

A Morpho-Syntactic Study of The Acquisition of Participle Forms of Verb Among Yoruba-English Speaking Primary School Pupils

Moses O. Ayoola and Gladys A. Ogunleye

ABSTRACT

This research work studied the acquisition of participle forms of verb by selected nursery and primary school pupils in Ekiti State Nigeria. The study was set out to find out how Yoruba ESL pupils show variability in their realization of inflectional morphology of English verb participle forms and to explain how the morphosyntactic features of the L1 and L2 interact to affect the learners' acquisition of English participle inflectional morphemes. One hundred (100) pupils were selected at random from five public primary schools. It was revealed from the findings that pupils have little know of participle form of verb inflections. Findings show that of all the verb inflections of participle form by pupils, Only 37% was correctly used and 63% was misused. Out of the 63% misused, 31% was a misuse of –ing form, 6% was a misuse of –ed form and 26% was a misuse of –en form. Pupils mostly overgeneralized rules of regular verbs for irregular verbs. From the research data, pupils misuse past –ed for –en and –en for –ed. The findings revealed that the pupils often exhibit variability with respect to the realization of verb-participle inflectional morphemes by either making wrong substitution of a particular kind of inflection for another or omitting inflections outrightly.

Keywords: inflection, language acquisition, morphosyntactic features, participle form, variation.

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I. INTRODUCTION

As human beings, we are naturally endowed with ability to use language for communication in a manner that the several intricacies that characterize may not be noticed. Theoretical postulations within the purview of generative linguistics have obviously revealed that there are limits on the form of a language because rules of language take specific forms and meaning generated from a sentence is dependent on specific syntactic configurations. Scholars within the generative linguistics have argued in favor of the fact that acquisition of language by children all over the world takes a similar way despite varying circumstances in which the acquisition happens. In the process of acquiring and learning a second language, a learner tends to make mistakes or commit errors. These may happen because he does not master a language rule and it may however be as a result of being unaware of a language rule. Many of the existing literatures on second language acquisition have confirmed that second language learners usually tend to exhibit optionality in realising inflectional morphemes even when it is an obligatory property of the L2, but not attested in the learners' L1 (Dulay & Burt, 1974). Optionality according to Vainikka and Young-Scholten (1996 p. 13) may be seen as the effect of competing grammars within the same individual. When the grammar of an earlier stage of learning competes with the grammar of a later stage and the

signs of the two stages are observable in the data produced. Several efforts have been made by scholars and researchers to ascertain if this optionality in the use of tense and agreement inflections by learners exists as features in their L2 grammars or is due to a certain functional categories' impairment in the learners' L2 grammars, or because of some other reasons (Prévost & White, 2000). Meanwhile, A number of researchers and scholars in the field of Second language Acquisition have argued that the optionality in the inflectional morphology of second language learners is not that their L2 grammars lack functional categories related to tense and agreement but rather it is a phenomenon due to the fact that second Language learners encounter difficulties in realizing inflectional morphemes in the target language or L2 (Lardiere, 1998; Prévost & White, 2000).

Nigeria, like many other former British colonies in the world, uses English as a second language and the official language. In Nigeria education system, English is a compulsory subject from primary school level to higher institution and it is equally used as the medium of instruction at all levels of education.

In Nigeria today, many elites want their children to acquire English as their first language. The idea that has been criticized by many scholars and Linguists (Ayoola & Bankole 2017). This study is set out to expose the irregularities in the acquisition of the participle verbs by the primary school pupils. Acquisition of participle forms of verb is not an easy task for ESL due to their numerous

alternatives and the polysemic nature of their meanings. Kirkpatrick (2009) affirms that, one of the most important functions of the verb in English language is to show which time an action takes place; whether someone or something is doing something, was doing something or will do something. Tense is used to express, and, in many languages, this is marked by inflection only in the present tense and in the past tense. In English Language, the past tense and past participles of regular verbs are realized by the addition-d or -ed morphemes while the present participle form is realized by adding-ing morpheme.

