

SYNTACTIC DEPLOYMENTS OF VERB FORMS IN WRITTEN ENGLISH OF FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS OF UNIVERSITY OF AGRICULTURE, MAKURDI

Adaje Ambrose Ochigbo

University of Agriculture, Makurdi.

&

Malata Andrew Zakayo

Department of English

Gombe State University, Gombe

Abstract

The study assesses verb conjugations, usage of verb forms in sentence constructions and syntactic deployments of verb forms in written English of first-year students of University of Agriculture, Makurdi. Structural grammar description of the English verb provides the theoretical framework employed to discriminate wrong verb forms in the students' works and to develop a competence test, tagged *Use of Verb Forms*, administered to eighty-four randomized subjects. The results of data analysis, using frequency and percentage, indicate incompetence in verb conjugation, use of verb forms in sentence construction and syntactic deployments of verb forms in sentence structures. On inflections of selected verbs (*singe, dye, traffic, bus, bar, call, hoe; lend, shear, bear, mishear, slit, slide, stink*), the students could only conjugate one (*call*). Again, the students are unable to construct sentences with some verb forms (*shake, shakes, talked(v-ed₂)*). On syntactic deployments of verb forms in standard sentences, *the base form* is used unacceptably in the present tense, the imperative and the present subjunctive structures; *the -s form* is incorrectly employed in the 3rd person singular present tense context; *the -ing participle* is unsuitably deployed in the progressive aspect and the -ing participial clause structures; *the past form* is properly deployed in its past tense structure; *the -ed participle* is incorrectly deployed in the perfect aspect and the passive structures. Conclusively, the students have difficulty conjugating verbs and using verb forms in English. Undergraduate students should be given required remedial instruction on verb conjugation and functional deployments of verb forms in English for effective communication.

Keywords: Verb forms, usage problems, undergradaute students

Introduction

Verbs are central to effective communication in English. They denote actions, activities, processes, states and events. Verbs, also, inflect to indicate person, tense, aspect and voice, thereby giving different kinds of information. Grammatically complete sentences must have at least a verb word or phrase (Biber, Conrad & Leech, 2003; Carter, McCarthy, 2006; Webster, 2011). The English verb is therefore a core aspect of school English language grammar teaching in non-native contexts. The Nigerian English language teaching and learning course design for primary, secondary and tertiary schools exposes learners to verb inflections and functions of verb forms to enable them possess basic linguistic

knowledge for necessary communicative competence (Ayodele, Isugo-Abanile, & Olafimihan, Adegbile,2021; Ayodele, Adegbile, Ofoego, & Nnamani,2020; Banjo & Bisong,2006). That notwithstanding, the spoken and written English of secondary school and higher education students still evinces incompetence in various aspects of verb usage; for example, research has established weaknesses of undergraduates in auxiliaries (Alagbe,2007; Ugoji,2006), aspects (Mansuur,2015), modals (Alobo,2015), and tenses (Bature, 2020;Wayar & Saleh,2016). Bamigbola (2015) points out that a common problem among Nigerian students, both secondary and tertiary school levels, is the inability to demonstrate adequate mastery of the linguistic competence

skills that are relevant to the use of English. Particularly, the identified verb usage deficiencies could be due to poor foundational knowledge of the morphology of full verbs, the communicative values of verb forms and the syntactic deployment contexts of verb forms in English sentences. The objectives of the study, therefore, are to assess some undergraduate students' conjugation of regular and irregular lexical verbs, to assess the students' use of verb forms in sentence construction and to find out the extent to which the students can deploy verbs forms in the appropriate syntactic slots of given standard English sentences.

