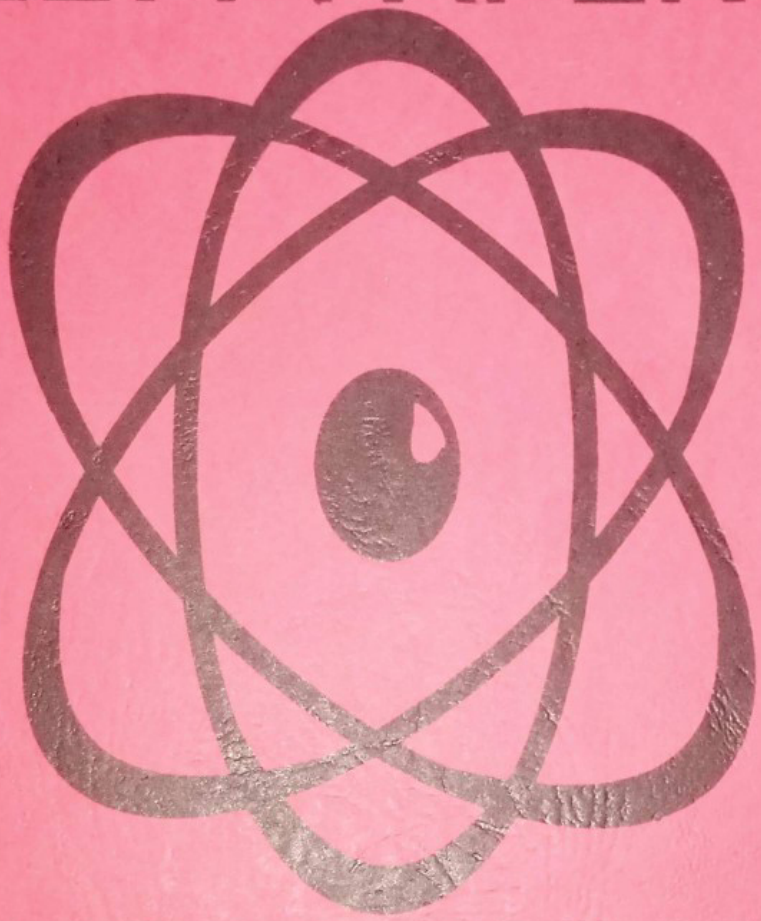
ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING TODAY

ELTT PAPERS



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ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING TODAY (ELTT)

A Journal for Teachers of English & Communication Skills

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Aims:
ELTT is a bi-annual journal devoted to the publication of articles, research reports and reviews on English Language Teaching for those involved in the teaching of English as a Second Language. It aims to:

- Provide a forum of exchange of ideas and experiences for teachers of English.
- Encourage teachers and researchers, publishers and writers to work together to develop teaching procedure, ideas and materials for the advancement of ELTT.
- Promote and support research in the areas of English for Academic/Special purposes.

Although ELTT welcomes contibutions in all areas of English Language research, greater emphasis will be given to papers with strong pratical classroom experience and application. Such areas may cover Needs Analysis, Course Design, Methodology, Testing, Materials Development, Programme Management, Teacher Training and Evaluation.

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Inconsistent Grammatical Rules and Ambivalent Rule Application as causes of Errors in Learning ESL

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Abstract
English Language has been and is still the official language of communication in Nigeria. It is the language of instruction in schools from the elementary to university level. However, many learners of the language find it difficult to perform well in the language either in written or in verbal communication and many reasons have been attributed to this. These among others include, the first language interference, lack of motivation by both the parents and government towards education generally, enough qualified teachers to teach the language as well as lack of seriousness on the part of the students. These obvious reasons have been the areas of concentration any time an attempt is made to find out why students perform poorly in English Language. No attempt has been made to look at the nature of English Language itself with a view to identifying the inconsistencies in the rules of its grammar. These inconsistent grammatical rules play a major role in impeding the better performance of students of English as a second language. It is therefore the aim of this paper to take a critical look at the English verbal and nominal systems with a view to pinpointing the areas where rules are inconsistent and so wrongly applied by learners. The paper also offers some recommendations and remedial drills as measures towards minimizing the impact of the problem highlighted.

