

AN ANALYSIS OF SYNTACTIC PROBLEMS IN THE ESSAYS OF SELECTED SENIOR SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS IN AKOKO-EDO L.G.A, EDO STATE

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Abstract

This study investigated the syntactic problems in English faced by senior secondary school III (SSS III) students, particularly, Dagbala Secondary School, Dagbala, Igarra girls Secondary School, Igarra, and Federal Girls College Ibilu. The data for this study were drawn from samples of the written essays by these selected SSS III students in these three schools. A composition test was administered to the students and the answer scripts collected were properly and thoroughly examined in order to bring out the various syntactic errors in each of the essays. The various errors were grouped with each heading, following a brief discussion of the topic, what is observed in the various essay scripts, citing examples from the data collected and a brief note on what ought to be Standard English form is exhibited throughout the analysis. For the purpose of this analysis, the researcher combines both description and classification of errors in order to ease the process. The identification, description and classification of the errors were done in line with one of our objectives. This, therefore, means that our major task, in essence, is to outline the standard usage. This paper suggests that more emphasis should be laid on the aspect of English identified to be problem to the subjects. Besides, competent teachers be allowed to teach the subject, remedial programme in specific problem areas be introduced and communicative approach to language teaching be adopted

Introduction

For the reason that English in Nigeria is a second language which is acquired after the mother tongue, there are bound to be peculiarities in the syntactic, lexical and semantic level of language use. This is a consequence of languages in contact as opined by Bamisaye (33):

In almost all cases, the two languages -- first (Nigerian language and second English) -- exhibit a lot of structural differences. Consequently, most Nigerian learners and users of English face a lot of difficulties....

Because the English language is learnt at a latter stage as a second language, the Nigerian users of English Language commit errors at the levels of grammar, lexis and syntax. All these levels of errors result from interference which is caused by the contact of the different languages, where the linguistic system of one language is transferred into the other in the process of producing the latter which is the second or target language. This means that if an individual already has a language, there is bound to be the problem that arises from languages in contact when learning the second language. The proponents of contrastive analysis in Applied Linguistics, such as Lado (57-62), Corder (17-20), claim that a systematic comparison of the learners' mother tongue and the second language at all levels of structure will generate predictions about the areas of learning difficulty in the second language. The theory claims that where the structure of the second language differs from that of the mother tongue, we should expect difficulty in learning the second language. Where the structures of the languages are similar, however, no difficulty or error is anticipated. Lado (62), puts it thus:

We assume that students who come in contact with a foreign language will find some features of it quite easy and others extremely difficult. Those elements that are similar to his native language will be simple for him, and those elements that are different will be difficult.

Thus, there is no doubt that, in the course of learning a second language, learners are bound to commit errors. This is as a result of the fact that learning a second language and indeed a foreign one entails some difficulties. These difficulties have been traced to a number of factors. The issue here, however, is not to identify why learners have difficulties in learning a second language. Rather, we are concerned with why we have to study learners' errors.

At this juncture, we may need to distinguish between a mistake and an error. A mistake involves some involuntary release of a language item whereas an error represents a deviant from acceptable norm. Dulay *et al* (138), maintain that errors are "the flawed side of a learner's speech or writing. They are those parts of conversation or composition that deviate from selected form of mature language performance.

Researchers are interested in errors because errors are believed to contain valuable information on the strategies people use to acquire a language, (see Richards (79-81)), Taylor (82-89). Different definitions of the concept of error have been developed from different perspectives in the error analysis of the literature.

According to Corder's definition (91-98), which is partially traced back to Chomsky's dichotomy between 'competence' and 'performance'.

Mistakes are adventitious, random errors in performance due to memory lapses or physical state; but errors on the other hand are systematic and reflect a defect in knowledge (i.e. linguistic competence).

A mistake refers to a performance error that is either a random guess or a slip, errors refers to idiosyncrasies in the inter-language of the learner's, which are direct manifestation of a system within which a learner is operating at the time. In other words, an error is a noticeable deviation from the adult grammar of a native speaker reflecting inter-language of the learner.

Another definition of error is suggested by Dulay *et al* (105), who claim that the term error: Can be used to refer to any deviation from a selected norm of language performance no matter what the characteristics or causes of the deviation might be.

Another definition of error is put forward by Lennon (182), as:
A linguistic form or combination of forms which, in the same context and under similar conditions of product would in all likelihood, not be produced by the speakers', native speaker counterpart.

