

## Morphological Errors in the Essay of Students of English as a Second Language

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### Abstract

*The English language poses as an influential language among other Nigerian languages. It is a language of communication, exchange, industry and commerce, among other uses. Its existence demonstrates estimable yardstick for measuring academic success and status. Low mastery of the English language among the students describes imperfection on the side of the students using it as a means of communication. This study investigates the morphological errors committed by the first year undergraduate students of Imo State University, Owerri, who are learning the English language as a field of study, and the reasons for these errors. The theoretical adaptation for this paper is based on Dulay and Burt's (1973) comparison on error of three groups of learners. The students' composition exercises serve as the data for this work. The findings reveal the students' inconsistency in the application of some morphological rules. Although they learn the English language, they have no concrete knowledge of morphology. It is therefore, recommended that teachers of the English language should pay more attention to the teaching of morphology as in the other components of the English language.*

**Keywords:** English language, students, morphology, morphological rule, error.

### Introduction

English as a second language in Nigeria which functions as an official language of the nation is regarded as an acceptable medium of communication among Nigeria's ethnic groups against any of the local languages. The introduction of the English language in Nigeria is traceable to slave trade, colonialism and western religion. When the Europeans came to Nigeria and Africa in general, they needed a language to communicate with the indigenous people of Africa. In order to bridge the gap in communication, they began to teach their languages, and also raised local teachers to do so. Consequently, the English language became the most significant language of education in Nigeria which was colonised by Britain. The English language prospered in commerce depending on the extent of its acquisition by an individual who used the language. Based on this concept, Brosnaham (1963:59) asserts that the English language is the language of commerce and law, of politics and the administration of education and of culture at all levels above the local languages.

Adesoye's (1980: 101) grouping of the speakers of the English language in Nigeria

describes the situation of the language in Nigeria. According to him, group one comprises those who speak the English language from the existence of daily use which variety is imperfect involving total transfer of first language (L1 henceforth) with poor mastery of the lexis and structure of the English language; the second group of speakers are those whose syntax is near the British standard, but their phonology and lexis are far from that which is the rule; the third group are mainly products of secondary school with syntax and semantics that are British, and their language usage acceptable to groups one and two; and group four are those whose English is characterised by standard British English (BrE). The last group comprises 5 per cent of the speakers of the English language in Nigeria. Adesoye's analysis describes the imperfection of Nigerians using the English language as a means of communication and how the imperfection varies from the second language (L2 henceforth) which is the target language. Also, because of their inability to understand the rules governing the use of the English language, the speakers lack high level mastery of the English language. Emenanjo (1990:4) buttresses the imperfection by stating that:



The use of the English language in Nigeria is class restricted based on circumstances. The percentages of Nigerians who are able to speak the English language are usually thirty per cent, and there is lack of good mastery and competence among the students which manifests in both external and internal examinations.

It is on the above notion that this paper examines the effective use of the English morphology by students of the English language. Morphology is an aspect of language that is concerned with the structure of words. Ndimele (2002:2) asserts that morphology is a branch of linguistics which is concerned with the study of how words are formed. He describes morphology as a co-joining of words which shows the internal structure of words. Omorodion (2011:162) refers to morphology as the internal structuring of how words are composed, and brings about arrangement of morphemes.

This paper examines the morphological errors committed by the first year undergraduate students of Imo State University, Owerri, and to find out the reasons for these errors on morphology. The focus of this paper is on word formation and the functional morphemes. The researcher chose the students' composition exercises as the source of data. This paper attempts to outline the regular situations where these errors appear on the students' scripts, and suggests ways to eliminate the students' morphological errors. This work will add to the ESL learners' knowledge on morphology and will add to existing literature in this field for future researches.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical adaptation of this paper is based on Dulay and Burt's (1973) comparison of errors of three groups of learners: the Spanish group, the English group learning the English language as their mother tongue and the Chinese group. Using Bilingual Syntax Measure (BSM) as an elicitation technique for acquisition of eight grammatical morphemes they called functors, a term sometimes used in word classification for words and bound morphemes whose role in

language is largely or wholly grammatical such as prepositions, articles, pronouns and conjunctions. Using empirical study to compare the language of these learners, the theorists' investigation reveals that the ESL speakers / learners find some grammatical morphemes difficult regardless of their length of exposure to the English language. They concluded their findings by stating that it is the L1 system rather than L2 system that guides the acquisition process, that is, the mother tongue is usually responsible for the difficulties or errors encountered by the learners. This theoretical framework is germane to this study because, this study intends to investigate on the morphological errors of students who are studying the English language as second language.

