

**SYNTACTIC STUDY: THE WRITINGS OF
NIGERIAN STUDENTS****Abu-Bakr Kigo****Abdullahi Sani****Mustapha Abdullahi Tafar**

Lead Researcher

Co-Researcher I

Co-Researcher II

Abstract:

The English language serves as the official language of communication in Nigeria, and the chief medium of instruction in all levels of education. And since parts of speech are the building blocks with which human speech is produced, verbs happen to be one of the few content words that convey the most information we disseminate whenever we use language. The following study will, as a result, focus on the performance usage of verb tenses.

INTRODUCTION

By the time Nigeria obtained her independence in 1960 the English language had become a strong second language in the country. And today, English is not only Nigeria's usual language of government, business and commerce, the mass media and inter-ethnic communication, it is also the country's principal medium of instruction.

Understandably, then, scholars have shown a great deal of interest in the English language problems Nigerian students have had since the early post-independence years, when deficiency in the students' command of the language first became a subject for private and public concerns. There have been many studies concerned – directly or indirectly – with isolating those language points that ought to be given prominence in the English language teaching texts used in the schools. Scholars have been equally preoccupied with the whole philosophy of English language use and presentation in the schools, and with examining and re-examining matters relating to ministry policy and school practices as regards the language.

However, in spite of the tremendous efforts at improving the quality of English language teaching and learning in the schools, it is the common belief that the level of performance in the language by the generality of Nigerian students has remained disturbingly low. There is even a feeling that the situation has gone from bad to worse. The study being proposed here represents a fresh attempt at meaningfully grappling with the problems involved.

1.0 BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

It is imperative to note that second language (L2) learners tend to have problems with learning the second language, which is chiefly caused by interference from their first language (L1). Language users generally tend to have problems with language use. Although some linguists use both "acquisition" and "learning" synonymously, a distinction between "acquisition" and "learning" would suffice to highlight the difficult undertaking of learning a

second language (McGregor, 2009: 203, 217). Richards & Schmidt (2002) on the one hand describe language acquisition as a non-conscious effort in internalising a language, “learning” on the other hand, requires a conscious study typical of a classroom context. It is noteworthy, therefore, that it is children who – mostly - “acquire” first language subconsciously, while adults have to use a conscious effort in order to “learn” a second language.

One of the factors that hinder second language learners from attaining high-level proficiency is the fact that the learning usually takes place in adulthood (Yule, 2002: 190). During the (second language) learning process (the knowledge and) use of the first language causes an interference on the target language. This is an instance of “negative transfer” (Richards & Schmidt, 2002: 294), whereby elements of the first language are transferred onto the second language. For example, a second language learner of the English language may produce the ungrammatical expression *The man he has come* instead of *The man has come*, as a result of the learner following the syntax of their first language (where it is grammatical to position the pronoun *he* alongside the noun *man*, to which it refers, in more of a reflexive pattern than substitution).

Language interference – as an incorrect use of a language - can occur at all levels (Tiwari, 2007: 53) of language description (Schmitt, 2010: 115). Second language learners may mispronounce certain sound segments (phonology), disarrange word order (syntax), or misuse inflection (morphology and grammar). Nonetheless, the focus of this research centres on the rendition of verbs. Verbs “indicate action, a state of being of existence or possession” (Murthy, 2007: 86) and are one of the content words that convey the most important information in a sentence. In the English language, verbs have tense (which indicates whether an action happened in the past or present), and mood (how the action of the verb is represented) (Ramaswamy, 2010: 184; Cullup, 2005: 75-6). According to Quirk & Greenbaum (2012: 38), verbs in the English language inflect to show the *base* form, the *-s* form, the *past* form, the *-ing participle*, and the *-ed participle*. This is shown below:

1. Base form (V): *call, drink, put*
2. *-s* form (V-s): *calls, drinks, puts* (used in third person singular tense)
3. Past form (V-ed): *called, drank, put*
4. *-ing participle* form (V-ing): *calling, drinking, putting*
5. *-ed participle* form (V-ed): *called, drunk, put*

(The past participle form is obtained with the addition of the auxiliary verbs *have, has, and had*.)

The past form and the past participle form, therefore, can be seen to have a common inflectional form (i.e., *-ed*). The foregoing is a generalised description of the inflection of the English past tense, as – although the *present participle* is invariably in the *-ing* form – the past tense has “various endings, as in *known, been, gone, come, lost*” (Metcalf & Astle, 1995: 38), where the most common ending is *-ed* (i.e., *baked, smoked*).

In traditional grammar, then, the claim is generally that there are three basic tenses, or three basic time-indicating verbal forms in English. These are the present tense (indicating present time), the past tense (indicating past time), and the future tense (indicating future time).

The progressive (or continuous) tenses are expanded forms of the basic tenses (present, past and future) and their perfective variants (present perfect, past perfect and future perfect). They describe actions that are “seen as in progress without necessary time limits” (Matthews, 2007: 321). Therefore, to form the progressive tenses, corresponding to any of the basic or perfective tenses, an appropriate form of the auxiliary BE is used together with the verb expanded into its –ing form (or present participle).

For example:

- Past progressive:

I
He
} was driving then.

- Present progressive:

I am
He is
} driving now.

- Future progressive:

I shall/will
He will
} be driving tomorrow.

- Past perfect progressive:

I
He
} had been driving before then.

- Present perfect progressive:

I have
He has
} been driving already.

- Future perfect progressive:

I shall/will
He will
} have been working already.

