

Wrong Usage of English Tenses in Student's Essays: The Nigerian Experience

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DOI: 10.56201/ijelcs.v8.no1.2023.pg27.36

Abstract

The paper examines wrong usage of English tenses in sentences contained in students' essays. English as a language has distinct and peculiar rules governing its usage and the rules guiding the correct use of tenses is one of them. The theory adopted for this study is Error Analysis by Pit Corder and it is adopted because it has been observed over the years that learners and users of a second or foreign language, most often than not, transfer the grammatical and semantic features of their first language (mother tongue) to the language that is being learnt. During the study, it was discovered after a careful data analysis of students' essays that English tenses are most of the time wrongly used by students. One of the recommendations given is that students should be encouraged and made to familiarize themselves with the distinctive English tense system so that they can easily identify their inadequacies in English tense usage and aim at improving on them to enhance their level of proficiency in English language usage generally.

INTRODUCTION

The wrong use of English tenses is predominant among different kinds of grammatical errors. In every language, learning to write or speak correctly and meaningfully is dependent on the learner's ability to master the verbal forms of the language involved. In English language, for example, the verb is the most obligatory element in the sentence. This means verbs cannot be omitted in a sentence if meaning is to be made. It is important, therefore, that one has to make himself familiar with English verbs and its correct usage so that he can master them and be consistent in the usage of tenses in the English language.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theory adopted for this study is 'Error Analysis' theory propounded in the '70s by Pit Corder as an alternative to Contrastive Analysis. It is believed in Contrastive Analysis that individuals tend to transfer the forms and meaning of their native language and culture both productively when attempting to speak the language and receptively when trying to understand the language and culture as practised by the native speakers of the language being learnt. On the other hand, Error Analysis, as an approach is the study of language use of the learner with a view to identifying mistakes learners make and to figure out the causes and significance of such errors.

According to Corder (1967), errors are significant of three things. First to the teacher, if he or she undertakes a systematic analysis to know, how far towards that goal the learner has progressed and consequently what remains for him to learn. Secondly, they provide the researcher with evidence of how language is learned or acquired, and what strategies or procedures the learner is employing in his discovery of the language. Thirdly, they are useful to the learner himself because making of errors is seen as a device or method the learner uses in order to learn. We can also see the occurrence of errors in the learner's language use as a sign of "the present inadequacy of teaching methods". (Pg. 163). This is corroborated by Anefnaf (2017) who stated that the occurrence of errors does not only indicate that the learner has not learned something yet, but helps to determine whether the teaching method applied in teaching the learner was effective or if it needs to be changed.

Moreover, the approach of error analysis that will be adopted for this study is that of 'interlanguage'. The concept of interlanguage was suggested by Selinker (1972) where he drew attention to the fact that there is a possibility that the learner's language can be regarded as a distinct language variety or system with its own characteristics and rules. This is based on the theory that while learning a second language, learners build up a system for themselves which is glaringly different in some ways from their first language and second language systems. This distinct peculiar system learners of a language build up is called interlanguage. It is worthy of note that David Jowitt (1991) deemed this theory reliable in his popular treatment of Nigerian English. The theory has been defined as a separate linguistic system whose existence we are compelled to hypothesize, based on the observed output which resulted from the L2 learner's attempted production of the target language (L2).

Also, the interlanguage is not static but a 'dynamic system' (Selinker) and a 'developmental continuum' (Corder) which shows increasing complexity. Hence, the learner undergoes a recreative process whereby in his mind, he creates the language afresh which initially did not exist in his vocabulary or lexicon. The grammar and all other features of the target language (L2) are – partially present in his mother tongue. This follows that the said transfer does not occur in a vacuum but as a result of the inability of the language learner to "effect a restructuring of the complex system of his MT (Mother tongue) in order to learn the equally complex system of the TL" (Jowitt).

In summary, the above discussed theory is for the analysis of this study. This is because the researcher is dealing directly with the wrong use of English tenses among students as discovered in their essay writing. The theory of error analysis agrees to this study as the causes of errors as well as its effects on learners of English Language (L2) are highlighted under data analysis.

