Challenges Associated with Teaching and Learning of English Grammar in Nigerian Secondary Schools

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 Abstract

This paper discussed the challenges which are associated with the teaching and learning of English Grammar in Nigeria secondary schools. Grammar is the spinal cord of any language and the user's mastery of it determines his competence and performance in the language. Furthermore, the factors which make teaching and learning of English Grammar a serious challenge were also discussed. Recommendations to make grammar teaching and learning less burdensome were also made.

 Introduction

Good writing requires a working knowledge of grammar, a refinement of the basic or instinctive knowledge the writer has already had. Good writing is more than the art of obeying grammatical rules. It is the art of arranging words, phrases, sentences and paragraphs in such a way as to engage and sustain the reader's attention.

Under-achievement in English at the secondary and even tertiary levels is a noticeable phenomenon in Nigerian educational system. The most noticeable indication of poor performance is in the WAEC conducted SSCE English Examination. The situation becomes worse every year.

The WAEC Chief Examiners Report each year confirms this. In 1992, the report states that:

> This paper was well within the experience of the candidates and the standard compared favourably with those set in the previous years. The candidate's performance however was generally disappointing.

In the institutions of higher learning-universities, Polytechnics and Colleges of Education, the seriousness of the situation is baffling. Nzinga (1983) lamented the low performance of new entrants at the University of Ilorin and said:

> The slow clear ignorance of most basic elements of logical interference … and most of the students do not have the opportunity to undertake advanced reasoning tasks.

From a number of continuous assessment and examinations conducted by the writer of this paper for the students over the years, a number of errors and deviant forms in language use have been noticed. Such errors among others include:

i. a poor knowledge of tenses and sequences of tenses;
ii. weakness in concord
iii. winding constructions due to illogical thinking
iv. wrong use of prepositions
v. direct translation from mother tongue thought process to English;
vi. inability to apply appropriate reading speed to reading material etc.

The devices which grammar uses to limit meanings are its operating principles. It is not surprising that most students in secondary schools lack the mastery of the grammatical principles which are the higher points of languages

The Concept of Grammar
Rivers (1988) defines grammar as the rules of a language set out in a terminology which is hard to remember, with many exceptions appended to each rule. The writing of a grammar is basically an attempt at systematization and codification of a mass of data which may at first sight appear amorphous but within which recurrent regularities can be discerned. The way in which this systematization is

approached depends on the convictions of the grammarian about the nature of language (River 1988).

William (1981) defines grammar as an inescapable fact of a language system because it is the set of principles which permit orderly speaking and writing. A grunt may be expression, but it has little to do with grammar. The fact is that grammar would exist even if there were no books about grammar because it is essentially the unwritten agreement among speakers of the language about the ways they will express idea most efficiently (William, 1981).

The grammar of a language covers such points of usage as tenses, spellings, punctuation, agreement, parts of speech, lexis and structures.

Challenges in the Teaching and Learning of Grammar

Learners' errors and deviant forms in the use of English are a major challenge in the teaching and learning of English in Nigerian Secondary Schools. However, Kisparsky (1972) Akinbode (2006) have classified errors in second language learning into two. They are global and local. According to him, the former impairs the intelligibility of a message, while the latter does not significantly affect the reception of the intended message.

The major challenges confronting the teaching and learning of grammar in Nigeria secondary schools are highlighted below:
1. Language transfer (Interlingual)
2. Faulty application of rules (Intralingual)
3. Faulty instructional materials and techniques
4. The inconsistency in the orthography of English

Language Transfer

Language transfer gives rise to interlingual errors which are based on the interference theory. The transfer of learner's first language patterns into those of the second language constitutes one of the bases

for interlingual interference. When this transfer has a negative effect on the second language, then the problems result.

First language interference is often exaggerated and made a scape-goat of second language errors. An error analysis carried out by Oniemayin (1985) revealed that about forty-five percent of errors made by Nigerian Secondary School Students are as a result of first language interference. Lado (1985) in his contribution to first language interference says:

> We know from observation of many cases that the grammatical structures of the native language tends to be transferred to the foreign language… these structures that are different will be difficult.

The view of Lado is shared by Rivers (1988) who views the first language phenomenon as one of the major sources of learning difficulty to a second language learner. He further states that the major difficulties for the second language learners are due to be found at those points where the foreign language differs most radically from the native language. First language interference is manifested at the levels of phonology, lexis, syntax and semantics.

