ACQUISITION OF THE INFLECTIONAL MORPHEMES BY NIGERIA LEARNERS OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE

AKINMADE TIMOTHY AKANDE
Obafemi Awolowo University, Nigeria

ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to investigate the acquisition of inflectional morphemes with a view to examining the occurrences as well as the misuse of these morphemes in the English essays of some Yoruba learners of English. The informants who participated in the study were sixty senior secondary school one (SSS1) pupils in Oke-Igbo township. The data used for the study were written English compositions and a grammar exercise. The written tasks of the subjects were analysed for various occurrences and misuse of inflectional morphemes. The study found out that there was a wide gap in the mastery of the inflectional morphemes by the subjects. On the basis of this finding, certain recommendations were made.

Keywords: English language, inflectional morphemes, language acquisition

INTRODUCTION

Statistics show that the level of performance of secondary and post-secondary school students in English has been deteriorating over the years. The decline in their performance in English is attested to by the alarming rate at which students fail English language in public examinations such as the West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE). Moreover, the quality of English, which many of our students speak and write is so substandard that one begins to doubt the fact that they ever sat for and passed the English language in the Senior School Certificate Examination and similar examinations by themselves. This poor performance is not a recent trend. In fact, as far back as 1979 the Chief Examiner's Report in English Language (Paper One) for the West African School Certificate (WASC) said this much for the examination of that year.

> Every year for the past few years, the performance has tended to be worse than the previous years, but this year, there has been a noticeable decline in general and there is certainly grave cause for concern about standard of English teaching and learning in our schools.

The causes of deficiencies of students in English in Nigerian secondary schools have been attributed to a lot of factors. These range from the inadequacies of English textbooks, lack of specialist teachers of English in secondary and

primary schools to the inability of the writers of English textbooks for Nigerian students to use contrastive analysis techniques (Oluikpe, 1974). In Nigerian secondary schools, English is taught as a subject and it is equally a medium instruction. However, most of the textbooks students should use are either too expensive or not available at all because of the economic situation, which makes it difficult to write and produce necessary textbooks. Writing on the effect of the economic situation on the teaching and learning of English in Nigeria, Seweje says:

> As a result of this, many schools and colleges have been partially, if not totally crippled. Both the sate and the local governments could not afford the huge amounts needed to purchase such materials and equipment for use in the effective teaching of English in schools. Furthermore, books cannot be produced and when produced, they are sold at exorbitant prices making the purchase unaffordable by most parents and leaving most students without the necessary English textbooks, thus hindering the teaching of English Language in schools.

The poor performance of students in English calls for urgent attention especially when we consider the crucial roles English plays in the country. The fact that "English Language is arguably the most significant, but most controversial subject taught in Nigerian secondary schools" (Nwogu 1988: 95) need not be over-stressed. Apart from English being instrumental to getting a good job in many cases, it is a pre-requisite for post-secondary education in Nigeria. It is also one of the four official languages recognized by the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. It is again the medium of instruction right from the "later" stage of primary school up to the university level (FGN, 1998). In view of these and many other roles it plays in the country, it will be difficult, if not practically impossible, for any person to be socially reckoned with in all spheres of life without a functional knowledge of English. If English is as important as we have pointed out above, it becomes necessary for us as teachers, curriculum planners, policy makers etc. to help, in various capacities improve students' and users' performance in it by studying all its aspects, i.e. lexis, phonology, grammar semantics etc.

The primary aim of this study is to examine the acquisition of the eight inflectional morphemes in English with a view to investigating the occurrences as well as the misuse of these morphemes in the written English of the selected subjects. This area of language (i.e., inflectional morphology) has been identified as a problematic area to learners of English as a second language since there are no overt inflectional markers in the mother tongue of our subjects. The eight inflectional morphemes in English perform grammatical functions as will be discussed later. These morphemes can be divided into three major groups, namely:

1. Noun inflections:
    (a) Z_1 (for plurality): book/books: man/men
    (b) Z_2 (for possession): Ade's car; men's world

