

# Grammar of Effective Composition in English

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**Abstract**— Pedagogical regiments of grammar and accuracy of expression is perhaps, one of the most dreaded aspects of second language acquisition, especially through conscious learning. Learners of different ages generally react in the same manner to the negative reaction or the low grades from both audience and graders; and most learners also share the same inhibiting obsession with 'correctness' or grammaticality of expression. Obviously, the teaching methodology of most English Language Teaching (ELT) professionals heightens the learners' dread of grammar, rather than mitigate it. This paper approaches grammar from the perspective of a make-up kit that beautifies our writing; not a set of dreadful rules you dare not break! This work briefly demonstrates salient aspects of grammar that enhance clarity of expression and relate these to effective composition and concludes that students who painstakingly negotiate the nexus of grammar and effective composition would in the main, succeed in their writing exercises.

**Keywords**— Grammar, effective communication, grammaticality, correctness, ESL.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Some grammarians have developed different perspectives on the grammar of English language, basically in terms of dominant grammatical approaches adopted in certain authoritative textbooks on the subject and the meta-language adopted. An instance of the latter is evident in the possible choice between the use of either 'parts of speech' or 'word classes'. But fortunately, the sustained tradition of the grammatical description of English has reduced the variation of the grammars of English to mere differences in categorization and terminology preferred by the writer (Greenbaum and Nelson 2009:2). The term 'grammar' covers a broad spectrum of language norms including: word classes, word formation and division processes, word structure and arrangement, etc. From this perspective, we may describe grammar as an equivalence of the syntax of a language, an embodiment of..... The most ubiquitous definition of grammar includes the declaration that it is a set of rules that govern language use (Eko 1987:41; Alo 1995:16; Ahaotu 2011:24;); or 'the way a language manipulates and combines words (or bits of words) in order to form longer units of meaning' (Ur 2004:4). Ndimele (2008:80-81) defines grammar as 'a body of innate linguistic rules concerning a language' and further affirms that normal native speakers of a language naturally develop and internalize a 'mental grammar' of the language and also utilize the knowledge in producing and recognizing well-formed sentences. Greenbaum and Nelson (2009:1) define grammar as 'the set of rules that allow us to combine words in English into larger units'. They further explain that grammar is a central component of language,

which plays a mediating role between the systems of sound or symbol and the system of meaning.

## Framework

The Communicative Approach (CA) to language learning de-emphasizes the concept of the teacher as sole authority in the classroom but promotes learner-centred interactive teaching and learning of language. The concept of CA encourages teachers to set learning goals and utilize a variety of communicative situations in the classroom to achieve the goal. In other words, CA is modeled after the natural approach to language acquisition, which Krashen and Terrell (2000:1) summarize in the following words:

The central hypothesis of the theory (of natural approach) is that language acquisition occurs in only one way: by understanding messages. We acquire language when we obtain comprehensible input, when we understand what we hear or read in another language. This means that acquisition is based primarily on what we hear and understand, what we say. The goal, then, of elementary language classes, according to this view, is to supply comprehensible input, the crucial ingredient in language acquisition, and to bring the student to the point where he or she can understand language outside the classroom. When this happens, the acquirer can utilize the real world, as well as the classroom, for progress.

In English as Foreign Language (EFL) and English as Second Language (ESL) situations, the language learning needs of students, even at the tertiary levels, are characteristically elementary in nature. A crucial issue in an ESL composition class, such as we jointly teach, is the learners' concern about making grammatical mistakes. Some English teachers unwittingly overemphasize the learners' need to conform to the requirements of formal grammar; and so, inadvertently impose a dread of writing on the learners. We view this obsession with 'correctness' as a hindrance to effective composition based on a number of observable deductions. First, the term 'learner' connotes 'non-expert' at its apex and neophyte at its lowest ranges of meaning. The logical extension is that we expect a learner's writing to necessarily contain a degree of errors, which would engender further learning until expertise is achieved. Undue obsession with grammatical correctness tends to distract a learner from acquiring other essential composition skills, such as: structuring, idea development, paragraph skills, and rhetorical devices. Also, learners may be discouraged by a teacher's excessive 'mutilation' of their compositions with the