Since it is a fact that a learner has to go through a complicated hit and trial process to learn a second language especially the segments that are not attested in his L1, the focus of this study, therefore is to examine the variant ways the ESL learners realize the Participle forms ed, ing and en. It must be noted that Yoruba which is the L1 of the subjects for this study does not have tense and agreement marking as a feature at all whereas English does. Therefore, it is worthwhile to study how Yoruba speaking pupils realize the English tense Participle inflection morphemes within the syntax of English.

II. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study is set out to: (a) determine the theoretical view that is able to explain why the Yoruba speaking ESL learners (Primary school Pupils) exhibit variability in their use of English participle inflectional morphology (b) explain how the morpho-syntactic features of the L1 and L2 interact to affect the learners' acquisition of English participle inflectional morphemes.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

There have been several studies by different scholars on the acquisition of certain features of English by L2 learners/Users. Some of them have focused on learner's acquisition through naturalistic learning; some also took the perspective of error correction in writing and speech production. Many of such studies have revealed that L2 learners tend to exhibit optionality on inflectional morphology when it is an obligatory property in the L2 but not a feature in the L1. Hsieh's (2008) study investigates the acquisition of three English morphemes by Chinese speaking ESL learners. The three English morphemes are: the third person singular-s, the regular past tense-ed, and the copula be. The results of the 3rd person singular-s and the regular past tense-ed showed that participants had knowledge of functional categories and features in tense and agreement but had problems with the realization of surface morphology. First language interference could be responsible for the difficulty the second language learners encounter in the realization of surface morphology.

Results of several studies have revealed a display of optionality on inflectional morphology by L2 learners even when such feature is attested in the target L2, but not found in the learners' L1. Prévost & White (2000) in their proposition, claimed that L2 learners have got the features of terminal nodes in syntax (from their first language,

Universal Grammar, or the second language input), but have not acquired the specified features of the related lexical items completely. Thus, Prévost and White (2000) claim that in second language learners' grammar, non-finite forms are under-specified but finite forms are specified. It seems that finite forms will only occur in finite positions; meanwhile, non-finite forms may occur sometimes in finite positions and in non-finite positions. As a result of this, L2 learners often replace finite forms with non-finite forms which also results to optional exhibition of verbal inflections. This can explain the reason for L2 learners' sometimes omission of the verbal inflections and sometimes display of them.

Legendre (2006) gives a series of five studies that analyse spontaneous production of verbal inflection by 2-year-old children that are acquiring French as L1. Resources of optimality theory were used for the analysis of the qualitative and quantitative results. The study reveals that their tense and agreement production reflect separate courses of acquisition, whereas their production of nonadult-like forms steadily come down as their utterances become longer and richer.

Schumann's study (1978) used a sample of ESL speakers who had Spanish as their first language to examine how second language acquisition (SLA) is independently developed from teaching. The study selected six different native speakers of Spanish which comprise two from each of ages 4 to 6, 11 to 14 and over eighteen. The data involved spontaneous speech, elicitation, and "pre-planned sociolinguistic interactions" (which took the subjects to restaurants, museums, and parties). The focuses of the study were auxiliary verb acquisition and its different Structures. The study was able to establish that Alberto's age was the biggest factor in his lack of acquisition of correctly using auxiliary verbs, and it was positive transfer from Spanish whenever he correctly used them. This means that certain resemblance between grammatical conventions of Spanish and English could have made him to produce correct utterances in English. Thus, he was simply observing his own Spanish grammatical rules; not necessarily knowing whether what he was saying was correct or not.

Muftah and Eng (2011) investigate adult Arab learners of English as a Second Language's (ESL) acquisition of English auxiliary be and thematic verb constructions in non-past contexts. An oral production task (ORPT) was used with 77 adult ESL learners who were subdivided into three different proficiency levels (lower-intermediate, upper-intermediate and advanced) in order to find out the nature of their interlanguage (IL) grammar at the L2 ultimate attainment level as well as to determine the extent to which the learners can acquire English auxiliary be and thematic verb constructions in non-past contexts. The analysis reveals that the L2 learners do omit and wrongly use the auxiliary-be inflections (am, is, are) more often than the thematic verb inflection (-s) in their production. The results reveal that the adult Arab ESL learners, even at ultimate attainment level, are more sensitive to the thematic verb contractions than to the be auxiliary constructions. These results suggest that variability in the production of verbal inflectional morphology is due to problems with the realization of surface morphology in accordance with the MSIH.