2. Verbal inflections
   (a) Z_3 (for subject-verbal concord): "He dances everyday"
   (b) -ing (for present participle): "I am reading"
   (c) d_1 (for past tense) kill/killed; come/came.
   (d) d_2 (i.e. -en/-ed for past participle): eat/eaten; go/gone; rob/robbed; come/came
3. Adjectival inflections
   (a) -er (for comparative): big/bigger; thin/thinner
   (b) -est (for superlative): biggest, tallest, youngest

To achieve our set goal, the following objectives are set in form of questions:
   (a) Which of the eight morphemes are regularly used?
   (b) Which of them are rarely used?
   (c) What are the inflectional morpheme-related errors in their texts?
   (d) How can we get the students to overcome these errors identified in (c) above?

It is hoped that this study will help to improve the communicative competence of students in English because grammatical competence, being an important aspect of communicative competence (Yule 1996), helps a long way in facilitating communicative competence.

1. ON LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

It is quite difficult to give a comprehensive overview of language acquisition (LA) theory and research because numerous scholars that have worked on it have taken different approaches and methodologies towards handling it. Brumfit (1984: 33) supports this position when he says:

> The field (i.e. language acquisition; author's note) is at the moment too diffuse, the amount of research too vast, and the theoretical pre-suppositions of researchers too varied for there to be a universally.

However, we shall attempt a brief discussion of LA here. Studies on both first Language (L1) and second Language (L2) acquisition have explicitly shown that certain variables such as exposure, age, motivation etc. are crucial factors, which could affect the acquisition of any language (Andersen 1976; Gardner 1982; Krashen 1982; Ellis 1997; and Brown 2000). It is not a surprise therefore that Fromkin and Rodman (1974) view language acquisition as the construction of the grammar of the language to which the acquirer/learner is exposed. In the course of the exposure, many hypotheses are formulated and as the acquirer grows up, he may modify some of the hypotheses or drop them completely. Kessler's (1971: 2–3) words lend credence to this:

By forming a successive series of hypotheses about how the grammar of a language works, coupled with testing of those hypotheses, the child eventually arrives at a grammar typical for the adult speaker of the linguistic environment in which the child has participated.

Modification of hypotheses in LA is not unique to children. Adults too also modify, change or drop some rules completely in the process of learning. While corroborating this, Brumfit (1984: 34) says:

But there is a sense also in which the adult continues to develop and modify the language acquired in early childhood. While the syntactic system usually remains relatively stable, phonology can be adjusted deliberately, and semantic relations may be subject to a great deal of change.

Contrary to the views of many L2 theorists, it is our position here that adults can also acquire a second Language and even attain a near native-like competence in it if certain conditions such as a long period of exposure, strong motivation of the learners and lack of constraints of stress and over-correction are met. In view of our position, it becomes apparent that there are two ways by which adults can gain competence in a second language and these ways are first, by acquisition and second, by learning (Krashen 1982).

Dissipating much energy on the distinction between the two terms is a fruitless enterprise since children have a lot of linguistic as well as discourse rules to learn about the L_1 and since adults can acquire a L_2. So, in this paper, acquisition and learning will be used co-terminously since in the words of McDonough (1981: 95):

One of the central questions to which research has been devoted is whether or not the process of becoming anticulate in the second Language is the same as in the first, and since this question has not yet been satisfactorily resolved, the two terms will be used interchangeably here.

One of the most insightful studies on language acquisition was carried out by Swain (1972). Her study on LA was done in relation to bilingualism and she opined that the acquisition of two languages is possible in a bilingual or multilingual environment. It was asserted in the study that it was not just the demands of second languages in themselves that usually led to failure in acquiring them but that age and social context played prominent roles in LA. On the acquisition of two languages simultaneously, Swain (1972: 238–9) says:

A child who hears nothing but English as he grows up is considered to have learnt English as a first Language … His English, however, will consist of a number of codes, for example a code he uses when speaking to babies, a code he uses when speaking with his peers, etc ….The speech of a child who hears English and French as he grows up will also consist

of several codes. Thus he should be considered to have learned French and English as a first language.

