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EFFECTS OF COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH TO TEACHING ON THE ABILITY OF NASSARAWA STATE POLYTECHNIC STUDENTS TO USE ENGLISH PERFECT TENSES

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Abstract

The inability of the students to use the perfect tense appropriately and the important role the tense plays in academic writings and indeed the overall communication process necessitated the need for this study. In this regard, the study investigated the effects of Communicative Approach to teaching the tense on the ability of students to use the present perfect and past perfect tenses. The objectives of the study were to determine the extent to which the students would be able to use the present perfect and past perfect tenses in both the passive and active voices before and after exposure to communicative teaching. Using 60 students of science and technology of Nasarawa State Polytechnic Lafia in the 2012/2013 academic session, the study was carried out using the pre-test post-test experimental research design. The students were grouped into the experimental and control groups and the experimental group was exposed to instruction on the use of perfect tenses using communicative teaching for six weeks. The researcher designed instrument was used for data collection and data collected was analysed using mean. Findings indicated that communicative teaching can improve students' ability to use perfect tenses. Recommendations given include drawing students' attention to the use of perfect tenses even while teaching other language structures.

Introduction

Tense choice is the communicative repertoire of English language users. It is used to create and communicate information which is responsive to rhetorical demands. In order to be able to comprehend different text types, it is important that students master the use of the various English tenses. Among the tenses, the simple present and simple past, dominate academic writings. Writing Center (2014), pointed out that the simple present, simple past and present perfect account for approximately 80 percent of the verb tenses used in academic writing. Since the present perfect is among tenses that dominate academic writings, it is also important that the past perfect is also mastered.

Demonstrating an understanding of the use of perfect tenses is not enough for students to master a language, however, developing students' mastery of language element that is obligatory in a sentence can contribute to the overall development of language. In using the perfect tenses, what the students need is to be able to demonstrate how, when, where and why to use them and which one to use in particular instances. Teachers have observed that communication, especially in a second language, is difficult for students with low grammatical competence even though they are equally quick to observe that higher grammatical competence does not necessarily guarantee better communication in the target language (Lee & Wang, 2002).

This study set out to find out whether students' ability to use the present perfect and past perfect tenses can be developed through communicative teaching. This is with a view to developing the students' communicative competence in the use of tenses. Communicative competence is of great importance to language teaching pedagogy. This is not to say that there is a single approach that is considered most appropriate as all approaches have a place in the language teaching and learning pedagogy. However, the communicative approach was considered for use in this study because it is one of the language teaching approaches that emerged as a result of criticisms of the traditional and structural approaches which were earlier used. In addition, proponents of the communicative approach say that it has been discovered

to be an innovative approach in developing various language skills in students in both English as a second language (ESL) and English as a foreign language (EFL) settings (Incecay & Incecay, 2009; Xiao, 2011).

Statement of the Problem

In spite of the important role tenses play in the overall communication process, students at different levels and in Nasarawa State Polytechnic in particular have continued to demonstrate difficulty in the use of perfect tenses. Problems the students encounter in using the perfect tenses include: inability to convert the main verb to its past participle form, using the simple past tense instead of present perfect tense, confusing the past perfect tense with the simple past tense and sometimes, the present perfect tense in the active voice is mistaken for simple present tense in the passive voice.

These difficulties arise mainly as a result of ambivalent rule application in the use of tenses which renders some verbs as regular and others as irregular. In addition to this is poor teaching methodology, according to Aje (2009) . A great deal of research has been conducted on the best approach to teaching English as a second language but few experiments have been carried out to establish the most appropriate to teaching the present perfect and past perfect tenses.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to find out the effects of communicative approach to teaching on ability of students of Nasarawa State Polytechnic to use English perfect tenses. Specifically, the study set out to:

1. Determine the extent to which the students would be able to use perfect tenses in the active voice before exposure to treatment.
2. Establish if communicative teaching would improve students' ability to use perfect tenses in the active voice.
3. Determine the extent to which the students would be able to use perfect tenses in the passive voice before exposure to treatment.

4. Establish if communicative teaching would improve students' ability to use perfect tenses in the passive voice.

Research Questions

The following questions guided the study:

1. To what extent does the group exposed to communicative teaching differ from the group not exposed to communicative teaching on ability to use perfect tenses in the active voice before exposure to communicative teaching?
2. To what extent does the group exposed to communicative teaching differ from the group not exposed to communicative teaching on ability to use perfect tenses in the passive voice before exposure to communicative teaching?
3. To what extent does the group exposed to communicative teaching differ from the group not exposed to communicative teaching on ability to use perfect tenses in the active voice after exposure to communicative teaching?
4. To what extent does the group exposed to communicative teaching differ from the group not exposed to communicative teaching on ability to use perfect tenses in the passive voice after exposure to communicative teaching?

