

The Implication of the English Irregular Verbs on the Second Language Learners

By

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Abstract

This work highlights the nature of the English irregular verbs by identifying what makes them irregular in nature; how this affects or causes problems to second language learners in Onitsha North Local Government Area of Anambra State and to proffer solutions on how to alleviate the problems. Related literature was reviewed under two subtopics: conceptual framework and empirical framework. Both library and field researches are required to get the facts needed for the analysis. Descriptive design requiring respondents to supply answers to objective and subjective tests is used. A total number of three hundred (300) students from six State Government schools in Onitsha North Local Government Area, Anambra State serve as respondents. Five research questions guided the research which aimed at discovering the extent to which the English irregular verbs cause problems to second language learners in Onitsha North Local Government Area of Anambra State. The theoretical framework used is Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) theory by Michael Halliday. Fifty questions were administered to the respondents to test the research questions. In analyzing the results, the researcher observed that the majority of the students do not have the required knowledge of the use of English irregular verbs. Based on the findings, some recommendations which aimed at improving the learning of English in an ESL situation were made.

Keywords: Errors, ESL, Interference, Irregular Verbs, Tenses

Introduction

Learners of English in Nigeria encounter two major problems, which include: the problem of language interference, where LI of the learner interferes with his L2 and the developmental problem arising from the structure of the particular language they are learning. Interference

problems occur because no two languages possess the same rules. The situation always results in transferring the rules of the first language to that of the learner's second language, thus creating misnomer and confusion in usage. The complex nature of the English language makes its second language learners face the above problem in mastering its grammar and vocabulary.

In the English word class, the verb occupies a significant position, and most of the errors that occur in the English grammar are caused by its verbs, particularly the irregular verbs. The English language verb is divided into two major parts: the lexical and the auxiliary verbs. The lexical verb is further divided into the regular and the irregular verbs. Verbs are classified as regular, if they form their past tenses and past participle tenses by adding "-ed" inflection; otherwise, it becomes irregular using different other ways to form their "ed" participle. The verb, therefore, is regarded as the most important part of speech since no sentence can be deemed acceptable without it. Correct verb usage makes grammaticality and acceptability possible. Surprisingly too, this most important part of speech constitutes the greatest source of error in English grammar. The aspect of English verbs that constitutes the greatest source of error in the English grammar is the irregular verb.

English irregular verbs form their past tenses and the past participle tenses in several ways other than the usual "ed" inflection of the regular verbs. This is the reason for their posing problems to ESL learners. Some of them exhibit changes in the middle vowel for one or both of the past and past participle forms (Sing, sang, sung; ring, rang, rung), and some have an "uen" inflection for the "ed" participle (speak, spoke, spoken; break, broke, broken; take, took, taken).

Some of the irregular verbs remain the same at the base forms (cast, cast, cast; put, put, put; broadcast, broadcast, broadcast; forecast, forecast, forecast). The verb "be" is highly irregular with eight forms; base "be", present "am", first person singular "is", (the "s" form for third person singular), "are"(second person singular and all plurals), past "was" and " were" (first, second and third person singular and plural), present participle or "ing" form "being" and the "ed" participle "been". The auxiliaries have a defective paradigm, since they only have the base forms and irregularly constructed past forms (can, could, may, might). Must is exceptional because it has only the base form.

There are other types of these irregular verbs that are very much idiosyncratic in their behavior. They pose almost the greatest problems when they occur in grammatical work. This is because any mistake in usage results in a change in their meanings. These forms when wrongly used alter the entire meaning of the verb by giving it a different meaning altogether. The verb like "hang" with its past form "hung", if wrongly formed as a regular verb, will convey a different meaning altogether. It will then mean, "to execute" instead of "to spread". Another example of this verb is "shine" with its past tense form "shone". If it is formed wrongly, it will mean another thing. If it takes the regular way, it will mean, "to polish".

The above exposition of the nature of the English irregular verbs shows that this type of verb poses a lot of problems to ESL learners. It is against this background that this research is embarked upon with a view to finding solutions to alleviating these problems.

