

## **CHAPTER 8**

### **Past Tense Errors in the Written English Composition of Selected Secondary School Students in Pankshin LGA, Plateau State, Nigeria**

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#### **Abstract**

This study investigates the occurrence of past tense errors in the written compositions of Secondary School Students in Pankshin, Plateau State. Using error analysis as a framework, the research identifies tense errors as the most frequently occurring error relating to tense forms in English among secondary school students in Pankshin, Plateau State. The study employs a mixed method approach in analysing the data, these approaches are qualitative, quantitative and descriptive in nature, involving 300 students from six selected schools (two government-funded schools, two community-funded schools, and two private

schools) in Pankshin Local Government Area, Plateau State. The students completed a written task titled “how I spent my last holiday”. The findings of the study reveal a predominance of past tense errors among others. The study concludes that explicit instruction on tense rules should be used, use of interactive and contextual grammar teaching methods be adopted.

**Keywords:** English tenses, tense errors, error analysis, secondary school, written composition, morphosyntax.

## **Introduction**

Verbs are a fundamental component of language, and in this case the English language. They play a pivotal role in conveying action and state of affairs within a sentence and also serve as the mainstay for expressing the dynamics of existence and interaction in communication. English verb forms consist of the base form (the main verb), the third person singular (-s), the past tense form (-ed), the past participle (-en) form and the present participle form (-ing). Morpho-syntactic errors in verb usage encompass a wide array of linguistic inaccuracies that occur at the intersection of morphology and syntax, particularly concerning inflection, agreement and placement of verbs within a sentence. These errors often stem from a variety of factors including L1 interference, incomplete language acquisition and lack of explicit instruction in the target language. Mastery of verb tense is essential for coherent communication in the English language, particularly for learners in second language environment such as Pankshin in Plateau State, Nigeria. Tense usage forms the foundation for expressing time and sequence in both spoken and

written discourse. However, these students, especially because of their multilingual setting, often struggle with correct tense application. This study focuses on analysing these errors to inform better instructional strategies.

The concept of errors in second language acquisition (SLA) is a fundamental area of study within applied linguistics, focusing on the mistakes learners make when they are learning a new language. Grammatical errors are simply referred to as mistakes in standard grammar usage. Grammatical errors are deviations from the standard grammatical rules. Some of these errors are seen in word order, subject/verb agreement, parts of speech and inconsistency in the use of tense. In the process of learning a foreign language, second language learners always face two language systems: their native language and the language they are learning. Learners are engaged in a process to compare the linguistic features of their language with that of the target language (Selinker, 1970, Ellis, 1994, 2015). According to Corder (1967), errors are significant in three ways: they tell the teacher what needs to be taught, they provide researchers with evidence of how language is learned, and they offer the learner a means to test their hypotheses about the language. Error analysis, as a methodological tool, involves identifying, categorising and systematically analysing these errors to understand the underlying processes of language learning and to develop effective teaching strategies (Ellis, 2014).

According to the Nigerian Policy on Education (NPE), senior secondary school students are “to acquire a good command of English language as a means of communication and for further education” (section 2.4.2); however, there is consistent misuse of the English language tense forms among students of Federal University of Education Pankshin, Plateau State, Nigeria. These

students have completed the required education stage of acquiring/learning English tenses as stipulated by NPE. It is based on this observation that the researchers visited some secondary schools to observe the students' use of English verb forms and realized that the problem persists in the secondary schools. Therefore, this study aims at analysing the tense errors in the written composition of senior secondary school students. This was achieved by identifying misuse of English verb forms in the written composition of secondary school students in Pankshin and to categorize the identified verb forms errors used by secondary school students.

### **Conceptual Explication**

#### **Grammar**

Grammar is a fundamental aspect of language that encompasses the rules governing the structure, formation and usage of words and sentences. It serves as the backbone of communication, providing a framework for conveying meaning and facilitating comprehension. The concept of grammar extends across various linguistic domains including morphology, syntax, semantics and phonology, each addressing specific aspects of language structure and function (Carnie, 2021). Grammar not only prescribes rules for linguistic structure but also serves communicative functions, enabling speakers to convey meaning effectively and efficiently. It provides guidelines for producing grammatically correct sentences that adhere to the norms of a given language community. Therefore, grammar serves as the structural foundation of language, encompassing rules governing morphology, syntax, semantics and phonology. It provides a framework for constructing and interpreting linguistic expressions, facilitating effective communication among speakers and listeners.