The study hinged on the principles of communicative language teaching approach which came into being from the concept of communicative competence. This approach to language teaching emerged partly as a response to Chomsky's criticisms of structural theories of language and partly based on the theories of British functional linguists such as Firth and Halliday and American sociolinguists such as Hymes, Gumperz and Lobov (Richards & Rogers, 2001).

Communicative approach encourages practice in real life context as a way of developing communicative competence. Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL International (1999) pointed out that among the principles that can be inferred from the approach is the fact that: Activities that involve real life communication promote

learning. Also, activities in which language is used for carrying out meaningful tasks promote learning and language that is meaningful to the learner promotes learning.

In this connection, this study ensured that the perfect tenses were taught within the context students encounter them, as materials that relate closely to their needs were used. During class sessions, the following communicative areas were considered: goals, activities, learner's roles and teacher's roles.

Communicative Language Teaching Approach

In the communicative approach, the method of teaching, content, syllabus and teaching routines are based on the learners' needs; as such, the approach embraces a wide range of methods and techniques (Richards & Rogers, 2001). This is because communicative approach is a set of principles about the goals of language teaching, which puts into consideration, the way learners learn a language, the kind of classroom activities that best facilitate learning, and the role of both the learner and the teacher in the learning process (Richards, 2006).

Hoan and Lan (2006) presented a typical traditional English grammar lesson in Vietnam thus:

The teacher writes down the name of the grammar point on the board.

1. The teacher presents the rule and structure.
2. The teacher gives examples (in English) to illustrate the rule given.
3. The teacher gets students to make up their own sentences using the rule they have just been given.
4. The teacher gets students to do some translation from L2 to Ll and vice versa. Very often, these are only at sentence level and are disconnected and de-contextualised.
5. For homework, the teacher often gets students to learn the grammar rule by heart and make some further sentences with them.

During this kind of lesson, the teacher controls the activities till the end of the lesson and tries to minimize the possibility of students making mistakes.

In a communicative classroom, however, the teacher leads the students to work with the target language during the lesson such that by the end of the lesson,

they are able to communicate using the language item learnt. In their contribution, Richards and Rogers (2001), Brown, (2002) and Larsen-Freeman (2003) observed that communicative lessons are: task oriented, needs based, learner-centered, contextualized, authentic and recursive. Richards (2006) gave the characteristics of CLT which distinguishes it from other methods as follows:

- Understanding occurs through active student interaction in the foreign language.
- Teaching occurs by using authentic texts.
- Students do not only learn the second language but they also learn strategies for understanding.
- Importance is given to learner's personal experiences and situations which are considered as valuable contribution to the context of the lessons.
- Using the new language in unrehearsed contexts creates learning opportunities outside the classroom.

English Perfect Tenses

Tenses are very important language elements that locate the time in a situation, and also add to the implication of an utterance. engVid (2010) noted that tenses are important to master for effective communication at various language levels. On the importance of tenses, Online English Guide (2012) has this to say: "If you are the one who desires to be a good, fluent and effective speaker of this language, English, then it is crucial that you should have a great command over the tenses." Perfect tenses show actions already completed. Perfect means "made complete". They focus on how a past action affects the present.

Present Perfect Tense

According to Aremo (2004), present perfect tense is used to express the idea that something happened or never happened before now, at an unspecified time in the past. Note that the exact time the event occurred is either not known or it is not important. However, when a specific time is mentioned, then simple past is often used instead. Here are some examples:

a) I have seen the man. (no mention of a specific time)

b) I saw the man yesterday. (a specific time is mentioned)

Present perfect tense is also used to express the repetition of an activity that went on before now. The exact time of the repetition is not important. For example:

a) He has known him for many years.

b) We have taken written tests this term.

The present perfect is a way of linking the past to the present. Present perfect tense is a particularly difficult tense for students to comprehend and a tough one for teachers to teach (Murthy, 2007). Ability to use present perfect tense correctly in most cases indicates good mastery of the tenses (Murthy, 2007; Global English, 2011). Global English (2011) presented the structure of present perfect as subject + auxiliary verb 'to have' + past participle of the action verb.

In using the present perfect tense, the time period is not finished and in this case, 'for' and 'since' are used with this meaning. 'For' is used with period of time and 'since' with point of time (Global English, 2011). Here is an example:

a) We haven't had any rest for two days.

b) She hasn't slept since yesterday.

This tense is also used to express personal experiences. When this happens, there is no definite time given. The time expressions 'ever' and 'never' are very often used with this meaning (Busyteacher, 2013). For example:

(a) She has never been to Hawaii.

(b) 1--lave they ever visited their mother?