Statement of the Problem

The grammar of English has rules guiding its unit formation. These rules are noticeable in the past tense and past participle tense formation of verbs. Verbs of English have the rule of adding "ed" to the base word in forming past and past participle tenses. But this rule has an exception, as all the English irregular verbs follow another pattern to form their past and past participle tenses. These different forms used to reflect changes in tense are difficult to memorize and use. For instance, the Igbo user of English, especially those who hail from Qnitsha North Local Government Area of Anambra State, tend to regularize all forms of English verbs because the formation of past tense and past participle tense in their language (Mother Tongue) almost follow a regular pattern unlike that of English. The Igbo verbs ‘buo’ (carry) and ‘rie’ (eat), for example, could be inflected to generate their other forms: future tense, past tense, perfect tense and participle tense in a regular pattern without necessarily considering if the verb is a regular or an irregular one. This is exemplified as follow

Word	Future Continuous	Past	Perfect Participle
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(Present)

Buo (regular) Ga-ebu

(Will carry)	Na-ebu (carrying)	Buru (carried)	Buola (carried)	Ebuola (carried)
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(carry)

Rie (irregular) Ga-eri Na-eri Riri Rielia Eriela

(eat)	(will eat)	(eating)	(Ate)	(eaten)	(eaten)
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The Igbo user of English (Onitsha North speakers/writers of English) unconsciously transfer similar structures in the table above in forming irregular verbs in English; thereby generating words (verbs) that sound so strange from the conventional English ones. This problem, to say the least, is caused by cross linguistic interference. This paper, therefore, sets out to investigate the extent these challenges affect the second language learner of the English language in Onitsha North Local Government Area with the hope of mitigating them.

Conversely, the problem of the use of irregular verbs by ESL learners has not been solved in its entirety because despite the volumes of researches on works on the influence of Mother Tongue on English irregular verbs, there is still enough evidence to prove that students still commit errors in grammar due to the misuse of English verbs. This sort of gap can prompt any researcher to embark on this kind of study in an attempt to mitigate the problem. It is on this ground that the researchers attempted to investigate the use of English irregular verbs and its implication on second language learners in Onitsha North Local Government Area. Again, to the researchers' best knowledge, no scholar or researcher has conducted a similar study sourcing data from respondents in Onitsha North Local Government Area of Anambra State. Hence, this research was conducted to fill this gap.

Objectives of the Study

The general objective of this study is to examine the extent of the use and misuse of English irregular verbs among L2 learners of the language. Other specific objectives include:

- (i) To ascertain ways students can use the more confusing verbs correctly in sentences.

- (ii) To identify the extent students can use correctly the class of English irregular verbs whose base forms (the past forms and the past participle forms) are the same.
- (iii) To ascertain the degree at which students use correct verb forms to indicate tenses in the English language.
- (iv) To identify the extent students can use the irregular verbs whose three forms are different correctly in sentences
- (v) To observe the extent students use forms of BE correctly in sentences.

Research questions

The following research questions guide the study:

- (i) To what extent can students use correct verb forms to indicate tenses in the English Language
- (ii) To what extent can students use correctly the class of English irregular verbs whose base forms (the past form and the past participle) are the same?
- iii. In what ways can students use some confusing verbs correctly in sentences?
- iv. To what degree can learners use forms of "BE" correctly in sentences?
- v. To what degree can learners use correctly in sentences the class of the English irregular verbs whose three forms are different?

Significance of the Study

One major significance of any ESL study is its contribution to the corpus of work in the English language pedagogy and learning. The verbs hold sway over many parts of speech. The irregular

type of verb constitutes the greatest source of error in the English grammar. As such, a good use of the English verbs, especially irregular verbs in sentences makes for grammaticality and acceptability. This may only be realized, as this work is intended, to improve the standard of English in our schools, colleges and institutions of higher learning.

In addition, it lies in being an important source material for language teachers who would now be placed in a better position by consulting this work to predict areas of difficulty and help the learner to overcome them.

Scope of the Study

This study is limited to the problems of the English irregular verbs and their implications for ESL learners in Onitsha North Local Government Area, Anambra State. It discusses the several ways these verbs form their past and past participle forms and the difficulties inherent in their mastery. Only SS3 students in six secondary schools, in Onitsha North Local Government Area, were used.

