

Bridging Post-Pandemic Learning Gaps Through Differentiated Instruction of Fifth-Grade English

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic caused massive disruptions in education worldwide, resulting in significant learning gaps among elementary grade students. This study aimed to test the effectiveness of differentiated instruction in closing these gaps in English among fifth-grade students. A quasi-experimental research design was utilized, with the control group receiving traditional instruction and the experimental group receiving differentiated instruction based on multiple intelligences and learning styles. The results indicated that the experimental group's performance significantly improved compared to the control group. This study has important implications for educators and school administrators seeking to address the impact of the pandemic on student learning outcomes.

Keyword: *differentiated instruction, multiple intelligences, learning style, COVID-19, learning gaps, English proficiency, elementary education*

1. Background

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected every aspect of our lives, including education (Haleem & Vaishya, 2020; Treceñe, 2020). The sudden closure of schools and shift to remote learning left students, educators, and parents grappling with a new reality. As the world grappled with this unprecedented situation, it became clear that the pandemic would have far-reaching consequences for students, particularly those in underserved communities (Nwokeocha, 2021). For many of these students, school is a place to learn and a refuge from challenging home environments (Atwell et al., 2020).

The impact on student learning has been particularly severe in the Philippines, where the pandemic-induced school shutdown has been one of the longest in the world (UNICEF, 2021). Recent data from UNESCO and the World Bank reveals that over 90 percent of 10-year-old Filipino children struggle to read and understand simple texts (Desmon, 2022). Additionally, the country had the lowest average score in English in the latest Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) study. An educational crisis needs to be addressed (Conoza, 2022). The Department of Education has acknowledged that the learning gap caused by the pandemic is so significant that they have implemented a 'two years backward approach' in their curriculum to compensate for the learning loss among pupils (Department of Education, 2021).

While remote learning has been instrumental in ensuring some continuity in education during the pandemic, it has also highlighted the existing disparities in many communities (Scarpellini & Cartabia, 2021). Limited access to reliable digital resources and the lack of physical and social interaction has made

it difficult for students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, to keep up with their peers (Dhawan, 2020).

If these learning gaps are not addressed quickly, they will compound, and students will likely stay caught up in their skills and knowledge (Ford, 2013). Differentiated instruction balances academic learning and individual student needs (Burkett, 2013). Our study aimed to explore the effectiveness of differentiated instruction in bridging the post-pandemic learning gap among fifth-grade English pupils in Cateel Central Elementary School. Differentiated instruction provides tailored instruction that meets the diverse needs of students, offering multiple pathways to learning and providing additional support and scaffolding as needed (Tomlinson, 2014). By tailoring instruction to meet the diverse needs of students, teachers can help ensure that all students have the opportunity to learn and succeed, bridging post-pandemic learning gaps in fifth-grade English. The researchers aimed that the results of this study will not only shed light on the effectiveness of differentiated instruction but also contribute to the ongoing conversation on how best to support students in the wake of the pandemic.

2. Methods

2.1 Research Locale and Duration

The research took place in Cateel Central Elementary School, located at Castro Avenue, Poblacion, Cateel, Davao Oriental. The Grade 5 classrooms were in Building 15 in front of Building 17 and next to Building 16. The intervention lasted for two weeks and consisted of 5 sessions each week.

2.2 Research Design

This study employed a quasi-experimental design with a control and experimental group to demonstrate the effectiveness of the intervention. In addition, the researchers administered self-made pre-and post-test questionnaires to the respondents that underwent validity and reliability testing.

2.3 Respondents and Sampling Procedure

This study aimed to test the effectiveness of the intervention by covering two out of five sections in Grade 5. The control and experimental groups were randomly allocated using a toss-coin method, and all learners in each section were included as respondents.

Pre-test and post-test questionnaires were administered to all participants, with only those who completed both tests included in the final analysis. To ensure data validity, respondents who were absent during the post-test but completed the pre-test were excluded from the analysis.

2.4 Research Instrument

The researcher utilized researcher-made pre-test and post-test questionnaires as the primary tool for collecting data. These questionnaires underwent validity and reliability testing, including 35-item multiple-choice and identification questions related to learning competency. The main objective of the pre-test was to evaluate the students' English learning gap level in identifying subject-verb agreement on intervening phrases, a learning competency identified by both the master teacher and the English subject teacher as the area where pupils had the most significant gap.

2.5 Research Procedure

The following outlined the process by which data was gathered to address the research problems in this study:

1. **Obtaining Research Ethical Clearance:** The researchers sought ethical clearance from the Research Ethics Office prior to conducting the study. They submitted the full research proposal, questionnaires, informed consent form, curriculum vitae, and a list of potential risks and solutions for approval.

