RESEARCH ARTICLE

ISSUES AND CHALLENGES IN TEACHING AND LEARNING OF ENGLISH IN TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS: A CASE STUDY OF KOGI STATE COLLEGE OF EDUCATION (TECHNICAL), KABBA

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the issues and challenges associated with the teaching and learning of English language in tertiary institutions with particular attention on Kogi State College of Education (Technical), Kabba. The data for the research were culled from students' continuous assessment and examinations conducted by the writers of this paper over a period of time and conversations in and around the campus. There are several conversations, but the study uses few for its analysis. However, the few cut across different issues that reflect the grammatical behaviour of the students involved and by extension, an average Nigerian student. The paper asserts that both teachers and learners of English face challenges Grammar plays a vital role and the users' mastery of it determines their competence and performance in the Language. The college is made up of heterogeneous population; there is also the problem of Language transfer, which results in Interlingua errors based on the interference theory. In addition, the paper also discusses the factors that make teaching and learning of English language a challenge. It concludes by proffering possible solutions and or recommendations to the various issues and challenges identified in the study.

INTRODUCTION

Studies have shown that second language learners of English in Nigeria often perform poorly in language tasks such that their performance falls below the required standard (Boadi *et al* (1968), Mohammed (1995), Omamor (2003) and Lamidi (1996). Hence, teaching and learning English language in a Nigerian based institution is a challenge because English is a second language if not third, so to speak, to most if not all Nigerian students. The mastery of it may be difficult since the mother tongue tends to interfere with English and may even suppress it sometime. As a result of this mother tongue interference, different students can have different difficulties and problems in their learning process. For example, they can make different mistakes in pronunciation, grammar, and orthography and vocabulary usage. This is because there is a connection between the native language of a learner and particular difficulties in learning and using English and the kind of mistakes a learner typically makes. This is technically referred to as native language interference. Larsen-freeman and Long (1991:: 53)

From a number of continuous assessment and examinations conducted by the writers of this paper for the students over a period of time a number of errors and deviant forms in language use have been noticed. One major area where learners of English make many mistakes is in agreement relations. Agreement, otherwise called concord, is a major component of sentences in a language. It consists of the feature of person, gender and number (Marantz (1995:365) and tense (Odejide *et al* (1999:236) Quirk and Greenbaum (1979). The agreement features of English are so elaborate and complex that they may constitute an herculean task to second language learners of English. Thus Ebira or Igala L1 speakers, whose language's agreement features are less elaborate may find the acquisition of the agreement features of English a daunting task, and feature of Ebira or Igala may interfere with those of English in language usage.

The following questions are apposite

1. Why do learners mix up English genders, using he instead of she or vice versa?
2. Why do learners have problems with subject-verb concord, especially in the areas of notional concord and proximity rule?
3. Why do learners mix up their tenses in complex or compound sentences?

In what follows, we try to provide answers to these questions. We first discuss the notion of grammar.

The Notion of Grammar

The word 'grammar' in present-day linguistic studies has at least two important meanings. We say that a speaker knows the grammar of his language. He usually does not know it consciously unless he has special training in linguistics, he cannot talk confidently about the nature of his grammar.

A grammar in this first sense comprises the linguistic knowledge speakers possess which enables them to communicate in their language. The second sense of the word has to do with the grammatical rules that govern a language and this has been defined as the whole system and structure of a language or of languages in general, usually taken as consisting of syntax and morphology (including inflections) and sometimes also phonology and semantics.

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Boadi, *et al* (1968) and identify and discuss four types of meanings related with grammar. First, grammar is the quality of the knowledge of a language that a speaker has; that is, the speaker's competence in the use of a given language like English, Igala, Ebira, and Yoruba and so forth. Second, the term grammar is used to mean a book that spells out the morphological and syntactic rules of a particular language. Morphology is the study of the structure of word; that is, the study of the rules governing the formation of words in a language. Syntax on the other hand is the study of the rules governing the formation of linguistic units larger than the words. These linguistic units include phrases, clauses, sentences and paragraph. So any book that explains all these and helps learners to understand such language is known as grammar book (Kuiper, *et al* 1996).

