

LOL WITH SYNTAX: TEACHING GRAMMAR THROUGH WESTERN MEMES

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Abstract

This study aimed to analyze how Western memes were used as an innovative medium for teaching English grammar in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context. The study addressed the limited empirical synthesis on multimodal, humor-based resources for grammar teaching in digital learning environments. Using a systematic literature review guided by the PRISMA protocol, twenty five empirical articles published between 2020 and 2025 were selected from Scopus, Google Scholar, DOAJ, and ERIC databases. The review showed that meme based grammar instruction increased students' motivation and emotional engagement and reduced learning anxiety through the integration of humor, visual supports, and culturally relevant content. The use of memes also fostered active participation and a more democratic classroom climate. However, the findings revealed age related differences: younger learners were more enthusiastic and readily aligned with meme culture, whereas older learners required clearer explanations of cultural references to benefit optimally. Overall, the synthesis indicated that Western memes were effective in enhancing grammatical understanding and long-term retention when implemented consistently and integrated with explicit instructional activities. These results suggested that memes could function not merely as entertainment but as a meaningful pedagogical tool that connects cognitive, affective, and social dimensions in English language learning. Implications for teachers and curriculum designers include the need to select culturally accessible memes and to scaffold their use with clear linguistic objectives

Keywords— English as a Foreign Language (EFL), Grammar instruction, Humor in education, Meme-based learning, Western memes

Introduction

English grammar is often perceived as the most demanding and least engaging component of language learning. Many students struggle to understand abstract rules and decontextualized examples, which can lead to boredom, anxiety, and low motivation. With the development of digital technologies and social media, however, new opportunities have emerged to present grammar in more meaningful, visually rich, and affectively engaging ways. One of these resources is internet memes, which circulate widely in online spaces and are increasingly used in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms. A growing body of research has examined how memes support vocabulary learning, discourse awareness, and general language engagement among EFL/ESL learners. Studies such as (Altukruni 2022), (Truong and Lambert 2025), (Kalyuzhna, Lavrinenko, and Radchenko 2023), as well as (Wang 2024) Li (2024), and (Zhang 2024) show that memes can make language learning more engaging, relatable, and easier to understand by embedding language in humorous and culturally relevant contexts. Other recent works on digital humor and interactive learning have also explored how humorous content on platforms such as TikTok and other social media can create a more relaxed, open, and participatory classroom environment. These studies suggest that students do not only

listen passively to their teachers, but are encouraged to participate, respond, and negotiate meaning in a more democratic classroom atmosphere. At the same time, researchers have pointed out that the social and cultural dimensions of memes are crucial. Learners from different cultural backgrounds may interpret the same meme in different ways depending on their prior experiences, sense of humor, and familiarity with Western popular culture. Recent studies, including (Lu et al. 2022) and (Oliveira, Porto, and Rabelo 2025), have also highlighted how technology and artificial intelligence are increasingly integrated into meme-based learning and communication, positioning memes not merely as entertainment but as a contemporary tool for digital literacy and language education.

Despite these contributions, previous research on meme based language learning has largely focused on motivation, engagement, and classroom participation, while giving less systematic attention to the emotional and psychological effects of meme use in grammar instruction, especially in the EFL context. There is still limited evidence on how Western memes influence learners' feelings such as confidence, anxiety, and enjoyment when studying grammar. In addition, few studies have compared how younger and adult learners respond differently to meme-based grammar learning, or whether the impact of memes on grammatical understanding is sustained over time. In response to these gaps, the present article, *Teaching English Grammar Through Western Memes: A Systematic Literature Review (2020–2025)*, aims to analyze how Western memes are employed as a medium for teaching English grammar in EFL settings. Specifically, this study investigates how the use of Western memes affects students' emotional engagement and motivation in learning grammar, how responses differ between younger and adult learners, and whether grammar learning through memes has a long-term effect on understanding and retention of grammatical structures. By synthesizing empirical findings from 2020 to 2025, this systematic literature review seeks to clarify the theoretical and empirical basis for integrating Western memes into grammar instruction and to extend current discussions on digital humor as a pedagogical strategy that shapes learners' emotions, cognition, and participation in English language learning.

