COMPETENCE OF ESL STUDENTS
IN GRAMMATICAL STRUCTURES

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Abstract:
Knowledge of basic elements of English grammar facilitates communicative competence. Grammatical structure, therefore, constitutes a main component of English language study at all school levels in Nigeria. The purpose of the study is to evaluate the grammatical competence of senior secondary school three students as candidates of senior school certificate examination (SSCE). The study subjects were some one hundred regular senior secondary school certificate examination (SSCE) candidates in Makurdi town in central Nigeria. The test instrument comprises of thirty structural items adopted from a particular past SSCE English language paper 2 of West African Examination Council (WAEC). The data were analyzed with percentage and frequency statistics. The results of the data analysis show that the students are particularly weak in question tags, phrasal verbs, subject-verb concord, modal meanings, subjunctive mood, tense backshift, personal pronoun objective case, correlative conjunction and compound noun plurals. These deficiencies affect their communication in English and invariably their performance in senior school certificate English examination. It is therefore recommended that students at this level should be taught basic elements of grammar to aid their proficiency in communication.

Keywords: competence, grammatical structures, Nigerian ESL students

1. Introduction

Learning the grammatical forms and structures of a language facilitates communicative competence in it. That is, standard language use results, to some extent, from conformity to the rules of grammar. Invariably, weak knowledge of grammar engenders poor language use. Elaborating on the relevance of knowledge of grammatical structures to effective communication, grammar has been described variously as core of linguistic statement (Crystal & Davy, 1969), central part of language (Leech, Deuchar & Hoogenraad, 1986) structure and machinery of language (Asiyanbola, 2005). The byproducts of grammar knowledge are standard language use,

ease of communication and elegance of expression (LePan, 2003). Grammar, therefore, holds a central position in language teaching (Ellis, 2006; Lester, 1990; Debala, 2003). In a second language context, classroom teaching and learning of grammar is indispensable as it is instrumental to effective communication in the target language. English is a second language to Nigeria where English is both a major language of instruction and a compulsory subject at all school levels. The study of English language commences early at the pre-primary in Nigerian school system which emphasizes the learning of core components like pronunciation, vocabulary, structures as perquisite for effective communication through writing and speaking modes. Grammatical structures feature prominently in English Language study materials at all Nigeria school levels (Awopetu, Adeyemi, Salami& Oyeleke, 2017; Grant, Nnamanu & Jowitt, 2011; Banjo & Bisong, 2006). The secondary school English curriculum, in particular, stresses the study of basic grammatical and communicative features of word classes, phrases, clauses and sentences (Azar, 2003; Biber, Conrad & Leech, 2003; Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, & Svartvik, 2007; Huddleston & Pullum, 2002). In terminal, sessional and certificate English examinations, competence in grammatical structures in often assessed. Empirical evidence has shown that Nigerian students, at all school levels, demonstrate grammatical weaknesses in written communication (Folasade, 2013; Okanlanwon, 2013; Wayar & Saleh, 2016; Alufohai, 2016; Nwigwe & Izuagha, 2017) But at the secondary school level, specifically, the students' competence in grammatical in structures is not yet established in some school communities. The purpose of this study is to evaluate the grammatical competence of some senior secondary school three students who are candidates of senior secondary school English certificate examination (SSCE), organized at different seasons by National Examination Council (NECO) and The West African Examination Council (WAEC). The objective is primarily to ascertain grammatical items that are difficult to the students and imperatively require further remedial teaching; thus providing some useful feedback on the English language teaching-learning process.

2. Methodology

The study is a descriptive survey aimed at establishing the linguistic competence level of some regular school SSCE candidates in grammatical structures which are learnt at this level. The study subjects are some randomly sampled one hundred senior secondary school three students in Makurdi, the capital town of Benue state in central Nigeria, which is populated by various ethnic nationals. The research instrument comprises thirty grammatical test items which are adopted from a particular SSCE English Paper 2 of WAEC. The test instrument was administered to the students who were at the verge of taking the WAEC or NECO senior school certificate examination. Frequency and percentage statistics as well as extracts from the students' answer scripts are employed to analyze the data purposively to determine their linguistic competence in grammatical item. An item in which the entire subjects score less than 50% is discriminated as a difficult one.

