"[Grammar is] even pleasant": Finnish upper secondary school students' attitudes towards grammar instruction as active users of internet English

Bachelor's thesis

Heini Kämäräinen

JYVÄSKYLÄN YLIOPISTO

Tiivistelmä – Abstract

Kieliopin opettaminen on ollut jo kauan aikaa varsin suosittu tutkimuskohde ja usein tutkijat pyrkivät selvittämään, miten kielioppia tulisi opettaa. Kieltenopetus pyritään nykyään yhdistämään autenttisiin puhetilanteisiin, joita lapset ja nuoret kohtaavat arjessa. Nykyään suomalaiset lapset ja nuoret viestivät paljon englannin kielellä digitaalisissa ympäristöissä, joissa kieli on kovin erilaista verrattuna luokkahuoneessa käytettävään kieleen. Tämän myötä on herännyt kysymys siitä, kuinka relevanttia kieliopin opettaminen todellisuudessa on, jos standardin kielen mukainen kielioppi kuitenkin jätetään huomiotta arjen kommunikaatiossa.

Tämän tutkimuksen aineisto kerättiin nettikyselynä, johon osallistui 16 opiskelijaa eräästä suomalaisesta lukiosta. Kyselyllä pyrittiin kartoittamaan opiskelijoiden näkemyksiä siitä, millaista on sekä internetissä että luokkahuoneessa käytettävä englanti ja millaisena opiskelijat kokevat nykyisen kieliopin opetuksen koulussa.

Suuri osa opiskelijoiden kokemuksista kielenkäytöstä internetissä liittyi sosiaaliseen mediaan. Tutkimuksen tuloksista kävi ilmi, että opiskelijoilla on varsin selkeä kuva siitä, että internetin englanti ja luokkahuoneen englanti ovat erilaisia keskenään. Tuloksista oli nähtävissä samankaltaisia internetin englannin piirteitä kuin aikaisemmissa tutkimuksissa on löydetty. Lisäksi selvisi, että opiskelijat kokevat kieliopin opetuksen suhteellisen yksitoikkoisena ja jopa pitkäveteisenä, vaikkakin tärkeänä osana kieltenopetusta. Samalla esiin nousi toiveita uusista tavoista opettaa kielioppia.

Muita tietoja – Additional information

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1 INTRODUCTION

Grammar instruction has been the target of research for a long time, as researchers attempt to build an understanding of the ways grammar is, or should be, implemented in language learning. Language education in Finland is in constant change due to the developing ideas on language learning and teaching. Language learning is connected more closely to authentic language use that occurs outside of formal educational settings, such as digital platforms. Virtual communication is a part of modern life, and it is fair to assume that most children and teenagers are familiar with language use online (Tilak and Sundke 2021: 4799). However, the English used in digital contexts is quite different from standard English taught in the language classroom. In some previous research, internet English has even been referred to as its own language variety (Tahir and Hassan 2021: 33). The grammar rules children and adolescents learn in formal education are often neglected in online interaction which created the inspiration for the present study. Adolescents are active participants in online communication which is why it can be assumed that they are familiar with the main characteristics of internet English. For this reason, internet language has also been called "the language of the contemporary youth" (Tagliamonte 2015; Aziz, Shamim, Faisal Aziz and Avais 2013). Even though internet English and its features still remain a new subject of research in Finland, the topic has been researched outside of Finland before. There is a vast amount of research that has identified the same salient features of internet English (Swanström 2020; Tagliamonte 2015; Tilak and Sundke 2021). Nevertheless, virtual communication in English is so common today, even in Finland, that it requires more detailed analysis.

The present study has two main points: the salient features of internet English and the importance of grammar instruction as a part of language learning. The purpose of this study is to gather information on internet English and opinions on the current grammar instruction from upper secondary school students. The connection between the two main points is made through an evaluation of internet language, a variety often used by adolescents, and whether grammar teaching is relevant, if still ignored in authentic language use. The data was gathered with an online questionnaire in an upper secondary school in Finland and analysed by utilising a hybrid form of content analysis.

I will begin by introducing the theoretical framework, key concepts and previous research done on the topic. Next, the current study is presented, including the research aims and questions, the target group and methods of data collection and analysis. The next section presents the findings of the study and a more detailed analysis, followed by conclusion and implications for future research.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In order to understand the need for the present study, it is important to gather information on previous research conducted on the topic, or related topics. The current topic has been studied to some extent by foreign researchers, but the amount of research on the Finnish field of study is significantly small. Even though research conducted on grammar instruction has been quite extensive, also in Finland, the importance of proper grammar in the light of internet language use should be given more attention as a topic of research.

The previous research articles share findings that are in this section categorised into five subsections. These sections include students' and teachers' thoughts on grammar instruction, characteristics of internet language, internet language use across different registers, electronic English as the language of the youth and, lastly, effects of electronic discourse on students' academic performance.

2.1 Thoughts on grammar instruction

Traditionally, *grammar instruction* involves memorising rules and practising the grammar theory through repetition (Harrity 2012: 1). Grammar instruction is often researched in the light of how grammar teaching should be developed. The development ideas are based on attitudes towards current grammar teaching and learning, and the opinions are usually gathered from either students or teachers. Polat (2017) attempts to gather information about teachers' personal attitudes on teaching grammar by using the Teacher's English Grammar Attitude Scale (TEGAS). Different variables are taken into

consideration and, according to the results, age and teaching experience create significant differences in the views on grammar teaching but gender does not. Although teachers are active participants in grammar lessons in the same way students are, the focus of the present study is exclusively on the students' perspective.

Opinions and attitudes towards grammar instruction are, naturally, subjective and cannot be reliably generalised which is also important to keep in mind with the current study. Akay and Toraman (2015) investigated university students' attitudes towards grammar learning through several variables, which include gender, age, faculty, time spent on language learning and proficiency level. The results show that only one variable, faculty, poses significant differences in the responses. Thus, students in faculties of education and humanities view grammar learning more positively than students of economics or business studies. It is important to note that even if in the present study only the personal opinions and experiences of students were taken into account and other variables were overlooked, previous research has proved that other variables can also affect the results of research on this topic. In terms of different variables that affect opinions on grammar teaching, another variable might be the methods the teacher uses to teach grammar. Nagaratnam and Al-Mekhlafi (2013) present in their study pre-service student teachers' attitudes towards two teaching methods, which are inductive and deductive. According to the findings, most participants favour deductive methods over inductive methods because presenting grammar in authentic tasks would make learning it more pleasant for students.

