

A GRAMMATICAL STUDY OF TENSE AND SENTENCE IN FIVE SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN NASARAWA METROPOLIS

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Abstract

Most students of secondary schools in Nigeria are assumed to have deficiency in the use of English Language probably because English is learnt as a second Language (L₂). But English Language has come to stay at least for now as the national language in Nigeria. Therefore, effort should be made to encourage students in our schools to learn it effectively. The aim of this paper is to discuss students' weaknesses in the use of tense of verb in sentences. The paper investigated the students' use of tense of verb in sentences by administering tests on the students as an instrument of research. The data collected from the tests were analysed based on the Theory of Error Analysis. The results of the data analysis revealed that secondary school students lack efficient use of tense of verb in sentences. The paper suggests some measures that could help students improve on their skills in the use of tenses of verb in sentences and English Grammar generally.

Keywords: Grammar, Verb, Tenses and Sentence.

Introduction

Secondary school students need to communicate in both written and spoken English in the course of the study. Moreover, it is not just communication in English but communication using Standard English grammar. More importantly, a credit pass in English language at WAEC, SSCE, NECO, etc is a requisite condition for entry into any tertiary institution in Nigeria. Therefore, secondary school students need effective skills in English Grammar, especially verb tenses and sentence. This is because sentence is the longest unit of grammar and verb is its indispensable component.

Verb is an indispensable and complex aspect of English sentence and grammar. Fromkin (2006:30) attest to this when she contends that verb has complicated forms: it has a singular present tense with -s, past tense with -ed, present participle/progressive with -ing, past participle with -en, etc. This implies that tense is a complex aspect of verb that often give secondary school students problem in grammatical construction of sentences specifically. Therefore, it behooves on this paper to focus mainly on tense of verb and sentence. The paper seeks to investigate the students' weaknesses in the use of tenses of verb in sentence construction so as to proffer solution to the challenge.

Aim and Objectives

The aim of the paper is to discuss the weakness of students' use of tense of verb in sentence construction. The objectives include:

1. to identify the different tenses of verb.

2. to discuss the grammatical relationship between the tenses of verb and time.
3. to discuss the past, present and future tenses.
4. to describe the various perspectives of tenses in sentence construction.
5. to demonstrate in practical terms the use of tense in sentence construction.

Methodology

Data Sampling Procedure

Five schools within the Nasarawa metropolis were selected for the paper. The schools are (1) Foundation Secondary School (2) Government Secondary School, Tammah, (3) Government Secondary School, Nasarawa, (4) Government Day Secondary School and (5) EWCA College. 100 SSII students were selected from each of the schools with the assistance of the Form Master. Their age bracket falls within 17-22 years. Two tests were conducted separately on the tense of verb. Each test was scored over 100%. The pass mark range from 40 marks and above.

The researcher conducted impromptu tests to avoid data being compromised. The tests were conducted separately in each school since there is no 500 capacity hall in any of the schools. This is also to avoid transportation and other logistics cost. Immediately after the test 1, ten teachers were chosen to assist the researcher in marking Test I while the researcher read the answer to them. This is to hasten the process of data collection and analysis. This process was

repeated in all the schools. The raw data were taken home where the researcher personally marked Test II and sort the scripts into pass and fail groups. In test 11, any student that is able to construct a minimum of four sentences with correct tenses of verb within the limit of the essay is considered for a pass mark. The data were analysed in a tabulated form. The results of the tests and data analysis are presented in the data presentation and analysis below.

Theoretical Framework

This paper is guided by the Error Analysis Theory. The theory was propounded in the 1970s by Stephen Pit Corder for use in the description of L₂ errors. Corder, (1974) classifies errors into four categories: omission, selection, addition, or misordering of some elements. The theory focuses on those errors committed by second language (L₂) learners. Mahmoodzadeh (2012) describes Error Analysis as a means for identifying, categorizing and explaining errors committed by foreign language (FL) and second language(L₂) learners. A-Khresheh (2016:82) observes that EA helps the teachers to pinpoint the students’ weaknesses and to make teachers revise their teaching methodology. This informs the adoption of this theoretical framework in the paper to figure out the weaknesses of secondary school students in the use of tenses of verb in sentences. The essence is to seek improvement on students’ skills in the use of tense of verb in sentences.

