meme project helped me to learn / consolidate English grammar.						
The meme project has increased my motivation to learn English grammar.						
The meme project was a fun way to practice English grammar.						
The meme project was an innovative way to practice English grammar.						
Memes were a good complement to grammar learning through Just-in-Time Teaching (JiTT).						

Questionnaire

Did the following aspects help you to learn / consolidate English grammar?

	Not at all	Barely	Little	Moderately	Quite	A lot
Choosing grammar-related memes in Rounds 1 and 2						
Creating a grammar-related meme in Round 3						
Coming up with accurate captions and hashtags for the memes						
Giving accurate grammatical explanations of the memes						
Analysing the memes chosen by other groups to vote for the best one						
Listening to the feedback provided by Audiovisual Communication students						

Would you like to participate in this grammar learning project again? Why (not)?

Results (*N*=41)

Memes and grammar

Bar chart values:
- Helped to learn grammar: 4,12
- Motivating: 4,32
- Fun project: 5,17
- Innovative project: 5,22
- Good complement to JiTT: 5,05
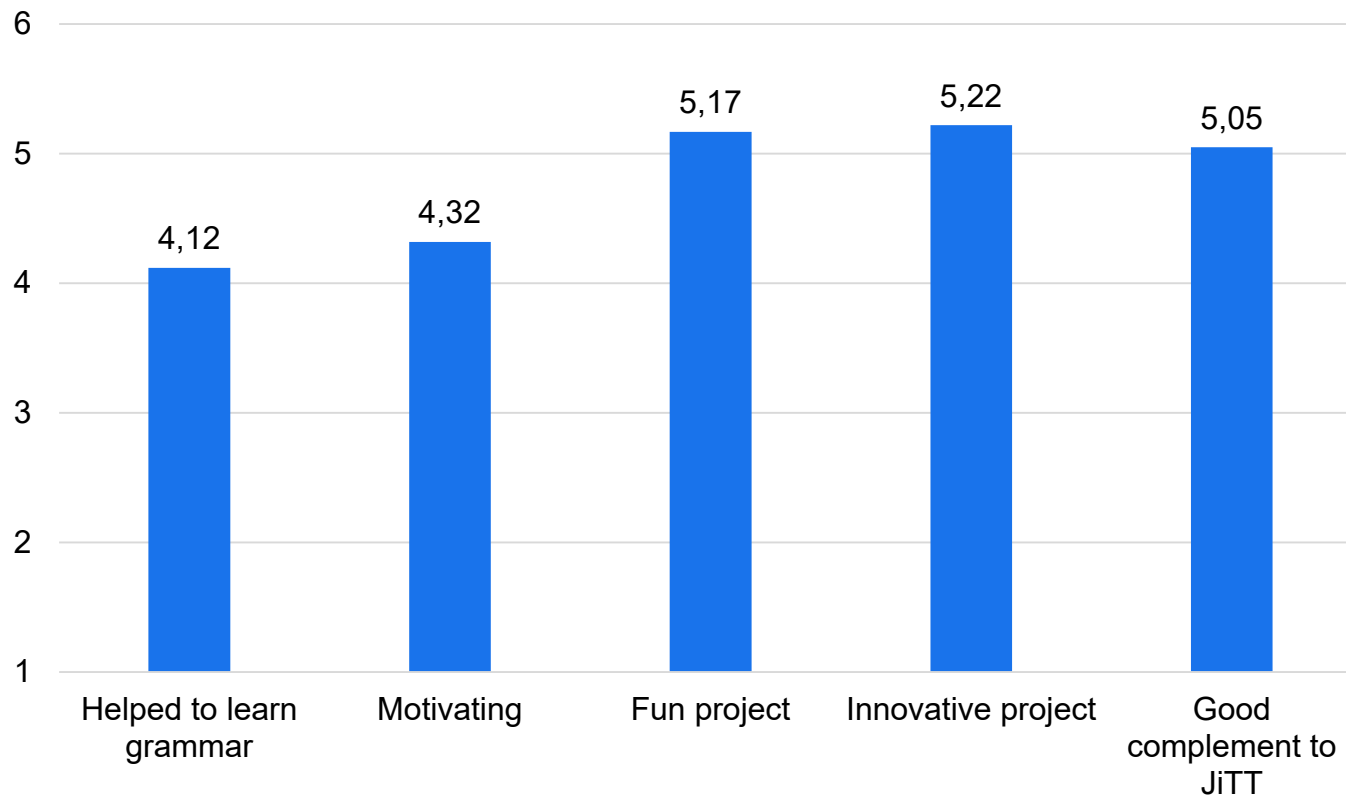
1 = Strongly disagree / 6 = Strongly agree