Understanding the principles of grammar is essential for language acquisition, communication and literacy, enabling individuals to navigate the complexities of linguistic expression and convey meaning accurately within a given linguistic community.

## **Syntax**

Syntax is a fundamental concept in linguistics that deals with the structural organisation of words to create well-formed sentences in a language. It encompasses rules regarding word order, sentence structure and grammatical relations between elements. Syntax determines the order in which words appear in a sentence and how they relate to one another, influencing the overall clarity and comprehensibility of communication. For instance, in English, the standard word order for declarative sentences is subject-verb-object (SVO), as in "The cat (subject) chased (verb) the mouse (object)."

One of the core aspects of syntax is the concept of syntactic categories, also known as parts of speech such as nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, prepositions, conjunctions and pronouns. These categories are essential because they provide the basic building blocks for sentence construction. Each category has its own rules and patterns for combining with other categories, leading to the formation of phrases, such as noun phrases (NP) and verb phrases (VP), which are fundamental units in sentence structure. For example, in the sentence: "The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog," the noun phrase "the quick brown fox" and the verb phrase "jumps over the lazy dog" work together to convey a complete idea (Radford, 2016).

## **Morphology and Morphosyntax**

According to Buhari (2011), morphology is important to any language in which it is studied because it elucidates the rules that govern the transformational patterns of the words used in that language. This makes morphology relevant to all languages. Morphosyntactic features refer to the grammatical structures and rules governing the formation of words phrases, and sentences in English, including verb tense, subject-verb agreement, pronoun usage and sentence structure. According to Halle (1973), the rules of word formation would tell, among other things, how morphemes are to be arranged in sequences to form actual words. These features will be analyzed based on their accuracy, complexity and appropriateness in written and spoken English produced by secondary school students.

## **Morpho-Syntactic Errors**

The concept of morpho-syntactic errors pertains to deviations in language that encompass both morphological and syntactic aspects. Morpho-syntactic errors arise when there is a breakdown or deviation in the application of these morphological and syntactic rules, resulting in language that may be grammatically incorrect or semantically unclear (Carnie, 2021). These errors can occur in both spoken and written forms of language and are particularly pertinent in the study of language acquisition, second language learning and analysis of language disorders. For instance, a common morpho-syntactic error is overgeneralization of past tense forms, where a child might say "goed" instead of "went." This error highlights a misunderstanding in the morphological construction of irregular verbs. Similarly, children might

produce syntactically incorrect sentences such as "What she is doing?" instead of "What is she doing?" These errors are a normal part of language development and reflect the child's process of internalizing the complex rules of their native language. Over time, with increased exposure and practice, most children naturally outgrow these errors as their understanding of language rules solidifies (Gass & Selinker, 2008).

In educational contexts, identifying and addressing morpho-syntactic errors is vital for improving language proficiency and academic achievement. Teachers play a crucial role in recognizing these errors in students' language use and providing corrective feedback. Effective feedback should be specific, timely and constructive, helping students understand the nature of their errors and how to correct them. For example, rather than simply marking a sentence as incorrect, a teacher might explain that "she don't like apples" should be "she doesn't like apples" because "doesn't" is the correct negative form for third-person singular subjects (Bitchener & Knoch, 2010).

### **Empirical Review**

Al-Zubeiry (2015) carried out research on "An analysis of morpho-syntactic errors of addition produced by Saudi EFL learners." The study aimed at describing the morpho-syntactic errors produced by Saudi university EFL learners with reference to the process of addition. The study adopted a descriptive and statistical approach to explain the errors that occurred in students' writings, count the frequency of errors occurrence and assign the possible sources of errors. Fifty students (girls and boys) were asked to write on any two of four topics given to them. The students' scripts were marked for

errors. The identified errors were categorized on the basis of their grammatical aspects, frequency of occurrence and sources (Interlingual/intralingual). The findings of the study showed that interference of the mother tongue accounted for the higher frequency of errors (51.61%), compared with those of the developmental (intralingual) sources (48.39%). The study indicated that most of the errors in English verb forms were ascribed to intralingual sources. Negative transfer of Arabic structures accounted for high frequency of errors in incorrect insertion of articles, redundancy of major constituents, wrong addition of prepositions and conjunctions. The study concluded with some suggestions for prospective teachers in coping with such errors.

According to Al-Zubeiry (2015), syntax, another crucial component of grammar, governs the arrangement of words to form coherent and meaningful sentences. It encompasses rules regarding word order, sentence structure and grammatical relations between elements. Understanding syntax involves examining how different elements within a sentence such as nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs are organized and interact to form coherent and grammatically correct sentences (Carnie, 2021).