2. **Content Validity of Questionnaires:** The questionnaires underwent expert reviews using an evaluation tool from three experts. The experts' evaluation was analyzed, and the Aiken V coefficient value was found to be 1.00, indicating that it was a very valid tool for assessing learning competency in identifying subject-verb agreement on intervening phrases.
3. **Pilot Testing to Test Reliability:** The researchers conducted a pilot test at San Rafael Integrated School to test the reliability of the questionnaire. The pupils' responses in each item were analyzed, and the Kuder-Richardson (KR) 20 coefficient value was found to be 0.675, indicating that the questionnaire was a reliable tool for assessing learning competency in identifying subject-verb agreement on intervening phrases.
4. **Requesting Permission to Conduct Action Research:** The researchers submitted a permission letter to the School Principal of Cateel Central Elementary School to conduct the research. Once the approval was granted, a letter requesting permission to conduct the research and use the tool with the students was submitted to the class advisers. The letter outlined the objectives of the study in detail.
5. **Administering Pre-Test Questionnaires:** The researchers administered pre-test questionnaires to the control and experimental groups to determine the extent of their learning gaps in English.
6. **Administering Multiple Intelligence and Learning Style Tests:** The researchers administered a multiple intelligence test to the experimental group to identify their dominant intelligences and a learning style test to identify each student's preferred learning style in the classroom. The researchers have identified four dominant intelligences among the pupils: one with mathematical intelligence, twelve with bodily-kinesthetic intelligence, eleven with interpersonal intelligence, and ten with verbal-linguistic intelligence. It is worth noting that most of the students in the classroom exhibit active or kinesthetic learning preferences, along with a preference for visual learning.
7. **Conducting the Intervention:** The control group received traditional instruction on subject-verb agreement on intervening phrases. In contrast, the experimental group received differentiated instruction based on their multiple intelligences and learning style.
8. **Administering Post-Test Questionnaires:** The researchers administered post-test questionnaires to both groups to determine any improvements in their learning.
9. **Retrieving Post-Test Questionnaires:** The post-test questionnaires were retrieved, totaled/tallied, encoded, analyzed, and interpreted.

2.6 Data Analysis

The results were encoded by tabulating the raw data after completing the responses from the experimental and control group respondents through the pre-test and post-test questionnaires. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) and the K-12 DepEd grading system were used to interpret remarks of data results, compare the performances of both groups, and analyze and achieve a reliable, realistic, and accurate interpretation of the collected data. The mean scores, independent sample t-tests, and analysis of covariance were employed to interpret the results.

Mean. It was used to determine (1) the level of respondents' pre-test scores and (3) the post-test scores of both groups.

Table 1. K to 12 grading scale and interpretation

GRADING SCALE	INTERPRETATION
90-100	Outstanding
85-89	Very Satisfactory
80-84	Satisfactory
75-79	Fairly Satisfactory
Below 75	Did Not Meet Expectations

Independent sample T-test. It was used to determine (2) the significant difference between the control and experimental groups' pre-test results and (5) the significant difference between the pre-test and post-test scores of the control and experimental groups.

Analysis of Covariance. It was used to determine (4) the significant difference between the control and experimental groups' post-test results.

3. Result and Discussion

3.1 Pre-test Scores of the Control and Experimental Group

Table 2 shows that the control and experimental groups' total score, mean, and grade percentage falls short of meeting the expected passing score.

Table 2. Level of pre-test scores between the control and experimental groups

Group	Total Score	Standard Deviation	Mean	Grade Percentage	Remarks
Control	35	4.29	11.45	66.36	Did Not Meet Expectations
Experimental	35	2.32	13.31	69.01	Did Not Meet Expectations

The results indicate that the control and experimental groups had pre-test scores below the expected level. Although the experimental group had a higher mean pre-test score, both group did not meet the expected level of performance. This result is consistent with UNESCO's and World Bank's findings that there is a significant learning gap in more than ninety percent of Filipino children (Desmon, 2022). It was further supported by Shepherd et al. (2021), who found that elementary pupils have only learned a quarter of what they would typically learn in their native language and half of what they had learned in English.

The result is attributed to many factors. First, the shift to remote and hybrid learning models has caused students to struggle with language learning concepts such as subject-verb agreement, as they cannot interact with their teachers and peers in person. As such, they are not given immediate feedback (Al-Hashmi, 2021). Insufficient instruction or limited practice opportunities also contribute to this difficulty. Since all classes were done remotely, students had limited exposure to the English language. Students who need to learn the grammatical rules of subject-verb agreement can face challenges, particularly with intervening phrases (Peregoy & Boyle, 2014).

In addition, socioeconomic status has been identified as another factor that can contribute to the learning gap in English proficiency among Filipino children. Students from low-income families need more access to quality education and resources, including language learning materials and opportunities for practice (Moscoviz & Evans, 2022). Their lack of access limits their exposure to the English language and hinders their ability to develop language skills, including subject-verb agreement. It is particularly relevant in the Philippine context, where poverty rates are high and access to quality education is limited in many areas (Mirasol et al., 2021).

