UTILIZING VISUAL SYNTACTIC TEXT FORMATING (VSTF) METHODS TO IMPROVE STUDENTS’ GRAMMATICAL COMPETENCE IN WRITING

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Abstract
Based on the result of a preliminary study conducted at SMKN 3 Madiun it was found that the grammatical competence in writing of Year 2013-2014 students in class X AK is still unsatisfactory. This study was conducted in two cycles consisting of eight meetings. The instruments were observation checklists, questionnaire, field note and the students’ writing test measured using scoring rubrics.

The finding of the study indicated that the implementation of VSTF methods was successful. It is indicated by the increasing of percentages of the students’ achievement of the criteria of success. The criterion was if more than 80% of the students participate or are actively involved in the teaching and learning process and the data analysis confirmed 75.00%, (in cycle I), 81.25% (in cycle II) students were actively involved. Concerning the second criterion was if more than 80% the students achieve the score greater than or equal to 60, and the finding showed that 71.88% (in cycle I), 84.38% (in cycle II) of students already achieved scores greater than 60.

Based on the findings, it can be concluded that VSTF method is effective to improve the students’ grammatical competence in writing and the students’ involvement in the teaching-learning English.

Keywords: VSTF, improve, grammatical competence, writing.

INTRODUCTION
There are several attempts done in teaching and learning English. Not only in English – speaking countries but also in non English – speaking countries, such as Indonesia. English is a foreign language to Indonesia. There are barriers and problems faced by the students of EFL countries. One of them is the problem in writing class. Writing is considered to be the most difficult skill for L2 learners to master (Richards and Renandya, 2002:303) because it involves highly complex skills, such as generating and
organizing the ideas, grammatical structure, words choice, and punctuation.

Smedley (1983) described the place of grammar in language especially in writing; since writing provides a permanent record, and does not allow an instantaneous corrections, pauses and hesitations of speech, it is deliberate, planned activity where we need to consider carefully what we put down on paper. It, therefore, becomes feasible to stick closely to certain grammatical connection (as cited in Ulfa, 2011: 13). This statement strictly agrees on the significance of grammar in writing

The following pieces are the students’ products in writing taken from descriptive writing class during the preliminary study.

*My school is one of famous high school in Madiun city. My school is very beautiful in my school so many plant and if you she that you will say “wow amazing”. My school is clean (a descriptive text written by a student in SMKN 3 Madiun with only short and single paragraph)*

The samples of students’ works show that, there are many errors in grammatical rule. The failure to use the correct sentence pattern is their problem.

However, current instructional practice does not seem to effectively address writing structures. The models frequently employed in classroom developed by the teacher do not give the students new experience in studying how to write better in English. The teacher needs to improve the students’ grammatical competence in writing by employing an appropriate method in teaching.

Based on the condition and theoretical background above, the researcher decided to solve the problem on the students’ grammatical competence in writing by utilizing an application that can help the students to improve their grammatical competence in writing. This application is VSTF or Visual Syntactic Text Formatting methods.

Why the researcher proposed the utilization of VSTF? It is with consideration that the use of digital media in language teaching and learning recently being worldwide. As mentioned by Richard and Renandya (2002) that computer-based activities can be highly stimulating and provide a rich resource for learning.

This study was a collaborative classroom action research. There were stages included, they were preliminary study, planning, implementing, observing and reflecting. The instruments used were observation checklist, questionnaire, field note and test.

The criteria of success of this research will be emphasized on two criteria, namely the teaching and learning process and the product of the students’ writing. The criteria of success are described as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The criteria of success</th>
<th>Data source</th>
<th>Instrument for data collection</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The process: 80% students of X Chemical Analysis of SMKN 3 Madiun respond positively during the implementation of VSTF methods</td>
<td>The students’ statement toward the implementation of the methods</td>
<td>Questionnaire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt; 80% students of X Chemical Analysis of SMKN 3 Madiun are motivated during the action</td>
<td>The record of the students’ attitude during the implementation of the methods</td>
<td>Field Note</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The product: The criteria of success: &gt; 80% students of X Chemical Analysis 3 of SMKN 3 Madiun scored ≥ 60</td>
<td>The result of the students’ writing product</td>
<td>Writing Test</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In this study, The implementation of the VSTF methods in teaching writing descriptive text encompassed several procedures: 1) give the students a descriptive text in the VSTF mode, 2) ask the students to read it several times and explain the text, 3)
explain the language features of descriptive text, 4) give the students “I am” poem in the VSTF mode, 5) ask the students to identify what they see in the VSTF text mode focusing on the adjective placement, noun and simple present tense, 6) guide the students to discuss about it, 7) guide the students to make sentences by using correct adjective placement, noun and simple present tense, 8) guide the students to arrange the sentences to become a digital text in the VSTF mode 9) guide the students to edit the draft in terms of grammar, and 10) ask the students to write the final version of the text.