The main confusion with the present perfect tense is that it is confused with the simple past tense, even when the simple past tense denotes an entirely different time reference. This confusion emanates from the fact that present perfect tense is accompanied by a past participle (Global English, 2011). In bringing out the difference between present perfect and simple past tense which it is often confused,

we will examine the following examples:

(a) I collected the money last week.
(b) I have collected the money.

In sentence (a), the money was collected and the time of collection is known. It is not certain whether it has been spent or not. In sentence (b) the money was collected and the specific time of collection is not known. The money is in the possession of the collector at the time of reporting. While both events happened in the past, only sentence (b) has relevance to the present.

Past Perfect Tense

The past perfect is formed through the combination of the subject which is followed by an auxiliary in its past form and the past participle form of the main verb. The structure of this tense is:

Subject + the auxiliary verb 'had' + past participle of the action verb
(I/she/he/they/we/you) + (had) (broken/drunk/cut/ gone) This tense is used for a past action that happened before another past action or for an action which ended before a certain point in time in the past. For example:

Mrs William 's had washed the clothes when she travelled.

In this example, the action of washing the clothes took place earlier than the action of travelling.

Wang (2002) commented that learners are often confused between the use of present perfect and past perfect tenses. The confusion that arises in the use of the past perfect tense led to suggestions as to which tense should be selected at which point in time. Aremo (2004) suggested that simple past tense should be used if the context makes it sufficiently clear what preceded what, instead of past perfect tense. For example:

They ate rice in the morning, and then ate the bananas.
(Simple past)

They had eaten rice when I ate the bananas. (Past perfect)

Global English (2011) suggested that if 'before' or 'after' is used in the sentence, past perfect is often not necessary because the time relationship is already clear. Here simple past tense may be used. For example:

1. "Pohloh slept before we got to Zaria" is the same as "Pohloh had slept before we got to Zaria". (The time relationship is already clear, so the simple past tense is used.)
2. "Pohloh slept after we got to Zaria" is the same as "Pohloh had slept after we got to Zaria". (In this example also, the time relationship is already clear, so the simple past tense is used.

In the above examples, 'before' and 'after' were used in sentences 1 and 2 which makes the time relationship very clear.

Methodology

The study was carried out using pre-test post-test experimental research design. Here, comparison, manipulation and control were used to ensure control for sources of internal invalidity. The comparison was done between the pre-test and the post-test scores and between the experimental group (students exposed to communicative teaching) and control group (those not exposed to communicative teaching). The objective Of the pre-test was to find out whether any of the groups had an initial advantage over the other. Similarly, it Was used to establish the ability of the students to use perfect tenses before exposure to treatment (communicative teaching), and was also used to make comparison with the post- test to determine the effect of the treåtment. Participants in the study were randomly selected an equal number vas assigned into the experimental and control groups. Thése in the experimental group were exposed to treatment (instruction on the use of perfect tenses using communicative appreaeh) and those in the control group were*ept busy with inmiction on reading. A. 60 National Diploma (NDI) students drawn from the School of Science and Technology of Nasarawa State Polytechnic Lafia in the 2012/2013 session were used for the study. The students, who were randomly selected, were between the ages of 17 — 35. The' students were science and technology students and they must have scored a minimum of 160 or above in the Unified Matriculation Examination

(UTME). Equally, they must have got a minimum of five credits in at least three science subjects plus a credit in English language and Mathematics. This makes the students homogeneous to a large extent. B. Instruments

For data collection, the researcher designed instrument known as English Tenses Achievement Test (ETAT) was used. This test is divided into two parts. The first part addressed the perfect tenses in the active voice and the second part covered perfect tenses in the passive voice. Three exercises each covered the present perfect tense in the active voice, two covered the past perfect active and four covered the past perfect passive. This gives a total of twelve exercises in all. The activities carried out in the various exercises included: examining pictures and writing down tasks being carried out, carrying out tasks and reporting them and using information provided to write reports. The instrument used was subjected to expert scrutiny for content validity. C. Procedures

The pre-test was administered after the assignment of subjects into the experimental and control groups. This was conducted in two stages and each stage lasted for one hour. The first stage was conducted immediately after the assignment of subjects into the experimental and control groups and it covered the perfect tenses in the active voice. The second stage of the pre-test was conducted the next day and it covered the perfect tenses in the passive voice. Both test one and two were conducted simultaneously for both groups. All answers were written on the question papers and collected by the researcher and research assistants after the pre-test.

A week after the administration of the pre-test, the treatment programme began. This ran for 2 hours every week for six weeks. Lessons for the programme were carried out in the lecture classrooms. The treatment (teaching the use of perfect tenses using communicative language teaching approach) was administered on the experimental group using the researcher designed programme known as Perfect Tenses Development Programme (PTDP). The control group was not given any treatment but to keep them busy, they were given an equally useful but not related instruction.

