

A Study Of Concord Errors Among Students Of The Federal Polytechnic Idah

Atodo, Ocholi Wilfreds

**Department of Languages
Federal Polytechnic, Idah, Kogi State, Nigeria
wilphatods@gmail.com**

ABSTRACT

The most nagging issue to polytechnic teachers of English language is the dwindling standard of spoken and written English language among polytechnic students. This is as a result of the nauseating grammatical errors committed by language users. An error arising from concord is one of the commonest grammatical mistakes committed by English users today. It is unarguable that the mastery of the rule of concord in English poses a great challenge to learners of English as a Second Language (ESL). It behooves the polytechnic teachers of English and students to continue to keenly and systematically note factors inhibiting appropriate learning and application of rules of concord as they are inevitable guides that illuminate the ESL learning process. Concord error is integral in the language learning process as it is critical to the students' language development. The paper employs a descriptive method that classifies the sources and different types of concord errors that emanate from the spoken and written languages of Higher National Diploma students of the Federal Polytechnic Idah. It concludes that the ESL learners' concord errors are as a result of inter-lingua and intra-lingual problems (i.e. L1 interference, L2 idiosyncrasies, inappropriate learning process and application of the rules). Other factors are faulty teaching, inappropriate learning process and application, overgeneralization of rules, ignorance of rule restrictions and false concept hypotheses. Recommendations and some remediation strategies were given to stem the frequency of concord errors in ESL learners' spoken and written English Language

Keywords: Inappropriate Learning/Application of rules, Concord Error, Teachers, Students, Intra-lingual-Interference

INTRODUCTION

According to Adejare (58:1996) the ESL learner "is prone to errors, both in speech and writing as he/she is faced with both interlingual and intralingual problem of learning English as a second language." This means that errors are inevitable outcome of the second language of the ESL learners' learning process but as Eyisi (2003) would say; "We do not blame a poor man for wearing threadbare coat, but we see no reason why it should be muddy after he had access to the brush." The fact remains that no pedantic teacher would be content with the ESL's vague expressions however lucid, if it carries deformed usage.

The errors of 'competence or performance' affect the ESL learners' grammatical intelligibility and accuracy. There is a tendency to say that the standard of Nigerian education is affected by the ESL learners' poor performance in English. Banjo (3:1989) lends credence to this when he asserts that; "... the success at each level of the educational system depends largely on competence in English". Scholars like Ayodele, 1988 and Onukaogu, 2002 also buttress this fact.

Despite the significant roles the English language assumes in Nigeria, the teaching of use of English Language in Nigeria tertiary institutions has been very cumbersome and tasking as the conscientious effort made by teachers to eradicate or minimize ESL learners' grammatical errors has been frustrating. The grammatical errors corrected are often repeated. More so a good number of well-meaning educated Nigerians are of the opinion that is not something to worry about as they would retort that; "After all, it is not their father's language".

The truth remains that there is need for the intelligibility and grammatical accuracy on the part of ESL learners in order to attain the desired high level of communicative competence. This has been the utmost priority of most teachers of English over the years. Adejare, (1995) one of those concerned strongly advocates that; “there should be a conscious and methodological teaching of grammar to achieve communicative competence. This has also been the focus of many researchers over the years. Bright and McGregor (237: 1970) also emphasize the need for the intelligibility and grammatical accuracy on the part of learners of English as a second language. According to Aiyewumi, et al., (2001:v) “If learner errors are left unchecked by the time the numerous infringements take their tolls, the outcome will be chaotic...” Eyisi (2004) also lends credence to this when she says; “...we must do something about the pathetic situation...”.

It becomes pertinent to examine the ESL learners’ understanding of the rules that govern the use of the language.

It is in line with the above comments and observations that this paper attempts to look at the structure of the written English of the Higher National Diploma students of The Federal Polytechnic, Idah. Conscientious efforts were made in this paper to identify, classify and analyze the concord errors in their writings. The overall aim is to have an insight of their strength and weaknesses in the application of rules of concord taught as a topic and to help improve on their areas of needs.

