THE USAGE OF TENSE AND ASPECT IN THE WRITTEN ENGLISH OF SOME SELECTED SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

The verbal group of English is the most crucial part in the structure of English and it constitutes a source of considerable difficulty for second language learners. The major aim of this paper is to find out the level of competence of the participants in the usage of tense and aspect features of English especially in their active, productive language use. The participants are 60 Senior Secondary Year Three students who were given a guided composition to write. Our findings showed that the different verbal group forms and their meanings posed different problems to the learners. On the basis of our findings we offer suggestions that can lead to a better understanding and usage of the features investigated.

In an English as a second language (ESL) country such as Nigeria, English is widely used as a medium of communication and to all intents and purposes serves as the official language of the country. In fact, the Federal Republic of Nigeria *National Policy on Education* (1998) states clearly the importance of English in the nation's educational system. Section 3.17(e) of this policy states that "The medium of instruction in the primary school shall be the language of the immediate environment for the first three years. During this period English shall be taught as a subject." While Section 3.17 (f) states further that "From the fourth year, English shall progressively be used as a medium of instruction and the language of immediate environment and French shall be taught as subjects."

English is, therefore, the major medium of instruction in the entire educational system from the primary to the tertiary level. The ESL learner, however, comes into contact with English mainly through the formal setting of the classroom. In addition, such learners, in most cases,

do not have much opportunity to use English outside the school environment. Thus, the overall achievement of the learner in English and, indeed, other school subjects will depend on the effectiveness of the teaching-learning process in the school.

THE VERBAL GROUP IN ENGLISH

Following Fletcher (1979) we use the verbal group to "summarize the range of auxiliaries, modals and inflections which signal temporal, aspectual or modal meanings and thus differs in its extension from the same term in transformational grammars where it covers the whole predicate phrase" (p. 261). The verbal group has also been described as the most central element in clause structure. Quirk, Greenbaum, & Svartvik (1985) state that:

> The verb element is the most 'central' element in that (i) its position is normally medial rather than initial or final; (ii) it is normally obligatory; (iii) it cannot normally be moved to a different position in the clause; and (iv) it helps to determine what other elements must occur… The other elements, subject, object and complement, are in various degrees more peripheral than the verb and less peripheral than the adverbial (p. 50).

The verbal group is not only the most central element, it is, in addition, one of the most complex areas of English grammar. Muir (1972) in connection with the complexity of the verbal group, asserts that:

> This complexity is brought about by the fact that a relatively large number of systemic choices are made here, and there is not a one-to-one correspondence between a term in a system and an element of structure realizing this choice. The same element(s) of structure may be the realization of a number of systemic choices (p. 41).

The verbal group is undoubtedly a source of considerable difficulty for ESL learners also probably because of the differences that exist between English verbs and verbs in their mother tongues. In the same vein, Palmer (1974) states that "For almost any language the part that concerns the verb is the most difficult. Learning a language is to a very large degree learning how to operate the verbal forms of the language" (p. 1).

The English verb carries markers of grammatical categories such as tense, aspect, person, number, voice and mood. In this study, however, we concentrate on the use of tense and aspect in the written English of our subjects because they (i.e. tense and aspect) are of direct relevance to the present study.

TENSE AND ASPECT

Tense is a grammatical category that is used to locate the time the verb refers to in terms of the situation of the utterance. Although there is a relationship between time and tense, we can distinguish the two concepts because tense is linguistic while time is extralinguistic. Tense is deictic, according to Lyons (1977), because it "grammaticalises the relationship which holds between the time of the situation that is being described, and the temporal zero-point of the deictic context" (p. 678). Many modern grammarians recognize the present tense and past tense in English while some grammarians recognize a third tense which is the future tense (cf. Okanlawon, 1999). For instance, Comrie (1976) distinguishes three tenses in languages although he concedes that "not all languages distinguish these three tenses, or indeed distinguish tense at all" (p. 2).

