Structural Errors Related to Word Formation among the Second Learners of English: A Case Study of Undergraduate Students of the Department of English and Literary Studies, Ebonyi State University, Abakaliki

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Abstract

Structural errors related to word formation among the second learners of English pose serious problems to L2 users of English especially at the undergraduate levels of English Studies. The study aims to find out the structural errors related to word formation in English and consider the pedagogical implications. The Item and Process (I.P.) Analytical theoretical framework is adopted while a descriptive research design method is deployed for the analysis. The finding showed that students have problems with different morphological processes in English as a result of factors such as the inconsistency in the morphological rules, misapplication of some word formation rules, and mother tongue interference. The study, therefore, recommends that teachers of English in this area of study should endeavour to master the in-depth knowledge of these morphological rules and applications to be able to transfer the skills to the second learners of English.

Keywords: Structural errors, word formation, morphological rules, second learners, English language

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1 Introduction

In Nigeria, English serves as a lingua franca. That is the official language of the government. Most importantly, English functions as the main language of instruction at all levels of educational institutions. On the other hand, Nigeria is a multi-ethnic nation. Thus, English serves as an untying factor. Agbedo (2000) observes that Nigeria has over four hundred languages spread across the country. However, English as a second language dominates all the language groups because there is no national indigenous language. In a quest to get a national indigenous language, the Federal Government of Nigeria adopted three out of these indigenous Nigerian languages to serve as indigenous national languages. These languages include Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba. Emeka Nwobia (2017) noted that these languages are adopted in Nigeria to complement the roles of English in national integration.

Structural errors related to word formation show how different segments are combined to form words while building up sentences. Because of the inconsistency and distance that exist between the two languages, the second language users usually manufacture new words especially when they cannot substitute them with the right combination to get their intended meaning. Against this background, in constructing sentences in English, second language learners do not care for the standard uses of words in the English language. Agbedo (2000) notes that word formation centers on morphemes, and the use of morphemes becomes more difficult as many second learners of English lack basic knowledge and application of morphemes. He states further that the problem becomes clearer when learners English as a second learner (ESL) users do not apply the morphemes to show how the keywords vary from one language to another in their formation processes.

Nwokwu (2022) observes that the problem of word formation manifests at an earlier stage among the second learners of the language in Nigeria because the teachers of English as a second language do not provide the necessary information for the mastery of English morphemes. They only provide the peripheral and surface descriptions of the morphemes without explaining the structural differences between the two languages. Akande (2009) points out that inadequate knowledge of allomorphs, a variant of morphemes, brings about structural errors related to word formation.

Mba (2011) explains that morphemes are vital in constructing sentences. He, however, notes that morphemes are identified in the Igbo language by splitting words into segments in syllables like the CVCV syllabic structure. This, of course, affects the way words are produced and constructively used. The problem becomes obvious when students who are mostly Igbo speakers and who have English as their second language do not always do thorough research on the analysis of the distinctiveness in the application of morphemes to show how the keywords differ from one another in their formation processes. In constructing sentences, some users of the English language who have little vocabulary may have serious deficiencies as they do not have prerequisite knowledge of morphemes and their applications.

In the English language, every meaning of a word is merely determined by the morpheme that forms the word. Mba (2011) carried out a critical appraisal of the grammatical differences between the Igbo language and the English language. He states that Igbo adjectives cannot be changed from one class of words to another because it does not accept an additional morpheme either as a prefix or suffix, unlike the way it is in the English language. He intends to distinguish between the formation of words via derivation into adjectives in both languages.