Grammar instruction and the attitudes towards it has also been studied in Finnish context before. In a study by Saaristo (2015), Finnish university students discuss the role of grammar in language teaching, and the aims of the research are very similar compared to the present study. The goal was to find out what students think of grammar teaching and how it could be improved, so it would be pleasant and effective to the students. The results show that some participants think of grammar as the foundation of language, whereas others describe it as a system of set rules. Many of the responses include quite strong statements, such as *essential*, *a central role* or *important.* Students often recognize grammar as an essential part of language learning, even if, in some cases, they find it quite boring (Sormunen 2013: 14.) Grammar instruction might be condemned as boring due to its unvaried nature and the traditional practices of

memorising grammatical rules. Nevertheless, in a study by Sormunen (2013: 14), students find grammar learning pleasant because there is a limited amount of grammar rules to learn. In a way, they rely on grammar instruction as a foundation of producing the language themselves. The results that contradict one another prove that one's view on grammar in general is subjective and is influenced by the methods they have been taught. Also, for young learners with no linguistic knowledge the opinion on grammar and language learning, too, relies on outside factors, such as the teacher and the atmosphere for learning in language class.

2.2 Characteristics of internet language

Even though internet language is in written form, it deviates significantly from standard written English. Internet language is more free in form and does not usually follow the grammatical rules of standard English. Today, researchers are interested to find out what speakers may do with language in a modern setting, such as digital communication (Swanström 2020: 4). In the current study, *internet English* is used to refer to the English language use that occurs in digital communication. In some previous research, digital language use is connected to the field of computer-mediated communication (CMC), which focuses on social effects of communication with electronic devices (Hård af Segerstad 2002). There are certain characteristics that are apparent in internet English which has, thus, been called its own language variety. AbuSa'leek (2015) introduces the notion of electronic discourse, or e-discourse, whose common features are gathered through an analysis of 340 messages written by Saudi Arabian college undergraduate students. The most common characteristics of e-discourse, according to the findings, are unconventional spellings, contractions, word-letter replacement and shortenings. Moreover, the findings conclude that even though the students' text messages include the most common features of e-discourse, the language is not as non-standard as, like AbuSa'leek (2015: 142) states, "the media pictured and want us to believe." However, it was not defined what type of messages are accepted, as long as they fit the presented e-discourse. Therefore, although the results showed that the language in the messages were not as non-standard as anticipated, it should be carefully considered whether or not the results can be generalised.

In the study by Swanström (2020), the language alternations in digital discourse are referred to as Digital Code Plays (DGPs). The participants are Finnish adolescents whose Whatsapp messages are the target of analysis in the study. As noted before in terms of AbuSa'leek's (2015) study, the selection of messages was not restricted in any way. Although the analysis discusses the main features of the language in the messages, the focus is also on other aspects, such as semantic plays and code-switching. Popular culture is also closely featured in the interaction, for example in the form of memes. Pictures of memes are used as a part of communication but, in some cases, certain memes are referred to in text-form, suggesting that the participants of the discussion have seen the picture of the meme before. In a similar way, Hård af Segerstad (2002: 140) recognises the use of visuals by listing emoticons as a common feature as well. Emoticons replace the loss of visual aids in conversation, such as body movements and facial expressions. The findings show that only the simplest emoticons are used because they are easy to interpret and quick to type (Hård af Segerstad 2002: 140). Therefore, it can be concluded that visuals are a significant part of electronic discourse as well.

2.3 Language use in different digital registers

Some studies extend the analysis of internet language across multiple registers in order to find out whether written online discourse takes different forms on different platforms. Some digital registers can be considered more formal than others, and there are previous studies that analyse the language use in quite different registers, for example email, text message, web chat, instant message or Facebook message (Hård af Segerstad 2002; Tagliamonte 2015; Kemp and Clayton 2017.) The respondents often associate emails with formal contexts, since they are used to communicate with parents, professors or employers. Text messaging uses more spelling variations and unique linguistic phenomena, such as acronyms and intensifiers, are evident (Tagliamonte 2015: 27.) In another study, Kemp and Clayton (2017) examine the use of *textese*, the language of virtual communication, in emails and Facebook messages. The findings indicate that textese is more commonly used on Facebook than in emails and the reason for that is the expected audience, which is peers and friends. Another reason is that emails are often accessed via computer, on which there is no need for quick typing or space-saving (Kemp and Clayton 2017). However, constructing electronic messages might be

challenging since the norms of digital discourse are not yet clear. The users struggle in attempting to construct a message that follows a language similar to speech in form, while still remaining in written format (Hård af Segerstad 2002: 119).

2.4 The language of the youth

It is evident that there are generational differences in the use of language on the internet. Internet language could be considered a variety mostly used by young people. This is important to note in terms of the current study, since the target group is upper secondary school students. According to Thurlow (2006, cited in Tagliamonte 2015: 6), computer-mediated communication (CMC) and young people as its users pose a threat to standard language. However, language is always changing and there remains the question whether CMC actually affects the normal processes of language change. In the study by Tilak and Sundke (2021: 4802), internet language is referred to as crippled or slang. This suggests that the language the youth is using on the internet is incorrect but it should be noted that it is only condemned as incorrect in comparison to the standard form of language. A study by Tagliamonte (2015: 45) also claims that CMC is the root of language ruin, since students bring the features of online discourse into the classroom which negatively affects their academic performance. Besides possible negative effects, Ivanović, Törteli Telek, Molnár, Jinil, Szűts and Vilmos Samu (2020: 1175), conclude that the use of slang language includes psychological factors, such as a desire to belong to a peer group. Shared language variety also creates a sense of togetherness, along with a way to separate the youth from the older language speakers.

Sánchez-Moya and Cruz-Moya (2015) used generational comparison in order to find out how the texting language of teenagers and adults differ. The findings showed that although teenagers use more non-standard language in texting, the differences are not as vast as originally expected. In the light of possible language ruin, the findings proved that teenagers are able to recognize when non-standard forms are appropriate to use. In addition, teenagers recognize spelling mistakes more effectively than adults, which suggests that unconventional spellings are a choice, rather than an unintentional error.

