

## Effects of Errors in the Use of Nouns and Prepositions in Nigerian English on Students' Performance in English Language

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**Abstract:** *This study investigated the effects of errors in the use of nouns and prepositions in Nigerian English on students' performance in English language in Abakaliki Education Zone of Nigeria. The study adopted a quasi-experimental pretest, posttest and non-equivalent control group design. To guide the study, one research question and one hypothesis were posed. A structured questionnaire was the instrument for data collection. Descriptive statistics of mean and standard deviation were used to answer the research question while ANCOVA was used to analyze for significant differences between levels of treatment on post-test scores using pre-test scores as covariates for the hypothesis. The result of the study revealed that there was a significant effect on the mean achievement scores of the students who were taught the use of nouns and prepositions. Based on the findings of the study, some recommendations were made.*

**Keywords:** ELT, Nigerian English, Nouns, Prepositions, Students Performance

### Introduction

According to Jowitt (1991), English language is seen as a second language in the Nigerian language situation. Among the multi-ethnic groups in Nigeria with more than 400 indigenous languages, English language has come to be accepted as the official language of communication and unity. It is regarded as the only medium of instruction at all levels of the Nigerian education system and serves as a yardstick for evaluating learners' performance in the school. A credit pass in English language guarantees one's admission into the university or any of the tertiary institutions in the country. However, Fakeye (2010) observes that Nigerian secondary school students have problems in learning the subject as revealed in their performance at external examinations. Most of them are delayed from advancing to higher institutions of learning because of their inability to obtain a credit pass in the subject.

However, Meirerkord (2006) observe that when English is not the mother tongue of the speakers who use the language for communicative purposes, another variety of the language is bound to emerge. This is because they have already acquired a reasonable degree of proficiency and competence in their mother tongue before being exposed to the English language.. Thus, Nigeria English has often been described as strikingly different from the standard forms and popular Nigerian English, which are characterized by errors and deviations. Dadzie (2004), Omoniyi (2004) and Ajani (2007) also state that the type of English spoken and written by Nigerians varies according to the level of general education attained because there is an obvious correlation between the level of educational attainment and the level of proficiency in English.

A noun is a word that refers to the name of a person, place, thing or concept. Nouns are usually used as subjects, objects of prepositions, and modifiers of other nouns. Schmied (1991), Jowitt (1991) & Macarthur (2002) observe areas of syntactic deviation in Nigerian English as the treatment of uncountable nouns as countable nouns plus the omission of determiners before nouns and inappropriate use of prepositions by Nigerian students. Similarly, the West African Examination Council (WAEC) Chief Examiner's Report (2004-2006) complained about errors in the use of nouns and prepositions by the students. They note that uncountable nouns are treated as countable while determiners are omitted before

nouns. These wrong uses clearly indicate errors and deviations from the standard norm of which students are penalized in exams giving rise to high levels of failure in English language.

A preposition is a word that describes how one thing relates to another. It comes before a noun or a noun phrase and links it to other parts of the sentence. Examples are on, at, in, etc. Lorincz & Gordon (2012) observe that English language learners find prepositions challenging to master due to its large numbers and different nature. Substitution, addition and omission are the most syntactic errors based on their analysis of linguistic output of learners.

According to Abaidoo (2018), academic performance is the knowledge gained which is assessed through marks by a teacher and/ or educational goals set by students and teachers to be achieved over a specific period of time. Eze & Osuji (2018) defined academic performance as the outcome of students' effort in an examination. It is determined by a number of factors such as teacher factor, student factor, etc. Poor performance in the English language has been attributed to errors in the learning process. WAEC Chief Examiner Report (2020) notes that poor expression, wrong use of tenses, poor use of prepositions and articles, errors in grammar, spelling and punctuation dominated students' essays and sometimes candidates merely translated their mother tongue into English language.

