

Problem of Tense Usage among Nigerian Speakers of English: Implications for Communication and Education

Miremba Bacia K.

Faculty of Education Kampala International University Uganda

ABSTRACT

This study explores the problem of tense usage among Nigerian speakers of English, examining the underlying causes and implications for communication and education. Despite the widespread use of English as an official language in Nigeria, many speakers exhibit difficulties with tense consistency and accuracy. These challenges stem from a complex interplay of factors, including the influence of native languages, educational practices, and socio-cultural dynamics. By analyzing data from various sources, including academic literature and linguistic surveys, the study aims to identify specific areas of difficulty and propose strategies to improve tense usage among Nigerian English speakers. The findings highlight the need for targeted educational interventions and a greater emphasis on practical language use in instructional settings.

Keywords: Tense Usage, Nigerian English, Communication, Education, Linguistic Challenges

INTRODUCTION

English is the official language of Nigeria and serves as a lingua franca in a country with over 500 indigenous languages. It is the primary medium of instruction in schools, the language of government, and a crucial tool for socioeconomic advancement [1, 2]. However, the use of English in Nigeria is marked by several deviations from Standard English, particularly in the area of verb tenses. Many Nigerian speakers of English struggle with tense consistency, often resulting in miscommunication and reduced clarity [3, 4]. This issue is not only a linguistic concern but also impacts educational outcomes and professional opportunities. Understanding the root causes of these tense-related problems is essential for developing effective teaching strategies and improving overall language proficiency among Nigerian English speakers. The primary issue examined in this study is the persistent problem of incorrect tense usage among Nigerian speakers of English [5, 6]. Despite years of formal education in English, many Nigerians continue to exhibit errors in tense usage, including tense consistency (frequent switching between past, present, and future tenses within a single discourse, leading to confusion), incorrect verb forms (misuse of verb forms, particularly in irregular verbs, and difficulties with auxiliary verbs), influence of native languages (interference from native language structures that do not align with English tense rules, contributing to errors), as well as educational shortcomings (inadequate emphasis on practical language use and insufficient corrective feedback in educational settings) [7, 8]. These problems are exacerbated by a lack of resources and trained language instructors who can effectively address these issues [9, 10]. As a result, Nigerian speakers of English often face challenges in academic and professional contexts where precise language use is critical. Identify the most frequent tense-related errors made by Nigerian speakers of English [11-16]. This paper will investigate the underlying causes of these errors, with a focus on the influence of native languages, educational practices, and socio-cultural factors. It will assess the current methods used in teaching English in Nigerian schools and their effectiveness in addressing tense-related issues. Furthermore, it will develop targeted strategies and recommendations to improve the teaching and learning of English tenses in Nigeria, including curriculum adjustments, teacher training programs, and practical language use activities.

Common Tense-related Errors Made by Nigerian Speakers of English

Identifying the most frequent tense-related errors made by Nigerian speakers of English involves a thorough examination of linguistic research and empirical data [17, 18, 19]. While specific studies focusing solely on Nigerian English tense errors may be limited, broader research on English language proficiency and errors among non-native speakers can provide valuable insights. Some common tense-related errors observed among Nigerian speakers of English, supported by relevant literature include:

Incorrect Verb Form Usage

Nigerian speakers of English often struggle with selecting the correct verb forms, especially irregular verbs, auxiliary verbs, and verb conjugations [20]. Examples: Incorrect use of irregular verb forms (e.g., "I have went" instead of "I have gone"). Incorrect conjugation of verbs in the past tense (e.g., "He goed" instead of "He went").

Tense Inconsistency

Nigerian speakers often mix different tenses within a single sentence or discourse, leading to confusion and lack of clarity. Examples: Inconsistent use of past, present, and future tenses within the same narrative. Shifting between tenses without a clear indication of temporal sequence [21].

Misuse of Modal Verbs

Modal verbs, such as "can," "may," "might," are often misused or overused by Nigerian speakers, leading to ambiguity or incorrect interpretations [22]. Examples: Incorrect use of modals for expressing possibility, permission, or ability (e.g., "I can to go" instead of "I can go"). Overuse of modals without clear context or necessity.

