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Students' Age and Grammar Competence

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Abstract

This study examined the relationship between students' age and grammar competence among Junior High School students in a national high school in the Division of Ozamiz City during School Year 2025–2026. Specifically, it determined the level of grammar competence across age groups, identified differences in grammar competence, determined the least learned grammatical categories, and developed instructional activities to address learning gaps. A descriptive research design was employed involving 67 students aged 12–17 years selected through total enumeration. Data were gathered using a 50-item grammaticality judgment test covering nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, conjunctions, and prepositions. Data were analyzed using weighted mean and one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA). Findings revealed that students generally demonstrated an average level of grammar competence. Conjunctions emerged as the strongest grammatical category, while pronouns, adjectives, and adverbs were identified as the least learned areas. Results further indicated no significant difference in grammar competence among students when grouped according to age. The findings suggest that grammar competence is influenced more by instructional exposure and learning experiences than by age. Instructional activities focusing on weak grammatical areas are recommended to improve learners' grammar competence.

Keywords

grammar competence; age; grammatical categories; descriptive research

1. Introduction

Grammar competence is a fundamental component of English language learning because it enables learners to construct meaningful, accurate, and coherent sentences. It plays a crucial role in both written and oral communication, allowing individuals to express ideas clearly and effectively. In linguistic theory, competence refers to a learner's internalized knowledge of language rules that allows them to produce and understand sentences appropriately (McNeil, 2006). Consequently, grammar competence is considered an essential component of communicative competence and a key indicator of language proficiency.

Grammar serves as the structural foundation of language. Without adequate grammatical knowledge, communication may become unclear and ineffective. Celce-Murcia (2005) emphasized that grammar instruction is necessary for effective communication, while Díaz-Rico and Weed (2010) argued that grammar equips learners with the skills needed to express ideas accurately in both speaking and writing. Recent studies further suggest that grammar should be taught in meaningful and

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contextualized ways to enhance learners' ability to apply grammatical knowledge in authentic situations (Ji & Liu, 2018).

In the Philippine educational context, the Department of Education continues to emphasize grammar competence through the K–12 curriculum and the MATATAG Curriculum reforms. English instruction integrates grammar with reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills to develop learners' overall communicative competence. Despite these initiatives, many Filipino learners continue to experience difficulties in grammar, particularly in written communication and language comprehension, highlighting the need for more effective instructional approaches.

Among the factors associated with grammar learning, age has received considerable attention in second language acquisition research. Studies indicate that older learners often perform better in grammar-related tasks because of their cognitive maturity and ability to analyze language structures explicitly (DeKeyser, 2000). Similarly, Ganjoee and Narafshan (2016) found that older learners demonstrate stronger grammatical performance due to their ability to apply logical reasoning and prior language knowledge. In contrast, younger learners may possess advantages in attaining natural fluency through prolonged language exposure and immersion (Krashen et al., 2007). These findings suggest that age may influence grammar learning in different ways depending on instructional context and learning experiences.

Recent literature emphasizes that grammar instruction should be responsive to learners' developmental characteristics. Pengelley (2019) reported that older learners benefit more from explicit grammar instruction, whereas younger learners respond more positively to interactive and contextualized learning experiences. Furthermore, grammar competence has been identified as a significant factor in writing development and academic achievement (Ji & Liu, 2018), reinforcing the importance of understanding variables that may affect learners' grammatical performance.

Although numerous international studies have examined the relationship between age and language acquisition, limited local research has explored how age influences grammar competence among Filipino learners. In Ozamiz City, improving English proficiency remains a priority among schools, yet there is insufficient local evidence to guide age-responsive grammar instruction. Understanding variations in grammar competence across age groups may provide valuable insights for developing targeted instructional interventions and improving English language teaching practices.

Anchored on the premise that age may influence learners' grammatical competence, this study examined the grammar competence of Junior High School students aged 12 to 17 years in a public secondary school in Ozamiz City during School Year 2025–2026. Specifically, the study assessed students' competence in nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, conjunctions, and prepositions; determined whether significant differences existed among age groups; identified the least learned grammatical categories; and proposed instructional activities to address identified learning gaps.

The study was guided by the hypothesis that there is no significant difference in the levels of grammar competence among students across different age groups. Findings from this study are expected to contribute to English language instruction by providing empirical evidence that may assist teachers in developing more effective and age-appropriate grammar teaching strategies. Ultimately, the study

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seeks to support improved language proficiency, academic performance, and communicative competence among learners.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Design

This study employed a descriptive research design to determine the grammar competence of Junior High School students aged 12–17 years. Descriptive research is appropriate for collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data to describe existing conditions and characteristics of a population (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Fraenkel et al., 2019). The design was used to assess students' competence in selected grammatical categories and determine whether significant differences existed among age groups.