Third, grammar is also used to mean the descriptive statements about the structures of a language. By structures we mean the morphological and syntactic structures. This is where we talk about expression as being grammatical or ungrammatical depending on whether or not such expression confirms with the pattern inherent in that language.

Finally, grammar is used to refer to the body of prescriptive statement about usages that are considered acceptable and those that are not acceptable in a given language. Each language has agreed norms this last definition of grammar means that one does not deviate from the agreed norms. At this point, we can define grammar as the art of speaking and writing correctly. The greatest challenge learners have in Kogi State College of Education (Technical) Kabba is with grammar of English especially the rules of concord or agreement, some of which are discussed below (Kuiper, *et al* 1996).

Concord Relation

The term 'concord' in grammar refers to the agreement relations that hold between components of a sentence such relations occur:

1. between subject and the verb;
2. between the subject and its complement;

Agreement in this sense means that there should be a form of correspondence in person, number, gender, tense and case among the different components of the sentence. We shall consider some of these presently. For example, Person agreement refers to the syntactic features of an NP with which verbs in the sentence must agree. In this sense, an NP (especially pronouns) can be in the first, second or third person forms (Kuiper and Allan, 1996: 226). The first person refers to the speaker; the second, the person being addressed and the third, the person or thing being discussed. When NPs occur in any of these forms in English, the verb (whether auxiliary or main) agrees with it. However, what we observed is that many students deviate from the norms in their spoken and written English as in the following:

Subject Verb Agreement

In subject-verb agreement, it is expected that the subject of a verb should agree in number with the verb such that when the NP is singular the verb is singular and when the NP is plural the verb is plural as in the following:

A singular subject takes a singular verb and vice versa.

1a.   The man have travelled to U.K.

1b.   The man has travelled to U.K.

2a. Titi play tennis.
2b. Titi plays tennis.

A conjoined/compound subject which has singular meaning as well as the one that refers to the same person will take a singular verb. This is another area where learners need to be on guard. For instance, when a compound subject has a singular meaning or referent, the verb should be singular. See the examples below:

3a.   Bread and butter are my favorite breakfast.
3b.   Bread And Butter is my favorite breakfast.
4a.   My lecturer and friend like me.
4b.   My lecturer and friend likes me.
4c.   our lecturer and HOD are here.
4d.   our lecturer and HOD is here.

In 4a&c, the speaker or writer misconstrued the compound subject as two different individuals. Since there is no second modifier before 'friend' and 'HOD', the seemingly compound subject in each case should be treated as singular.

When either or, or neither nor is used with the subject of a sentence, the verb agrees in number with the second noun.

5a.   Neither the rector nor the members of staff likes the new policy.
5b.   Neither the rector nor the members of staff like the new policy

A subject in plural form but with singular meaning will take a singular verb.

6a.   The news are good.
6b.   The news is good

When the subject is followed by as well as, together with, apart from in conjunction with, accompany by, with,

7a.   The girl together with the boys live in Ibadan.
7b.   The girl together with the boys lives in Ibadan.
8a.   Lawrence, as well as his wife, were proud.
8b.   Lawrence, as well as his wife, was proud.

When the subject is an indefinite pronoun, the verb must be singular:

9a.   Everybody want a well paid job.
9b.   Everybody wants a well paid job.
10a.   Nobody like to be cheated.
10b.   Nobody likes to be cheated.

When the subject refers to length of time, distance, amount of money, weight etc, the subject is singular.

11a.   Ten miles have been covered in the journey.
11b.   Ten miles has been covered in the journey.
12a.   One of the cars are mine
12b.   One of the cars are mine
13a.   One of my students were given an award last year.
13b.   One of my students was given an award last year.