### Errors in the Use of Nouns and Prepositions

According to Okoro (2002), among Nigerians, the commonest errors in the use of nouns include the following:

- The use of non-count nouns in the same way as count nouns. Noun count nouns do not make a distinction between singular and plural but are usually treated as singular. Therefore, they should not occur with the plural ending -s; the indefinite article, a, or an; the numerals, one, two, etc.; quantifiers such as many, few, several. Examples of the non-count nouns often erroneously made plural or misused by many Nigerians: advice, furniture, luggage, baggage information, equipment, stationery, jewelry, software, hardware etc.
- The omission of determiners, especially articles before singular nouns. A determiner should always precede the singular form of a count noun. But many Nigerians frequently omit such determiners, especially articles (a, an, the).

Nordquist (2019) observes that in Nigerian English, there is a tendency to omit the preposition 'to' in the collocation 'enable' someone /something to do something as one of the key features of the dialect of the English language. 'Enable' and 'to' are indissolubly married in American English and the Standard British English, one cannot appear without the other. So where Nigerians will write or say 'I hereby apply for a loan to enable me buy a car, British or American speakers would write or say 'I hereby apply for a loan to enable me to buy a car'. 'While Nigerians blithely omit prepositions when using enable, contest, reply etc., prepositions are inserted where they are normally not used in native varieties of the English language. An example is the phrase, 'request for', In American and British English request is never followed by a preposition. For example where Nigerians will say, 'I requested for a loan from my bank,' native speakers of the English language would write, 'I requested a loan from my bank,' (Kperogi, 2012).

Examples of Error in the use of prepositions include:

James asked after you. (asked of); The children have returned back from school (are back from)

### The Concept of Error in Languages

An error is a form in a learner's language that is inaccurate, meaning it is different from the forms used by competent speakers of the target language. According to Nordquist (2020) grammatical error is a term used in prescriptive grammar to describe an instance of faulty, unconventional or controversial usage,

such as misplaced modifier or an inappropriate verb tense. It is also called usage error. According to Corder (1991) error refers to learners underlying knowledge of the language and mistakes refer to incorrect forms caused by memory lapses, slips of the tongue and other instances of performance errors. Learners can correct their mistakes but cannot correct their errors because they do not have enough knowledge to distinguish their own utterance and that of the native speaker. He pointed out two explanations for learners errors. First, the occurrence of errors is merely a sign of the present inadequacy of the teaching techniques. The second explanation is that despite teachers' best efforts the occurrence of errors is inevitable because errors occur for many reasons such as: interference from L1, overgeneralization, an incomplete knowledge of the target language, the complexity of the target language and fossilization. According to Coder (1991), errors fall into four main categories: omission, addition, selection and misordering.

*Omission:* certain linguistic forms may be omitted by the learner because of their complexity in production. Omission also occurs in morphology. Learners often omit the third person singular morpheme –s, the plural marker –s and the past tense inflection –ed.

*Addition:* Learners not only omit element which they regard as redundant but they also add redundant element.

*Selection:* Learners omit errors in pronunciation, morphology, syntax and vocabulary due to the selection of the wrong morpheme, structure or vocabulary item.

*Misordering:* can occur in morphological level.

Other types of error include: errors of competence which occurs as a result of application of rules by the L2 learner which do not correspond with L2 norms. Errors of performance occur as a result of mistakes in the speech of both native speakers and L2 learners.

## Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study is the language learning theory of inter-language. The term, inter-language is used to describe the linguistic stage second language learners go through during the process of mastering the target language. According to Selinker (1972), inter-language is a temporary grammar, which is systematic and composed of rules. It is based on the view that by analyzing learner's error one can predict the linguistic stage of a learner. Hence, Jowitt (1991) maintains that Nigeria English is an inter-language because in general, Nigerian users of English are second language learners. English is not acquired in the first few years of life as it is by children of the native speakers, but is learned over a long period of time after the mother tongue had been acquired and chiefly through formal instruction in school. Hence, it is marked at every stage along the developmental continuum by errors.