Another important study conducted in L2 acquisition was that of Dulay and Burt (1974). Their study, a cross-sectional study, was greatly influenced by the research carried out on L1 acquisition by Brown (1973). Dulay and Burt used bilingual children whose age range was between eight and eleven. The subjects were children who had Spanish or Chinese as their L_1 but were attending English-Speaking Schools in America.

The aim of the study was to investigate the correct usage of eleven grammatical words and endings, which they called "functors" in order to either affirm or reject Brown's (1973) finding that those functors appeared consistently in a predictable order in the language of native American children after they had reached a certain stage in the process of English Language acquisition. The elicitation instruments used were pictures shown to the informants and questions designed to elicit some types of language forms were asked based on the pictures. It was found out that the eleven functors could be grouped into three and these groups, they claimed, could form a natural hierarchy for the acquisition of the functors. The hierarchy is found below:

1. pronoun case
2. copula, auxiliary, plural -s, continuous -ing, articles
3. possessive, regular and irregular past tense, 3rd person -s and, plural -es. The study further revealed that the items in group 2 cannot be acquired by the children without having acquired the items in group 1 and in the same vein, the items in group 3 cannot be acquired without the acquisition of the items in group 2.

Oladejo (1988) investigated the acquisition of the semantics of English modals as a second language features with a view to examining whether L_1 and L_2 learners' performances are similar or not. Using 80 Yoruba-speaking learners of English drawn from secondary schools, he discovered that the performances of L_2 learners of English couldn't be compared to those of L_1 learners, as some errors are predominant in the L_2 subjects' performances. The errors he identified include:

(a) Use of modal form to express concepts outside the domain of such modals (e.g. **can** for necessity / obligation).
(b) Use of modal forms of express non-modal notions.
(c) Use of non-modal items where modals are required.
(d) Hypothetical reference and modal forms and.
(e) Avoidance of use of certain modal forms.

An investigation of morphological processes in pharmaceutical nomenclature in English was carried out by Akinwale in 1994. His study focused on the morphological description of processes of forming words to name pharmaceutical products. The data for the study were drawn from

advertisements in **Pulse**, a monthly health magazine, and **the Nigeria Nurse**. The publications of these two magazines between 1977 and 1981 were critically examined. After a close examination and analysis of the data collected, he claimed that the morphological processes in pharmaceutical nomenclature could be grouped into five, namely: blending, forming acronyms, clipping, compounding and miscellaneous. On these groups, he has this to say:

> It should be pointed out that 73.3% of the data analysed are examples of blending. Forming acronyms as a morphological process constitutes 3.3%. Clipping and compounding both account for 6.6% each. Miscellaneous (i.e., products whose names involve an interplay of two or more morphological processes), make up 9.9%. Two other major morphological processes found in English but not represented in the data are Affixation and conversion (Akinwale, 1994: 29).

The study revealed among other things that:

    (a) blending has a high preference in pharmaceutical nomenclature;

    (b) product naming is an interplay of morphological and phonological processes;

    (c) morphological rules are broken to create new words in pharmaceutical nomenclature with the purpose of bringing about "attention-grabbing characteristics";

    (d) there are product names, which do not lend themselves easily to morphological and morphophonemic analyses.

Some years later, Akande (2001) researched the learners' competence vis-à-vis morphological appropriateness in ESL writing. The aim of the study was to examine the morphological errors in the written texts of one hundred and fifty senior secondary school one (SSSI) pupils drawn from three public secondary schools in Egbedore Local Government Area of Osun State in Nigeria. The data used for the study were written essays, which were analysed for various occurrences of morphological errors. In respect of his findings, he has this to say:

> The patterns of occurrence and deviation were similar in the three schools. The data showed that the level of acquisition of conversion, acronym, blends and clipping by the subjects is not encouraging. Suffixation is the most regularly used (MRU) while prefixation and compounding are less averagely used (LAU). Processes such as conversion, acronym, blend and clipping are rarely used (RU) while duplicatives are unused (U) at all (Akande, 2001: 42).

