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### **AN ANALYSIS OF TENSE ERRORS IN THE WRITTEN ENGLISH OF SELECTED SCIENCE STUDENTS OF GOMBE STATE UNIVERSITY, NIGERIA**

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#### **Abstract**

*This study investigates tense errors in the written English of selected science students of Gombe State University, Nigeria. The work identifies the level of students' competence in the use of the different tense forms in expression as well as the extent to which the problem of wrong use of tense affects the overall ability of the students to effectively communicate. The result of this study shows that there exists poor knowledge of the English tense forms in the written English of these students. The study draws a relevant conclusion and suggestions on how to remedy the problems encountered by students*

*on the use of English tense forms to express different actions and state of affairs.*

## **Introduction**

English plays an instrumental role in the educational system of Nigeria and it is crucial at all levels of learning. It is the language of formal instruction in schools; therefore, an individual intending to reach the peak of his or her educational career in Nigeria needs to have proper knowledge of English language. Yet, a look at the performance in the written English by students in higher institutions in Nigeria has been rated low (Manjuk, 5).

The situation has motivated numerous researches into the quality of students' English (spoken and written) in Nigeria. Studies such as Ofuokwu (1984), Digga (1990), Inekwe (2006), Adedigba (2007), Manjuk (2009) and Awolaja (2012) have found that students of tertiary education encounter difficulty with tense, in addition to other language items. Though some of these studies were not all devoted to the study of tense in particular, they have all demonstrated that tense is one of the major language items that are problematic to students.

Furthermore, advanced discoveries and inventions in science and technology are being made in the universities located in the English speaking developed countries (like United States of America, Britain and so on) where English language is the means of scientific discourse. This indicates that English language is very important to the science students from Nigeria to be able to participate in such discoveries. Against this background therefore, this study examines the tense errors of selected science students of Gombe State University, Nigeria.

## **Objectives**

The study aims at achieving the following objectives:

1. To identify and categorize tense errors in the written English of the subjects.

2. To interpret the difficulties encountered in each error and reconstruct it.
3. To examine the extent to which the problem affects the students' written communication.

### **Statement of Problem**

In Gombe State University for example, lecturers have (during Departmental and Faculty Board meetings) expressed concerns about the use of tense by students. Observations of the researcher and members of staff of the Department of English (through marking of written tests) show that tense errors are conspicuous in the written English of science students of the University. Ideally, undergraduate students are expected to have acquired the verbal forms and how to use English tenses appropriately. Unfortunately, the contrary is the case in most institutions of learning in the country, (Digga, 5, Inekwe, 4). In the faculty of Science of Gombe State University, there are departments like Biology, Geography, Geology, Chemistry, Physics, Computer Science, Mathematics and Statistics. The use of English which extends to students of these departments is to improve their linguistic skills which are meant to provide the tools for acquiring and verbalizing thoughts in science and technology. Kelly (1) clearly identifies the significance of language to the science students:

The young technologist needs to be able to use language functionally...to express himself clearly and lucidly within his own specialized subjects; and in subjects closely tied to it.

Thus, if the quality of English written by the science students is still poor, there will be adverse implications for the scientific and technological development of the country.

## Methodology

Data for this research were collected from the written works of eighty (80) science students of Gombe State University. The University was established in 2004. The subjects of the study were 100 Level and 200 Level students chosen from all the science departments. The rationale for drawing subjects from 100 and 200 levels was on the assumption that if subjects at these levels are able to use tenses appropriately, they would be better users of English language at more advanced levels.

The test instrument was therefore designed in a manner that the responses of the students could manifest their difficulties with tense in English. The test comprised 100 items divided into four frames namely: present tense, past tense, future tense and tense sequence/consistency. In the first three frames, the items tested the forms and meanings (uses) of the specified tenses, while the fourth frame examined the students' ability to use two or more tense features correctly within a sentence or a group of sentences which deals with a single idea or thought. The students' answers to the questions revealed their difficulties with tense.

## Tense

The tense of a verb indicates whether an action has occurred in the past, is occurring in the present or will occur in the future. It also indicates the continuity of an action or an explanation (Corder, 64) and the grammaticalisation of location in time (Comrie, 1). Although the verb can be said to be complicated grammatically, the verb forms constitute the life wire of every construction. Therefore, any misuse or error in verb form leads to a distortion of the message. Palmer (1) confirms this as he argues:

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 that language; and except in the case of those that are related historically, the pattern and structure

of the verb in each language seems to differ considerably from those in every other.

