



TENSE ERROR ANALYSIS COMMITTED BY 300 LEVEL ENGLISH UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN NORTH-WESTERN NIGERLA

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ABSTRACT

This study seeks to investigate the gravity of tense errors made by 300 level English students from two North-Western Nigerian universities in the written production of English with a view to finding solutions to them. The data was obtained from fifty semester examination answer booklets written by students as a part of their requirements for graduation. The data collected was analysed using EA approach developed by Corder (1974). The findings of the study reveal that the errors can be grouped into nine categories out of which tense errors is the second most committed by the students after capitalisation. Based on these findings, the teachers of English and the students are suggested to be more pro-active in handling such errors because English students are the hope of other students from other disciplines after graduation. These remedies would help prevent students from internalising such errors which by implication serve as threats to national development

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INTRODUCTION

It is very clear that the role of writing has been realised by the English language teaching practitioners and even those of other disciplines. Good users of every language (English language inclusive) are expected to be able to express themselves in both spoken and written language. Attempts are being made by policy makers and implementers to increase the proficiency of learners in written production of English, that is why Writing is been widely taught as a subject in various stages of language teaching and learning programmes. However, Writing serves as a great challenge to both students and teachers as well. In their own part, the students view writing is viewed as a tedious and difficult task. Tense is one of the important grammatical areas of English language. It has received much attention from various scholars and researchers. For example, Quirk and Greenbaum (1985, 1990), note that English tense is used to express time. According to these scholars, tense represents the changes that occur in the form of a verb to indicate the time in which an action takes place.

They recognised three tenses in English language; present, past and future and these are respectively expressed using the various verb forms chronologically. In the same vein, Thomas (1993) posits that English Language has two forms of tenses only, the past associated with 'ed' for regular verbs and the present with or without 's' as exemplified in the following sentences:

- *Mary embraces her husband. (reg. verb)*
- *Mary embraced her husband. (reg. verb)*
- *The boy is hungry. (irregular verb)*
- *The boy was hungry. (irregular verb)*

The roles and functions of English language in our day to day activities cannot be under estimated. This is because of the increasing usage by different communities especially in Africa where most of the countries are multilingual in nature. On the other hand, grammar, which forms the basis of constructing acceptable sentences in the language, has a significant role to play in this direction. Unfortunately, from the researchers' observation, most of the sentences constructed by students in North-Western Nigerian universities are found to be faulty and shaky in terms of grammar and tenses. The reasons or factors responsible for this are many and depend on the circumstances.

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It would be wrong for us as teachers in this set up to predict the possible reasons for this trend. This is why we decided to embark on a study of this nature in order to find out the errors, classify them, analyse them and probably determine the reasons behind them which form threats to the students' performance as well as the universities which are the ultimate places students can attend for them to be recognised in the labour market and by ministries and parastatals. In view of the above, this research is set to investigate these errors in an attempt to find dependable solutions to them which would go a long way in assisting the students who are future leaders of our great country, Nigeria. There are combinations of factors that are responsible for this problem and learning a language is not an easy task especially in a situation where less efforts are being made to ensure that things work in order in the nation's educational sector. According to Chukuegu (2004:87) 'learning a second language is necessarily a difficult activity if the learners are taught with an appropriate approach'. Regardless of the students' courses of study in the federal universities in Nigeria, English language remains the language of instruction, with which all the academic activities are carried out. The roles English play in the life span of his/her studentship from the beginning to the end cannot be over emphasised. However, observations reveal that, students in our universities nowadays do not bother on the way they use tenses in their write ups even during semester examinations.