Conceptual Framework

Irregular verbs are then those verbs which act contrary to the rules of regular verb formation. It is generally agreed by some linguists and grammarians that the English irregular verbs are the antiques of old English, that is to say that they are the surviving members of the old English verbs. Many prominent grammarians highlight the behavior of these verbs and the problems they pose to learners. According to Crystal (1995: 212), "the forms of a regular lexical verb can be predicted by rules, but the forms of an irregular lexical verb are the ones where some of the forms are

unpredictable." He opines that the English irregular verbs are made up of five forms. These forms are the infinitive, the simple present, the simple past, the past participle and the present participle. Most of these forms, he says are made with spelling changes. Irregular verbs, according to him, make "s" form and the "ing" form by adding an ending to the base in the same way as regular verbs do, but they have an unpredictable past participle form or both. Most irregular verbs in his view change the vowel of the base while some do not change anything at all as in "cut". According to him, the irregular lexical verbs pose routine problems for young children and foreign learners.

Fowler et al. (1998), in their work, state that all English verbs have five basic forms except "Be" which has more. For examples: kick/kicks/kicked/kicked/kicking; live/lives/lived/lived/living. They confirm that most English verbs are regular which add "d"/"ed" to the base to form past and past participle tense and so do not often cause problems in speech and writing. According to them, there are about two hundred English irregular verbs which form their past tense and past participle tenses in some irregular ways. Some form their ed 1 and ed2 by changing an internal vowel, - begin, began, begun; come, came, come; some have same form in their past and past participle tenses- sleep, slept, slept, while some are the same in all the basic forms - cut, cut, cut; let, let, let. These authors stress the fact that verbs are troublesome not only to learners, but also to experienced writers. They state thus,

Verbs can cause trouble for writer regardless of their level of skill. For some Inexperienced writers, choosing the correct tense or form of a verb is a challenge. Verb endings and the forms of irregular verbs (inflections) can be quite confusing. Even experienced writers may occasionally stumble

over the forms of 'lie' and 'lay' or worry about maintaining a correct sequence of tense in a complicated writing task. (Fouler et al., 1992:223).

This means that the English verbs especially the irregular verbs cause trouble to everyone. Quirk and Greenbaum (2012: 30) say that irregular verbs differ from regular verbs in the following ways; irregular verbs either do not have a (d) or (t) inflection or break the rule for a voiced inflection. Irregular verbs typically but not necessarily have variations in their base vowel. Irregular verbs have varying number of distinct forms.

This means that the irregular verbs have their own way of forming their past and the past participle tenses different from the regular rule formation of (d) or (t) inflection. They have variations in some base vowels while some others do not. According to them, the irregular verb forms vary from three (e.g. "put") to eight (e.g. "Be"). This is because there are some English irregular verbs that do not entertain any change of any kind in their 'ed' one and 'ed' two. They only re-appear in their 'ed' one and; 'ed' two with no change of either consonant or vowel. After this, the authors identify the different classes of the irregular verbs putting them in groups of seven as they form their past and past participles. Eyisi (2014: 49) states "out of all the parts of speech we have in the English language, verbs undoubtedly are the most problematic. Learners, therefore, encounter a lot of difficulties while using them in sentence constructions". She lists a number of areas where difficulty can occur in the use of verbs as follows:

Using a verb in its wrong tense is a frequent error in the use of English in Nigeria. There is often a misuse of the past tense and the past participle form of the irregular verbs, besides, the verb to "lie" and to "lay" are often confused. (Eyisi, 2014: 50).

This means she agrees with others that the English verbs, especially, irregular verbs are problematic to ESL learners.

Huddleston (1995: 211) shares his view when he states thus; "when learning a second language as an adult, the irregular forms always impose disproportionate burden on the memory." This statement is supported by Labito et al. (2001: 85), when they conclude that "almost everyone has some degree of trouble with irregular verbs" This means that irregular verbs cause trouble to young and adult learners or to both ESL and native learners.

Leech and Svartrik (2002: 50) on verb state:

Most English verbs are regular, but there are over 200 main verbs that are irregular. Irregular verbs are like regular verbs in having "s" and "ing" forms. For example, the regular verb "break" has the forms of breaks, breaking as the regular verb, walk has the forms of walks and walking. With irregular verbs we cannot predict their past tense or past participle forms from the base.