Ukachi (2022) carried out a research on “**Morphological Errors among Senior Secondary School students in Pankshin Local Government Area of Plateau State.**” The research employed descriptive survey research design. The population of the study consisted of all the SSS II students in Pankshin Local Government Area with a population of 14,210 students. The sample of this study consisted of one hundred (100) students from five (5) selected secondary schools in Pankshin Local Government Area. In selecting the sample schools for this research, a simple random sampling technique was

adopted. An objective test was used as instrument for data collection while the collected data were analysed using simple percentage. The findings of the study indicated the morphological errors found and were classified into errors of prefixation, suffixation, infixation and circumfixation. 43.7% of the students passed circumfixation morphological process while 56.3 failed. 60.8% of the students passed prefixation morphological process while 39.2% failed. 52.7% of the students passed suffixation morphological process while 47.3% failed. Finally, 32% of the students passed infixation morphological process while 68% failed. The dominant morphological error found among the students was infixation with 73.6% failure while the least morphological error was prefixation with 39.2% failure. Based on the findings of the study, the following were recommended: teachers should pay attention to students' morphological errors and guide them where necessary, students should be encouraged to make use of other morphological processes such as infixation, circumfixation, suffixation and others so that they can get used to their formation process like they do in prefixes; government should employ only qualified teachers of English to teach in senior secondary schools in Pankshin.

Ulhaq, Suryana, Asikin and Fadhly (2022) carried out a research on "A morpho-syntactic error analysis of university students' argumentative writing." The research aimed to identify the morpho-syntactic errors in argumentative text writing by university students at the English Department of Kuningan University and found out the difficulties that students face in writing argumentative texts. A descriptive qualitative is used through the instruments of document analysis and interviews. The subject of this research was 5 students of the English Education Department who were in the second semester. The

result of the document analysis showed that errors in using prepositions was the most frequent error at 6 errors (25.24%), errors in using verbs group at 4 errors (16.5%), the third place of errors are errors in using articles and errors in word order, and errors in using relative clauses and relative pronouns for 3 errors (12.5%), errors in using tenses and errors in using adverbs for 2 errors (8.3%), the next is errors due to lack of concord for 1 error (4.16%) and the last is errors in using conditional sentences for 0 error. Moreover, the difficulties that students face in writing argumentative texts based on interviews were: language features, grammar, vocabulary election, writing strategy, personality background, study background and the environment including learning sources. The errors were found in writing argumentative texts because these factors affected the student's performance in writing argumentative texts.

One of the core aspects of syntax is the concept of syntactic categories, also known as parts of speech, which include nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, prepositions, conjunctions and pronouns. These categories are essential because they provide the basic building blocks for sentence construction. Each category has its own rules and patterns for combining with other categories

These errors are a key area of morphosyntactic difficulty in second language acquisition. Scholars such as Corder (1967) and Ellis (1994) have emphasized the significance of errors indicators of learning processes. These errors typically include misuse of regular and irregular past forms and confusion between the past and past participle forms. The causes often include L1 interference, overgeneralisation and inadequate grammatical instruction.

## **Theoretical framework**

This study adopted Transformational Generative Grammar theory. Generative Grammar, developed by Noam Chomsky focuses on the underlying structures and rules that generate and govern the grammatical aspects of language.

In the context of the study, the analysis of English verb structures among senior secondary school students involves examining the morphological and syntactic patterns and rules that govern the formation and use of verb phrases in English. Transformational Grammar, as a theoretical framework, provides a systematic framework for analyzing the structure and transformational processes involved in generating grammatical sentences. In the case of verb structures, the theory allows for analysis of various transformations such as passive, interrogative and tense transformations which affect the surface structure of the sentence.

## **Methodology**

This study adopts the error analysis methodology. According to the Centre for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition (2024), error analysis is a method used to document the errors that appear in learner language, identify their causes and reasons. Errors are classified according to the levels of language: phonological errors, lexical (vocabulary) errors, and syntactic errors. Native speakers of the Target Language (TL) who listen to learner language probably find learners' errors very noticeable. Fauzan et al (2020) report that the errors that students mostly produce are portraying failure in proper use of grammar, articulation and inaccurate spelling. Thus, making errors is natural and unavoidable. This study adopts a descriptive mixed-method design. A sample of 300 students was drawn from six secondary schools (two government-funded secondary schools, two community-funded secondary schools, and two private

secondary schools) in Pankshin (a local government area in Plateau State). The students wrote a composition on “How I spent my last holiday”. They are given forty minutes to complete the task. The compositions are evaluated for tense errors. The data are presented in a table, and a description of the table is given thereafter. In other words, statistical descriptive analysis of simple percentage table is employed in the analysis.