Conceptual Clarification

In the context of this paper error refers to widespread imperfect production caused by an ESL learner as a result of genuine ignorance of accepted rules which is in conformity with the standard variety. Broughton et al, (1980) defines error as “systemic infringements of the normal rules of the language,” Similarly, Crystal (1999), also define error as; “Unacceptable form produced by someone learning a language, especially a foreign language” while mistakes are speakers; “non-systemic features of production speakers would correct if their attention were drawn to them.” Dulay and Burt (1974) see error as; “those instances of deviation from the norms of a language.”

Concord on the other hand refers to where the choice of one element triggers off the use of a particular form of another element. Quirk et al (1973:176) broadly define concord as “the relationship between two grammatical element such that if one of them contains a particular feature (e.g. plurality), the other must also have that feature”. Lyons (239:1968) explains why the constituents of a particular syntactic construction are said to ‘agree’, or be ‘in concord’, with respect to such features as ‘gender’, ‘number’, ‘case’, ‘person’, etc.

It is unarguable that the English language sentence has a strict word order and the element that make up a sentence must be in concord otherwise, the linear sequence becomes ungrammatical or an error. Concord errors out of all the grammatical errors are picked upon, because the notion of concord is an important and an integral aspect of English grammar. The principle of concord is very central to syntax generally because the whole point about syntax is that it deals with interrelationship or harmonization among linguistic structures.

Sources of Errors in Spoken and Written English

There are different sources of errors in the use of English by the ESL learners as it indicates poor knowledge of the code of English language. Bamgbose (1976), share Arnolds and Adejare’s opinion that; much of the grammatical errors committed by ESL learner come from intralingual problems. For Ozioko, (2007) “errors could be caused by carelessness and thoughtlessness.” Myles, (1997) identifies both social and cognitive factors as sources of errors in second language learning. He further explains that learners of the second language may continue to exhibit errors in their spoken or written English for the following reasons:

- Negative attitude towards the target language
- Continued lack of progress in the second language
- Wide social and psychological distance between them and the target culture and lack of integrative instrument for learning.

He also states that learners equally exhibit errors for these reasons:

- Difficulty in acquiring academic and discourse
- Lack of coherence in organizing information both at the sentence and the text level.

- Complex process of writing in a second language transfer due to learners' lack of the necessary information in the second language or the capacity to actuate the appropriate second language routine. The above reveal the fact that interlingual and intralingual interference are the key sources of errors in the second language.

Types of Concord

English has different types of concord such as; number between subject and verb, concord of person, subject-complement concord, pronoun concord, Concord with Correlatives, Concord by Collective Noun, Concord by Proximity, Notional Concord etc. This study will specifically be based on the errors or deformities in the following types; number between subject and verb, concord of person, subject-complement concord, subject-complement concord and pronoun concord.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study is descriptive in nature. It is interested in the description, categorization or classification of the use or misuse of concord among sampled Higher National Diploma students of the Federal Polytechnic Idah, Kogi State, as exhibited in a composition test given to them. This is in consonance with Corder's view (91-97: 1974); that; "The ESL learners' competence could be tested by the learner's ability to distinguish between grammatically acceptable or ungrammatically acceptable sentences."

A written composition test was personally administered to the 2016/2017 set of sampled Higher National Diploma (HNDI) students from different departments of the polytechnic as part of the teaching process or exercise of essay writing during the first semester. Three different essay topics were given to the students from which they were expected to write on any one of their choice. These essay topics were designed in such a way that they were of interest to the students. This is to enable the students generate a free and unrestricted flow of expressions or creative writing in the use of English, especially in the use of the simple present tense. The students were given ample time to read over their works in order to eliminate mistakes which are products of "chance circumstances" (Corder, 10:1981).

