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An Analysis of Grammatical Errors in the Written Compositions of Primary School Pupils in Ode-Omu, Osun State, Nigeria

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Abstract

The study examined the errors committed by primary school pupils in their written compositions. The literature review covered different kinds of compositions, Contrastive Analysis, Error Analysis and types of grammatical errors. Three research questions were raised to guide the study and with the aid of a free response research instrument titled, 'My favourite Food', responses were got from sixty nine pupils selected through purposive sampling technique. Findings showed that primary school pupils' compositions were full of errors, indecipherable errors constituted the higher percentage, 33.39% while misordering errors constituted the least, 0.17%. The study concluded that errors water down the quality of primary school pupils' compositions with attendant effects on their academic performance. The study recommended, among others, that teachers should give regular composition exercises to pupils, teach rudiments of grammar to pupils and emphasis the differences between homophones such as alter/altar and days/daze.

Keywords: grammatical errors, written compositions, contrastive analysis, error analysis pupils

Introduction

Written compositions are imaginative creative writings that communicate ideas, give information, narrate stories, make requests, give directions and so forth. It is an expression through writing (FGN/UBE-MDGs, 2011). Compositions are usually written in formal situations for academic purposes as responses to questions, letters, memoranda, narratives and minutes of meetings. Ideas conveyed in compositions are usually through the medium of a language which is either in writing or speaking. Deficiency in grammar leads to poor writing and speaking, while a sound knowledge of grammar helps communication (FME/NTI, 2017).

Written composition is an important aspect of examination, be it internal or external that must be handled with utmost care if pupils are to succeed during examinations. In fact, in examinations conducted by National Examination Council (NECO) and West African Examination Council (WAEC) composition writing is compulsory and integral part of the total mark is allocated to writing (NECO, 2010). As indicated above, a good knowledge of grammar is essential for good writing or communication. This allows the writer to marshal his/her points clearly and accurately for coherence and accuracy. This implies that if the composition is riddled with grammatical errors, the ideas or information being communicated will not be well communicated leading to misconstrued ideas or communication breakdown or both.

Statement of the Problem

Chief Examiner's report for the year 2010 reported that students commit a lot of grammatical errors in their essay and letter writing which made them to lose marks; about 95% of the candidates scored no mark in mechanical accuracy (NECO, 2012). Reports show that most errors committed are grammatical broadly under morphological and syntactic errors (WAEC, 2004). Also, Adepoju (2004), found out that errors committed in writing are most grammatical; one thousand eight hundred and sixty three (1,863) syntactic errors, one thousand two hundred and sixty one (1,261) mechanical errors and two hundred and twenty nine (229), lexical errors. This has been a thorn in the flesh of teachers over the years because the situation keeps on repeating itself. The study specifically set out to investigate grammatical errors in the writing compositions of primary school pupils, the foundation level of our educational system with view to knowing the causes, types and finding lasting solutions to this widespread problem. It is the belief of this study that if these problems are nipped in the bud or reduced to the barest minimum at this elementary and formative level, candidates' compositions will be devoid of avoidable grammatical errors.

Research Objectives

(a) To identify grammatical errors committed by primary school pupils written compositions.

(b) To identify causes of grammatical errors committed by primary school pupils in written compositions.

(c) To correct grammatical errors committed by primary school pupils in written compositions.

Research Questions

In line with the research objectives, the study raised and addressed the following research questions:

(a) What are the types of grammatical errors committed by primary school pupils written compositions?

(b) Why do primary school pupils commit grammatical errors in written compositions?

(c) How can these errors be corrected?

Literature Review

In teaching English language, the teacher is expected to pay distinctive attention to all the skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing in addition to teaching grammar (NERDC, 2007). This implies that there is a strong connection between grammar and the language skills. Writing is used to create and communicate ideas Ngubane, Ntombela and Govender, (2020). Ogbuehi (2002), defined an essay, an aspect of writing, as piece of communicative writing that is grammatically correct. This shows that there is a great bound between writing and grammar; without grammar writing cannot exist; it is the foundation upon which writing is built. The invaluable contributions of writing to academic success of learners include creativity, innovation, critical thinking and ability to use grammar, idioms and vocabulary of the language Ngubane, Ntombela and Govender (2020). This brings to the fore the nexus between grammar and writing again.