Finding in cycle I
The Students’ Participation in the Teaching-Learning Process

In meeting 1, it was found that 13 students (40%) were active (A); as they met three indicators in the observation checklist, 9 students (28%) were active enough (AE) as they met two of the indicators, 8 students (25%) were not active (NA) as they met only one of the indicators. 2 students were absent in this meeting. From these data, it could be stated that 22 students (68.75%) were categorized as active participants –active plus active enough– and were actively involved in the teaching-learning process. In meeting 2, it was found that 15 students (46%) were active (A); as they met three indicators in the observation checklist, 10 students (31.25%) were active enough (AE) as they met two of the indicators, 7 students (21.86%) were not active (NA) as they met only one of the indicators. 4 students were absent in this meeting. From these data, it could be stated that 25 students (78.13%) were categorized active participants –active plus active enough– and actively involved in the teaching-learning process.

It could be concluded that the students’ involvement of learning activity as the implementation of the VSTF was good. It was still below the criteria of success of the study (80%).

The Students’ Grammatical Competence in Writing Achievement.

In the fourth meeting the researcher gave the students a test. The result of the students’ writing was collected by the researcher. It was assessed in terms of grammar. Three components were used; they were noun, adjectives placement and simple present.

The result of VSTF mode based on the syntactic pattern of sentences has already provided readers with the correct order of words in a not monotonous pattern of line. It was helpful in overcoming the monotonous blocking of sentences in paragraph. Even though the students could use correct noun and correct placement of adjectives, they still had difficulty in the use of verbs or the use of the simple present tense. The students still had difficulties in using the correct nominal and verbal sentences in simple present tense. It was also about the difficulties in subject-verb agreement in term of plus –s or –es (for singular or plural subject).

The sample of students’ writing product was presented below.

A Dream Valuable usually people who are dreaming of various kinds. There is a bad dream, beautiful dream, dream or valuable precious dream. The dreams probably has many valuable messages. In the dream could possibly be our motivation for further. So if we experience
the dreams that might be valuable so we become great. By: SK

It was found that there was also still a displacement of adjectives. In the title, the student used “A Dream Valuable” instead of “A Valuable Dream”.

In general, 23 students (71.88%) got more than or equal 60 and 9 students (28.12%) got less than 60. Therefore based on the criteria of success it could be concluded that the result had not already reached the criteria of success because only 71.88% students reached it.

In accordance with the result of the students’ writing and also some findings obtained from the result of the observation, the criteria of success have not been reached because the result of students’ writing in term of grammar was still low.

To avoid the problem above, in cycle II, the researcher gave more examples or exposure to sentences about the simple present in VSTF mode and additional information about simple present tense correctly. The researcher still also prepared worksheets for the noun and adjectives placement understanding. Besides, the researcher made some different steps of applying the strategy as mentioned in lesson plan for cycle II.

Finding in Cycle II
The Students’ Participation in the Teaching-Learning Process

In getting the data on the students’ activities and participation during the teaching-learning process, the researcher utilized observation checklists. The observation checklist used in the cycle II was the same as the observation checklists used in the cycle I.

In meeting 1, it was found that 19 students (59.38%) were active (A); as they met three indicators in the observation checklist, 5 students (15.63%) were active enough (AE) as they met two of the indicators, 8 students (25%) were not active (NA) as they met only one of the indicators. In conclusion, 24 students (75.00%) were categorized as active participants –active plus active enough– and were actively involved in the teaching-learning process.

In meeting 2, it was found that 20 students (62.50%) were active (A); as they met three indicators in the observation checklist, 6 students (18.75%) were active enough (AE) as they met two of the indicators, 6 students (18.75) were not active (NA) as they met only one of the indicators. In other words 26 students (81.25%) were categorized active participants –active plus active enough– and were actively involved in the teaching-learning process.

The data from meeting 3, showed improvement of participation in teaching-learning process from the previous meeting. The observation checklist for this meeting showed that 22 students (68.75%) were active (A); as they met three indicators in the observation checklist, 7 students (21.86%) were active enough (AE) as they met two of the indicators, 3 students (9.36%) were not active (NA) as they met only one of the indicators. All students were present in this meeting. It could be concluded that 28 students (87.50%) were categorized as active participants –active plus active enough– and were actively involved in the teaching-learning process.

