
*SYNTACTIC ERRORS IN ESSAY WRITINGS AMONG
SELECTED SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS FROM
URBAN GIRLS SECONDARY SCHOOL, EKWULOBIA,
AGUATA LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA*

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Abstract

English Language is a great historical bequest inherited by Nigeria from the colonial masters. The language swiftly found its place in all levels of administration in government, schools, media and inter-ethnic integration in Nigeria. Despite this conspicuous position occupied by the language in Nigeria, it has been assailed by myriad of grammatical-syntactic errors which give navigation, purpose and aim to this research. The researcher used syntax, particularly Chomsky's phrase structure grammar as theoretical frame work. The researcher adopted combined methods of universal and classroom observation by Skinner (1965), and purposive sampling by Bernard (2002), as methods of data collection. The researcher also used descriptive grammar as method of data analysis Ndimele (2008). Through this research, the researcher found out that Grammatical-syntactic errors emerge in two forms: intra-linguistic errors and inter-linguistic errors, having the former heavily linked to mother tongue interference and the latter linked to the student's over-generalization, over confidence and wrong assumption due to inadequate knowledge in the target language. Beside the usual grammatical and lexicon errors investigated by most researcher's, Discourse errors, a latent error dimension was scratched open by the researcher along side with mechanical errors in grammar; and the need to curtail the influx of both American and British standards of English in one piece of essay. **Keywords:** Essay, Errors, Syntactic, Writing, School

INTRODUCTION

The significance and impact of English language in Nigeria is overwhelming due to the conspicuous position it occupies ranging from national functions in politics, economy, broadcasting, administration to interpersonal communication that culminates into the present harmonious cross-cultural integration we enjoy in the polity called Nigeria. According to Adegbite and Akindele (2002), there exist about five hundred languages in Nigeria from about two hundred ethnic groups. This factual assertion presents the most chaotic multilingual language situation capable of causing a great friction in the wheel of mutual intelligibility. The emergence of English language as *Lingua Franca* in Nigeria saves the day as varying incongruous tribes could freely communicate despite linguistic disparity. This colossal and incredible function English Language performs in Nigeria hikes the desire for effective proficiency by every Nigerian in English Language. In Nigeria today, the level to which respect is accorded in any given social event is proportionate to the speaker's level of grammar. This is evident in public linguistic analysts coming up with great analytic criticism after a presentation or speech by any prominent person, the president not excluded. All these roles played by English Language, touching almost all facets of lives in Nigeria makes it a treasured diamond searched by all to sound prestigious. This quest makes syntax, the most important part of grammar, the fore stepping stone to competency in English. This problematic aspect of grammar forms the hub of this research.

English Language is like a vast ocean that cannot be traversed overnight. It is always a process that must be followed to be a good orator, article and essay writer. In the present dispensation, attention is erroneously turned to spoken English thereby making speakers of English that are linguistically incompetent but communistically competent. Chomsky (1965) observed that linguistic competence (which goes with the grammar of a Language) precedes communication competence which is the actual utilization of the linguistic knowledge acquired in a social linguistic event. This means that, for a person to achieve communicational competence he must first, as a matter of necessity, be linguistically

competent (knowing the rules of the language which goes with grammar).

The word 'grammar' is a multi-ambiguous word that has attracted varying but related observations. To Tomori (2005), the word grammar could refer to the entirety of the knowledge of a language a language speaker processes; it could be a book consisting of the morphological and syntactic rules of a language; it could be a descriptive statements about the morphological and syntactic structure of a given language; it could be prescriptive statements concerning senses that are seen as acceptable and those considered unacceptable in particular language. This research is not coming from the idiolect dimension because attention is on acceptability and non-acceptability in relation to concord and syntactic assessment and analysis. This, the fourth description of grammar is very instrumental to this work.

The researcher carried out this research out of passion to edify secondary School students to better their grammar devoid of errors both from lexical perspective and grammar wise. Grammar is the bedrock of every language.

