Treatment of Tense and Aspect Errors in the Essay Writing of Senior Secondary School Students in Osogbo Local Government Area, Osun State

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Abstract
The study investigated the treatment of tense and aspect errors in the essay writing of senior secondary school students in Osogbo Local Government Area of Osun State. The study adopted the survey research design. Simple random sampling technique was used to select 100 SS II students from five secondary schools in the Local Government Area. Students' Essay Writing Achievement Test (r=0.78) was used for data collection. Data collected were analysed using the descriptive statistics of frequency counts and percentage scores. Findings of the study revealed that that the majority 32 (32%) of students selected performed averagely in English essay writing, 58 students (58%) scored below average while the remaining ten (10%) scored above the average score. It showed that 365 (41.3%) were past tense errors, 125 (14.1%) were present tense errors while 239 (27.0%) were perfective aspect errors, while 155 (17.5%) were progressive aspect errors. It was also revealed that past tense errors (frequency= 365) appeared more frequently in students English essay writing than present tense errors (frequency=125), while perfective aspect errors (frequency=239) appeared more frequently than progressive aspect errors (17.5). Based on the findings of the study, it was recommended that teachers should devise means of reducing students' errors in essay writing by giving them feedbacks. Students should be encouraged to read grammar textbooks so as to reduce their errors in essay writing. Students should learn more on tenses and aspects.

Keywords: Tense, aspect, errors, essay writing

Introduction

The fundamental objective of the English language curriculum, like other language curriculum in Nigeria is the mastery of the four skills. Among the four skills, writing has been seen as the most difficult because it involves the act of putting down in conventional graphic form, something which has been spoken which involves the correct association of conventional graphic symbols with sounds. According to Kolawole (2003), writing skill occupies a more prominent position among other skills. It is particularly very important in academic advancement. Writing skill is an indispensable skill in all-round advancement. Writing is the act of expressing one's ideas, opinions and thoughts through the inscription of signs and symbols (Adeleye, 2016).

Muodumogu and Unwaha (2013) view writing skill as foundational to success in academics, in the work place and in the global economy. It can be concluded that writing skill is an indispensable skill in educational advancement. According to Fakeye and Ohia (2016), writing skill occupies a more prominent position among other language skills within the school system, it is very important in students' academic advancement because examinations are conducted through the medium of writing and students must be able to respond clearly to examination question through writing for them to make progress and proceed to another academic stage.

Writing is an important skill for learning to take place. Without writing, language learning remains incomplete (Elizabeth, 2004). It is an activity that humans do not acquire naturally but learn formally and consciously, irrespective of their geographical location (Ezeokoli and Igubor, 2016). According to Ahmed (2010), writing is a reflective activity that requires enough time to think about the specific topic, and to analyse and classify any background knowledge. Adegbile and Alabi (2007) assert that writing involves composing. That is, the ability to tell or retell pieces of information in the form of narrative or descriptive or to transform into new texts as in expository or argumentative essays.

A good writing skill is essential for learners because their academic performance is assessed through the medium of writing. Thus, pupils' performance in writing could affect their achievement, not only in English language as a subject but also in other subjects (Igubor, 2015). Writing as one of the major aspects of English language is tested at West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE) and National Examinations Council (NECO) SSCE in form of continuous writing which involves essay and letter writing.

Essay writing involves such practices as compiling content materials for the essay; organizing the materials into logical order (paragraphing); using appropriate expression in terms of appropriate vocabulary and sentence construction and mechanics: punctuation, capitalization, spelling and grammar (Fakeye 2002; Igbuor 2015). As a skill, essay writing types include the development of the art of writing letters, memos and minutes of meetings, articles for publications, reports and speeches. Others include description of various things, situations and experiences, narrations or accounts of happenings and presentation of reasoned persuasive thoughts.

Fakeye and Ohia (2016) assert that essay writing also requires conscious efforts and practice in composing, developing and analysing ideas. It also provides a natural outlet for the writer's reflections on a given topic. It is a form of composition whose content and organisation are guided by the topic and purpose of writing. Essay writing involves such processes as choosing the topic to write on, identifying the audience or the reader of the essay, gathering material for the essay, outlining the material, these involve organising the materials into logical order (paragraph) using appropriate expression in terms of appropriate vocabulary and sentence construction and mechanics; punctuation, capitalization, spelling and grammar (Igubor, 2015).

According to Oruche (2014), to write an essay or composition means to compose a piece of writing by carefully putting together some ideas or points which are part of a given topic. A good essay has three necessary parts: an introductory paragraph which introduces the essay and states the main points in a thesis statement, the

body which supports (shows, explains or proves) main point and support paragraphs and the concluding paragraph summarises the whole idea of the essay.

The West African Examination Council (WAEC) and National Examination Council (NECO) syllabuses 2016-2020 show that marks are allotted to different aspects of English language test as follows: Essay/letter writing, 50 marks; Comprehension, 20 marks; Summary, 30 marks making a total of 100 marks. The skill of writing is not limited to essay writing only because it is also required in the other two aspects (comprehension and summary). It means a student that lacks good writing skill will not perform as expected in all the sections of paper one which means by implication probability of such student performing well in the examination will be very low.