traditional red ink, especially when this is accompanied by negative remarks. Such learners tend to lose their self-confidence, become de-motivated and often view themselves in terms of the teacher's denigrating remarks. Another fact that should contribute to the decision on obsession with grammar is the nature of English grammar rules themselves. Contrary to laws in the physical sciences, rules in grammar are generally non-rigid, usually containing exceptions and limitations of scope. For instance, the law of gravitational pull in physical science applies to all objects without exception, but the grammar rule of pluralization contains several exceptions (Ahaotu 2011:35-40) and this phenomenon is common to rules of grammar. The implication is that a learner's preoccupation with memorizing grammar rules would more likely produce misapplication of the same rules (another form of ungrammaticality) and would less likely lead to immediate perfection.

#### *How much Grammar Makes Effective Composition?*

We have argued in the preceding paragraph that obsession with grammar impedes progress in acquiring important skills for effective composition. Although we recognize the central role of grammar in teaching, learning, and using a language, we are exploring a channel of achieving greater mastery of composition skills through an integrative approach, which balances learning needs with methodology. Contributing to the argument on correctness, Swan (2009) observes that:

If people say that a form is not 'correct', they can mean several different things. They may, for instance be referring to a sentence like *\*I have seen her yesterday*, which normally only occurs in the English of foreigners. They may be thinking of a usage like *less people* (instead of fewer people), which is common in standard English but regarded as wrong by some people. Or they may be talking about forms like *\*ain't* or 'double negatives', which are used in speech by many British and American people, but which do not occur in the standard dialects and are not usually written. ... if someone makes too many (grammatical) mistakes in a foreign language, he or she can be difficult to understand, so a reasonable level of correctness is important. (word in bracket is ours)

Swan (2009:ix)

Like Swan, we agree that a reasonable level of correctness is necessary at every stage of the learning process, but we also believe that fluency of thought and overall expression should not be jeopardized by excessive obsession with grammatical accuracy. On weighted scales, some issues of accuracy add up to very little when they are compared to the communicative function. Eko (1987:41) notes that:

Because English is a growing language, it also has controversial expressions which are in general and current usage but which grammarians and old fashioned textbooks condemn as incorrect. Such expressions include *different than*; *walk any further*; certain usage of *who* and *whom*; and *less people*. The point is that the ultimate criterion for

correctness is current educated usage, especially in spoken and informal written English. However, in formal written English, it is always better to play safe and use the traditional forms. Grammar should be functional. As we try to avoid bad grammar, we should also try to avoid sounding pedantic.

Ahaotu and Ndimele (2008:200) cite the following lines from Dellar and Hockings to support the view that obsession with grammar is detrimental to the acquisition of fluency:

If you spend most of your time studying grammar, your English will not improve very much. You will see most improvement if you learn more words and expressions. You can say very little with grammar, but you can say almost anything with words!

The requirements of speech fluency are proportionally exerted on writing, although in a more formal manner. In the following section, we highlight some grammatical issues that we consider paramount in effective composition, especially at the intermediate and advanced levels of language learning.

#### *Mechanics*

The term refers to the basic marks required in punctuation. It covers a wide range of symbols, such as: capitalization, bullet, spacing, period, ellipsis, exclamation mark, quotation mark, question mark, comma, semi-colon, colon, apostrophe, hyphen, dash, caret, asterisk, parenthesis, braces, slash, and underlining.

The rules of punctuation are flexible within clear-cut principles of usage. Despite their non-rigid application, punctuation marks make written texts readable and more meaningful. For instance, spacing is the only reason why we can make sense of a written passage; primary terminals (Huddleston and Pullum 2002:1731) mark the end of an expression; word-level punctuation marks (Ahaotu 2011:3) indicate word boundary, compounding, and division; etc. Without punctuation marks, the text of a passage will be jumbled together and quite difficult to read or understand.

#### *Ambiguity*

Ambiguity is the possibility of more than one accurate interpretation for an expression. Ndimele (2007:237-238) identifies three levels of ambiguity: lexical, structural, and derivational. Lexical ambiguity involves the use of polysemic words; structural ambiguity contains a structural proposition of duality of meaning; while derivational ambiguity arises from the word order and the placement of sentence elements. However, the essential property of every kind of ambiguity is the presence of more than one correct interpretation of the expression. One common source of ambiguity in English sentence structure is the addition of a prepositional phrase to a verb phrase (Saeed 2007:193) and certain cases of the dangling modifier. The following sentences exemplify ambiguity.