Based on the observation checklists for those three meetings, it can be inferred that there was improvement on the students’ involvement. In meeting 1, 75.00% of the students were actively involved in the teaching and learning process, whereas in meeting 2, 81.25% of the students were actively involved in the teaching and learning process. The improvement of the students’ involvement from meeting 1 to meeting 2 was 6.25%. Meanwhile, in meeting 3, 87.50% of the students were actively involved. The improvement from meeting 2
to meeting 3 was 6.25%. The improvement from meeting 1 to meeting 3 was 12.5%.

Based on the result of final students’ involvement from the observation checklists for those three meetings, it can be inferred that there was improvement on the students’ involvement. In meeting 1, 75.00% of the students were actively involved in the teaching and learning process. In meeting 2, 81.25% of the students were actively involved in the teaching and learning process. The improvement of the students’ involvement from Meeting 1 to Meeting 2 was 6.25%. Meanwhile, in Meeting 3, 87.50% of the students were actively involved. It indicated that the improvement from Meeting 2 to Meeting 3 was 6.25%. On the other hand, the improvement from meeting 1 to meeting 3 was 12.50%. The average was 81.25%.

The Students’ Grammatical Competence in Writing Achievement.

In cycle II, it was shown that the students’ grammatical competence getting improved. They could use the correct adjective placement and noun. They also could use the correct simple present tense in their writing product, it was descriptive text. The students were also guided to edit their writing in term of grammar during the implementation of VSTF methods. In this case, they were allowed to discuss their result on writing with their group members and also were given feedback by the teacher.

In the last meeting, the students were given writing test. The products of the students then analyzed in term of grammar; they were noun, adjectives placement and the simple present tense.

The followings are examples of students’ writing products.

My successful athlete

He is TaufiqHidayat. He is my idol athlete. He is the successful athlete of badminton. He is handsome and nice. He is the brother in law of Mr. AgumGumelar. In physically, he has black hair and sharp eyes. He has white skin. He is like my dream. My dream is my successful athlete. I can describe that my dream is TaufiqHidayat.

This is good because TaufiqHidayat is famous person. So, I have dream become famous person like the successful TaufiqHidayat.

(By: PPM)

From the example above, it can be seen the improvement made by the students in term of adjective placement and noun phrases. The use of simple present seems to be better though there is still inappropriate use of copula be; where the student used double be; “is” and “was” in the at the same time. In general, it does not bother the whole meaning of the text.

In general, the improvement made by the students can be concluded from final result of students’ achievement. The final students’ scores show that 27 students (84.38%) got more than or equal to 60 and 5 students (15.63%) got less than 60. Therefore based on the criteria of success it could be concluded that the result had already reached the criteria of success.

Finally, as the conclusion of this research, it is important to provide the teaching strategy utilizing the VSTF methods that encompasses several procedures: 1) give the students a descriptive text in the VSTF mode, 2) ask the students to read it several times and explain the text, 3) explain the language features of descriptive text, 4) give the students “I am” poem in the VSTF mode, 5) ask the students to identify what they see in the VSTF text mode focusing on the adjective placement, noun and simple present tense, 6) guide the students to discuss about it, 7) guide the students to make sentences by using correct adjective placement, noun and simple present tense, 8) guide the students to arrange the sentences to become a digital text
in the VSTF mode 9) guide the students to edit the draft in terms of grammar, and 10) ask the students to write the final version of the text.

DISCUSSION
Discussion on the Activities in Implementing the Visual Syntactic Text Formatting

The positive interaction in the teaching and learning process was expected to support the students to reach the objective of the study. Besides, the essential activity during class is about communication between the students and the teacher. As stated by Prozesky (2000) that in gaining the goal of teaching and learning process, the existence of a good interaction between teacher and students is significant.

Next, the objective of the study and procedure of writing process were explained to the students in order to improve the students’ understanding about what would be the lesson that day and to motivate the students to write successfully. Besides, the utilizing of visual syntactic text formatting was also needed to be explained first since the students never faced it before. The teacher provided the simple way to explain about the visual syntactic text formatting. In explaining the objectives of the study and procedure of the writing process, questioning and answering were used in order to raise the students’ participation in the teaching and learning process. In questioning and answering the teacher tried to dig up information from the students dealing with the writing process.

