

Errors of Pronoun Usage among Nigerian Secondary School Students

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Abstract:

This study examined the errors of pronoun usage among Nigerian Secondary School Students. The study looked specifically at pronoun types, and identified and examined the errors that secondary school students make in their use. The research subjects were students of public secondary schools in Oyo West Local Government Area. There are fifteen (15) public secondary schools in the Local Government Area. However, out of the fifteen (15) public secondary schools, five (5) were chosen. The researcher made use of stratified sampling technique in order to classify the respondents' view into different characteristics for clear and better results. A total of one hundred (100) students were selected for the study, with twenty (20) students selected from each school. Test questions with options were designed specifically for the students in the selected schools. The test questions focused on all the aspects of pronoun usage, especially the areas where students make errors such as subjective case pronouns, objective case pronouns, possessive case pronouns and tactic pronouns. The test was adequately supervised to see that the respondents did not consult their mates for any assistance before they could respond to the test. It was administered in the classroom for their convenience and proper supervision. There were twenty (20) questions in the test, four questions each were on the subjective case, objective case, possessive case, problematic pronouns usages and unique pronouns types (indefinite pronoun and reciprocal pronouns). At the end, the test scripts were collected and marked. The errors made were identified and categorised and examined. The study clearly showed that secondary school students in Nigeria use pronouns that are inaccurate or incorrect in their expressions. In this vein, the study showed that these errors occur because the students have not fully learned the correct use of the pronouns. The study also found that the teaching method applied in the teaching of English grammar in secondary schools is not very effective and English language teachers need to set up a workable teaching and evaluation method that will show how well a learner has learned. The study concluded that the students need constant exposure to the English language to fully develop communicative competence in it.

Keywords:

pronoun use; pronoun errors; error analysis; syntax; grammar

I. Introduction

An error is a speech act that is inaccurate or incorrect (Fang and Xue-mei, 2007). An error is different from a mistake. While an error is non-conformity with accuracy or correctness, a mistake is an error created by a fault. The fault could be carelessness, misjudgment or forgetfulness. When somebody deviates from the norms of standard language especially in the area of grammar, orthography and pronunciation, the person is said to have committed an error. According to Richards & Schmidt (2002), an error refers to the use of a word or grammatical items in a way that is not perfect or that depicts incomplete learning. An error usually occurs when a learner has not learnt the target language well, and as a result, speaks the language wrongly. Hence, error can be described as a systematic deviation from the rules or norms of a language. Sermsook et al. (2017) observe that the errors doesn't only indicate that the learner has

not learned the language well, but also suggest that the teaching method used is not effective or it needs to be changed..

The examination of errors in the use of a language led to the development of the theory termed 'error analysis (EA)' (Yang, 2010). EA developed into an aspect of Linguistics in the 1960s and argued that the mother tongue was not the main or the only source of errors committed by learners (Zafar, 2016). The language system is more complex and errors can be caused by the target language itself, and by the communicative strategies used and the type and quality of the second language instructions. EA tries to identify the strategies that learners use in language learning, in relation to the approaches and strategies used in the teaching and learning process (Khansir, 2013). EA also tries to identify the causes of learners' errors, that is, investigating the motives behind committing such errors as the first attempt to eradicate them (Al-Khasawneh, 2014). EA tries to gather information on common the problems in language learning, as a utility to teaching or in the preparation of the teaching materials (Chaudhary and Al Zahrani, 2020). The two major causes of error are the Interlingual error, which is an error committed as a result of the learner's linguistic background and native language interference, and the Intralingual error, which is the error committed when the learners misuse some of the rules of the target language. A major finding of error analysis is that learners' errors are made by learners making wrong conclusions about the rules of the target language (Zheng and Park, 2013). Errors may also be classified according to the level of language: phonological errors, vocabulary or lexical errors, and syntactic errors (James, 2001).