### Data Presentation, Analysis, and Interpretation

#### Misuse of Past Tense Verb Form

Errors Identified	Sample Sentences of Identified Errors	Correct Forms	Frequency Of Occurrence	Percentage (%)
'Spend' instead of 'spent'	I <b>spend</b> my holiday in Rivers state... I will have <b>spend</b> my holiday in Rinret's house but...	I <b>spent</b> my holiday in Rivers state  I would have spent my holiday in Rinret's house but...	235	15.1
'wake' instead of 'woke'	One day, I <b>wake</b> up..... We <b>wake</b> up and pray in the morning...	One day, I <b>woke</b> up..... We <b>woke</b> up to pray in the morning...	150	9.6
'make' instead of 'made'	We <b>make</b> our breakfast The moimoi we <b>make</b>	We <b>made</b> our breakfast The moimoi we <b>made</b> the following evening	94	6.0

	the following evening was sweet	was delicious		
'give' instead of 'gave'	She <b>give</b> us money I <b>give</b> the cup to...	She <b>gave</b> us money I <b>gave</b> the cup to...	48	3.1
'are' instead of 'were'	My parent <b>are</b> happy They <b>are</b> the biggest animal in the zoo	My parent <b>were</b> happy They <b>were</b> the biggest animal in the zoo	206	13.3
'go' <sub>z</sub> instead of 'went'	We all <b>go</b> to the zoo We <b>go</b> to the plaza too and...	We all <b>went</b> to the zoo We <b>went</b> to the plaza too and...	144	9.2
'prayer', 'pray' <sub>z</sub> instead of 'prayed'	We all <b>prayer</b> Every morning we <b>pray</b> ...	We all <b>prayed</b> Every morning, we <b>prayed</b>	31	1.9
'meet' 'call' <sub>z</sub> instead of 'met' 'called'	I <b>meet</b> my best friend on my way back home, I <b>call</b> her by name, Rita. Anytime they call me Jane I...	I <b>met</b> my best friend on my way back home, I <b>called</b> her by name, Rita. Anytime I they called me Jane, I...	112	7.2
'cook' 'are' and 'do' instead of 'cooked', 'were' and 'done/did'	Mummy <b>cook</b> rice and stew, and when we <b>are do</b> .  Aunty Rita cook	Mummy <b>cooked rice</b> and stew, and when we <b>were</b> <b>done</b> .  Aunty Rita cooked	71	4.5

	varieties... We <b>do</b> plenty games	varieties... We <b>did</b> or <b>played</b> a lot of games		
'visit' instead of 'visited'	I <b>visit</b> my grandmother... Amina <b>visit</b> us and we <b>visit</b> the playground with her...	I <b>visited</b> my grandmother Amina <b>visited</b> us and we <b>visited</b> the playground together...	133	8.6
'pay' instead of 'paid'	He also <b>pay</b> my school fees Uncle <b>pay</b> at park for all of us	He also <b>paid</b> my school fees Uncle <b>paid</b> for everyone	74	4.7
'go' 'win' instead of 'went' 'won'	We <b>go</b> for competition and <b>win</b> the competition	We <b>went</b> for a competition and <b>won</b> the competition	161	10.3
'decide' instead of 'decided/had decided'	I <b>decide</b> to stay After she <b>decide</b> to climb the round round round...	I <b>decided</b> to stay After she <b>had decided</b> to climb the merry-go-round...	82	5.2
'kill' instead of 'killed/slaughtered'	My dad <b>kill</b> me a big chicken They <b>kill</b> cows everyday in the restaurant...	My dad <b>killed (slaughtered)</b> a big chicken for me Cows are <b>killed (slaughtered)</b> everyday at the restaurant	11	0.7

	<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>1,552</b>	<b>100</b>

The table above indicates that the frequency of errors in the compiled essays are 1552 past tense error. The first column shows the errors identified and the correct forms that should have been employed. The second column showcases some sentences in which the identified errors occur in the students' compositions. This is so as the entire 1552 instances cannot be captured here entirely. The third column presents the correct suggested versions which render evidence to the errors in column 2. The fourth column indicates the number of time that the errors identified in the first column are found in the entire composition evaluated. The last column indicates the percentage of frequency of each identified error against others. The highest rate of error occurred with misuse of the past form of 'spend'. The lowest rate is misuse of the past form of 'kill'.

