An Analysis of Grammatical Concord in Selected Examination Scripts of Students of the Ghana Technology University College

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ABSTRACT The present paper investigates the use of grammatical concord in undergraduate students of Ghana Technology University College English Communication Skills examination scripts. Purposeful and critical discourse analysis methods were employed to analyse sentences from selected scripts of level 200 students to ascertain their proficiency in the use of grammatical concord in English. The paper observed that students are not proficient in the use of grammatical concord as a result of poor foundation they had in their previous schools before entering the university. The paper concludes that more exciting pedagogical methods such as teaching grammar in context, use of substitution tables, constant practice, amongst others, should be employed by teachers to whet students' appetite in the language.

INTRODUCTION

Ghana, like most sub-Saharan countries, is blessed with many indigenous languages but the English language continues to play a pivotal role in day-to-day transactions of Ghanaians. As a result of this, rather unfortunate case of linguistic imperialism, the Ministry of Education (MoE) has made it a policy for the English language to be taught from kindergarten to the university level. In addition, it is also medium of instruction in almost all subjects. Afful (2007: 144) has observed that apart from English Language being used as an official language or Lingua Franca in Ghana, 'it is an important means of inter-ethnic communication internally and a source of communication with the international community – politics, trade, and science. Afful's assertion, with regard to the importance of the English Language in Ghana has been buttressed by Quagie (2010), who, in extolling the role of English posits that he is yet to read or see any written manifestoes of political parties in other Ghanaian languages. This is very unfortunate as the majority of the population is not very literate in English.

However, it is important to mention that notwithstanding the status of the English Language in Ghana, not much has been done to improve upon how the language is taught and learned, let alone spoken as one would have expected. In this regard, mention can be made of how issues surrounding the teaching and learning of the language in Ghana continue to pose challenges to Ghanaian teachers and other academics. The students of Ghana Technology University College (GTUC) are no exception to this predicament. Indeed, one of such basic grammatical rules which are often abused is that regarding the use of grammatical concord. Studies have revealed that some teachers of English subject, especially those at the Junior High Schools (JHS) and Senior High Schools (SHS), are not properly trained to teach the rudiments of the language to meet the needs and aspirations of students (Klu 2006). The present paper is an attempt to find out remedies to some of the challenges encountered by English Second Language learners in relation to their use of grammatical concord. Samples were drawn from the examination scripts of level 200 students of Ghana Technology University College (GTUC).

Literature Review

Dulay and Burt (1977) have contended that a new language cannot be learned by anybody without 'goofing'. This assertion by these grammarians, lends credence to the fact that second language learners are bound to make errors in their attempt to learn the target language which in this case is English. English, like any other language is rule governed and these rules should be learned by anybody who wants to speak the language correctly and effectively. However, this is not always possible. As a result of these challenges, many speakers of English as second language, especially in Ghana, are

often confronted with certain grammatical glitches when it comes to using the rules of grammatical concord. Long (2007: 606) has argued that 'for a sentence to make sense, subjects and verbs have to agree with each other …'. She goes on to assert that issues about subject-verb agreement are relevant basic skills which every student must strive to acquire. Kwofie (2011: 11), drawing on *The Macmillan English Dictionary* (2007) edition asserts that 'concord is the way in which words are used together correctly according to the rules of grammar'. The various definitions of concord in the literature have been buttressed by Freeborn (1987) who opines that 'grammar provides the rules for putting words into the right order so that our meaning is clear' (P. xiii). The researcher has found Freeborn's definition of grammar intriguing and relevant to this paper in that for English to be taught and learnt properly the basic grammatical rules should not be violated; and since concord is an aspect of English grammar, it behoves teachers, students, and other users of the language to adhere to the rules governing it in order to achieve effective communication. Quirk et al. (2005) contend that concord is a relationship which exists between two grammatical units such that when one of them displays a particular feature, for example, plurality, that accords with a displayed feature in the other. Thukur (2002) concurs with the arguments raised by the earlier writers with regard to concord when he indicates that one of the useful rules of English language is when the verb agrees with the subject in terms of number and person. Kwofie (2011: 23), citing Yankson (1994) has argued that when second language learners commit grammatical errors, it reflects badly on their personality and that tells listeners something about their educational background and shows their inter-language as 'developing grammar' that borders on illiteracy. This comment from the renowned Ghanaian scholar of ESL lends credence to the fact that one's poor knowledge of English grammar can belittle and embarrass one in the eyes of one's audience. In this regard, care must be taken by ESL speakers to escape the dangers posed by the wrong use of grammatical concord in their verbal and written communications. English, is however, not an easy language to master and this is clearly pointed out by Thakur (2002) who indicates that it is not surprising that even advanced learners and speakers of ESL sometimes get confused with some of the grammatical rules which govern the language.