Research Method

2.1 Methods

The research method used is a Systematic Literature Review (SLR). SLR summarizes various previous studies relevant to the use of Western memes as a grammar learning medium, which is then used to present facts comprehensively and (Van Dinter, Tekinerdogan, and Catal 2021). TPS is a scientific approach that focuses on answering specific research questions using a systematic method that includes the identification, selection, summarization, and in-depth evaluation of similar studies. through this approach, the research gains a broader understanding of the effectiveness of memes in increasing interest and understanding of English grammar through relevant and up to date literature reviews. The main reason for choosing the polling station is to collect, compare, and adopt various literature discussing creative and fun grammar learning strategies using Western meme media. The research design for determining criteria and data collection follows the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines. The PRISMA stages consist of (a) identification, (b) screening, (c) eligibility, and (d) quality assessment (see Figure 1).

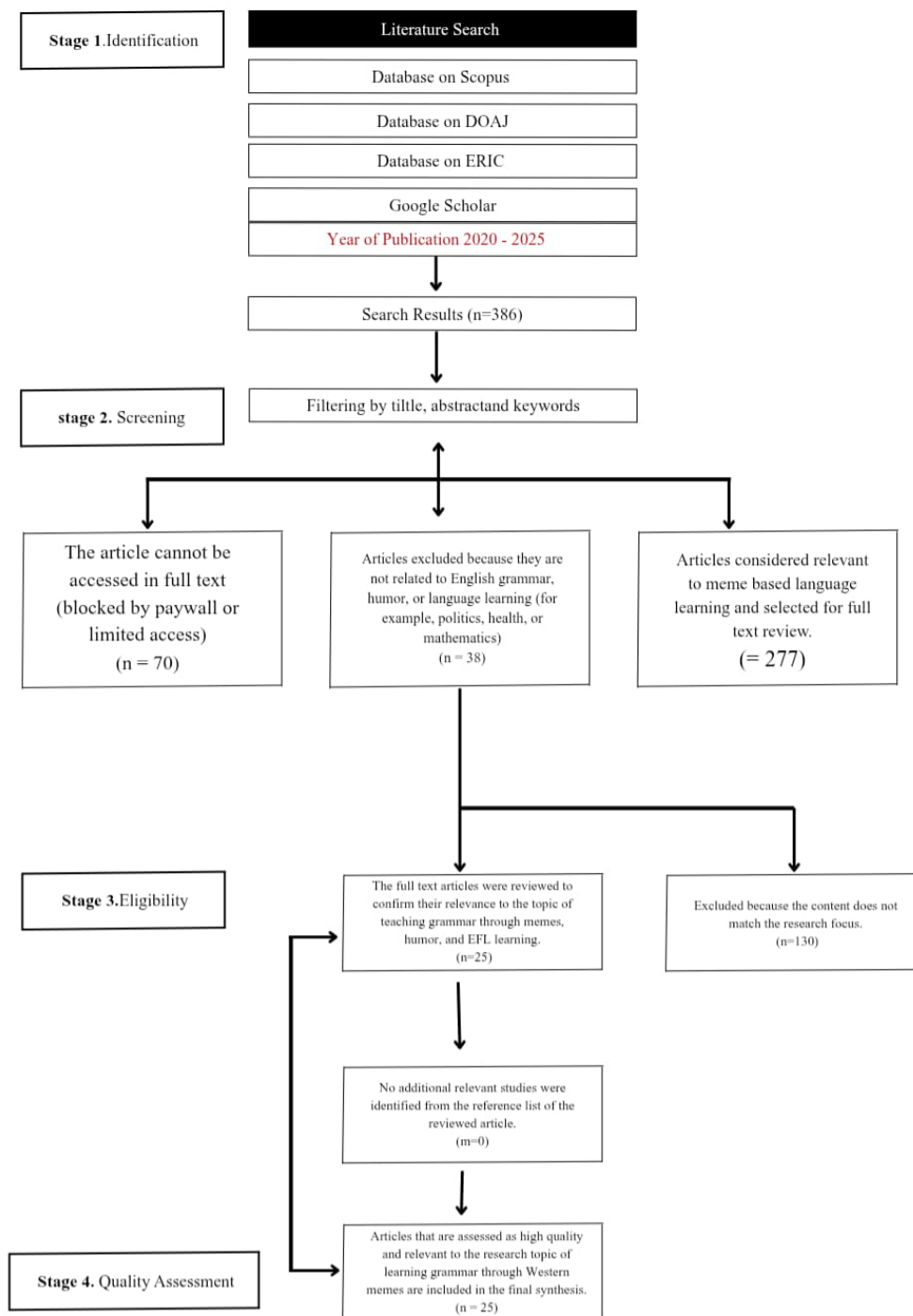


Figure 1. Stages of the search and selection of papers (PRISMA Flow Chart Diagram)

2.2 Identification

Identification is the initial stage in searching for literature from database sources (Van Dinter et al. 2021). There are five methods used in searching for literature from databases. By using applications (Publish or Perish, Scopus, Google Scholar, ERIC, and DOAJ), the reason for using the Publish or Perish application is to make it easier for authors to search for, retrieve, and analyze articles and writings found in the Scopus Journal database. The author also uses Publish or Perish to help select the best articles in the Scopus database. One of the reasons the author uses the DOAJ and ERIC portals is because they are respected international journals that are accessible worldwide across various disciplines. Next, you should search for articles with the keywords "Learning