LITERATURE REVIEW

REASONS FOR WRONG USE OF ENGLISH TENSES

Tense is an exclusive property of the verb. It is a term used in grammar to indicate the time an action or event expressed is said to have happened or occurred. Hence, tense basically refers to time. Cowan (2008) explains tense thus,

*...expresses the time that an action occurs in relation to the moment of speaking... Tense has three "dimensions" 'present; 'past; and 'future'.
(P. 350)*

For example; i) Jane loves Peter. (*Present tense*)

ii) Jane loved Peter. (*Past tense*)

iii) Jane will love Peter. (*Expressing future time*)

Students in tertiary institutions in Nigeria studying English as a second language face several difficulties in their attempt to master English tenses properly. According to Cowan (2008) ‘use of verb forms is one of the two or three most difficult areas for English language learners to master’ (P. 350). As a result of this, the learners sometimes make mistakes in the proper use of verb forms as they attempt to express the time an event took place in the target language being learnt which is the English Language.

There are numerous reasons for the wrong use of English tenses by learners and users of English language especially in a second language situation where the learners have previously mastered a first language known as the mother tongue (MT). This is referred to as the mother tongue interference on the target language (TL) and as a result of this, learners or users of English language as a second language (L2) tend to have so many problems, like the problem of overgeneralization, gravitational pull of the first language (L1), internal analogy, pronunciation according to spelling, poor learning, exposure to non-standard variety of English used outside the classroom (e.g. pidgin), the attitudes of the community, lack of adequate vocabulary to express concepts, ideas and the culture gap of the two systems.

Language scholars and linguists all over the world have been theorizing on L1 (first language) interference on L2 (second language). Two basic models have arisen as a result of the researchers’ theories called positive and negative interference. However, much attention is being given to negative interference. This is because it is the aspect which has negative impact on second language (L2) learners of any language. In fact, negative L1 transfer on L2 is considered as the influence resulting from the differences between the target language and the second language. Such view of language transfer may be too simplistic and restrictive. It should be stated here that both empirical and teaching experiences have shown that teaching L₁ and L₂ differences do not necessarily imply learner’s difficulties. This invariably means that not all errors made or committed by learners are attributable to negative transfer of L1 features to L2 being acquired.

Another reason for errors could be lack of mastery of the target language, which in turn affects the correct use of tenses among students who acquired English as their second language. Reacting to this, David Jowitt (1991) rather than tag this as transfer, gives priority to the claim that the second language learner is just being monolingual and lacks competence to adopt to the appropriate usage of the grammatical features of the target language. He states;

The learner does not only effect a restructuring of the complex system of his mother tongue in order to learn the equally complex system of the target language nor are his ‘errors’ solely due to transfer (or interference) of mother tongue features (Pg. 35).

Thus, once the first language is acquired, the sound system, grammar and structure of the second language become tasking for the learner or speaker to acquire because the L1 features have been

internalized by the learner. Agreeing to this, Eka and Udofot (1996) says that unless one puts in his best to make an extra effort to study the grammatical structure or system of the target language (English), errors and incompetence would always manifest in ones sentences as regards the misuse of English tenses (Pg. 52).

Furthermore, Carl James (1980) in his Contrastive Analysis theory states that contractive analysis predicts errors by comparing the linguistic systems of the mother tongue and the target language. It is based on the assumption that second language learners will tend to transfer to the second language utterances, the formal features of their first language. He continued that “individuals tend to transfer the forms and meanings of their native language and culture to the foreign language and culture” (Pg. 22). However, Jowitt (1991) does not believe that errors are made as a result of mother tongue interference alone. Thus, he asserts;

It is legitimate to speak of varieties as ‘errors’ where they are due to wrong learning and are generally regarded by educated people as errors. To be more specific, we might attribute some errors to be mother tongue transfer (I hear the smell of gas) or to transfer from pidgin (I for tell you that...). Others to false hypothesis or overgeneralization (I am go...), others to failure to learn the special phonic or syntactic features of certain words (she deals on cloth). (Pg. 36).

