How to Make Grammar Interesting and Nice With Action Grammar

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The pedagogical grammar has been search for hundred years. Researchers have thought that they can develop it on the writing table. No one from the grammar theorists has gone inside the school class. I organized on the seventh grade experimental and control group test. In the experimental groups they used drama methods. In the control groups they used traditional text books and exercise books. On one grade they had during the fall term no grammar. Other classes dealt with parts of speech. The classes had pretest at the beginning of the fall term and at the end of the period a final test. In the control groups the grammar was experienced boring and dull. In the experimental groups, where the drama methods were used, the grammar experienced interesting and nice. The pupils asked already in the beginning of the lesson, “do we have expression?”. They could ask that some exercises should make again—they were so desirable. In the experimental groups learning was nice and cooperative. The experienced learning by the pupils was many-sided. They learned not only parts of speech but also improvisation and to be in a group.

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Introduction

In the comprehensive school of Finland the pupils have on the grades three to six parts of speech on every class. However, they deal them still on the seventh grade more accurate. Rarely occuring cases come as new among the cases. As repetition and learning deeper come the comparison of adjectives and conjugations. I shall tell about an experiment which I made on the seventh classes during the period when they dealt with parts of speech.

It arouses attention that in the textbooks there is no drama exercises. Instead, they are alone or in pair/group made recognizing, completing, compounding, changing, and production tasks. They are pencil-paper tasks in an exercise book, so they are suitable for home tasks. The lesson time suits for common and creative tasks. Action grammar which was making experiments here changed the atmosphere nice and motivational. The grammar which was experienced boring became interesting and nice.

In the research on teaching, it is not easy to find control groups. Nobody wants to brand his teaching bad. It is also not sure if you get significant differences, although teaching situations are different. Intervening variables and error variables are numerous. I began, however, to make experimental—control group research with the following design

Yb	X	Ya	experimental group 1
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Yb	X	Ya	experimental group 2
Yb	-X	Ya	control group 1
Yb	-X	Ya	control group 2
Yb	-X	Ya	control group 3

Yb is pretest, Ya final test and X a new kind of grammar teaching. The participants are assigned to the experimental group and the control group, and are pretested on a measure of Y, the dependent variable (grammar). “The investigator can then check the equality of the two groups on Y”. The difference between the five groups is tested statistically. “An interesting and difficult characteristic of this design is the nature of the scores usually analyzed: difference, or change scores, $Y_a - Y_b = D$.” (Kerlinger & Lee, 2000, p. 494). The researcher searches for statistically significant differences.

Research Questions

The small interest of grammar and its experience of bore are harmful for the whole school subject. We must seek means of improving the situation. The research on teaching is a way with which the situation can be solved. Experimental—control group design tells if the new method is better than the traditional method.

How do seventh graders experience different subareas of the school subject mother tongue and literature? What is the status of grammar?

What differences occur between experimental and control groups? When do they deal parts of speech during the grammar period?

How do pupils stand in a relation to action grammar? How do they feel that they learn from them?

To solve the research questions, we need a class where the teaching goes traditional with textbook, exercise book, and the tasks the teacher divides to the class, and another class where the teacher uses action (drama) exercises.

Research Classes

An interested teacher of mother tongue, literature, and expression was found who was ready to make experiments with the new method in her classes. She got another teacher in the same school to become inspired and to come to the research design. Also willing comparison classes were found. The rectors in the schools agreed about the research. The school bureau permitted the design a research approval. The control groups were classes 1—3 and experimental classes 4 and 5. All classes are seven classes in the comprehensive school in the same city. In the classes there were pupils on the following way. They had pretest and final test.