Pryse (125) asserts that tense is a “means of differentiating in time the various thoughts and happenings that humans usually chronicle in words”. According to her, it is the verb of the action word which is affected by tense. By this postulate, tenses are part of English sentence that need to be used accurately as every action could differ in time.

To adequately examine the use of tenses of the subject of the study better, this study draws upon the works of different authors like Eckersley and Eckersley (1974), Leech (1971), Palmer (1974), Close (1975), Woods and McLeod (1990) and Comrie (2010). These grammarians argue that, the grammatical category of tense relates the time of action, event or state of affairs referred to in a sentence to the time of utterance. They share similar views on the use of tense. Their position is that, tense grammaticalizes the relationships that hold between the time of the situation described and the deictic contexts.

### **The Science Student and Tense Errors**

Adedeji (143) explicates the importance of English language to the science and technology students. The student, according to him:

Needs English to help him define concept and describe substances, objects, locations, processes to report facts, draw inference and conclusions, classify and generalize. Moreover, he needs English to enable him cope with listening and understanding his lectures.

According to Corder (278) errors are made by:

omission of some required elements, addition to some unnecessary or incorrect elements; selections of incorrect items, disordering of elements and assigning them to different linguistic levels.

Corder sees them as not physical failure but the sign of imperfect knowledge; that is, the learner has not yet initialized the formation rules of the second language.

Allen (73) in addition, attributes errors to the personality of the speaker. He says:

...errors made depend greatly on personality factor and on what the learner believes to be the attitude of other people who matter; the teacher and the listener.

The role of a teacher is very important here. This is because most students often believe that whatever the teacher writes or says is true, correct and perfect.

According to Sweet (198):

Cross association arises simply from the fact that each idea that comes into our minds instantly suggests the initiative expression for it, whether the words are uttered or not however, strongly we may stamp the foreign language expression on our memories, the native one will always be stronger.

Sweet seems to put the second language learner into consideration as the first language (mother tongue) usually has an advantage over the second language.

### **Discussion and Analysis**

In the table below, the average scores of each group, based on how it performed in the use of the different categories of tense are shown. The average scores are arrived at by adding up the total percentage scores of each frame for each group, divided by the number of items in each frame.

Category	Group A	Group B
Present tense	44.04%	45.68%
Past tense	35.68%	42.04%
Future tense	38.48%	41.52%
Tense Sequence	39.44%	46.12%

In communicating ideas with the present tense, the students do not use the correct verbal form, particularly the s –form where the subject of the sentence is third person singular as in:

- a. I sees him every day.
- b. She smile a lot
- c. This corruptions starts from the top government officers.

The subjects could not also distinguish the grammatical functions of ‘has’ and ‘have’, when used as tense markers. While ‘has’ may be an auxiliary, or a main verb in a sentence that the subject is third person singular, ‘have’ only correlates with subject in first person and second person as well as third person plural. But the student could not reflect this distinction in their work. Example:

- a. She have borne six children
- b. All her children has had measles

Another difficulty of students with the present tense is the use of wrong grammatical structure for the present perfect tense, as in

- a. Corruption has eating up Nigerians.
- b. God have restore my lost glory.

These sentences demonstrate that students are not conversant with the correct grammatical structure of the present tense, which is ‘has\have + past participle.

Besides the present tense, students also have difficulties with the features of the past tense. They seem to demonstrate particular problem with the forms and meanings of certain irregular verbs such as 'lie', 'lay', 'die', 'sting', 'hang' and 'overthrow'. Wrong past tense for these verbs are therefore used (by adding '-ed'). Furthermore, the students used the past progressive without an auxiliary to indicate the past as in:

- a. They drinking too much.
- b. She running late.

Also, where the past perfect tense is required, the present perfect tense is used as in:

- a. The man have caught the fish
- b. She have brought the keys.