He goes further to make an important distinction between idiosyncratic errors and common errors and subdivides common errors into what he calls “vulgar and institutionalized errors”. Idiosyncratic errors are those peculiar to individual characterizing idiosyncratic dialects which are likely to be identified and corrected by teachers, peers, older children, parents and so on. However, these idiosyncratic features are stigmatized by the average Nigerian community because they impede communication but they tend to be eliminated at relatively early stages of the learning process and have less chance of being fossilized. In contrast, common errors are those occurring in the written and spoken English of large numbers of learners. The subset called vulgar errors are those which show ignorance of fairly elementary rules of syntax, morphology and spelling errors. Also, institutionalized errors are common errors which are not identified as errors except by native users or by the most highly educated and experienced Nigerian users of English within the wider class of the educated. Such errors occur with the breaking of the rules of more advanced syntax (e.g. the pluralization of uncountable nouns, misuse of tenses) or of phonology.

In the same view, Alan Cruttenden (1985) in his treatment of performance target sees the aged learner’s speech (due to incompetence in tenses and misuse of tenses) as being understood only in terms of the context of use. The result of which he calls *the level of restricted intelligibility* and he adds that the factors which obviously determines the learner’s aims are connected with his age and his natural ability to do so; he may succeed in speaking English with the system of his own language (L1) in which case he may not make meaning to listeners outside his own region, domain or environment (L1).

Moreover, the overall goal of learning English over the years has been an effort towards acquiring SBE (Standard British English) otherwise called Received Pronunciation (RP) but the outcome of learning for most Nigerian learners had been an interlanguage mastery also called popular Nigerian

English (NE). So, to what extent can it be said that the goal has been achieved since errors (in grammar, meaning and pronunciation) still manifest? Of course, this is legitimate and normal as it results from mother tongue (MT) or first language (L1) transfer and are generally regarded by the educated people as errors. This is according to David Jowitt.

Also, Bamgbose et al (1995) believe that English language in Nigeria has been ‘localized’ or ‘nativized’ by adopting some language features on its own such as sentence structures, words, expressions and so on (Pg. 70). An example is the expression “He ate government money” or “He embezzles government money”.

Nevertheless, these errors are corrected through comparison with standard forms of usages as will be seen in Data Presentation and Analysis section of this paper.

However, it should be noted that there are few Nigerians like court judges, some lecturers in higher institutions, some top civil servants who have attained an appreciable level of competence in their use of English after many years of learning and career practice. These persons can conveniently take over the responsibility of teaching the young Nigerian learners of English in the correct Standard English usage. These few Nigerians have passed the level of being called learners because they speak or use English with a degree of maturity to near nativelike competence.

Worthy of mention is the contribution of Kenneth Beare (1996) on the misuse of tense in the use of English in a second language situation. He observed thus;

I'd definitely agree that tense use is one of the most common mistakes that learners make. However, that doesn't impede communication. Often, listeners can fill in the clues contextually. Certainly, learners should strive to improve their tense usage but one of the best ways to do that is to communicate in English as often as possible. The tense eventually begins to sort themselves out after many, many mistakes are made. (Pg. 33)

The above assertion reaffirms the fact that the correct use of tenses constitute a major problem for a person who is learning English as a second language (L2) and a conscious effort should be made to learn English tenses so that with time, correct usage can be attained even if wrong use do not necessarily hinder communication.

DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

Below is a detailed presentation of data collected and a critical analysis of the collected data. The sentences are extracts from students' essays and are numbered for easy reference in the analysis. The title of the essay is “My memorable experiences on Campus” which is narrative and descriptive at the same time.

Error Description and Explanation

Extract 1: (Essay 1, Paragraph 1, Sentence 1 and 3)

1. My experience on campus is characterized with a lot of obstacles and achievements which can be trace from my first day on campus.

2. The registration exercise is a very tedious one which took me three weeks to complete because I have not experience anything of such before.

Extract 2: (Essay 2, Paragraph 4, Sentence 8 and 9)

3. I manage to complete my education even in my moment of lack.
4. Two weeks to my final semester exams, I go to church everyday for prayers.

Extract 3: (Essay 3, Paragraph 3. Sentence 4 and 6)

5. It was better to tried and fail than not trying at all.
6. It take persistence and hard work to succeed in life.

Extract 4: (Essay 4, Paragraph 2, Sentence 3)

7. It was fun and at the same time, too many academic stress like study, study and study combine with other social activities as all work and no play made Jack a dull boy.