Grammar through Memes" and "Learning Western Memes in Language Learning" in various databases. The search focus for articles is publications from 2020 to 2025, which present the latest developments in the use of digital media and visual humor in English language learning. This period was chosen because since 2020, the utilization of social media and digital content, including Western memes, as part of interactive and contextual learning approaches has increased. Additionally, it is believed that a popular culture-based learning approach can help students worldwide bridge the gap between formal and everyday language. The 2020–2025 timeframe also ensures research on current trends in creative learning, technology-based pedagogy, and the use of humor as a linguistic tool. It is hoped that this study can describe the development of more communicative, enjoyable, and relevant grammar teaching methods for today's digital generation during this time period.

The literature search results show 385 articles, namely 200 articles published in Scopus indexed international journals, 80 articles published in Google Scholar, 60 articles published in DOAJ journals, and 45 articles published in ERIC journals (Figure 2).

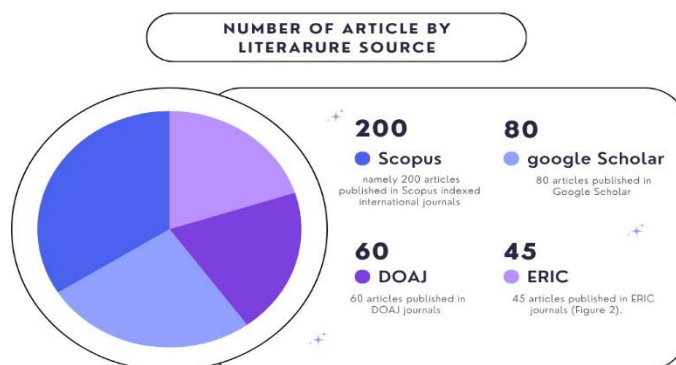


Figure 2. Number of articles on Teaching English Grammar Through Western Memes

2.3 Screening

The screening stage is carried out by selecting articles based on title, abstract, and keywords to ensure relevance to the research topic. Out of a total of 385 articles obtained during the initial identification phase, 70 articles were not fully accessible due to paywall restrictions, inactive links, or the complete text not being available. Additionally, 38 articles were excluded because they only discussed language learning in general without focusing on teaching grammar through Western memes. After screening and removing duplicate entries across databases, 155 unique articles were obtained that met the initial eligibility criteria and were then further analyzed to assess their thematic relevance and methodological quality.

