



Literature

Elixir Literature 50 (2012) 10632-10634

Elixir
ISSN: 2229-712X

A survey on the use of the past perfect tenses

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received: 17 June 2012;

Received in revised form:

16 September 2012;

Accepted: 26 September 2012;

Keywords

Relevance of grammar,
Wrong use of concord (Verb agreement),
Past Perfect tenses,
Other simple tenses (simple past tenses),
Sentence structure.

ABSTRACT

This study examines a survey and analysis of the wrong use of the past perfect tenses by students in essay writing. The survey became necessary because of the in-depth deficiency students exhibited in essay writing in West African Senior Certificate Examination (WASSCE) and National Examination Council (NECO). The respondents of the study consisted of final year senior secondary student for the WASSCE and NECO classes and respondents from High Impact Capacity Teacher Building Workshop. They were required to write an essay or composition titled 'My Best Teacher' on page I of High Impact Capacity Teacher Building Workshop. It was discovered that there were some similarities in the type of errors, especially in the area of past perfect tenses in the second composition: 'My First Day in the School (page 48-50). (Taken from Countdown for WASSCE/SSCE, NECO, JME English Language (Ogunsanwo et al 2005).

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Introduction

It is obvious that errors are bound to occur on the process of teaching and learning. A good teacher should not ignore these errors since it provides valuable judgment about learners' progress in their learning process. It is pertinent to make distinction between errors and mistakes in analyzing learners' errors. Brown (2000; 217) defines errors as "a noticeable deviation from the adult grammar of a native speaker (which) reflects the competence of the learner".

In spite of the above distinction however, for the purpose of this research paper, the term paper past perfect tense comes to play when we are faced with the difficulty of having to describe two related actions that took place at different points in time in the past. In this case, we use the past perfect tense to refer to the action that had taken place before the other one in the past, and we employ the simple past tense to describe the other action that took place later. Therefore, this study specifically focuses on the use of the past perfect tenses since it was discovered that many students make errors in the usage of these tenses although exposure to both the simple present and past tense is given at their early stages in the teaching of English Language at schools in this country (Nigeria). Although simple tenses include the simple present, the simple past, the simple present, the present perfect, the present continuous and the simple future, only the past perfect tenses were analyzed in this study. This is so, because the questions given for the students to write essay in this study were descriptive and narrative in nature which requires the student to use more of the past perfect tenses than the present tenses.

The simple present form, as the name implies, simply tells us of what is taking place now. This is in terms of events and actions which include the present moment. It teaches "what is".

Examples:

I am a teacher.

Mary is a nurse.

Sam and David are farmers.

According to Jackson (1990) it is also used to express habitual action and to make future reference in which it is said to have overtones of "definiteness" such as in timetable announcements. The simple past tense, on the other hand simply describes an action that occurred in the past or an event that took place earlier. It could be a century back, a decade ago, twelve months earlier, yesterday or even a few minutes ago. According to Jackson (1990) it is usually used to narrate the sequence of actions of events.

Examples:

Onicha Olona Teaching Training College, in the then Bendel State was established in 1978.

Five students were last week punished by the principal for fighting.

To achieve the aim of this study, the research studied the essays written by the student with the focus being given on the past perfect tenses and verb structure. The High Impact Capacity Teacher Building Workshop students were asked to write an essay on the topic, "My Best Teacher" while the final year WASSCE students were asked to write essays on the topic, "My First Day in the school".

Methodology

In his study, the essay written by the students based on the writing stimulus taken from page 1 of High Impact Capacity Teacher Building Workshop: Direct Impact, A Training for English Teachers in Senior Secondary Schools in Delta State, Nigeria. 8-Day Master Training (Train-The-Trainer) workshop for 200 Teachers. September 1st-8th, 2011. From the perspective of this researchers, this essay is within limit of all respondents to handle based on the contribution or view of (Arshad Ahd. Samuel et al. 2002) "as there was little language support involved thereby requiring the students to demonstrate their true ability and proficiency in the language.

The following short composition was written by one of the student:

I'd ^(A) had a lot of teachers that I liked so ^(B) much, but it was a long time ago and I can't remember really. But recently I'd ^(C) had a teacher and I think I'll never forget her. She wasn't extraordinary. She was a normal person.

She was ^(D) confident about her. She didn't want to show us good/bad things/feelings about her. She wanted only to teacher. She decided 'you have to learn this' and she ^(E) was going straight on! She had a good way to teach and could understand our weaknesses. She ^(F) always was trying to find the best way. Before or after grammar's lessons, she tried to show us how and why learn this lesson, with some practical joke (examples).

Everyone ^(G) was enjoying her lessons. No one wanted ^(H) the end of the class.

But I think she was so good because before teaching ^(I) something for someone she thought 'if I didn't know this, how I would like that ^(J) someone teach to me? Which is the best way?

A careful study of this short composition showed that the student lacked knowledge of verb agreement (Concord) and sentence structures as well. The students did not adhere to the rules of grammar.

Corrections

The following corrections were effected in table below.

	Identification of errors	Correction of errors
A	I'd had	'I have had'
B	So	'Very'
C	I'd had	Had
D	She was confident about her-vague	She was confident of herself
E	Was going straight on	She went on or she continued
F	She always was trying to find	She tried always to
G	Everyone was enjoying	Everyone enjoyed her teaching
H	No one wanted the end of the class	No one wanted her lesson to end
I	Before teaching something to someone	Before teaching any topic (there is an element of language interference here).
J	"that someone teach to her	'That someone taught her'.