The researcher buys the idea of Chomsky when he relates language to a progressive activity in acquisition and learning, flowing from linguistic competence to communicative competence. This means that a speaker should first know the rules of a language before he can effectively communicate in that language without erring or bumping into errors. It is not news to re-echo the fact that mass failure resonates through Nigeria of recount in NECO, WAEC, JAMB and other national and official examinations due to poor knowledge of grammar. This problem that has resulted in mass examination malpractices in Nigeria motivated the researcher to synergize in this direction to salvage the situation so that students could effectively write their exams in confidence and come out victorious with distinctions in their use of English. This research is not only necessary and useful to English language students, it will transcend to other disciplines as almost every course is taught in English.

A lot has been done on this research, especially from the lexical aspect of grammar regarding spelling errors. Other researchers

have also considered this research from syntactic perspective just like the one at hand but narrowed investigation mostly to concord and mother tongue interference. This research goes beyond concord agreement. It first considers the error at lexical level, at punctuation level, at phrase level, at sentence level and at discourse level. This shows that this research is all encompassing, touching new areas (like punctuation) that other earlier researchers failed to cover. The research also takes note of the disparities that exist between American lexicons and expressions and its British counterpart which gives an addendum of knowledge to the students as to how to write without involving the both standards at a go.

One salient fact most students fail to realize is their wrong conception as to what grammar means. Most people tie grammar to heavy lexical items possessed by a speaker. Thus, when you array hard dictions to semi-literate, or worst, literate people, you will be applauded as a great speaker with good grammar without any little assessment as to obedience to syntactic rules. This lopsided understanding of grammar, singularly from

the word perspective activates this research to broaden knowledge on the subject. This work sets out as a strategy to marry hard lexicon with proper usage as they combine in a given linguistic situation in the most syntactic norm to make meaning, the end product of every communicative product.

Over eight articles investigated, which are reviewed under theoretical review for this work ponder heavily on mother tongue (language one) as the major cause of syntactic errors amongst students which is true to an extent. The researchers under review fail to take the learning environment, learning materials and resources; the availability of qualified and competent teachers into consideration which this research considers as a causative factor that brings about the knowledge in concord, in particular and grammar at large. This research takes note of most of the contributive factors responsible for errors that move abreast secondary students which will be re-emphasized under suggestion and recommendation in this work.

Statement of the Problem

The major problem of this research therefore is to discover the syntactic errors in the written essays of S.S. II students of Urban Girls' Secondary School Ekwulobia, the sources of such errors, analyse the errors and give suggestions on how best to eliminate or reduce the occurrence of such errors.

Purpose of the Study

This work sets to analytically investigate and describe the abundance of errors committed by secondary school students as found in the Essays collected and sampled from the targeted population for this research. The research also sets to define the problems after identification and proffer a navigation to curtail the various syntactic errors that lead to poor performance and failure recorded in our secondary schools evident in their national examination results.

Research Questions

- 1) What are the syntactic errors amongst secondary school student?
- 2) How frequent are these errors
- 3) What are the solutions to grammatical syntactic errors amongst secondary school students?

- 4) How could these errors amongst secondary school learners of English be improved on?

REVIEW OF RELEVANT SCHOLARSHIP

This section presents a comprehension review of exiting literature on the subject matter under study. This review was however thematically divided; capturing the conceptual framework, theoretical framework, empirical review, and summary of reviewed relevant scholarship.

Conceptual Framework

This chapter reviews some of the views of previous researchers on the relevant concepts that form the back bone of this research. The theoretical frameworks on which this study anchors are examined as well as the empirical studies. These efforts are necessary as they will held the researcher broaden that knowledge on the important issues that relate to the work so as to ascertain the sate of the art and situate the work in its proper context.