- (i) We stood at the bank and waited for our friends. (river bank or institutional bank?)
- (ii) John is an American English teacher (Ndimele 2007:238). (citizen of America or teacher of the subject 'American English'?)

- (iii) She bought the jeans from the trader with intricate designs. (which has the intricate designs: trader or jeans?)

The principal goal of writing is effective communication and ambiguity often hampers that. Except where ambiguity is designed for stylistic effect; as is common in literary writing an in advertisements and political discourse, formal writing should be devoid of ambiguous expressions as much as possible.

#### Redundancy

A redundant expression is one which presence or absence does not affect the grammaticality or meaning of an expression. Redundancy abounds in cases of utility words, circumlocution and tautology. Kirszner and Mandell (1995:108) describe redundant expressions as ‘deadwood’ and recommend that such words/phrases be deleted to improve effectiveness of writing. The following are some examples of redundant expressions:

- (i) Most perfectly (‘most’ is superfluous; ‘perfect’ is the highest quality)
- (ii) On account of the fact that (‘because’ is sufficient)
- (iii) Due/owing to the fact that (‘since’ or ‘because’ is sufficient)
- (iv) As far as leadership is concerned, Africa is backward (African leadership is ineffective)
- (v) It is entirely false and untrue that she met the Queen. (it is not true that she met the Queen).

A piece of written text becomes more effective if it is made concise; that is, when redundant expressions are deleted from it. However, the economy proposed here does not include a paucity of details and of expression.

#### Unclear Modification

Modifiers are words and expressions, (usually adverbials and adjectival) that add extra meaning and clarity to expressions. Unfortunately, they produce the opposite effect when they are misplaced. Effective writing skill requires a writer to place a modifier close to the headword it modifies. Modifiers are more effective in the sequence: modifier + subject + verb + object → Sentence. The meaning conveyed in a written text would be vague, if it contains expressions such as:

- (i) The baby was pushed by its mother in a pram. (who is in the pram?)
- (ii) She bought the jeans from the trader with intricate designs. (which noun has the intricate designs: trader or jeans?)
- (iii) Delta Park stretches up to banks of River Aluu, which is at the centre of the campus. (is it the river or the park that is at the centre of the campus?).

It is, therefore, necessary to use modifiers effectively, except the design is to mislead or confound.

#### Inappropriate Lexis

Precision in lexical selection is a hallmark of proficiency in language acquisition and usage. According to David Wilkings in Ahaotu and Ndimele (2008:195), ‘without

grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed’. Carter (1992:146) compares errors in grammar and lexical choice and concludes that mistakes in lexical selection are less generously tolerated than mistakes in syntax. Our emphasis here is on relative uniqueness of each word: even where words are generally classified as synonyms, there often exist certain shades of meanings that make a particular one more appropriate in a specific context (compare: chew/masticate/eat/lick; inflate/extend/expand). Learners may enhance their selection while proofreading because revision offers them a crucial ‘second look’.

#### The Problem of Concord: (i) Subject/Verb Concord. (ii) Pronoun/Antecedent Concord

Another important grammar consideration in effective writing in English or any language for that matter is concord. Concord or Agreement refers to the form in which different parts of a sentence relate to one another (Akere 2011:88). The rather well-known are the Subject/Verb Concord, and the Antecedent/Pronoun Concord. The subject of a sentence necessarily agrees in number with the verb within the same clause. On the pain of sounding rather prescriptive, let us consider some of the rules for Subject/Verb agreement and pronoun/antecedent concord.