Results (*N*=41)

Did the following aspects help you to learn / consolidate English grammar?
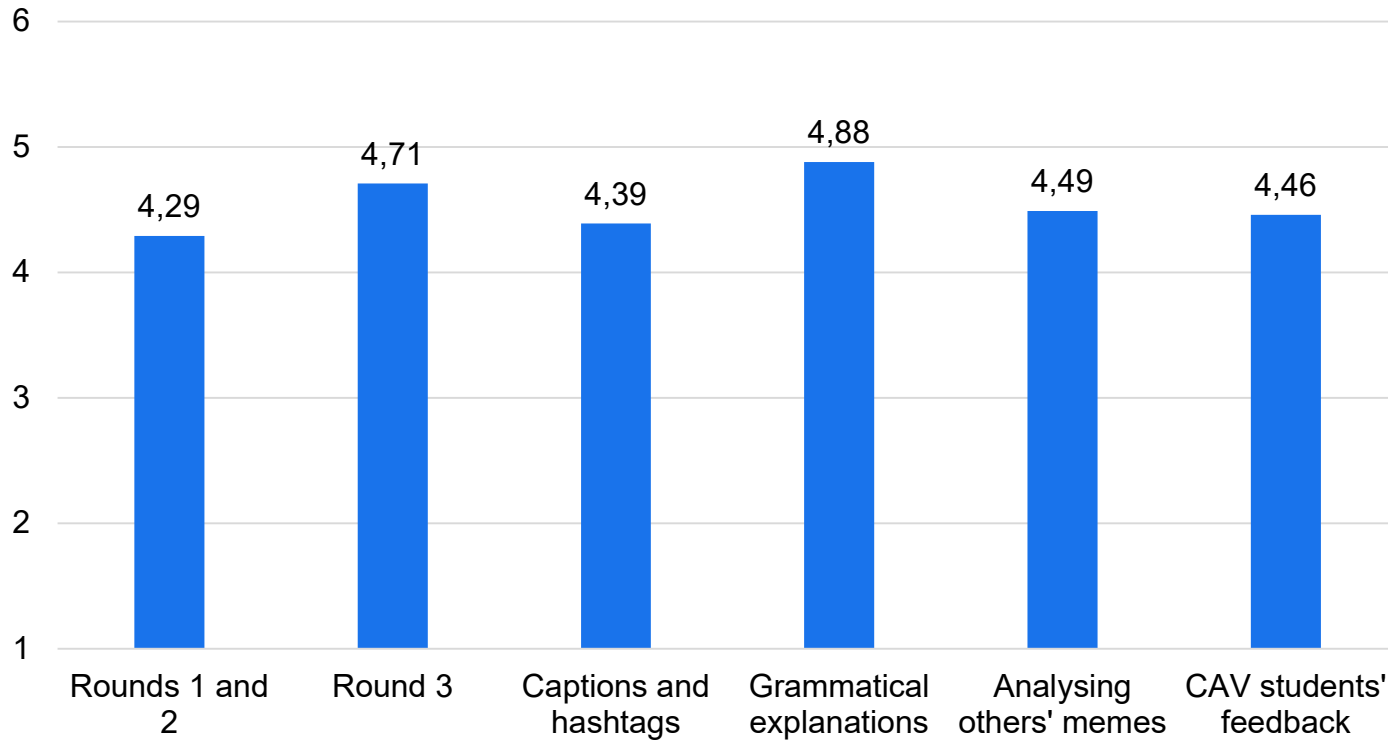
1 = Not at all / 6 = A lot

Results *(N=41)*

90.2% of students would like to participate in the project again.

