

Using Differentiated Learning Activities to Improve Students' Grammatical Competence

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ABSTRACT: The study assessed the grammatical competence and learning styles of Grade 7 students and was a basis for developing differentiated language learning activities as an intervention that matched students' learning styles based on Flemmings and Mill's VARK learning style. Information about their competence in grammar were obtained through a pre-test and post-test. The assessment on morphology focuses on root words and affixation and while syntax focuses on the verb tenses, subject-verb agreement, prepositions and pronouns. Results from the posttest suggested that students who were given an intervention through the use of differentiated learning activities performed better compared to their scores during their pre-test. Results also showed that students responded well to the different activities that were aligned to their preferred learning styles.

Keywords: Differentiated learning activities, grammatical competence, morphology, syntax and learning styles

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INTRODUCTION

As highlighted by Alonzo (2015), teachers should ensure that English is a means of communication, rather than a set of facts to be learned. According to the study of Cabigon (2015), Philippines is recognized globally as one of the largest English-speaking nations with a majority of its population having at least some degree of fluency in the language. Proficiency in the language is also one of the country's strengths; however, in a recent roundtable discussion organized by British Council, stakeholders agreed that the country needs to step up its efforts in improving the teaching and learning of English.

Grammar teaching in any language educational program is essential. The question is not whether it should be taught or not, but rather how it should be taught. One of the challenges that every language teacher face is developing the language competence among their learners so that they can use the language correctly and appropriately in a variety of social contexts. Language competence features grammar and lexis which contribute to the meaning and the interpretation of the meaning of a given communicative scenario (Mojabi, 2014). In relation to this, one of the main competency areas of language competence is the grammatical competence which focuses on the knowledge of the morphology and syntax.

Grammatical competence is one of the four areas of the communicative competence theory put forward by Canale and Swain (Gao, 2001). Grammatical competence focuses on command of the language code, including such things as the rules of the word and sentence formation, meanings, spelling and pronunciation (Gao, 2001). In a foreign language, students show grammatical competence when they produce adequately accurate language by applying the rules they have learned to form structures, using the vocabulary that they know.

In English language classroom, students are usually exposed to the grammatical rules; however, students still have the difficulty in writing complete and grammatical sentences.

Thus, language teachers should develop creative strategies inside the classroom in reference to the different learning styles of the students. In the 21st century classroom, teachers need to take away the traditional grammar teaching to pave the way with the new strategies according to the learning styles of the students. Ellis (1995) says that second language teachers used traditional grammar teaching to give learners opportunities to produce specific grammatical structures since learners have to work with grammar exercises or activities that give them opportunities to produce sentences containing the targeted structure. However, teachers found teaching students to produce grammatical structures and when students committed mistakes during the process of learning and using

the language caused the increased of their anxiety and eventually may result in a psycho-affective block to learning.

The traditional method of teaching grammar to English learners have often based on linguistic analyses of the syntax and morphology of the target language (Freeman & Freeman, 2004). Exercises and drills have been designed to teach surface-structure patterns, often with little attention to meaning. Moreover, students learn to imitate the patterns but fail to construct the underlying rules that are needed to comprehend and produce the language. In contrast, teachers who use current methods teach language through content.

A language learner is considered proficient in morphology when they can identify, spell, derive words and how the shapes of words may be systematically adjusted in order to accomplish a communicative task; while syntax, on the other hand, is described as how words combine to form sentences (Taylor & Francis, 2008). However, over the last two decades, research has indicated that second language (L2) learners develop high levels of comprehension skills, fluency, and self-confidence in L2 production, yet they experience a permanent difficulty in grammatical development (Harley, Cummins, Swain, and Allen, 1990 as cited by Khaki, Ganjabi, Khodamoradi, 2014).