2 Literature Review

Some of the selected word formation errors are presented under the following categories

i.   Compound related errors
ii. Affixation related errors
iii. Conversion related errors
iv. Back-formation related errors

Compound Related Errors

In the formation of compound words in English, compounding is a morphological process which consists of the amalgamation of at least two free morphemes like

cup + board $\longrightarrow$ cupboard
shoe + maker $\longrightarrow$ shoemaker
brain + drain $\longrightarrow$ braindrain
whistle + blower $\longrightarrow$ whistleblower

Quirk *et al* (2007) identified three orthographic criteria for compound words in English. These are:

i.   Block or solid compound as in the classroom, billboard, headmaster
ii. Open compound as in: in fact, in front, in short, in case
iii. Hyphenated compound as in: father-in-law, pen-pals, tax-free, block-rosary

Quirk *et al* (2007) observed that the majority of the second learners of English do not have good and clear knowledge of these rules. Thus, they mix up the whole issues as the block compounds are written as open compound and vice versa. Likewise, some hyphenated compounds are expressed as open compounds. Here are some examples:

i.   Open compound
     infact   instead of in fact
     inshort   instead of in short
     infront   instead of in front
     inrespect   instead of in respect
ii. Block or solid compound
     cup-board instead of cupboard
     pick-pocket instead of pickpocket
     black-board instead of blackboard
     hand-kerchief instead of handkerchief
iii. Hyphenated compound
     taxpayer instead of tax-payer
     gatecrasher instead of gate-crasher
     oathtaking instead of oath-taking
     day dream instead of day-dream
     home made instead of home-made
     selfemployed instead of self-employed

Knowledge of plural formation is one of the major issues in compound related errors.

Affixation-Related Errors

Asiyanbola (2012) observed that a large number of English as second language learners, especially secondary school students employ prefixes wrongly while attempting to create new words or provide the opposite of some words. Part of such errors include errors emanating from the wrong use of prefixes like –in, -un, -mis, -dis,

L2 users of English standardized usage
    i.   The "inmature" ladies were raped. (immature)
    ii   He is "unloyal" to the community. (disloyal)
    iii   Our principal was "mistrusted" by the students. (distrusted)
    v.   She is a "disbeliever." (an unbeliever)
    vi.   If you are not informed, you are "disinformed." (misinformed)

Tomori (2007) posited that the wrong use of suffixes in English affects word formation process as a result of wrong inclusions of past tense markers. This was found in some essays written by these undergraduate students the university. Such instances include:

i.   They offed the light before the action started (instead of put off)
ii.   She knowed the answer (instead of knew)
iii.   Bimbo breaked the bottle (instead of broke)
iv.   He rided the bicycle (instead of rode)
v.   Mr. Agu shew the place (instead of showed)

There are some errors committed due to analogous use of some suffixes as shown below:

i.   He walks fastly to the mosque (fast)
ii.   The idle ladies are gossipers (gossips)
iii.   The man felt his wife's response was insultive (insulting)

Olaoye (2000) identified another error resulting in making uncountable nouns countable. For instance, the following excerpts were got from the students compositions:

i.   We have many hostel "accommodations" in our school (accommodation)
ii.   The Vice Chancellor bought laboratory equipments (equipment)
iii.   He packed the furnitures in our sitting room. (Furniture)
iv.   My grandmother bought woods in the market (wood)

The misuse of these words is as a result of generalization usually observed among second language users. In the same vein, words like "children," cattle, furniture do not have plural "S" markers since they are irregular nouns. On the other hand, there is the misuse of -en and –ing suffixes in the students constructions as seen in the following sentences extracted from their essays:

i.   She is being taking to the hospital (taken)
ii.   They were giving building materials (given)
iii.   The children were forgiving (forgiven)

It is observed from the sentences above that the proper forms of the words which would have been -taken, given, and forgiven- were not used. This emanates from their lack of the knowledge of the difference between present continuous tense and present participle tense forms of these words.

Conversion-Related Errors

These errors arise as a result of the interference of the first language on second language usage. When there are no equivalent words to substitute with a second language, the local or first language that is nearest in meaning is used. Examples:

i.   I am "opportune" to witness the occasion. (fortunate)
ii.   They served everybody "minerals". (soft drinks)
iii.   The driver horns as he drives. (sounds the horn)
iv.   They swept the ground quick, quick. (quickly)

Backformation and Blending Related Problem

Ndimele (1999) defines backformation as the use of analogy to create forms that are similar to ones already in existence in the language. For examples:

i.   Resurrect ⟶ resurrection
ii.   enthuse ⟶ enthusiasm
iii.   burgle ⟶ burglar
iv.   attrit ⟶ attrition
v.   pronounce ⟶ pronunciation

On the other hands, Udofot (1999) describes blending as the joining together of two already existing words that are not morphemes to form a new word.