A pronoun is a word that is used in place of a noun or noun phrase (Shankara, 2007). Subtypes include personal and possessive pronouns, reflexive and reciprocal pronouns, demonstrative pronouns, relative pronouns, interrogative pronouns, and indefinite pronouns (Horst and Heike, 2002). Personal pronouns may be classified by person, number, gender and case. English has three persons (first, second and third) and two numbers (singular and plural); in the third person singular there are also distinct pronoun forms for male, female and neuter gender. English personal pronouns have two cases, subject and object. Subject pronouns are used in subject position while object pronouns are used for the object of a verb or preposition. Possessive pronouns are used to indicate possession. Some occur as independent noun phrases such as mine, yours, hers, ours, theirs. Others act as a determiner and must accompany a noun such as my, your, her, our, your, their. Reflexive pronouns are used when a person or thing acts on itself. In English they all end in -self or -selves and must refer to a noun phrase elsewhere in the same clause. Reciprocal pronouns refer to a reciprocal relationship (each other, one another). They must refer to a noun phrase in the same clause. Demonstrative pronouns (in English, this, that and their plurals these, those) often distinguish their targets by pointing or indicating position. Indefinite pronouns refer to one or more unspecified persons or things. One group in English includes compounds of some-, any-, every- and no- with -thing, -one and -body. Another group, including many, more, both, and most, can appear alone or followed by of. Relative pronouns in English include who, whom, whose, what, which and that). They rely on an antecedent, and refer back to people or things previously mentioned. They are used in relative clauses. In addition, relative pronouns can be used in an interrogative setting as interrogative pronouns. Interrogative pronouns ask which person or thing is meant. In reference to a person, one may use who (subject), whom (object) or whose (possessive). The use of pronouns often involves anaphora, where the meaning of the pronoun is dependent on an antecedent. Many secondary school students don't fully understand how the pronouns can be used, and as a result, they end up using pronouns wrongly in their expressions. This has prompted many scholars to study errors in different aspects of the English language.

Studies have been carried out on different language errors across the world. Watcharapunyawong and Usaha (2013) study Thai EFL students' writing errors in different text types focusing on the interference of the first language. Abushihab et al. (2011) carry out an analysis of written grammatical errors of Arab learners of English as a foreign language at Alzaytoonah Private University of Jordan. Hyland and Anan (2006) examine teachers' perceptions of error with particular attention on the effects of first language and experience. Maicusi and Maicusi (2000) study the error in the second language acquisition process. Sattayatham and Honsa (2007) investigate medical students' most frequent errors at Mahidol University, Thailand. Thus, this study is an attempt to add to the existing knowledge on language errors with particular attention on pronoun errors among secondary school students in Nigeria. The study looks specifically at pronoun types, and identifies and examines the errors that secondary school students make in their use.

II. Research Methods

The research subjects were students of public secondary schools in Oyo West Local Government Area. There are fifteen (15) public secondary schools in Oyo West Local Government Area. However, out of the fifteen (15) public secondary schools, five (5) were chosen. The chosen schools are: (1) Army Children Secondary School, Ojongbodu, Oyo, (2) Baptist Community Secondary School, Isokun, Oyo, (3) Ojongbodu Secondary School, Ojongbodu, Oyo, (4) Awumoro Community Secondary School, Awumoro, Oyo, and (5) Fasola Grammar School, Fasola, Oyo.

The researcher makes use of stratified sampling techniques in order to classify the respondents' view into the desired characteristics for clear and better results. Three schools among the chosen schools have the highest number of students in Oyo West Local Government with students from different social background. There are students whose parents are literate, students whose parents are semi-literate and those whose parents are stark illiterate. Among the five (5) chosen schools, two (2) of them are located in the villages which might likely be the source of the students problem in English grammar. A total of one hundred (100) students were selected for the study, with twenty (20) students selected from each school.

Test questions with options were designed specifically for the students in the selected schools. The test questions focus on all the aspect of pronoun usage. The test also covers the problematic and systematic areas of pronoun usage. The test questions cover all the areas where students make errors such as subjective case pronouns, objective case pronouns, possessive case pronouns and tactic pronouns. The test was administered on twenty sampled students from each of the five (5) selected schools. The test was adequately supervised to see that the respondents did not consult their mates for any assistance before they could respond to the test. It was administered in the classroom for their convenience and proper supervision. There are twenty (20) questions on the test, four questions each were on the subjective case, objective case, possessive case, problematic pronouns usages and unique pronouns types (indefinite pronoun and reciprocal pronouns). At the end the test scripts were collected and marked. The errors made were identified and categorised. The causes of the errors were also examined.