He, therefore, suggested a re-examination of the grouping of morphological processes into major and minor processes by Quirk and Greenbaum (1973) as the two extreme groups cannot be regarded as a correct reflection of the performance of learners in ESL writing.

While discussing the linguistic problems of Yoruba learners of English in Nigeria, Babalola and Akande (2002) opined that a lot of inconsistencies present in English made it difficult for second language learners of English to acquire it. These inconsistencies, which I prefer to tag as the polysystemic nature of English here, are found at all levels of the language namely graphology, orthography, grammar, lexis and so on. One of the problems, which they identified, and which is of relevance to this paper is morphological inconsistencies. According to them, "English is not free of inconsistencies in the area of morphology. There are ambiguities, which usually compound learners' problems" (Babalola and Akande, 2002: 250). The instances of such inconsistencies, which they gave, are couched in the following words:

> The suffix -er usually means "the person who performs the action indicated by the verb." So**, writer/producer/teacher** means "somebody who **writes/produces/teaches**," but **brother/sister** does not mean "somebody who ***brothes/sists**" neither does **type-writer** mean "somebody who type-writes." If someone who sings or writes is a **singer or writer** respectively; why shouldn't somebody who ***cooks, *gossips, *cheats, *sponsors** be a ***cooker, *gossiper**, ***cheater, *sponsorer**? In an English as a second language environment (ELSE) such as we have in Nigeria, learners are bound to make mistakes such as identified above (Babalola and Akande 2002: 250).

Rounding this section up is the investigation of the structural complexity of the post modified nominal group type conducted by Akande (2002). The aim of the study is:

> … to find out whether our suspicion that secondary school students made more mistakes when they used the hq NG structures than when they used any other structure including the mhq can be supported by data (Akande 2002: 246).

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Morphology is indisputably one of the traditional branches of grammar; the other branch being known as syntax. It (i.e. morphology) is the study of the internal structure of words (Tomori 1977). So, when we claim that **impossibility** has three components namely **in-**, **possible** and **-ity**, we are carrying out a morphological study of the word. A very good knowledge of morphology is crucial to the mastery of the grammar of any particular language; for if we do not know how the words in a language are formed, how do we know how to combine those words to form groups, clauses and sentences and be able to use them (the words) in appropriate contexts?

A very paramount concept in morphology is the **morpheme.** Out of the five units that have been identified in English grammar, the morpheme is the lowest

on the rank scale (Muir 1972; Berry 1977; Tomori 1977; Farinde & Ojo 2000). The morpheme has been defined differently by many scholars. According to Tomori (1977: 16):

> The morpheme is the minimal linguistic element that carries grammatical and/or semantic meaning; it is not further divisible into smaller grammatical components.

This definition is in line with Farinde and Ojo's view of the morpheme. According to them:

> The morpheme can be defined as the smallest meaningful grammatical unit of English. Although it is the smallest in our rank scale, it exerts a lot of influence on the word, which is the next higher unit of the rank scale. This is because the classification and the syntactic function of a word can change with the addition of a morpheme e.g.

Word	Class		Word	Class
Teach	Verb	-er	Teacher	Noun
Nation	Noun	-al	National	Adjective
Heavy	Adjective	-ly	Heavily	Adverb

Source: Farinde and Ojo, 2000: 15.

From the two definitions of a morpheme given above, it is apparent that we can talk of morphemes with grammatical meanings and those with semantic meanings. The morphemes with grammatical meanings, which of course, are limited in English, are inflectional morphemes and they are not capable of changing the class and/or the meanings of the words to which they are attached. Some of what they do in English are listed below:

(a) to indicate plurality e.g. <u>pen</u>/<u>pens</u>
(b) to indicate tense e.g., <u>kill</u>/<u>killed</u>
(c) to indicate possessive case e.g., <u>children's books</u>, <u>Ade's</u> car.