Theoretical Framework

Theory of Error Analysis

Error analytic theory by Kotsyuk (2015) is adopted for this work. This work covers a vast aspect of language as it touches grammar, on a general view, and syntax as the base of analysis. This research concentrates on the structure of English as it is regularly utilized in written essays by secondary school students. Rogers, (2008), relates syntax, as a theory, to generative grammar. To him, grammar formalism provides a general mechanism for the recognition or generating of languages while grammar itself specializes on that mechanism and rules for a specific language. This work focuses on syntax as theoretical framework in relation to English Language. This theory is expanded to touch other relevant linguistic aspects from the lexical and mechanical perspective to the main, structural and discourse perspective. Thus, the researcher will plod a little into morphology and formalism since a little attention is given to words and punctuations in terms of grammaticality and ungrammaticality. Also, a leap is made to discourse analysis as the researcher scratches open a new dimension of error analysis – discourse error, to show how structural errors

gives rise to discourse error and meaning misplacement. The researcher takes note of some lexicons employed from the syntactic-morphological perspective to create a gap between the two standards of English Language to manage erroneous influx into the two language standards.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This aspect encompasses the research style and elegance. Descriptive Research Design is befittingly selected for this work. It is a form of research design that described observable characteristics of the individual, texts subject or object of the study, COOU PGS Research methodology (2017)

The various grammatical-syntactic errors are descriptively classified and hierarchically arranged after the classroom investigation and data collection. The various classes of errors discovered are stylistically arranged classified and review with solutions, in different tables. Another table is made available after the whole review to contain the intensive application of the two standards of English at a go i.e the American and the British standards, for clarification and further

research, the research attached an appendix containing the various Essays collected and reviewed.

Population of the Study

Drawing from the research design, it is clear that the research is pragmatic and involves classroom investigation. A class of 50 students, particularly SS 2 student is used as population for this research. The whole fifty Essays written by the students, on the topic: The Causes of Mass Failure in WAEC, NECO, JAMB and other O level examinations were gathered; twenty Essays were purposefully selected at random for review, analysis and presentation.

Sampling Technique

This research involves field work. The data is generated from the SS2 students, urban secondary school, Ekwulobia. The Essays collected are further subjected to scrutiny and twenty viable ones were picked for the research at random.

Sources of Data

The researcher used physical results collected from the classroom- The students Essay, no

further interview is conducted from the preliminary universal investigation carried out to assert the writing capacity and ability of the students. Also no questionnaire is issued for review

Method of Data Collection

In terms of data collection, the researcher employs a joint method of Bernards (2002), purposive sampling technique, which involves an approach to data collection that sources only relevant data to the work at hand; and Skinner's (1965) universal and classroom investigative method. While Skinner's method is employed for the classroom assessment and data collection, Bernards purposive method is adopted for data selection and sampling

Method of Data Analysis

To enhance clarity and full shape data analysis and presentation for this work, the researcher hinges on descriptive method of data analysis by Ndimele (2008). This is an approach to grammar study that seeks to account for the way the speakers of a language actually use their language without any reference to an approved standard or the grammatical structure of another language.

To achieve this, the researcher describes the in the collected data, classifying them, solving various grammatical-syntactic errors as found the problems with fruitful suggestions.

RESULTS

Research Question 1: What are the syntactic errors amongst secondary school students?