2.5 Effects of internet language use on academic performance

Due to the increasing use of digital communication, educators and parents are concerned whether the use of non-standard virtual language has a negative effect on the academic performance of students. However, previous research has found out that possible effects can occur as well. Van Dijk, Van Witteloostuij, Vasić, Avrutin and Blom (2016: 5) explore the influence of textese on children's performance regarding grammar learning. Their hypothesis was that the use of textese positively affects children's grammar performance, and the hypothesis turned out to be correct: Omitting words in textese use results in an improved grammar system. Verheijen (2019: 15) poses a question of whether CMC has an influence on Dutch youth's literacy. The results support the hypothesis in the study, which means that even though students use an informal language in CMC, they are still able to adapt to a formal register appropriately, in terms of proper grammar. Similar conclusions can be found in the study by Tagliamonte (2015), where it is claimed that there is evidently no degeneration in standard grammar when using language in online environments. The grammar use might be different in comparison with traditional standard language, but the young users of the electronic discourse are only navigating through different registers. The effects of internet language have also been studied in higher educational levels and the results are still very similar as the studies presented above have shown. Aziz, Shamim, Faizal Aziz and Avais (2013) study how the common features of texting language are visible in texts of undergraduate students, aged from 19 to 25. The discussion indicates that switching registers from informal to formal is effortless and students are able to use proper language due to consciousness of context. When analysing how informal language use affects formal language use, it is crucial to understand that the use of improper language does not necessarily diminish knowledge on proper language use. Different language varieties can exist in one's language repertoire together, without replacing each other. Therefore, as discussed before, the key is to understand when a certain language is appropriate and to be able to adjust one's own language use in terms of the context.

3 THE PRESENT STUDY

This section introduces the research questions and aims, along with the target group, the methods of data collection and data analysis.

3.1 Research aim and questions

The main aim of this study is to gather information about the current methods for teaching grammar, from the point of view of Finnish upper secondary school students who are exposed daily to the English language on the internet. The point of view in question is important because while students learn grammar systematically in the school environment, they still encounter, and even use, improper grammar in digital contexts. For this reason, it is worth researching whether the current grammar instruction practices are effective and if they should be improved. Therefore, the research questions for this study are:

> 1. How do upper secondary school students describe the language used in the registers of (1) the language classroom and (2) the internet?

> 2. What do upper secondary school students think of the current grammar instruction, in the light of the modern digital language discourses?

The word *register* in the first research question refers to English used in both classroom and digital contexts. The assumption is that English is used differently in these two contexts, and there are explicit differences that indicate that these two varieties of English have their own distinctive features. In the present study, internet English is considered as its own language variety. Previously, internet English has been given quite different names, such as *electronic discourse* (Muniandy 2002), *SMS language* (Aziz, Shamim, Faisal Aziz and Avais 2013) and *netspeak* (Tahir and Hassan 2021). The second research question is about grammar instruction, a phenomena that has been studied to some extent in the recent decades. However, as stated before, the point of view of digital contexts brings a fresh angle to the study.

3.2 Participants

The target group of the present study was Finnish upper secondary school students from one institution in Finland. All the participants were learning English as a foreign language. Since the institution chosen for this study was quite small, the participating students were not chosen by age but merely the fact that they are attending an upper secondary school. In other words, students from all grades participated in the study and age was not a considerable factor. In total, 16 students participated in the study. Regarding the ethics of the study, the participants were asked to sign a permit which indicated the voluntary nature, as well as the anonymity of the participation. Since some of the participants were under aged, their guardians were asked to sign the permit. In addition, the research required permits from the municipality authorities and the headmaster of the upper secondary school. In terms of anonymity, the questionnaire used for data collection did not include any personal questions about the participants, age or gender for instance. It was also emphasised to the participants that they cannot be identified from the data.

The target group was chosen to fit the main goals of the study. The reason I chose upper secondary school students to be the target group was because of the concern and uncertainty of the quality of the responses. I believe that if I had chosen a lower education level, lower secondary school level, for instance, the responses would have been less well-thought-out and, thus, less beneficial for this study. Another reason for the target group choice was that the English level of upper secondary school students is higher, which might lead to the students participating more actively in conversations online in English. Moreover, upper secondary school students are likely to be more capable of critically viewing their language use on the internet, as well as analysing the characteristics of both internet and classroom language.

3.3 Data collection

McNeill and Chapman (2015: 9) introduce three concepts that should be taken into consideration when choosing a method for data collection. These concepts are reliability, validity and representativeness. The method of data collection is reliable, if

the same results received from the study could be achieved by someone else using the same method. Validity of the data refers to the problem of whether the received data is the genuine picture of what is being studied. In the light of the present study, McNeill and Chapman (2015: 9) conclude well: "This is particularly relevant in attitude surveys, where it is important not to assume that people's attitudes, on, say, race relations are consistent with their actual behaviour". To put it differently, what the respondents answer needs to be viewed critically by the researcher, since there is no evidence that the answer is genuine. The last concept, representativeness, refers to the question of whether the participating group and its responses represent all groups alike. For example, in the current study, the data was collected from only one upper-secondary school in Finland. Therefore, it is important to carefully analyse whether the findings can be generalised so they apply to all other similar groups as well.

The chosen method for data gathering was an online questionnaire. Questionnaires are effective for collecting information from a large group of people and, as online questionnaires have become more popular in modern times, it is possible to reach participants in different geographical locations (Valli 2017: 21). For this study, the data was collected with an online questionnaire that was distributed to the students in class by the teacher. The questionnaire was in Finnish because it is the main language of the target group. The reason I chose the online form was due to its multiple benefits, but mostly because I believed that filling out the questionnaire online would be more pleasant and appealing to the students, since more and more of their school materials are virtual nowadays.

The questionnaire started with statements using the Likert-scale, followed with open-ended questions for a chance for more qualitative analysis. Regarding questionnaires, a strategic placement of the questions avoids frustration or confusion of the participants, which leads to more reliable answers (Valli 2017: 16-17). Therefore, the statements using the Liker-scale functioned as warm-up questions.

3.4 Methods of analysis

The present study utilised content analysis, a method of highly risen popularity in the field of research. Basic content analysis is often used as a method for quantitative data analysis because it distinctively employs systematic categorization and other similar techniques (Berelson 1952: 18, cited in Drisko and Maschi 2016: 3). However, other approaches to content analysis, such as interpretive content analysis, make the method more suitable for analysing qualitative data (Holsti 1969, cited in Drisko and Maschi 2016: 3). Since the present study consists of both quantitative and qualitative data, a hybrid approach was implemented in the data analysis. Qualitative content analysis follows the main principles of quantitative content analysis and could be described as "a qualitatively orientated category-based content analysis" (Mayring 2019). Categorising is a part of content analysis and could be utilised in sorting out internet language features as well, as AbuSa'aleek (2015: 138) did in their research. Similarly, attitudes and opinions on grammar instruction can be categorised by analysing themes that often occur in the participants' answers. In this study, both the quantitative and qualitative data are presented in the form of categories. First, the Likert scale statements are presented as relative frequencies in two separate figures. Second, the responses to the open-ended questions are categorised based on the sections presented in the theoretical framework chapter of this study. The examples in the data analysis are organised based on the similarities they have. To demonstrate, examples that include thoughts on the methods teachers use in grammar class are grouped together. Similarly, a question regarding the feelings towards grammar teaching is connected to the statements that clearly answer that question.