### **Morphological Errors**

Morphological errors are some of the constraints which the L2 learners of the English language encounter when developing their word formulation. Consequently, they misapply the rules as a result of inability to comprehend the restriction rule of the language. Akande (2001:14) takes a serious investigation on the acquisition of eight inflectional morphemes in English. He stipulates on the high margin of errors from the students on grammatical morphemes. His analysis on the students' essay shows that the students exhibit poor mastery of the use of the English language: participles, passive, inflection, past tense morpheme and plural inflection were low. He reveals the inappropriate expression of words by the students on their essays on word-formation which impedes good mastery of the language. Akande's analysis shows students' poor performance on the grammatical morphemes. Thus the second language learners found plural morphemes difficult. This is attributed to the irregularities in the rules of the English language. For instance, *cat - cats, church - churches, lady - ladies, leave - leaves, man - men and chief - chiefs*, and so on. These irregularities in the English morphemes presume complexity and confusion on the English as second language (ESL) learners

Hawkins (2001:40) states that the ESL learners find some grammatical morphemes of



the English difficult to acquire despite their length of exposure to the English language. He claims that the students lack acquaintance in their language learning. Hawkins identifies the levels of inaccuracy when the students are given task to solve. His evidence on the learners constitutes inconsistency on the students' grammatical morphology. However, the students misunderstanding of the rules gives room for misapplication of the use of the restriction rules of the language. Consequently, comprehension of the concepts becomes difficult in developmental structure of the morphemes.

McNeill's (1996:36-63) studies on vocabulary knowledge profiles with evidence from two different groups of learners studying ESL: English major graduates who had been instructed through the medium of English and the third year students in pursuit of Bachelor of Art degree in the English language. Thus, he claims also that there is an important difference between the groups. The aspects of the English tested them according to McNeill's study were, word meaning, phonology, morphology and sentence production, but morphology is the aspect that is of direct relevance to this study.

#### **Statement of the Problem**

Morphology as a branch of linguistics has polysyllabic nature in the English language. Most problems the ESL learners encounter are basically on inconsistency inherent the language. The inconsistency generates high level of confusion to the learners which makes them over-generalise and misapply the rules guiding the language when given any task to perform. Some of the irregularities or inconsistencies are illustrated as follows: If the plural forms of knife, calf, and thief are knives, calves and thieves, respectively, why should the plural of *chief* not be *chieves*? Similarly, if the plural of *box* is *boxes*, why is *ox* not *oxes* but *oxen* or *cattles* not the plural of *cattle*? This also applies to the formation of past tense in the English language. *Killed* is the past tense of *kill*, but *eated* is not the past tense of *eat*, but *ate*. These inconsistencies or irregularities have serious implications in the learning of the English language by ESL learners. There are therefore, numerous rules existing in

the English language which no doubt, create difficult mastery to the ESL learner.

Perhaps, the teachers who teach the students do not give adequate time when teaching morphology, but concentrate more on syntax and lexis. The kind of textbooks the students use may hinder effective learning as the authors of these textbooks may not analyse morphology related topics the way they should. This inhibits mastery of the language as a unified whole.

Akande (2005:46), citing Ririn (2010:32) argues that some of the causes of students' errors relating to forms, rules and practice are supposed to be pathway of controlling the student's morphological errors. Akande stresses on the teachers who teach the students who should on regular basis attempt supposable drills and practices to facilitate their knowledge on morphology.

#### **Population and Sample of the Study**

The population of the study consisted of fifty (50) first year undergraduate students (one hundred level), in the department of English Language and Literary Studies, Imo State University, Owerri, who were randomly selected.

#### **Data Presentation and Analysis**

This paper adopted the descriptive approach for the analysis of the morphological errors discovered from the students' written essays. The analysis was grouped into categories: affixation related errors, and compounding errors. The students were requested to write a restricted essay of about three hundred words (300) entitled, *A Day I will Never Forget in My Life*, with some listed items to be written in opposite forms such as *significant*, *able*, *decent*, *mature*, *honest*, *dispensable*, *necessary*, *conscious*, and to indicate the plural forms of *equipment*, *information* and *accommodation*. The exercise took place in the classroom. After identifying the morphological errors on the students' scripts, the researcher classified the data collected based on the morphological errors discovered on the students' scripts. and numbered them. The study also measured the frequency of each type of morphological error which appeared on the students' scripts. The data was analysed using simple percentage:



Values were assigned to the percentages as

follows: above 19% and below is regarded as insignificant.