This study will help create desired awareness among students of the two universities, and the need for developing ways of tackling the problem. Against this background therefore, this study investigates the grammatical errors in students' writings in two selected universities in the North-West geo-political zone of Nigeria, with a view to examining their tense errors. The universities are Federal University Gusau (FUG) and Usmanu Danfodiyo University Sokoto (UDUS). The present research project also needs to be done to help teachers of English especially at the university level search for a more effective way of helping their students improve their performance in English tenses so that the problem of poor performance in the language (as compared to other school subjects) could be addressed. The poor performance of students in tenses in our universities has continued to be a source of concern to teachers, parents, students, applied linguists, education authorities, examination bodies, political figures and others who have not yet found a way out.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A number of researches have been conducted on students' writing errors. Although this research shall be focusing on the investigation of tense errors in students' writing, the need to review related literature cannot be over emphasised. In the same vein, Lyons (1977) however sees tense as a deictic category but contends that a tensed proposition is not merely time bound or even temporarily restricted but makes a reference to some point or period of time which cannot be identified except in terms of zero point of reference. He therefore claims that the division of English tense into past, present and future was not essential to the definition of tense as long as the temporal zero point of situation or utterance could be identified. This therefore implies that only the finite verb forms can be used to express tense while the non-finite verb forms which merely relate a situation but not at the time of speaking cannot express tense. The following sentences exemplify these:

- *It is raining in Lagos now.*
- *It was raining in Lagos at noon of 6th January, 2009.*
- *Aliyu wants to sing.*
- *Jamilu loves dancing.*

In a research carried out by Bodunde, H.A. and Sotiloye B.S. (2013), students have problems with almost all aspects of grammar – tense, punctuation, spelling, concord, abbreviation, preposition, and word amalgamation. At the 100 level, tense and spelling errors are the most frequent while in the remaining levels punctuation and tense errors are more prominent. Tense errors are common to both groups as a result of negative transfer from the first language (L1), though the environment in which they occurred differ. The study also reveals an important relationship between a mastery of the speaking skill and effective writing.

In addition, Hourani (2008) claims that "writing is a difficult process even in the first language. It is even more complicated to write in a foreign language". Many studies reveal that there is interference from first language in the process of writing in English. Writing in a foreign language often presents the greatest challenge to the students at all stages, particularly essay writing because in this activity, writing is usually extended and therefore it becomes more demanding than in the case of writing a short paragraph. In fact, Theodore I. (2013) explained that second language acquisition is a developmental process, in which the learners are inevitably making errors which should be treated as an integral part of learning even believes that learners' errors should be categorised and analysed, and the psychological process of how learners commit such errors should be studied. Error analysis therefore plays an indispensable role in understanding second language acquisition. At the University context, error analysis has been conducted in Nepal, Jordan, Iran and so many countries of the world. Giri (2009) found that bachelor level students of English in Nepal produced all sort of grammatical errors in the use of the English language, and the seven most errors were on conditional, mood, verb forms, tense, main verb, subject-verb agreement, question formation.

In Jordan, Abushihab et al (2011) studied grammatical errors produced by university students enrolled in paragraph writing class. They found that the most problematic areas for students were preposition, morphological errors, articles, verbs, passivisation, and tense. While Abbasia and Karimnia (2011) studying students' errors in Iranian university tried to re-classified errors into lexico-semantic and syntactico-morphological errors. In lexico-semantic categories, they found that the students produced false cognates (82%) and Cross association (18%). In syntactico-morphological categories, the seven most occurrence errors were word order, tense, there-existential, passivisation, word form, preposition, and question formation. In a more recent literature, Downing and Locke (2006) seem to reinforce Quirk and Greenbaum's view. They contend that since tense represents the grammatical expression of the location of events in time, it anchors an event to the speaker's experience of the world by relating the event time to a point of reference. They posit that the universal, unmarked reference point is the moment of speaking-speech time. They conclude the argument by asserting that "the location of the speaker, the moment of speaking and the speaker her/himself make up 'the *I*, the *here* and the *now*'- the 'deictic centre'- which serves as the point of reference for definiteness and proximity" (Downing and Locke 2006:353).

In view of these studies therefore, this research shall be investigating tense errors by 300 level English students' writings in Federal University Gusau and Usmanu Danfodiyo University Sokoto with the view of finding and recommending solutions to the problems.