Objective of the Study

It is no longer a moot point that second language learners are bound to encounter some learning problems as established earlier. This work, therefore, attempts:

- i.) to identify some of the grammatical errors common among some selected senior secondary school students which is a representative sample of Nigerian secondary school students.
- ii) to suggest some possible solutions by which some of the problems identified could be curbed.
- iii) to contribute to the development of Standard English among Nigerian students and help to attain a better proficiency in the language.

Research Question

It is hoped that this work will be able to provide answers to the following questions.

- (i) What are the common errors
- (ii) Why do the students commit the errors in the target language?
- (iii) What are the forms of errors often committed by these students?
- (iv) Is it possible for a second learner of English as a second language to overcome these of errors and acquire near native competence in the language?

Scope of the Study

The research is restricted selected senior secondary school student in Akoko-Edo L.G.A, Edo State. It is such designed in order to reflect the language situation in this school and in other Nigerian secondary particularly in the area the research is carried out.

Nonetheless, the researcher believes that the information obtained here would serve as a representative of other parts of Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

In this work, two analytical frameworks are employed. These are traditional grammar and discourse analysis. This is because two essays questions given to the students to write on would be examined through the tools of traditional grammar and discourse analysis.

The Research Methodology

The data for the study was collected by conducting test for the students in various schools. This was done by giving the students two essay-type questions to write on. This is considered most effective for this purpose because essays give one the opportunity of knowing the students' area of weakness.

A simple random technique was employed. In all, a total of 20 students were drawn from each of the three schools making 60 students.

The various samples of the students' written essays were marked and graded in order to identify some common grammatical problems in their written English. The various errors found were then grouped into different categories depending on their nature and type.

Analysis of Data

Analysis of Syntactic Errors

The errors that would be considered in the student's composition at this level include: wrong choice of tenses, wrong choice of aspect, errors in the sequence of tenses, error of concord, wrong choice of preposition misuse of parts of speech, misuse of words, interference, wrong choice of articles.

Wrong Choice of Tense

According to Longe et al (1996), the term tense means the correspondence between the finite verb form and any of the three divisions of time (past time, present time and future time). It follows that there are only two tenses, in other words, only two correspondences between the finite verb forms and time are possible in the English language: the present tense and past tense. After examining the students scripts, below are some of the tense errors discovered.

Extract From Student's Essays

1. 'I leave there as at that time.'

2. 'When I get to the school that day.'
3. 'Such occurrence happened all time.'
4. 'I am very far away when it happened.'

In all a total of 60 students scripts were examined and 40 number of students were discovered to have committed the error(s) representing 66.60% of frequency of occurrence. Considering the extract above, 'leave' instead of 'left' as used by the student to express past tense is wrong. Again in example 2, the simple present tense instead of past tense as used by the student is not proper. Therefore, 'got' as past tense of 'get' is required here.

In the case of example 3, a simple present tense is required. Since the student was talking about habitual action. Therefore, 'happened' instead of 'happens' used by the student is an error. Example 4 is also an error because of the use of 'am' instead of 'was' as used by the student.

Therefore, the correct forms are as follows:

- I left there as at that time.
- When I got to the school that day.....
- Such occurrence happens all the time.....
- I was very far away when it happened..

Wrong Choice of Aspect

According to Quirk et al (1973), aspect concerns the manner in which the verbal action is experienced or regarded (for example as completed or in progress). There are two aspectual contracts: progressive and perfective aspects.

If the action is in progress, it is progressive and if it has been completed it is said to be perfective. The action of the verb can be in progress at the present time and it is called present progressive. If the action of the verb is in progress during past time, it is called past progressive. The same thing goes for the perfective present perfect and past perfect.

For emphasis, the progressive aspect is indicated by the use of the forms of the auxiliary verb 'Be' and the '-ing' suffix added to the auxiliary verb, the use of 'Have' of variant forms of the auxiliary verb and past participle suffix '-d', 'ed' added indicates the perfective aspect.

The following examples are errors discovered from students scripts after examining them.

Extract from Student' Essays.

1. 'We have already be briefed by the student union'
2. I was inform that...

In all, 35 students committed the error representing 58.3% of frequency of occurrence.

In example 1, 'be' instead of 'been' as used by the student is an error. Again in example 2, 'informed' should have been used by the student rather than 'inform'. Therefore, the correct forms are as follows:

- We have already been briefed by the student union
- I was informed that.....