The 'a' part of each of the above example is grammatically wrong while the 'b' part is not. Each example in 'b' is a statement written or said by either a student or a lecturer. The error in each case is that of agreement between the subject and its predicate. Obviously the speaker(s) are influenced mostly by their mother tongue since most Nigerian languages do not

inflect for plural on their verbs. The speaker simply carries this over to English language which results in error (s).

Tense Agreement

The tenses in English language used on verbs in a sentence need to agree with one another (Lamidi, 2004). This is technically called parallelism in English. This is the situation in which the tense sequence in English requires that verbs in a compound or complex sentence have the same tense (Odejide *et al*., 1999:255). However, there are certain exceptions which may be problematic for L2 learners of English. The rules are the following:

The verb of the embedded clause can be in the present tense if the Claus expresses some universal or habitual facts

14a. We hear that the rector travels monthly.
14b.We heard that the rector travels monthly.

15a.I learn from the Geography class that the world was round.
15b.I learnt from the Geography class that the world is round.

The speaker b of each example did not apply the exception to the rule of parallelism discussed earlier. Hence, he used the past tense of verb while talking about universal truth. Teacher needs to make conscious effort to teach this exception.

Person Agreement

Person agreement refers to the syntactic features of an NP with which verbs in the sentence must agree. In this sense, and NP (especially pronouns) can be in the first, second or third person forms (Kuiper and Allan, 1996: 226). The first person refers to the speaker; the second, the person being addressed and the third, the person or thing being discussed. When NPs occur in any of these forms in English, the verb (whether auxiliary or main) agrees with it as in the following:

16a   I am ready
b.   You are ready
c.   He is ready
17a   I like Mathematics.
17b.   You like Mathematics.
18.   He likes Mathematics.

The verbs in (16) are linking verbs (copulas), while like in (17) is a transitive verb. The pronoun in (16a) is in the 1st person singular and the verb differs accordingly. In (16b) You is assumed to be the second person plural and so agrees with the plural verb are. He in (c) is a third person singular pronoun and takes the singular verb is which agrees with it. The situation is different in (17) which despite the different person status I and You still has the same form of the verb like. The only difference is in the third person singular which has an inflection on likes. The onus lies on the learner of English to note this distinction and master the rules. The learner has to know whether all copulas, say words lke become can be treated like the verb be.

Verbs in most Nigerian languages are invariant whenever they occur with different NPs in different persons. That is why a Nigerian speaker of English language could commit the following errors:

18a.   I reads every day.
18b.   I read every day.

19a.   he read every day.
19b.   he reads every day.
20a.   Everybody

As these examples show, verbs in most Nigerian languages are invariant whenever they occur with different NPs in different persons. This accounts for most of the errors being committed by students because they carry over the knowledge of mother tongue to English language. It follows that Nigerian learners of English must learn each English verb with it peculiarities and apply this knowledge to the rules of agreement as it concerns the pronouns.

Gender Agreement

"Gender agreement on words is perceived as the concord relation holding between entities that share the same gender" (Lamidi, 1996). Gender is assumed to be in three forms namely masculine, feminine and neuter (or neutral) (Freeborn, 1996:72). Although, these are not morphologically realized on nouns, gender distinctions are inherent in words such as king, boy and lion (masculine); queen, girl and lines (feminine); and child, parent and spoon (neutral). Nevertheless, pronouns in English show these distinctions. However, Nigerian languages do not show distinction in gender, especially on pronouns. This informs the following erros:

21a.   He blamed herself.
21b.   He blamed himself.
22a.   She corrected himself.
22b.   She corrected herself.
23a.   Olu broke her leg.
23b.   Olu broke his leg.

In these examples, the reflexives in A's do not agree in gender with the subject of each sentence. In contrast to the English structures in B's above, many Nigerian languages have no gender specification of pronoun though the distinctions are inherent in such nouns that refer to the three genders.
This explains why learners of English make mistakes on gender distinctions saying he when they mean she or vice versa.