In the classes 1 and 2 there were traditional grammar. It was learnt from the book and as an aid was an exercise book. To the grammar there were no action drama exercises. The control group 2 is a mathematical class. They have been selected by entrance examination. In the class 3 there was in the fall term no grammar at all, for they concentrated on the language planning (correct Finnish). In the experimental classes 4 and 5, there were the same teacher who used almost same exercises in both classes. Class 4 was a language class who got bilingual teaching (in English). Lessons in mother tongue were in Finnish. Class 5 was an expression class, where the pupils were selected on the ground of application. Both in the experimental and control groups it was used as textbook Aleksis 7. I tell you pretest and final test results on the fall term 2008. The trial continued on the spring term 2009, but I don't tell about it. I concentrate this presentation on the first semester (see Table 1).

Table 1

Research Classes

Control groups
School 1, class 1, girls 5, boys 11, in total 16
School 2, class 2, girls 4, boys 12, in total 16
School 3, class 3, girls 9, boys 12, in total 21
Experimental classes
School 3, class 4, girls 7, boys 11, in total 18
School 3, class 5, girls 20, boys 1, in total 21

Pretest**Open Answer Questions**

In the pretest questionnaire the pupils were asked, what nice and boring there is in the school, what their favorite subjects are and what they like least. From the grammar they were asked what is interesting and nice and is there something boring. From its knowing they were asked to tell, how well they can it on their opinion, what should be learned more and better and how he/she learns best grammar.

What nice/boring is there in the school?

Pupils from different classes mentioned same things from the nice features. They were friends, brakes, eating, holidays, different subjects, learning, relaxed atmosphere, when they do not get homework, etc.. They experienced boring long school days, examinations, homework, bullying, some subjects, and teachers, bad food, early mornings, etc..

From the questions “From which subject do you like most/least?” I code only those where there is mentioned mother tongue.

The pupils’ answers about the pleasantness/unpleasantness of the grammar and its knowing were almost similar in different classes in pretest measurement. Some answers in the following.

What is in your opinion interesting and nice in the grammar?

—New things what one needs; learning new things.

—Parts of speech.

—No one, I do not know.

—Verbs.

—Several things are quite nice, I cannot say.

—All conjunction lists “that, although, when, so that, etc.”.

—Nice names to cases.

—Inflection of words.

—It is interesting to learn for example different inflections of words.

—In the grammar there is not other nice than the parts of speech.

Is there in the grammar in your opinion something boring?

—I cannot say.

—All thing.

—Difficult things.

—Rare parts of speech.

—Nothing, sometimes a little boring.

- Parts of speech.
- It is dull.
- I do not like that difficult things must be learnt by heart.
- In the grammar there is nothing dull, I just do not like it.

Pretest results tell about that the pupils are usual seventh graders. They have customary seven graders' opinions from the school, the subjects, and their knowing. In the following, there are more accurate measurement results, so that it is worth to present close to each other as pretest and final test results (see Table 2).

Table 2

Mother Tongue Mentioned Among Mostly Liked Subjects and Among Least Liked Subjects

	Mentioned favorite subject	Mentioned least liked subject
Class 1	2	2
Class 2	2	2
Class 3	2	2
Class 4	1	0
Class 5	4	2
—Expression 12		

Pretest and Final Test Measurements About the Attitudes Towards Different Subareas of Mother Tongue

Among different classes there were not significant differences in attitudes towards different subareas of the subject. The pretest tells how the attitudes have been worked up in elementary comprehensive school and what has been the attitude result the classroom teacher has produced. The variables has been encoded so that very pleasant thing has signed with number 5, pleasant with number 4, I cannot say with 3, unpleasant with 2, and very unpleasant with 1. Among, the classes there are small differences. I don't look here at desirability orders of different subareas of the subject. Instead, I concentrate only on the grammar.

From the results, it can be seen that the grammar and the correct Finnish are least pleasant subareas in all classes. In the attitudes are some small changes, both increases and reductions. In the experimental class 4, there is an almost statistically significant difference in the desirability of grammar between pretest and final test: t value 2,10 (df 14), p .054. In the reading and in the correct Finnish, there is in the class 4 similar change (see Table 3).