This shows that these authors have the same view that verbs have several forms and that irregular verb forms cannot be predicted because they do not follow a specific method in forming the past and the past participle tense. These authors distinguish three main types of irregular verbs. These are verbs in which all the three principal parts: the base, the past and the past participle are identical - cut, cut, cut; let, let, let. Verbs in which two parts are identical-spend, spent, spent; come, came, come and verbs in which all the three parts are different -blow, blew, blown, speak, spoke, spoken.

Marciver (1998) shares the same view with others when he states that irregular verbs form their - past tense and past participle in other ways. "Many Irregular verbs however form them differently". (65). He identifies the misuse of past tense and past participle tense as the worst error. He states:

One of the worst errors in speech and writing is the use of the past participle instead of the past tense. Examples: "I seen you"; "They done that"; and the past tense instead of the past participle. Examples: "Have you broke it?" "They have went". (1998: 65).

Murthy (2012: 99), on the other hand, divided verb into two classes based on the method by which they form the past tense from the present. He uses the terms strong and weak verbs to identify them. The regular lexical verb, he calls the weak verb, while the irregular lexical verb he calls the strong verb. He opines that weak verbs are verbs which form their past tense by adding "ed" "d" or "t" to the present, while strong verbs are ones that form their past tense by simply changing the vowel without adding 'ed' 'd' or; 't'. From the above, one could decipher that the irregular verbs, being the stronger verbs, will definitely pose a lot of problems to the ESL learner because of its constant change in nature and form.

Empirical Framework

Scholars in language and linguistics had conducted a good number of researches on irregular verbs and their pedagogical implications on learners of English as a Second Language in Nigeria. It is against this backdrop that Nwuba (2010), highlighted the nature of English irregular verbs and how they constitute a problem to Nigerian learners of English. The study adopted a descriptive research design and the theory of morphemic and/or morphosyntax of English irregular verbs. The sample of the study consisted of 200 students selected randomly from Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka and Nwafor Orizu College of Education, Nsugbe. The results showed that majority of respondents do not possess the required knowledge of the use of English irregular verbs. It was

thus suggested that further researches should be conducted on irregular verbs which pose problem to Nigerian speakers of English.

Ayuba (2014), in his work, explored competence and performance in the use of irregular verbs in some secondary schools in Kano State. The study aimed to determine how the learning and use of the English irregular verbs affect the written English performance of the students in English. Three research questions were answered using Frequency Count and three hypotheses were tested using r Pearson at 0.05 level of significance. Out of 64685 students in Kano State, 1749 students were selected from 317 schools through random selection. The hypotheses revealed that there was a significant relationship between the use of irregular lexical and primary auxiliary verbs. However, Irregular lexical verbs were more difficult than irregular auxiliary verbs. It was, however, suggested that a practice-based approach should be used to teach irregular verbs in Nigerian secondary schools.

On his part, Tayo (2010) investigated tense and aspect in English and Yoruba: problem areas of Yoruba learners of English. The study was anchored on Lado's Contrastive Analysis. It was revealed that Yoruba learners of English were not at home with some irregular verbs in English such as burst, feed, bite, cut, spread etc., the researcher thus suggested, among many, that learners should not generalize rules which allow S2 features to interfere with S2forms. 'Teachers and scholars of English as a second language, therefore, need to emphasize these areas of language in their teaching and books on the subject need to expound more on them too' (Tayo, 2010:358).

Similarly, Eze (2011) conducted extensive research on the topic "participle problems encountered by senior secondary school students in Nsukka Local Government Area of Enugu State". The

overall objective of the study is to find out the participle problems encountered by students of English, the constraints they face and possible ways of helping them. The study used four research questions which guided the study. The study borrowed insight from Corder's Error Analysis to explain the theoretical pep of the study. Methodologically, the research is a survey. The population of this study is made up of senior secondary three (SS 111) students and the English language teachers in the five schools used. Using the stratified sampling technique, 150 students were selected from five schools in Nsukka Local Government Area. Data were collected through a 24 item-questionnaire which were distributed and collected for analysis. The data were analyzed using weighted mean. Based on the four-point rating scale of the questionnaire, a mean of 3.21 was adopted as cut-off point for the questionnaire. The findings revealed that the teaching and learning of participles is faced with numerous problems in the target schools. The researcher thus gave three valuable recommendations that would alleviate the problems.