Number Agreement

Number refers to the quantity of an NP in an expression. Words can be singular or plural. This is usually reflected on English NP s by plural affixes such as –es, -s, -ies and zero morpheme. What we observed in our data is that there are many errors of subject-verb concord especially in the area of third person singular. This is because in many Nigerian languages whether the NP is singular or plural as in verb and its auxiliary remain uninflected. The same is also true of pronouns irrespective of whether they are singular or plural. It follows that the errors of subject-verb concord especially in the area of third person singular emanate from the mother tongue interference.

Scarcity of Professional English Teachers

Most of the problems encountered by students in the tertiary institutions are a carryover from the secondary schools due to lack of trained English teachers at the grass-root level. In most cases history and Government teachers are used as make up device to teach English. If teachers of English are many; students will be motivated to learn.

Inadequate Learning Period

In every school, the time allocated to the teacher of English is not more than six hours per week. This is quite low compare to the importance of this subject and considering the fact that many learners do not have good foundation in the language from their various homes where L1 is dominant. Hence more time will be required to enhance greater contact with the language.

Limited Linguistic Materials

In Nigeria, where English is a second language the learners usually face the problems of sparse and artificial language materials. This has no doubt affected learning and teaching. The text books used are usually filled with illustrations drawn from a non-native to teach English language may not always be of help in a second language environment.

Problem of Transition

A child who developed from babyhood to childhood with a mother tongue may find it difficult to adapt to the new system that school offers. That is, if a child grew up speaking any of the Nigerian language like Ebira, Igala or Yoruba he may find it challenging to transit from the home-language to the school language. The point is that the expected systematic and smooth transition from the home to school is always lacking and this problem may linger to the tertiary institutions as we have it in Kogi State College of Education Kabba.

Implications for English Language (Grammar) Teaching and Learning

KGSCOE (T), Kabba students do not always perform to expectation of English teachers. This is because the significance and causes of problems discussed so far have serious implication for teaching and learning English Language (grammar in particular). Concord errors impair the intelligibility of both the spoken and written forms of English, hence the need to eliminate or at least minimize their occurrence. For effective communication, therefore, the two practical criteria of intelligibility and acceptability must be met. The language teacher has a herculean task ahead of him in the attainment of effective communication. He must, for a start, be proficient in the target language; he must possess apt content and pedagogical skills if effective teaching is desired. All the same, learners' errors could be minimized if they are exposed to the target language early enough. The treatment of grammatical errors should be carried out with all seriousness.

The misapplication of rules of the target language, which often leads to intra-lingual errors, can be minimized if such rules are positively presented to learners from the inception-right from the primary school level, even from home owing to the fact that English language is the Language of Wider Communication (LWC) and it performs many functions in Nigeria. It is the language that brings people from different ethnic groups together.

In fact, it is the Nigeria Lingua Franca because it cements bound between Nigerians of different ethnic groups. Therefore, it is expedient that the issues and challenges in teaching and learning of English in tertiary institutions be taken seriously.

CONCLUSION

Problems in the English grammar can be minimized through teachers' and learners' commitment to the task of teaching and learning. The art of spelling can be perfected through constant practice and reading. Learners should be encouraged to cultivate the habit of constant use of the dictionary when in doubt about spelling of any word. Apart from the consent and pedagogical skills which teachers must acquire they must acknowledge the inestimable role of motivation in second language learning. This task can only be accomplished by competent teachers who are conversant with modern trends in language teaching.

Recommendations

Having considered the various issues and challenges in teaching and learning of English in tertiary institutions, it is strongly recommended that a learner should always look up unknown vocabulary in English dictionaries and use other English reference books when reading and writing a text in English. And most of all, good textbook on grammar should be made available in the school library for both the teachers and the students. In house training should be organized for teachers on a regular basis in order to improve their teaching methodologies. And lastly, government and other stakeholders should provide the basic systems and services that are necessary for an institution to run smoothly.

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