Thus, learning the two subheadings (Morphology and Syntax) involves studying of rules and vocabulary and students who learn second language break the subject down into manageable chunks and try just to memorize and practice the different parts of the language with the goal of being able to use the language to communicate. In a research conducted by Krashen (1998) as cited by Freeman & Freeman (2004) many students of second language (L2) are able to pass the quizzes in English grammar but are not able to use the new language to communicate with native speakers. In addition, this learned knowledge is quickly forgotten if it is not used.

Consequently, a proposed solution by Swain (2005) is that teachers should provide learners with opportunities in which they can use the learned output in grammar containing the special target form so that learners will be helped bridge the gap between their current ability and the correct use of given form. Doughty (2005) cited that individual variation of individual differences and the mismatches in cognitive and instructional styles in most classroom made a huge impact in the learning of the grammar or acquiring a second language inside the classroom.

As a result, language teachers are having a hard time delivering the lessons, especially on grammar since students tend to be passive when teachers are discussing this type of lessons. Teachers need to understand that some learners like to learn individually, others like to learn in collaborative activities, and some are good in interacting with peers when learning something. Hence, it

is of crucial importance to understand the learning style of the students when learning grammar.

It is known that most teachers tend to teach in the way they were taught or in the way they preferred to learn. Sometimes conflicts might arise because of a mismatch between the teacher's teaching style and learner's styles, which might have negative consequences both on the part of the learner and the teacher. For this reason, as Stebbins (1995) as cited by Tabanlioglu (2003) asserts teachers should know the general learning style profiles of the whole class, which will enable them to organize and employ instructional materials accordingly.

Raising students' awareness regarding their learning styles might make them not only prepared for learning but also more analytic about their learning styles. Reid (1995) as cited by Tabanlioglu (2003) states that developing an understanding of learning environments and styles will enable students to take control of their learning and to maximize their potential for learning.

Most of the Filipino language teachers provide students with considerable language support, particularly on the acquisition of academic literacy. The researcher observed that during the discussion of grammar lessons, learners are not really participative but when teachers gave their students different grammar activities learners are more active. Hence, teachers should understand students' learning style that will help develop or enhance learning.

Therefore, this study aimed to assess the grammatical competence and learning style of Junior High School students and use differentiated language activities as an intervention that matched students' learning styles with the end view of improving their grammatical competence.

OBJECTIVES

The study aimed to assess the grammatical competence and learning styles of Grade 7 students using differentiated language learning activities that matched students' learning styles. Further, this study intended to determine whether these activities improve the students' grammatical competence. The study sought to answer the grammatical competence of Grade 7 students in terms of morphology and syntax; students' dominant learning styles (VARK) based on Flemming and Mills (2006) Visual, Aural, Read and Write and Kinesthetic; the language learning activities can be developed in relation to the students' learning styles and the extent of the differentiated language learning activities improves the students' grammatical competence.

METHODOLOGY

This study used one group Pretest- Posttest Quasi- Experimental design to assess the grammatical competence and learning styles of Grade 7 students.

There were two sets of questionnaires that were given to the respondents. First was the questionnaire on from the VARK (Visual, Aural, Read/Write, Kinesthetic) Questionnaire, version 7.8 (Flemming, 2006) to assess the students' individual learning style. The other questionnaire was a researcher- made questionnaire which measured the morphological and the syntax skills of the students.

In this study, there were two sets of questionnaires that were given to the respondents.

The first set of the research questionnaire was adapted from the VARK (Visual, Aural, Read/Write, and Kinesthetic) Questionnaire, version 7.8 (Flemming, 2006) Part 1 of the first survey was the Learning Style which consisted of sixteen (16) questions.

The second research instrument was the grammatical test which was composed of a researcher-made instrument that was extracted from various standardized test materials, books, work texts and even in web sites on grammar test (syntax) that consist of twenty- five (25) questions and morphology test which was adapted from the study of Maag (2007) on "*Measuring Morphological Awareness in Adult Readers: Implications for Vocabulary Development*" which also consisted of twenty-five (25) vocabulary test.