Table 3

The Desirability of Mother Tongue in its Different Subareas in Pretest and in Final Test

Class	1	2	3	4	5
Desirability of reading					
Pretest	3,81	4,56	2,86	3,63	4,25
Final test	3,81	4,64	2,89	4,00	4,45
Desirability of writing					
Pretest	3,19	2,94	2,90	3,56	3,85
Final test	3,19	2,93	2,58	3,44	3,75
Desirability of grammar					

(table 3 continued)

Class	1	2	3	4	5
Pretest	2,88	3,00	2,48	2,73	3,10
Final test	2,75	2,71	2,37	3,22	3,15
Desirability of correct Finnish					
Pretest	3,19	2,75	2,70	2,67	3,32
Final test	3,00	2,64	2,53	3,22	3,30
Desirability of literature					
Pretest	3,31	4,00	2,20	3,19	3,50
Final test	3,06	3,64	2,42	3,17	3,65
Desirability of expression					
Pretest	4,19	3,56	3,24	4,00	4,95
Final test	2,75	3,71	3,14	4,39	4,90
Desirability of acting					
Pretest	4,25	3,81	3,00	4,00	4,90
Final test	3,88	3,64	3,06	4,17	4,95
Desirability of media					
Pretest	4,25	4,06	3,33	4,07	4,00
Final test	3,94	4,08	3,53	4,17	4,10

What About Grammatical Knowing?

To solve what pupils learnt from the grammar, they had the pretest, where they were asked to recognize parts of speech. From a prosa text they had to pick subjects, adjectives, and verbs and write them in the ground form on empty lines. Also argumentation—how do you know that it is the part of speech in question, was asked. I punctuated correct answers. The results in the pretest from different classes are in the table 4.

Table 4

Knowing of Parts of Speech in Pretest

Classes	1	2	3	4	5
Pretest					
Parts of speech	12,81	14,63	12,10	13,13	11,95

Experimental class 4 has got in the pretest the second best result. Experimental class 5 has got the lowest score. The differences are however not statistically significant.

The test of parts of speech could not be repeated as final test. It would be too simple, because the pupils had studied parts of speech the whole period. Their teacher held an examination which was its period test from the teacher's guide of the textbook. In the experimental class 4 and 5 the teacher told before the examination that other classes had got from it in mean 7,20. The examination was then difficult. The experimental class 4 got from the examination in mean 9.

In the examination of the teacher's guide there is an item where you have to invent sentences in accordance with the instruction. They were in type (1) substantive + verb + adjective, (2) particle + verb + adjective + substantive, (3) pronoun + verb + adjective, and (4) verb + substantive. I took the task in the final test measurement. From every correct answer the pupil got a point. It was the same task for every class.

The variable changed 0-12 points. The comparison class 3 has had no exercises of parts of speech, so it is understandable that it has cleared up worst. The experimental classes 4 and 5 have succeeded well, also the control class 2. The control class 1 cannot be either considered bad (see Table 5).

Table 5

Knowing of Parts of Speech in the Posttest

Classes	1	2	3	4	5
Production of sentences	9,38	11,71	6,00	10,61	9,70
Mean of control classes	9,03				
Mean of experimental classes	10,16				

Reliability

By the reliability, we seek a dependable measure and measurement. It means the “degree to which the measurement agrees with itself”. The measurement and the instrument shall be stable, consistent, predictable, and lack of distortion. If the instrument is “true” we can trust on it (Kerlinger & Lee, 2000, p. 642).

Methods of obtaining the reliability coefficient is parallel forms, internal consistency, and test—retest testing. The same measurement instrument will be given to the same group on two different occasions. “The time spread between occasions depends on the type of measurement and the purpose of the measurements. Usually, the time interval between occasions is chosen so that sufficient decay of memory for the responses occurs” (Kerlinger & Lee, 2000, p. 653). Every person has two measurements.

The item to produce sentences from parts of speech was in the grammar examination and also the second time in the attitude questionnaire. From it there was possible to count the stability reliability of two parallel measurements. It was .75 (Pearson’s product moment correlation). The dependability of measurements can be hold satisfactory.