2.2. Research Setting and Participants

The study was conducted in a public secondary school in the Division of Ozamiz City during the School Year 2025–2026. The school offers Junior High School education and serves learners from various barangays in Ozamiz City.

The participants consisted of all 67 Junior High School students aged 12 to 17 years enrolled in Grades 7 to 10. A total enumeration sampling technique was employed, allowing all eligible students to participate in the study. This approach ensured adequate representation of all age groups included in the investigation.

2.3. Research Instrument

The study utilized a 50-item grammaticality judgment test designed to assess students' grammar competence. The instrument required respondents to identify whether a sentence was grammatically correct or incorrect. The test covered seven grammatical categories: nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, conjunctions, and prepositions.

The test items were derived from officially published Philippine English textbooks aligned with the K–12 curriculum. Since the items were adapted from established instructional materials used in classroom instruction, they were considered appropriate for measuring students' grammar competence.

2.4. Data Collection Procedure

Prior to data collection, permission to conduct the study was secured from the appropriate educational authorities and school administrators. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study and their voluntary participation.

The grammaticality judgment test was administered during the scheduled data collection period. Respondents received standardized instructions and were given sufficient time to complete the instrument. Upon completion, all answer sheets were collected, checked, encoded, and prepared for statistical analysis.

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2.5. Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Mean scores were computed to determine the level of grammar competence in the seven grammatical categories. To determine whether significant differences existed among students grouped according to age, a one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was employed at the 0.05 level of significance.

2.6. Ethical Considerations

Ethical standards were observed throughout the conduct of the study. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by ensuring that no identifying information was disclosed in the presentation of results.

The researcher adhered to principles of honesty, integrity, and objectivity during data collection, analysis, and reporting. All information presented in the study was based on actual findings, and all sources were properly acknowledged to avoid plagiarism and ensure academic integrity.

3. Results and Discussion

Grammar Competence of Students According to Age

Table 1. Summary of Students' Grammar Competence by Age Level

Age Level	General Weighted Mean	Overall Adjectival Rating
1. 12 years old	57.57	A
2. 13 years old	45.71	A
3. 14 years old	45.03	A
4. 15 years old	42.86	A
5. 16 years old	45.02	A
6. 17 years old	41.27	A
Overall Weighted Mean	46.24	A

Table 1 presents the grammar competence of students when grouped according to age. The findings revealed that all age groups obtained an Average level of grammar competence. Among the six age groups, the 12-year-old learners obtained the highest overall weighted mean (57.57), followed by the 13-year-old learners (45.71), 14-year-old learners (45.03), 16-year-old learners (45.02), 15-year-old learners (42.86), and 17-year-old learners (41.27). The overall weighted mean of 46.24 indicates an Average level of grammar competence among the respondents.

The results suggest that students possess moderate competence in grammar regardless of age level. Although slight variations in mean scores were observed, all groups remained within the same adjectival rating. This finding indicates that age alone does not necessarily correspond to higher grammar competence.

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The result supports the view of Ellis (2015), who emphasized that grammar acquisition is influenced not only by age but also by exposure to language, quality of instruction, and opportunities for practice. Similarly, Lightbown and Spada (2021) argued that learners may achieve comparable grammatical competence when exposed to similar instructional environments and learning experiences.

Grammar Competence According to Grammatical Components

Table 2. Summary of Students' Grammar Competence by Age Level and Component

Components	Age Levels					
	12	13	14	15	16	17
1. Nouns	63.30	65.19	57.31	59.72	53.06	53.33
2. Pronouns	80.00	29.63	29.24	27.78	29.72	26.67
3. Verbs	47.00	57.04	63.16	58.33	56.67	57.78
4. Adjectives	57.50	22.96	24.56	18.06	27.22	22.22
5. Adverbs	56.00	34.07	35.09	27.78	30.97	28.89
6. Conjunctions	53.64	71.11	73.10	69.44	71.81	60.00
7. Prepositions	45.56	40.00	32.75	38.89	45.69	40.00
Over-all Average	57.57	45.71	45.03	42.86	45.02	41.27
Overall Adjectival rating	A	A	A	A	A	A

Table 2 presents the grammar competence of students across the seven grammatical components. The findings reveal that conjunctions consistently obtained the highest mean scores across most age groups, ranging from Average to Moving Towards Mastery. Conversely, pronouns, adjectives, and adverbs consistently obtained the lowest mean scores and were generally interpreted as Low. Nouns, verbs, and prepositions were rated Average across age groups.

The results indicate that students demonstrate greater competence in connecting ideas through conjunctions than in using descriptive and function-based grammatical structures. The relatively high performance in conjunctions may be attributed to their frequent use in oral and written communication. In contrast, pronouns, adjectives, and adverbs require greater grammatical awareness and contextual understanding, making them more difficult to acquire.