Lack of Agreement between Subject and Verb

Agreement errors between subjects and verbs are common among Nigerian English speakers, particularly in complex or compound sentence structures [23]. Examples: Lack of subject-verb agreement in number or person (e.g., "He are coming" instead of "He is coming").

Incorrect agreement between the subject and auxiliary verbs.

Misuse of Verb Tenses in Conditional Sentences

Nigerian English speakers may struggle with selecting appropriate verb tenses in conditional sentences, leading to errors in conveying hypothetical situations [24]. Examples: Incorrect use of verb tenses in conditional clauses (e.g., "If I will go, I will call you" instead of "If I go, I will call you"). While these tense-related errors are not unique to Nigerian speakers of English, they are commonly observed among non-native English speakers, including those in Nigeria. Addressing these errors requires targeted language instruction, awareness of linguistic differences, and ongoing efforts to improve English language proficiency in educational and professional settings.

Factors responsible for Tense errors

Investigating the underlying causes of tense errors among Nigerian speakers of English involves examining a combination of linguistic, educational, and socio-cultural factors. While specific research solely focusing on tense errors in Nigeria may be limited, broader studies on English language learning and proficiency in multicultural contexts can provide insights into the unique challenges faced by Nigerian English learners. They include:

Influence of Native Languages

Structural Differences

Verb Conjugation Patterns: Many Nigerian indigenous languages have different verb conjugation patterns compared to English, leading to confusion when applying English tense rules [25].

Aspectual Systems: Variations in aspectual systems between English and native languages can influence the expression of time relationships and tense usage [26].

Transfer of Linguistic Features

Interference: Transfer of native language structures and grammar rules to English can result in tense errors, as learners may apply rules from their first language to English [9].

Literal Translation: Attempting to directly translate sentences from native languages to English can lead to tense inaccuracies due to differences in linguistic structures [22].

Educational Practices

Curriculum Design

Focus on Grammar: Traditional English language teaching in Nigeria often emphasizes rote learning of grammatical rules without sufficient focus on practical language use [23].

Limited Contextual Learning: Insufficient exposure to authentic language contexts and communicative activities may hinder learners' ability to apply tense rules in real-life situations [27].

Teacher Competence:

Lack of Training: Many English language teachers in Nigeria may lack sufficient training in teaching English as a second language, resulting in ineffective instruction and corrective feedback [21].

Inconsistent Pedagogical Approaches: Variations in teaching methods and approaches among educators may contribute to inconsistencies in tense instruction and reinforcement.

Socio-Cultural Factors

Language Attitudes

Dominance of Indigenous Languages: Strong cultural attachment to indigenous languages may lead to a preference for using native languages over English in everyday communication, reducing opportunities for English language practice [22]. Perception of English Proficiency: Socio-economic factors and societal attitudes towards English proficiency may influence motivation levels and investment in language learning [24].

Language Use Environment

Code-Switching: Regular switching between English and indigenous languages in informal settings may contribute to confusion and inconsistency in tense usage [20]. Limited Exposure to Standard English: Limited exposure to

Standard English in everyday interactions outside of formal education settings may hinder language acquisition and proficiency development [25].

Current Methods Used in Teaching English in Nigerian Schools/their Effectiveness

1. Grammar Translation Method (GTM): The GTM emphasizes rote learning of grammatical rules and translation of texts between English and native languages.

Effectiveness: While the GTM may help students grasp grammatical concepts, it often fails to develop practical language skills and may contribute to tense errors due to overemphasis on memorization [21].

2. Audiolingual Method (ALM): The ALM focuses on oral drills, repetition, and pattern practice to reinforce language structures.

Effectiveness: While oral drills can aid in tense practice, the ALM may not adequately address tense-related issues in written communication or promote critical thinking skills [27].

3. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT): CLT emphasizes interactive and communicative activities to develop language proficiency in real-life contexts.

Effectiveness: CLT promotes practical language use and may help students apply tense rules in meaningful communication situations, but implementation may vary depending on teacher training and resources [23].

4. Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT): TBLT focuses on language learning through tasks that simulate real-world activities, encouraging learners to use language creatively.