### Affixation Related Errors in the Students' Essays.

Note: Words wrongly used in the sentences are marked asterisks

Table 1(a): Errors arising from wrong use of suffixes

| Sentences  | No. of times error occurred | No. of respondents | Percentage (%) of Respondents |
|--|-----------------------------|--------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1. You are *inhonest (dishonest)                                 | 20                          | 15                 | 30%                           |
| 2. It is *unsignificant (insignificant)                          | 26                          | 12                 | 24%                           |
| 3. The girl does not agree because, she is *inmatured (immature) | 32                          | 23                 | 46%                           |
| Total  | 78                          | 50                 | 100%                          |

#### Source: 2019 Survey

Table 1 indicates that 30% of the participants committed error in the use of *dishonest*. This error appeared 20 times in the sentence because, the participants were ignorant of the appropriate prefix to be used while trying to create new words or give the antonym for *honest*. The second row shows that the respondents were unable to form their prefixes well on *insignificant*, and by so doing, committed an error. 24% of the students committed this error for a total of 26 times. In the third row, 46% of the participants committed error in the use of *in-* morpheme, instead of *im-* morpheme.

Though the errors in the table above were syntactic errors because, they made the sentences ungrammatical, they indicated that the respondents committed errors in the use of

morphemes. For instance, it is a well known fact that the opposite of some words are formed by affixing *un-* before their roots as in, *unacceptable*, *unable*, *unnecessary*, just as the opposite of some words are formed by placing *in-* before them as in, *indecent*, *indispensable*. This implies that some of the respondents, who committed these errors in table 1 above, probably applied these rules without being conscious of the restrictions involved. In the case of (3) above, two errors were identified. Firstly, there was an unnecessary insertion of the *-d* suffix, and secondly, the correct prefix was *im-* and not *in-*. Thus, as far as the word in *immature* was concerned, two different morphological errors were committed, that is, the use of an incorrect prefix and insertion of an unnecessary suffix.

Table 2: Errors arising from wrong use of suffixes.

| Sentences   | No. of times error occurred | No. of respondents | Percentage (%) of Respondents |
|---|-----------------------------|--------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1. The stupid boy *broadcasted the news to everybody (broadcast). | 20                          | 40                 | 80%                           |
| 2. I *cutted my finger and was taken to the hospital (cut)        | 10                          | 5                  | 20%                           |
| Total   | 30                          | 45                 | 100%                          |

#### Source: 2019 Survey

Table 2, number 1 shows that 40 (80%) of the respondents committed error of adding the *-ed* morpheme to *broadcast*. This error occurred 20 times in the 40 students' scripts. In sentence

number 2, 10 (20%) of the participants also committed the error of adding *-ed* morpheme to *cut*. As could be seen from the data above, the errors were caused as a result of the insertion of



the past tense marker *-ed* to *broadcast* and *cut* which amounted to inserting unnecessary suffixes, *broadcasted* and *cutted* respectively.

**Table 3:** Errors arising from analogous use of certain suffixes:

| Sentences   | No. of times error occurred | No. of respondents | Percentage (%) of respondents |
|---|-----------------------------|--------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1. They did the work *fastly (fast)                               | 40                          | 18                 | 36%                           |
| 2. Our friends are *gossipers and they will never change(gossips) | 30                          | 12                 | 24%                           |
| 3. I hate *cheaters (cheats).                                     | 31                          | 10                 | 20%                           |
| 4. I am sure you know that is *insultive (insulting)              | 40                          | 10                 | 20%                           |
| <b>Total</b>  | <b>141</b>                  | <b>50</b>          | <b>100%</b>                   |

**Source: 2019 Survey**

Table 3, sentence number 1 shows that 18 (36%) of the participants committed an error by adding the *-ly* morpheme to the root *fast*. In the second row of table 3, 12 (24%) of the respondents committed an error by adding the *-er* morpheme to *gossip* instead of the *-s* morpheme. Instead of the *-s* morpheme, 20% of the respondents added the *-ers* morpheme to the root *cheat* in the 3rd row. In the 4th row, the respondents showed wrong use of the morpheme by adding the *-ive* morpheme to *insult* instead of the *-ing* morpheme. The students who committed this error were ten in number which made up to 20% of the respondents.

From the data above, various factors were responsible for the errors on table 3 above. They included the misapplication of the rules, to inappropriate use of the suffixes which were due to lack of knowledge of some restrictions to certain morphological rules. However, there are

verbs which constitute exceptions to these rules such as *gossip*, *inhabit* and *cheat*, whose *noun* counterparts are *gossips*, *inhabitant* and *cheats*, than being *gossipers*, *inhibitors* and *cheaters* as were written by the respondents. These words simply undergo the morphological process of conversion and need no inflection (Arema, 2005:44). Similarly, *fastly* was used instead of *fast* in table 3(1) probably as a result of their knowledge of certain adjectives like *quick*, *slow* and *happy*, when they are used as adverbs. In 3(4) above, *insultive* was analogously used instead of *insulting*. In the English language, the word, *instructive* is formed from *instruct* and it was probably this knowledge that the students applied in forming *insultive*. It is important to state that their use has become almost institutionalised in Nigerian English as errors of this nature are made by several people from different works with very high level of educational background.