Statement of the Problem

The issue of grammatical concord in English has become an albatross hanging around the necks of both teachers and students in Ghana and elsewhere. So endemic is the problem of grammatical concord to the extent that Owusu-Ansah in a book, *English in Ghana* (1997: 30) citing Yankson (1989) has argued 'concord errors…are damaging to one's reputation than other errors …'. This observation, with regard to use of grammatical concord, is relevant to this article in that issues about grammatical concord in English grammar have become age long grammatical challenges, which needed to be tackled properly and efficiently by teachers and students of English second Language. However, it is sad to mention that although issues about grammatical concord continue to 'torment' both teachers and students, adequate measures have not been put in place by teachers, students, educationists and other stakeholders to improve the way and manner this aspect of English grammar should be taught, especially in Ghanaian schools, colleges and even universities. Indeed, whenever it comes to issues on grammatical concord, teachers and students narrow their thoughts to a mere subject-verb agreement, forgetting that other important issues such as concord within tenses, notional concord, proximity concord, concord with relative pronouns – who, which, that, whose, amongst others, remain insurmountable to all stakeholders (Quagie 2010, 2011).

Aim of the Paper

The paper aims to address certain key areas with regard to grammatical concord in ESL in Ghanaian schools and colleges for better attention to enable students to overcome such challenges in both verbal and written communications. In addition, the paper has recognized to a large extent that one key factor which has accounted for the problem of grammatical concord among students and users of ESL in Ghana and elsewhere, is the poor approach or pedagogy employed in teaching and learning the language. The paper attempts to recommend more useful ways or pedagogical approaches to the teaching of concord as an aspect of English grammar.

Research Questions

This paper seeks to find answers to the following research questions:
  (a) Why do students continuously face problems or challenges when it comes to the observance of the rules governing grammatical concord in English second language?
  (b) What semantic problems are created when students violate the rules of grammatical concord?

METHODOLOGY

A purposive sampling and critical discourse analyses approaches were used in this paper. Alhasan (2007: 53) defines purposive sampling as a method in which the 'researcher carefully selects the sample to reflect the purpose of the investigation'. Indeed, several grammatical issues were identified in the selected students' scripts, but the concern of the paper was to investigate how students use grammatical concord, what challenges confront them in their bid to use grammatical concord.

In the case of critical discourse analysis approach, the work of Van Dijk (1976) was considered. In particular, in his book: *Cognitive Processing of Literary Discourse* (1976). Van Dijk argues that in analysing literary texts, readers should take into account 'highly ambiguous, vague, incomplete sentences which may occur in some kinds of literary texts' (P. 144) and see how these can be interpreted in order to enhance the understanding of the text. We have found the assertion by Van Dijk concerning analysis of literary texts very relevant to this paper in that the sentences, which might contain some challenges with the use of grammatical concord in the selected students' scripts would be analyzed thoroughly in order to ascertain the semantic effects or implications these grammatical concord issues create for both teachers and students.

Analysis

This paper focused on four key areas in grammatical concord namely: (i) concord within tenses, (ii) subject-verb concord or agreement, (iii) concord with the relative pronouns, (iv) concord with certain phrases, expressions or words such as: as well as, in addition to, together with, including, along with, amongst others. Below, the paper presents and analyses an example of each grammatical concord challenge as identified from the selected examination scripts of the GUTC students.

1. Concord within Tenses

A look at the selected students' examination scripts revealed the following sentence: *The police left the scene of the accident after they **took** measurement of the place*. It is obvious from the example that when it comes to the use of concord within tenses, students are not conversant with the rule, which stipulates that whenever one wants to describe two events which occurred in the past, the correct tense to use is the past perfect. In addition, they tend to forget that the past perfect tense uses the auxiliary verb 'had' and the perfect form of any lexical verb. The correct sentence, which students should have written is: *The police left the scene of the accident after they had taken measurement of the place* or *After the police had taken measurement of the place of accident, they l**eft** (the place)*.

2. Challenges with Use of Subject-Verb Agreement

As a response to a question: *State two usefulness of communication to human beings*, which appeared in one of the question papers, students provided the following answers: 1) *Communication **help** human beings to spread information.* 2) *It **helps** human beings to spread information.* Indeed, these responses from students underscore the fact that they have not internalized the rule of subject-verb agreement. In other words, it is apt to argue that students find it difficult to identify the subject, especially when it is an abstract noun, and when the impersonal pronoun 'it' acts as a subject in sentences they construct.