The current study differs a little as it examines the acquisition of Participle forms of verb among primary school pupils who are ESL learners. The pupils have Yoruba language as their first Language. The focus of this study is to examine the variant ways these ESL learners realize the Participle forms *ed*, *ing* and *en*. It must be noted that Yoruba language has no tense and agreement inflectional morphology at all whereas English does. Therefore, it is worthwhile to study how Yoruba speaking pupils realize the English tense Participle inflection morphemes within the syntax of English.

IV. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is situated within the theoretical framework of Chomskyan Universal Grammar (UG). Universal Grammar is a theory that explains the underlying linguistic knowledge in the mind of a second language learner. Noam Chomsky whose theory has focused on the effortless language acquisition and learning by children did not subscribe to the idea that exposure to a language was enough for a child to become efficient in a language. He postulates that humans are endowed with an innate ability to learn any language. According to his theory of Universal Grammar, at birth, the human brain had already been encoded with the basic structures of language and that every human language has some rules and systems that are similar. For instance, every language has a system of asking questions and a way of making negative or positive structures. The same way every language has a way of showing that an action was either in the past or present and a way of marking gender. To UG, the basic grammatical rules are the same in all languages and a child only needs to follow the particular set of rules that his peers follow in order to understand and produce their native language. According to Chomsky, Universal Grammar is designed to provide answers to three basic questions about human language generally. The questions are, what constitutes knowledge of human language? How is knowledge of language acquired by children? And how is knowledge of language put to use in communication? The UG claims there is a universal set of principles and parameters which manage the shape of human languages that is inherited by all human beings. Universal Grammar provides an authentic description for the logical problem of the first language acquisition, and it gives a detailed descriptive structural proof which enables researchers to prepare hypotheses about the problems facing the learner. It suggests to us a way of emphasizing the significance of child language acquisition. According to Hogue (2021), Chomsky claims that knowledge of language is a biological endowment and is not learnt.

A. The Three Hypothesis of Universal Grammars of Second Language Acquisition

The three hypotheses of Universal grammar in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) focuses on whether or not an adult language learner can access the basic principles and parameters of Universal Grammar in constructing the grammar of a second language. The three hypotheses are: (a) The direct accessibility, (b) The indirect accessibility, (c) And the inaccessibility.

The direct accessibility hypothesis claims that adult learners learn both first and second languages through setting of parameters to Universal Grammar. So, if Universal Grammar can be used in the first language, it also can be relevant and applicable in second language learning. Second language learners apply UG fully including the areas that are not reflected in their L1 or mother tongue. Thus, the grammar knowledge of a second language learner is largely determined by the degree of UG.

The indirect accessibility hypothesis on the other hand assumes that UG functions in SLA through the grammar of mother tongue. When the parameter setting of Second Language is different from that of first language, Second Language learner cannot apply the parameter which has been lost in UG. According to Hoque (2021), Clahsen (1980) carried out a comparative study using two different two groups. The first group comprises speakers of German as native language while the other group are learners speaking German as L2. It was found that the learners in the first group learn the subject-verb-object (SVO) first and then acquire the knowledge of SOV. With this, Clahsen concludes that Universal Grammar hardly plays any role in the Second Language Acquisition. Therefore, it can be said that Universal Grammar is inaccessible to Second language Acquisition.

Inaccessibility hypothesis turns down all the influence of Universal Grammar on Second Language Acquisition on the assumption that the parameters of UG have been set in the process of first language acquisition, which cannot be reset. Proponents of inaccessibility hypothesis are of the opinion that there is a critical period for language acquisition and when the period passes, Universal Grammar will no longer be available. Second language learners who are adults will have to explore other learning mechanisms or strategies to learn L2. Thus, just like any other aspects of knowledge their second language is learnt in a similar process. Scholars who are in support of full access position hold that Universal Grammar continues to operate for adult L2 learners. They affirm that all the parameters of UG are available and can be reset (Hogue, 2021). The learning tasks of L2 learners are complete by the psychological device and cognitive strategies present in them. This implies that access to Universal Grammar can only be got by that only first language learner. Therefore, the inaccessibility hypothesis only recognizes the value of universal grammar in the first language learning but denies its influences in L2 learning.