On the other hand, the morphemes with semantic meanings are called derivational morphemes. These are numerous in English and they can change the meanings and/or the classes of the words to which they are attached. While it is possible to have more than one derivational morphemes attached to a word, a word can only have one inflectional morpheme. When both derivational and inflectional morphemes are attached to the same word, the derivational morphemes(s) come before the inflectional morphemes. The words below illustrate this:

1. derive + ion + al → derivational (2 derivational morphemes)
2. establish + ment + s → establishments (1 derivational and 1 inflectional)
3. dance + er + s → dancers (1 derivational and 1 inflectional)

4. grammar + al + ity + s → grammaticalities (2 derivational morphemes and 1 inflectional)

Mathews (1974) refers to these two types of morphemes as inflectional and lexical formatives and in line with these two formatives, he claimed that the two branches of morphology are inflectional and lexical morphology.

The two morphemes that have been discussed so far are bound morphemes because they cannot appear in isolation in English. They have to be attached to the base or the root of other words. In the process of the attachment technically known as affixation, derivational morphemes may come before the base (i.e. as prefixes) as in **ir-** in **irregular** and **irresponsible** or after the base (i.e., as suffixes) as in -**ion** and -**er** in **education** and **dancer** respectively. The other category of morpheme that has not been mentioned is the free morpheme. The free morpheme is synonymous to the base or the root and these are words, which can appear alone without prefixes or suffixes attached to them and still be meaningful e.g., **table, come, quick, fast** etc. Though words like **the, an, so, in, or** can appear in isolation, they cannot be regarded as free morphemes because they do not possess inherent meanings like root words do.

At times the same spelling and the same sound especially -**er** and / / may function as both a derivational morpheme and an inflectional morpheme. For instance, while **er** / / is a derivational morpheme in **dancer, singer** and **writer** meaning "somebody who performs the action of **dancing, singing** and **writing,** the same -**er** / / is an inflectional morpheme in **younger brighter, taller** and **quicker** meaning **more – than**. That "they **(-er)** look the same does not mean they do the same kind of work" (Yule 1996: 77). Similarly, there are some words in English in which -**er** / / appears and it is not a morpheme in them at all. These words seem to abound in kinship terminologies such as **brother, sister, father, mother** etc. In each of these words, -**er** is not a morpheme. On the identification of morphemes, Nida (1946) also discussed in Tomori (1977) proposed six principles, which could be used to establish what is a morpheme and what is not. On how to establish the morpheme, Muir (1972: 14) says:

> The morpheme is formally established by comparing words and discovering recurrent patterns. Native English speakers will presumably agree that hunting is composed of two elements, hunt + ing, but that stout is not composed of two elements, st + out. This is so because the native speaker recognises the occurrence of patterns already evident in the language. He knows that ing appears after many other elements: singing, shooting, swimming, turning, hoping etc., and that hunt appears without other element (i.e. as a word): tiger hunt their prey; the hunt was successful; and that 'hunt' also occurs before other endings: hunts, hunted, hunter. On the other hand, he knows that although out occurs alone and before other endings, st does not regularly occur with other items. He also knows that when out occurs alone it has a meaning that it does not have when it occurs as part of stout.

In the formation of words, it is quite possible for morphemes to undergo phonetic changes (Tomori 1977). These changes are governed by what is called morphophonemic rules. For instance, **educate** becomes **education, which** is a clear example of the voiceless alveolar plosive /t/ becoming a voiceless alveo-palatal fricative / / after it has undergone a phonetic change. These same rules apply to **electric, produce** and **mouse** to make them become **electricity, production** and **mice** respectively. Thus, it is possible to form a new word from the existing one through mere addition of a morpheme to a word, replacement of one sound by another or through a complete change of the form of the existing word. The examples below show this clearly.

Word	Morpheme	Becomes	Process
Boy	+ -hood	Boyhood	Addition
Kill	+ -ed	Killed	Addition
Man	+ -s (plural)	Men	Replacement
Take	+ -ed (past)	Took	Replacement
go	+ -ed (past)	went	Suppletion

On the basis of the above processes, there is a sense in which we can describe a morpheme as an additive, a replacive or a suppletive morpheme.