Furthermore, students from non-English speaking backgrounds struggled with the subject-verb agreement due to differences in grammatical structure and sentence formation between their native language and English (Suryani et al., 2020). The results indicate that before the intervention, the factors mentioned negatively dominated, creating a significant learning gap in English.

3.2 The Difference in Pre-test Scores Between Control and Experimental Group

Table 3 shows a statistically significant difference between the pre-test scores of the control and experimental groups. It means the groups had a different English language proficiency level at the start of the study.

Table 3. Mean comparison between pre-test scores of control and experimental group

Group	Mean	Standard Deviation	t-value	p-value	Interpretation
Control	11.45	4.29	-2.057	0.044	Pre-test scores between the two groups differ significantly.
Experimental	13.31	2.32			

Several factors influence the significant difference in pre-test scores. Kosaretsky et al. (2020) and Moscoviz and Evans (2022) revealed that socioeconomic status could influence students' English proficiency. In some cases, students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds tend to have lower English proficiency levels than those from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. The lack of support and guidance from parents and caregivers, who may also have limited English language proficiency, further contributes to this difficulty (Kalayci & Oz, 2018; Stelitano, 2020).

In addition, differences in teaching methods and instructional materials used between teachers also contribute to the varying levels of English proficiency among students (Mohammed, 2018). Differences in teaching styles, preferences, and classroom dynamics affect students' readiness and engagement (Shaari et al., 2014). Each teacher may have employed unique instructional methods and approaches, resulting in students' prior knowledge and skills variations. The quality of English language instruction, such as the qualifications and experience of English teachers, also contributes to differences in English proficiency among students (Yang, 2020).

Another explanation for the difference in pre-test scores is the students' prior exposure to English language instruction. Akbari (2015); Souriyavongsa et al. (2013) suggest that students exposed to English language instruction at an early age tend to have better English language skills than those who have not. Based on the results, students in the experimental group had prior exposure to English language instruction, contributing to their higher pre-test scores than the control group.

3.3 Post-test Scores of the Control and Experimental Group

Table 4 shows that both the control and experimental groups made progress in their performance in subject-verb agreement on intervening phrases after the intervention. The experimental group's mean post-test score indicates a satisfactory level of performance, while the control group's mean post-test score is still below the expected level.

Table 4. Level of post-test scores between the control and experimental groups

Group	Total Score	Standard Deviation	Mean	Grade Percentage	Remarks
Control	35	5.06	15.17	71.67	Did Not Meet Expectations
Experimental	35	3.00	24.07	84.39	Satisfactory

The results showed that the experimental group, who received intervention through differentiated instruction based on multiple intelligences, performed significantly better than the control group. Several possible factors contributed to the difference in the two groups' performance. Firstly, the experimental group was provided instruction catering to their dominant intelligence and learning styles, which helped them better understand and retain the subject matter. Gardner (2013) posited that individuals have multiple intelligences and different learning styles, and instruction tailored to their preferred style can lead to better learning outcomes. The intervention provided to the experimental group improved performance.

Secondly, differentiated instruction allowed for a more personalized learning experience for the experimental group, which led to increased motivation and engagement with the subject matter. Personalized learning experiences can improve academic performance (Nahas, 2022). Since their learning styles and needs were catered to, they felt more invested in their learning and more willing to put in the effort to improve their performance (Armstrong, 2017).

In contrast, the control group received instruction that was not differentiated, which led to feelings of disengagement and frustration. When students feel that instruction is not tailored to their needs, they may need help understanding the subject matter and become disinterested in learning (Tomlinson, 2014). This lack of engagement and motivation contributed to the control group's poor performance. Another factor contributing to the control group's poor performance is traditional, teacher-centered teaching methods. Traditional teaching methods that rely heavily on lectures and rote memorization may not effectively promote deep learning and understanding among students (Weimer, 2013).

3.4 The Difference in Post-test Scores Between Control and Experimental Group

Table 5 shows a statistically significant difference between the post-test scores of the control and experimental groups. This finding suggests that the intervention, which involved differentiated instruction based on multiple intelligences and learning styles, improved the experimental group's performance in subject-verb agreement on intervening phrases.

Table 5. Mean comparison between post-test scores of control and experimental group

Group	Mean	Standard Deviation	F-value	p-value	Interpretation
Control	16.34	5.11	753.183	0.000	Post-test scores between the two groups differ significantly.
Experimental	27.45	1.96			

Several factors contributed to why the experimental group performed better than the control group and why the control group did not meet expectations. Firstly, the intervention provided to the experimental group, which involved differentiated instruction based on multiple intelligences and learning styles, played a significant role in the experimental group's improved performance (Tomlinson, 2014; Dunn et al., 2013). Another factor that contributed to the experimental group's success was engaging and relevant materials (Anwer, 2019). Differentiated instruction often involves using varied materials and resources to cater to different learning styles and interests (Burkett, 2013). Teachers can increase their motivation and engagement with the subject by using relevant and engaging materials for students, leading to improved learning outcomes (Johnson, 2017). It aligns with Ahmed's (2015) findings which revealed that students with a positive attitude toward learning English tend to perform better than those with a negative attitude.