Note: This is how the essay on my best teacher ought to be written; as shown below.

My Best Teacher

I have had a lot of teachers that I liked very much but, that I was a long time ago, I cannot remember fully. Recently, I had a teacher I think I will never forget. She was not extraordinary but a normal person.

She was so confident in herself that she did not want to show us her feelings good or bad. She liked teaching and made sure everyone learnt through good teaching techniques and understood our weaknesses through demonstrations, jokes and other teaching methods. She impacted her lessons to us. She provided objectives and reasons for lessons taught.

Everyone enjoyed her lesson as none wanted her lesson to end.

She was actually a good teacher because she researched before teaching. Indeed, she was my best teacher.

Another source of data for this study was taken from NECO and WASSCE past questions on page 48-50 in Countdown for WASSCE/SSCE, NECO, JME English Language (Ogunsanwo et al 2005). From this researchers' point of view, this exercise is suitable for all students to handle "as there was little language support involved thereby requiring the students to demonstrate their true ability and proficiency in the language". (Arshad Abd. Samad et al. 2002).

Data Analysis

In determining the correct use of past perfect tenses for the purpose of this study, general parameters were used as a guideline.

The researcher also considered the wrong use of past perfect tenses as used by the students in the composition "My Best Teacher". The students lacked the knowledge and the rules against writing in contrast form in essay writing.

Examples:

'I'd had – at the beginning of the essay.

'I'd had – on the third line of the essay.

'I'll never' – on line four line of the essay.

'She wasn't – lines five.

'She didn't' – lines six on the second paragraph.

'If I didn't know this – last paragraph line three.

Generally, the following wrong use of sentences structures, the apostrophe "s", wrong use of punctuation marks still under paragraph two- "grammar' s" was going on" – wrong use of the past perfect tense, were analyzed.

The following wrong sentence structures were identified: "confident about her".

"was going straight on".

"always was trying to find the best way".

"was enjoying her lessons".

"The end of the class".

"something for someone".

"that someone teach to me?" Wrong use of punctuation mark, question mark.

Based on the above parameters, the researcher observed that the students lacked knowledge of the use of past perfect tenses in their composition. They also lacked knowledge of sentence structure(s), thereby breaking the rules of grammar of normal order. It should be noted however that the researchers did not actually go into detail analysis of other misused quotation marks. These were overlooked for time limit.

Our focus is in this research was critically on the use of the past perfect tense as apply to grammar. It is pertinent to emphasis here that the past perfect tense is one of the tenses as relates to grammar. Therefore, it should be extensively and thoroughly taught by teachers of English.

The past perfect tense comes to play when we are faced with difficulty of having to describe two related actions that took place at different points in time in the past. In this case, we use the past perfect tense to refer to the action that had taken place before the other one in the past, and we employ the simple past to describe the other action that took place later.

Examples:

Ngozi had learnt sufficient English before she returned to Nigeria.

Jude had eaten the cakes before his mother went to the market.

I had spent the money before I received a telephone call from my mother asking me to conserve it.

Studying these sentences revealed a pattern: the entire sentence have the words "had" and "before". The first word "had" suggested a past action while "before" shows that more than one thing happened. It is noteworthy, however, that "when can, in some circumstances take the place of "before" in this kind of construction. For instance: "I had eaten my lunch when he came".

The aircraft had taken off before I arrived.

Conclusion

This research summarized that the students involved in the several of essays writing above lacked knowledge of concord (Verb agreement), correct use of collocation and the use of well constructed sentence structure. It was also observed that some of the students are being affected by the influence of mother tongue (mother tongue interference). The students tend to make use of the past tense when they meant to use the present tense, simple past when they intend to use the simple present. They completely lacked knowledge of the use of the past perfect tense(s).

It was a general observation in the case of both written essays that the students made some similar errors among the school students. One likely explanation to this could relate to intralingual and developmental errors which reflect "the learners' competence at a particular stage, and illustrate some of the general characteristics of language acquisition". (Richards1974). There are some similarities in the order of the most frequent type of errors in all the students in various written essays of this study, as shown on the table above.

It is also generally observed by the researchers that teachers of English seem not to be doing enough in terms of grammar, particularly in the aspect tenses. It is our humble advice that teachers of English should as a matter of urgency to focus attention on grammar teaching. Teachers should realize that good students need guidance and help as much as the weak ones. Language teachers should always emphasis the teaching of simple present, simple past tenses, past perfect tenses, which of course is the main focus of this study. They should even extend to the teaching of present perfect tenses, present continuous tenses, past continuous tenses, past perfect continuous tense, simple future tense, future perfect tense and the future continuous tenses. It is expected that with the greater awareness of the above English grammar, our second language learners will become not only fluent, but accurate, and confident when using the language.

Acknowledgement

I wish to give my special thanks, glory, honour and appreciation to God Almighty for His continuous blessings, protection, and good health and for granting us the opportunity, strength and ability throughout this study.

Worthy of special mention is my husband. My profound gratitude and appreciation go to my beloved husband and children for their cooperation and understanding during this write-up.

My gratitude goes also to Mr. Elisha Isieza, who took time and care to typeset this work. May God continue to bless his endeavour. (Amen).

Also, my thanks go to all whose work contributed to this work. May God Almighty guide, protect and bless us all.

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