3. Results

The aggregate performance rating of the students in each item is presented below:

Table 1: Performance of Some Senior School Students in Grammatical Structures

S/N	Grammatical Test Item	The Students' Performance		
		X	%	Rating
1	It's been smooth so far, …….? (a) hadn't it (b) wasn't it (c) isn't it (d) hasn't it	31	11	Poor
2	The test seemed ……. simple that we would all pass (a) too (b) very (c) so (d) much	108	56	Weak
3	Good citizens are expected to abide ……. the stipulated laws. (a) with (b) in (c) to (d) by	125	64	Good
4	In the olden days, people gave cowries …… food (a) on exchange for (b) in exchange of (c) in exchange for (d) on exchange with	101	52	Weak
5	The man tried to cash in …… the boy's ignorance. (a) by (b) at (c) on (d) with	13	7	Poor
6	Adamu studied very hard …….. passing the examination. (a) with a view to (b) with the view of (c) with a view of (d) with the view to	8	4	Poor
7	No sooner had the judge read the verdict …… pandemonium broke out. (a) than (b) when (c) and (d) then	49	25	Poor
8	I could not distinguish the original ….. the fake. (a) from (b) to (c) by (d) with	48	76	Good
9	When I came home, mother asked me if I ….. (a) ate (b) was eating (c) have eating (d) had eaten	89	46	Poor
10	Uncle Richard invited Naza and …… to his house (a) me (b) I (c) myself (d) she	31	16	Poor
11	My sister prides herself …… her cooking. (a) on (b) for (c) over (d) in	19	10	Poor
12	I suppose it's high time we …… attention to our studies (a) pay (b) are paying (c) paid (d) should pay	23	12	Poor
13	We were expecting them in the evening but they arrived …… dawn (a) on (b) at (c) in (d) for	156	80	Good
14	Children often try to live up …… their parents' expectations. (a) in (b) by (c) to (d) on	79	41	Poor
15	He ….. be fat, but he is still smart. (a) may (b) could (c) might	70	36	Poor
16	The students had no choice …… to do as they had been commanded. (a) even (b) but (c) rather (d) only	101	52	Weak
17	The dog was run ……. by a careless driver. (a) under (b) upon (c) across (d) over	98	51	Weak
18	When will the strike be …..? (a) called off (b) called back (c) called out (d) call over	150	77	Good
19	I received an award ……. my outstanding performance in the debate. (a) for (b) through (c) in (d) over	126	65	Good
20	The earlier we leave …… for us. (a) the best (b) the much (c) the better (d) it is better	142	73	Good
21	I just couldn't …… what he was saying. (a) make do (b) make out (c) make up (d) make by	80	31	Poor
22	The men were charged ……. murder. (a) of (b) for (c) with (d) on	16	8	Poor
23	It is I who …… to blame for the lapses. (a) was (b) am (c) is (d) are	21	11	Poor

24	We had to look …… the word in the dictionary. (a) with (b) on (c) at (d) up	43	22	Poor
25	Each of the winners ……. to receive five thousand dollars. (a) are (b) is (c) have (d) were	28	14	Poor
26	Everyone was happy when the two friends made …. after their disagreement. (a) off (b) do (c) away (d) up	135	70	Good
27	It is rude to cut ……. when people are talking. (a) through (b) off (c) in (d) from	97	50	Weak
28	I ……. a song when I got my letter of promotion. (a) broke into (b) broke out (c) broke for (d) broke in	146	75	Good
29	Our tour of tower came to an end ….. soon. (a) much (b) rather (c) too (d) more	121	62	Good
30	The ….. of the various dailies attended the conference. (a) Editors-in-Chiefs (b) Editors-in-Chief (c) Editors-in-Chief (d) Editor's-in-Chief	68	35	Poor

The table reveals that the students perform excellently well in 6 items. In 3 other items, they are good. But there is weak performance in 5 items and outright failure in 16 other items. Deductively, the students are good in 14 items but poor in 16. So, incontrovertibly, they are poor in grammatical structures and the problematic items here are question tags, phrasal verbs, correlative conjunction, verb backshift, personal pronoun objective case, subjunctive mood, modal auxiliaries, subject-verb concord and compound plural.

4. Discussion

Focusing wholly on the difficult items (the failed ones), the discussion explicates the causes of the grammatical problems and proffers corrective guides.