Literature Review

A verb is a word or group of words that denote action. Therefore, the tense of a verb indicates the time the action takes place. This means that tense of verb points out the time a particular event or action spoken about actually occurred. Quirk and Greenbaum (2000:40) lay credence to the motion of tense and time when they argue that “a tense is a universal non-linguistic concept with three divisions of past, present and future. Tomori (1977) describes tense as the feature of the clause that relates the organisation of the clause to the non-linguistic concept of time.

It is important to clarify that a clause in this context is the same as a simple sentence. This justifies the relationship among the tense of verb, the actions performed and the actual time of the occurrence of event. However, the structural grammarians argue that there are only two tenses of verb in English sentence. Consequently, there is no obvious structural form of change in English verb to show the future tense as obtained in (v-o) and (v-s) used for the present tense and (V-d) for the past tense, rather; it the modal auxiliary verb “shall” and “will” that are used as the future makers. For example,

- i. I shall travel tomorrow
- ii. We will run next week.

In i, the verb travel is the (V-o) present tense. In ii also run is the (V-o) present tense. Therefore, there is no obvious future tense but the addition of modal auxiliary to the present tense (V-o)

However, modern grammarians recognise the future tense in verb. For instance, Muir (1972:132), Shaw (1975:xx), Osisanwo (2008:109) Ibe (2010:19), Adejare (1996), Halliday (1985:177), etc. all agree that the tense in English has three forms: the present, the past and the future. These three terms represent the simple tenses of verb. Simple in the sense that these tenses are indicated by one-word verb as opposed to the complex tense which may be in phrase comprising of at least a minimum of two words and a maximum of five words.

The three terms of the simple tenses of verb are presented on the table below:

	Present Tense	Simple Past Tense.V-d	Simple Future Tense
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	Simple Present Tense (V-O)	Simple Present Tense 3rd Per Singular (V-S)		
1	Go	Goes	went	shall/will go
2	Run	Runs	Ran	shall/will run
3	Take	Takes	Took	shall/will take
4	Speak	Speaks	Spoke	shall/will speak
5	Call	Calls	Called	shall/will call

The table above indicates that the simple present tense is the base form (v-o) the simple present tense 3rd person personal pronoun is (v-s) and the simple past used for all persons is (v-d). The simple present tense is the base form without s. For example, I go to school. The simple present-3rd person personal pronoun singular form has s. For example, He/ She/John/Mary goes to school. Simple past is used for all persons – They/She/I/He/went to school. In the simple future tense, the British English uses “shall” for the first person personal pronoun and “will” for the second and third persons to express simple futurity. However, to express determination, threat and a promise, the reverse is the case. For example, I/we/shall travel tomorrow. They/He/You/ will travel tomorrow. The complex tense of verb is referred to as the verbal group, which contains two or more verb in form of a phrase. For example,

- i. John is cooking rice
- ii. John had been cooking rice
- iii. John was going to have cooked rice

Tenses of Verb and its Use in the Sentence Structure

Tense of a verb refers to the action that takes place. Action could take place in the present, past and future. These three basic tenses are sub-divided into different types. In fact, there are thirty-six (36) tense description of verb. Suffice here to demonstrate with a few illustrations.