Verb forms in Modern English Usage

The structural grammar description of modern English language provides useful teaching, learning and usage guides for learners of English as a second language (Greenbaum,1996; Huddleston & Pullum,2006; Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech & Svartvik, 2007; Aarts, 2011) ; so its exposition on verb forms, their functions and syntactic deployments in English is adopted here. Full verbs have basic five form-types, namely, the *base* form, the *-s* form, the *-ing* participle, the past form and the *-ed* participle. Distinct verb forms could be three (as in *hurt ~hurts ~hurting*), four (as in *come ~comes ~coming ~come*) and even eight for the highly irregular *be* (e. g: *be is, am, are ,being, was, were, been*). Morphologically, full verbs have regular and irregular forms. Most English verbs are regular; they are so called because the other forms are predictable from their base; this powerful generalization rule applies to even foreign words in English: *Xerox ~ Xeroxes ~ Xeroxing ~ Xeroxed*(Quirk, et al; Leech& Svartvik,2002;Ansell,2000;Thomson& Martinent,1986; Swan,2006).

The -S Form and the -ING Participle.

The *-s form* of both regular and irregular verbs is formed with the addition of *-s* suffix as in *talk, ~talks; speak ~ speaks*. The *-ing* participle for both regular and irregular verbs is predictable from the base: *talk ~talking; speak ~ speaking*. The *past* form and the *-ed* participle forms are identical for all regular verbs, as in: *talk ~talked ~talked*. It is therefore convenient to refer to them both as the *-ed form*, distinguishing between *v-ed₁* for the past tense, and *v-ed₂* for the *-ed* participle where necessary. Regular verb inflections exhibit some

spelling variations such as doubling of the final consonant of the base, as displayed in: *bar ~ barring, ~ barred; traffic ~ trafficking~ trafficked*; deletion or addition of a final *-e*, as exemplified in: *dye~ dyes ~ dyed ~dyeing ~ dyed; singe ~singes ~ singeing ~ singed*; and substitution of *-i-* for a *-y* or vice versa as shown in: *carry ~ carrying ~ carries ~carried*.

Irregular full verbs are similar to regular verbs in their *-s* form and *-ing* participle forms but differ from regular verbs in the simple past and the *-ed* participle forms. Both the past tense and *-ed* participle are irregular and have to be learnt as distinct lexical items (Quirk, et al, 2007; Azar, 2002; Huddleston& Pullum,2000). Since the *-s* form and the *-ing* participle are predictable for both regular and irregular verbs; the base form, the past form and the *-ed* participle constitute the principal parts of the verb (Greenbaum,1999; Lester, Franklin &Yokota, 2010)

Syntactic Deployments of Verb Forms in Modern English Usage

Syntax, as a distinct core aspect of English language study, investigates sentence structure(Burtos-Roberts,2011; Aarts, 201Z) The verb, also termed verb phrase and referred to as *predicator* in syntactic analysis, is a functional element in sentence structure; other elements are *subject (S), object (O), complement (C) and adjunct (A)*. These constituents of the sentence structure are demonstrated in:

1. The woman(S) considers (V) the car (O) rather expensive(C) actually (A).

The predicator can consist of a single verb word or more. The verb must manifest the form appropriate to the grammatical conditioning in the sentence in order to achieve a communicative goal. In (1) above, the verb word, *considers*, an *-s form* of the *base form*, *consider*, is a grammatically conditioned verb form which is correct in the context; others forms such as *consider, considering, considered*, as *v-d₁*, and *considered*, as *v-ed₂*, are incorrect in the constituent structure of the verb phrase. A verb form (whether the *-s* form, the *-ing* participle, the past form or the *-ed* participle) therefore, functions acceptably in English only when it is deployed in the appropriate syntactic structure

of the sentence (Aarts,2011; Huddleston & Pullum,2000; Biber, Conrad & Leech; Carty & McCarthy,2006;). Invariably then, students' problem with verb usage could likely stem from using a verb form in a wrong context and such usage is unlikely to achieve any communicative goal. Possible standard syntactic deployment contexts of the verb forms are briefly discussed and exemplified below (Quirk, et al, 2007; Greenbaum & Nelson, 2002; Huddleston & Pullum, 2007)

The base *form* occurs as a finite in the imperative, the present subjunctive and the present tense (in all grammatical persons and numbers except 3rd person singular, where the -s form dominates), as respectively demonstrated by these examples:

- 2a. *Open* the door
- 2b. *Put* the flowers on the table
- 3a. The parents demand that she *call* and *see* them
- 3b. Even if that *be* the official view, it cannot be accepted.
- 4a. I *advise* her to enlist in the army
- 4b. *We thank* you for the recent visit
- 4c. They *want* fresh bread

The *base form* also occurs as a nonfinite in bare infinitive and to-infinitive, as exemplified below:

5. They may *sell* another car this year
6. They want *to sell* the old car.

The *-s form* occurs as a finite in the 3rd person singular present tense, as in this example:

6. He/She/Joseph/Josephine *reads* The Sun newspaper every morning.

The *-ing participle* occurs as a nonfinite in: (i)the progressive aspect following BE and (ii)the *-ing* participial clauses, shown respectively as in 7 and 8 below:

- 7a. Ann is *singing* well
- b. Ann was *singing* well
- 8a. *Leaving the room*, he tripped over the mat
- b. Her Aunt, *having left the room*, I asked Ann for some personal help.

The *past form* occurs as a finite form in the past tense, as in:

9. When *did* the guest arrive?

10. *He was* once a heavy smoker

The *-ed participle* occurs as a nonfinite in (i) the perfective aspect following HAVE, (ii)the passive voice following BE and (iii) *-ed* participial clauses, as exemplified in 11, 12, and 13 respectively below:

11. They want to hide what they had *done*
12. Only a third of the dog food was *eaten*
13. *Covered* with shame, they apologized abjectly.

The above short grammatical description unearths some of the possible standard syntactic deployment contexts of verb forms in English; in order words, verb forms are not arbitrarily used; they have semantic imports with corresponding syntactic deployment contexts in which they function in English (Leech, 1989). The short review also provides a theoretical framework for assessing the students' competence in conjugation of verbs, employment of verb forms in sentence construction and use of verb forms in suitable syntactic structure of the verb phrase in a sentence.

Methodology

The study is a survey study that entails assessment of verb form usage competence of some advanced learners of English as a second language. The data-collection instrument, called *Use of Verb Forms*, divides into two sections; the first part is on conjugation of verbs and use of verb forms in sentence construction while the second focuses on deployments of verb forms in different syntactic contexts of standard sentences. The study subjects were eighty-four first-year students of University of Agriculture, Makurdi. The students were randomly selected from a class of English and communication skills course tagged *English in Communication*. The test instrument was administered as an end-of-semester continuous assessment test. Frequency count and percentage score were employed for data analysis and the decision-criterion score is 50% as the test is an assessment of competence in a common elementary grammar item that is taught and learned at lower academic levels (primary and secondary schools). A score that is lower than 50% score is discriminated as a weak performance, an evidence of poor competence level. The asterisk

mark (*) is used to isolate deviant usage in the discussion of findings.

3. Results of Data Analysis

The results of data analysis focus on the

objectives of the study, that is, evaluation of verb conjugation, usage and syntax of verb forms in the students' English which are presented in thematic tables below.

Table 1A: The Students' Conjugations of Regular Verbs

S/N	Regular Verb Conjugation Tasks	Students' Performance			
		Simple past		Past participle	
		X	%	X	%
1a.	He (sing)...his hair as he tried to light his cigarette	25	29	--	--
1b.	She had (sing)... Her hair before she turned on the cooking gas	--	--	46	54
2a.	She (dye)... her hair blonde	31	36	--	--
2b.	That man's hair was (dye)	--	--	61	72
3a.	She had (traffic)..... three girls before she was apprehended	61	72	--	--
3b.	Jane (traffic)..... the slave girl last year	--	--	34	40
4a.	We (bus)..... from the airport to our hotel	27	32	--	--
4b.	He has (bus)..... to school	--	--	26	31
5a.	He (bar)...all the doors and windows	13	15	--	--
5b.	We found our way (bar)..... by racks	--	--	13	15
6a.	She (call).....you earlier	57	67	--	--
6b.	I was (call)..... to the office today	--	--	68	80
7a.	He has (hoe)..... the flower beds	13	15	--	--
7b.	He (hoe)..... the garden this morning	--	--	17	20

Table 1A depicts wrong conjugation of regular lexical verbs; the students are unable to generate the simple past forms of *singe*, *dye*, *bus*, *bar* and *hoe*. Also, the past participles for *traffic*, *bus*, *bar* and *hoe* are unknown to them.