V. METHODOLOGY

The research design for this study was experimental research. The research studies the effects of the independent variables (participle forms of verb) on the dependent variable (pupils' acquisition) without manipulations. However, it was carefully observed and recorded information as it naturally occurred at the time of the study was conducted. The sample for this study comprises one hundred (100) respondents, which were randomly selected from five (5) public primary schools in Ikere Local Government Area of Ekiti State, Nigeria. The Five (5) primary schools were selected from the Local Government

through stratified random sampling techniques. The pupils who have Yoruba language as their L1 have always been taught English as a subject where all the forms of verb, tense system and agreement in English are taught. Besides, English is the medium of instruction for other subjects. The research was conducted to ascertain the level of the pupils' acquisition of the participle forms of verb by examining the spontaneous English of 20 school pupils per school.

VI. ANALYSIS OF DATA

The data generated from the pupils was presented, analyzed, interpreted and discussed. Data obtained from the study was descriptively presented and analyzed systematically to discover the level of pupils' acquisition of the participle forms of verb:

TABLE I: PERFORMANCE OF PUPILS ON THE TEST ON PARTICIPLE FORMS OF VERB

| Inflections of participle forms of verb | Correct inflection | wrong Inflection |
|---|--------------------|------------------|
| -ing form | 18% | 31% |
| -ed form | 16% | 6% |
| -en form | 3% | 26% |
| Total percentage | 37% | 63% |

The Table I above shows the extent of optionality and variability displayed by the pupils in the realisation of the participle forms of English verbs to which pupils understand the participle forms of verbs. The result of statistics shows that in all the spontaneous speeches of the pupils involving participle forms of verbs, only 37% were correctly used and 63% were misused. Out of the 63% misused 31% were misuse of-ing form, 6% were misuse of-ed form and 26% were misuse of-en form.

A striking observation from the study is that Pupils mostly overgeneralized rules of regular verbs to irregular verbs. From the research data, pupils misuse past-*ed* for-*en* and-*en* for-*ed*. The errors could be traced to the fact that the learners seem not to have been sure about the tense that they must use in the given composition task, so they confuse the inflections.

TABLE II: USAGE OF PARTICIPLE FORMS OF VERB BY PRIMARY SCHOOL PUPILS

| Examples of participle form error | Types of participle form error | Correct inflectional structures |
|--|--|--|
| We are eating lunch | Inflecting present participle for simple present tense. | We <i>are</i> eating lunch |
| Esther is slept. | Use of past- <i>ed</i> for- <i>ing</i> . | Esther <i>is</i> sleeping |
| Ade has carried my plate | Inflecting past participle – <i>en</i> for present form. | Ade <i>has</i> carried my plate |
| The boy <i>has laid</i> there for many days. | Use of pasted for - <i>en</i> . | The boy <i>has lain</i> there for many days. |
| You have <i>burst</i> ed the secret. | Inflecting irregular verb for past. | You have <i>burst</i> the secret. |
| The terrorist has been <i>hung</i> . | Overgeneralization of - <i>en</i> participle. | The terrorist has been <i>hanged</i> . |
| She has <i>sung</i> a new song. | Using simple - <i>ed</i> for - <i>en</i> . | She has <i>sung</i> a new song. |

From the Table II presented above, it was revealed that majority of the pupils do not use participle forms of verb correctly as seen in the use of past -*ed* for -*en*., inflecting

present participle for simple present tense, inflecting past participle -*en* for present form, inflecting irregular verb for past and overgeneralization (of -*en* participle and -*ed* in regular verbs). The researchers believe that most of these are interlingual rather than intralingual. Some of the pupils were not sure how to use the verb inflections. For example, when the verb “have/has” is used, the next verb that follows should be in its past participle, but some used it in a different way. Some pupils used past -*ed* for -*en* and -*en* for -*ed*. This is an indication that despite the pupils' exposure to various grammar courses, they cannot effectively master the rules of participle forms of verb in English which may be due to inadequacy of teaching materials; poor linguistic input provided for the pupils or deficient and insufficient practice. Some of the pupils over generalized the rules of participle forms of verb especially in the area of regular and irregular verbs. It was hard for some to distinguish among the inflection that should be used based on the tense. They are confused in using the past and past participle form.