1. **Simple present tense:** This tense is used to describe action that take place in the present time without relation to past or future.
e.g. (a) I buy a car today.
(b) He eats rice today.
2. **Present Continuous (progressive) Tense:** This tense is used to describe action or event that is in progress at the time the statement is being made.
e.g. (a) I am buying a car (now)
(b) He is eating rice (right now)
3. **Present Perfect Tense:** This tense is used to describe action or event that has taken place immediately before the statement is made.
e.g. (a) I have bought a car (just now)
(b) He has eaten rice (“ ” or Progressive
4. **Present Perfect Continuous (progressive) Tense:** This tense is used to describe action or event that took place in the past and is still continuing in the present time.
e.g. (a) I have been buying cars (and I am still buying)
(b) He has been eating rice (“ ” “ ”)
5. **Simple Past Tense:** This tense is used to describe action that took place in the past without relationship to the present.
e.g. (a) I bought a car (yesterday)

- (b) He ate rice (yesterday)
6. **Past Continuous (progressive) Tense:** This type tense is used to describe action that was continuing in the past time.
e.g (a) I was buying a car {when you}
(b) He was eating rice {called me}
7. **Past Perfect Simple Tense:** This tense is used to describe action or event that was completed in the specific past time.
e.g. (a) I had bought a car (before we wedded)
(b) He had eaten rice (before. I came in)
8. **Past Perfect Continuous (progressive) Tense:** This tense is used to describe continuous action that was completed in the past time.
e.g (a) I had been buying a car {before
(b) He had been eating rice {I stopped}
9. **Simple Future Tense:** This tense is used to describe future event or action generally.
e.g (a) I shall buy a car (next year)
(b) He will eat rice (tomorrow)
10. **Future continuous (progressive) Tense:** This tense is used to describe action that will be continuing in a known future time.
e.g (a) I shall be buying cars next year.
(b) He will be eating rice (tomorrow morning).
11. **Future Perfect Tense:** This tense is used to describe action or event that will be completed in a specific known future time.
e.g. (a) I shall have bought a car by January 2022.
(b) He will have eaten a bag of rice by January 2022.
12. **Future Perfect Continuous (progressive) Tense:** This tense is used to describe action or event that will be continuing in a specific known future time.
e.g (a) I shall have been buying cars in January 2022
(b) He will have been eating rice in January, 2022.

List of the complete 36 tenses of verb is attached here for references.

	Verbal Group	Tense Description
1	breaks / does break	Present
2	broke / did break	past
3	will break	Future
4	has broken	past in present
5	had broken	past in past
6	will have broken	past in future
7	is breaking	present in present
8	was breaking	present in past
9	will be breaking	present in future
10	is going to break	future in present
11	was going to break	future in past
12	will be going to break	future in future
13	is going to have broken	past in future in present
14	was going to have broken	past in future in past
15	will be going to have broken	past in future in future

16	has been breaking	present in past in present
17	had been breaking	present in past in past
18	will have been breaking	present in past in future
19	is going to be breaking	present in future in present
20	was going to be breaking	present in future in past
21	will be going to be breaking	present in future in present
22	has been going to break	future in past in present
23	had been going to break	future in past in past
24	will have been going to break	future in past in future
25	has been going to have broken	past in future in past in present
26	had been going to have broken	past in future in past in past
27	will have been going to have broken	past in future in past in future
28	is going to have been breaking	present in past in future in present
29	was going to have been breaking	present in past in future in past
30	will be going to have been breaking	present in past in future in future
31	has been going to be breaking	present future in past in present
32	had been going to be breaking	present in future in past in present
33	will have been going to be breaking	present in future in past in future
34	has been going to have been breaking	present in past in future in past in present'
35	had been going to have been breaking	present in past in future in past in past
36	will have been going to have been breaking	present in past in future in past in future

(Culled from: Use of English: Centre for Remedial Studies, University of Calabar 1992).

It is true that many of these tenses are not commonly used, it is however necessary for the analyst to be able to account for the selection of tense in simple and complex verbal groups.

Sentence

A sentence is the unit of meaningful thought expressed in spoken or written form. Aliyu (2006:180) defines a sentence as a grammatical form which can be analysed into constituents such as noun and verb phrases (NP, VP). This definition points to a sentence as a combination of the subject and the predicate. Adejare (1996:57) sees a sentence as the largest grammatical unit that provides the basis for grammatical description of the smaller units below it; while Osisanwo (2008:18) who approaches the meaning of a sentence from the orthographic perspective sees sentence as a stretch of language which begins with a capital letter and ends with a full-stop, a question mark or an exclamation mark.