4.1 Question tags
A question tag is a type of *yes-no* question; it is a short question which is appended to a statement, called a host. In its structure, a tag consists of an operator, which depends on the verb phrase in the statement, and a pronoun that repeats or co-refers to the subject in the statement. The structural order is, operator -pronoun: *the train has left the station, hasn't it?* Question tags are useful in making request, showing reactions and making imperatives more polite (Quirk, at el, 2007; Leech & Svartvik, 2002; Sinclair, 1993). Test item 1 examines the students on question tag (Close, 1985: 35-39). A tag question can be one in which an affirmative statement is followed by negative tag (as in: *you have taken your breakfast, haven't you?) o*r vice versa (as in: *you haven't taken your breakfast, have you?*). Also, an affirmative statement can be followed by an affirmative tag (for example: *you have fought again, have you?*). Irrespective of the meaning of the tag, its verb must echo the operator (the verb word) in the statement. A *have or haven't* in the statement echoes *haven't or have* in the tag. Other patterns are: *was… wasn't; has… hasn't; could… couldn't; would… won't; etc.* Thus the students failed test item 1 because they chose options that the verb words do not refer to the operators in the statements, as demonstrated below:

a) It's been smooth so far, isn't it?*
b) It's been smooth so far, hadn't it?*

    c) It's been smooth so far, wasn't?*

The correct option is: *It's been smooth so far, hasn't it?* It can be reasoned that the failure is induced by the incomprehension of the contractive form: *it's* (*it has*) which might have been misconstrued as *it is*. This is a clear evidence of weak grammar base because the standard usage in English grammar is: *it is being* not *it is been*.

4.2 Phrasal verbs

Phrasal verbs are verb-adverb or verb-preposition combinations which extend the meaning of the verb or create a new meaning in communication. Phrasal verbs operate in four main structures; in the first, the verb combines with a particle without an object, e.g: *He <u>turned off</u> the radio*; in the second, the verb goes with a particle and an object, e.g: *He <u>looked after</u> his sick father;* in the third structure, the verb takes an object and a particle, e.g.: *The boss likes to <u>order people around;</u>* and in the fourth structure, the verb is followed by a particle and a preposition with an object, e.g. : *The boy has to learn to <u>stick up for</u> himself* (Sinclair, 1993; Dehe, 2002) Item 5 is a test of correct preposition that collocates with the phrasal verb *cash in*. Of the prepositions given (*by, at, on, with*), the students preferred *by, at, with,* to *on,* which is the correct prepositional collocate in the context: *cash in on* (Cowie and Mackin, 1993; Errey, 2007). Item 6 test consists of two pairs of contrasting phrasal verbs: *with a view to* or *with the view to* and *with a view of* or *with the view of*. But the correct phrase in the context is *with the view of.* The students, also, failed item 11, a test of phrasal verb, for using incorrect preposition with *pride,* as illustrated below:

    a) My system prides herself *in* her cooking *
    b) My system prides herself *over* her cooking *
    c) My system prides herself *for* her cooking *

The correct phrasal verb required in the context in *pride on.* Item 24 examines the phrasal verb, *look up.* The students wrongly chose *look with, look on* or *look at*. *Look up the word in the dictionary* is, for example, a common imperative sentence that students at the SSCE level would have severally heard their English Language teachers say; yet they failed the test, affirming their weak knowledge of phrasal verbs. Item 14 is another test on phrasal verb. The students are to provide the correct preposition (from a list of four prepositional items: *in, by, to, on*) that collocates with *charge* in the context. The correct phrase verb required for item 22 is *charged with*, even though the other phrasal verbs (*charge for, charge of* and *charge on*) which are unsuitable in the sentential environment, appealed more to the students. Again, item 21 is another phrasal verb test. Of the four phrasal verb options, (*make do, make out, make up, make by*), provided for item 21, the second option applies directly to the context but they chose the others, including *make by* which is meaningless.

4.3 Correlative conjunction

A conjunction indicates the relationship between ideas expressed in a clause and the other ideas in the clause. There are coordinate, correlative and subordinate conjunctions (Hashemi & Thomson, 2003). Item 7 is a test of correlative conjunction in which the

second correlative endorses the meaning of the first (Quirk, et al 2007). In particular the test item contains the comparative correlative: *no soon … than*. The second element (of the comparative correlative) is always formally, '*than*' not *when, and* nor *then* which the study subject chose.

