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**A Study of the Acquisition of ‘Their’ and ‘There’ by
Selected Nigerian Students**

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Abstract

This study investigated the acquisition of ‘their’ and ‘there’ by selected Nigerian learners of English. The data for the study were drawn from an essay writing assignment written by 40 purposively selected 100 and 200 level students of Michael Otedola College of Primary Education, Epe, Lagos State, Nigeria. The data were analysed using descriptive statistics of simple percentage. The results showed that ‘their’ was more frequently used than ‘there’. It was established that 99 instances of ‘their’ were used by the students. Out of these 63 (63.64%) were correctly used while 36 (36.36%) were instances of wrong usages. Moreover, it was revealed that only 18 instances of ‘there’ were recorded; of which 6 (33.33%) were correctly used and 12 (66.67%) were instances of deviant usages. In spite of the high frequency rate and correct usage of ‘their’ there were deviant usages which can make non-native speakers’ texts appear confusing and even obscure. The study revealed how and why the problems arise and how they can be corrected. The study thus concluded that these and other problems be focused on and solutions to them be found so that English spoken and written by Nigerian learners/users will be more acceptable and intelligible globally.

Introduction

The indigenization and acculturation of English to meet the social and institutional demands of the Nigerian society has elevated it to the status of a second language. As English has attained this official status, it is used in the spheres of administration, commerce, justice, sports and education. Despite this official and public emphasis on English, the standard of teaching and learning the language has not achieved the desired objectives (Afangideh, 2004). Scholars such as (Alo 2005, Akere 1998, Oladunjoye (2005) assert that linguistic competence of learners at all levels of education is nothing to write home about. To confirm this, there have been empirical evidence on the falling standard of education in this country. Current researches still reveal that most students in various institutions of learning in Nigeria cannot effectively communicate in English (Alo 2005, Okon and Ansa 2002, Afangideh 2002, Onukaogu 2002).

Scholars have identified four reasons as being responsible for the inability of students to acquire the linguistic and communicative competencies and English language awareness that they need. First is the absence of a vigorous and robust language policy that should inform the totality of the English language curriculum. The second problem is that there are inadequate materials for the teaching and learning of English. The third factor is the assertion that teachers of English in our schools and colleges do not have the relevant educational qualification and experiences to teach English. This assertion is however debunked by Onukaogu (2002) because our Colleges of Education, Institutes of Education, Departments of English, of Communication and Language Arts, of English Studies in various universities annually produce a good number of graduates who have acquired and have been certified competent to teach English.

Despite this, we should not loose sight of the fact that some graduates cannot defend the certificates that they claim to have obtained from reputable universities and colleges in Nigeria. This is quite disheartening. The fourth factor identified by scholars as being responsible for the falling standard is in respect of the English language curriculum which separates literature from language.

There are several other factors identified by scholars as being associated with the ones identified above. These are the influence of the mother tongue, poor library facilities, irregular nature of English which manifests at different



levels of language description i.e. phonetic, morphological, syntactic and semantic levels.

Thus, the focus of this study is on some aspects of the syntactic structure of English that Nigerian learners of English have problem with and how these problems could be overcome by learners and users of English as a second language. This study therefore, aimed at investigating the problems that arise from the usage of 'there' and 'their' in the written English of selected Nigerian learners of English in Michael Otedola College of Primary Education, Noforija, Lagos State. Methods/approaches that could be used to effectively teach these linguistic items are suggested in this paper.

Significance of the study

This study is significant in the teaching and learning of English because:

- (i) It will help teachers of English to determine how far learners have progressed and consequently, what remains for them to learn.
- (ii) The study will indicate to teachers of English and curriculum developers which parts of the target language students find difficult to produce correctly.
- (iii) It will also help in improving the linguistic and communicative competencies of learners/users of English.

Methodology

Source of Data

The data used in this study were drawn from 40 (100 and 200 levels) students of Michael Otedola College of Primary Education using purposive random sampling procedure. This was to allow for adequate representation and useful responses from the students; the sampled population comprised twenty (20) 100 level students and twenty (20) 200 level students. These students are studying English in combination with other courses such as French, Social studies, Yoruba, Computer and Arabic studies. The elicitation instrument used for the study was a continuous assessment (essay writing) which was on the following topic:

A Cultural Event I Witnessed Recently

The topic was chosen because cultural events are issues that usually generate interest among Nigerians both young and old and virtually everybody gets



involved in them one way or the other. It was expected that students in Schools of Arts/Social Sciences and Languages should be able to write an essay on a topic like this. Hence, each of the students was expected to write an essay of not more than 350 words in 40 minutes on the topic given. The essays written by the students were analysed for the instances of 'their' and 'there' using descriptive statistics of simple percentage. The instances of these linguistic items were identified and the problems associated with their usage were examined and appropriately addressed for effective communication among learners and users of English as a second language.