Errors of Sequence of Tenses

Extract from Students' Scripts

1. 'If we had known we will have tell the Rector.'
2. 'We showed Tunde when he comes.'

3. 'The storm took place when it rains.'

After the study of students' scripts, it is observed that there are grammatical mistakes on sequence of tenses. Sequence of tenses, requires that the tense used in the main clause should reflect and be maintained in the sub-ordinate clause. However, this rule is at one time or the other violated by the students as we can see in the above extract. In all, a total number of 29 students out of the 60 students committed this error type representing 48.3% of frequency to occurrence.

The above expressions from the students' scripts are incorrect because they are not in line with the rule guiding sequence of tenses.

Therefore, the correct forms are:

If we had known we would have told the Rector

We showed Tunde when he came

The storm took place when it rained

Error of Concord

The following are instances of concord error in the students scripts loving examined them thoroughly. In all the 60 scripts studied, 45 students committed the error, representing 75% of frequency of occurrence.

Extract From Students' Essays

1. 'Many students who does not know'
2. 'Several things is being said that....'
3. 'All the school's facilities was damaged'
4. 'I, Peter Ukpaka, wishes to inform you...'
5. 'If one fail to buy textbooks...'
6. 'The Rector have made a promise...'
7. 'Everything were done fast.'
8. 'John and Kemi does not know what to do...'

Concord refers to the relationship between two grammatical items in which a certain feature in the form of one of them requires a corresponding feature in the form of the other. For instance, if one of the items has a grammatical feature 'x' in its own form, the other must also have grammatical feature of 'x' in its own form. The two items are then said to be in concord with respect to grammatical feature 'x'. The traditional term for this kind of relationship is "agreement". In other words, according to Longe et,al (1996), when we talk of concord, we mean that certain grammatical elements agree with each other either in number or in person.

Examples

The boy is good (singular subject + singular verb)

The boys are good (plural subject + plural verb)

Carefully studying the students' essays above, we have a good number of gross violations of this rule.

The most important type of concord in English is concord of number (i.e. singular or plural) between the nominal group that realizes the subject(s) and the verbal element. This type of concord is commonly known as subject – verb concord of number. It operates by a simple two-part rule, which may be stated as follows:

A singular subject requires a singular verb.

A plural subject requires a plural verb.

Considering the extract from the students scripts above, it is discovered that there are concord errors in their expression. For instance, in example 1 above, 'does' as a simple present tense that can only co-occur with the third person singular should not have been used but rather the student should have made use of 'do' because we have plural subject 'many students' in the expression. Again in example 2, 'Several things' is a plural subject therefore a plural verb is required and not a singular verb 'is' as used by the student here. In example 3, a plural verb 'were' is required and not a singular verb as used by the student. In example 4, we have the first person singular 'I' as the subject. Therefore, there should not be inflectional 'es' with the verb 'wish'.

In the case of example 5, we have the third person singular that requires inflectional 's' with the verb 'fail' but this was not observed by the students. In the case of example 6, 'has' (a singular verb) is required instead of 'have' (plural verb) as used by the student. This is because the Rector is a singular subject, therefore, a singular verb is required.

In example 7, 'everything' is an indefinite pronoun and it is the subject of the expression in this example thus, a singular verb is required.

In example 8, Kemi and John is plural subject in this instance therefore, a plural verb should be used instead of the singular verb used by the student.

Thus, the correct forms should be:

Many students who do not know....

Several things are being said that....

All the school's facilities were damaged....

I, Peter Ukpapa, wish to inform you...

If one fails to buy textbooks...

The Rector has made...

Everything was made...

John and Kemi do not know what to do...

Wrong Choice of Preposition

Prepositions are mainly used to express the relationship between two entities one of which is the object of the preposition. They are usually either simple or complex. Most of the common English prepositions, such as "at" "in" "for", etc are simple, that is, they consist of one word. Other prepositions, consisting of two or more words are called complex prepositions. Such prepositions are "along with", "as for", "by means of", "in front of", and so on. From the various essay scripts marked, prepositions, which denote time and place constitute the error type identified.

The following are some of the instances of wrong choice of preposition when the scripts were examined. At the end, 38 students committed the error representing 66.3%.