The choice of grammar as a learning area is based on the consideration that grammar is often perceived as a boring and difficult aspect by English language learners. Therefore, the use of Western memes is seen as an innovative learning strategy that can bring humor, cultural context, and emotional engagement into the classroom, thus helping students understand language structures in a way that is more enjoyable and relevant to their digital lives a concept supported by recent research such as (Altukruni 2022), who stated that "using meme-based learning creates a positive, fun, interesting, and

engaging learning environment; enhances retention and understanding of new concepts; and simplifies complex concepts and ideas."

2.4 Eligibility

At this stage, manual screening is performed by evaluating titles and abstracts to ensure all articles meet the criteria by looking at the overall content of the article text. Inclusion criteria were: (1) articles explicitly mentioning grammar learning through Western memes, (2) empirical studies, and (3) focusing on language learning at the primary or secondary education level. Exclusion criteria included: (1) articles not focusing on the use of memes in grammar teaching, (2) non-empirical papers such as opinions or editorials, and (3) studies not related to language or grammar teaching. After the eligibility check, 25 articles were obtained (Figure 3).

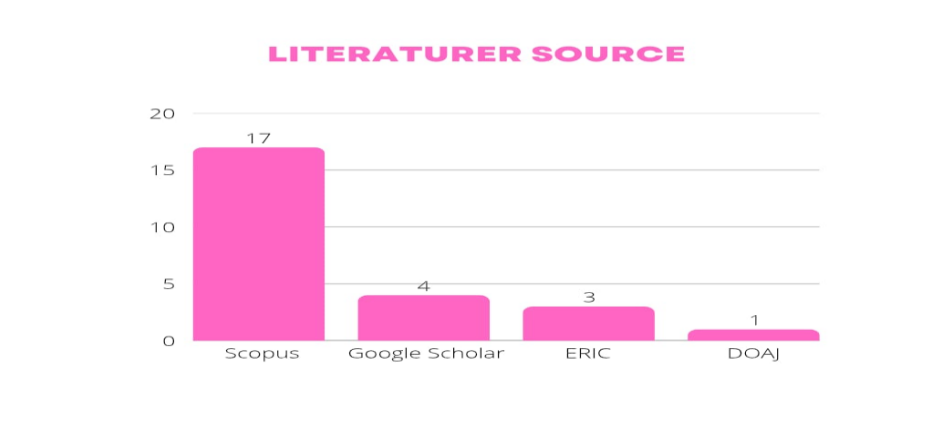


Figure 3. literature Source

2.5 Quality Assessment

This is a validation process that goes beyond thematic relevance. The eligibility stage ensures that each article aligns with the research focus and provides full-text access, while the quality assessment stage tests the methodological rigor of the research. This includes evaluating the clarity of the research design, the justification of the sample size, the reliability of the instruments, and the credibility of the findings. Only studies demonstrating good methodological quality were retained for the final synthesis.

Results and Discussion

The research findings on grammar learning through Western memes are presented based on the extent to which this learning affects students, how responses differ by age, and whether this learning has a long-term effect on students' understanding.