Introduction
English Language is very important nationally and internationally. It is the language of the government, business, commerce, judiciary, education, the news media and literature, Bamgbose (1971). It has been the country's lingua franca, and a force that has united us in our diversity, Nwoke (1988).

The role of English is also most noticeable in the field of education. English is introduced as the language of instruction in schools up to the university level. Akpan (1997:2) says: "Government has decided to see to it that the medium of instruction beginning from primary four and throughout the rest of the educational levels is English Language". The Nigerian Government took this decision because of the importance of English Language in education and because classrooms have been too heterogeneous in terms of language of education.

However, the level of performance of our students at all levels of education is not improving with time. Communication either oral or written in English is very difficult for most of our students. This leads to the fall in the standard of education in the country generally due to the fact that English Language cuts across the entire school curriculum.

Many factors have been attributed to the phenomenon above. Some of these are, unseriousness on the part of the students, lack of encouragement by the parents and government, lack of dedication of teachers and the attitude of the entire society to education generally. These factors in addition to the influence of the first language are obvious factors impeding the performance of students in English Language. Many writers have highlighted a lot on these factors. However, the fact the English Language rules create problems to learners of English Language has been ignored. The rules are highly inconsistent and full of exceptions. The inconsistency in English Language rules has led to ambivalent rule application by second language learners. In most cases, the learners over generalize the rules and so make mistakes phonologically, syntactically and semantically.

In this way, Richards (1974) maintains that the learners on the basis of his experience of the language constructs a deviant structure, for instance:

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1. She can goes
2. We are see the moon
3. Last week, I walk to the shop and I buy.

The error above might be regarded as a blend of two structures in the standard version of the language. In the three sentences given as examples above, (1) shows a blending of the continuous and simple present (2) both the modal and the standard 3rd person singular – 's' suffix are used. (3) the redundancy is removed because the adverbial marker 'last week' is for the learner sufficient to indicate a time reference and so, the –ed is omitted from the stem of the verbs. In the first two examples 1 and 2, the overgeneralization is that of removing the necessity for concord and overgeneralizing the rule which states that in the present simple tense, there are no suffixes except for the third person singular.

Language according to Corder (1997) is generally rule governed and every language has a set of rules which guide its speakers in their everyday use of the language. Gochal (1994) and Boadi (1968) also agree with the above assertion when they maintain that "language of every society is highly systematic with its rules, functions and the extent to which it can be flexible". English Language is not an exception; it is just like all other languages made up of rules which must be followed strictly before a correct expression is made. However, because some of these rules are not 100% consistent, learners of the language in written and oral communication ambivalently apply them. This paper therefore, aims at a critical look at some problem areas particularly the verbal and nominal systems where due to inconsistency in English Language rules, second language learners apply the rules wrongly through overgeneralization and so make mistakes. The paper will also provide appropriate measures for minimizing such problems.

The English Verbal System

In the English Verbal system, experience has shown that learners of English as a second language have problems with the following areas:

(a) the verb forms
(b) transformation from one form of the verb to another
(c) the irregular Verbs.

The Verb Forms

Quirk and Greenbaum (1973) maintain that many English Verbs have five forms. These are: the base, the –S form, the **–ed**, the **ing** participle and the **ed** participle. The irregular verb forms vary from three to eight forms while the modal auxiliaries have only one form i.e. the base. The followings are examples.

Base	**s-form**	**ed form**	**ing-participle**	**ed- participle**
Call	calls	Called	calling	called
Sing	sings	Sang	singing	sung
Read	reads	Read	reading	read
See	sees	Saw	seeing	seen
Pay	pays	Paid	paying	Paid
Do	does	Did	doing	Done

Some verbs have only three forms such as:

Base	**-s form**	**-ing participle**
Hit	Hits	Hitting
Put	Puts	Putting
Cast	Casts	Casting
Cut	Cuts	cutting

The next category of verbs is the verb 'be' which has eight forms as be, am, is, are, was, were, being, and been.