From the foregoing, it is evidently clear that the current study and the works reviewed are significantly related in that both works seek to explicate the difficulties Nigerian learners of English as a second language encounter in the use of English irregular verbs in speech and writing. However, the current study differs slightly from the works reviewed in that, while Nwaba (2010) carried out a related study in Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka and Nwafor Orizu College of Education, Nsugbe, the current study was conducted in Onitsha North Local Government Area of the same state. The researcher's choice of geography differentiates the two works. Again, while Nwaba used university and college of education students, the current study made use of secondary school students. In a similar vein, this study also differs from that of Ayuba (2014) and Tayo (2010) who conducted their researches using Yoruba and Hausa speakers of English, respectively, the

current study used the Igbo speakers of English in Anambra State. Eze's (2011) work differs from the current study in that his work investigated participle problems encountered by senior secondary school students in Nsukka Local Government Area of Enugu State but this study only attempts to examine the extent of the use and misuse of English irregular verbs among L2 learners of the language in Onitsha North Local Government of Anambra State. Last but not the least, this study also differs from that of Ohakamike (2016) which examines the syntactic variation in Nigerian English and students' achievement in English language; but this study only attempts to explore the use of English irregular verbs and their implication on pedagogical matters. This difference is, therefore, the gap which this work intends to fill thereby contributing to knowledge.

Theoretical Framework

The framework for this study is guided by Michael Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) theory. The theory came to be in early 1960s. Halliday's work has a foundation on the works of Ferdinand de Saussure, Louis Halliday, Malinowski and the Prague School Linguists. In a similar way, Halliday drew insights from the works of American anthropologists Boas, Sapir and Whorf. However, Halliday's greatest inspiration came from J.R. Firth, the man who he owes the notion of language as a system. So, Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) is an approach to linguistics that considers language as a social semiotic system. SFG is, therefore, a language theory centered around the notion of language function (Halliday, 1985).

The major focus of this theory is centered on functional linguistics. The school believes that language should be functional; it should have the ideational, interpersonal and textual met functions. These language levels are discussed below:

The Ideational Function of Language

This meta function mode relates to the Field of discourse and is concerned with construing experience. In other words, it is concerned with interpretation and presentation of experience. It is the means by which we make sense of reality (Halliday&Mattheissen,2014). The ideational meta function is categorized into Logical and Experiential. Logical function refers to grammatical resources for building up grammatical units into complexes, for instance, for combining more clauses into a clause complex. The Experiential function is concerned with grammatical resources involved in construing the flux of experiences through the unit of the clause. The ideational meta function (field), therefore, explicates the social process in which language is implicated.

The Interpersonal Function of Language

Interpersonal meta function relates to Tenor of discourse. It is concerned with enacting interpersonal relations through language. (Halliday, 1994; Halliday & Mettiessen, 2014). The central system in the realization of interpersonal meta function is mood, which covers the lexico grammatical resources which signal different type interaction between interlocutors. Interpersonal meta function is made up of three components: the speaker/writer, social distance and relative social status. Social distance and social status relate mostly to spoken text but they also be applied to written text.

Textual Function of Language

Textual relates to the Mode of discourse. It is the internal organization and communicative nature of a text (Halliday, 1994; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Textual function also concerns itself with organizing ideational and interpersonal meanings as a text in context. According to Leech and

Short, cited in Yeibo and Akerele (2015), "Halliday's textual function is a way of using language to organize, understand and express information for effective communication" (p.147).

These are reflected in the grammar across different ranks, such as classes, groups or words, creating functional subdomains or grammar regions. Caffarell et al., cited in Lavid, Arus and Rafeal (2010) contend that textual resources are associated with prosodic forms of realization. Textual resources are, therefore, associated with periodic forms of realization, organizing semiotic reality as waves of information.

Summarily, the theory sees grammar as the system of wordings of a language. They maintain that language is used to interact with one another. It is also used to construct and maintain our interpersonal relations and the social order that lies behind these relations and in doing so; we interpret and represent the world for one another and for ourselves. This theory is adopted for this study because it deals with what is obtainable in the classroom situation which involves the L2 learner of the English language, in this case, the teaching and learning of English irregular verbs in Nigerian schools.