3.1 The Use of Western Memes Affects Students' Feelings

In the context of contemporary education, the frequent integration of memes with Western cultural aesthetics has been shown to influence students' emotional states and social bonds. For example, (Beatrice Hayes et al. (2025) n.d.) stated that students feel closer to instructors when using memes and GIFs in learning communication. They also say that this produces positive emotional responses, such as humor and active engagement. Furthermore, research by (Zhang, Zhao, and Merritt 2025) found that memes are used by non-EU international students as an "emotional bridge" to cope with stress, enhance a sense of belonging, and communicate their experiences of living abroad on a UK campus. However, the elements of Western culture in memes can make them isolated if their context is not properly understood. Additionally, a study by (Petrucco 2023) showed that memes in the learning process not only make students happy and focused, but can also lead to cognitive overload and reinforce cultural stereotypes if not carefully selected. As a result, when memes rooted in Western cultural references are used intentionally in the learning process, they have the potential to increase motivation while also reducing anxiety and making students feel part of a community. However, to ensure the learning experience remains meaningful and inclusive, it's important to consider the cultural and emotional impact.

The latest recommendations emphasize that educators should assess students' reading comprehension, also known as reading comprehension, and provide explanations of cultural context to maintain inclusion and positive emotions. A survey of higher education lecturers also showed that humor and memes play a positive role in online learning environments when used purposefully to create a safe emotional climate. When Western memes are selected considering emotional valence, cultural relevance, and meaning-making scaffolding, their use can reduce academic anxiety while strengthening students' affective attachment to the learning process. However, a number of challenges have emerged. (Petrucco 2023) emphasizes that memes can trigger cognitive activation and student reflection, but they risk causing high cognitive load or cultural stereotypes if the context of meaning is not explained. (Fatima and Holloway n.d.-a) found that memes and emojis can strengthen teacher-student communication, but without proper management, they can be considered unprofessional and decrease emotional engagement. (Tidy et al. 2024), suggest using memes as a tool to encourage introspective thinking and promote emotional discussion, with a clear framework to ensure they are not just for fun. Pedagogically, the success of Western memes depends on assessing students' emotional relevance and providing cultural context. Memes can enhance feelings, foster a sense of community in the classroom, and maintain a balance between culture, humor, and deep learning if managed correctly

Researcher&year	Method	Main Findings	Implications on Students' Feelings/Emotions
(Beatrice Hayes et al. (2025) n.d.)	Student Perceptions Survey on Learning Communication with Memes & GIFs	The use of memes and GIFs increases students' closeness with instructors and generates humor and active engagement	Fostering positive emotions such as enjoyment, closeness, and learning motivation
(Zhang et al. 2025)	Qualitative study on non EU international students at a British campus	Memes are used as an "emotional bridge" to manage stress, strengthen the sense of togetherness, and express the migrant experience	Helps reduce stress, strengthens the sense of togetherness, but can cause feelings of alienation if the cultural context is not understood
(Petrucco 2023)	Pedagogical analysis and observation of meme usage in learning	Memes facilitate student excitement and attention, but risk causing cognitive load and reinforcing cultural stereotypes if not carefully selected	Can increase excitement and focus, but also potentially cause confusion or cognitive stress if not accompanied by context
(Fatima and Holloway n.d.-b)	Lecturer survey and teacher, student communication study	Memes and emojis strengthen communication, but if not managed properly, they can be considered unprofessional.	Can increase emotional attachment, but if excessive, it decreases respect and emotional warmth
(Tidy et al. 2024)	Conceptual research and application studies of memes as a reflection tool	Memes are effective as tools for reflection and triggers for emotional discussions when used within an explicit framework	Triggers positive emotional reflection, increases empathy and social understanding in the classroom

Table 1. Important Findings from Reviewed Studies on Meme Based Learning (2020–2025)

3.2 Short Term vs Long Term Effects

Due to the fact that many students are bored of learning grammar, EFL classroom findings show high levels of boredom, especially in passive activities. Teachers continue to seek ways to make learning more interactive and engaging for students. Memes as a learning medium have recently become a widely discussed approach because their visually humorous nature can capture students' attention, facilitate understanding of language context, and increase student engagement. Pedagogical literature on humor also indicates that mindfully used humor can support the learning process, including aiding content retention, when integrated with appropriate instructional strategies. Based on that, a key question arises for this research: does learning grammar through memes produce long-term effects (lasting retention) or only temporary effects that fade without further reinforcement?