A critical look at the examples above will reveal phonological and orthographical problems which can impede the learning of English as a second language. For instance, the forms of the verbs vary from three to as many as eight. For verbs like cut, put, burst, cost etc. a student may apply the same rule of five forms which most verbs have and therefore, come up with words like putted, bursted, costed, cutted etc. Moreover, even if a student is familiar with the three forms rule for such words, he may still face some orthographical problems. This is because, the last consonant of most of the verbs with three forms are doubled in the –ing participle and there is the tendency that the student may produce words such as puting, cuting, hiting, beting, especially as it is correct to spell costing, bursting, casting, hurting etc. without doubling the consonant. Furthermore, some regular lexical verbs require more than a straight forward addition of –ing to the base, for apart from consonant doubling, the last alphabet of some words are deleted before the –ING is added. This is true of words like wiggle, like, love, sieve, prove etc.

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Moreover, the '–s' form of the English verbal system is also a problem area to learners of English as a second language. Syntactically and semantically the –s form is used with 3rd person singular subjects and other singular subjects, except the first and second persons singular, I and you. In this case, it is correct to say, "He takes the book on the table" or "The man beats his children" but wrong to say "I takes the book on the table" or "you comes to school every day". Going by this rule, a child wonders why it will be wrong to make expression such as, "He wrotes a letter everyday" or "He will writes a letter" since 'he' is a third person singular which permits the use of the –S form.

Furthermore, in pronunciation and orthography, the –S form is also a problem to learners because in most cases it requires the learner to do more than just adding a '-S'. In line with this, it is the belief of many English grammarians like Quirk and Greenbaum (1973), Close (1975), Christopherson and Sandved (1980) and Huddleson (1988) that the s-form has three spoken realizations (/1Z/, /Z/ and /S/ and two spellings, -s and –es. The /1Z/ is used after bases ending in voiced and voiceless sibilants and spelled –es unless if the base already ends in –e. Examples are:

pass - passes
buzz - buzzes
catch - catches
push - pushes

2. /Z/ pronounced after bases ending in voiced sounds and spelled –'s' in words such as
call - calls
rob - robs
say - says
have - has
3. The third class is pronounced /s/ and spelled –'s' after bases ending in other voiceless sounds e.g.
cut - cuts
lock - locks
look - looks
sap - saps

All these intricate rules can be confusing to learners of English as a second language. There is therefore the need for adequate learning and appropriate teaching techniques by the learners and teachers of English as a second language.

Moreover, while transforming verbs from present to past and past participle, students could also run into a lot of problems which are largely due to inconsistency in English language rules. Transformation to past tense according to Quirk, Greenbaum and Geoffrey (1992) is largely through the addition of –e or –ed. For instance, work – worked, play – played, cook – cooked, jump – jumped, finish – finished etc. However, there are largely other numerous types in this process that can be confusing to a non-native learner of English such as

- Doubling of Consonant

In some cases, the final base consonants (except x) are doubled before inflections beginning with a vowel letter when the preceding vowel is stressed and spelled with a single letter e.g.

bar - barred
permit - permitted

But there is no doubling when the vowel is unstressed or written with two letters:

e.g. enter - entered
dread - dreaded

But then, there are exceptions along the following lines:

a. With bases ending in certain consonants, there is doubling after unstressed vowels! e.g.
humbug - humbugged
traffic - trafficked
b. For some verbs, the last consonant is doubled such as
nab - nabbed
signal - signalled
man - manned
dug - dugged
program - programmed

In similar words like the above, the consonant is not doubled in the past tense e.g.

gossip - gossiped
envelop - enveloped
bang - banged
hang - hanged

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In the above situations, learners are bound to apply the rules wrongly in the absence of adequate teaching and learning.

Furthermore, in bases ending in a consonant + y, the following changes occur before inflections that do not begin with i: Examples

carry	-	carried
bury	-	buried
fly	-	flied

Also, the past of the following verbs has a 'y' changed to 'i' after a vowel.

lay	-	laid
pay	-	paid
say	-	said

Moreover, in some transformations to the past, there is deletion of the final 'e' before the –ed inflection as in,

shave	-	shaved
share	-	shared
agree	-	agreed
dye	-	dyed

The rules governing these transformations are numerous and too complex for a learner to remember and master within a stipulated number of years he is expected to spend in a school system. These inherent problems of the language itself will definitely do more harm than good in his day-to-day use of English Language.

There are also more stressing problems in English verbal system which constitute a lot of difficulties for learners of English as a second language. This has to do with the irregular verbs. In English Language, the irregular verbs are so called because they do not have a /d/ or /t/ inflection, have variation in their base vowel, and have varying number of distinct forms (Quirk and Greenbaum, 1992).