S/N	Error Identification	Error Description and Classification	Error Correction
1.	Can be said to be various ways	Error of omission of ' in'	.. can be said to be in various ways
2.	Various ways or reasons that contributes	Error of addition of unnecessary element/verb agreement.	Various ways or reasons that contribute...
3.	There are many reasons to that;	Punctuation error	There a re many reasons to that:
4.	...to read at all both in schools and in homes.	Error of misplacement/addition of unnecessary element.	...to read at both in school and at home.
5.	Firstly laziness on the part of the students. The inability to read at all both in schools and in homes. The act of.	Punctuation error	Firstly, laziness on the part of the students: the inability to read at all both in schools and at home; the act of...
6.	Not attending lessons during class period.	Error of redundancy	Not attending classes.
7.	In school	Error of omission	In schools
8.	The laboratories in schools... tends to	Error of verb agreement.	The laboratories in schools...tend to.
9.	Secondly, poor reading habit. This simply means the inability...	Punctuation error	Secondly, poor reading habit: this simply means the inability...
10.	... a given comprehension or passage even novel booklets.	Error of misordering/discourse	... a given comprehension, passage or novels.
11.	Students are not eager to comprehend what they have read the first simply re-read, or revise it the second time you will actually see.	Punctuation/omission/discourse errors.	Students are not eager to comprehend what they have read. They have to first re-read or revise it the second time to actually understand...
12.	...and who you wants to be...	Error of verb agreement.	...and who you want to be...
13.	Mingle with people who knows...	Error of verb agreement.	Mingle with people who know...
14.	..planet earth, because while waiting...	Punctuation error.	...Planet earth because, while waiting...

15.	Not heeding to advice especially when..	Punctuation error	Not heeding to advice, especially...
16.	They says...	Error of verb agreement	They say...
17.	Take advices	Error of addition of unnecessary element.	Take advice.
18.	The least but not the last prayer	Error of misordering /punctuation	The last but not the least, prayer.
19.	Leave the rest to God. For God helps those who help themselves.	Punctuation error	Leave the rest to God for God helps those who help themselves.
20.	Few weeks to the exam	Error of addition of definite article.	Few weeks to exam.
21.	Students should adopt or making reading habit their hobby.	Tense error of addition	Students should adopt or make reading habit their hobby.
22.	Come rain come sunshine read always. Never wait till.	Punctuation error	Come rain come sunshine, read always, never wait till...

Research Question 2: How frequent are these errors?

The errors are frequent and are hierarchically arrange in the error tables.

S/N	Error Identification	Error Description and Classification	Error Correction
1.	... and other O level examinations	Punctuation error and other O' level examinations
2.	Majority of student...	Error of omission of plural markers and the error of omission of the definite article	The majority of students..
3.	Also poor education standards in addition to the two.	Discourse error	In addition to the two causes given, poor educational standards also contribute...
4.	In all the countries that takes	Error of verb agreement	In all the countries that take...
5.	Is nothing to write home about Nigeria is even...	Punctuation error	is nothing to write home about, Nigeria is even...
6.	Tertiary education in the education in the country.	Discourse error	Tertiary education in the country

7.	This has made the standard of learning to decreases	Error of addition	This has made the standard of learning to decrease.
8.	Moreover, social media: I am one of those...	Discourse error	More so, social media is one of the causes of failure in examination to which I am a proponent.
9.	... has done more bad to students than good this is...	Punctuation error	... has done more harm to students than good. This is...
10.	The truth is the most of them...	Error of misplacement	The truth is that most of them...
11.	I have said it time and again.	Error of omission	I have said it times and again.
12.	The materials one uses to prepare... goes a long way...	Error of verb agreement	The material one uses to prepare... goes a long way.
13.	Every jamb candidates must...	Error of addition	Every jamb candidate must...
14.	They includes	Error of verb agreement	They include
15.	WAEC is now every wise.	Error of misplacement	WAEC is now very wise
16.	It is impossible for candidate to pass their examination through examination.	Error of omission	It is impossible for candidates to pass their examination through malpractices.
17.	Many student WAEC examination because...	Discourse error/omission	Many students fail WAEC examination because...
18.	About 5% of student...	Error of omission	About 5% of students...
19.	Today students care more about finding a way.	Punctuation error	Today, students care more about finding a way.

Research question 3: What are the solutions to syntactic errors among secondary school students?

Considering the height of error recorded in researcher porters the following solution: Our just one school particularly SS II alone, the Secondary school system should be reshaped

to involve more external investigator order than the usual ' eye service ones that come barely once a year from the ministry of education, to critically inspect and pragmatically check the educational standards of teachers handling delicate subject like English secondary schools. This inspection should be in the classroom, to consider and advise on the best teaching methods to be used to achieve better result.