Furthermore, the experimental group's improved performance indicates that they have benefited from increased peer interaction and collaboration. Differentiated instruction often involves group work and collaborative activities, which can promote social interaction and help students learn from each other. This type of interaction has been shown to positively impact student learning and performance (Doubet & Hockett, 2018; Taylor, 2015).

As seen in the pre-test results, the control group had a different level of English proficiency prior to the study, which indicates that their ability to improve in the subject-verb agreement on intervening phrases is also different. In addition to the pre-existing difference in English proficiency, other factors contributed to the control group's poorer performance. One factor is the need for individualized attention and feedback from the teacher. In a traditional classroom setting, teachers often deliver instruction to the entire class without providing personalized attention to each student (Muganga & Ssensuku, 2019; Wang, 2022). This results in some students needing to catch up or fully understand the subject. Providing differentiated instruction based on multiple intelligences and learning styles can effectively improve student performance in English language learning. It highlights the need to consider students' different learning styles and preferences to maximize their learning potential (Gentry, 2013).

3.5 The Significant Difference in the Results Among the Respondents

Table 6 shows a statistically significant difference between the pre-test and post-test scores of the control and experimental groups. This finding suggests that the control and experimental groups improved their performance in subject-verb agreement on intervening phrases after receiving instruction. However, the experimental group showed a more significant improvement than the control group, as shown by the higher mean post-test score of the experimental group.

Table 6. Mean comparison between pre-test and post-test scores

Type of Test	Mean	Standard Deviation	t-value	p-value	Interpretation
Pre-Test	12.38	3.54	11.39	0.000	Pre-test and post-test differ significantly.
Post-Test	19.62	6.10			

The results of Table 6 indicate that the control and experimental groups improved their performance in subject-verb agreement on intervening phrases after receiving instruction. This finding is consistent with Larsen-Freeman's (2015) study, which found that instruction targeting specific grammar rules, such as subject-verb agreement, can improve language proficiency. It is important to note that both groups received the same instruction, but the experimental group received additional intervention through differentiated instruction based on multiple intelligences. The fact that both groups improved suggests that the instruction was effective for all students, but the additional intervention provided to the experimental group helped further their learning (Gardner, 2013; Tomlinson, 2014; Dunn et al., 2013). The more significant improvement in the experimental group's post-test scores can be attributed to receiving additional intervention through differentiated instruction based on multiple intelligences.

Moreover, the present study showed that even with the same instruction, students have different learning needs that require individualized attention (Gentry, 2013). In the experimental group, the teacher implemented differentiated instruction based on multiple intelligences and learning styles to tailor the instruction to the needs of each student (Gardner, 2013). This approach allowed the teacher to address each student's unique learning style and preferences, which contributed to the more significant improvement in post-test scores in the experimental group (Tomlinson, 2014).

In contrast, the traditional approach used in the control group involved providing the same instruction to all students, regardless of their individual learning needs and preferences (Larsen-Freeman, 2015). This approach assumes that all students learn in the same way and at the same pace, which is not the case (Gardner, 2013; Dunn et al., 2013; Tomlinson, 2014). The lack of differentiation in the instruction provided to the control group has limited their ability to fully understand and apply the subject-verb agreement on intervening phrases, particularly for students with different learning styles and preferences. As a result, their improvement in post-test scores has been limited compared to the experimental group (Larsen-Freeman, 2015; Tomlinson, 2014).

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the study's findings, the following conclusions were drawn:

1. The control and experimental groups failed to meet expectations in the pre-test, with the control group having a grade percentage of 66.36 and the experimental group with 69.01. It indicates that at the beginning of the study, both groups had a significant learning gap in English.
2. There was a significant difference in the pre-test scores between the control and experimental groups, with the experimental group having a higher mean score than the control group. It indicates that the control and experimental groups had varying English proficiency levels before the intervention.
3. The post-test scores of the experimental group showed a more significant improvement than the control group, which indicates that differentiated instruction had a positive impact on the English proficiency of the experimental group, leading to a significant improvement in their subject-verb agreement skills compared to the control group.
4. There was a significant difference in the post-test scores between the control and experimental group, with the experimental group having a higher mean score. It indicates that the treatment given to the experimental group effectively bridges their learning gaps in English.

5. The pre-test and post-test scores of the subjects showed a significant difference, with a higher mean score for the post-test.

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