Examples, while the past tense of cook is cooked, the past tense of drink is not drinked, but drank and drunk in the v-ed and ed- participle respectively. In the same vein, the verbs find and write have variations in their base vowels. They are not 'finded' and 'writed' as a learner may assume but found and wrote respectively. Examples of other forms of transformation of irregular verbs from present to past and participle are:

speak	-	spoke	-	spoken
come	-	came	-	come
burn	-	burnt	-	burnt
build	-	built	-	built
draw	-	drew	-	drawn
dream	-	dreamt	-	dreamt
eat	-	ate	-	eaten
feel	-	felt	-	felt
choose	-	chose	-	chosen
do	-	did	-	done
bear	-	bore	-	borne

As far as transformation of irregular verbs from present to past and past participle is concerned, one can see that there are numerous problems likely to be faced by English as a second language learners. One of these is that it is difficult to pin such transformations to a specific rule or rules as this is done in many ways. For instance, in some cases, the words are entirely different in their present, past and past participle forms e.g. eat-ate-eaten. In others, the internal vowels are changed e.g. speak-spoke-spoken; write-wrote-written; freeze-froze-frozen; break-broke-broken; drink-drank-drunk. In some others, the internal vowel is reduced in the past tense e.g. choose-chose; freeze-froze; bleed-bled; breed-bred; feed-fed; meet-met etc.

Moreover, in many of these transformations, there is orthographical problems, for instance the past tense of read, dream, are read but pronounced /red/ and dreamt but pronounced /dremt/. In these situations, a learner may write as he pronounces and so write read as red and dreamt as dremt.

Furthermore, some irregular verbs have the same form in the past and past participle while many others have varied forms. Here also, the learners may apply the rules wrongly while using these verbs.

The Nominal System

The major problem the learner of English as a second language is likely to face in the nominal system is Noun Pluralization. The English Number system according to Quirk and Greenbaum (1973) is comprised of singular which denotes one and plural which means more than one. A learner of English is confused with the numerous systems of pluralization in English. At the elementary level of his exposure to the language, he is familiar with the use of 's' and

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'es' when he pluralizes, but as time goes on, he realizes the inconsistency in the rules for pluralization. This stems from the fact that the English number system consists of the variable and invariable nouns. The variable nouns are count nouns and can be regular or irregular. The regular variable nouns have five different ways of pluralizing Quirk and Greenbaum (1973).

1. the addition of 's' e.g. boy – boys
2. voicing e.g. calf-calves
3. mutation e.g. man – men
4. EN plural e.g. child – children
5. zero plural e.g. sheep – sheep

The irregular variable nouns deal with foreign words which have the most inconsistent methods of pluralization. For instance, radius – radii; stratum – strata; thesis – theses; criterion – criteria; cherub – cherubim etc.

These systems of pluralization above are likely to present orthographical and phonological problems to the learner, his exposure to the language notwithstanding. For instance, the 's' inflection can take the following phonemic symbols /S/, /Z/ or /1Z/

/S/ for words such as boys, cats, books
/Z/ for words such as trees, fees
/1Z/ for houses, coaches, riches, claves etc.

Moreover, some plurals may take the 's' inflection in sound but spelling creates numerous exceptions. This is true of the following categories of Nouns.

1. Nouns ending in –y - some change the 'y' to 'i' and add -es as in skies, flies, spies. However, in words such as journey, Germany, stand-by, day, boy, etc. only the 's' inflection is used.

2. Nouns of unusual form sometimes pluralize in 's' e.g.
   a. letter names: dot your i's
   b. numerals: 1980s
   c. abbreviations: Mps
3. Nouns in –o, have plural in os, with some exceptions having either optional or obligatory – oes.

Plurals in – os and oes:
Archipelago, banjo, buffalo, cargo, halo etc.
Plurals only in oes, in words like echo, embargo, hero, potato, tomato etc.

Moreover, the invariable singular and plural nouns also present difficulties to learners. For instance, some nouns are plural in form but singular in meaning e.g. News, Phonetics, Mathematics, Measles, Physics etc. With these class of nouns, the students will have the problem of agreement i.e. whether to use singular or plural verb.