3. METHOD

The subjects that participated in the research were sixty Yoruba-speaking learners of English drawn from four secondary schools consisting of two public and two private schools in Oke-Igbo, Ondo State of Nigeria. The four schools are:
 (a) Progress Model College, Oke-Igbo (henceforth school A)
 (b) Highland Grammar School, Oke-Igbo (henceforth school B)
 (c) Oke-Igbo Grammar School, Oke-Igbo, (henceforth school C)
 (d) Oloroke Grammar School, Oke-Igbo (henceforth school D)

While schools A and B are private schools owned by individuals, schools C and D are founded by the government being public schools. The informants, fifteen pupils randomly selected from each of the schools, were senior secondary school one (SSS 1) pupils whose ages range from ten to fourteen years. The pre-test oral interaction with them revealed that majority of them had been exposed to English Language as a subject and as a medium of instruction right from the primary school while some claimed that they were exposed to English in the nursery school. Thus, the period of their formal experience in the language ranges between six and eight years.

The elicitation instruments used for the study were of two types: written English compositions and a grammar exercise. The topics from which the participators were to choose one and write an essay of about 500 words on within the time duration of 45 minutes are:

1. A memorable day in my life.
2. A story that begins or ends with "one good turn deserves another."
3. Naming ceremony in Yoruba culture.

To complement the essay test, a grammar exercise, consisting of about 25 questions, which required them to fill the gaps in the exercise with the appropriate words given to them. The questions were set in such a way that their knowledge of the inflectional morphemes would be revealed. Some of the questions are found below:

> *Instruction:* Fill the gap in each of the sentences below by choosing the appropriate word in the bracket in front of each sentence.
> The man always _____ his wife everyday. (is beating, beat, beats)
> The two _____ came. (chiefs, chiefs, chieves)
> John thinks he's _____ than us. (wise, wisest, wiser)
> You and I will be _____ there. (go, going, went)
> Each of them _____ every week. (paying, pay, pays)
> Those _____ books are expensive. (childrens', childs', children's)
> He has _____ for it. (come, coming, came)
> The boy has _____ his finger. (cutting, cut, cutted)
> The _____ girl in the class is Tola. (taller, tallest, tall)
> They _____ the news yesterday. (broadcast, broadcasted, broadcasting)

One rationale for giving them the grammar test is to investigate further if, in case there is paucity of the usage of inflectional morphemes in their essays, they actually know the appropriate context in which to use different words having these morphemes. Another reason is that it is natural that certain topics will elicit the use of certain inflectional morphemes at the expense of other. The grammar exercise, which covers all the IMs being investigated will cater for the disproportionate use of the morphemes that may characterize their written output and will also give us useful insights into their mastery of the morphemes.

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSIONS

The table below (Table 1) shows the occurrences of the IMs in the students' written compositions.

Table 1. Occurrences of Inflectional Morphemes in the students' written compositions.

Types of Inflectional morphemes (IM)	Schl A	%	Schl B	%	Schl C	%	Schl D	%	Total No. of each IM type	Overall % of each IM	Rank order
Plural marker: Z_1	602	32.79	579	31.54	371	20.21	284	15.47	1836	34.28	2
Possessive marker: Z_2	54	43.90	59	47.97	7	5.69	3	2.44	123	2.30	6
3rd person concord marker Z_3	68	33.01	57	27.67	46	22.33	35	16.99	206	3.85	5
Past tense marker: d_{14}	831	35.93	711	30.74	399	17.25	372	16.08	2313	43.19	1
Past participle marker:d_2	109	31.23	113	32.38	58	16.62	69	19.77	349	6.52	4
Present participle marker: ing	161	29.22	152	27.59	99	17.97	139	25.23	551	10.29	3
Comparative marker: -er	19	30.65	23	37.10	13	20.97	7	11.29	62	1.16	7
Superlative marker: -est	11	42.31	9	34.62	5	19.23	1	3.85	26	0.49	8
Total	1855	33.94	1703	31.16	998	18.26	910	16.65	5466	100.00	

The written essays of two hundred and fifty senior secondary school. Two pupils in Osun State of Nigeria served as the source of data for the study. Their written tasks were analysed and the study revealed that "the post modified head type (hq type), though structurally less complex, is more difficult to acquire than the pre- and post-modified head type (the mhq type)" (Akande 2002: 246).