Table 1B: The Students' Conjugations of Irregular Verbs

S/N	Irregular Verb Conjugation Tasks	Students' Performance			
		Simple Past		Past Participle	
		X	%	X	%
1a.	The bank (lend)... me the sum	9	10	--	--
1b.	The book was (lend)..... to me by a friend	--	--	10	11
2a.	He (shear) the rough edges off	25	29	--	--
2b.	The sheep were (shear)..... last week	--	--	6	7
3a.	You (mishear)...the announcement from our class representative	31	36	--	--
3b.	You may have (mishear)..... her	--	--	30	35

4a.	She (bear) a son in 1982	24	28	--	--
4b.	She has (bear) three children	--	--	9	10
5a.	The victim's throat was (slit)	18	21	--	--
5b.	She (slit)..... the tape and opened the package	--	--	20	23
6a.	The car (slide) into the ditch	9	10	--	--
6b.	He logs were (slide) down the hill	--	--	2	2
7a.	The whole economic situation (stink) last year	13	15	--	--
7b.	Our team really (stink) up the joint tonight	--	--	10	11

Table 1b proves clearly the students' difficulty with irregular verb conjugations; they cannot generate the past forms and the past participles of *lend*, *shear*, *mishear*, *bear*, *slit*, *slide* and *stink*.

Table 2A: Irregular Verb Forms in the Students' Sentence Constructions

S/N	Verb Forms	Students' Usage Performance		
		Verb words	X	%
1.	THE BASE FORM	Shake	18	21
2.	-S form	Shakes	26	30
3.	-ING participle	Shaking	54	64
4.	Past tense	Shook	55	65
5.	Past participle	Shaken	30	35

In Table 2a, the students have problems with constructing sentences with the base form (*shake*), -s form (*shakes*) and past participle (*shaken*) of the verb, *shake*.

Table 2B: Regular Verb Forms in the Students' Sentence Constructions

S/N	Verb Forms	Students' Usage Performance		
		Verb words	X	%
1.	Present form	Talk	45	53
2.	-s form	Talks	6	71
3.	-ing form	Talking	61	72
4.	Past tense	Talked	53	63
5.	Past participle	Talked	13	15

Here, the students demonstrate competence in sentence construction with the various verb forms of *talk* except the past participle (*talked*).

Table 3a: The Students' Competence in Syntactic Deployments of the Base Form and -S Form

S/N	Verb forms	Syntactic contexts	Usage tasks	Students' competence		
				X	%	Mean
1.	The BASE	The present tense	I (Go)home on	6	7	7

FORM		Sundays				
	The imperative	(Work).....harder!	37	44	44	
	The present subjunctive	They demanded that she (call).....and (see)..... them	59	70	35	
	The bare infinitive	She may (visit)..... her parents	49	58	58	
	The to-infinitive	They want her to (visit).....	55	65	65	
2.	The –S FORM	3 rd person singular present tense	Uncertainty (breed) indecision and delay	12	26	26

The students have difficulty with the use of the *base form* in the present tense, the imperative and the present subjunctive structures. Also, majority of the students are unlearned in deploying of the *-s form* in its sole syntactic context of the 3rd person singular present tense.

Table 3b: The Students’ Competence in Syntactic Deployments of the –ing Participle and Past Form

S/N	Verb forms	Syntactic contexts	Usage tasks	Students’ competence		
				X	%	Mean
1.	-ING PARTICIPLE	The progressive aspect	1. Turn the music down, I (be)..... (read).....	14	57	18.75
			2. We (be).... (go)...to Paris this February	12	14	
			3. I (have)... (be)... (work)... all day	2	2	
			4. I (be)... (sit)... at my desk by 9 o’clock	2	2	
			5. (Leave)... the room, he tripped over the mat	37	47	
2.	THE PAST FORM	Past tense	6. She (call)... you earlier	57	67	67