The gathering of data for this study was done into four phases: a) pre-assessment, b) development of learning activities c) implementation of differentiated learning activities, and d) post assessment

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Grammatical Competence of Grade 7 students

The table below shows the result of the pre-test on morphology which composed of root words and affixation. Morphology constitutes on root words, prefixes and suffixes. Score range used in interpreting the results of the pre-test in morphology was based on the assessment procedure as stated in DepEd Memo no.8 and the standard criterion of 50% was based from the school's grading system.

Table 1. Pre-Test Result on Morphology

Score Range	f	%	
Outstanding	21-25	17	27.42
Very Satisfactory	18-20	29	46.77
Satisfactory	15-17	16	25.81
Fairly Satisfactory	13-14	0	0

Did Not Meet	1- 12	0	0
TOTAL		62	100

The assessment on morphology focuses only with affixation since the topics were based on the Grade 7 Curriculum Guide of the Department of Education. Based on the result, the majority of the students got a very satisfactory interpretation of the scores in the morphology. The test focuses only on the affixation which is in root words, suffixes and prefixes only.

In addition, there were 27.42% of the sample population got an outstanding interpretation and some students got a satisfactory rating on their scores in morphology test. The result also indicates that all the sample population got a passing score during their pre-test in morphology even if there were no activities provided prior to the test. This means that majority of the sample population have already a prior knowledge in root words and affixation.

The table below shows the result of the performance of the students in morphology that focuses in affixation. The table shows the domains in affixation that composed the morphology test. It also shows on what domains in affixation that students performed well and what domains in affixation that needs an improvement during the pre-test.

Table 2 Performance of the Students in Affixation

Affixation Domains	No. of Items	f	%
Root Words	9	23	37.09
Prefixes	2	60	96.77
Suffixes	5	61	98.39
Both Prefix and Suffix	9	53	85.48
TOTAL	25		

Table 2 shows the items on affixation in which students performed well on the items in suffixes. The frequency in the table shows the number of students who got the items correct in a particular domain in affixation. Moreover, root words have the lowest percentage among the affixation domains. The result also implies that students are more familiar with prefixes and suffixes compared to root words.

Although students considered root words as their weakness in the aspect of morphology, it does not indicate that it has a significant effect on the morphological learning of the students.

Roots and affixes can help students decode and decipher new words, even if they are in an unknown or unfamiliar language because they sound and look similar. The knowledge of roots and affixes has been proven to help students of all ages and in a variety of fields of study (Wang, 2008). Thus, students having an awareness of morphology have been proven based on the result of their pre-test that they are already proficient learners even without the use of vocabulary strategies.

The table below shows the result of the pre-test on syntax. Syntax constitutes on verb tenses, subject-verb agreement, prepositions, pronouns and nouns. Score range used in interpreting the results of the pre-test in syntax was based on the assessment procedure as stated in DepEd Memo no.8 and the standard criterion of 50% was based from the school's grading system.

Table 3 Pre-Test Result on Syntax

Score Range		f	%
Outstanding	21-25	0	0
Very Satisfactory	18-20	2	3.23
Satisfactory	15-17	4	6.45
Fairly Satisfactory	13-14	2	3.23
Did Not Meet Expectations	1- 12	54	87.09
TOTAL		62	100

Based on the result on pre-test in syntax, majority of the students did not meet the expected passing score of 50% out of the 25-item test. The result implies that students are not that competent in grammar in terms of their syntactical skills compared to their pre-test result in morphology. They failed to master some basic aspects of syntax like the verb tenses, subject-verb agreement, pronouns, prepositions, and nouns. Although, the result also shows that one of the students' strengths in terms of the aspect in syntax is about nouns, in which majority of the sample population have recalled their knowledge about this lesson.

The result implies that there is a need to improve the teaching strategies and activities need to be aligned to students learning style since most of them did

not meet the expected target of the pre-test result. Although, there are other factors that may affect to the learning of the students in syntax but still there is a need also to focus on the techniques and activities used during the discussion.