However, despite the importance attached to the teaching and learning of essay writing in secondary schools, it is disheartening to note that the poor achievement of students in this aspect of the English Language affects students' performance in public examinations and it has been described as the major cause of decline in the general academic achievement and standard of education in Nigeria. According to WAEC Chief Examiner's report (2016), candidates' weaknesses were mentioned which include gross violation of grammatical rules in their expression, poor spelling, wrong concord, poor knowledge of functions of clauses and inability to identify parts of speech. Similarly, WAEC Chief Examiner's report (2017) revealed that candidates didn't perform well in the examination, especially in the aspect of essay writing. The weaknesses observed include: poor expressions as a result of wrong concord, poor punctuation marks, wrong use of tenses, poor use of preposition and articles, inability to construct simple and correct sentence, spelling errors, use of SMS language. Also, WAEC Chief Examiner's report (2018), the situation did not improve. Candidates' weaknesses include poor expression, faulty analogy and concord, wrong use of tenses, poor use of conjunction, preposition and articles, lack of writing skills inability to construct simple and meaningful sentences, poor knowledge of the basic rules of English grammar.

Efforts to address the problem of students' poor performance in English language have made scholars to carry out different studies on effective strategies of teaching essay writing and addressing other teacher and student-related factors. Most of these studies came up with good insights to the teaching and learning of essay writing especially in secondary school but with less attention paid to treatment of tense and aspect errors in the essays of secondary school students. Therefore, it means that there are more to be done to solve the problems of teaching and learning of essay writing than just improving teaching strategies. It has been observed that students' weaknesses include students' wrong usage of tenses and aspects, errors of spelling and punctuation, poor expressions and wrong amalgamation.

Tense is associated with the verb where the basic contrast in meaning has to do with the location in time of the situation, or the part of it under consideration (Huddleston and Pullum, 2005). Tense stands for a verb form or a series of verb forms used to express time relations. Time vary in different languages. Tenses may indicate whether an action, activity or state is past, present or is in the future. Tenses may also indicate whether an action, activity or state is, was or will be complete, or whether it is, was or will be in progress over a period of time (King, 2000). Deurich (2005) describes English tense as having event time (which is also the time at which an event takes place), reference time (the time a situation is validated) and speech-act time (the point of time at which utterance is made). The normal, universal and therefore unmarked point of reference is the moment of speaking-speech time, what has been called the inescapable and constantly changing now in which all verbal interactions takes place.

According to Christopherson and Sandveil (1996), tense is defined as a set of grammatical forms (usually verbs) bearing some relation to the notional category of time. The category of time is common to all mankind and has nothing to do with language as such, but time may be expressed linguistically. And one way in which this is done is by the use of tense. Tense is described as distinction of form in a verb to express past, present or future time or duration of the action or state it denotes. Collinge (1990) defines tense as the relationship between the form of the verb and the time of the action or state it describes. In English, verbs may be in the past or present tense. However, the present tense form of the verb is also used in timeless expressions. The past tense form of the verb may also occur in conditional clauses. Past tense locates the time of speaking to some other time which is prior to the moment of speaking. Present tense reference is simultaneous with the moment of speaking. Past events take place before the “now”, while the future events are thought of as taking place after it.

In English, aspect has been grouped into two: perfective and imperfective (Osisanwo 1999). Ojo (2011) notes that the problem with aspect in English is the fact that, traditionally, it has always been lumped together with the tense. Aspect accounts for the manner in which the verb action is regarded or experienced or the state of completion of the action specified in the verbal group. Comrie (1976) also classified aspect into perfective and imperfective. Perfectivity involves lack of explicit reference to the internal temporal constituency of a situation, rather than explicitly implying the lack of such internal temporal constituency while imperfectivity involves explicit reference to the internal temporal structure of a situation, viewing a situation within (Comrie, 1976).

Many studies have shown that there is a strong link between tense and aspects defects and performance of students in various aspects of English language like comprehension and summary but treatment of tense and aspect errors in the essays of secondary school students has not been given much research attention. Therefore, this study treated tense and aspect errors in the essays of secondary school students in Osogbo Local Government Area of Osun State.

Statement of the Problem

Essay writing is an important aspect in English Language as credit pass in the subject is compulsory for admission into tertiary institutions in the country. However, reports have shown that students' performance in essay writing is very low. Efforts to address this

problem have made researchers to investigate students and teachers related factors. Also different strategies of teaching essay writing have been experimented. In spite of the useful insights of these studies to the teaching and learning of essay writing in secondary schools, the problem of students' poor performance in this aspect of English Language still persists. Scholars have therefore advocated a shift in research focus from teachers' teaching strategies to treatment of tense and aspect errors in the essays of secondary school students. Literature has shown that there is a strong link between tense defects and performance of students in various aspects of English language like comprehension, summary and grammar but tense defects in the essays of secondary school students has not been given much research attention. Therefore, this study investigated tense defects in the essays of secondary school students in Osogbo Local Government Area of Osun State.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What is the students' achievement in essay writing?
2. What type of tense and aspect errors do students commit in their essay writing?
3. How frequent do tense and aspect errors manifest in the students' essay writing?