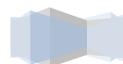
Theoretical Framework Adopted for this Study

The linguistic model adopted for this work is systemic functional linguistics of Halliday's approach. The theory centres around the notion of language use and its function in a social cultural setting. While the theory accounts for the structure of language, it places the function of language as centre in preference to more structural approaches which place the elements of language and their combinations as centre (Chapelle, 1998).

Systemic grammar represents language as having three primary levels: substance, form and situation. Substance is the raw material of language, which could be phonic if it is speech, or graphic, if it is writing. Form, on the other hand, organizes substance into recognizable and meaningful patterns. So, form is divided into lexis and grammar with lexis catering for the kind of pattern, which operates between individual linguistic items and grammar (Ayeomoni, 2005). By so doing, linguistic items like verbs, pronouns, adverbs, nouns etc are also catered for. These items function differently in diverse linguistic environments accounting for the pattern of the language and situational contexts in which they are made to function. Thus, these aspects of systemic linguistics are applied to this investigation.

English Grammatical Items

The grammatical items which occur in sequences in language structures can be divided into classes. In this case, they are divided on the basis of their likeness in potentiality for representing a certain element or elements of structure. Each element of structure which is realized by a grammatical item usually has the function(s) it performs in sentence constructions. Based on this, the two grammatical items being examined in this study i.e. 'there' and 'their' can function differently in different linguistic environments, for instance, there can function as a proform for place adjuncts e.g.



He traveled to Lagos yesterday.

Yes, he went there.

'There' in the second sentence is a proform for the adjunct of place – to Lagos in the first sentence.

'There' can also be used as a pronoun e.g.

There is an issue you need to attend to.

'There' in the sentence above is making a cataphoric reference to an issue in the same sentence.

'Their', on the other hand, basically functions as a pronoun in two different ways:

(i) As a possessive pronoun - adjectival form e.g.

Their mother told them to return the toy, but they said it was theirs.

(ii) The last word in the sentence above i.e. theirs is a possessive pronoun as well, but in pronominal form.

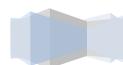
It should be noted that the positional distribution of English grammatical items usually determines their functions in the sentences in which they occur. In the case of 'there' and 'their', this will be further exemplified in the subsequent section of this paper.

Data Analysis and Discussion

The table below presents the analysis of the data drawn from the essays written by the selected students on the acquisition of 'their' and 'there'.

Level of the students	No of occurrences of 'their'	Correct usages	Incorrect usages	No of occurrences of 'there'	Correct usages	Incorrect usages
100L	32	17 (53.13%)	15 (46.87%)	12	4 (33.33%)	8 (66.67%)
200L	67	46 (68.66%)	21 (21.34%)	6	2 (33.33%)	4 (66.67%)
Total No of Occurrences	99	63 (63.64%)	36 (36.36%)	18	6 (33.33%)	12 (66.67%)

From the table it is shown that a total 99 occurrences of "their" were used by the students out of which 63 (63.64%) instances were correctly used while 36



(36.36%) were wrongly used. For 'there' a total of 18 instances were recorded. Of these, 6 (33.33%) were correctly used while 12 (66.67%) were instances of errors.

Analysis across the levels revealed that the selected 100 level students had 32 total occurrences of 'their'. Out of which 17 (53.13%) were used correctly while 15 (46.87%) were instances of errors. For 'there' a total of 12 instances were recorded, 4 (33.33%) were correctly used while 8 (66.67%) were incorrectly used.

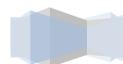
For 200 level, the selected students had a total of 67 instances of 'their' out of these 46 (68.66%) were correctly used while 21 (31.34%) were instances of errors. For 'there' there were 6 instances of which 2 (33.33%) were correctly used while 4 (66.67%) were errors.

It is obvious from the analysis above that 'their' was more frequently used than 'there'. The reason for this could be because 'their' is a content word if we consider it to function as an adjective that is, possessive adjective or a possessive pronoun; adjectival form as distinct from pronominal form while 'there' as used in the texts analysed is a pronoun; that is, a grammatical/structural word. However, there were few instances where 'there' was used as an adverb of place.

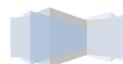
Deviant Usages of 'Their' and 'There'

'Their' and 'There' are two linguistic items that are often confused and therefore often substituted for each other as observed in the Continuous Assessment (essay writing) test of selected 100 and 200 level students of Michael Otedola College of Primary Education, Noforija, Epe. Some instances of errors in usage are given below:

- ❖ *Their* is one representative from each town and all together they will become seven in number.
- ❖ The seven of them met at the King's palace for blessing after which everybody comes *their* to celebrate with them.
- ❖ My perception was also changed that my own culture supersedes other people's culture that *their* is no decency, respect, caring and loving people in village because they are illiterate.