Examples:

i.   smoke + fog   smog
ii.   breakfast + lunch   brunch
iii.   motor + hotel   motel
iv.   television + marathon   telethon
v.   chuckle + snort   churtle
vi.   television + phone   telephone

It should be noted that the absence of these backformation and blending words creates serious confusion for the second learners of English. The second learners of English, therefore, need lots of guidance to overcome this part of word formation related problem in our schools.

3 THEORETICAL STUDIES

This work adopted the Item and Process Theory (IP). It was formulated by Hockett in 1947. According to him, there is a process of utterance formation that yields one form out of the other. He further stated that it is merely a process through the configuration, moving from one part to another or a larger part of the pattern. Item and Process (IP), therefore, is an attempt to explain the process in a particular root or base undergoes rather than representing a morpheme with a morph as in the Item Arrangement Process theory (IA). The (I.P) approach will be easily used to explain the composition of morphemes and morphemic changes in simple and complex utterances. In his own view, Hockett (1954) notes that any utterance in a given language consists wholly of a certain number of minimum grammatically relevant elements called morphemes in a certain arrangement relative to each other. He posited that the structure of the utterance is specified by stating the morphemes and the arrangement. Hockett (1947) listed eight processes that a linguistic item could undergo viz: suffixation, prefixation, vowel change, consonant change, suppletion, infixation, reduplication, and juxtaposition.

Bleun (2006) affirmed that modern theories collapsed the three theories vis-à-vis

i.   Item and Arrangement theory (I.A)
ii.   Item and Process theory (I.P)
iii.   Word and Paradigm theory (W.P)

The collapse of the three theories resulted in the formation of abstraction and construction theories. In their arguments, the proponents of the theories contended that there are no major difference between (I.A) and (I.P) theories. According to them, the construction theory which polarized into (I.A) and (I.P) serves as building blocks to the abstraction theory. In other words, abstraction is a "bottom up" theory while a construction is a top down" theory

Asiyanbola (2003) asserted that in a morphemic analysis, the theories play a complementary role. That is, an analyst cannot do without making reference to the other

theories. Quirk and Greenboun (1985) supported the Item Process theorists to a large extent which also guided this work, "Structural errors relating to word formation".

Quirk and Greenbaun (1985) grouped the word formation processes into two broad parts: major and minor forms. The major process includes affixation, which comprises prefixation, suffixation, conversion, and compounding. The minor processes include reduplication, clipping, blending, and acronyms. However, the major focus of this work will be on structural errors related to the major processes of word formation in English.

4 Methods and Materials

For this study, a descriptive design approach is chosen because it involves gathering data that define the variables and analysis. Samples of morphemes of the English language are structurally written in a tabular form so that the variations both in correct and incorrect usage can be ascertained.

Table 1. *Compound related errors*

	Items tested	No of respondents	Correct usage	Incorrect usage
1	Furthermore, I collected the prize.	10	2	8
2	In fact, I have concluded the lesson.	10	2	8
3	Moreso, bose rejected the offer.	10	4	6
4	In respect of your view, let's support them.	10	4	6
5	Indeed, John deserved the honour.	10	3	7
6	The man stands in front of you.	10	3	7
7	In case you need my help, dial my number	10	5	5
8	In short, I missed the goal.	10	5	5
9	Moreover, the police arrested him.	10	3	7
10	In terms of your request, we will consider it.	10	3	7
	Total	100	34	66
	Percentage		34	66

There are a total of 10 items tested on compound related errors. 10 respondents were asked to tick either correct or incorrect structural usage. A total of ten (10) respondents were to tick each item giving a total of 100 respondents. 23 items were correctly ticked representing 34% while 66 items were incorrectly ticked. This represented 66%. The result shows that most undergraduate students of English and Literary Studies at EBSU have problems in using compound words in forming sentences in the English languages.