Significance of Study

This study revealed the tense and aspect errors that manifest in students' essay writing. It would also help students to identify tense and aspect errors that manifest in their essays. So, they would be careful not to commit these errors when writing their essays and as a result, it would improve their performance in essay writing and English Language generally. Through the findings of this study, educational stakeholders would be guided on identifying factors that could enhance students' achievement in essay writing. Finally, the study would add to the pool of research on solution to the poor performance of students in essay writing.

Methodology

The study adopted the survey research design. Simple random sampling technique was used to select 100 SS II students from five secondary schools in the Local Government Area. Students' Essay Writing Achievement Test (r=0.78) was used for data collection. Data collected were analysed using the descriptive statistics of frequency counts and percentage scores.

Results

Research Question 1: What is the achievement of students in essay writing

Table 1: English Essay Writing Achievement Test

Level of Achievement	Frequency	Percentage
0-19 (lower achievers)	58	58%
20-39 (middle achievers)	32	32%
40-50 (higher achievers)	10	10%
Total	100	100.0

Table 1 shows the level of achievement of students in English essay writing. The table indicates that the majority 32 (32%) of students selected performed averagely in English essay writing, the table further shows that 58 students (58%) scored below average while the remaining ten (10%) of the selected students scored above the average score. This implies that majority of the selected students performed poorly in the English essay writing achievement test.

Research Question 2: What type of tense and aspect errors do students commit in their essay writing?

Table 2: Tense and aspect errors in English essay writing of the selected students

Tense errors	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Past tense error	365	41.3%
Present tense error	125	14.1%
Perfective aspect	239	27.0%
Progressive aspect	155	17.5%

The above table shows the type of tense and aspect errors committed by students selected for this study. From the finding, the total number of 884 tense errors were committed by the students, 365 (41.3%) were past tense errors, 125 (14.1%) were present tense errors while 239 (27.0%) were perfective aspect errors, while 155 (17.5%) were progressive aspect errors. This implies that most errors made by students selected were past tense and perfective aspect errors.

Research Question 3: How frequent do tense and aspect errors manifest in the essay writing of the selected students?

Table 2 also shows how frequent tense errors appear in essay writing of the selected students, past tense errors (frequency= 365) appear more frequently in students English essay writing than present tense errors (frequency=125), while perfective aspect errors (frequency=239) appear more frequently than progressive aspect errors (17.5).

Discussion of findings

Table 1 revealed that majority of the selected students performed poorly in the English essay writing achievement test. This finding may be as a result of their errors as errors always make students to lose marks in essay writing. This is in line with the study of Abdullahi and Bichi (2015) who reported that students performed below average in English essay writing. Also, Hamed and Sani (2016) found that students performed poorly in essay writing because of errors. This is against the finding of Indriati (2015) who reported that students performed well in essay writing.

Table 2 revealed that that the type of errors committed by the students selected were past tense and perfective aspect errors. This may be as a result of the fact that most students find it difficult to know when to use past tense and perfective aspect. They like to render sentences in present tense, even when they should be in pat tense, perfective aspect or progressive aspect. This finding is line with the study of Alufohia (2016) who found that most students were unable to organise their essay, most of the time; students could not differentiate between present tense and past tense. This is against the finding of Fitria (2020) who revealed predominant errors in students' essay was the future tense. Also, Hamed and Sani (2016) reported that the predominant errors committed by students in essay writing were spelling errors.

Table 2 also revealed that past tense and perfective aspect errors manifested more frequently in students' English essay writing than others. This finding is similar to the study of Fenny (2013) who revealed that the frequently committed error in the students' essay writing were past tense and perfective aspect. They used the simple present tense to refer to simple past tense. This is against the finding of Hamed and Sani (2016) who found that the frequently manifested errors in students' essay writing were spelling errors.

Conclusion

The study has shown that past tense and perfective aspect errors manifested more frequently in students' English essay writing than others. The study has provided a better understanding of tense and aspect errors that could affect students' achievement in English essay writing.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, it is therefore recommended that:

1. Teachers should devise means of reducing errors of students in essay writing by giving them feedbacks.
2. Students should be encouraged to read grammar textbooks so as to reduce their errors in essay writing.
3. Students should learn more on tenses and aspects. They need to know that the two (tenses and aspects) cannot be used interchangeable
4. Government should ensure that certified and qualified graduates are employed to teach essay writing.
5. Teachers of English Language should be exposed to periodic workshops, seminars and conferences where they could be exposed to various instructional strategies that will help in reducing students' errors in essay writing.

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