An Extract From the Learning Logs

The pupils who used action method were asked to respond about it how they experienced the exercises. They answered to the questions: (I) What did I learn? (II) Wow did I feel when doing the exercise?

All pupils have not learnt in the same amount from every exercise. They have not all either liked every exercise. An exercise that most of them have experienced nice can for some pupil be boring because he/she has not got in or has not experienced to be sufficient good. I present in the following pupils’ comments as such from the exercises (1) tarpot and (2) dropping game.

Opinions about the tarpot

(1) In the tarpot pupils stand in a circle. One touches the pupil in the back and says a substantive. When he/she says a word belonging to another part of speech, he/she begins to run and the touched pupil begins to run in another direction. Who is at first on the empty place, remains there. The other continues to count over substantives.

(I) What did I learn?

Always I don’t get in myself but however it can be nice.

Quite nice, it was exciting. I learnt to be more accurate and to invent substantives.

I learnt to distinguish better what is a substantive and what is a verb.

Words

I learnt cooperation and to distinguish better parts of speech.

I didn’t learn anything because I couldn’t do anything.

(II) How did you feel when doing the exercise?

Nice (2)

Fun (6)

Really fun

Neat

It was difficult to think of substantives.

It was a little dull, because I had only to stand when others could run.

(2) Opinions about the dropping game

The pupils float and say sur, sur, sur. The teacher says one letter. The pupils stiffen to present a thing that begins with the same letter. The teacher shows a pupil who says the substantive he/she is presenting. If the pupil says wrong or a substantive that is already said, he/she falls from the game.

(I) What did I learn?

To improvise better.

I learnt to be more creative.

I learnt to invite better words.

I learnt fastness and reacting capacity.

I invited surprising rapidly words.

(II) How did you feel when doing the exercise?

Very nice.

Nice (4)

It was funny but I fell almost at once.

Conclusion

The action grammar has become very popular in Finland and in Eastland. The teacher of the experimental groups, Nina Maunu, has held innumerable inservice occasions to teachers. We were in conferences in Copenhagen 2010 and in Hildesheim (Germany) 2011. She visited the Department of teacher education in Turku. She has applied action grammar to cases, tenses, comparison of adjectives, modal forms of verbs, and to syntax.

The parts of sentences have their own features. The predicate is a motor, a starter (the heart of the sentence), elastic (be conjugated), collaborative (combines sometimes with the subject), a leader (other parts of sentence are not possible without a predicate), independent (can appear and act alone in a sentence, in Finnish *Sataa* = It rains, *Tuulee* = It blows), a clear bad side: it evokes dependence (there is no sentence without a predicate; other parts of sentences are dependent on it).

Also other teachers have told about their experiments: Helena Tommola (2010) from the elementary comprehensive school, Marjaana Markkula (2010) from the secondary school, and Juli Aerila (2011) from teacher training. All have been satisfied with the new method.

In the experiment, pupils' attitudes and the results in their examination were better than in control groups. The pupils waited for grammar lessons, indeed they asked "do we have expression?". They had noticed that during the expression lessons there is exciting and nice. It is not only making tasks in the exercise book. Every pupil is in occasion to attend, they have interesting and demanding tasks. They work together; they have the possibility to invent, to improvise, and to use their creativity. They don't need to sit in their desks but they use the floor area. They can move, walk, and run. The lesson is not monotonous or tedious. They can attend

creatively. They have group tasks; they learn to be in the group. Some tasks are individual.

The teacher needs belief in the method. He/she shall like to move in the class. It is necessary that he/she wants to seek the grammar of young people, not only adult grammar. He/she wants to give tasks that are interesting and demanding for pupils. They can use their whole body as an instrument. There are really many possibilities to make different tasks. The teacher needs touch in them.

If all classroom teachers from the elementary level and subject teachers begin to use action grammar, the attitudes to the grammar could change. The school subject mother tongue could become pleasant. It demands a new teacher education.

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