Tense points are usually among the most difficult in grammar for non-native learners of English to master effectively. This explains why the analysis and description of tense are accorded a great deal of attention in English textbooks.

1.1 TENSE ERRORS IN ENGLISH

By “tense errors in English” it is meant mistakes made in the use of the various English tense forms. Such mistakes could be of the following kinds:

assessments and examinations) from the selected schools and analyzed them for concurrence of various types of tense errors. The Nigerian National Bureau of Statistics (2019) had put the total number of students in public schools in Kebbi State at 87,900. Using the Krejcie and Morgan sampling size, it had been determined that a population size of 75,000 would be allocated a sample size of 382. Therefore, relying on such method a total of 380 students - as respondents - had been selected across the public schools, while adopting random sampling in choosing the respondents' English assessment answer scripts.

2.1 DATA COLLECTION

The categorization was based on the quality of the performance of students in the different secondary schools in their General English Studies courses, where virtually all students would be asked to write a composition to form either a part of their continuous assessment or examination. However, it was presumed that the topics or questions answered were designed with considerations of being capable of getting the students to use as many of the various tense forms in English with which they were familiar. Thus, the various tense forms would have an equal opportunity of being used.

The data collected was analyzed the data from the written texts of the selected students, the procedural steps used are as follows:

- a. An equal number of 38 answer scripts from each school were randomly selected. This was to ensure that the findings would adequately reflect the situation across the different schools.
- b. Each script was analyzed for occurrences of various types of tense errors from a single answered question.
- c. The Relative Frequency Percentage (RFP) was calculated using the formula:

$$\text{RFP} = \frac{\text{Total number of errors that occurred at least once}}{\text{total number of scripts analyzed}}$$

- d. The Relative Frequency Percentage Average (RFPA) for each tense error type across the schools was calculated using the formula:

$$\text{RFPA} = \frac{\text{Total Relative Frequency Percentage (RFP) for the error type for the schools}}{\text{number of schools}}$$

- e. The tense error types identified were listed in the form of their relative frequency percentage averages (RFPA).

The findings, as shown by the ordered list of the tense error type, formed the basis for conclusions as to the extent to which particular tense error types may be said to be common in the students' written English, and for suggestions to be made on ways of improving the teaching of English tense forms in Nigerian schools.

2.2 SCOPE OF THE STUDY

It would be clear from our objective that even though the impetus for this study was generated by the state of English studies all over the country, the scope of the research has been restricted to ten (10) secondary schools in Nigeria, and examining at least 38 (thirty-eight) students' answer booklets on examinations or assessments on the English language. The total number of answer scripts, therefore, stood at 380 (three hundred and eighty).

The restriction notwithstanding, however, there is a strong indication from the available literature that our findings, recommendations and conclusion will be generalizable to almost all other secondary schools in Nigeria.

3.0 FINDINGS AND ANALYSES

The performance of the students, with regards to their usage of verb forms indicating correct and incorrect use will be shown in percentages. The classification or groupings of the verb forms will be indicated by the different verb tense forms in English.

Table 1. Frequency of observed verbs

<i>Verb (tense) form</i>	<i>Error occurrence</i>	<i>RFA</i>
<i>Simple tense (infinitive)</i>	87	0.87
<i>Past tense</i>	113	1.1
<i>Participle tense</i>	83	0.83
<i>Past participle tense</i>	82	0.82
<i>Future tense</i>	33	0.33
<i>Total</i>	398	3.98

RFA = Relative Frequency Percentage

The foregoing observed performance indicates the percentage of the occurrence of errors in each of the tense forms. The data in Table 1 above indicates relatively good performance with regards to accuracy of verb usage. The percentages show a less than one percent error occurrence for the individual tense forms, except for the use of the past tense. On the other hand, the error occurrence in the use of the future tense recorded the lowest occurrence. The results, therefore, illustrate a strong performance in the said category of verb tense forms.

Table 2. Average of errors occurrence

<i>Verb (tense) form</i>	<i>RFA</i>	<i>RFPA</i>
<i>Simple tense (infinitive)</i>	0.87	8.7
<i>Past tense</i>	1.1	11
<i>Participle tense</i>	0.83	8.3
<i>Past participle tense</i>	0.82	8.2
<i>Future tense</i>	0.33	3.3
<i>Total</i>	3.98	39.8

RFA = Relative Frequency Percentage; RFPA = Relative Frequency Percentage Average

Table 2, however, indicates a strong occurrence of verb tense errors when the percentage for the 10 schools is taken into account. The results reveal that the respondents' performance, for the most part, indicates a weaker

usage of the simple verb tense form. It can be deduced, from the findings - in particular the RFA - that the students experienced the most difficulty in the simple tense, participle tense, past participle, and with the worst errors in the past tense. It is likely that the nature of the narrative style of the essays, being in the past tense, accounted for the lower error occurrence in the future tense. The performance of the respondents, with regards to usage of the past tense form, indicates a comparatively more difficult problem, which is quite distinctive from the use of the future tense.

4.0 CONCLUSION

With regards to the importance of the understanding and usage of the various verb forms indicated in this study, it is quite pertinent to reinforce the accuracy in the teaching of verb tenses. Perhaps, it may be argued that the conclusions drawn from this study indicate that the students in question have shown a developed use of verb tense, that does not provide a much clearer picture on the students' competence with regards to other aspects of the English syntax and grammar. Therefore, it is quite premature, without further studies on other aspects the English in order to determine the level of the students' proficiency and performance in the English language. One could argue, nonetheless, that the data collated in this research has indicated a sound performance in the students' use of verb tenses.

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