Research Design

This study was carried out using six research questions. The research questions were tested with fifty questions administered on the respondents; the SS3 students in the six secondary schools randomly selected from Onitsha North Local Government Area, Anambra State, namely: Queen of the Rosary College, Dennis Memorial Grammar School, Metropolitan Secondary School, Prince Memorial Secondary School, Washington Memorial Grammar School and Our Lady's Secondary

School. In addition, Oral interview was conducted. The result of the data was analyzed and recommendation given.

Population and Sample

The people that constitute the population of the study are the entire SS3 students in the sixteen (16) secondary schools in Onitsha North metropolis. However, the population was systematically reduced to six (6) schools because out of the 16 secondary schools, 5 of them were government schools ran in partnership with the mission while 11 of them were purely run by the government. Out of the ones managed by both government and mission I selected 2 school while from the purely government managed ones I selected 4 schools, namely: Queen of the Rosary College and Dennis Memorial Grammar School (both managed by government and mission) Metropolitan Secondary School, Prince Memorial Secondary School, Washington Memorial Grammar School and Our Lady's Secondary School (pure government schools) all in Onitsha North Local Government Area, Anambra State. This selection was not done intuitively; rather it was done based on the need to represent fair schools that cut across gender. It was on this basis that the schools mentioned above were selected.

Method of Data Collection

This study was carried out using five (5) exploration questions. The research questions were extended to fifty (50) objectives and subjective questions which were administered to the total number of three hundred (300) SS3 students selected from the six schools in the area of the study. The schools include Queen of the Rosary College, Dennis Memorial Grammar School, Metropolitan Secondary School, Prince Memorial Secondary School, Washington Memorial

Grammar School and Our Lady's Secondary School, all in Onitsha North Local Government Area, Onitsha, Anambra State. In each school, fifty (50) students were randomly selected to complete the questionnaires designed to test their knowledge of the use of irregular verbs.

Method of Data Analysis

Frequency counts and percentages were used for this exercise with fifty (50) questions administered on the students. The overall achievement in each section is judged based on competent score of seventy percent (70%) as the pass mark.

Data Analysis

The research questions guiding the administered questions are transformed into sub-sectional titles for easy analysis. There are five (5) tables in all, each table analyzes ten (10) questions bordering on irregular verbs and the several ways they form their past and past participle forms.

Table 1: Respondents' use of correct verb forms to indicate the various tenses of the English language

Questions	No of respondents	Total no failed	% failed	Total no passed	% passed
1-10	300	199	66.3	101	33.6

One hundred and ninety-nine (66.3%) of the respondents scored below the pass mark level, and only one hundred and one (33.6%) scored above the pass mark. This table shows that a greater number of respondents found it difficult to use verb forms to indicate tenses in English.

Table 2: Respondents' usage of class of irregular verbs whose base forms, past forms and past participle forms are identical

Questions	No of Respondents	Total No failed	% failed	Total No passed	% passed
11-20	300	150	50	150	50

This table shows that one hundred and fifty (50%) of the respondents found it difficult to use the irregular verbs whose three parts are the same correctly, while one hundred and fifty (50%) did not find it difficult. This shows a little improvement in the use of the irregular verbs whose three parts are identical.

Table 3: The Respondents' use of the irregular verbs whose three parts are different

Questions	No of Respondents	Total No failed	% failed	Total No passed	% passed
21-30	300	179	60	121	40

This table shows the performance of respondents to the correct use of the irregular verbs with their three parts different. The result shows that the majority of the students have problems in using this class of the irregular verbs. One hundred and seventy-nine (60 %) scored below the pass mark level. Only one hundred and twenty-one (40 %) scored above the pass mark level.

Table 4: The Respondents' use of the more confusing pair of the irregular verbs: lie/lay; sit/set and rise/raise

Questions	No of Respondents	Total No failed	% failed	Total	No	Passed
						% Passed
31-40	300	225	75	75	25	

Table 4 shows that two hundred and twenty-five (75%) of respondents scored below the pass mark level and seventy-five (25%) scored above the pass mark level. This shows that a greater number of students find it difficult to use this class of the English irregular verbs.

Table 5: The Respondents' use of the forms of the irregular verb "Be"

Questions	No of Respondents	Total No failed	% failed	Total	No	passed
						% passed
40-50	300	170	56.6	130	43.3	

Questions forty to fifty (40- 50) tested the students' ability to use the irregular forms of "B". The result as shown in the table above indicates that one hundred and seventy (56.6 %) respondents failed the test while one hundred and thirty (43.3 %) of them scored above the pass mark level. The result shows a slight improvement in the use of the forms of "Be", but the students' performance is still below expectation.