Evidences of first language interference are most prominent at the phonological level. This makes it possible to situate the ethnic background of some Nigerian users of English by the way they speak and write English. These variations are due to the following factors.

  i.   The stress pattern
  ii. Absence of some English vowels and consonants in the Nigerian languages.
  iii. The source of exposure to English

Intralingual
Errors in this category reflect general characteristics of rules of learning e.g. over-generalisation or faulty application of rules, thereby

producing incorrect forms of analogy. Learners make inductive generalizations about the target language system based on the data to which they are exposed. As a result of the restriction based on the data, learners who are ignorant of the exceptions to certain rules of grammar generalize and produce incorrect forms by analogy.

The inability of learners to apply the exceptions to rules leads to errors in the formation of plural and the past tense patterns. The general rule of adding the morpheme to form plural words is applied.

For example, it is appropriate to add an "s" to the word "cat" but inappropriate for a word like "lorry". The plural form has to be 'lorries' as a result of a specified exception to the rule. The tendency to add the–ed morpheme to any word in the past tense often leads to some wrong forms. By this overgeneralization, the past tense of 'keep' becomes *'keeped'* while that of 'broadcast' becomes *'broadcasted'* instead of 'kept' and 'broadcast' respectively.

Faulty instructional materials and instructional techniques
Some problems such as the aforementioned arise mainly from faulty instructional materials and the pedagogical shortcomings of the teacher. The language teacher is expected to be dynamic in his instructional techniques. He should be conversant with the modern trends in language teaching. Teachers who fail to develop on the job are bound to be dormant and ineffective. The assumption by learners that the teacher is infallible makes this type of challenge quite dangerous to the teaching and learning process.

These errors basically crop up when wrong concepts are taught the learners. A common feature is a situation whereby unrelated language items are lumped together.

Little or no preparation by teachers could also result in bad teaching. Note of lesson which should guide teaching are seldom prepared or made use of by many secondary school teachers while some feel complacent with sketchy schemes of work.

Teacher's use of the indigenous language to communicate ideas in the second language, though a common practice, does not facilitate the learning of second language and its grammar. A teacher's technique of teaching can be said to be faulty if he fails to make use of instructional materials where they are required.

The inconsistency in the orthography of English
Spelling has been identified as a problem related to the nature of English. This is a problem area to both speakers of English as a Second language and the native speakers of English. This is due to the defect in the English alphabet and sounds, which Pink and Thomas (1989) have observed thus:

> The sounds of the spoken language are represented in writing by means of symbols known as the letter of the alphabet. In a perfect alphabet, every letter would be a phonetic symbol representing one sound and the one only and each sound should have its appropriate symbol.

Judged by this standard, the English alphabet is obviously defective.

Implications for English Language (Grammar) Teaching and Learning
The significance and causes of problems discussed so far have serious implication for teaching and learning English language (grammar in particular). Errors impair the intelligibility of both the spoken and written forms of English, hence the need to eliminate or at least minimize its occurrence. For effective communication therefore, the two practical criteria of intelligibility and acceptability must be met.

The language teacher has a herculean task ahead of him in the attainment of effective communication. He must, for a start, be proficient in the target language; he must possess apt content and pedagogical skills if effective teaching is desired.

Growing out of the first language phenomenon is the assumption that is not common for a second language user to attain equal mastery with native speakers. All the same, learners' errors could be minimized if they are exposed to the target language early enough.

The treatment of phonological errors should be carried out with all seriousness. The aural-oral skills which are often poorly taught due to paucity of resources both material (language laboratory, tapes and other audio aids for listening and production skills) and Human (qualified and professionally competent phoneticians) must be given due consideration.

The misapplication of rules of the target language, which often leads to intra-lingual errors, can be minimized if such rules are positively presented to learners. It is relevant to say that even the rules are explicit; learners' effective mastery of the linguistic generalizations is largely dependent on their practical application of rules in the construction of utterances, rather than their conscious understanding of the rule in question. Such rules should therefore be carefully presented and followed up with constant practice and reinforcement.

Teachers' application of faulty teaching materials and techniques can be remedied by teachers and language curriculum developers. The latter should be charged with the development of meaningful and graded items which are suitable to second language learning. The ability of the teachers to make appropriate selection is of paramount importance.

Conclusion
Problems in the English grammar can be minimized through teachers' and learners' commitment to the task of teaching and learning. The art of spelling can be perfected through constant practice and reading. Learners should be encouraged to cultivate the habit of constant use of the dictionary when in doubt about spelling of any word.

Apart from the consent and pedagogical skills which teachers must acquire they must acknowledge the inestimable role of motivation in second language learning. This task can only be accomplished by competent teachers who are conversant with modern trends in language teaching.

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