METHODOLOGY

Fifty students studying English in their 300 level from two federal universities in North-Western Nigeria were chosen as the subjects for the study. Data were collected from their written essays conducted during semester examinations for the 2016/2017 academic session. Approximately, 200 sentences were collected from the examination scripts. The secret behind using this strategy was to get the natural data. And if the students know that their scripts would be used for this purpose they would try to adjust in their expressions and constructions. The writers identified the errors, classified them and later corrections were made by the authors. There were about 200 errors made by the students and over 100 were on tenses. The identified errors were counted based on their frequencies. When the same error occurred twice, they were counted as two errors in the tabulation. The proportional stratified random sampling technique was used to ensure an equitable representation of the sample group members in order to avoid bias. This also ensures that each proportional stratum is as homogeneous as possible. Thus, from the study population of 100, a sample size of 50 was drawn and used for the research. According to Ellis (1994) an approach in the form of error analysis (EA) emerges in the early 1970's which regards errors as part of a language system which when properly managed can discover errors that neither textbooks nor contrastive analysis can accurately predict, and hence provide more practical direct ways in which the interest of specific language classes can be catered for. In this approach, Corder (1974) suggests five procedures which include the selection of corpus of language, identification of the errors, the classification of the errors, the explanation of the errors and their evaluation. EA therefore served as the guiding theoretical framework for this study while statistical analysis was used to inform the findings of the study. In the classification level, the errors were tabulated and classified into the following categories: capitalisation, tense, spelling, concord, number (plurality), auxiliary, pronoun, punctuation, and determiner. Then, from this tabulation, the frequency of errors and the percentage for each category was calculated to see their distribution and severity. The choice of students of English department was due to the importance of tenses to them and they are in the best position to know the grammatical rules compared to their counterparts in other disciplines.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Data analysis shows that there are nine categories of errors commonly made by 300 level students studying English in two selected universities of North-Western Nigeria. The distribution of those errors is shown in figure 1. The figure shows that the most severe errors regarding the occurrence are capitalisation with 24%/0% and 20%/5% for FUG and UDUS for first and second semesters respectively. The second place is errors on tenses with the occurrence of 18%/10% and 18%/14% for the two universities. Errors in spelling occupy 8%/10% and 12%/8% of the errors tabulated. Meanwhile, errors on concord are 4%/15% and 1%/3%.

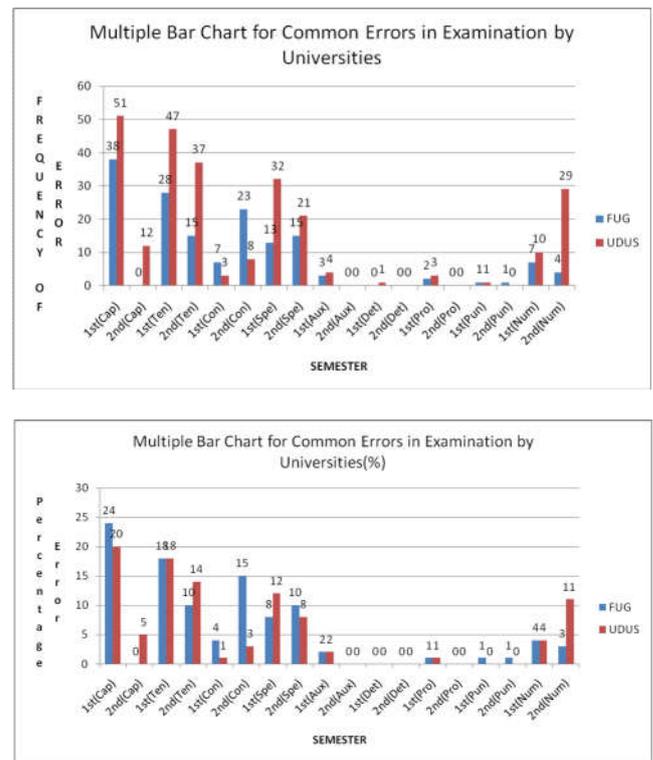


Fig. 1.