As shown in the table above, out of 5466 occurrences of inflectional morphemes (IMs) used, the past tense marker (d_1) and the plural marker (Z_1) are the mostly used morphemes. While the former appeared 2313 (43.19%) times, the latter accounted for 34.28% (i.e., 1836 occurrences) of the total number of IMs used. The occurrences of the two taken together summed up to 4149 (75.91%) of the 5466 instances of IMs. While the two types of adjectival inflections (i.e., -er and -est) totalled 88 (1.61%), the past participle (d_2) and the present participle (-ing) occurred 349 (6.52%) and 551 (10.29%) times respectively. In the same vein, there were 123 (2.30%) instances of possessive suffixes (Z_2) 206 (3.85%) cases of the third person concord marker (Z_3) in the written tasks of the pupils. The data further revealed that in the use of the IMs, schools A and B's pupils performed much better than schools C and D's pupils. Out of the 5466 examples of IMs used, the numbers of IMs that appeared in the

scripts of schools A and B's pupils accounted for 3558 (65.09%), while those used in schools C and D taken together were 1908 (34.91%). Generally speaking, there was an acute discrepancy in the mastery and usage of inflectional morphemes by the subjects as revealed in the table above. It could thus be said that the pupils' mastery of the other six IMs (i.e., apart from d_1 and Z_1) is grossly deficient as the total number of these six types taken together was just 1317 (24.09%).

In the next table, errors related to the use of the IMs were shown.

Table 2. Errors of occurrences and omissions of inflectional suffixes used.

	Expected occurrences	Actual	Occurrences	Correct	Occurrences	Error of	Occurrences	Error of	Omission
Types of IM	No	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%
Z_1	1886	1836	97.35	1652	90.01	184	10.02	50	2.72
Z_2	129	123	95.35	103	83.74	20	16.26	6	4.88
Z_3	226	206	91.15	180	87.38	26	12.62	20	9.71
d_1	2350	2313	98.43	2063	89.19	250	10.81	37	1.60
d_2	365	349	95.62	289	82.81	60	17.19	16	4.58
-inG	558	551	98.75	546	99.09	20	3.63	7	1.27
-er	63	62	98.41	60	96.77	2	3.23	1	1.61
-est	30	26	86.67	24	92.31	2	7.69	4	15.38

As it could be found in Table 2, a total of 1886 Z_1 and 129 Z_2 were expected to be used by the subjects. This implies that there were errors of omission in the use of Z_1 and Z_2 by the subjects. While there were 50 (2.72%) errors of omission in the use of Z_1, there were 6 (4.88%) in Z_2 out of 1836 and 123 actual Occurrences for Z_1 and Z_2 respectively. Out of 1836 and 123 Occurrences of Z_1 and Z_2 respectively, there were 184 (10.02%) and 20 (16.26%) examples of misuse of Z_1 and Z_2 respectively.

The total expected occurrences of Z_3, d_1, d_2 and -ing respectively are 226, 2350,365 and 558 while those of -er and est are 62 and 26 respectively. As could be gathered from the data, the error of occurrences for d_2 and Z_2 had the highest percentages with 17.19% (60 examples) and 16.26% (20 examples) respectively. The errors of omission for these two IMs (i.e., d2 and Z_2) were respectively 6 (4.88%) and 16 (4.58%). Similarly, for Z_3, Z_1 and d_1, 26 (12.62%), 184(10.02%) and 250 (10.81%) were respectively recorded. The other three -ing, er and -st, had 20 (3.63%), 2(3.23%) and 2(7.69%) for error of occurrences and 7(1.27%), 1(1.61%) and 4(15.38%) respectively for errors of omission.