The table above depicts the students’ ineptitude in deploying the *-ing* participle verb form in its syntactic contexts of the progressive aspect and the *-ing* participle clause. However, the students demonstrate some level of mastery in the use of the past form in its sole syntactic context of the past tense

Table 3c: The Students' Competence in Syntactic Deployments of the -ed Participle

S/N	Verb forms	Syntactic contexts	Usage tasks	Students' competence		
				X	%	Mean
1.	-ED PARTICIPLE	The perfect aspect	1. He felt much happier now that he (have)...(find)...a new job	24	28	33
			2. Tell me when you (have)... (finish)...	34	40	
			3. The gate (be)... (lock)..... at 6 o'clock every night	3	3	
			4. Dozens of trees (be)... (destroy)...	6	7	
		The passive voice	5. Jobs are still (be)... lost	6	7	
			6. He couldn't (have)... (be)... (tell)... by Jimmy	38	45	
			7. (cover)... with confusion, they apologized abjectly	56	66	
			8. The discussion (complete)..., the chairman adjourned the meeting for half an hour	50	59	
	-ed participial clause					

Except for the syntactic context of the -ed participial clause, the other two syntactic contexts, namely, the perfect aspect and the passive voice, are unfamiliar to the students; they are incapable of using -ed participle verb form in the contexts.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of the study are organized and discussed according to the objectives.

Verb Conjugations in the Students' Written English

A main finding of the study is that the students are not practiced in the morphology of regular and irregular lexical verbs. The regular verb conjugation tasks demand the simple past and the past participle forms of *single*, *dye*, *bus*, *bar*, *call*, *traffic* and *hoe* which are *singed~singed*, *dyed~dyed*, *bussed~bussed*, *barred~barred*, *called~called*, *trafficked~trafficked* and *hoed~hoed* respectively. The students are only able to generate the two past forms of *call* correctly but poor in the others (*single*, *dye*, *bus*, *bar*, *traffic* and *hoe*), for which the students' past form and past participle productions are these strange and inapplicable words: **singes*, **sange*, **sang*, **singe*, **sing*, **sunge*, **singering*, **sing*, **swang*, **swange*, **sung*, **sined*, **singled*; **dye's*, **dye*, **dyeid*, **ties*, **dyeed*, **die*, **dies*, **dyeing*, **bus*, **bussing*, **buses*, **busing*; **bare*, **bars*, **burring*, **bared*, **bard*; **traffic*, **traffick*, **trafficks*, **trafficks*, **trafficking*; **hoe*, **hoeing*, **hoes*, **hoered*, **hoeing*. These aberrations are proofs of the students' incompetence in regular verb conjugation.

The conjugation of irregular verbs also is complex to the students; for the simple past and past

participle forms of *lend* (lent~lent) *shear* (sheared~shorn), *mishear* (misheard~misheard), *bear*(bore~born), *slit* (slit~slit), *slide*(slid ~slid) and *stink*(stank~stunk); the students' non-standard productions are *lended, *lends, *lented, *lending, *lends,; *sheards, *shearing, *sheard, *shear, *shears,; *misheard, *mishears, *misheld, *mishearing, *mishear; *heard, *hear, *hear, *bare, *beard, *bone; *slits, *slut, *slot, *slitted, *slitting, *sluted, *slited, *sliten; *slied, *slidden, *sliden; *stink, *stinks, *stunk, *stank, *stuck, *stunk, *stinkle, *stinkeled, *stanking, *stinkling. These odd forms only display the students' weakness in irregular verb conjugations.

Use of Verb Forms in the Students' Sentence Constructions

Another major finding of the study is that the students are not proficient in sentence construction with some of the selected verb forms; they have hardship using *shakes* (the-s form), *shook* (the past form), *talked* (the v-ed₂) and *shaken*(the past participle) acceptably in English, as displayed below :

13. *I was shake by the lecture

14. *John shake the boy

15. *I shakes them ass

16. *I am shakes hand with them

17. *He reminds me shaken

18. *The sound shaken the whole place

The students could not construct standard sentences with past participle of *talk* which is *talked* :

19. * Mr Mark talked to the lazy boy to change

20.. *We talked for hours

The problem arises from the fact that the v-ed₁ (*talked*) and the v-ed₂ (*talked*) are identical, being regular verbs; so only the usage context establishes the difference:

21. He received (v-ed₁) the news yesterday

22. He had received (v-ed₂) the news before he travelled(v-ed₁) yesterday

Syntactic Deployments of Verb Forms in the Students' English

One chief finding of the study is that the basic verb forms are not deployed in the appropriate syntactic contexts in the students' sentences.