III. Results and Discussion

3.1 Results

a. Overall Results of the Test

Table 1 shows the overall results of the test.

Table 1. Overall Results of the Test

QUESTIONS	CORRECT	INCORRECT	TOTAL
Q1	80	20	100
Q2	95	05	100
Q3	40	60	100
Q4	30	70	100
Q5	60	40	100
Q6	30	70	100
Q7	17	83	100
Q8	80	20	100
Q9	60	40	100
Q10	90	10	100
Q11	30	70	100
Q12	70	30	100
Q13	90	10	100
Q14	80	20	100
Q15	40	60	100
Q16	90	10	100
Q17	32	68	100
Q18	77	23	100
Q19	13	87	100
Q20	08	92	100

Table 1 shows that there were 20 questions in the test. The questions were labelled Q1 to Q20. The number of students who chose the correct answers and the wrong answers were also displayed in the table. More than half of the students got 11 questions correctly. These questions include Qs 1, 2, 5, 8, 9, 10, 12, 13, 14, 16, 18. The table suggests that the students performed averagely in the test.

b. Analysis of Pronoun Errors in the Test

In this section, the test questions are analysed. Each question has four options. The following tables reveal the options for each question, the number of students who picked the options and their percentages.

Q1. _____ love him.

OPTION	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
She	80	80%
It	05	5%
We	10	10%
He	5	5%
Total	100	100%

In the question above, 80% of the total respondents picked 'she', 5% of the total respondents picked 'it', 10% of the total respondents picked 'we' and 5% of the total respondents picked 'he'. The respondents with the total percentage of 10% got the answer to the question right.

Q2. Mary and _____ love pet.

OPTION	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
He	01	1%
She	02	2%
I	95	95%
Me	02	2%
Total	100	100%

In the question, 1% of the total respondents picked 'he', 2% of the total respondents picked 'she', 95% of the total respondents picked 'I' and 2% of the total respondents picked 'me'. The respondents with the total population of 95% chose the right answer to the question.

Q3. _____ sailors love the sea.

OPTION	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
We	40	40%
Them	20	20%
Us	0	0%
I	40	40%
Total	100	100%

In the question, 40% of the total respondents picked 'we', 20% of the total respondents picked 'them', and 40% of the total respondents picked 'I'. The respondents with the total population of 40% out of the sampled population chose the right answer to the question.

Q4. _____ are waiting for you.

OPTION	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
He	20	20%
It	20	20%
They	30	30%
Us	30	30%
Total	100	100%

In the question, 20% of the total population sampled picked 'he', 20% of the total population sampled picked 'it', 30% of the total population sampled picked 'they' and 30% of the total population sampled picked 'us'. The respondents with the total population of 30% chose the right answer to the question.

Q5. _____ were here yesterday.

OPTION	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
You	60	60%
Us	0	0%
Him	0	0%
It	40	40%
Total	100	100%

In the question, 60% of the total population sampled picked 'you' and 40% of the total population sampled picked 'it'. In the total population sampled, 60% out of the total population sampled chose the right answer to the question.

Q6. The third man is _____.

OPTION	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
He	70	70%
She	0	0%
Him	30	30%
It	0	0%
Total	100	100%

In the question, 70% out of the total population sampled picked 'he' and 30% out of the total population sampled picked 'him'. In the response to the question given, 30% out of the total population sampled chose the right answer to the question.

Q7. Jim saw _____

OPTION	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
We	18	18%
Us	17	17%
Its	45	45%
They	20	20%
Total	100	100%

In the question, 18% of the total respondents picked 'we', 17% of the total respondents picked 'us', 45% of the total respondents picked 'its' and 20% of the total respondents picked 'they'. In the responses of the total respondents, 17% of the total respondents chose the correct answer to the question.

Q8. The matter is strictly between Joe and _____

OPTION	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
She	10	10%
They	0	0%
Me	80	80%
Its	10	10%
Total	100	100%

In the question, 10% of the total respondents picked 'she', 80% of the total respondents picked 'me' and 10% of the total respondents picked 'its'. In the response of the total respondents 80% of the total populations sampled chose the correct answer to the question.