More attention should be given to English in eth curriculum and the school time table to multiply and allocate more periods to English language study. Teachers should also take note of the problematic areas in English which error features predominantly.

Research Question 4: How could these errors amongst secondary school learners of English be improved on.

The errors could be improved on by taking careful note on students area of weaknesses in error and work on it under the guidance of a good teacher, though in Nigeria we mostly have English teachers that are mostly partially linguistically competent but communicationally incompetent due to

mother tongue interference and deficiency in phonetics and phonology.

DISCUSSION

On a general scale more than fifteen essays out of the fifty essay collected are completely below readability. That is, you cannot read through any of the sentences comprehensively, that is if there are sentences at all, because of abundance of error. It is

unbelievable that SSII students that are expected to write WAEC and other National examinations in less than a year ahead could not construct a good simple sentence. To mention but a handful, Ifunanya Magbo has an essay that is incredible in this category; every of her sentence is error personified.

Thus, you see sentence structures like, student lack concentration, they beginning of downfall, some things teachers and..., time to no how read they book, supervisor will saw such, there is an adage read the book, pop more knowledge acquiring your desire, for der more, moretonezd... when you child is going faurther..., etc. Ezenwanne Chinemerem is another terrible error personified student as it' s found all over his work. Thus, you see excerpts like: the causes

mass of failure, and student mind they believe in miracle, which makes students loses so much neverue through the education towards the eradication of the school will never think of enggang in it, bad reputet, impotency brain damage one retrace his/her step, to prevent and totally avadieate this social vice, public enlistment seminary family training, punishment and havy fine fie people and above all players etc. This is the most horrible discovery that is quite disheartening as one wonders how this set of students manage to arrive at SSII safely without any ' road block' to make them repeat right from their primary education. This is necessary because some primary six students could write something better compared to the garbage of unreadability presented by these students. The ones given above are just a mint from the ocean of errors contained in many other essays that are almost unreadable. One could imagine how they will manage to pass their WAEC and NECO, and how they will cope in the university because such products are found in our modern university as they miraculously pass their WAEC and NECO and JAMB more than the serious students

often. This is unbelievable but it' s happening as most parents hire machineries to come forward and clear the papers for their wards for money.

Another discovery made is that, all the students are found guilty of error; even the best essay still contains more than five errors as seen in the works of Okafor Chinecherem and Arinze Chiamaka Promise. None of the students comes out neat. The assessment is not a critical one as spelling error is not amplified in data analysis and presentation if not, this research could go over two hundred pages.

Another great finding made during this research is that the students have bad knowledge of English phonology as none of them has an average of the recommended accent to articulate words properly. Thus, most of them ended up writing speak in our native languages which contributed greatly to their failure. This is found in words like ' reat' for' read' by Martins Chioma, ' universities' for unnecessary by Umeokoi Osinachi Juliet. This aspect is related to speech errors thus would be given little attention.

Another huge discovery, which serves as the remote cause of the students failure is indiscipline; though this is directly unconnected with this work but far relevant. During the universal data collection at the preliminary stage, it takes high level of serious efforts to calm the students down for the assessment to be conducted. The students seem to be at their discretion behaving the way they, want finding it so difficult to take instruction.

Most researchers reviewed under empirical review point to the fact that error, in their respective area of investigations, are traced to mother tongue interference (ie language one affecting language two) through transfer of some needless elements from language one into the targeted language. In this research, reverse appears to be the case as the hierarchical classification of the errors in percentage range proves otherwise. Error of misordering/misplacement appears highest as it appears in 56 places with the highest percentage of 25%. It is followed by error of omission of some necessary and needful elements which appears in 49 places with a percentage of 23%. Punctuation errors follow