The programme began with the treatment of the use of the present perfect instead of the simple past. Lesson two was on differentiating between the present perfect active and the simple present passive. Lesson three was on using the past perfect instead of the simple past. Lesson four was on differentiating between the past perfect and the present perfect. In lessons five and six, using the present perfect and past perfect in reporting was treated. The post test was administered in the sixth week immediately after the administration of the programme. This was conducted the same way the pre test was conducted. D. Data Analysis

In this study, data collected was analysed using mean scores. Mean scores were used to answer the research questions as it gave a description of the extent to which the students' performance was spread within the group. Details of the result are presented below.

Research Question One

Table 1: Ability to Use Perfect Tense in Active Voice Before Exposure to Communicative Teaching

Group	No of Students	Mean	Std. Deviation
Experimental	30	6.366	5.633
Control	30	4.366	4.567

On ability to use the perfect tenses in the active voice before exposure to treatment, table 1 shows the mean scores of the experimental group as 6.366 and that of the control group as 4.366. This is below the expected average mean score of 16 .

is 40%. Also, mean scores of both groups are not too far apart. Consequently, the two groups were homogeneous before exposure to treatment.

Research Question Two

Group	No of Students	Mean	Std. Deviation
Experimental	30	6.800	4.566
Control	30	7.966	4.916

Table 2 shows the ability of students in both groups to use the perfect tenses in the passive voice before exposure to treatment. 1--lere the experimental groups recorded a mean score of 6.800 and the control group scored 7.966. This is below the expected mean score of 16. Equally, mean scores of both groups are not far apart. This implies that both groups have a low ability to use the perfect tenses and the two groups were homogeneous before exposure to treatment.

Research Question Three

Table 3: Ability to Use Perfect Tense in the Active Voice After Exposure to Communicative Teaching

Group	No of Students	Mean	Std. Deviation
Experimental	30	18.200	8.036
Control	30	6.166	4.646

Result presented in table 3 shows the experimental group having a mean score of 18.200 after exposure to treatment on the use of perfect tenses in the active voice. This is more than double the initial mean score of 6.366 recorded by the same group before exposure to treatment. The control group had a mean score of 6.166 from an initial mean score of 4.366. Mean score of the experimental group is above the expected average mean of 16. This implies that the instruction on the use of the perfect tenses using communicative approach was effective in improving students' ability to use the perfect tenses in the active voice.

Research Question Four

Table 4: Ability to Use Perfect Tense in the Passive Voice After Exposure to Communicative Teaching

Group	No. of Students	Mean	Std. Deviation
Control	30	4568	.8341
Experimental	30	11.833	.8337

Table 4 shows the experimental group recording a mean score of 11.833 on ability to use the perfect tenses in the passive voice after exposure to treatment. The initial

mean score recorded by this group was 6.800. The control group scored 4.568 from an initial mean score of7.966. Though the experimental group did not score up to the expected average mean score of 16, mean score recorded after exposure to treatment is almost double of mean score recorded before exposure to treatment. Consequently, the students gained from instruction using communicative approach as their performance to use the perfect tenses in the passive voice improved.

Summary of Major Findings

Findings of this study reveal that the students have a low ability to use the perfect tenses. This agrees with Aje (2009) who pointed out that students have difficulty in the use of tenses. The findings also reveal that communicative teaching improved students' ability to use the perfect tenses. This is in consonance with Putra (2012) who discovered that teaching the simple past using communicative approach was effective in improving students' mastery of the simple past tense. The findings of this study equally reveal that there are challenges with mastering the use of the perfect tenses in the passive voice. This agrees with Murthy (2007) who explained that students demonstrate difficulty in the use of tenses particularly in the passive voice.

Conclusion

The ability of the students of science and technology of the Nasarawa State Polytechnic Lafia to use the perfect tenses is very low. This is even lower when it comes to using the perfect tenses in the passive voice. This low ability can however be improved upon through communicative language teaching. The low ability to use the perfect tenses demonstrated by the students reflects probable use of inappropriate teaching methodology. Significant improvement in performance of the students on the use of the perfect tenses calls for consideration of the adoption of the communicative approach to teach tenses. This is because of the eclectic methods involved in the approach and its relevance to the students' language needs. However, more still needs to be done in teaching the perfect tenses in the passive voice.

Recommendations

From the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

- The past participle of both regular and irregular verbs should be taught alongside the perfect tenses. This will aid students in expressing the perfect tenses correctly.
- None of the perfect tenses should be taught in isolation. Those that are easily confused should be taught together in order for students to see their differences. For example, the simple past tense should be introduced while teaching the present perfect tense. Also, the simple past should be explained alongside the past perfect tense and simple present in the passive voice should be clearly differentiated from the present perfect tense in the active voice.
- Students should be exposed to the perfect tenses as much as possible even as other language items are taught. This can be done by making the students to identify the tenses and use them while learning other language items.

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