Different types writing exist in academics. Basically, compositions are divided into two in this study, namely, letters and essays. A letter is a written (hand or printed) message sent from a writer to a receiver (Badaiki, Babajide, Omiteru, Adediran, Ador, Onyeguiri and Ogunlana, 2017). Letters are divided into two according to the physical features they possess- they are formal and informal letters. A formal letter is a letter addressed to people holding offices such as principals, directors and commissioners and it contains two addresses with date, salutation, heading, introduction, body, conclusion and subscription while an informal letter is letter sent to friendly people and consists of one address with date, salutation, introduction, body, conclusion and name of the writer (Ademola-Adeoye, Adam, Somoye, Omiture, Macauley, Oderinde, Badaiki, Hawkes and Dallas 2015 and Banjo, Elugbe, Onaga and Akano, 2018).

On the other hand, essays are pieces of continuous writings about some phenomena. Badaiki, et al (2017), identified four main types of essays. They are narrative, descriptive, argumentative and expository essays. A narrative essay tells a story about what somebody did or what happened in the past in sequential order and written in the past tense with the heading, introduction, body and conclusion as its major features (Badaiki, et al 2017 and Banjo, et al, 2018). The descriptive essay is a type of composition that gives vivid picture of an event, place or person in such a way that the reader can draw a mental picture of the situation while an expository essay 'informs, explains, directs and instructs' with the use of language to make readers understand every detail (Eyisi, Adekunle, Adepoju, Ademola-Adeoye, Adam and Eto, 2018). The scholars further

remarked that argumentative essay, as the name implies, is the type of writing that expect a writer to support or oppose a topic or motion with the use of persuasive language to convince readers.

It should be borne in mind that writing is a productive skill (Akinboboye and Adepoju, 2018) used to express ideas and irrespective of the type and for it to accomplish its task, effective communication is a necessity. Federal Ministry of Education, FME (2017), succinctly remarked that a writer should be able to write grammatically correct sentences because a good knowledge of grammar leads to effective communication while poor knowledge of grammar hiders communication. In other words, error free sentences are pivotal to effective communication in writing. This brings to the fore the importance of grammar in any composition. *What is grammar?* Grammar is set of rules guiding the combination of morphological and syntactic elements (Ojo, 2011). Grammar is also described as the level at which a speaker masters a language also it is a school subject like Mathematics, Biology and so forth (Farinde and Ojo, 1998).

Errors are frequently committed mistakes in the speech or writing of a learners or deviations or departures from the rules of the targeted language majorly caused by linguistic interference, faulty teaching methods and the nature of the language (Adepoju, 2004). Errors manifest in all aspects of grammar which hinder effective communication, poor performance and failure during examinations (National Examination Council, NECO, 2010). The term error, according to Kansir, (2012), is a departure from the laid down standards of a language and are unavoidable in second language learning (Sampong, 2014). This implies that when errors are committed, the learner unconsciously produces a version that is different from the acceptable standard. In other words, the rules of the targeted language are broken in the process of writing or speaking.

The study of errors has always been major preoccupation of scholars over the years and that accounts for reasons for coming up with linguistic theories for the study of errors namely, *Contrastive Analysis (CA)* and *Error Analysis (EA).* Contrastive Analysis is a traditional approach to the study of errors. This theory looks at the structures of the First Language (L1) and the Second Language (L2) and predicts that the differences between the two account for the errors produced by L2 learners; L1 is an impediment to the learning of L2. CA assumes that errors made by L2 learners are instances of *Linguistic Interference* (Adepoju, 2004 and Kasim, Nawas, Tahir, Yusriadi and Gheisari, 2022). C. A, as a theory, lacks some merits as it does not take into consideration the learning environment and the methodology used in the course of learning but majorly concentrates on the differences between the two languages (Kansir, 2012). Consequent upon this, E.A was developed to cater for these inadequacies.