The use of memes in the learning process is based on two main cognitive mechanisms: By utilizing humor and visual humor and visual elements. As stated by (Kayali and Altuntaş 2021) "memes can be used as one of the strategies to create an innovative learning and teaching process," which indicates that meme media combines fun and creativity in vocabulary or grammar revision exercises. Humor in the context of learning is also closely linked to increased motivation for example, in a study on digital humor sources, it was found that "humorous resources can facilitate learning by generating positive emotions and increasing student motivation, interest, and performance." From a visual perspective, the combination of image or illustration elements with text strengthens memory because the human brain tends to "process and store visual representations more efficiently than pure text." As stated in the practical guide for teaching using memes, "memes are memorable because they include images and text in a humorous or relatable way. This study aims to collect and synthesize the studies that focus on the automation of SLR to pave the way for further research Method: A systematic literature review is conducted on published primary studies on the automation of SLR studies, in which 41 primary studies have been analyzed and Results: This SLR identifies the objectives of automation studies, application domains, automated steps of the SLR, automation techniques, and challenges and solution directions and Conclusion: According to our study, the leading automated step is the Selection of Primary Studies. Although many studies have provided automation approaches for systematic literature reviews, no study has been found to apply automation techniques in the planning and reporting phase. Further research is needed to support the automation of the other activities of the SLR process.", "container title": "Information and Software (Van Dinter et al. 2021) and (Truong and Lambert 2025). When students actively create memes, involving image selection, short text writing, and reflection on their meaning, they are not just passively receiving information, but rather reprocessing (elaborative encoding) and drawing connections between relevant text images and emotional experiences. This combination of humor and visuals allows for dual coding, which creates stronger and more easily retrievable memory traces.

When considering the effectiveness of meme media in learning, it's important to distinguish between temporary and long term effects. For example, research by Enhancing the student learning experience through memes showed that 81% of students stated that creating memes "helped them remember the course content more easily." However, just because respondents feel they remember doesn't mean the retention will be long-lasting without reinforcement. Temporary effects occur when using memes only attracts attention and increases engagement for a short period without repetition or further practice. As explained in the context of humor in learning, "humor activates the brain's dopamine reward system which means that humor can improve retention in students of all ages." In other words: students become more motivated and engaged, but if the material isn't reviewed, the forgetting curve will still progress. Conversely, the consistent and integrated use of memes with real-world practice shows potential for long-term effects. For example, the study emphasized that meme-making is not just a one-time activity but part of a teaching mechanism that "fosters knowledge retention through the emerging area of edutainment." In a grammar learning scenario, if teachers regularly incorporate memes into classroom activities, for example, as an introduction to grammar rules, followed by application exercises and then repetition through meme creation, students not only participate momentarily but also build lasting memory traces. Conversely, without repetition, the benefits can fade quickly. Therefore, we can conclude that using memes in grammar learning does not automatically guaranty long-term retention; long-term effects will only be formed when followed by repetition, application, and consistency within the learning context.

Overall, learning grammar through memes has proven effective in capturing attention and increasing students' motivation to learn. Elkhamisy and Sharif (2024) explain that incorporating humor and visual elements into meme-based learning can significantly increase student engagement and encourage their active participation in class activities. By utilizing humor and visuals, memes can create a fun and contextual learning experience, making it easier for students to understand and remember grammar rules. However, as stated by García Martín et al. (2022), the use of humor will be effective in increasing motivation and learning outcomes if accompanied by consistent teaching strategies. This means the positive effects of memes won't last long without continued practice. Therefore, in order for learning to result in long-term retention, teachers need to combine the use of memes with active learning strategies such as discussion, repetition, reflection, and real-world application. This aligns with the findings of Hattab and Salem (2023), who stated that “*memes can foster long term learning outcomes when embedded in repeated instructional contexts*. Thus, it can be concluded that memes are not just a tool for entertainment in the classroom, but can be a meaningful learning strategy when used continuously and integrated into the learning process, promoting deep understanding and long term retention.