Extract 5: (Essay 5, Paragraph 2, Sentence 2)

8. The issue of secret cult, bad gang violence and riot makes me uncomfortable and I sometimes regretted why I choosed the school in the first place.

Extract 6: (Essay 6, Paragraph 4, Sentence 1)

9. Students who resume late were made to cut the grass and paid a fine.

Extract 7: (Essay 7, Paragraph 2, Sentence 3)

10. My first three months in school was lonely because I use this period to observe my fellow students especially the ones in my class and get acquainted with the school environment.

Extract 8: (Essay 8, Paragraph 4, Sentence 1)

11. Some students did not cared about the kind of reputation they built for themselves in the society today.

Extract 9: (Essay 9, Paragraph 3, Sentence 1)

12. Just when I thought I have got used to the school, I have an encounter which bring me sad memories.

Extract 10: (Essay 10, Paragraph 1, Sentence 3)

13. I cry for joy and singed all day long when I gained admission into the polytechnic of my choice. Nothing can be compare to the way I felt that day.

Detailed Explanation of Errors

The analysis of the data presented above is done here. It is important we know that the MT (Mother tongue) or L₁ (First language) of the students being sampled is not English language but various Nigerian languages like Yoruba, Igbo, Ukwuani, Ika and Aniocha dialects of the Igbo language and Urhobo language. This foreknowledge helps the researcher to know, to an extent, the possible causes of the problem of wrong use of tenses in the students' essays examined.

The data of errors has been collected from ten (10) students of Delta State Polytechnic, Ogwashi-Uku whose first language (mother language) vary from Ibo, Ika and Ukwuani variants of Igbo language, Urhobo, Yoruba, Bini, Esan and Isoko languages.

Extract (1)

In sentence (1), the writer talks of his experience in school from the first day and he uses the present tense form of the verb 'trace' to talk about an event which occurred in the past. This error is clearly a passive one and is caused by mother tongue interference as the writer directly translates from his mother tongue into English language. However, most Nigerian languages have time divisions of present, past and future with the aid of adjuncts like yesterday, today, tomorrow, the day after tomorrow, the day after yesterday, before and so on. most Nigerian languages do not have clear time specifications as there are in English language where the tense accounts for the time of action of the verb.

In sentence (2), the writer uses the present tense of verb 'to be' known as 'is' to refer to a past event that has taken place, 'have' is used instead of the past tense 'had' and 'experience' instead of the past 'experienced'. This error is solely due to mother tongue interference whereby the writer transfers his inbuilt knowledge of his mother tongue into English in constructing sentences without applying the rules and conventions of English language.

Extract (2)

In sentence (3), the writer uses the verb 'manage' instead of the past tense 'managed'.

In sentence (9), the writer uses the present tense 'go' instead of 'went'. These errors are as a result of mother tongue interference.

Extract (3)

In sentence (4), the writer uses past tense form of the verb 'was' instead 'is' and 'tried' instead of 'try'.

In sentence (6), he writes 'take' instead of 'takes'. This is clearly as a result of his inability to master English language concord rules especially the rule which states that a noun must agree with its verb in terms of number in a sentence. That is; *It takes...*, *They take*

Extract (4)

In Sentence (7), the writer whose mother tongue is Ika dialect of the Igbo language, engages in direct transliteration of his mother tongue to English language. For example, the repetition of 'study' is allowed in Ika language but looks odd when used in English unless the speaker wants to use it for emphasis. He also uses present tense 'combine' instead of past tense 'combined' and past tense 'made' instead of present tense 'makes'. It is obvious here that the writer cannot distinguish between correct present and past tense usage but uses any of the two at will. This is understandable because the writer's mother tongue does not have a clear distinction of tense in the past or present.

Extract (5)

Sentence (8) also has tense error. The verb 'makes' is used by the writer instead of 'make'. This is also as a result of the writer's inability to use tense correctly in sentences. A plural subject as we see in the sentence should normally take a plural verb 'make'. But the writer fails to use the appropriate verb because of his mother tongue interference. Also 'choosed' is wrongly used. The right word to use is 'chose'.