It is imperative to note that after the administering the test out of the scripts collected from the students, 50 scripts were randomly selected as sample for analysis within the context. Each was closely examined to identify the different types of concord errors mentioned above as the paper is designed to show the students weakness and strength in the rules of concord which they were taught in class. The concord errors identified were painstakingly categorized while other types of grammatical errors were ignored as they are not useful for the study.

PRESENTATION OF RESULTS

Types of Concord-Analysis Studied

Subject-Verb Concord Errors

From analysis of the studies, it was discovered that subject-verb concord errors top the list of all the different types of concord errors in frequency. This is a very interesting discovery since subject-verb concord has been said to be the most significant of all the concord relations in English as it forms a major learning problem. (Quirk et al, 1973;Dukiya, 1991). The following are attempts by the ESL learners to merge subject and verb thus:

1. These eleven players has positions to play
2. My brother always hate my father
3. Rice contain some protein
4. Some people wants to take beans
5. There is two linesmen
6. They does their work.
7. We goes to work.
8. Even the waste matter from our cows are useful.
9. Exchanging gift between friends are always encouraging.
10. The news that reached us shortly after the accident were shocking.

In each case of the deformed sentences above, the predicator fails to agree with the subject either in terms of singularity or plurality. For example, sentences 1, 4, 5, 6 and 7, ought to have plural verbs 'have', 'want', 'are', 'do' and 'go' – respectively in consonance with their plural subjects. Sentences 2 and 3 ought to have taken singular verbs 'hates' and 'contains' respectively to agree with their singular subjects but the ESL learners are unaware that a singular verb always ends with the morpheme '-s'. For serial no. 8, 9 and 10, the verb that agrees with the subject are: 'is' and 'was' respectively. Many instances of subject-verb concord errors discovered in the sampled data appear to be caused by a combination of factors like over generalization, hyper-correction, and confusion as to rule application, mother tongue interference and faulty teaching.

Pronoun Concord Errors

The English language makes a distinction between the masculine, the feminine and neuter genders, so strict consistency is expected in the use of the pronouns associated with each of the genders. Here, the rule demands that; a pronoun must agree with its antecedent in number, case and gender but in usage, the following are deformities identified in the pronoun concord errors committed:

1. If one wants to cook rice, you will first wash it.
2. My sister will not come home, he will sleep outside
3. The man enjoyed her stay in Abuja.
4. He came back to the office to search for her supervisor
5. Graduates have no means of catering for himself.
6. Human beings have mindful things he find necessary.
7. Each linesmen is on either side of the pitch with a flag in their hand
8. Whoever knows how to play it, the country takes them out.
9. On the part of the student they fail to read before the examination.

In the first sentence, the anaphoric pronoun 'you' does not tally with their definite pronoun 'one'. In the second, third, fourth and fifth sentences there are cases of gender violation while in the 6th, 7th, 8th and 9th remaining sentences there were cases of number violation. The major causes of pronoun concord errors among the subjects of this research appear to be the absence of gender distinction in the ESL learners' mother tongues and also as a result of their inability to make a distinction in their selection of pronoun to suit the subjects (the antecedent) in the sentence. In other words, they failed to observe the rule of pronoun antecedent which states that pronoun replacing a noun must be masculine if the noun is masculine, feminine if the subject of the noun is feminine and neuter if the noun is neuter.

Concord of Person Errors

This class of errors is discovered to be the third in frequency out of the concord errors researched. The rules demands de that there must be concord of person between the subject and the verb of the sentence but in usage the sampled ESL learner have the following deformed-utterances:

1. The students sits for the examination.
2. The doctors helps.
3. Most people choose career for prestige.
4. My parents doesn't know my brother's wife
5. He have a son
6. The goal keeper and the back man was there

These types of concord errors are closely related to subject-verb concord errors. However, in concord of person, what is emphasized is the harmony between the subject element of a sentence and the predicator in terms of person and not necessarily number. The above examples are therefore less usual because they breach the concord of person between the subject and the predicator in each of the cases. Basically, errors in the concord of person among the subjects appear to have their origin in the structure of English language itself. The process of selection of verbs by different persons in English grammar is rather complex and rigid due to the idiosyncratic nature of English. The sampled ESL learners being confounded therefore, resorted to arbitrary selection in their bid to communicate in English thereby making such errors.