Q9. I was _____ eating ice-cream.

OPTION	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Them	60	60%
Us	10	10%
Its	10	10%
His	20	20%
Total	100	100%

In the question, 60% of the total sampled respondents picked ‘them’, 10% of the total respondents picked ‘us’, 10% of the total respondents picked ‘its’ and 20% of the total respondents picked ‘his’. In the responses so far, 60% of the total respondents chose the correct answer to the question.

Q10. I like _____ swimming skill.

OPTION	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Her	90	90%
Hers	05	5%
They	0	0%
It	05	5%
Total	100	100%

In the question, 90% of the total respondents picked ‘her’, 5% of the total respondents picked ‘hers’ and 5% of the total respondents picked ‘it’. In the view of responses, 90% of the total respondents chose the correct answer to the question.

Q11. The ball is _____.

OPTION	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
My	30	30%
Myself	30	30%
Mine	30	30%
Them	10	10%
Total	100	100%

In the question, 30% of the total respondents picked ‘my’, 30% of the total respondents picked ‘myself’, 30% of the total respondents picked ‘mine’ while 10% of the total respondents picked ‘mine’. In their responses, 30% of the total population sampled chose the right answer.

Q12. The lady cut _____ with a razor blade.

OPTION	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Herself	70	70%
Himself	0	0%
Itself	10	10%
Themselves	20	20%
Total	100	100%

In the question, 70% of the total population sampled picked ‘herself’, 10% of the total population respondents picked ‘itself’ and 20% of the total population respondents picked ‘themselves’, in their responses to the question asked. From the answers provided, 70% of the total population sampled chose the right answer.

Q13. _____ are students.

OPTION	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
I	0	0%
We	90	90%
Them	10	10%
It	0	0%
Total	100	100%

In the question, 90% of the total sampled respondents chose 'we' and 10% of the total respondents picked 'them', in their feedback to the question asked. From the answer provided, 90% of the total sample respondents got the answer to the question right.

Q14. _____ are my books.

OPTION	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
That	0	0%
This	20	20%
These	80	80%
It	0	0%
Total	100	100%

In the question, 20% of the total respondents picked 'this' and 80% of the total sampled respondents picked 'these' as their answers to the question asked. From their responses, 80% of the respondents chose the right answer to the question.

Q15. The girl _____ greeted me is my cousin.

OPTION	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Which	30	30%
Whose	20	20%
Who	40	40%
Whom	10	10%
Total	100	100%

In the question, 30% of the total respondents picked 'which', 20% of the total respondents picked 'whose', 40% of the respondents picked 'who' and 10% of the total respondents picked 'whom' as their feedback responses to the question. In the feedback answer only 40% of the total respondents chose the correct answer to the question.

Q16. _____ is invited to the party.

OPTION	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Everybody	85	90%
We	05	0%
That	0	0%
Who	10	10%
Total	100	100%

In the question, 85% of the total population sample picked 'everybody', 5% of the total respondents picked 'we' and 10% of the total respondents picked 'who' as their answer to the question. In the total respondents' response, 10% of the total respondents chose the correct answer to the question.

Q17. _____ of the fruits are bad.

OPTION	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
What	48	48%
Who	0	0%
Many	32	32%
Why	20	20%
Total	100	100%

In the question, 48% of the total respondents picked ‘what’ as their answer, 32% of the total respondents picked ‘many’ as their answers and 20% of the total respondents picked ‘why’ as their answers to the question. In the feedback of the respondents 32% of the total respondents chose the correct answer to the question.

Q.18. _____ cooked the food?

OPTION	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Which	10	10%
Who	77	77%
Why	13	13%
It	0	0%
Total	100	100%

In the question, 10% of the total respondents picked ‘which’, 77% of the respondents picked ‘who’ and 13% of the total respondents picked ‘why’ as their response to the question. From the total respondents, 77% chose the correct answer to the question.

Q19. _____ five men are here.

OPTION	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
All	13	13%
Few	43	43%
A few	20	20%
Some	24	24%
Total	100	100%

In the question, 13% of the total respondents picked ‘all’, 43% of the total respondents picked ‘few’, 20% of the total respondents picked ‘a few’ and 24% of the total sample respondents picked ‘some’ as their answer to the sentence given. 8% of the total respondents chose the correct answer to the question.