VII. DISCUSSION

Having thoroughly examined the level of pupils' acquisition of participle forms of verb in this study, the researchers believe that pupils face both interlingual and intralingual problems. The slow level of pupils' acquisition of participle forms of verb as reflected in their performance is caused by both interlingual and intralingual transfers. Interlingual factors are evident in the use of present and past forms of the participle verb. This occurs when the learner has internalized his native language (L1) whereas some segments of structure of the target language in the second language acquisition manifest some degrees of difference and similarity with the equivalent item or structure in the pupil's first language. Since verb inflection is not found in Yoruba language, which is the L1 of the pupils, most of them find it difficult to master the correct usage of participle forms of verb in English. This finding may suggest that the appropriate use of English verbs was a major learning difficulty of pupils who form the subject of this study. The level of acquisition of participle forms of verb shows that the pupils still have difficulty on when and how to use the participle form of the verb. Some of the pupils were not sure how to use the verb inflections. Our observation here confirms Prévost and White (2000) assertion that “the representations of the inflectional morphology may be fully specified in the L2 grammar, yet the production of the corresponding overt forms seems to be problematic for the L2 learners due to performance limitations resulting from communication pressure” (Prévost & White, 2000, 129).

Another observation is that the pedagogical approaches used in teaching the children are not explicit enough. For instance, it is discovered that the children are not taught what a sentence cannot mean, which kinds of utterances are not acceptable English and in most cases, they are not properly corrected when they make grammatical mistakes. Meanwhile they have clear intuitions about whether a given utterance is acceptable or not in their L1. To this end, it is important for second language teachers to provide adequate authentic language materials to improve the learners'

awareness of first language and second language differences.

Moreover, in the L2 teaching process, English teachers should provide pupils with ample amounts of language input and examples as well as create more opportunities for pupils to write to help them understand inflectional morphemes taught. Teachers should create conducive classroom environment for pupils to participate in class writing activities to improve their grammatical and morpheme inflection competence.

This study reveals that pupils have little knowledge of participle form of verb inflections. Findings shows that of all the verb inflections of participle form produced by the pupils, only 37% was correctly used and 63% was misused. Out of the 63% misused, 31% was misuse of -ing form, 6% was misuse of -ed form and 26% was misuse of -en form. Pupils mostly overgeneralize rules of regular verbs for irregular verbs.

Identifying whether pupils used the correct participle forms of verb when writing, it was revealed that even after been taught, majority of the pupils do not use participle forms of verb correctly as seen in the use of past -ed for -en., inflecting present participle for simple present tense; inflecting past participle -en for present form; inflecting irregular verb for past and overgeneralization (of -en participle and -ed in regular verbs). From the performance of the pupils observed, it was seen that many strategies have to be put in place to help pupils acquire the verb inflections effectively.

VIII. CONCLUSION

From the findings of our study, it is concluded that the Primary school ESL frequently exhibit variability in the production of inflectional morphology of the participle verb forms by either mixing up the appropriate inflection for the inappropriate one or omitting inflections out rightly (White, 2010, 9). It has been pointed out that the underlying syntactic representations of the surface structure of the utterances produced by the learners are thus correct; meanwhile, the surface functional morphology produced is not appropriate as a result of the difficulties encountered in mapping the correct morphology onto the feature representation in the syntax. This has led Prévost and White (2000) to submit that “this phenomenon could be a reflection of a production-specific mapping problem rather than a deficit in the syntactic representation competence, possibly due to prosodic constraints operative in the L2 learners’ L1” (Goad & White, 2006).

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