Error Analysis (E. A.), first advocated by S. P. Corder and his colleagues in the 60s, moved from forecast errors to the real errors committed by learners, advocates that difficulties inherent in L2, such as overgeneralisation of rules and inability to master the rules of the lead to errors (Al-Khresheh, 2016). E. A. as a theory, identifies, groups and analyses errors committed instead of predicting possible errors in the L2 (Setiyorini, Dewi, and Masykuri, 2020).

Errors, in L2 learning, are caused by linguistic interference, intralingual problems and inappropriate teaching techniques (Adepoju, 2004, Kasim, Nawas, Tahir, Yusriadi and Gheisari, 2022 and Maftukhin, 2023). Linguistic interference is a nonconformity in the production of the L2 caused by influence of the L1 (Koptleouva, Khairzhanouva, Jumagaliyeva, Baisevouva and Kurmangalieva, 2022). Similarly, Adepoju (2014) remarked that errors are caused by interlingual, intralingual and developmental factors. In the work of Monica et al (2022), grammatical errors are inappropriate usage of tense or modifiers. Grammatical errors manifest in the violation of the rules of nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, prepositions, conjunctions and determiners and can be in form of omission, addition, misordering, blends and misselection (Sampong, 2014 and Maftukhin, 2023).

(a) **Wrong omission**: This is an unconscious removal of a grammatical item from a sentence. For example, my father good instead of my father **(is)** good.

(b) **Wrong addition**: This is the insertion of inappropriate morpheme into a root word. For example, **taked** for took (regularisation) and the use of past tense of an auxiliary verb with the past tense of a main verb, as I **did** went there (double making).

(c) **Wrong adjectival/adverbial word order**: This arises when the rule governing the use of arrangement of adjectives or adverbs are jettisoned. For instance, a **ball black** instead of a black ball.

(d) **Wrong selection of words/misinformation**: This arises when two homophones are confused. For examples, new for knew and course for cause.

(e) **Wrong combination of alternative grammatical items**: This occurs when two similar words follow each other such as still yet or collapse downfall (Sampong, 2014 and Yuliawati & Andayani, 2020).

Maftukhin (2023), identified the following grammatical errors: subject predicate errors, concord of number errors, concord of noun errors, word choice errors and so forth. The findings of Shiddiq, et al (2023), revealed errors such as concord errors, tense errors, verbal errors and wrong use of parts of speech and omission errors were the most common errors committed while Monica, et al (2022), found out that misinformation errors were the most frequent. Commenting on the level of awareness of the errors committed, Adepoju (2014) grouped errors into three, viz: errors that learners can recognize, errors that learners can correct if noted and errors that learners can neither identify nor correct.

This study investigated errors in the written compositions of primary school pupils with focus on primary six pupils. Unlike previous studies such as, Sugeng (2016), Monica et al (2022) and Shiddiq, et al (2023), which studied grammatical errors of English literature students, errors in advertisement and lexical and grammatical errors in translation respectively. Also, Adepoju (2014), only studied grammatical errors in the written English of secondary school students.

Methodology

The study is a case study of Ode-Omu, a town in Ayedaade Local Government Area of Osun State, Nigeria focusing on three selected primary schools. The study used a composition titled ***'My Favourite Food'*** to elicit responses from the participants. Primary six pupils formed the population of the study while purposive sampling technique was used to select eighteen, twenty one and thirty pupils from Baptist Primary School, named ***'School A'***, Christ Apostolic Primary School named ***'School B'***, and Ansar Ud Deen Primary School named ***'School C'***, respectively making a total number of sixty nine pupils. The scripts were marked and errors categorised. Data were analysed using descriptive analyses, simple percentage and pie chart for quantitative data while thematic analysis was used for qualitative data.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Table I: Showing Schools, Types, Number and Percentage of Errors Committed