In addition to the difficulties with present and past tense, most of the subjects are not quite familiar with the different grammatical constructions for expressing future. The only grammatical construction used for future is 'will\shall + infinitive'. As a result, they are unfamiliar with other ways of expressing future (events), most of the subjects have difficulties with the future perfect and future progressive tenses

Findings could then be summarized as follows:

1. There exists no significant difference in the 100 level and 200 level science students of Gombe State University in the use of tense.
2. That science student's exhibit inability to identify errors in their use of tense.
3. There is correlation in the performance of both the 100 and 200 level students.

The results of the test proved that more than half of the subjects tested could not identify the appropriate tenses. From the overall performances of eighty (80) respondents, it is therefore obvious that most of the students in the Faculty of Science of Gombe State

University (i.e. more than half of the students tested failed the test) have difficulty using English tense forms in expressing ideas correctly. It is assumed that if twenty (20) scripts are examined out of forty scripts (40) with the same characteristic errors, one is likely to arrive at the same conclusion even if 100 scripts were examined.

To test subjects on the use of tense within a sentence or a group of sentences which treat a single idea, tense sequence/consistency was examined. The test on tense sequence was predicated on the assumption that subjects' sentences lack sequence of tense. Below are examples of the subjects' errors with regard to tense sequence.

1. Item 1: He think he has made a mistake
2. Item 2: Mr Clay stay on and will be helping you
3. Item 3: I lie down for a while when I felt ill last week
4. Item 4: Our art teacher wish his carving were selected
5. Item 5: I had not decide where I will stay
6. Item 9: I saw you last week but my friend didn't saw  
you
7. Item 16: The man has not giving us the items
8. Item 11: They knows that she gives freely
9. Item 17: I didn't did it.
10. Item 20: I love Onyi and Chi love him too

From the examples of subjects' errors in tense sequence presented above, the incorrect responses exhibited by the subjects show that the use of the appropriate tense in expression posed great difficulty for most of the students. In some cases, past tense is used for a present tense as in 6, and present tense is used in place of the past tense as in 5. Also, progressive tense is used instead of a perfect tense as in 7, and the singular subject is used with a plural verb as in 2, 4, and 11 above.

### **Recommendations**

In view of the preponderance of the errors in the total number of items examined, it can be concluded that the students were still competent in

the use of the English tenses. In the aggregate, all the forms of the English tenses as outlined in the chosen model constitute difficulty to the students. It was also found that the errors made by the students were similar to those heard in the expressions made by some teachers in the Faculty of Science. Therefore, it is advisable that more effort be put into the teaching and learning of English language grammar and tense in particular.

Also, it is important that science students should remove the notion that they are not expected to study English language because they are science students and not English students. Rather, they should develop greater interest in English language so that the quality of English they will use after graduation will be free of such errors.

The students are encouraged to speak English language quite often in the classroom and outside the classroom to improve their ability to achieve communicative competence. Importantly too, they are encouraged to read novels, educative magazines like Times magazines, Newsweek, etc. By so doing, the alert reader will find it necessary to take note of forms of language discovered through such reading. Finally, employers of graduates should make the knowledge of written and spoken English a compulsory criterion for employment as this will induce an improvement in students' (under graduates) knowledge and performance in English while they are still in the tertiary institutions.

### **Conclusion**

The empirical point in this research is the consideration of tense errors in the written English of science students of Gombe State University. The study examined the factors responsible for the tense errors, as well as an identification of the different areas of errors in English tenses. The variables considered were the 100 level and 200 level science students. This is based on the assumption (of this study) that students are generally weak in the use of the English tense forms.

English language is the medium of instruction for tertiary education in Nigeria. This reason justifies the inclusion of the use of English course (English and Communication Skills) in the curriculum of tertiary education including Gombe State University; yet the overall standard of English among the students remains lamentably poor.

The basic assumptions of the study are that wrong use of tense as well as violation of rules of tense sequence are pervasive and characterize the written English of science students of Gombe State University. This problem of wrong use of tense affects the overall ability of the students to effectively communicate and thereby perform well in public examinations.

Based on the available evidence, it can therefore be concluded that there exist poor knowledge of the English tense forms in the written English of science students of Gombe State University as subjects from the different departments exhibit similar errors. As earlier indicated, the high percentage of failure in the use of English tense forms shows that many students do not use these tenses appropriately in expressions.

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