3. Concord with Relative Pronouns

From the selected scripts, students were asked to make a choice between certain verbs which were placed in brackets in sentences such as: *In Ghana, one of the challenges that (contribute/contributes) to the growth and development of the tourism sector is the fast food*

industry. Only few students were able to make the correct choice of verbs in the brackets to agree with the subject – antecedent – the challenges. The rest of the students chose the verb "contributes" instead. Indeed, the responses which the students gave clearly demonstrated their paucity of knowledge when it comes to issues regarding the rule of concord with relative pronouns.

(4) Concord with Expressions - Such As, As Well As, In Addition To, Together With, Including and Along With

(Wiredu 1998; Sekyi-Baidoo 2003; Quagie 2010) amongst others have argued, whenever the phrases or words as mentioned above are used to describe or modify a series of nouns and noun phrases, the verb should agree with the form of the first noun mentioned in order to achieve unity and coherence in grammatical concord. Guided by this principle, we found from the selected students' examination scripts the violation of this grammatical rule as presented in the following: *My father, together with other younger siblings of mine, **were** conveyed to the hospital.*

In the example above, the noun phrase 'my father' represents a singular noun; therefore, requires a singular verb 'was' instead of 'were'.

DISCUSSION

Research Question I: Why do students continuously face problems with the use of grammatical concord in English as a second language?

This question aimed at investigating why grammatical concord continues to pose a challenge to students. From the discussions and analyses of the various extracts, it was realized that almost all the grammatical concord types identified in this study have posed some threat to the students because of the following factors: First, the students do not have adequate knowledge with regard to the use of the rules which govern grammatical concord; hence, the challenges. Secondly, students' plight with the use of grammatical concord might be due to poor teaching pedagogies employed by some teachers of ESL, especially at the basic school level in Ghana and elsewhere. Finally, it is pertinent to

reiterate the point that the problem of English grammar – concord, continues to haunt students because of the caliber of teachers who teach the language in schools, colleges and even universities. Indeed, it is pathetic to indicate that some teachers of ESL in some Ghanaian schools and colleges are not trained languages teachers at all. They teach because they feel they can speak English fluently so they can also teach it.

Research Question II: What semantic problems are created when students violate rules of grammatical concord?

The question sought to ascertain the semantic effects that are created when students violate the rule of concord in ESL. Semantics is a branch of linguistics which deals with meaning (Sekyi-Baidoo 2002). It therefore stands to reason that meaning in ESL can be impeded when rules which govern how the language is spoken and written are not adhered to. From the analysis, it is obvious that 'poor grammar obstructs communication and therefore meaning' (Aloysius et al. (1997: 294). Indeed, when one considers students' violation of the rule of concord within tenses as portrayed in Example 1 of the analysis, there is no doubt that the sentence can present different shades of meaning as a result of wrong tense concord.

CONCLUSION

From the discussion it is obvious that the knowledge of ESL teacher is paramount to the teaching of the language. The study, therefore would like to reiterate the earlier point that teachers of ESL must be well trained and should be given regular in-service training to keep them abreast with the current developments in the discipline. More so, grammar has become an essential communicative tool; therefore, the pattern practice of teaching grammar, should give way to practical discussion on how students can use grammar to communicate essential information. In this regard, the paper would like to argue unequivocally that teachers of ESL should endeavour to read constantly in order to enhance their understanding of issues pertaining to the teaching of the language. In fact, the paper has observed with grave concern that whenever it comes to teaching of grammatical concord, teachers merely 'brush off the surface' of

the subject for students, and leave other complex issues such as concord with the relative pronouns, amongst others, still insurmountable to students.

Finally, as a word of admonition to students, they must cultivate the culture of reading good grammar books, which have discussed some challenging issues in grammatical concord and English grammar in general. They can also read novels by African writers such as Achebe, Soyinka, Amarh, Mda, etc. and learn from them.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The paper recommends that in order to ameliorate the problem of grammatical concord amongst ESL teachers and students in Ghana and elsewhere, the teaching of the language should be intensified and modernised. For example, the various activities and methods which ESL teachers employ during teaching and learning should be suitable to the level of students and should be geared towards enhancing a particular grammatical skill in students. Secondly, only properly trained and certified teachers should be allowed to teach the language. Finally, technology abounds with numerous and readily available courses so such courses should be carefully sought and recommended to students.

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