Extract (6)

In sentence (9), the writer also uses the wrong verb tense ‘resume’ instead of ‘resumed’. The present tense is erroneously used because the writer is using the structure of his mother tongue and translating it directly to English language which is his second language. Also, ‘pay’ should replace ‘paid’ in the sentence so that the sentence can read “Students who resumed late were made to cut the grass and pay a fine”.

Extract (7)

Here, we observe the wrong use of present tense ‘use’ instead of the past tense ‘used’ which is appropriate in the context. Also, this is another case of transferring the features of mother tongue of the writer directly into English language. As has been observed above, most Nigerian languages do not have obvious inflections of tense but are realized through the use of time markers like ‘yesterday’, ‘today’ ‘now’, ‘last year’ ‘next year’ and so on.

Extract (8)

In sentence (11), the writer erroneously used the past tense form ‘did’, ‘cared’ and ‘built’ instead of ‘do’ ‘care’ and ‘build’ which are in their present tense forms. This particular writer’s mother tongue is Yoruba and what is observed here is mother tongue interference of Yoruba language into English language.

Extract (9)

In sentence (12), the writer produces a sentence that is not grammatically correct because instead of ‘thought’ as past tense of ‘think’, he indulges in false hypothesis or overgeneralization where he uses ‘ed’ marker to realize the past tense of the word ‘think’ (thought). The writer is actually using the word because he feels that if ‘play’ becomes ‘played’, ‘walk’ becomes ‘walked’, then ‘think’ should become ‘thought’ when changing from the present tense to past tense in English language.

Extract (10)

In sentence (13), the writer uses the verbs ‘cry’ and ‘compare’ instead of past tense ‘cried’ and ‘compared’. We also see an instance where the writer overgeneralizes by using the word ‘singed’ as the past tense form of the verb ‘sing’ instead of ‘sang’. Like in most of the cases of wrong tense use analyzed above, this is a case of the writer’s mother tongue intruding in his use of English language. This is why the essay writers (students) translate the form of tenses as contained in their mother tongues into English even when they have different mother tongues of Yoruba, Igbo, Ibo, Ukwuani, Ika and Aniocha languages.

In summary, from the data analysis above, it has been observed that errors students make as regards wrong use of English tenses in their written and spoken English are mostly due to mother tongue interference, false hypothesis, overgeneralization of the rules of grammar, and exposure to non-standard variety of English language outside the classroom.

RECOMMENDATIONS

From the study so far, the following recommendations have been drawn to reduce if not totally eliminate the causes of wrong usage of English tenses by individual using English as a second language. If adopted by teachers, students and professionals in the field of language study, the incidence of wrong tense usage will greatly be reduced to the barest minimum if not completely

eradicated in the speech and writing of learners using English as a second language. These recommendations are:

First, the teacher should place greater emphasis on tenses which confuse students most like the simple past, present perfect and past perfect tenses. Teachers can help the English as second language learners to overcome this problem by giving them context-manipulation exercises. Also, instructional activities that require learners to supply or manipulate contexts for given forms may help to address the difficulties learners have in mastering appropriate tense usage with the meanings they want to express.

Secondly, students should try to familiarize themselves with the distinctive English tense system so that they can easily identify their problems and aim at improving them.

Thirdly, the students should be encouraged to study at their leisure time grammar books such as those written by Tomori, Quirk et al, Roach, Gimson, Brighter Grammar series and so on so that they can build themselves properly on the use of English language tenses as well as other aspects of grammar to improve their written and spoken English.

Fourth, school libraries should be well equipped and furnished with various English grammar textbooks of different levels of difficulty so that students can easily have access to reading materials to augment those given or recommended by their English lecturers/teachers.

Finally, English language teachers and curriculum planners should periodically be sent on refresher courses by their institutions, education agencies and the government. Such trainings and refresher courses help to reinforce the knowledge base of the teachers for optimum productivity in the classroom.

CONCLUSION

From the findings above, it can be concluded that most students are unable to use the English tenses correctly in their spoken and written English because of so many factors especially as a result of mother tongue (first language) interference on their acquisition and use of the second language (English). The students, therefore, need to go back to their notebooks, textbooks and even their elementary grammar texts in order to rebuild their weak knowledge/foundation for optimal English language proficiency in their studies and workplace after graduation from school.

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