The result from the syntax pre-test also implies that learners forget their past lessons and knowledge on the different rules and structure of grammar when in fact these lessons have already been taught since the early years of their elementary. According to Sepide (2014), knowledge of syntax enhances students' ability in most aspect of learning English. He also added that if students' prior knowledge of syntax is poor there is a big probability that they will fail in manipulating syntactic features of the target language and thus, the result.

The table below shows the result of the performance of the students in syntax that focuses in verb tenses, subject-verb agreement, prepositions, pronouns and nouns. The table shows the aspect of syntax that composed the syntax test. It also shows on what aspect of syntax that students performed well and in what aspect in syntax that students need an improvement during the pre-test.

Table 4 Performance of the Students in the Aspect of Syntax

Aspect of Syntax	No. of Items	f	%
Verb Tenses	10	8	12.90
Subject-Verb	3	15	24.19
Prepositions	3	20	32.26
Pronouns	5	32	51.61
Nouns	4	60	96.77
TOTAL	25		

Table 4 shows the aspect of syntax in which students performed well on the items in nouns. The frequency in the table shows the number of students who got the items correct in a particular aspect in syntax. Moreover, verb tenses have the lowest percentage among the aspect in syntax in which there are only 8 students among the 62 respondents got most of the items about verb tenses.

The result from the table that verb tenses are considered a weakness to most students who took the pre-test in syntax was supported in a study by Cowan (2008) that use of verb forms is one of the two or three most difficult areas for English language learners to master. Learners sometimes make mistakes in the proper use of verb forms as they attempt to express the time of an event in the target language.

In addition, Guo (2008) mentioned that students read relatively simple sentences during their early school year which often composed of nouns and

verbs. However, as students continue in school, the syntactic complexity of reading passages increases rapidly and language teachers did not already pay attention in using different strategies to provide an easier grasp of knowledge during syntax discussion. There were less intervention during the failure of learning the lesson and thus the understanding of syntax becomes lesser as the learner advance to a new grade level.

Therefore, it is empirical that teachers should develop language activities that could help improve the students' grammatical competence, especially in syntax. Liberman (1991) in his study that the general English instruction provided at schools may be effective in teaching English usage with regard to the syntactic rules but does not help the learner in the understanding of how these rules are related to language use for communicative purpose.

Inventory of Students' (VARK) Learning Styles Based on Flemmings and Mills' (2006)

Table 5 shows the results on the VARK Learning Style based on Flemmings and Mills' (2006) of Grade 7 Students. It also shows that some of the students classified having dual or multiple dominant learning styles.

Table 5. VARK Learning Style of Grade 7 Students

VARK Domains	f	%
Visual (V)	5	8.06
Auditory (A)	2	3.23
Read/Write (R)	7	11.29
Kinesthetic (K)	33	53.23
Visual and Kinesthetic (VK)	6	9.68
Aural and Kinesthetic (AK)	6	9.68
Read/ Write and Kinesthetic (RK)	1	1.61
Visual and Read/ Write (VR)	1	1.61
Visual, Read/Write and Kinesthetic (VRK)	1	1.61
n= 62		100

Learning styles- the notion that each student has a particular mode by which he or she learns best, whether it's visual, auditory, read, and kinesthetic or some other sense. Based on the result, the highest percentage among the VARK

domains is the Kinesthetic in which most of the students preferred or learn best by actually performing an action. According to Cherry (2016) that Kinesthetic learners are thought to enjoy being physically active and tend to excel at sports and prefer lessons that involve movement such as performing an experiment, working with a group or performing a skit. This was also supported by a study of Doppelt and Schunn (2008) in which students performed better if they are given physical activities (such as hands-on activities, computers, and experiments) than those students who were taught in a more traditional scripted curriculum.

In connection with the result of the study, Spence (2006) stated that visual learners account for around 30% of the population and auditory learners account for around 25% of the population. Kinesthetic learners may account for as much as 45% of the population. With the support of this study, it shows that 21st-century learners are considered mostly as an active learner and they become successful learners when they are engaged in a learning activity.