3.3 Differences Between Young and Adult Learners

In language learning, visual approaches and humor are known to have a significant effect on increasing student engagement and motivation. For example, literature studies show that integrating verbal visual elements such as images and text in communication (like comics, memes, emojis) can strengthen meaning-making and language learning processes. Furthermore, humor in the context of language learning has been seen as a cognitive tool that strengthens memory and increases learning interest. Because today's students are increasingly familiar with digital visual media and pop culture, an approach that combines visuals + humor is becoming increasingly relevant. The reason for using Western memes as a teaching medium for Western grammar is that the digitally distributed humorous image/text format offers a rich combination of visuals, text, and cultural context. Some studies suggest that using memes in language classrooms helps create a positive, engaging learning environment and facilitates understanding of complex concepts (including grammar) through humor and visual association. Additionally, memes also support digital literacy and multimodality, making them suitable for the learning styles of young people who are accustomed to social media and visual content. Thus, using Western memes as a teaching medium for grammar is seen as an innovative strategy that can increase student motivation and strengthen understanding of language structure. This study aims to analyze how different responses emerge between young and adult students when they use Western memes as a grammar learning medium. Thus, the research focus includes: (1) exploring the extent to which the two age groups have different levels of engagement, acceptance, and understanding of meme-based media, and (2) examining the implications of these age differences for the effectiveness of using memes in teaching grammar.

To summarize the reviewed literature, Table 1 presents the main findings, research gaps, and results from 25 studies related to meme-based grammar and language learning published between 2020 and 2025.

no	Name	Title	Result
1	(Truong and Lambert 2025)	Learner-generated content and teachers' collaborative planning on using memes in EFL instruction	Learner generated memes foster richer collaboration, creativity, and pedagogical reflection.
2	Poddubnaya et al. (2022)	Using Internet Memes in Teaching English Grammar to Students of Pedagogical Programs	Memes increase Engagement and improve grammar correction skills.
3	(Antón-Sancho et al. 2022)	Usability of Memes and Humorous Resources in Virtual Learning Environments	Teachers see memes as effective for motivation and participation in online classes.

4	Ugalingan et al. (2022)	The Pedagogy of Multiliteracy and Multimodality through Memes	Meme-making promotes critical thinking, creativity, and multiliteracy.
5	(Francisco Junior et al. 2023)	Science by Means of Memes? Meanings of Covid-19 in Brazil	Only few memes convey scientific knowledge; humor mixes critique and awareness.
6	Kilpeläinen (2021)	Memorable Language: Sociolinguistic Analysis on Internet Memes	Memes represent creative language play and online identity.
7	(Peeters et al. 2021)	On the Vernacular Language Games of an Antagonistic Online Subculture	Memes shape cultural identity and foster linguistic innovation
8	(Verheijen and Van Hout 2022)	Manifold Code-Mixing in Computer-Mediated Communication	English words in memes enrich Dutch youth's online language.
9	(Lu et al. 2022)	Towards Building an Open-Domain Dialogue System Incorporated with Internet Memes	Integrating memes into AI dialogue improves engagement and emotion recognition.
10	(Altukruni 2022)	A Systematic Literature Review on the Integration of Internet Memes in EFL/ESL Classrooms	Memes boost learner motivation, participation, and creativity.
11	(Oliveira et al. 2025)	Memes, Online Education and Teacher Training in Digital Culture	Memes enhance digital literacy, engagement, and reflection in teacher education.
12	(Zhang et al. 2022)	Learners' Perceived Advantages and Social-Affective Dispositions toward Online Peer Feedback	Memes and emojis foster empathy and positive feedback in online writing.
13	(Alaiyed 2025)	Internet Memes and Gender: A Pragmatic Analysis of Saudi EFL Students	Male and female students use memes differently; males for humor, females for emotion.
14	Tu et al. (2023)	Using Memes to Promote Student Engagement and Classroom Community During Remote Learning	Memes reduce stress and strengthen peer connection in remote classes.
15	(Greijdanus, Van De Wetering, and Roos 2025)	Humor and Social Norms on Social Media	Humorous memes mobilize engagement for social and humanitarian action.
16	(Barnes et al. 2024)	Topicality Boosts Popularity: NYT Articles and Reddit Memes	Trending topics increase meme virality and popularity.
17	(Kolber 2024)	Ancient Methods & Modern Memes: Socratic Circles and TikTok in Teaching	Memes and TikTok democratize learning and stimulate critical discussion.