When people learn a second language, they cannot instantly develop a native-like control over the target language. Instead language learning is a gradual process of internalizing the rules of the target language and in such process people cannot acquire the target language without making errors (incorrect forms). These errors are then regarded positively as evidence that the learners are testing hypothesis about the linguistic system of the target language, (Tizazu, 2014)

## Literature Review

Obiegbu (2018) carried out a study titled, errors of English usage among older and younger users of educated Nigeria English. Based on the electronic written language corpus of 64129 words, written by 60 Nigerians and containing four different text types (academic writing, informal letters, formal letters and novels), several syntactic features described as typical errors occurring in Nigeria English in previous studies were analyzed. Findings revealed that most of the syntactic features occur with a very low frequency rate among both groups of speakers.....It also revealed that the low frequency of errors

indicate that the written English of educated Nigerians is minimally characterized by errors and that the occurrence of errors are affected by speakers age and level of education.

Tulabut, Guzman, Abaring, Armada, Ilustre and Torda (2018) carried out a study on common errors in prepositions committed by grade 9 students: Implications for teaching. Common errors of 44 grade 9 students in the use of preposition were analyzed using an objective test. Data were analyzed using mean and standard deviation. Findings revealed that the students had more errors in prepositions of direction. Moreover, students tend to choose inappropriate prepositions that are out of context. Result also showed that students were confused with the multiple functions of prepositions.

Warimu & Ngugi (2021) carried out a study on the analysis of prepositional related errors in English composition of upper primary learners in Kieni east Sub County in Nyeri County. A sample size of 168 teachers and 408 pupils from public primary schools was selected for the study. Data were collected through interview guides for the teachers and composition test for the pupils. Findings showed four main errors: prepositional errors, errors of omission, addition, substitution and misordering.

Maiguero, Tankari & Allagbe (2021) examined the grammatical errors in the written productions of some secondary school students in Lycee Zinder, Niger. 30 students (14 male and 16 females) learning English as a foreign language constituted the sample size. Data were collected from the three paragraph essay writing written by the respondents. Findings revealed errors on tenses, spelling errors, agreement errors, prepositions, article errors, error in the use of nouns and adjectives.

### Statement of the Problem

With the poor performance of secondary school students in English language in Nigeria, parents, teachers, researchers and educators are worried and concerned. The problem therefore is to find out whether error in the use of nouns and prepositions as it relates to Nigerian English may have contributed to students poor performance when measured against the standard British English which is used for marking and scoring students English language exam. This study therefore attempts to investigate the effect of error in the use of nouns and preposition in Nigerian English on secondary school (SS2) students' performance in English language in Abakaliki education zone of Ebonyi state in Nigeria.

### Research Questions

The following research question was formulated to guide:

1. What are the mean achievement scores of SS2 students based on deviation packages (nouns and preposition) in Nigeria English?

### Hypothesis

This hypothesis was formulated and tested in the study at 0.05 level of significance

HO<sub>1</sub>: There is no significant main effect of syntactic deviation packages (wrong use of nouns and prepositions treatment) on students' achievement in English language.

### Methodology

Schools in Abakaliki education zone were used for the research study. The study adopted a quasi-experimental pretest, post-test and non-equivalent control group design. 256 SS2 students were randomly selected as sample for the study from the four local government areas that made up Abakaliki Education Zone. The students were grouped into 3 (2 experimental groups and 1 control group). The control group had already been exposed to the Standard British English, which is the target language, taught to students in Nigerian schools. Group A was taught areas of wrong use of nouns in Nigerian English. Group B were taught areas of wrong use of preposition. A pretest was first administered to the students to determine

their previous knowledge level in the subject. The main instrument for data collection was an objective test designed by the researcher. The researcher designed the questionnaire by generating a list of achievement test items which solicited students' responses on error in the use of nouns and prepositions in Nigerian English. The 36 objective question items had four answers out of which one was correct. 256 copies of the questionnaire were administered and collected after one week. Descriptive statistics of mean and standard deviation were used to answer the research question. ANCOVA was used to analyze significant differences between levels of treatment on post-test scores using pre-scores as covariates for the hypothesis.

## Results

**Research Question1:** What is the mean achievement of SS-2 students based on syntactic deviations (wrong use of nouns and wrong use of prepositions treatment) in Nigeria English?