The *base form* is not employed in the present tense, the imperative and subjunctive structures; some of their faulty responses are:

23a. * I goes home on Sundays.

23b *I going home on Sundays

23c. Correction: I go home on Sundays

24a. * Works harder!

24b. *Working harder!

24c. Correction: Work harder

25a. *They demand that she calls and sees them

25b. *They demand that she called and seen them

25c. Correction: They demand that she call and see them

The use of the *-s form* in its sole syntactic context of the 3rd person singular present tense is problematic to the students; the deficiencies are shown here:

26a * Uncertainty breeds indecision and delay

26b * Uncertainty breded indecision and delay

26c. Correction: Uncertainty breeds indecision and delay

The *-ing participle* verb form is not deployed in the progressive aspect and the *-ing* participial clause structures. Some of the substandard responses are shown below:

27a. * Turn the music down, I be read

27b. * Turn the music down, I being reading.

27c. Correction: Turn the music down, I *am reading*

28a. *We *be goes* to Paris this February

28b. *We *been goes* to Paris this February

28c. Correction: We *are going* to Paris this February

29a *I *has worked* all day

29b *I *had work* all day

29c. Correction: I *have been working* all day

30a. *I *been sitting* at my desk by 9 0'clock

30b. *I *will sitting* at my desk by 9 0'clock

30c. Correction: I *was sitting* at desk by 9 0'clock.

31a. * Leaves the room, he tripped over the mat

31b. * Leaved the room, he tripped over the mat

31c. Correction: *Leaving* the room, he tripped over the mat

The syntactic context of the past form is the past tense and it is not problematic to the students

The -ed participle form is not deployed in the perfect aspect and the passive voice structures. The students' weakness here is highlighted below:

32a.* He feels much happier now that he *has find* a new job.

32b.* He feels much happier now that he *had found* a new job.

32c. Correction: He feels much happier now that he *has found* a new job

33a. *Tell me when you *had finished*

33a. *Tell me when you *has finished*

33c. Correction: Tell me when you *have finished*

34a. *The gate *be locked* at 6 o'clock every night

34b. * The gate *will lock* at 6 o'clock every night

34c. Correction: The gate *is locked* at 6 o'clock every night

Conclusion

The purpose of the study is to find out some undergraduate students' knowledge of verb morphology, uses of verb forms in sentence construction and syntactic deployment of verb forms in English sentences. The study has established that lexical verb conjugation, correct utilization of verb forms in sentence construction and syntactic appropriation of verb forms in English sentences are problematic to the students. The conclusion of the study, therefore, is that the students are weak in generating verb forms and using them correctly in English

Recommendation

The findings of the research portend some implications for English language teaching at first-year university level. Frequent exercises that demand the use of verb past forms should be given to the students. Since undergraduate students, according to the findings of this research, have more hardship with the irregular verb conjugations than the regular verb conjugations, teachers should

provide a list of the English 250 common irregular verbs and their inflections for students to learn. As irregular verbs do not form the past tense and past participle in a regular way, the students should be given constant drills on the past forms of irregular verbs to improve the students' usage

Subjecting the students to writing essays involving narrating past experiences could improve their use of verb past forms. Also, teachers could assign students to read and review recommended story books, plays and novels written in Standard English which would expose the students to learned uses of basic verb forms in English.

Students, on their part, should regularly revise the principal parts of verbs (*the base form, the simple past form and the past participle*) which are provided as appendix to the Oxford Advanced Learners' Dictionary, a recommended student companion at secondary and tertiary school levels. The above suggestions should make students become practiced in verb form usage.

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