Q20. _____ are your books, not ours.

OPTION	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Those	08	08%
That	50	50%
His	17	17%
Thus	25	25%
Total	100	100%

In the sentence above, 8% of the total sampled respondents picked ‘those’, 50% of the total respondents picked ‘that’, 17% of the total respondents picked ‘his’ and 25% of the total respondents picked ‘thus’. According to the responses in the table, 8% of the total respondents chose the correct answer to the question.

3.2 Discussion

From the results of the study, there is an indication that the students failed to choose appropriate subjective case pronouns in agreement with the verbs in the given sentences. There is necessity for agreement between the subjective case pronoun and the verb in order to bring about correctness. The responses of the students revealed that students communicate effectively

with the use of 'I' as the first person or as a referrer in the sentence. This suggests that they may have difficulties with which kind of subject to use when referring to many people in sentences.

The results also revealed that the students need adequate knowledge on the use of third-person plural personal pronoun which can be used in the subject position and object positions. However, the results showed that the respondents had adequate knowledge on the use of second person personal pronouns in both positions but this was made easy because the second person pronoun 'you' do not show differences in both subjective and objective cases in singular and plural form. It was revealed that students need serious and adequate knowledge of the categorization of pronoun gender and forms uses. It was also revealed that the total respondents found it difficult to clearly state the difference between the position of 'We' and 'Us' in a sentence and 'they' and 'we' in their use in sentences.

It was revealed that the students could easily identify the object of 'we' in the sentences and the object of 'they'. The results here did not give the respondents much stress; almost all of them got the answer right. The responses of the respondents showed that the students had a good knowledge of the correct use of 'her' in object position without mistaking it for the possessive pronoun 'hers'. There was also an indication that error of interference had effect on the respondents knowledge of pronouns whereby the students misuse 'My', possessive pronoun, for 'Mine', which is pronominal. The respondents thought the writing in English is the same as they speak their regional languages where as English is a language of mastering; without the mastering of rules, expressions will bring about errors.

The results further showed that the students had adequate knowledge of the use of singular reflective pronouns and plural reflexive pronouns. The performance of the students was encouraging in the use of the demonstrative pronouns, the pronouns which refer to near (close) or distant (far) entity. Almost all the students got the correct answer in this question.

From the results, it was revealed that the students had great challenges in relative pronouns. The students could not choose correct relative pronouns to complete the given sentence. Relative pronouns include 'who', 'whose', 'which', 'whom' and 'that'. In the use of the pronouns to introduce a clause, they require the mastery of certain rules to use them correctly, especially in the use of 'who' to refer to a subject; 'whom' to refer to an object, 'which' to introduce 'objects/things' and 'that/who' to introduce human beings. There was clear indication that the students had serious challenges in the use of indefinite pronouns as well as their uniformity with verbs in sentence formation. There is need for them to know that some indefinite pronouns are meant to go with singular lexical, main verb or primary auxiliary verbs, where as some indefinite pronouns like 'none' can take either singular or plural verbs in their usages.

Additionally, the results showed that the students had problems with some interrogative pronouns which occurred in the subject of the sentence but some common interrogative pronouns like 'What', 'Who', 'Why', and 'How' did not create confusion for the students because they are very common in their day to day expressions.

IV. Conclusion

The study clearly shows that secondary school students in Nigeria use pronouns that are inaccurate or incorrect in their expressions. In this vein, the study shows that these errors occur because the students have not fully learned the correct use of the pronouns. The study also suggests that the teaching method applied in the teaching of English grammar in secondary schools may not be effective or may need to be changed. The study also finds that English language teachers need to set up a workable teaching and evaluation method that will show how well a learner has learned and what remains for him to learn because the occurrence of errors is clearly a sign of inadequate teaching methods. The study also shows that these errors could be caused by the target language itself. The target language has many rules and there are exceptions to some of the rules depending on the context in which they are used. As a result of this, the students need constant exposure to the English language to fully develop communicative competence in it. Thus, this study has been able to establish the errors of pronoun use, the causes and possible solutions, thereby adding to existing knowledge on errors in language use, especially in the aspect of grammar.

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