1. Subjects and verbs must agree in number.
  - a. The girl *loves* dancing. The girls *love* dancing.
  - b. He *walks* to school every day. They *walk* to school every day.
2. Modifying or qualifying elements do not affect the subject agreeing with the verb.
  - a. The man who killed the lion is a brave man.
  - b. The men who killed the lion are brave men.
3. Prepositional complement of the subject do not affect the subject-verb agreement.
  - a. The colours of the rainbow are beautiful.
  - b. The way of a man is right in his own eyes.
4. When *there* or *here* starts a sentence, the subject comes after the verb.
  - a. There is a man I love so much.
  - b. Here are the winners of the faculty football competition.
5. In questions, subjects don’t always come before the verbs.
  - a. Does Chike eat *amala*?
  - b. What are the conflicts about?
6. If two subjects are linked with a conjunction, and, the verb will be in the plural form; but if the two subjects refer to the same entity, the verb will be in the singular form.
  - a. Deji and Akin *love* reading.
  - b. Rice and beans *is* my favourite dish.
7. When the subject is modified by each, every, or no, the verb is singular.
  - a. No gate crashing *is* allowed in heaven.
  - b. Every man *bears* his own burden.
  - c. Each boy or girl *does* their own thing.
8. Singular subjects connected by the words *or*, *nor*, *neither/nor*, *either/or*, and *not, only/but*, normally



take singular verbs, and plural when subjects connected are plural, but when the two subjects are of different number forms, the proximity rule follows (i.e. the closest subject to the verb determines the verb form).

- a. Boma or Ada is guilty of the offence.
  - b. Neither Boma nor Ada is guilty of the offence.
  - c. Either Boma or Ada is guilty of the offence.
  - d. Either Boma or the boys play table tennis.
  - e. Either the boys or Boma plays table tennis.
9. A collective noun may take either a singular or plural verb depending on the sense intended in the collection.
- a. A new committee has been formed in the department.
  - b. The committee were unanimous in their decision.
  - c. The council has/have decided not to publish the names of the offending students.
10. Certain words, such as *few*, *many*, *several*, take plural verbs.
- a. Few of the nurses in UPTH are courteous.
  - b. Several of the injured animals were caged.
  - c. Many of the players in the national team are tired legs.

#### *Pronouns must agree with their antecedents*

Antecedents are the nouns the pronouns refer to. In other words, they are the nouns replaced with the pronouns. A plural antecedent takes plural referent and singular, singular.

- a. *The newly elected governor of Ondo State* delivered his acceptance speech.
- b. *Susan* was told to present *herself* as a candidate for the party elections.
- c. Many of the students love their parents.
- d. Several of the girls came with their guardians.
- e. Few of the students really understand their lectures.

An anaphoric pronoun must agree with its antecedent.

- a. The boys enjoyed talking to each other/one another. (Bidirectional/multidirectional).
- b. David and Jonathan love each other. (Strictly bidirectional)
- c. We all love ourselves/one another. (Reflexive or bidirectional reciprocal).

In ESL and EFL writing, concord in English seems a difficult to master and even some ESL instructors find it confusing. As a consequence, the ESL learners should combine both the communicative and the prescriptive approaches for better results. The rules given above are only representative and not an exhaustive list of the rules. However, a mastery of the basic rules will aid the student in no small way in mastering the concord needs of English grammar.

#### *Variation of Sentence Length and Structure*

Another important writing strategy is to vary both the length and the structure of sentences. This strategy employs a calculated mixture of the four types of sentences (simple,

complex, compound, and compound-complex) to remove boredom and improve passage rhythm. Apart from legal writing that overly favours compound-complex structures, most other forms of formal writing adopt more complex structures than others. It is advisable to follow one structural form with another, but not in a mathematical precision.

## II. CONCLUSION

We would like to summarize this chapter by restating that the ultimate goal of a grammar lesson is not entire in itself alone, but rather, to assist the learner in making choices from a range of structures. Rather than relegate the overall importance of either explicit or implicit knowledge of grammar to the goal of language learning, our contention is on the tendency to concentrate on correctness to the detriment of other aspects, especially as they concern writing. An appropriate knowledge of grammar is necessary in the acquisition of any of the four language skills of listening, writing, speaking, and reading. As we are concerned with grammar in effective composition in this chapter, our interest is in the production of well-formed grammatical structures to the extent that they enhance the learner's ability to convey meaning in writing. In the words of Swan (2009:ix), 'learners should aim to avoid serious mistakes ... ; but they should not become obsessed with correctness, or worry every time they make a mistake. Grammar is not the most important thing in the world!'

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