The students were asked to read the text in the VSTF mode many times. In this session students read intensively with no voice. By using the text in VSTF mode, the students were guided to label and to identify the grammatical features on the text. This was the process of exposure given to the students through reading intensively in VSTF text model. The teacher gave feedback to the students dealing what they have done in the class. This combination of teaching learning activities could help students to improve their grammatical competence. Fogel and Ehri (in Andrews:2005) presented a different kind of study in which mastery of standard English written forms is improved for elementary school African-American pupils by a process of exposure, strategies for labeling and identifying grammatical features and, crucially, practicing writing in these forms and receiving teacher feedback.

Besides, the help of VSTF methods that have processed the complex syntactic structures into the simple one could simplify the students’ difficulty dealing with grammatical structure. It is in line with Goswami, U., & Bryant, P.E. (1990) that their study provides evidence that the ability to process complex syntactic structures in a foreign language does contribute to one’s efficient reading comprehension in that language.

The core of this study is to describe how the VSTF methods could solve students’ grammatical problem in writing. This was confidently proved by this study that the benefit of the cascaded syntactic formatting of text in VSTF methods mode helped students to comprehend the text. The labeling and identifying the sentences done during the VSTF methods helped the students to memorize the grammar more. It supported Warschauer et al (2011) that the participants comprehended significantly better when reading VSTF methods than in either of these formats. This memory gained from the discussion was useful to help the students write better.

This study used the descriptive text. It discussed 3 points that were about the noun, adjectives placement in text and the use of simple present. The students then were also given worksheets in which they drilled about the noun phrases, especially in the adjectives
Discussion on the Improvement of the Students’ Grammatical Competence in Writing

Students had been exposed to the several descriptive texts using the VSTF methods. They made improvement in their grammatical competence in writing. The improvement could be seen from the gradual improvement of score in writing from cycle I and cycle II. It meets the statement that the texts can be used on limited basis to help children learn and strengthen specific writing skills. The specific writing skill focused here in this study is grammatical competence.

In term of reading exposure using VSTF methods, the students in this study practiced reading a lot. They experienced better reading comprehension and got knowledge in understanding about part of speech; especially noun, adjective and infinitive verb. It is in line with the statement of Stotsky (1983) that better writers tend to be better readers (of their own writing as well as of other reading material), that better writers tend to read more than poorer writers, and that better readers tend to produce more syntactically mature writing than poorer readers”. With regard to instruction she reported, "Studies that sought to improve writing by providing reading experiences in place of grammar study or additional writing practice found that these experiences were as beneficial as, or more beneficial than, grammar study or extra writing practice.

This was crucial in term of students’ grammatical competence improvement. As this study had given the reading exposure to the students, the students’ knowledge about grammar that was gradually improved.

While the using of VSTF methods had the real benefit in helping the students to be easily read the text. VSTF methods had formatted the common blocked text into cascaded syntactic pattern. Simultaneously the students enjoyed reading the text in best eye spans and movement and good syntactic pattern of sentences. Unconsciously, they read and studied about the grammar of the text. This is relevant with the initial function of VSTF that is to help readers understand the syntactic pattern of the text while reading in easy movement of the eyes. (Walker, 2007)

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings the researcher draws the conclusion that he students’ problem of grammar in writing can be improved by using VSTF methods and as additional finding, the students’ problem of low motivation in writing activity can be solved.

Students could improve their grammatical competence in writing through some guided writing activities. First, at the reading stage, the students were exposed to the text that has been formatted by the VSTF application. They read the text by themselves. Second, they were guided into the discussion about the text focusing on the noun phrases; included the adjectives placement, and the simple present tense. They labeled and identified the text and understood the function of those three points of the text dealing with the grammatical features of the
text. Third, the students did the activities with the worksheet about the noun phrases. They were asked to fill in the blanks by using certain possible adjectives to be used to describe the noun in the worksheets they got. Fourth, they were guided to make their own writing products by choosing topic to discussed, for instance, athlete, Olympiad, dream, hope and etc. Then, the reinforcement of the use of this VSTF methods has been done during all meetings. After being engaged with this teaching learning process, the students’ grammatical competence improved.

The improvements could been seen from their abilities in using correct noun and adjective placement (noun phrases) and also the betterment in the use of the simple present tense. By using the VSTF methods the students could make writing products that pay attention to the use of specific grammar features correctly.

As additional finding, it is also can be concluded that utilizing the Visual Syntactic Text Formatting methods as a media of teaching and learning writing can improve the students motivation.

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