S/N	Type of Error	School 'A'	School 'B'	School 'C'	Total	%
1	*Omission Errors*	36	86	54	176	29.53 %
2	*Addition Errors*	18	10	3	31	5.20 %
3	*Misordering Errors*	-	1	-	1	0.17%
4	*Wrong Selection Errors*	41	54	90	185	31.04 %
5	*Wrong Combination Errors*	-	1	3	4	0.67 %
6	*Indecipherable Errors*	42	72	85	199	33.39 %
	Total	137	224	235	596	100 %

From table I above, a total number of five hundred and ninety six (596) grammatical errors were committed by the respondents in the schools used for the study. Pupils in ***'School C'*** committed the highest number of errors which is two hundred and thirty five (235) grammatical errors, followed by pupils in ***'School B'*** who committed two hundred and twenty four (224) grammatical errors while pupils in ***'School A'*** committed one hundred and thirty seven grammatical errors which is the least.

From the above table also, on the type of grammatical errors committed, unprintable errors committed were one hundred and ninety nine which represents 33.39 % of the errors committed, wrong selection errors were one hundred and eighty five (185), that is, 31.04 % of the errors and omission errors were one hundred and seventy six (176) which represents 29.53 % of the errors. In addition, addition errors committed were thirty one which constitute 5.20 % of the errors, wrong combination errors four (4), that is, 0.67 % of the total errors and the least type of errors committed were misordering errors which formed just 0.17 % of the errors. In the findings of Shiddiq, et al (2023) errors such as concord errors, tense errors, verbal errors and wrong use of parts of speech and omission errors were the most frequently committed errors while the study of Monica, et al (2022) revealed that misinformation errors were the most common. The findings of these scholars and this study are similar. The frequency of the errors can also be seen on the pie chart depicted in figure I below.

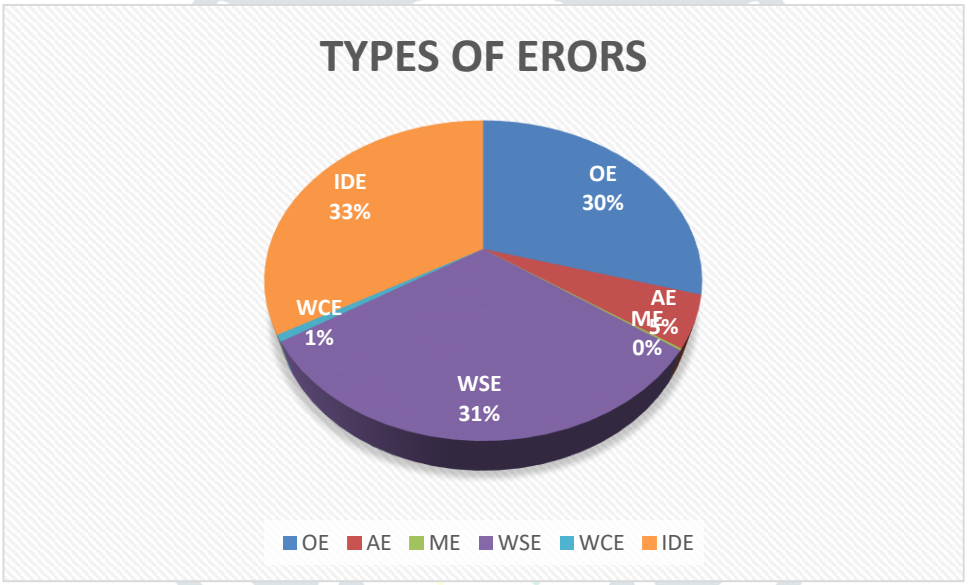

Figure I: Types of Errors

Key

OE: Omission Errors

AE: Addition Errors

ME: Misordering Errors

WSE: Wrong Selection Errors

WCE: Wrong Combination Errors

IDE: Indecipherable Errors

Excerpts from Pupils' Scripts

The following are excerpts from written compositions of the respondents as classified into different types of errors:

Omission Errors

(a) The name of my **(favourite)** food **(is)** rice.
(b) It is simple **(to)** prepare.

In the above sentences, the grammatical items in brackets were omitted in the sentences constructed by the respondents. Thus, sentence (a) was written as, *'The name of my food rice.'* And sentence (b) was written as, *'It is simple prepare.'*

Addition Errors

(a) To prepare **(d)** jollof rice…
(b) I can eat it with **(a)** meat.