These findings are consistent with Celce-Murcia, Larsen-Freeman, and Williams (2014), who explained that conjunctions are acquired earlier because they function as discourse organizers frequently encountered in language input. On the other hand, Biber, Conrad, and Leech (2019) noted that adjectives and adverbs involve multiple syntactic and semantic functions, increasing their complexity

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for language learners. Ellis (2015) likewise emphasized that pronouns require learners to manage reference, agreement, and discourse context simultaneously, making them cognitively demanding.

Significant Difference in Grammar Competence According to Age

Table 3. Test of Significant Differences in Students' Grammar Competence among Six Age Levels

Parameters	Findings
F-Stat Value	0.758
Sig (p-value)	0.718
The decision of the Hypothesis	Reject
Interpretation	Without Significant Difference

To determine whether significant differences existed in grammar competence among students grouped according to age, a one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was conducted.

Table 3 shows that the computed F-value was 0.758 with a corresponding p-value of 0.718. Since the p-value is greater than the 0.05 level of significance, the null hypothesis was accepted. Therefore, there is no significant difference in the grammar competence of students when grouped according to age.

The result indicates that age did not significantly influence the grammar competence of the respondents. Although the mean scores differed slightly across age groups, the differences were not statistically significant. This suggests that students from different ages generally demonstrate similar levels of grammar competence.

The finding supports DeKeyser (2020), who stated that successful grammar learning depends more on instructional quality, exposure, and practice than on chronological age alone. Likewise, Ellis and Shintani (2019) argued that explicit grammar instruction and guided practice can produce comparable learning outcomes across age groups. The result further implies that all students were exposed to relatively similar learning conditions, which may have contributed to their comparable levels of grammar competence.

Least Mastered Grammatical Categories

Analysis of the grammatical components revealed that pronouns, adjectives, and adverbs were the least mastered grammatical categories among the respondents.

Pronouns consistently received low ratings across all age groups, indicating difficulties in reference tracking, agreement, and contextual usage. Adjectives also obtained low scores, suggesting challenges in adjective ordering, placement, and descriptive functions. Similarly, adverbs emerged as a weak area due to their flexible placement and multiple grammatical functions.

The findings support Ellis (2015), who explained that pronouns require simultaneous processing of grammatical and discourse information. Carter and McCarthy (2015) further noted that adjectives

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present difficulties because learners must understand both syntactic position and semantic meaning. Likewise, Biber et al. (2019) argued that adverbs are among the most complex grammatical categories because they can modify various sentence elements and appear in different positions within a sentence.

The persistent difficulty observed across age groups suggests that these grammatical categories require more focused and systematic instruction. Explicit teaching, contextualized practice, and repeated exposure may help learners improve mastery in these areas.

Proposed Instructional Activities for Grammar Improvement

Based on the findings, instructional activities were proposed to address the least mastered grammatical categories. These activities include sentence substitution drills, pronoun reference games, picture description tasks, adjective ordering exercises, sentence rearrangement activities, adverb identification tasks, preposition mapping activities, and verb tense practice exercises.

The proposed activities emphasize meaningful communication, contextualized learning, and repeated exposure to grammatical structures. According to Larsen-Freeman, DeCarrico, and Celce-Murcia (2016), grammar instruction becomes more effective when learners engage in communicative activities rather than memorizing isolated rules. Nation (2022) likewise emphasized that repeated encounters with language forms in meaningful contexts contribute significantly to grammar acquisition and retention.

Overall, the findings suggest that grammar competence among students is generally average across age groups, with no significant differences according to age. However, weaknesses in pronouns, adjectives, and adverbs indicate the need for targeted instructional interventions to improve learners' grammatical competence. Such interventions may help strengthen students' overall English language proficiency and support more effective communication in both oral and written contexts.

4. Conclusion

Based on the findings of the study, the students demonstrated an Average level of grammar competence across all age groups. Among the grammatical categories assessed, conjunctions emerged as the strongest area of competence, while pronouns, adjectives, and adverbs were identified as the least mastered grammatical categories. Nouns, verbs, and prepositions were generally rated at an average level, indicating moderate understanding of these grammatical structures.

The results further revealed that age did not significantly influence students' grammar competence, as no significant difference was found among the six age groups included in the study. This suggests that grammar competence is not determined by age alone but is more likely influenced by factors such as instructional practices, learning experiences, exposure to language, and opportunities for meaningful practice.

Moreover, the consistent weaknesses observed in pronouns, adjectives, and adverbs indicate the need for focused instructional interventions to strengthen learners' understanding and application of these grammatical categories. The findings imply that learners require continuous reinforcement and contextualized learning experiences to improve their grammatical competence.

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Therefore, the study concludes that improving grammar competence requires sustained, systematic, and communicative grammar instruction across all grade levels. Effective teaching strategies that provide meaningful practice and authentic language use are essential in enhancing students' overall grammatical proficiency.

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