Table 2. *Affixation Related Errors*

	Items tested	No of respondents	Correct usage	Incorrect usage
1	I am uncomfortable here	10	4	6
2	I am disconfortable here	10	5	5
3	Amina dislikely hated Aliyu	10	3	7
4	Amina unlikely hated Aliyu	10	2	8
5	You may be disinformed	10	4	6
6	You may be misinformed	10	3	7
7	Bella is unsatisfied with them	10	4	6
8	Bella is dissatisfied with them	10	4	6
9	The building plan is disapproved	10	3	7
10	The building plan is unapproved	10	4	6
	Total	100	36	64
	Percentage		36	64

In affixation-related errors, 10 items were tested by 10 respondents making a total of 100 respondents. A total of 36 items were correctly used. This represents 36% while 64 items were incorrectly used representing 64%. The findings show that most of the respondents could not differentiate the usage of these similar affixation words in sentences. This attests to the view of Asiyanbola (2012) that a large number of English as a second language learners employ prefixes wrongly while attempting to create new words or provide some opposite of some words. This work suggests that in forming affixations, teachers should clarify the usage of new words formed using different sentences.

Table 3. *Conversion Related Errors*

	Items tested	No of respondents	Correct usage	Incorrect usage
1	We <u>sourced</u> the news.	10	4	6
2	Messi <u>heads</u> the ball.	10	4	6
3	Allen is <u>housing</u> the migrants.	10	3	7
4	He wants to blackmail me.	10	4	6
5	Daniel sabotaged his effort.	10	3	7
6	Umoren is whistling.	10	4	6
7	They powered the generator.	10	4	6
8	Nkechi is bottling the water.	10	4	6
9	Have you buttered the toast?	10	3	7
10	The man fathered the boy.	10	4	6
	Total	100	35	65
	Percentage		35%	65%

There are a total of 10 items tested. Each item was ticked by 10 respondents making a total of 100 respondents. The number of correctly used conversion-related errors is 35 representing 35% while the number of incorrectly used items is 65 representing 65%. This result indicates that the respondents could not construct adequate sentences using word conversion. Hockett (1957) asserted that the Item and Process (IP) approach is suitable for explaining the composition of morpheme and morphemic changes in simple and complex utterances. It, therefore, behooves the teachers of second learners of English to use this approach to inculcate the skills to the learners.

Table 4. *Backformation Related Errors*

	Items tested	No of respondents	Correct usage	Incorrect usage
1	The news has been televised (television)	10	4	6
2	He donated his life savings (donation)	10	4	6
3	Obi enthused his followers (enthusiasm)	10	2	8
4	They opt for a change (option)	10	3	7
5	She pronounces the words correctly (pronunciation)	10	4	6
6	The job seeker gate crashes (gatecrasher)	10	3	7
7	Jesus resurrects from dead (resurrection)	10	5	5
8	He wants to self destruct himself (self-destruction)	10	4	6
9	The inspector liases with the ministry (Liason)	10	4	6
10	The fans ambushed him (fanatics)	10	4	6
	Total	100	37	63
	Percentage		27%	63%

Table Four indicates that there were 10 items tested each by 10 respondents, making a total of 100 respondents. 37 items were correctly ticked by the respondents representing 37% while 63 items were wrongly ticked representing 63%. The finding reveals that most of the respondents have issues relating to back formation words or clipping. The implication is that the errors resulting from its usage affect students' performance in their writing skills.

5 Conclusion

The application of morphemes is a complex process in the English language especially as it affects the second learners of the language. It requires adequate mastery of the rules to use and apply the process of word formation both in its structural and lexical usage. With the knowledge of the Item and Process (I.P) approach, teachers of English as a second language will inculcate skills required for learners to overcome challenges associated not only with morphology but also with the learning of the English language morphemes at large. Thus for English as a second language learner to be adequately taught, teachers should be given periodic opportunities for self-improvement through seminars, workshops, and other in-service training programmes that could keep them abreast with current issues in language teaching and learning. A concerted effort should be made to expose students of English to wide and varied levels of linguistic descriptions including morphology.

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