The morphemes put in brackets in the above sentence were wrongly added. Thus, sentence (a) should have been written as, *'To prepare jollof rice…'* and sentence (b) as, *'I can eat it with meat.'*

Misordering Errors

(a) I cocked rice yesterday very well, instead of, *'I cocked rice very well yesterday.'*

The above was the only misordering error found in the scripts and the main reason for this is that the respondents wrote in simple sentences.

Wrong Selection/Misinformation Errors

(a) You we (will) put water on fire.
(b) Yam is god (good).

In sentence (a), pronoun *'we'* was used instead of the auxiliary verb *'will'* and in sentence (b), instead of *'good*', *'god'* was used.

Wrong Combination Errors

(a) My best best food.
(b) It was give me energy.

In sentence (a) the combination or repetition of *'best'* is ungrammatical and the combination of '*was* and *give'*, that is, *'was give'*, in sentence (b) is wrong.

Wrong Selection of Tense/Verbal Errors

(a) My mother give me money.

(b) It is difficult to cocked.

In sentence (a), present tense, that is, give was used instead of 'gives' and in sentence (b), past tense, that is, *'prepared'*, was used instead of *'prepare'*.

Indecipherable Errors

(a) She war to the olner.

(b) Batem presym sas.

These are errors that cannot be understood as they do not fall into any of the categories and they are unreadable, incomprehensible and unintelligible. The rules they contravene are not known in grammar.

Some of these errors are interwoven. For examples, wrong selection errors and wrong verb selection are similar. Errors when committed, make sentences senseless, confusing and student loose good marks (NECO, 2010).

Discussion of Findings

Findings show that indecipherable errors, which represents 33.39% of errors in the findings of this study, constitute the highest percentage of errors committed by the participants. These errors cannot be interpreted because they were not meaningful. This has semantic implications on the sentences constructed (FME, 2017) and by implication make pupils loose marks and eventual failure during examinations (NECO, 2010). One of the finding of this study which shows that wrong selection errors were second highest is similar to the findings of Shiddiq, et al (2023), which found out that concord and wrong selection of parts of speech were the most common. When words are wrongly selected, errors are committed and different meanings are read to the sentences where they appear.

Similarly, the finding of Adepoju (2004), revealed that syntactic errors were the highest committed, followed by mechanical errors. This aligns with the findings of this study which has wrong selected of words as one of the most common. When words are wrongly selected, such as wrong selection of tense or any other part of speech, syntactic errors occur. In the same vein, Adepoju (2014), discovered that syntactic errors occurred more frequently than other errors**.** In Adepoju (2004) and Adepoju (2014) the results of the studies correlate in their findings with this current study. The indecipherable errors identified in this study are errors that cannot be read and categorised. These errors make sentences where they appeared incomprehensible and by implication and extension make communication difficult.

Conclusion

The study revealed that written compositions of primary school pupils are riddled with different types of errors which make their compositions substandard and incomprehensible. The telling effects on the pupils' academic performance is poor grade or total failure in English and the ripple effects on other subjects because English is the medium of instruction which if not properly written in answering questions will make pupils to loose marks in all subjects.

Recommendations

From the findings of this study, it was discovered that in order to make pupils' compositions error free, more readable and attract good marks, it is hereby recommended that:

(a) teachers should expose pupils to written composition as early as possible;
(b) pupils be encouraged to participate in writing competitions;
(c) teachers should teach pupils rudiments of grammar to pupils;
(d) teachers should teach pupils the differences that exist between homophone, such as week/weak, alter/altar and days/daze;
(e) teachers should always give pupils regular exercises, such as spelling drills to pupils to train them;
(f) pupils' grammatical errors should be corrected by teachers immediately;
(g) teachers should be well groomed in Error and Contrastive Analyses;
(h) games should be used to teach spelling drills;
(i) vocabulary development should be properly handled; and
(j) government should encourage reading by providing more public libraries because reading is the mother of writing.

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