When asked why…

Why (not) participating again?

9,8   0

36,6

51,2

- Yes, I want to be taught more grammar like this.
- Yes, but I would prefer to be taught other skills.
- No, participating once was enough for me.
- No, I didn't like the meme project.

Discussion

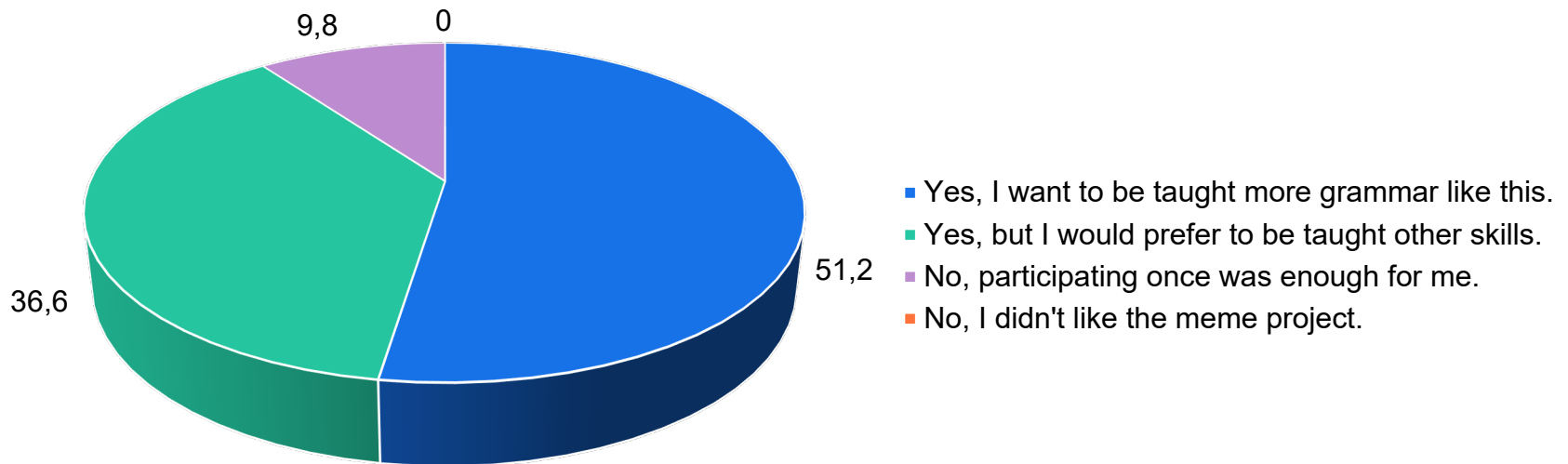- The project proved to be rather successful in terms of **engagement and participation**:

    - Familiarity with the genre in both L1 and FL

    - **Informal genre**, associated to leisure and social networking; not to academic lectures

    - Bringing out-of-class activities into the university classroom

- Innovation in the FL classroom: new forms of teaching grammar. (Pawlak, 2021)

- **Contextualised** form of presenting grammar: thought to lead to better learning. (Morelli, 2003)

- However, no measure of learning. **Did it actually help?** Further research needed with more empirical approaches; reliance on students' perceptions?

Discussion

- Students feel creating the memes (Round 3) helped the most to learn grammar knowledge: **production** leading to a deeper consolidation of the knowledge previously learned? (Soruc et al., 2017)

- **Explicit focus on the task** (i.e., providing grammatical explanations) more beneficial according to participants, in line with previous research. (DeKeyser, 1994; Ellis, 1998; Klapper & Rees, 2003; Ling, 2015)

- Quite a **motivating experience** for the participants (low-stake situation): increasing intrinsic motivation. **Eye-opener** for more out-of-class practice?