Extract from Students' Essay

1. 'Our mummy has left home to Ibadan' instead of (for)
2. 'Then we went in an excursion.' Instead of (on)
3. 'You will see different of things...' instead of (X)
4. 'He is not superior than us.' Instead of (to)
5. 'The group is comprises of...' instead of (X)
6. 'Think on what you can do.' Instead of (of)
7. 'I wish to plead on behalf on the students.' Instead of (of)
8. 'The Rector accused the students for...' Instead of (of)

Interference

Interference refers to a situation where languages overlap. In this situation, the linguistic system of one of the languages is transferred into the other. In this case, we have the transfer of the linguistic system of a local language into the English Language at the level of grammar, lexis, phonology and semantics.

Extract from Students' Essay

1. 'bigmen in the town were...'
2. 'They were asked to pay high money.'

Words such as 'bigmen' and 'high money' as used by the students are transferred from local languages. It is not uncommon to refer to a rich man as a 'bigman' in our local languages, thus, the transfer by most students of these lexical items into English.

There is also an instance of grammatical interference in the essay. We find a direct transfer of the grammatical structure of local language into English Language. Thus, producing statements as in:

Extract from Students' Essay

1. 'Standing here, you will be notice the house at the front'

In the above example, we can see that it is unnecessary using "be" before "notice" in the simple present tense.

Wrong use of Articles

Extract from Students Essay

1. 'I take him to Ekpoma General Hospital with a one policeman'
2. 'The memorable day of my life are many but there is the most one which I could remember'
3. '... the school has a several classes or department'

From these examples, it would be noted that another prominent error in the scripts of our students is that relating to the use of article. The problem is two-fold. One is the wrong use of the articles a(n), and the while the other is the total confusion or unusual use of the two.

A careful look at these examples indicates that the indefinite article a(n) is often wrongly used with the ordinal one as in:

'... I take him to Ekpoma General hospital with a one policeman'

Again, it could be seen that the indefinite article a is sometimes used wrongly with a plural noun:

'... the school has a several classes ...'

In the same vein, the definite article the is used wrongly quite often. The major problem here is the redundant use of the article:

... there is the most one which I could remember

Apart from this, there are some instances where article the is wrongly omitted:

'After [the] rain by then I was together with my friends'

It should be noted however, that this grammatical problem is not peculiar to the Auchi Polytechnic students of English. Different studies such as the ones carried out by Tomori in 1963 and others have shown that the definite article, the, among others, pose difficulties to learners of English in Nigeria.

In summary, we can therefore say that the error committed at this level are as a result of the developmental stage of the students. They can also be traced to interference. These problems can also be attributed to the language difficulties within the target language itself.

Discussion of Findings

It is observed in the study of the extracts/essays analyzed that so many errors contained therein. The errors committed in these written essays could be traced to the language difficulties in the target language. Most learners of English language tend to shy away from the written aspect of the language. Perhaps, these students are not yet exposed to intensive writing exercise which will enable them acquire needed skills in writing.

Also, it is discovered that many of the errors committed by these students are avoidable errors if they are properly drilled in the correct usage. In the syntactic aspect, it is discovered that there are a lot of rules too many for students to master particularly by polytechnic students who do not take English as a main course. The submission here, is that inter-lingual problem, intra-lingual difficulties and teaching deficiencies contribute to the occurrence and persistence of errors in the English usage by polytechnic students. The simple fact emerging from our data is that the subjects are very weak in their knowledge of the basic rudiments of grammar and the use of it.

With the result of this study, one can say that for the Auchu Polytechnic HND 1 student, irrespective of which linguistic group he/she belongs to, English grammar is a very big problem. As we can see from the data analyzed, the students find it difficult to use English grammar correctly. The students have not properly mastered the rules of the English language in the secondary school, and this affects their use of syntactic grammar correctly. One reason for this, could be that they are not properly taught as a result of the poor attitude of secondary school teachers to work occasioned by the non-prompt payment of their salaries.

Conclusion

Through the analysis of data, the nature of errors in learners' writing have been revealed; which are intra lingual and inter lingual in nature. This will enable teachers to know the real causes of errors which may be teaching techniques, or interference among others.

Some of errors discovered from the data analyzed will go a long way enabling teachers to have a mental idea of some errors that are frequent in the learners' speech or writing. It will also enable the teacher to adjust his/her teaching technique with a view to tackling the learners' problems. This study has also enabled us to accept the earlier fact of the assumption that different linguistic background associated with learners hinder their competence and proficiency in English. The fact is that, one cannot make an appropriate use of a language he/she does not understand.

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