In the traditional sense, a sentence is a complete utterance which is the largest structure within which a full grammatical analysis is possible (Quirk and Greenbaum, 2008:52; Ojo 2011:18). Tomori argues that, two constituents stand side by side in a simple sentence structure. The two constituents represent the subject and the predicate, Lamidi (2008:12) buttresses the relevance of verb in the agreement of the two constituents and asserts that the quality of the knowledge of the two constituents of the sentence the speaker possesses determines his skills in grammatical construction. In the sentence construction, the subject and the predicate must agree in tense.

Grammatical Analysis of a Sentence

A sentence is the highest level of grammatical unit. It is analysed into its grammatical elements as:

1. **The Subject element:** John bought a car
2. **The Verb element:** John bought a car
3. **The Direct object element:** John wrote a car
4. **The Indirect object element:** John gave Mary a pen
5. **The subject complement element:** John is a teacher
6. **The object complement element:** The villagers made John a king
7. **Adjunct element:** The man is behind the car.

In all these sentences, the verb and its tenses are involved in the construction.

Data Presentation and Analysis

One hundred (100) Senior Secondary two students were selected from each of the schools. This brings the total number of students for the tests to 500. Two separate tests on tense of verb were administered on the students as the instrument of research below:

TEST I

" I am eating rice" This sentence is in present continuous (Progressive) tense.

The question is," Re-write the same sentence in the following tenses.

- Q1. Simple present tense
- Q2. Simple past tense
- Q3. Simple future tense
- Q4. Present perfect tense
- Q5. Past perfect tense

ANSWERS:

- Q1. I eat rice.
- Q2. I ate rice.
- Q3. I shall eat rice.
- Q4. I have eaten rice.
- Q5. I had eaten rice.

	SCHOOLS	NO OF STUDENTS	Q1		Q2		Q3		Q4		Q5	
			Pass	Fail								
1	Foundation	100	15	75	20	80	15	75	40	60	10	90
2	GSS Tammah	100	30	80	40	60	20	80	30	70	20	80
3	Govt sci school	100	40	60	30	70	40	60	10	90	40	60
4	Destiny Kings	100	10	90	20	80	30	70	15	85	50	50
5	ECWA College	100	30	70	40	60	20	80	40	60	20	80
	5 Table I	500	125	375	150	350	125	3[75	150	350	140	360

Data analysis on test I

Using the simple percentage formula the data are analyses as:

$$Q1 \text{ Pass } \frac{125}{500} \times \frac{100}{1} = 25\%$$

$$\text{Fail } \frac{375}{500} \times \frac{100}{1} = 75\%$$

$$Q2 \text{ Pass } \frac{150}{500} \times \frac{100}{1} = 30\%$$

$$\text{Fail } \frac{350}{500} \times \frac{100}{1} = 70\%$$

$$Q3 \text{ Pass } \frac{125}{500} \times \frac{100}{1} = 25\%$$

$$\text{Fail } \frac{375}{500} \times \frac{100}{1} = 75\%$$

$$Q4 \text{ Pass } \frac{150}{500} \times \frac{100}{1} = 30\%$$

$$\text{Fail } \frac{355}{500} \times \frac{100}{1} = 70\%$$

$$Q5 \text{ Pass } \frac{140}{500} \times \frac{100}{1} = 28\%$$

$$\text{Fail } \frac{360}{500} \times \frac{100}{1} = 72\%$$

TEST II

For Test II, students were asked to write an essay on any topic of their choice within 50 minutes. The scripts were marked and errors sorted out and the results analysed in a table.