Many scholars distinguish a two-fold opposition in the realization of tense in English. Quirk et al. (1985) assert that:

> English has no future form of the verb in addition to present and past forms. Some grammarians have argued for a third, 'future tense', maintaining that English realizes this tense by the use of an auxiliary verb construction (such as *will* + infinitive): but we prefer to follow those grammarians who have treated tense strictly as a category realized by verb inflection (p. 176).

In a similar manner Lyons (1977) also contends that future time can not be regarded as future tense because "futurity is never purely a temporal concept; it necessarily includes an element of prediction or some related modal notion" (p. 67). While Quirk et al. (1985) recognize present and past tense distinction in English, many other scholars such as Comrie (1985), and Van Valin, Robert and La Polla (1997) view English as having past and nonpast tense distinctions. In this study, however, we follow Quirk et al. (1985), in their categorization of present and past

tense distinction based on the argument that "Tradition and familiarity favour the retention of the label 'present' in place of 'nonpast'" (p. 177).

Aspect, on the other hand, refers to the manner in which the verb action is regarded or experienced in terms of progressiveness and perfectiveness. Unlike tense, aspect is non-deictic because it is not relative to the time of utterance. In an attempt to describe tense and aspect in English; we must realise that these two grammatical categories are inseparable. Quirk et al. (1985) state this point succinctly in their assertion that:

> Aspect is so closely connected in meaning with tense that the distinction in English grammar between tense and aspect is little more than a terminological convenience which helps us to separate in our minds two different kinds of realization: the morphological realization of tense and the syntactic realization of aspect (p.189).

Based largely on pedagogical consideration, the focus of our investigation is on the areas that constitute the core of the classroom presentation of the English tense system to the learners. We have, therefore, focused on the following:

(1) Simple present
(2) Present progressive
(3) Simple past
(4) Past progressive
(5) Present perfect
(6) Past perfect
(7) Present perfect progressive
(8) Past perfect progressive

METHODOLOGY

The participants for this study are 60 Yoruba speaking Senior Secondary School Year 3 students drawn from two schools in Ile-Ife, Nigeria. Given the number of years the participants have spent in secondary schools and their consequent exposure to English, we believe they ought to have had a good mastery of English. Secondary school education in Nigeria has six-year duration and is given in two stages;

junior and senior, each with a three-year duration. The elicitation instrument was a guided essay writing exercise. The students were asked to write a composition on the topic 'Curbing Indiscipline in Our Schools.' This type of elicitation instrument was chosen because our intention is to capture the active language knowledge of the participants rather than their passive or receptive language knowledge for which a fill-in exercise would have been suitable. Our focus is, therefore, on the verb forms that the subjects use.

The scripts of the participants were collected and analysed by using simple frequency percentage. All the verbal forms in the essays were noted and then analysed in terms of whether they were correctly formed and whether they were correctly used. Our findings are presented below.

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The verb forms relevant to our area of investigation found in the written texts of the participants as well as the overall performance on each of these forms are presented in Table 1 below. A rank ordering of the forms in terms of the total number of occurrences in the scripts reveals the following order: simple present, simple past, present perfect, present progressive, past progressive, past perfect, present perfect progressive and past perfect progressive. This rank ordering does not include consideration of the correctness of these forms as used by the participants.

On the basis of the number of occurrences of the different verbal group forms in the usage of the participants, and for pedagogical purposes we have assigned the verbal group forms into three groups:

(i)   Regularly used verbs (RUV);
(ii)   Non-regularly used verbs (NRUV);
(iii) Rarely used verbs (RAUV)

Table 1.   Overall Performance on Each of the Verbal Group Forms
Investigated

Verbal group form	N^a	N^b	P (%)
Simple present	1460	1320	90.4
Present progressive	80	74	92.5
Simple past	159	139	87.4
Past progressive	32	25	78.1
Present perfect	119	82	68.9
Past perfect	20	12	60
Present perfect progressive	2	0	0
Past perfect progressive	0	0	0