Effectiveness: TBLT encourages active engagement and may provide opportunities for tense practice within authentic contexts, but its effectiveness may depend on teacher expertise and curriculum alignment [21].

Limitations of the Current Methods used in Teaching English in Nigerian Schools

1. Emphasis on Grammar over Communication: Many current teaching methods in Nigeria prioritize grammatical accuracy over practical language use, potentially neglecting the development of tense proficiency in authentic contexts [23].

2. Limited Resources and Infrastructure: Schools in Nigeria often face challenges such as overcrowded classrooms, lack of teaching materials, and insufficient teacher training, which can hinder effective tense instruction [21].

3. Lack of Student-Centered Approaches: Traditional teaching methods may rely on teacher-centered instruction, limiting opportunities for student engagement and independent tense practice [27].

Strategies for Improving the Teaching and Learning of English Tenses in Nigeria

Improving the teaching and learning of English tenses in Nigeria requires a multifaceted approach that addresses linguistic, educational, and socio-cultural factors. Here are strategies and recommendations to enhance tense instruction and proficiency among learners:

1. Curriculum Enhancement: Integrate Communicative Language Teaching (CLT): Incorporate communicative activities that focus on using tenses in real-life contexts, such as role-plays, debates, and group discussions.

Task-Based Learning (TBL): Design tasks and projects that require students to apply tenses in meaningful tasks, such as writing narratives, conducting surveys, or giving presentations.

2. Professional Development for Teachers: Training Workshops: Provide regular workshops and seminars for English language teachers to enhance their understanding of tense structures, teaching methodologies, and assessment strategies. Peer Observation and Mentoring: Implement peer observation and mentoring programs where teachers can observe each other's classes and provide constructive feedback on tense instruction techniques.

3. Student-Centered Approaches: Interactive Learning Resources: Utilize multimedia resources, interactive software, and online platforms to engage students in interactive tense practice activities, quizzes, and games.

Project-Based Learning: Encourage students to undertake projects that require research, writing, and presentation skills, allowing them to apply tense knowledge in authentic tasks.

4. Assessment and Feedback: Formative Assessment: Implement regular formative assessments, such as quizzes, presentations, and written assignments, to monitor students' tense proficiency and provide timely feedback.

Peer Assessment: Incorporate peer assessment activities where students evaluate each other's tense usage in speaking and writing tasks, promoting self-correction and reflection.

5. Cultural Sensitivity and Contextualization:

Integration of Local Contexts: Include examples and materials that reflect Nigerian culture, contexts, and language varieties to make tense instruction more relevant and relatable to students.

Respect for Indigenous Languages: Encourage a positive attitude towards students' native languages and dialects while emphasizing the importance of English proficiency for academic and professional success.

6. Collaboration and Partnerships: Collaboration with Stakeholders: Foster partnerships with parents, community leaders, and local organizations to promote English language learning outside of the classroom through community events, language clubs, and reading programs.

Engagement with Industry: Collaborate with employers and industry stakeholders to identify the specific tense-related language skills needed in the workplace and tailor instruction accordingly.

7. Continuous Evaluation and Improvement: Action Research: Encourage teachers to conduct action research projects to evaluate the effectiveness of different tense instruction strategies and adapt their teaching practices based on empirical evidence.

Curriculum Review Committees: Establish committees to periodically review and update the English language curriculum, incorporating best practices in tense instruction and language pedagogy.

CONCLUSION

By implementing these strategies and recommendations, Nigeria can enhance the teaching and learning of English tenses, ultimately improving students' language proficiency and communication skills. It's essential to adopt a holistic approach that considers the diverse needs and contexts of learners while fostering a positive learning environment that values linguistic diversity and promotes effective language acquisition