**Table 1: Mean Results of Students Based on Treatment**

S/N	Treatment	Adjusted mean score	Standard deviation	Grade
1.	Errors package due to nouns	80.59	11.33	2 <sup>nd</sup>
2.	Error package due to preposition	83.18	11.44	1 <sup>st</sup>
3.	Standard British English	44.89	8.80	3 <sup>rd</sup>

Based on the descriptive statistics presented above, those in group 1 taught on errors in the use of nouns had a mean score of 80.59 and a standard deviation of 11.33 were graded second. Those of group 2 had a mean score of 83.18 and a standard deviation of 11.44 came first after being taught on errors in the use of prepositions. The control group (group 3) who were taught the Standard British English had the least, with a mean score of 44.89 and a standard deviation of 8.80.

## Hypothesis I (Ho<sub>1</sub>)

There is no significant main effect of wrong use of nouns and wrong use of prepositions on students' achievement in English.

**Table 2: Result of Analysis of Covariance based on Treatment**

Source of sum of square	Variation	Df	Mean square	F	Sig of f
Covariates	243.727	1	243.727	1.883	0.171
Pretest	243.727	1	234.727	1.883	0.171
Main	51914.965	2	17304.988	133.676	0.00
Effects					
Treatment	51914.965	2	17304.988	133.676	0.000
Explained	52914.962	2	13039.673	100.727	0.000
Residual	32493.210	251	129.455		
Total	84651.902	255	331.968		

Significant at P<0.05

To answer the null hypothesis (Ho<sub>1</sub>), which states that there is no significant main effect of syntactic deviation in nouns and prepositions on student's performance in English language (when they were taught errors in the use of nouns, prepositions, and the standard British English), ANCOVA analysis was carried out. The result of the ANCOVA analysis showed the value of F at 0.05 level of significance as 0.000, therefore, Ho<sub>1</sub> was rejected. This implied that the treatment was effective in improving student's knowledge of areas of syntactic deviation (error in the use of nouns and preposition) in Nigeria English.

## Discussion of Results

On the research question, the treatment positively impacted on the students' achievement (experimental groups 1 and 2), as the control group performed poorly. Based on the above, HO, which stated that there is no significant main effect of syntactic deviation (treatment) on students' achievement in English

Language as a result of syntactic deviation in nouns and prepositions was rejected at 0.05 level of significance. This implies that treatment was effective in improving students' knowledge of areas of syntactic deviation in Nigerian English. The mean achievement for those students taught errors due to preposition contributed more to the significance of the result obtained.

The findings of this study correspond with the findings of Schmied (1991), Jowitt (1991) and Meierkord (2006) that specific grammatical errors observed in Nigerian English include features such as determiners are omitted before certain nouns, extension of progressive construction to static verbs, treatment of uncountable nouns as countable nouns, and wrong use of prepositions. These findings also corroborate with the findings of Jowitt (1991), Dadzie (2004), Omoniyi (2004) and Tulabit et al (2018) that students had more errors in prepositions and misuse of nouns. WAEC Chief Examiner (2020), Warimu & Ngugi (2021) observes that students' essays were replete with prepositional errors. In most cases extreme divergence from the rules of LI English has even resulted in poor achievement in English language.

### Summary

This study was aimed at investigating the effects of error in the use of nouns and error in the use of prepositions in Nigerian English on the performance of SS 2 students in English language. There was a higher improvement in the mean achievement scores of the students after they had been exposed to areas of syntactic deviations in Nigerian English as it relates to nouns and prepositions. The students were able to recognize errors easily and this enhanced their performance in the target language, which is the standard British English. It is believed that the contribution of the findings of this study would improve the hitherto poor performance of students in English language in public examinations.

### Recommendations

1. Curriculum planners should introduce Nigerian English syntax in the language classroom and taught in pari passu with the Standard British English to mitigate the massive failure recorded in English language exams in recent years.
2. Government should restructure the English language textbooks of instruction to reflect the background of the learners and the sociolinguistic factors in language use.
3. Teachers should emphasize more on teaching students the rules applicable to the use of nouns and prepositions for the remediation of the fossilized Nigerian English interference.

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