4.4 Verb backshift

To report what someone else has said, quotation marks (direct speech), or a *that*-clause (indirect speech) is used (Leech & Svartvik, 2002). Changing a direct speech to an indirect one involves making some changes in the direct speech if the time of the original utterance has changed. Changes that slice verb are termed *verb backshift* (Leech, 1989). Item 9 examines verb backshift phenomenon in reported speech where the present perfect aspectual construction changes to the past perfective aspect. The mother's question probably was this: *Have you eaten?* This is a direct speech which, in reported language, becomes *when I came home; my mother asked if I had eaten.*

4.5 Personal pronoun objective case

Pronouns are words used instead of nouns to avoid repetitions in speech. There are personal and reflexive pronouns. Personal pronouns characteristically exhibit number, person, gender and case. The case features are its subjective, objective, genitive or possessive forms (Carter & McCarthy, 2006; Greenbaum & Nelson, 2002). The test of objective case of the personal pronoun *I* is the thrust of item 10, one of the failed items. The personal pronoun *I* has as its subjective case as *I*; the objective case is *me*; the reflexive is *myself*; while *my* functions as determiner, *mine* operates in nominal function (Quirk & Greenbaum, 1973; Huddleston & Pullum, 2007). Consequently, the correct sentence is: *Uncle Richard invited Naza and <u>me</u> to his house.* But the study subjects wrongly preferred *I, myself,* and *she* to *me* in the context of the sentence.

4.6 Verb subjunctive mood

The subjunctive belongs to the verbal category called mood, with the subclasses of indicative, imperative and subjunctive moods (Quirk and Greenbaum, 1973). The subjunctive mood has two forms, the present and past subjunctive. The present subjunctive has two main types, namely, mandative subjunctive (e.g: *It is necessary that every student learn the school rules and regulations*); formulaic subjunctive (e.g: *Come what may, I will go ahead with the marriage*); the subjunctive *were* (e.g: *It is high time we went home).* The mandative and the formulaic are realized by verb base form while the subjunctive-*were*, by the simple past verb form (Quirk, et al, 2007). Item 12 is a test on the subjunctive mood. So the correct subjunctive mood for the verb *pay* in the context of item 12 is, *paid* and not none of the other verb phrases (*pay, are paying, should pay*) preferred by the students.

4.7 Modal auxiliaries

Modals express attitude towards a likely state or action; and, impliedly, a range of semantic notions permission, possibility necessity, obligation, volition, intention and

prediction. Core, major or central modal verbs are *can, could, may, might, must, shall, should, will, would* while the semi-modals, also called periphrastic modals or quasi-modals, include *be able to, be about to, going to, used to, is supposed to, be allowed to, had better, have got to, have to, need to, ought to, be due, to be likely to, be that, be obliged,* etc. (Foley & Hall, 2003). In item 15, the sentence requires one of these modal auxiliaries: *may, could, can or might,* to make up its meaning. The modals can all imply probability in different contexts but since the meaning suggested here is that, *he is fat, yet he is smart; may* is most applicable in the context (Woods and Macleod, 1990: 18-120).

4.8 Subject-verb and distributive number concord

Concord refers to the relationship between two grammatical units in which one of them exhibits a particular feature that agrees with a similar feature in the other (Quirk at, 2007; Hewings, 2013). Subject-verb concord and concord of person are major types; other types of concord are subject-complement, object-complement, and distributive number concord. Item 23 is test on subject-verb concord (Azar, 1999); the subject is the nominative person pronoun *I* but followed by an interpolative relative pronoun, *who,* which, however, does not determine the choice of corresponding verb. It is the subject that determines that; so the correct verb word in the context is *am* but the students chose *was, is* or *are*. Item 25 tests distributive concord (Quirk et al, 2007). The subject noun phrase of the sentence in item 24 (*Each of the winners*) makes reference to singular number; so it takes a singular verb. The correct verb word from the given options is: *is,* and not *are, have,* nor *were* which the students went for.

4.9 Compound noun plural

The English has two-term contrastive number system namely, singular that devotes *one* and plural that means *more than one* (Quirk, et al, 2007; Wickens, 1992; Thomson & Martinet, 1986). Item 30 is a test on the plural of the compound noun, *editor-in-chief,* which is, *editors-in-chief,* but the students failed it.

The study has proved that the students lack knowledge of basic English grammatical items which are in dispensable to effective communication.

5. Conclusion, Implication and Recommendation

The study has shown that some Nigerian learners of English as a second language particularly at the point of taking the senior school certificates English examination lack knowledge of grammatical items which are rudimental to standard usage. The grammatical elements include verb pattern in tag question, meaning of phrasal verbs, correlative subordination, tense shift in reported speech, objective case of personal pronoun, subjunctive mood, modal meanings, subject-verb concord and plurals of compound nouns among others. The deficient use of the identified linguistic elements causes poor written English which, itself, partly accounts for the recorded low performance in NECO and WAEC senior school certificate English language examination annually. The teaching of English at the secondary school level should

impact adequate knowledge of basic grammatical items to enable the students write and speak Standard English. It at this school level that fundamental linguistic competence can be learnt.

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