SN	SCHOOLS	TOTAL NO OF STUDENTS										
			Pass	Fail								
1	Foundation	100	15	85	20	80	30	70	40	60	40	60
2	GSS Tammah	100	10	90	30	70	40	60	30	70	30	70
3	Govt sci school	100	40	60	50	50	10	90	45	55	10	90
4	Destiny Kings	100	50	50	10	90	20	80	40	60	25	75
5	ECWA College	100	40	60	20	80	30	70	20	80	50	50
	5 Table I	500	155	345	130	370	130	370	175	265	155	345

Data analysis on test II

Using the simple percentage formula that data are analyzed as:

$$Q1 \text{ Pass } \frac{155}{500} \times \frac{100}{1} = 31\%$$

$$\text{Fail } \frac{345}{500} \times \frac{100}{1} = 69\%$$

$$Q2 \text{ Pass } \frac{130}{500} \times \frac{100}{1} = 26\%$$

$$\text{Fail } \frac{370}{500} \times \frac{100}{1} = 74\%$$

$$Q3 \text{ Pass } \frac{130}{500} \times \frac{100}{1} = 26\%$$

$$\text{Fail } \frac{370}{500} \times \frac{100}{1} = 74\%$$

$$Q4 \text{ Pass } \frac{175}{500} \times \frac{100}{1} = 35\%$$

$$\text{Fail } \frac{265}{500} \times \frac{100}{1} = 65\%$$

$$Q5 \text{ Pass } \frac{155}{500} \times \frac{100}{1} = 31\%$$

$$\text{Fail } \frac{345}{500} \times \frac{100}{1} = 69\%$$

Summary of Tests I and II

SN	SCHOOLS	NO OF STUDENTS	QUESTIONS	TEST I		TEST II	
				% Pass	% Fail	% Pass	% Fail
1	Foundation	100		25	75	31	69
2	GSS Tammah	100		30	70	26	74
3	Government Sci school	100		25	75	26	74
4	Destiny Kings	100		30	70	35	65
5	ECWA College	100		28	72	31	69
	5	500		138	362	149	351
				TOTAL % PASS	29%	TOTAL % FAIL	71%

Findings

The paper identifies errors of wrong selection of tenses of verb in the tests scripts. This type of error is usually

committed by learners of second language (L₂). This is because the learners lack adequate knowledge of the target language (TL) to enable them select appropriate tenses.

There were several other grammatical errors such as errors of omission, concord, spelling, wrong syntactic order, etc. found in the written scripts. However, the focus of the paper is on errors of tenses. In the regard such errors as: I go to school yesterday instead of I went, I have ate instead of eaten, they has finished the test before we arrived instead of had, etc. were identified in the marked scripts.

These are errors of wrong selection of tenses of verb. Students need consistent drilling on the tenses of verb to overcome this challenge. From table III above, the summary of data shows that $138 + 149 \div 10 = 29\%$ passed the tests while $362 + 351 \div 10 = 71\%$ failed the tests. The highest percentage score was $\frac{031}{100}\%$. This is less than the fixed 40% mark for the tests. This shows that the students actually have difficulties in the use of tenses of verb in sentence construction.

Conclusion

The data analysis revealed that secondary school students have problem with the use of tenses of verb in their communication. The poor performance in the tests conducted is not unconnected with the general low competence in the use of English as often ascribe to, or associated with the scarcity of teachers of English Language generally. Other issues often associated with poor students' performance are lack of functional textbooks, especially on English grammar and poor remuneration for teachers. There is also the issue of laziness on the part of the students who concentrate more on social media rather than reading books. The complex nature of the verbal group is also a major challenge.

Recommendations

1. There is need for all tiers of government to take the issue of teachers' salaries seriously. Teachers should be paid as at when due.
 2. Related to this is the quality of teachers of English language. Teachers must be employed on the basis of qualification and experience rather than on sentiments of state of origin, religion and tribe.
 3. Parents should endeavor to monitor their children/wards' use of the cell phones. The phone should be used more for educational purposes.
 4. Functional library should be provided in all the schools to afford the students the opportunity to read hard.
 5. Teachers of English language should make effort at developing new methodology for teaching grammar of English Language.
 6. Schools should adopt student's improvement programme (SIP), where students are made to receive extra lesson after school. The SIP should focus more on teaching English grammar.
- If all the suggestions are adequately addressed in our schools, it is hoped the students would improve on the correct use of tenses of verb and other aspects of the English grammar.

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