This table shows language errors (in the past tense form of verbs) made by senior secondary school students in Pankshin. The sentence 'I *spend* my holiday in Rivers state' shows the student's misuse of the verb 'spend' in its past form (spent). This error occurred on a frequency of 235 and at 15.1 percent rate. The sentences 'One day, I *wake* up...', 'We *wake* up and pray in the morning' also show misuse of the past form of the verb "wake" which is "woke", giving the correct form as 'One day, I *woke* up.....', 'We *woke* up to pray in the morning'. This error occurred on a frequency of 150 and at 9.6 percent rate. The students

substituted 'make' for 'made' in the sentence 'we make our breakfast' instead of "we made our breakfast"; this type of error occurred on a frequency of 94 and at 6.0 percent rate. The sentence 'she *give* us money', instead of 'she *gave* us money' occurred on a frequency of 48 and at 3.1 percent rate. The sentence 'my parent *are* happy' instead of 'my parents *were* happy', occurred on a frequency of 206 and at 13.3 percent rate. The sentence 'we all *go* to the zoo' was used instead of 'we all *went* to the zoo', It occurred on a frequency of 144 and at 9.2 percent rate. The sentence 'we all prayer' was used by the students instead of 'we all prayed'. It occurred on a frequency of 31 and at 1.9 percent rate. The sentence 'I *meet* my best friend on my way back home, I *call* her by name, Rita' was used by the students instead of 'I *met* my best friend on my way back home, I *called* her by name, Rita.' It occurred on a frequency of 112 and at 7.2 percent rate. The sentence 'Mummy *cook* rice and stew, and when we *are do*....' was used by the students instead of 'Mummy *cooked* rice and stew, and when we *were done*...'. It occurred on a frequency of 71 and at 4.5 percent rate. The sentence 'I visit my grandmother' was used by the students instead of 'I visited my grandmother'. It occurred on a frequency of 133 and at 8.6 percent rate. The sentence 'He also *pay* my school fees' was used by the students instead of 'He also *paid* my school fees'. It occurred on a frequency of 74 and at 4.7 percent rate. The sentence 'We *go* for compation and *win* the competition' was used by the students instead of 'We *went* for a competition and *won* the competition'. It occurred on a frequency of 161 and at 10.3 percent rate. The sentence 'I decide to stay' was used by the students instead of 'I decided to stay'. It occurred on a frequency of 82 and at 5.2 percent rate. The sentence 'my dad kill me a big chicken' was used by the students instead of

‘my dad killed (slaughtered) a big chicken for me’. It occurred on a frequency of 11 and at 0.7 percent rate.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

These sample errors are related to the structure of the verb in its past form. It is noted that most of the students perform poorly in their use of tenses (past tense). In composition writing, especially narrative essay, the past form of verbs is mostly used, but this seems to be a major challenge with the senior secondary school students of Pankshin. This work reveals several cases of misuse of English verb forms. Students replaced past tenses with words in their present forms. Examples of such words are “spend, cook, wake, go, give, make, prayer, visit, pay, kill decide”, instead of” spent, cooked, woke, went, made, prayed, visited, paid, killed, decided.”

The findings here highlight the significant challenge that tense mastery poses to Nigerian L2 learners. Past tense errors likely stem from both irregular verb patterns and the influence of students’ mother tongues such as Ngas or Hausa which may not employ same or equivalent tense systems. Persistent errors across different school types (public – government and community-funded – and private) suggests systemic instructional gaps.

It can be concluded that the students commit a lot of errors in the past tense form, this shows that the students are not adequately equipped in their grammatical knowledge of verb tenses. These findings underscore the need for targeted instructional strategies to address the prevalent errors. Tense errors in students’ compositions point to a pressing need for pedagogical reform.

Hence, this paper recommends explicit instruction on tense rules and past forms of irregular verbs. One of the most effective ways to address past tense errors among secondary school students is through explicit instruction that focuses on the rules governing tense usage especially the past tense. Teachers are encouraged to highlight the differences between verbs (regular and irregular verbs)

Integrating the use of interactive and contextual grammar teaching methods should be encouraged. Beyond explicit instructions, students gain a lot when grammar is taught through engaging context. For example, students can narrate past events, write diary entries, etc. Learning grammar should be less abstract and be more engaging.

Consistent practice is essential for helping students overcome difficulties with past tense usage; students should be encouraged to make simple sentences into short paragraphs and full compositions with close attention to tense accuracy. This helps students to inculcate the habit of consciously checking their verb usage when writing independently.

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