4 RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The aim of this study was to find out how Finnish upper secondary school students view the English grammar used in digital contexts and, as active internet users, think of the current grammar instruction in the English language classroom. The results were gathered by an online questionnaire and are, in this section, presented and discussed in detail. First, I will present and analyse the responses to the Likert scale statements and, after that, discuss the answers to the open-ended survey questions. The open-ended

questions are categorised into two sections: characteristics of internet English and thoughts on grammar and grammar instruction. To specify the categorisation further, the first three open-ended questions were used to gather information on how the students describe language use in digital contexts and, based on those results, to build understanding of the distinct features of internet English. The second category, which is thoughts on grammar and grammar instruction, includes questions about the grammar instruction the students have received. However, is it important to note here that opinions on grammar in general and opinions on grammar instruction specifically, are not necessarily the same. The grammar instruction a student receives may influence the way they think of grammar. To demonstrate, a student might think of grammar in a negative light due to teaching methods that have not been suitable for them in the past.

4.1 Likert scale statements

The first two questions of the survey consisted of Likert scale statements, to which the participants answered by rating their agreement or disagreement on a scale of 1 to 5. The scale format was the following:

1. Strongly disagree
2. Disagree
3. Neither agree nor disagree/cannot say
4. Agree
5. Strongly agree

The participants were instructed to choose option 3 only when necessary to ensure the validity of the answers.

4.1.1 English language on the internet

The first question had five statements, all of which were related to the participants' English language use on the internet and the grammatical correctness of their language use. The second question had four statements, relating to the current grammar instruction in schools.
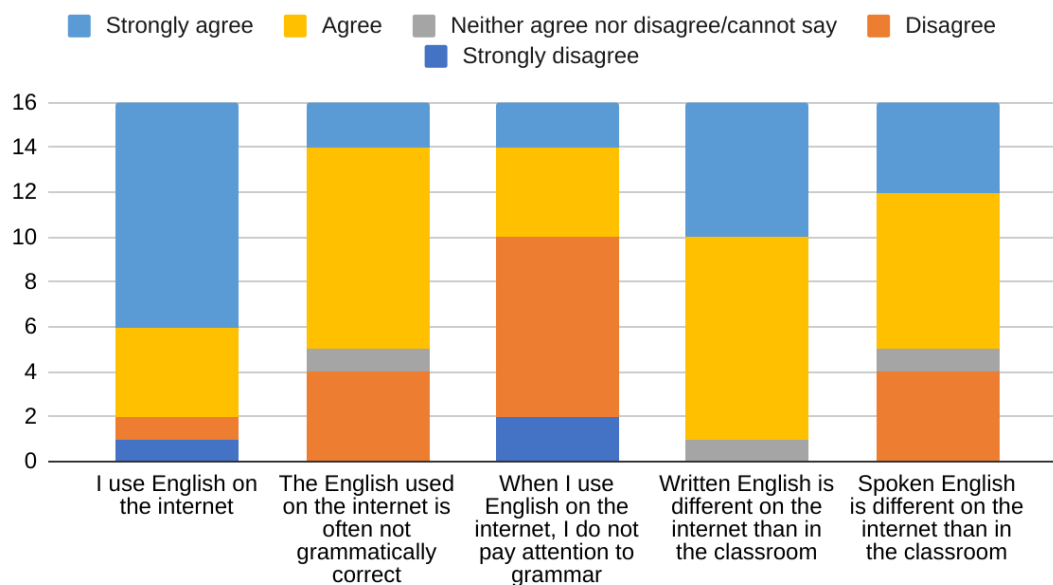
English language on the internet

FIGURE 1. Finnish upper secondary school students' (n = 16) responses to statements regarding their English language use on the internet and the grammatical correctness of their language use.

As can be seen from Figure 1, the majority of the participants, which is 88% (14 of 16), opted for either "Strongly agree" or "Agree" to the first statement "I use English on the internet". Therefore, it can be interpreted that most of the participants use English on the internet. Of course, in this case, the options can be interpreted as the amount of language use. For example, option 2 could mean that the participant uses English a little and option 1 means that the participant does not use English on the internet.

The majority of the participants, 69% (11 of 16), agree with the second statement "The English used on the internet is often not grammatically correct", which indicates that the students have noticed the informal nature of internet English. Regarding the third statement "When I use English on the internet, I do not pay attention to grammar", 62% of the participants (10 of 16) chose either option 1 or 2, which means that the majority pays attention to grammar when using English on the internet. It is still worth noting that the difference is not significant, since 38% (6 of 16) of the participants chose either option 4 or 5, thus displaying agreement with the statement. It is important to note that the second statement "The English used on the internet is often not grammatically correct" refers to the language use of others and, thus, excludes one's own language use. The third statement "When I use English on the internet, I do not pay attention to

grammar", in turn, only refers to the participant's subjective use of the language. The results indicate that it is possible that one might view correct grammar as an important aspect of their own language use, but not mind grammatical incorrectness of others.

The fourth statement "Written English is different on the internet than in the classroom" and the fifth statement "Spoken English is different on the internet than in the classroom" are quite similar in content but the answers differ a little. Although in both statements most of the participants, which is 94% (15 of 16) in the fourth statement and 69% (11 of 16) in the fifth statement, showed agreement, with the fifth statement the answers are more multipolar. 25% (4 of 16) of the respondents disagreed with the fifth statement and, therefore, think that spoken English is not so different on the internet compared to the classroom environment. This might be because the features of internet English, such as abbreviations or unconventional spellings are clear in written language but harder to hear in spoken language. In addition, electronic discourse basically shares features of both written and spoken discourse so, in terms of internet language, the notion of a hybrid discourse is more appropriate (Muniandy 2002: 45).

4.1.2 Grammar instruction in the English classroom

The second question had four statements, relating to the current grammar instruction in schools. The statements were designed to gather information of subjective experiences the students have had in the English classroom.