18	(Tidy et al. 2024)	Enhancing the Student Learning Experience through Memes	91% of students found meme activities fun; 85% said they improved recall.
19	(Trillò 2023)	The Cross-Cultural Valuation of Good Morning Memes	Younger users value humor and irony; older users prefer connection.
20	(Ramadhan and Anjaniputra 2025)	Ableist and Non-Ableist Meaning Making of Internet Memes.	Half of memes promote inclusion; others reinforce stereotypes.
21	(Msisa, Stamenkovic, and Dvorak n.d.) 2024	Exploring the Role of Memes in English Language Learning and Opinion Formation	Memes help students learn informal English and express opinions.
22	(Neff and Dewaele 2023)	Humor Strategies in the Foreign Language Class	Memes and humor increase enjoyment and engagement.
23	(Vásquez and Aslan 2021)	Multimodal Humor and Creativity in an Internet Meme	Humor arises from linguistic play and visual-textual interaction.
24	(Tianli et al. 2024)	A Systematic Review of Humor in ESP Teaching in Asia	Humor reduces anxiety and enhances motivation when contextually used.
25	(Kalyuzhna et al. 2023)	Presenting Grammar through Internet Memes in Teaching ESP	Meme-based grammar teaching increases test results and creativity.

Table 2. Important Findings from Selected Studies (2020–2025)

Conclusion

Based on the results of a systematic literature review, this study addresses the main objective of analyzing the extent to which Western memes can function as a grammar learning medium in the EFL context. The findings indicate that using memes not only increases students' motivation and emotional engagement but also reduces learning anxiety and strengthens social bonds within the classroom. The main mechanism at play is the combination of humor, visual elements, and cultural context, which makes learning more interactive and enjoyable. Additionally, the impact of learning through memes can be long-term if integrated consistently into teaching and learning activities. These positive effects don't just arise from the entertainment factor, but also from repetition, real-world application, and deep reflection, which support the retention of grammatical memory. Meanwhile, the comparison results between young and adult students show differences in emotional responses and levels of acceptance toward visual humor. Younger students tend to be more enthusiastic and adapt quickly to meme culture, while older students are more selective and require cultural context to avoid misunderstandings. Thus, Western memes have proven effective as a learning aid capable of integrating cognitive, affective, and social aspects in English grammar learning. However, its effectiveness depends on selecting an appropriate cultural context, clear instructional scaffolding, and integration with other active learning strategies.

Further research is suggested to conduct direct empirical experiments in the classroom to measure the long-term impact of meme usage on students' grammar retention and academic performance. Additionally, research can broaden its focus on cultural and gender differences in interpreting humor in memes, making learning more inclusive and relevant for all students. On the other hand, developing a

digital pedagogical model based on artificial intelligence (AI) is also important, so that the system can automatically adjust memes to each student's learning style and cultural background. Furthermore, several advanced studies using experimental approaches and neurolinguistic analysis are also being developed to evaluate the relationship between digital humor, positive emotional activation, and long-term memory formation in the context of language learning

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