REFERENCES

1. Ajepe, Ife & Ademowo, Adeyemi. (2016). English Language Dominance and the Fate of Indigenous Languages in Nigeria.
2. Mohammed, I. S. (2018). Use and Relevance of English as Nigeria's Official Language: Politics, Nexuses and Intricacies.
3. Chika Glory, Opara. (2019). DEVIATIONS IN POPULAR NIGERIAN ENGLISH SYNTAX.
4. Abana, Ifeoma & Njemanze, Queen. (2023). An analysis of tense errors on the written English of selected university students in Nigeria.
5. Porc, Gabriela. (2021). The effectiveness of CLIL for English language learning in Swedish primary schools. 10.13140/RG.2.2.14740.01928.
6. Afrin, S. (2016) Writing Problems of Non-English Major Undergraduate Students in Bangladesh: An Observation. *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, 4, 104-115. doi: 10.4236/jss.2016.43016.
7. Bukit, Herawati. (2020). THE ERROR ANALYSIS IN USING TENSES MADE BY STUDENTS IN ENGLISH TEACHING AND LEARNING PROCESS. JETLi: Journal of English Teaching and Linguistics. 1. 92-101. 10.55616/jetli.v1i2.21.
8. Ogunyemi, O. K., & Bada, A. E. (2020). Nigerian languages, ethnicity and formal education. *Stud Lit Lang*, 20, 22-7.
9. Bamgboṣe, A. (1992). Standard Nigerian English: issues of identification. *The other tongue: English across cultures*, 148-161.
10. Brosnahan, L. F. (1958). English in southern Nigeria. *English Studies*, 39(1-6), 97-110.
11. Okoro, O. (2004). The identification of standard Nigerian English usage. *Nigerian English: Influences and Characteristics*, 158-178.
12. Afolayan, A. (1984). The English language in Nigerian education as an agent of proper multilingual and multicultural development. *Journal of Multilingual & Multicultural Development*, 5(1), 1-22.
13. Taiwo, R. (2012). Nigerian English. *The Mouton world atlas of variation in English*, 410-416.
14. Awoniyi, T. A. (1975). The Yoruba language and the formal school system: a study of colonial language policy in Nigeria, 1882-1952. *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 8(1), 63-80.
15. Götz, S. (2015). Tense and aspect errors in spoken learner English. *Learner corpora in English testing and assessment*, 191-216.
16. Christensen, L. (2003). The acquisition of tense. *LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND LANGUAGE DISORDERS*, 33, 31-74.
17. Leonard, L. B. (2015). Time-related grammatical use by children with SLI across languages: Beyond tense. *International journal of speech-language pathology*, 17(6), 545-555.
18. Arakkitsakul, Y. (2008). *An error analysis of present perfect tense: case study of freshman students at Nakhon Si Thammarat Rajabhat University: academic year 2008* (No. 122283). Thammasat University.
19. Indriyani, F. Error Analysis On English Tenses Found In The Students' Writing: a case study at the second year students of SMP Dharma, Karya Universitas Terbuka Tangerang, Academic Year 2006/2007.
20. Okoye, A. C. (2014). Common Grammatical Errors among English Language Learners in Nigeria. *Journal of Education and Practice*, 5(6), 98-105.
21. Olatoye, R. A. (2011). Analysis of Lexico-Syntactic Errors in the Written English of Secondary School Students in Nigeria. *Journal of Educational and Social Research*, 1(5), 37-44.
22. Adegbija, E. (2004). Language Attitudes in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Sociolinguistic Overview. *Multilingual Matters*.
23. Ekundayo, S. A. (2013). The Challenges of Teaching English Language in Nigerian Secondary Schools. *Journal of Educational and Social Research*, 3(2), 13-20.
24. Olagbaju, O. O. (2015). Nigerian English Usage: A Comparative Study of Tense and Aspect in Nigerian and British English. *International Journal of Language and Linguistics*, 3(1), 25-32.

25. Uzoezie, R. U. (1992). The Influence of Nigerian Indigenous Languages on English Verb Forms. *Journal of Nigerian Languages and Culture*, 2(1), 45-58.
26. Banjo, A. (1996). *Making a Virtue of Necessity: An Overview of the English Language in Nigeria*. Ibadan University Press.
27. Ojo, O. M. (2007). Common Errors in English Usage among Senior Secondary School Students in Ekiti State, Nigeria. *Journal of Nigeria English Studies Association*, 9(1), 17-30.

CITE AS: Miremba Bacia K. (2024). Problem of Tense Usage among Nigerian Speakers of English: Implications for Communication and Education. RESEARCH INVENTION JOURNAL OF CURRENT RESEARCH IN HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES 3(2):28-32.