In the same vein, nouns like Thanks' which is always in plural form even though it is not quantified is also an exception to the usual rule because it looks as if the final 's' is the –s inflection for plurality. Not that alone, the form of some nouns does not change whether in singular or plural. Examples are sheep, staff, furniture, information etc. but there is the tendency that a learner may adopt any of the methods of pluralization already discussed while using them in plural sense.

Conclusion and Recommendations

As a solution to the problems highlighted above, teachers of English as a second language should be conscious of the inconsistency in grammatical rules and make adequate provision for it in their content and methods of teaching. They should realize as Corder (1973) puts it that mistakes or errors are not physical failures but the sign of an imperfect knowledge of the code. That, the learners have not yet internalized the formation rules of the second language. The teacher should therefore expose the students adequately to the language to enhance appropriate language habits. The structure of the language should be taught gradually through constant repetition to ensure remembering as well as minimize the problems of rule over generalization and misapplication. Any aspect of the language that is confusing to the students should be taught again.

In Corder's (1973) view, language is a system of systems with all parts being interconnected, therefore nothing can be fully learned until all the parts are fully learned. English Language teachers should therefore allow the students to learn the rule systems of the target language by presenting them with sentences, which exemplify the rules so as to develop competence in the language as a whole. Moreover, the language data presented to the learners should be such that would allow them to build up rules of production and use.

Moreover, there should be appropriate linguistic grouping in the teaching process so that those items, which have some sort of relationship to each other, either semantic or syntactic, should be taught at the same time. For instance, if "he plays" is taught together with "he is playing", after sufficient learning time, the teacher may produce a blend of the two as if he is singing. Therefore, items of the same time have to be grouped together and taught at the same time. For

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instance, the past forms of verbs such as blow, break, drive, flow, should be taught at once because the same rule guides their transformation to the past, while others such as cut, put, hurt, cost, cast, etc. should go together. This will enable the learners to discover underlying regulations or make significant generalizations.

Moreover, the English Language teachers should also expose the students to drills, dialogues, and exercises so as enable them to make functional use of the language. These drills and exercises should emphasize an area, which are likely to constitute problems to the students. Drills of any kind in English Language help to facilitate re-learning which results in remembering and automaticity in the learners.

In the light of the problems highlighted in this paper, the following exercises can be used.

1. Give the singular forms of the following plural nouns and devise a heading for each group of plurals.

A	B	C
teeth	sheep	news
men	staff	phonetics
oxen	information	physics
brethren	furniture	measles
D	E	F
houses	lorries	keys
coaches	babies	cars
riches	flies	pots
fishes	skies	books

Tables could also be used to familiarize the students with the areas under discussion. This stage in the process is for the teacher to get the students to produce orally or in writing some correct examples of areas where English Language rules are conflicting to them. For instance, students may be asked to generate correct sentences from the following tables

A. (Present Continuous)

I	Is	goingcoming	to school
We	Are		to the house
He	Am	reading	my book
You			

B (Simple present)

I	come	to school everyday for his lunch at 12 noon.
Ali		
She	comes	
We		
He		

C - Transformation from present to past tense

Match the following words correctly to form present, past and past participle.

Come	saw	flew
See	frozen	agree
Blow	slept	blown
Dream	came	wrote
Freeze	worn	slept
Sleep	blew	froze
Agree	begged	seen
Beg	flown	come

The students could also be told to form as many sentences as possible from the words in the table.

On Noun pluralization, the teacher should demonstrate to the students the whole system of pluralization in English and may after that give the following exercises.

Give the plural of the following nouns:

1. mathematics
2. measles
3. staff
4. sheep
5. news
6. tomato
7. goose
8. radius

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Students should also make sentences with the given words.

Conclusion

A problem identified is a problem half solved. This paper has highlighted the fact that, the inconsistency in grammatical rules of English Language is a cause of errors to learners of English as a second language. It causes phonological, syntactical, semantic and orthographical problems as shown in this paper. These problems so caused have contributed to ambivalent rule application of various forms such as rule over generalization, reduction of redundancy, over simplification etc.

These have led to errors in performance. However, the paper also offers some recommendations as well as remedial drills and tables that could help minimize these problems. It is therefore the belief of this paper that curriculum planners, classroom teachers and our methods of teaching English as a second language should be geared towards taking into consideration the problems highlighted and the recommendations offered in this paper.

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