Table 5 also shows that there are 15 students whose dominant learning styles are dual or multiple. Tabanlıoğlu (2003) in his study that it is impossible to limit a person's learning style only with a certain dimension, that is, it cannot be said that a person is only limited for visual, kinesthetic, auditory or read and write. He also added that not everyone fits neatly into one or another of learning style categories to the exclusion of the other, parallel categories of learning style.

Hence, teachers should be aware of the different preferred learning styles of the students. By doing an inventory of the learning styles of the students, teachers can incorporate various methods and strategies in their teaching that may be able to adapt to each learning style domains.

Extent of Differentiated Language Learning Activities in Student's Grammatical Competence

The tables below show the comparative results of the pretest and posttest of the Grade 7 students on morphology. To find out the extent of the improvement of students' grammatical competence, the students' pretest and posttest in morphology were treated using mean, standard deviation and dependent t-test.

Table 6. Comparative Result of Pre-test and Posttest on Morphology

	n	Pre-Test		Posttest	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD
GRADE 7	25	19.29	2.11	19.73	1.70

Table 7. Mean Gains of Pre-test and Posttest Result on Morphology

	n	Mean		<i>d</i>	t-value
		Pre-test	Posttest		
GRADE 7	25	19.29	19.73	0.44	-1.59

Table 6 and 7 show that morphology scores increased according to the mean gains during the posttest after the intervention of the differentiated language learning activities. This means that students understanding were already evident after their preferred learning style was used in making as lesson activities. Although, their scores in pre-test in not that low still there was an aspect in affixation that needs to be treated using an intervention.

The improvement of students' scores in their posttest may give a huge impact in their competence in grammar and they may have an easier understanding for deeper words which can be a tool for them to think critically, to express ideas and feelings and to learn about the world. Johnson (2004) state that because words are the very foundation of learning, improving students' vocabulary knowledge has become an educational priority. Student's word knowledge is strongly linked to academic accomplishment because a rich vocabulary is essential to successful reading comprehension and may improve their competence in grammar.

Furthermore, the result in this study was similar to the result of the study by Carlo (2004) in which students' performance in vocabulary improved specifically their knowledge about root words and affixes when they received an intervention. The word activities were also designed in that study to help students in word analysis-roots and affixes. After the study conducted, students showed great improvement in three key areas: knowledge of words taught, knowledge about word analysis and comprehension of texts including challenging words.

The tables below show the comparative results of the pretest and posttest of the Grade 7 students on syntax. To find out the extent of the improvement of students' grammatical competence, the students' pretest and posttest in syntax were treated using mean, standard deviation and dependent t-test.

Table 8. Comparative Result of Pre-test and Posttest on Syntax

GRADE 7	n	Pre-Test		Posttest	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD
	25				

8.98 3.56 14.29 3.22

Table 9. Mean Gains of Pre-test and Posttest Result on Syntax

	n	Mean		d	t-value
		Pre-test	Posttest		
GRADE 7	25	8.98	14.29	5.31	-12.97

Table 8 and 9 show that syntax scores in students' posttest increased by 5.31 after the intervention was done through the use of differentiated language learning activities. There was a huge impact on their scores since syntax scores during their pre-test were very low compare to their pre-test scores in morphology. Moreover, the scores improved after each learning styles were given the opportunities to explore different activities that are aligned with their preferred styles.

Although knowledge of syntax cannot be developed overtime but with the use of proper strategies and activities may help each learners to understand the subject better. In addition, learners acquired more understanding of the different rules in grammar since students become aware on how to construct sentences according to the different properties of grammar.

The result shows that the intervention conducted by the teacher-researcher on syntax helped improved students' competence in grammar. The differentiated language activities did cater the needs of the students which greatly affects their score in their post-test compared to their scores in their pretest on syntax.