Discussion of Results

Students' poor performance in the use of tense as recorded in table I shows the persistent problems confronting them in the use of this feature of verb. ESL learners, especially the natives of Onitsha North Local Government Area, have often mistaken tense for aspect. The English language has only two tenses- the present and the past. Tense is a compulsory element of a verb and verb is one of the most important parts of speech which causes most of the errors of grammar. Fowler et al. (1992:223) say that verbs can cause trouble to writers, regardless of their skill. They state, "For some inexperienced writers, choosing the correct tense or form of a verb is a challenge. Verb endings and the forms of irregular verbs (inflection) can be quite confusing." Eyisi (2006:49) confirms this when she says that "out of all the parts of speech we have in English, verbs undoubtedly are the most problematic. Using a verb in its wrong tense is a frequent error in the use of English in Nigeria." Oji (1988:40) adds that "tense is one aspect of grammar that continues to puzzle many teachers of English". This is because traditional grammarians equated "tense" with "time" namely the present, the past and the future. While tense is the form that a verb takes to show the time of an action, "aspect", which people mistake for sub-tense, is the category of the verb which shows inception, duration, continuity or completion. There are two aspects in English - the progressive, which indicates that the action is still going on, and the perfective, which indicates that the action has been completed.

An ESL learner is, therefore, faced with the challenge of making proper use of verbs, whether in their present or past tense form or in their progressive or perfective aspect form. In their efforts to do this, they commit certain errors as a result of not making proper application of rules. It is not

surprising, therefore, that greater percentage of the population who participated in the test exercise scored below the adjudged pass mark, since even the teachers and experienced writers are also in trouble with verbs and their tenses.

Aside from tenses in general, respondents have problems with the class of irregular verbs whose base, the past and the past participle are same. This is evident in the balanced performance of the respondents. The result of the exercise shows 150 (50 %) of the participants failed the test in this aspect of English usage. The assumption is that not only that they have problem of not being able to identify the verb that fall under this class, but they also tend to regularize the verbs. Thus, some of them write "forecasted" and "broadcasted" instead of "forecast" and "broadcast" in that order. Much effort is only required on the part of the instructors and learners to put things right. It is however the only area where students show a little improvement.

Apart from the above, the class of the English irregular verbs with all the three parts different in table 3, creates its own problems. As the base, past tense and past participle differ, example for sing, sang, sung and eat, ate, eaten, students find them different to learn. It is noted that some learners tend to use indiscriminately the forms of the past and the past participle together. It is not surprising therefore, that poor result is-recorded in the text exercise as the majority of the participants scored below the pass mark.

The next highly noticeable variant forms of the irregular verbs are exemplified by the verb "Be". This verb has eight forms, am, is, are, (present tense 1st, 3rd and 2nd person), was and were (past tense, 1st, 3rd, 2nd persons); being -ing, form (progressive aspect) been (perfective form). Student's performance on the use of "Be", as shown in table 5, shows that the majority of the respondents

scored below the pass mark level. Nevertheless, this test shows a slight improvement as 43.3 % scored the pass level line.

Conclusion

Learning a language, especially a foreign language implies engaging in several sets of difficulties. You must master the sounds that make the language (the phonemes), understand how to arrange words so as to make meaningful utterances (syntax) and acquire new words that may seem unrelated to their meaning (the morphemes). Learning the English irregular verbs is saddling oneself with several sets of difficulty. Identifying them and mastering their tenses, inflected form processes are herculean tasks to many.

Anyone who has had the privilege of teaching and evaluating the English language course at the secondary and even degree level will admit that there is a lot of confusion in the use of the English irregular verbs. One major fact recognized is that the present-day students do not have the required rudimentary knowledge of grammar. This is a result from how they were taught or what they were told about it.

Recommendations

We strongly recommend therefore that our instructors, in this case, the teachers be exposed to in service trainings, seminars, workshops and even personal improvements through e-learning so as to be well equipped in instructing the learners better. The learners too should be well exposed to internet learning, the art of public speech like inter schools' debate, seminars, essay competitions and whatever will help them improve on both their written and spoken English.

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