Note. [a] Number of occurrences   [b] Numbers correctly used

In the first group (RUV) we have the simple present and the simple past. In the second group (NRUV) we have the present perfect and the present progressive while in the third group (RAUV) we have the past progressive, the past perfect and the present perfect progressive. There was, however, not a single occurrence of the past perfect progressive in our data.
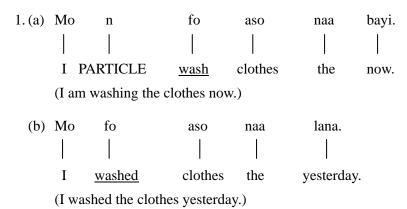
The learners' non-use of the past perfect progressive, as well as the virtual non-use of the present perfect progressive, can be explained on the basis of the complexity of these verbal group forms. Here we have a combination of both aspectual distinctions, and this complexity could have led to avoidance strategy on the part of the learners.

We can use the grouping of the verbal group forms, as indicated above, to understand the hierarchy of problems confronting our learners and to proffer solutions to them. In the case of the verbal group forms that are not regularly used, measures must be taken to make them and their various meanings available to the learners so that they can ultimately become part of their active language knowledge. The non-use of these forms makes the English of the learners repetitive, monotonous and unidiomatic.

On the regularly used forms, greater efforts will have to be made to improve the accuracy levels of the learners. For instance, despite the

simple present being the most regularly used as shown in Table 1 above, it still constitutes a source of difficulty for the learners. The influence of the learners' mother tongue may be a factor since verbs in Yoruba, the mother tongue of the learners, are not inflected for number and person as in English.

For instance, in Yoruba, there are no overt markers of tense. As Oyelaran (1982) states "tense is not a constituent of the AUX and is therefore not a grammatical category of the language" (p. 3). The same verb can be used for present and past tense forms of verbs in Yoruba, e.g.

1. (a) Mo   n   fo   aso   naa   bayi.

       I PARTICLE   <u>wash</u>   clothes   the   now.

    (I am washing the clothes now.)

 (b) Mo   fo   aso   naa   lana.

       I   <u>washed</u>   clothes   the   yesterday.

    (I washed the clothes yesterday.)

Arising from the examples above, the word 'fo' 'to wash' can be used to signify present event as in 1(a) or past event as in 1(b) without any inflectional changes. It should be noted that the 'n' in 1(a) above is not a tense marker; it is an aspect marker (progressive aspect marker).

However, the difficulty must transcend the mother tongue as the problem of the acquisition of the simple present has been attested in both first and second language acquisition studies, e.g. Brown (1973), De Villiers and De Villiers (1973), Hakuta (1974), and many others. For the number of years of the learners' exposure to English the observed accuracy levels are not impressive and concerted efforts have to be made both by the teachers and learners to improve the learners' acquisition of this very important aspect of English.

Apart form an examination of the overall performance of the learners; we now present an analysis of the errors in the written English of the subjects.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF LEARNERS' ERRORS

One of the first scholars to comment on the positive place of errors in second language learning is S. P. Corder. Corder (1967/1981) claims that "we can regard the making of errors as a device the learner uses in order to learn," and that learners' errors are useful to the teacher because they indicate "how far towards the goals the learner has progressed and consequently what remains for him to learn" (p. 11). There are numerous studies which have adopted directly or otherwise Corderian error analysis of the English of Nigerian ESL learners and such studies include Babalola (1999) and Ojetunde (2005).
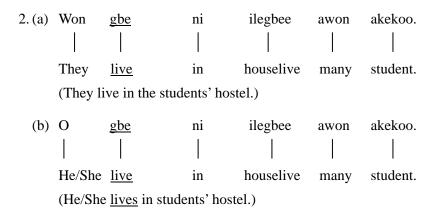
Table 2.   Learners' Errors and Error Types