with a record of 47 appearance at a percentage of 18%. 36 verb/concord agreement errors are recorded with a percentage of 14%. It is followed by error of discourse. Discourse errors appear in 31 places at a percentage of 12.5%. It is followed by error of addition of unnecessary elements which appears in 19 places at a percentage of 6%. It is followed by tense error with a record of 6 appearances at a percentage of 2%. It is followed by error of redundancy which appears in 4 places at a percentage 1.5%. Mother tongue interference comes last with an appearance only in 2 places at a percentage 1%. This shows that environment, speakers and the relationship between L₁ and L₂ determine the level to which transfer is possible. The low record could be due to the fact that students are becoming more aware of the vast distinction and gap that stands between their mother tongue and the English language – targeted language, and the need to study and use them independently.

Another great discovery is, the students are not exposed to essay writing thus lack the requisite knowledge of how essay should be written and how points, related points should

be discussed in different paragraphs that should start with a topic sentence to wrap up with what the writer will be discussing in each paragraph. Only two students come up to introduce their essay before going into detailed discussion that is not properly and coherently arranged into defined paragraphs. This is still another area that needs great attention to salvage our writing culture as social life on social media encroaches gradually.

The use of complex dictions to impress is another finding the researcher makes in the course of this research. Most students resort to bombardment, employing words they don't fully know the meaning with the mindset to impress the examiner which in turn makes their work aimless as most of them wonder away from the point due to the meanings behind the words they employ. The essay of Ezundu Oluchi is a perfect example she uses words that are semantically incongruous to what she tries to say or emphasis thus saying one thing but meaning another thing.

Recommendations

The researcher recommends, as a matter of urgency, that the 'Pharaoh let my people go' pattern of insensate promotion in secondary school be stopped. Any student that is not up to average at the end of every third terms should be forced to repeat the class. This is because of the discovery made during the research that more than 15 essays written by SS II students are completely senseless due to abundance of error, and comparable to that written by primary three. One wonders how comes. It is discovered during the research that students in public schools are hardly graded and that every student is given promotion at the end irrespective of whether they pass or not thus making them to be too free and lazy. This accounts for the general failure recorded in public schools of recent. The researcher recommends intra school and inter-school essay competition on error related topics to kindle and rekindle the students consciousness with regards to error for them to learn and correct their mistakes in the process.

The researcher also recommends an academic symposium for teachers in English language to come together, minimum three times a

year, to debate on critical teaching competence among teachers as every teacher must come with a seminar to be presented which should be published into academic journals for other teachers to learn. By so doing, competent teachers will sprout to bring sanity in the academic sphere in terms of error in English as it will reflect in students performance.

The researcher also recommends a severe punishment for examination malpractices prior to secondary school final year examinations. Any student caught in the act of cheating during third term promotion examination should be expelled to discourage the students from such acts which in turn will make them to become serious in their academic which will drastically motivate them to go a long way to reducing error and malpractices in our secondary schools.

Conclusion

An investigation into error analysis as it related to English language usage in secondary schools is quite an interesting one. This research titled Grammatical-Syntactic analysis of errors among secondary school students exhaustively presents and analyses

the various data purposefully selected for the work by identification of the various errors and classifying them ranging from error of addition, error of omission, discourse error, error of redundancy, error of misordering, verb agreement error, mother tongue interference induced errors, to discourse error; the research also corrects the errors in chapter four. The researcher gives a good

background to the study, stating the problems that leads to the investigation, build edible and related research questions drawn from the problems, arrays some goals and objectives under the purpose of the study given, outlines some benefits and significance of the work and state the scope of the study and delimitation in chapter one. The researcher reviews related scholarships in chapter two from three dementias: the conceptual review, the theoretical framework employed for the research and the empirical review. Chapter three of this work is dedicated to methodology consisting of research design population of the study instrument for data collection, sambaing technique validity of instrument method of data collection and method of data analysis while chapter five discusses the

findings during the research, offer some suggestions and recommends the way out of the problems, which are all summed up in the conclusion.

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