Subject-Complement Concord Errors

Errors of concord as they affect the subjects and complements of sentences usually breach the system of number in English grammar. The rule here is similar to what operates in the subject-verb concord. The subject and the complement of a sentence must agree in relation to number but in usage the sampled ESL learners make errors as a result of not mastering the rules guiding number system in English, thus the following ungrammatical sequence:

1. Idoko and Tule are my sponsor
2. Football is the kings of all games
3. My father is a bad parents
4. Saturdays and Sundays are special in our house
5. Beans is a foods that gives protein

Subject-Object Concord Errors

This is the least frequent type of concord errors in the study. The concord rules demand that where the objective element is a reflexive pronoun there is usually a concord of person, number and gender between it and the subject. This invariably means that there should be consistency and no shift in person, number and gender but in usage the sampled ESL learner deviates resulting to following errors:

1. The linesmen will raise their flag.
2. Most of them are graduate.
3. It is one of the social evil facing our country.
4. It covers all aspect.
5. Bribery is one of the major act.
6. The federal Polytechnic has five school.
7. We have different religion.
8. In some office you have to bribe
9. The players can wound himself like that .
10. Parents should lay good examples for his children
11. You will boil it or roast it before you can eat them

This type of error of concord, especially as it affects the use of pronouns appears to be due to mother-tongue interference in the learning process of the English language. This has to do with the use of honorific pronoun in their mother tongues in deference to age or authority. Some of these errors are also probably caused by inadequate attention or lack of a firm grasp of the rules of the systems of number, gender and person at this stage of the students' competence.

From the foregoing, in order not to be seen as the ESL teacher as part of the ESL learner's problem, he/she must be ethical enough to make the ESL learner recognize that their incompetency on concord as a reflection of general problem facing the use of English in the Nigerian society not as a sign of failure.

CONCLUSION

It is impossible to avoid errors or correct all the errors committed among students but as much as possible errors of ESL learners should not be overlooked or tolerated, they should be noted and corrected. The errors analyzed are often seen as sign posts to show that learning is taking place. It has been suggested that; "every English teacher is highly opportuned to engage in some sort of research in error analysis to avoid grammatical blunders..." Apparently, rules that are badly learnt and applied induce errors as seen in this study so the teacher should always note and correct all errors encountered among students to avoid being fossilized and entrenched.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The first step towards the remediation of concord errors is the awareness on the part of the teacher that such a problem exists in the learning process of the polytechnics ESL learners and also evident that the learner is working his/her way towards the correct usage .

For effective teaching and remediation of concord problems, more time should also be devoted to the methodological teaching of concord problems in English because of their significance and centrality to the concept of syntax. This is simply because when teachers of English were pedantic about

students' and users' spoken English as a second language people tend to speak and write better than what is obtainable today.

The teacher is encouraged to patiently adopt a guided approach to error correction by the students themselves. It is both impossible and undesirable for the teacher to correct all errors for the students. If the students are actively involved in the error correction process, it will serve to stimulate them to revise their work and become more critical of their writings. Invariably, the teaching of concord errors should be ESL learners' centered.

The teacher needs to always analyze and describe the grammatical errors recognized and also use the material specifically prepared to deal with particular errors.

The ESL teachers should encourage the students to memorize those rules and use them appropriately within the given context as such sentence pattern should be drilled until the point of perfection is reached.

English language Instructors or ESL Teachers should always revisit teaching strategies and make recording of errors encountered a subject of discourse in every ESL teacher's forum.

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