- Students aware of the potential of such practice for language learning: beneficial for other skills? Many respondents point at its usefulness for **vocabulary learning**. (Kayali & Altuntas, 2021)

- Listening to Audiovisual Communication students' feedback one of the least beneficial activities: what about **peer evaluation** and giving feedback themselves?

Limitations and further research

- Results based on students' perceptions and questionnaire; **no factual data collected**:

    - Good teaching innovation approach, but more research on the actual learning potential of memes is needed

- Students' perception and results may be **biased**: gamified project and prizes, compulsory in-class activity

- More research is needed:

    - Applied to grammar in this project: **what about other skills**?

    - Any improvement in **digital communicative competence** and **literacy**?

    - Results on participants' perceptions of **gamification** and **MALL**

    - **Audiovisual Communication students' views** on meme analysis and giving feedback

Thank you!

Acknowledgements
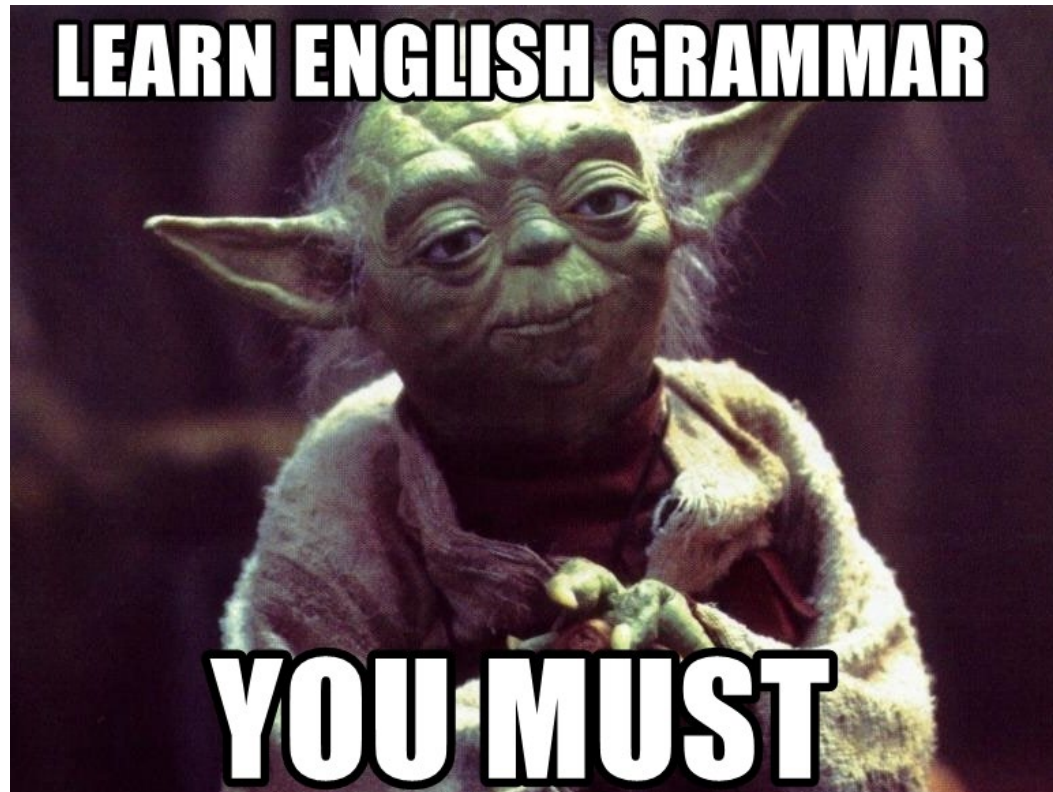
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