As we can see, in the table, the pupils generally had very poor competence in the use of the past participle, possessive inflection, past tense inflection and plural inflection as these four had high percentages of errors of occurrences. Some of the noticeable actual errors in the written essays of our subject are:

(a) omission of the past tense marker as in:
    (i) I ate and <u>dance</u> that day (instead of "I ate and danced that day")
    (ii) They gather together and give many names to that girl that day (instead of " They gathered together and gave many names to that girl that day").

(b) wrong insertion of past tense marker as in:
    (i) The man would brought the items (instead of "The man would bring the items")
    (ii) The ceremony did not ended until 7.pm that day (instead of "The ceremony did not end until 7.pm that day")

(c) omission of the third person concord marker as in:
    (i) Somebody who want to dance can do so (instead of "Somebody who wants to dance can do so")

(d) wrong use of the past participle form of words as in:
    (i) As he was eaten the food, he was also laughin (instead of "As he was eating the food, he was also laughing")

(e) the use of present participle (-ing) where the past participle should be used as in:
    (i) By the time we come back, the robbers have taking everything away and … (instead of "By the time we came back, the robbers had taken everything away and …")

(f) misuse of the superlative inflection (-est) as in:
    (i) We gave them the tough time of the year (instead of "we gave them the toughest time of the year").

(g) the use of positive adjective where comparative form should appear as in:
    (i) The king is tall passed everybody (instead of "The king is taller than everybody")

On the grammar exercise given to them, all the subjects performed relatively well as none of them got below 10 out of the 25 questions, though schools A and B excelled again. However, a critical look at their performance indicated that more than three quarters of the whole subjects did not have a good knowledge of some exceptional rules in the use of past participle and past tense forms. More than half of the subjects took **came** and **broadcasted** as the past participle and past tense forms of **come** and **broadcast** respectively. The possessive form also posed some problems as they picked **childrens**' instead of **children's** as the correct answer to:

    These _____ books are expensive (childrens', childs', children's)

The error that featured prominently is the choice of a present form of a plural verb in **one of...** or each **of...** constructions. In simple present sentences in a construction such as this, to satisfy the requirement of agreement between the subject and the verb, a singular verb in its present form with the addition of **-s** inflection is needed. This discovery confirmed the investigation of the acquisition of the hq nominal group carried out by Akande (2002).

Though this study revealed that the subjects did not have a good mastery of all the inflectional morphemes, it was found out that there were few errors in the way these morphemes were used. As the actual errors pointed out above showed, most of the errors were made either as a result of carelessness on their part (by not reading through again and again) or ignorance of certain rules in English. That the subjects did not adequately use some inflectional morphemes especially the adjective inflections might be rooted in their MT. In the MT (Yoruba) of our subjects, which the present researcher is familiar with, no single word bears an overt marker of comparison; be it comparative or superlative. For instance in Yoruba, we may have:

Igi yi ga ju awon yooku. (Tree this tall than those others.)
(This tree is taller than the others.)

Another reason for the paucity in the use of most of the inflectional morphemes identified is that there are no inflectional suffixes at all in Yoruba and such features as plurality, tense and concord are contextually determined. So, in Yoruba it is possible to have:

O lo lana (He / She / It went yesterday
O nlo lola (He / She / It is going tomorrow)
O maa n lo lojojumo (He / She / It goes everyday)

where the lexical verb **lo** is uninflected but its tense is determined by the item that appears before or after it

5. CONCLUSION

It was discovered that there is a wide gap in the mastery of the IMs by our subjects. Out of the eight IMs investigated, the only two the students were familiar with are the past tense and the plural markers. The study also revealed that there were errors of omission of the d_1, d_2 and Z_3 and wrong insertion of the past tense inflection. In view of the foregoing, we would like to suggest that teachers should employ contrastive and error analysis techniques in the teaching of the English language since it is apparent that our subjects' knowledge of their mother tongue (i.e, Yoruba) interferes with their use of inflectional morphemes of English.

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