**4. Errors arising from uncountable nouns**

| Errors Arising from Uncountable Noun                  | No. of times error occurred | No. of respondents | Percentage(%) of respondents |
|---|-----------------------------|--------------------|------------------------------|
| 1. We have many *equipments there (equipment)         | 20                          | 15                 | 30%                          |
| 2. He brought her many *furnitures (furniture).       | 25                          | 18                 | 36%                          |
| 3. They gave them new *accommodations (accommodation) | 30                          | 17                 | 34%                          |
| <b>Total</b>  | <b>85</b>                   | <b>50</b>          | <b>100%</b>                  |

**Source: 2019 Survey**

Table 4 shows that a total of 85

morphological errors of diverse kinds were



committed by all the respondents in their composition exercise in the following way: In the first row, 30% of the respondents committed an error by adding the *-s* morpheme to *equipment* to form the plural. The total number of this error identified in the respondents' scripts was 20. In the second row, 36% of the subjects committed an error in the use of the uncountable noun *furniture* by adding the *-s* morpheme to it to form the plural. 34% of the respondents committed an error by adding the *-s* morpheme to *accommodation*.

From the data above, the errors in (1) to (3) were made due to the tendency of most English L2 learners to make uncountable nouns countable. Thus, such deviant forms as *accommodations*, *equipment*, and *furniture* are common in the English usage of most Nigerians. Just as the examples above indicated in their L1, the concepts which these English words represent are countable. The errors can therefore, be attributed to the influence of the L1 on the English language.

**Table 5: Errors caused as a result of the use of the *-ing* morpheme instead of the *-en* morpheme**

| Sentences  | No. of times the error occurred | No. of respondents | percentage (%) of respondents |
|--|---------------------------------|--------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1. I cut my finger and was *taking to the hospital (taken) | 40                              | 15                 | 30%                           |
| 2. My mummy was *beating (beaten)                          | 30                              | 20                 | 40%                           |
| 3. She was *taken the money when .... (taking)             | 35                              | 15                 | 30%                           |
| <b>Total</b>   | <b>105</b>                      | <b>50</b>          | <b>100%</b>                   |

**Source: 2019 Survey**

Table 5, row 1, shows that 40% of the respondents committed the error of using *-ing* morpheme instead of the *-en*, thereby, realising *taking* instead of *taken*. The same type of error occurred in the second row where 30% of the respondents committed an error by adding the *-ing* morpheme to *beat* instead of the *-en* morpheme. In the third row, 30% of the respondents committed an error by using the *-en* morpheme instead of the *-ing* morpheme.

Most of the errors highlighted above were syntactic errors as they made the sentences in which they appeared ungrammatical. However, since the study focused on each word and the kind of error which a particular word manifested, they also qualified to be regarded as morphological errors realised from the respondents.

The above analysis on morphological errors of first year undergraduate students were considered as deviant or inefficient on the intended rules of the English morphology, thereby, showing the inability of the learners to

generate absolute rules of the language. Headbloom (2006:33) claimed that morphological errors were caused as a result of not being aware, and over generalisation of inflections.

**Recommendations**

Based on the findings from this study, the following recommendations are made:

- 1) The teachers who teach morphology should be graded on it and must give more attention to the subject rather than to the other components of the language because, morphology development increases the students' vocabulary in English.
- 2) The study observed that morphology-related topics were not taught at all in most institutions probably as a result of dearth of textbooks. The English language scholars should be encouraged by the government and other stakeholders in the Education sector by funding the publications of textbooks on morphology or textbooks embedded with detailed topics on morphology, for effective



teaching of this aspect of the English language.

3) The students should ensure that they create good consciousness in using morphological rules while writing in order to avoid morphological errors.

Since the school is an institution of learning where pupils, students and other learners come to learn and be equipped in the English language, the students learning morphology of English should put every effort to improve in this aspect of the language.

3) Morphology should be systematically taught in schools especially, in the undergraduate classes to enable the students gain mastery of the restriction rules.

### Conclusion

This paper has attempted to show clearly how far the productivity of word formation rules generated complexity to the learners of the English language. The morphological rules need to be specified by condition and constraints in order to avoid over-generalization and inconsistency. An understanding of the fundamental rules guiding morphology is very crucial for the second language learner in order, for mastery to take place. All effort must be put in place to boast performance in the English language as it is the pedestal upon which success in education lies. Morphology of English must therefore, be treated in the same manner as other topics in English as a unified whole.

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