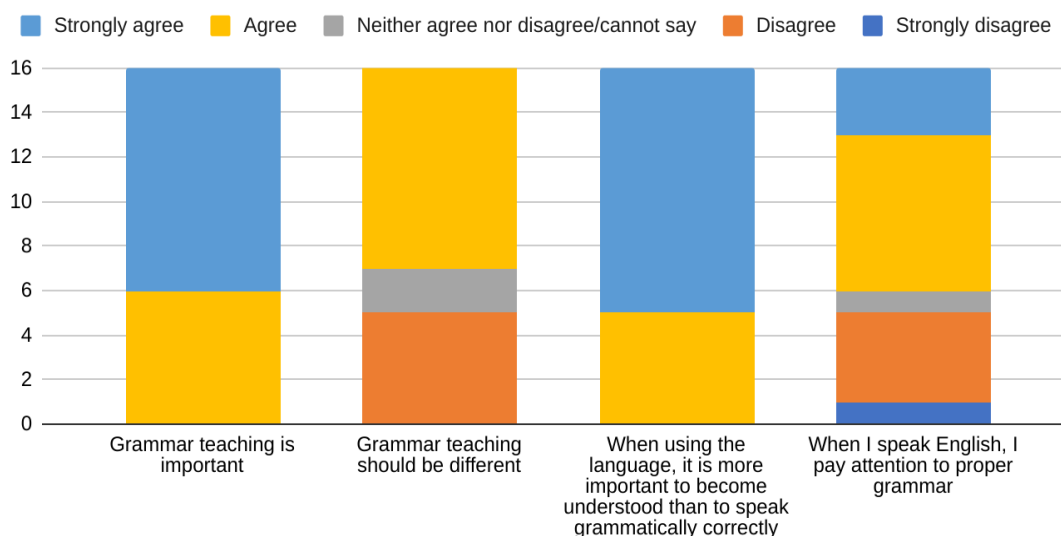## Grammar instruction in the English classroom

FIGURE 2. Finnish upper secondary school students (n =16) responses to statements regarding their opinions on the current grammar instruction.

As mentioned before, the second question of the survey was also done with Likert scale statements, all of which related to the current grammar instruction. The data in Figure 2 shows that the participants were quite unanimous in their answers for the first statement "Grammar teaching is important". 37% (6 of 16) of the participants opted for option 4 and 63% (10 of 16) opted for option 5. Therefore, it can be concluded that students view grammar as valuable in language teaching, although opinions may vary when it comes to the individual suitability of the teaching methods that the teacher utilises. Similar perceptions have been expressed before in Finnish research (Saaristo 2015: 298). Furthermore, 56% (9 of 16) of the participants agreed that grammar teaching should be different than it currently is. 31% (5 of 16) of the participants disagreed with the statement, whereas 13% (2 of 16) of the participants chose option 3, hence indicating a neutral opinion on the matter.

With the statement "When using the language, it is more important to become understood than to speak grammatically correctly" all the responses indicated unanimous agreement, although of different amounts, since both options 4 and 5 were chosen. Most participants, which is 69% (11 of 16), strongly agreed with the statement, while 37% (5 of 16) of the participants chose option 4. As a conclusion, students find fluent communicative competence important in language use, even though it might

include grammatical errors. Extensive emphasis on grammar learning might even demotivate students to communicate and undermine fluent language use (Nagaratnam and Al-Mekhlafi 2013: 81). The statement "When I speak English, I pay attention to proper grammar" gave more differing responses. 44% (7 of 16) of the respondents opted for option 4 and 19% (3 of 16) chose option 5. Because 31% (5 of 16) of the participants chose either option 1 or 2, it can be stated that the majority agrees with the statement. According to Hartwell (1985: 109, cited in Harrity 2012: 4), the knowledge on the formal patterns of language is deeply rooted in the mind and is difficult to banish. Therefore, it affects the interaction in a way that one is forced to pay attention to grammar in speech, because they have been taught to do so.

The reason these statements are important is because the current discussion on whether grammar teaching should be connected more closely to authentic language use and if more communicative practices should be implemented in teaching (Polat 2017: 380). Moreover, the responses on the statement "When using the language, it is more important to become understood than to speak grammatically correctly" align with opinions found in previous research, where it was mentioned that more emphasis should be put on speech rather than grammar (Saaristo 2015: 295).

4.2 Open-ended questions

The second part of the survey consisted of six open-ended questions, where the students could share their answers freely. The second part had questions about the platforms where the students encounter or use English, how they describe the English used in digital platforms and in the language classroom, how the students have been taught English and how they feel about it and, lastly, why they think grammar teaching is a part of language learning.

Question 3 "On which internet platforms do you encounter or use English?" was used to find out which online platforms and sites the students normally use the most. The question resulted in quite a range of digital platforms for different purposes. Most participants listed social media platforms, of which Instagram, TikTok and Snapchat were mentioned several times. It was anticipated that social media would be explicit in

the responses, since it is publicly available and has allowed technology to be a part of everyday life (Tahir and Hassan 2021: 37). Other sites included, for example, Youtube, Facebook and Pinterest, along with streaming media services, such as Netflix. Wikipedia was also mentioned a couple times, which is no surprise taking into consideration the target group of the study; upper secondary school students might seek for information for school work on Wikipedia and, because of the role of English as the global lingua franca, the information they look for will most likely be in English.

4.2.1 Characteristics of internet English

One of the main purposes of this study was to gather information on how upper secondary school students in Finland would describe the English used on the internet, and whether it differs from the English in a language classroom. With questions 4 and 5, the aim was to gather salient features of English in both of the aforementioned contexts. The answers aligned strongly with previous studies on the subject. AbuSa'leek (2015) presented the electronic discourse and its characteristics, some of which were also in the answers of the survey. The following examples are responses to Question 4 "How would you describe the language you encounter or use on the internet (especially grammar)? You can give examples, such as words/sentences/idioms or other ways the language is used.":

(1) Netissä epävirallisia postauksia selaillessa tulee törmättyä tosi puhekieliseen englantiin, sanoja lyhennellään ja väännetään paljon. Esimerkkeinä 'imma' 'tryna' you ->u
When browsing for informal posts on the internet, one often encounters very informal English, words are shortened and twisted a lot. For example 'imma' 'tryna' you->u

(2) Monesti ei puhuta kieliopilliseati oikein, vaan käytetään lyhenteitä sanoista ja kielioppia ei oikestaan ole ollenkaan. Paljon puhekieltä kirjoitettuna.
Often one does not speak grammatically correctly, but uses abbreviations of words and grammar does not actually exist at all. A lot of informal language in written form.