Differentiated language activities provide learners a new avenue to learn the grammar lessons effectively in accordance to their preferred style. Smith (2014) pointed out that most of the problem with schools at the moment is that teachers are often teaching for exams, which should not be the case. She also added that it is important to consider a student's psychological needs and that's where the differentiation of activities comes in.

The varied activities a language teacher in the class can really make a great significant difference to motivation and achievement levels of each learner. The huge difference between the scores in pretest and from the post-test shows that because the teacher is already sensitive with the learning style of the students while planning for an activities for each grammar lesson, students whose scores were low during the pretest have improved a lot in their post-test result.

Meeting the students where they are is a deliberate act of all modern language teachers to become competent in grammar. Students are more responsive and successful learners if activities are provided at their readiness level and take their interests into consideration. When students' interests are built into instructions and activities, they are more eager and engaged learners. The results proved that if differentiated learning activities are given in enhancing the skills in grammar and vocabulary lessons this will all lead to more competent students in grammar and other areas in education, and success builds also confidence and leads to more success.

CONCLUSION

The study aimed to assess the grammatical competence and learning styles of Grade 7 students with the use of differentiated learning activities as an intervention. The activities made matched the students' learning styles and with the end view of determining whether the differentiated language learning activities improve the students' grammatical competence. It was found out in the findings of the study that learning styles have a bearing on the learner's grammatical competence in terms of morphology and syntax. Although learning styles do not tell us about a person's intelligence or abilities but in one way or another being aware of their learning styles will help language teachers plan for different language activities that will not only focus on the traditional strategies and approaches when teaching grammar. In the end, teachers need to create new ways to activate the prior knowledge and to motivate students in learning the different structures in grammar and vocabulary that will create a positive impact for all the learners.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Differentiated Language Learning Activities

With the design of the differentiated language learning activities, teachers may consider the use of the researcher-made lesson guide for their classroom activities to enhance teaching strategies and for them to be able to target the learning styles of their students.

Furthermore, in planning for differentiated language learning activities teachers need to align also the assessment of the learning styles of the students specifically in making the pen and paper test.

2. Inventory of the Learning Preferences of the Students using the VARK Learning Style Survey

Teachers may determine the learning styles of the students and group them according to their learning preferences to facilitate better performance in the Language class. Also, teachers may adapt to learning styles of students to achieve the maximum level of proficiency and may assess the needs of the poor achievers in class then may carefully plan activities based on their learning styles as a guiding point. Lastly, teachers may provide more activities that may develop more the students' communicative competence as a whole and may plan well in the choice of test to be given.

3. In-Service Training for Differentiated Learning Activities

School administrators may provide in-service training for teachers in making differentiated learning activities that can be applied to all subject areas. This may help students to improve their grades or scores in different assessments in school. And also, knowing the importance and the use of differentiated learning activities may provide teachers in achieving the new paradigm shift of teaching wherein teachers should act as a facilitator for learning.

4. Implication of Differentiated Learning Activities to the Students

The use of differentiated learning activities to the students may give them a new set of opportunities to enhance their skills and improve their motivation in learning the subject area. In taking a look at their preferred learning style and differentiated learning activities, students may encourage to participate more in lesson activities inside the classroom and won't be hesitant to show their strengths and weaknesses.

5. Implementation of the Differentiated Language Learning Activities

In implementing the differentiated language learning activities teachers need to start assessing the learning styles of the students at the beginning of the school year since implementing the differentiated learning activities will need time to fully implement for each learning styles. It is recommended that these activities will be done throughout the school year and assess individual on their improvement at the end of the academic year. Through this, a teacher can have a good assessment on the improvement of their students.

6. For Future Researcher:

Further studies may be conducted on the following topics:

- a. Extent of Individualized Instruction to Students' Academic Performance
- b. The effectiveness of positive approach in teaching grammar skills among junior high school students.
- c. A Study on Learning Styles: Its Relationship to English Achievement

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