Verbal group form	N^a	Error types (n)
Simple present	140	Plural verb used for singular verb (67)
		Singular verb used for plural verb (53)
		Present progressive used for simple present (12)
		Simple past used for simple present (8)
Present progressive	6	Past progressive used for present progressive (6)
Simple past	20	Simple progressive used for simple present (13)
		Past progressive used for simple past (7)
Past progressive	7	Simple present used for present progressive (7)
Present perfect	37	Primary auxiliary have + base form of verb (25)
		Has + plural subject (12)
Past perfect	8	Had + base form of verb (8)
Present perfect progressive	2	Have been + base form of verb (2)
Past perfect progressive	0	Not used

Note. [a] Number of errors

In the present study, the analysis of the errors and error types on each of the verbal group forms investigated are presented in Table 2 below. In the simple present we have classified the 140 errors into 4 error types. In

English, a third person singular subject occurs with a singular verb while a plural subject occurs with a plural verb. Our analysis has shown that the most difficult problem the participants have with the simple present tense is number concord.

The difficulty the participants have with number concord in English can be traced partly to the mother tongue and faulty learning. Yoruba, the mother tongue of the participants, does not have the third person singular inflectional marker after the third person singular subject, e.g.

2. (a) Won   gbe   ni   ilegbee   awon   akekoo.

       | | | | | |

       They   live   in   houselive many   student.

(They live in the students' hostel.)

 (b) O   gbe   ni   ilegbee   awon   akekoo.

       | | | | | |

       He/She live   in   houselive many   student.

(He/She lives in students' hostel.)

As shown in the examples above, the same verbal form gbe realizes both plural and singular forms with the third person. Hence, there is a tendency of the participants to use singular verb for plural subject and vice versa. In addition, faulty learning can also be used to explain the problems of the participants because it appears that when they become aware of the fact that English requires the third person singular inflectional marker they are still at a loss when it comes to its appropriate usage. Of the 140 errors recorded with the simple present, 120 of these arise from number concord with 67 errors arising from the use of plural verb where singular verb is required and 53 vice versa. Below are examples of such errors taken from the scripts of the participants.

Plural verb used for singular verb:

3. (a) The principal decide what punishment is to be given to offenders. (decides)
  (b) The Senior Prefect have the right to confiscate black shoes. (has)

Singular verb used for plural verb:

4. (a) Some parents <u>doesn't</u> pay attention to their children. (don't)
   (b) Those reasons is responsible for bad behaviour. (are)

It is obvious that greater attention has to be paid to this area. More lessons, than hitherto, have to be given and more continuous writing in which this specific area is targeted have to be designed. The use of the present progressive for habitual action is problematic and it needs attention. The usage of the present progressive by the participants in contexts where the simple present is required arises, at times, from pattern drills that are used to teach the progressive tense. The participants tend to extend the progressive tense to the simple present because of their inability to recognize meaning differences between the two forms. Examples of the present progressive used for simple present include the following:

5. (a) We are <u>praying</u> everyday and the students still fight. (pray)
   (b) All students know we <u>are having</u> morning assembly at 8.00a.m yet they come late. (have)

The last error type under the simple present is the use of the simple past for simple present. Examples of such errors are:

6. (a) If you led a riot the Principal will dismiss you from the school. (lead)
   (b) When you went to report to the teachers, they tell you to stop disturbing them. (go)

The simple present tense in English has many uses and we would have expected that these uses would have been mastered by the participants since they were at the tail end of their six-year secondary school career. It is, therefore, important that this tense form with all its uses be given special attention by teaching and re-teaching with as much practice in oral and written work as possible through the school years.

In the present progressive we have recorded only six errors out of 80 occurrences. All these six errors were caused by the use of the past progressive for the present progressive, e.g.

7. (a) While some students <u>were studying</u> others will be playing. (are studying)
   (b) The problem of rich boys <u>was disturbing</u> everybody and the Principal should send for their parents. (is disturbing)

In the simple past 20 errors were recorded out of 159 occurrences. Of these 20 errors, 13 arose from the erroneous use of the simple present for the simple past, e.g.