(3) Netissä käyttämäni englannin kieli on huomattavasti rennompaa eikä esim. ehkä sanajärjestyksellä ole niin paljon merkitystä kun minut kuitenkin ymmärretään. Lisäksi on pieniä kirjoituseroja, kuten "you":n voi kirjoittaa "u" tai "your" voi olla "ur".
The English language I use on the internet is significantly more free and, for example, word order might not have as much meaning because I am still understood. In addition, there are small differences in writing, like "you" can be written as "u" or "your" can be "ur".

Examples 1, 2 and 3 mentioned shortening or clipping of words as a common feature of internet speech. Unconventional spellings and word combinations, such as "imma" or "tryna", were also brought up, and have also been mentioned as salient features of internet speech in previous studies (AbuSa'aleek 2015; Sánchez-Moya and Cruz-Moya 2015; Verheijen 2019).

The communication on the internet is instant and, in that way, similar to spoken language, even though it appears in written form. The language needs to be modified to fit the quick manner of conversation. That is why the digital discourse cannot be categorised as purely written, because it shares the features of both written and spoken discourses (Muniandy 2002.) The online language's connection to spoken language, as well as the need for quick communication, was also mentioned in the responses of Question 4:

(4) Internetissä pyritään nopeampaan viestin välitykseen jos vertaisi esimerkiksi englannin essee-vastauksiin. Ero on aika samanlainen, jos miettii vaikkapa sitä, miten suomea kirjoitetaan "tieteellisiin" tarkoituksiin ja miten sitä käytetään esimerkiksi Whatsapp-palvelussa. Varsinkin peleissä kaikenlaiset muutaman kirjaimen lyhenteet ovat suosittuja. Muualla, esim. sosiaalisessa mediassa, voidaan käyttää vakiintuneita ilmauksia, joita ei niinkään "kirjakielessä" käytetä. *On the internet one aims for quicker message delivery than in, for example, English essay answers. The difference is quite similar when thinking of how Finnish is written for "scientific" purposes and how it is used on, for example, Whatsapp. Especially in games all kinds of abbreviations of a couple letters are popular. In other places, e. G. in social media, one can use established expressions, which are not used in written standard language.*

According to Example 4, students seem to recognize the language change that takes place when moving between places where language use happens, for example the change from a language classroom to an internet forum. Language choices are based on the perceptions of what is appropriate to a certain context, along with the audience the message is intended to (Kemp and Clayton 2016). In a way, the purpose of internet language is not only to communicate but to entertain which leads to playful and creative ways to use the language (Ivanović, Törteli Telek, Molnár, Jinil, Szűts and Vilmos Samu 2020: 1167-1168). It can be assumed that since students recognize the changes in language between registers, they are also able to alter their own language use to fit the register appropriately.

The responses to Question 5 "How would you describe the language you encounter or use in the classroom (especially grammar)? You can give examples, such as words/sentences/idioms or other ways the language is used." displayed further the explicit differences between the two language registers. A couple thoughts that were mentioned several times in the responses were the representation of only one variation of English, clear connection to Standard English and learning based on theory and exceptions in grammar rules in English. These phenomena were put to words as follows:

(5) Se kuulostaa hyvin usein aina samalta, että esim. erilaisia murteita tai tapoja puhuja ei kuule juurikaan. Toisin kuin netissä kuulee paljon eri tapoja puhua englantia. Luokkahuoneessa tietysti mm. Sanajärjestyksellä on merkitystä ja lauseet ovat pidempiä ja ehkä jotenkin monimutkaisempia.
It sounds very often the same and, for example, there are no different dialects or ways of speaking. On the internet, on the contrary, one hears a lot of different ways of speaking English. In the classroom, of course, i. a. Word order matters and sentences are longer and maybe somehow more complex.

(6) Siellä keskitytään pikkuasioihin ja mm. kieliopissa keskitytään paljon poikkeuksiin. Asioita käydään enemmän läpiä teoriassa, kuin käytännön tasolla.
There small things are paid attention to and i. a. In grammar one pays attention a lot to exceptions. Things are processed more in theory, than in practice.

The variety of English that is commonly taught in Finnish language classrooms is British English. Other varieties are rarely taught in the same depth but are often only briefly introduced. On the internet, more varieties and dialects are used and the users of the internet are, therefore, more easily exposed to new language conventions and, for example, multiple ways of word spelling or pronunciation.

4.2.2 Thoughts on grammar and grammar teaching

In the core of the present research is the question of the importance of grammar instruction in the light of the new digital language discourse. In a response to Question 5, the possibility of connecting the two contexts of language use, internet and classroom, was brought up in Example 7:

(7) Mielestäni luokkahuoneessa käytetty kielioppi on todella paljon virallisempaa. Itselle voisi olla helpompaa sisäistää kielioppisääntöjä, jos esim. Mallilauseet olisivat otettu internetistä tai niissä käytettäisiin helpompia sanoja.

To my mind, the grammar used in the classroom is a lot more formal. Personally, it could be easier to internalise grammar rules if, for example, exemplary sentences were taken from the internet or there were easier words used in them.

Perhaps the benefits of grammar teaching were more visible to students if the teaching was more closely connected to environments where students often encounter language which is, in this case, online. Again, the need for more authentic language use is evident, in order to make grammar learning meaningful (Nagaratnam and Al-Mekhlafi 2013: 82; Polat 2017: 380). The presence of grammar online is different compared to a classroom setting, as Example 8 shows:

(8) Luokkahuoneessa kielioppiin keskitytään enemmän kuin internetissä, koska sitä arvioidaan. Kielioppi netissä on "rajoitettu" oikeastaan vain mielikuvitteellisesti siten, ttä ihmiset kuitenkin vielä ymmärtäisivät, mitä tarkoitetaan.
In the classroom, grammar is focused on more than on the internet, because it is evaluated. The grammar on the internet is actually "limited" only imaginarily in the way that people would still understand what is meant.

Interestingly, the importance of grammar here, in Example 8, is connected to evaluation in the classroom. It is true that evaluation is continuous in the classroom, not only in the form of tests, but in every lesson as well. Here, the participant also described the use of grammar online only limited by imagination, because grammar in speech is more implicit and what matters is that others understand the message one attempts to convey. In a way, online platforms are an imaginary space for language use (Yates 2001: 106, cited in Muniandy 2002: 45). The online language discourse is not restricted by the same standards as the traditional written discourse but is more unexpected and spontaneous (AbuSa'aleek 2015: 137). Although, the comprehensibility of the language depends on whether or not the recipient is familiar with the internet language.