- ❖ I realized that living in the village is very comfortable in the sense that *their* will be no noise pollution, air pollution, armed robbery attacks etc in the village.
- ❖ *Their* was one amazing thing I saw; a flash light which looks like the sun shinning brightly.
- ❖ ... there is a masquerade that must carry it and the name of the masquerade is Omojuabi.
- ❖ Before they pray *their* is a man among the elder that read Deuteronomy 28.
- ❖ The cultural dancers came and displayed *there* culture.
- ❖ After then, the Alagemo will now move back to *there* various destinations with *there* remaining charms and loads on *there* heads with *there* body guards.
- ❖ It was on the day of *there* dancing that I went and watched them from morning till night.
- ❖ They will be performing rituals with *there* clans.
- ❖ In the case of women who went to wait for the men (magicians) on *there* way to Imodi/mosan, the ladies will tie *there* face from seeing them and be on *there* knees.
- ❖ During *there* own performance everyone of them performed well in terms of drumming, dancing and singing.
- ❖ The Olubadan festival is characterized by heavy eating, drinking and singing about private parts to entertain themselves and *there* audience.
- ❖ After some minutes – they stop the drum and they greet there in laws.
- ❖ There mood was filled will joy, happiness and smiles..... Although of wasn't there first child but it shows in the mother's face how happy she was for giving birth to a baby girl.
- ❖ But to cut the story short, those cult guys wounded one of us and went back inside the school to destroy many things *their*.



From the extracts above, it is observed that the confusion is as a result of the problem which is both phonetic and syntactic in nature. Phonetically, the two words are realized by the same diphthong /eð/. To produce the sound, the glide begins from the front part of the tongue towards the centre. The shape of the lips is neutral throughout the production. Some words with /eð/ may have a final 'r' in the spelling as in the case of 'their' but the 'r' is not pronounced unless it is followed by another word beginning with a vowel. The 'r' in such a case is called a linking 'r'. The word 'pair' for instance, is pronounced /peð/ but 'pair of' is pronounced /peðrðv/. The following pairs of words clearly show the contrast between the diphthongs: /ɪð/ and /eð/

here	there
wear	where
fear	fair
cheer	chair
weird	their

Thus, the two words 'their' and 'there' are realized by the same diphthong /eð/ which makes them homophonous but not synonymous in usage. It should be noted that when English words (whether grammatical or lexical) occur in isolation (i.e. in citation forms), they are produced in their strong forms. However, when a phrase or sentence is produced, the stresses assigned to words in the word group become gradable (Akinjobi 2004). Grammatical words such as pronouns, conjunctions, determiners, prepositions and auxiliary verbs which are often one-syllable words and which are usually stressed when they occur in isolation, consequently become unstressed (O'Connor 1984, Onuigbo 1996). Therefore, the strong vowels (e.g. - /eð/) in English grammatical words have a tendency to reduce to /ð/ when they occur in sentences.

e.g. in context - /ðð mðð is ðraund/

in isolation - /ðeð/

'There' on the other hand, usually appears in stressed strong form if used as an adverb e.g.

What are you doing there?



but if used as a pronoun, it appears in unstressed weak form e.g.

There is a man in the room.

Syntactically, it is observed that the students do not have enough knowledge of the words 'their' and 'there' in terms of the word class or classes that they belong to and grammatical functions they perform.

There belongs to two different word classes and can perform more functions than *their*. As an adverb, there can be used to mean a proform of place adjuncts which indicates far orientation as with that e.g.

What did you do there?

and as a pronoun when used as a subject of a sentence or a clause when the real subject follows the verb e.g.

- (i) There is a restaurant around the corner.
- (ii) There are two people waiting outside.

Their on the other hand belongs to the word class of adjective i.e. possessive adjective. Their is used as a determiner in a nominal group. It is the possessive form of the third personal plural pronoun they and their can also be used instead of his or her to refer to a person whose sex is not mentioned or known e.g.

- (i) If anyone asks for their form you can refer them to me.
- (ii) Their parties are always fun.

The pronominal form: theirs as in - The car is theirs.

Syntactically, we can see from the explanations above that the two grammatical items are entirely different. Substituting one for the other is an indication of poor linguistic background of the learners.

Steps towards ameliorating the problems identified

- English language curriculum needs reformation to include grammatical elements discovered to be posing problems to learners in their usage of English.



- Authors of English textbooks in this country should be conversant with the current trends in English teaching and learning so as to restructure textbooks on English in a way to address the problems of learners/ users of English in Nigeria.
- Teachers of English should try as much as possible to engage in functional teaching of the language so as to improve the communicative competence of learners. In other words, teaching and learning process should be interactive in nature.
- Pronunciations, spellings and syntactic functions of different classes of words should be effectively taught by teachers of English so as to avoid confusion in usage.
- Students should also be encouraged to imbibe the culture of extensive reading; through this they will be familiar with different usages and functions of different grammatical items.

Conclusion

This study investigated the problems associated with the usage of their and there in the written English of selected students of Michael Otedola College of Priamry Education. The study has found out that the problems in the usage of these grammatical items arise basically from poor linguistic background of the learners. Apart from the problems identified in this study, there are other aspects of the language that the students are still found wanting as seen in the texts analysed. On the basis of this, it is essential that these problems of language learning and usage be addressed so that English spoken and written by Nigerians will be intelligible and acceptable internationally.



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