8. (a) When I <u>get</u> to the back of the classroom I saw that they were gambling (got)
   (b) My classmate <u>lose</u> his money and we <u>have</u> to search everybody. (lost, had)

The remaining 7 errors on the simple past arose from the use of the past progressive for the simple past, e.g.

9. (a) The gang boys escaped because they <u>were hiding</u> behind the toilet when the teachers were looking for them. (hid)
   (b) The class prefect <u>was reporting</u> the innocent boy to the principal. (reported)

On the past progressive, seven errors were recorded out of 32 occurrences. And all these arose from the use of the simple past for the past progressive. The confusion of the simple past with the past progressive arises largely from the fact that teachers tend to teach tenses without regard to either situation or verbal context. The participants were, therefore, unable to use these forms correctly. Some examples from our data are the following:

10.   While the Prefect <u>talked</u> the boys and girls <u>shouted</u> and trouble started. (was talking, were shouting)

The present perfect presented 37 errors out of 119 instances. Of these 37, 25 errors arose from the use of primary auxiliary have+ a base form of the verb rather than the past participle, e.g.

11. (a) I <u>have explain</u> the reasons why a riot can happen. (have explained)

(b) Some of the bad girls <u>have change</u> for the better. (have changed)

The remaining 12 errors on the present perfect arose from the use of plural subject + has, e.g.

12. (a) Nearly all the teachers <u>has been</u> retired by the government. (have been)
    (b) So many classes <u>has been</u> cancelled. (have been)

For the past perfect only 20 instances were found in our data, 8 of these being errors. All the errors were caused by the use of <u>had</u> + a base form of verb, e.g.

13. (a) Some <u>had forget</u> what happened last year. (had forgotten)
    (b) The prefect <u>had confiscate</u> the shoes before trouble started. (had confiscated)

Analysis of errors shows that the difficulty that the participants had with the usage of the perfect aspect is not the confusion of the progressive with the prefect but largely the verb form to follow the aspectual marker. Of the 45 errors identified above, 37 with present prefect and 8 with the past perfect, 33 arose from this source. It is obvious that the participants had been taught the present tense, past tense and past participle verb forms. The memorization of these verb forms for both regular and irregular verbs is started very early in the teaching of English in Nigeria. One explanation that can be used to account for the non-use of the past participle with the verb *have* to form the perfect by the participants is that the past participle verb forms are not taught or learnt in suitable contexts.

With the present perfect progressive, the following two recorded occurrences were errors:

14. (a) The Pastors <u>have been preach</u> to the whole school. (have been preaching)
    (b) The particular boys <u>have been steal</u> before. (have been stealing)

On the other hand, the past perfect progressive form was not used by any of the participants.

An overview of this study has shown clearly that many things are

wrong with the participant's acquisition of this crucial area of the English Language.

CONCLUSION

This study has shown that the verbal group of English continues to be a particularly troublesome part of the language for our learners. It is clear that more efforts would be needed if our students are to achieve near native-like competence, especially in the area of grammar, that is expected from users of English as second language. The English language classroom is where the appreciable part of this task can be achieved. Unfortunately, the classroom situation in Nigeria does not help learners much in effective learning (Okanlawon, 1995). The English tenses will have to be taught in a cyclic manner. The verbal group forms listed in this study will have to be taught, and re-taught at different times.

The different uses of each of these forms have to be taught in contexts that will make the different meanings very clear. The teacher must also provide realistic and authentic contexts in which the students can produce their own output for the different uses that are taught. For instance, these verbal group forms can be used during pre-writing activities after which the students can be expected to use them to write guided compositions. The complexity of the items taught and the complexity of the writing assignment can be varied according to class and individual needs. Errors observed in the student's essays can also be used positively to re-teach and to build up on areas of deficiency. In all these, the teacher must be creative and must use the materials at his disposal flexibly to enhance the learning of what remains a crucial part of the second language learning effort.

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