Questions 6, 7 and 8 were about the students' subjective experiences of the grammar teaching they have received. In previous Finnish research, students have described grammar as an important part of language learning, although somewhat dull and repetitive. Diversity of teaching methods and exercises have also been mentioned as necessary (Korhonen 2010; Sormunen 2013.) Similar thoughts were found in the present results, as students described the teaching methods they are familiar with. For Question 6 "How would you describe the grammar teaching in English lessons?" different views on grammar and grammar teaching were expressed:

(9) Toimimattomana. Opettaja puhuu luokan edessä 60min erilaisista säännöistä ja poikkeuksista, sitten kun pitäisi tehdä tehtäviä on oma pää vaan aivan sekaisin, ei muista niistä yhtäkään ja menee korvakuulolla.
Ineffective. The teacher talks about different rules and exceptions in front of the class for 60 minutes, then when it is time to do exercises, my own head is confused, cannot remember any rules and it all goes by ear.

(10) Opin englantia lähinnä kaikkialla muualla kuin luokassa
I learn English mostly everywhere else but in the classroom

(11) Kohtuu tylsää ja yksitoikkoista. Pakko ne asiat on vaan oppia, mutta joskus toivoisin siihen vaihtelua ja eri opetusmetodeja, kuin kirjasta opetus ja tehtävien tekeminen.
Quite boring and monotonous. Those things just have to be learnt, but sometimes I wish for variation and different teaching methods, not only teaching from the book and doing exercises.

Example 9 describes grammar teaching as ineffective because after listening to the lecturing done by the teacher, the student cannot remember anything that was just taught and the exercises are done by what sounds right, rather than basing the answers on actual knowledge of grammar. Students might develop negative feelings towards grammar because they haven been taught with ways that they find ineffective. Even though most answers indicated grammar teaching to be dull and monotonous, there were also positive comments on grammar instruction. Respondents described grammar as "incredibly important and beneficial" and "comprehensible" which align with previously discovered opinions on grammar (Sormunen 2013: 71). In one response, grammar teaching was described as "even pleasant". This comment is interesting because of the add-on word "even". It seems that the respondent connects the notion of grammar with a negative stigma, as if it is supposed to be seen as dull but they subjectively view it as pleasant. Negative perceptions on grammar are not uncommon in research (Saaristo 2015: 303). Furthermore, there is a certain prejudice towards the role of grammar in language learning.

Question 7 "In what ways is grammar taught in the classroom?" resulted in the following answers:

(12) Mielestäni kieliopin opettelu on perustunut pitkälti "pänttäämiseen". Mutta toisaalta ei varmaankaan ole muuta keinoa.
To my mind, learning grammar is mostly based on "cramming". But, on the other hand, there is probably no other way.

(13) Opettaja opettaa, opiskellaan itsenäisesti ja tehdään tehtäviä sekä harjoituksia. Joskus saatetaan katsella videoita tai opiskellaan muuten erilaisesti.
The teacher teaches, we study independently and do exercises. Sometimes we might watch videos or study in different ways.

(14) Todella perusopetus tavalla. Esimerkkien ja tehgävien avulla.
Very basic way of teaching. With examples and exercises.

A uniting aspect in Examples 12, 13 and 14 is that the students seem to have an understanding of a normative way of teaching grammar. Repeating grammar rules and practising by doing exercises independently after listening to a lecture led by the teacher seems to be the format the students are used to. In other words, it might even be a description of a typical grammar lesson (Sormunen 2013: 64). Example 12 shows that the student thinks there is no other way of learning grammar, which might be evidence of too small a range of teaching methods introduced to the students. Example 13 includes the word "different", which is interesting in this context, because it also points to a normative, basic method of teaching. In the responses it is clear that the students, sometimes, even yearn for new ways of learning.

Lastly, there was a question about why the students think that grammar is taught in the language classroom. The aim of this question was to deepen the understanding of the need for grammar in environments outside of formal education institutions. One informal environment, as such, is the internet, on which the students spend a lot of time. The question resulted in various opinions, some of which are presented below:

(15) Kielen rakenteen ja monipuolisuuden takia kieliopin taitaminen on tärkeää. Myös, jos tarvitsee englantia muuhunkin kuin arkikäyttöön esimerkiksi netissä.
It is important to know grammar for language structure and its complexity. Also, if one needs English for other purposes than everyday use, for example on the internet.

(16) Luulen, että jatko-opintojen kannalta on erittäin tärkeää osata kielioppia.
I think that for future studies it is very important to know grammar.

(17) Jotta osaisimme käyttää englantia työmahdollisuuksissa
So we could use English in job opportunities

(18) Se on tärkeä osa kielen oikein käyttämistä. Ilman kielioppia kieli on huonoa ja vaikeaselkoista, ihan niinkuin suppealla sanavarastollakin käytetty.
It is an important part of correct language use. Without grammar the language is bad and difficult to understand, just like with a small vocabulary.

(19) Kuuluu vahvasti kieleen, jos ei ymmärrä kielioppia, ei täydellisesti voi ymmärtää kieltä. Jos ei tiedä kielioppia, on hankala ymmärtää, miten kieltä käytetään. Tavallaan kuuluu yleissivistykseen.
It is a significant part of language, if one does not understand grammar, one cannot perfectly understand language. If one does not know grammar, it is difficult to understand how to use the language. In some way, it is a part of common knowledge.

Surprisingly, quite many of the responses mentioned either future studies or employment opportunities as the reason for why one should learn grammar. Additionally, connecting good grammar knowledge to common knowledge and the ability to use language well offers an interesting additional point of view. Grammar is often seen as the foundation of language use, the primary tool of proper speech (Saaristo 2015). This idea can also be seen in Examples 15, 16, 17 and 18. It is also worth noting that in upper secondary school the lessons need to be planned to prepare the students for the matriculation exam which often tests knowledge on correct language use (Sormunen 2013: 66). Additionally, it is possible that students connect the need for grammar to future language use opportunities because there are certain contexts where non-standard language use is generally considered inappropriate (Kemp and Clayton 2017: 143).

The students seem to find grammar teaching important and grammar, in general, an essential part of language learning. How pleasant the learning experiences regarding grammar, however, are seemingly different. Regarding internet language, the students have a quite clear view on the explicit differences between English online and English in the classroom. For development of future language learning, the present study has shown that students seem to recognise the different grammar use that is apparent online.