The fifth on the list is number (using plural markers wrongly) which produces problems to students with the level of occurrence of 4%/3% and 4%/11%. It is followed by errors in the use of auxiliary verbs with 2%/0% and 2%/0%. Use of the pronouns and punctuation marks are not so many produced by students with equal occurrence of 1%/0% and 1%/0% for the two universities. The field with the least errors produced is confusion in the use of determiner. It occupies 0% of the total errors for both first and second semesters of the two schools surveyed.

DISCUSSION AND INTERPRETATION

As shown in table 1, tense is one of the areas where the students being studied make significant errors, it ranks second to capitalisation. The frequency table shows 18% and 10% for FUG while 18% and 14% for UDUS for the two semesters. This clearly shows that there was increase in the percentage errors committed by the students in the second semester examination when compared to capitalisation which ranks first in the tabulation. English tense is difficult for the learners because of its classification and sub-classification. Crystal (1991) thus appears to recognise the classification of tenses into three (i.e. past, present and future tenses). He however later argues that if tenses are seen as forms of verbs, English then has no future tense. He consequently sees constructions such as "I will/shall go" as best analysed as modal auxiliary verbs displaying a different grammatical function such as expression of intention or obligation that may often involve futurity. The most common errors seemed arise from students' carelessness in using capital letters. This may result in their failure to use capital letters at the beginning of sentences or at the beginning of proper nouns. See the sentences below:

- In English language, most idioms are regarded as a chiches.
- English is a world language.

The second category of errors arises from the confusion of irregularity in selecting verbs in sentences. This may result in the using present tense instead of past and vice versa. Example: **and mostly formal language is mostly acquire in school.*

Spelling is another source of errors which ranks third in the frequency table. These errors arise mostly from the confusion of vowels and other related issues. This category comprises total wrong spelling, insertion and the omission of many letters. Consider the following:

**spoken varity*
the **wood* pidgin formally **sepelled pigin.*

This finding confirms Haggan's (1991) idea that mispronunciation, lack of awareness of spelling rules and irregular spelling patterns strongly contributed to spelling errors. She found that this even will be more among the more advanced students. The use of article is another area of errors for students, but this research detects no single error on the use of articles by the sampled students. This is very surprising because the assumption is that article may be difficult to students than tenses or concord. Likewise, the use of articles used to be very confusing for learners of English.

Concord is one of the big problems to students. It ranks fourth in the total errors. The problems with concord have to do with faulty and shaky grammar used by the students in their sentence construction. See the sentences below:

taboo words is an abusive words.

So nowadays there are many language that are spoken and written

Only two errors are identified on the use of pronoun and punctuation marks in the sampled sentences.

Using the auxiliary verbs is another source of concern by the 300 level students of English. This research also confirms that only four errors were committed by the sampled population in the two semesters of the study.

Recommendation

Many scholars and educationists have conducted researches on students' tense errors and provided a number of recommendations on the way forward in tackling the problem. See Abushihab, I. *et al* (2011), Maradun (2012), Ibrahim, S. (2013) and many other scholars for details.

Conclusion

This study shows that there are nine major categories of errors made by 300 level English students of selected northern Nigerian university students in their semester examination writing - capitalisation, tenses, spelling, number (plurality), concord, pronoun, auxiliary verbs, punctuation and determiner. Out of these errors, tense is one of the most prevalent. It ranks second in the tabulation and frequency of occurrence. The article suggests that teachers of those students should pay more attention to the occurrence of those errors and make efforts in providing remedies. The students on the other hand should intensify efforts in learning the language as future teachers and leaders.

These attempts would go a long way in preventing the students from having a negative impression that English language is difficult to learn. The limited data used for the study prevents the researchers from making the generalisation of the findings into a larger population. Therefore, the authors further suggest that another research should be carried out to cover a wider population. What is shown by this study is the general taxonomy of errors in writing. The writers also suggest that further research is needed to study the relationship between errors made by student and his age, the type of secondary schools the students attended (private or public) and whether the mode of discourse affects the error taxonomy or not.

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