5 CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The question of whether grammar instruction is in need of development, or even necessary in language learning at all, has been quite explicit among researchers in previous years (Sormunen 2013). Alike to previous research, it also functioned as the inspiration for the present study. An interest towards the digital discourse of language and how it is described by Finnish internet users was also raised by the fact that English is the global lingua franca and the dominant language of the internet (Valppu 2013). The digital language variety has not been researched in Finland in a similar manner than it has been outside of Finland, and for this reason this study offers some information on the topic, although in a small scale. The target group was chosen because upper secondary school students are active users of internet language, which created the assumption that they can identify features of internet English, as they encounter or use it

online. Grammar teaching has been an area of interest for a long time, but students' views on internet English, connected to the attitudes towards the current grammar instruction, create a perspective that has not been seen in the field of Finnish research, until now.

Before concluding the findings of the present study, it is essential to note the factors that limited the study. Due to the small scale of the study, along with the rather low number of participants, it should be noted that the results cannot and should not be generalised. A total of 16 students took part in the study and the target group was from one upper secondary institution in Finland and, thus, it is evident that the results might vary across similar target groups. As digital language use gains more popularity, the need for further research on the topic is necessary. A larger target group or a different educational level could offer interesting findings. Moreover, different aspects of internet language features, grammar instruction and grammar in general were analysed in this study but each of these phenomena could be analysed in detail in further research. For example, the questionnaire used for this study included questions on both subjective grammar use online and opinions on the grammar use of others but remained on a rather shallow level. Therefore, a wider scale study and a more detailed look into these phenomena is needed in the Finnish field of research.

Regarding the findings of the current study, upper secondary school students seem to understand well what it is like to use English on the internet and in the language classroom. Especially knowledge of the different features of the two language registers are effectively demonstrated in the findings. Grammar instruction has proven to be quite a controversial topic in the field of research and, as an important part of language learning, it should be changing appropriately as a response to new uses and contexts of language. Language use in digital platforms challenges the current grammar instructions by proposing the question of whether or not it is still relevant to learn grammar as a part of language learning, if the students still end up ignoring it in natural communication. The findings of the present study suggest that although seen as a valuable aspect of language learning, there is still room, and even desire, for improvement.

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APPENDIX

Appendix 1: Questionnaire

Lukio-opiskelijoiden ajatuksia englannin kielestä internetissä ja nykyisestä kieliopin opetuksesta

(i) Pakolliset kysymykset merkitty tähdellä (*)

Hei ja tervetuloa!

Olen kolmannen vuoden englannin aineenopettajaopiskelija Jyväskylän yliopistossa ja kirjoitan parhaillaan kandidaatintutkielmaani. Olet vastaamassa kyselyyn, jolla pyrin kartoittamaan suomalaisten lukio-opiskelijoiden näkemyksiä siitä, millaista englannin kieltä he kohtaavat internetissä. Pyrin myös selvittämään, mitä lukio-opiskelijat ajattelevat kieliopin opettamista ja sen tärkeydestä. Vastatessasi kyselyyn voit miettiä esimerkiksi sosiaalisen median palstoja, kuten Instagramia, Snapchatia, Twitteriä tai TikTokia, tai mitä tahansa sivustoa, jossa **joko luet/kuulet englannin kieltä tai käytät sitä itse.** Lisäksi voit pohtia, millaista internetin englanti on verrattuna luokkahuoneessa opetettavaan englantiin, **erityisesti kieliopin ja oikeaoppisen kirjoittamisen osalta.**

Kyselyyn vastataan anonyymisti ja vastaaminen on täysin vapaaehtoista. Toivon, että vastaat kysymyksiin omien näkemystesi mukaisesti ja pidät mielessä, että vastaustesi avulla kykenen edistämään tutkimustani. Kyselyyn vastaaminen kestää noin 15-20 minuuttia. Kyselyn tuloksia käytetään kandidaatintutkielmani datana ja käsitellään luottamuksellisesti.

Tarvittaessa voit ottaa yhteyttä kyselyn tekijään:
Heini Kämäräinen
heini.m.kamarainen@student.jyu.fi

Kiitos jo etukäteen osallistumisestasi kyselyyn!

(Seuraava)

33% Valmis (1 / 3)

1. Englannin kieli internetissä

	Täysin eri mieltä	Jokseenkin eri mieltä	En osaa sanoa	Jokseenkin samaa mieltä	Täysin samaa mieltä
Käytän itse englantia internetissä *	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Internetissä käytettävä englanti ei useimmiten ole kieliopillisesti oikein kirjoitettua *	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Kun käytän englantia internetissä, en kiinnitä huomiota kielioppiin *	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Kirjoitettu englannin kieli on erilaista internetissä kuin luokkahuoneessa *	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Puhuttu englannin kieli on erilaista internetissä kuin luokkahuoneessa *	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

2. Kieliopin opetus englannin oppitunneilla

	Täysin eri mieltä	Jokseenkin eri mieltä	En osaa sanoa	Jokseenkin samaa mieltä	Täysin samaa mieltä
Kieliopin opetus on tärkeää *	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Kieliopin opetuksen pitäisi olla erilaista *	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Kieltä käytettäessä ymmärretyksi tuleminen on tärkeämpää kuin kieliopillisesti oikein puhuminen *	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Puhuessani englantia kiinnitän huomiota siihen, että puhun kieliopillisesti oikein *	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

(Edellinen) (Seuraava)

Lukio-opiskelijoiden ajatuksia englannin kielestä internetissä ja nykyisestä kieliopin opetuksesta

> (i) Pakolliset kysymykset merkitty tähdellä (*)

AVOIMET KYSYMYKSET
Tässä osiossa vastaat kysymyksiin vapaasti.

3. Millä internetin sivustoilla kohtaat englannin kieltä tai käytät sitä itse? *

4. Kuinka kuvailisit internetissä kohtaamaasi tai käyttämääsi englannin kieltä (erityisesti kielioppia)? Voit antaa esimerkkejä, kuten sanoja/lauseita/sanontoja tai muita tapoja, miten kieltä käytetään. *

5. Kuinka kuvailisit luokkahuoneessa kohtaamaasi tai käyttämääsi englannin kieltä (erityisesti kielioppia)? Voit antaa esimerkkejä, kuten sanoja/lauseita/sanontoja tai muita tapoja, miten kieltä käytetään. *

6. Millaisena koet kieliopin opettamisen englannin oppitunneilla? *

7. Millaisilla tavoilla kielioppia opetetaan oppitunneilla? *

8. Miksi mielestäni kielioppia opetetaan kielten oppitunneilla? *

9. Tähän voit halutessasi jakaa vielä muita ajatuksia aiheesta.

Kiitos paljon vastaamisesta! Vastauksellasi edistät tutkimustani eteenpäin. :)

Edellinen   Lähetä