



Research Article

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An Assessment of the Use of English Grammatical Concord in the Compositions of Senior Secondary School Students

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Abstract: This study aimed to examine the writings of senior secondary school students in Maradi municipality and find out the types of misuses in concord that prevent them from communicating well in writing. The mixed methods approach was used to assess the students' use of concord when writing in English. 370 students selected from four (4) senior secondary schools in Maradi municipality participated in the study. They were asked to write an essay choosing one of the four different topics given. The analysis revealed that the use of concord was very chaotic in the writings of the students. It was also shown that the three aspects of concord that the study sought to investigate were difficult for the students to use. The study, however, indicated that pronoun/antecedent concord was easier for the students to use, while concord in person appeared to be more complicated for them. In order to improve the students' use of concord, the study recommends that teachers provide students with extensive writing practice. It is also suggested that they introduce the grammatical rules explicitly to the students starting with the less difficult before the most complicated ones.

Keywords: Assessment, Grammatical Concord, Composition, Senior Secondary School Students.

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INTRODUCTION

English is used as a foreign language in Niger republic. Its mastery is, however, very important because it plays undeniably a pivotal role in many aspects of our social life, in the present days. For this, it has been made a compulsory subject from junior secondary school level to the university in both public and private schools. The reason for this policy is to enable the students to use the English language accurately in both the spoken and written communications. Using English is very necessary for every student since it is the means by which we can communicate with the international community, access to scientific information, and get a better education.

In spite of the aforementioned benefits of the English language in communication, access to scientific information, and better education, most senior secondary school students perform very poorly in English. One of the reasons for the students' poor performance in English, especially, in the written communication is probably due to their poor level in grammar, their inappropriate use of grammatical concord. Concord, also referred to as agreement, is a term used in grammatical descriptions to refer to some grammatical relationships between elements in a clause or sentence so that a structure changes its form due to the influence of another structure (Crystal, 2008;

Hopper *et al.*, 2010; & Richards & Schmidt, 2010). Leech (2006) agrees with the above view when he states that concord is a relation that exists between two elements such that they match one another in terms of some grammatical features. A similar view is raised by Aarts *et al.* (2014) indicating that concord is a 'morpho-syntactic phenomenon whereby two or more elements in a clause or sentence are harmonized in terms of the shape they take'.

It follows from the foregoing arguments that concord plays a major role in the structure of English sentences. This means, the correct application of grammatical concord rules provides the language user with the ways of constructing good utterances in English (Bakuuro, 2015; & Jafar, 2020). Thus, for communication, especially, written communication to be effective in English language, there should be harmony among the words in a sentence. To buttress this view, Uchegbu-Ekwume & Okongor (2015) state that for a sentence to be grammatically correct all its elements must be in harmony with one another. Misapplication of the rules of concord may, therefore, affect communication and lead to misunderstanding by the reader. Since there is an undeniable connection between the structure of an utterance and its comprehensibility, nonnative students should, thus, strive to learn how to make effective use of the rules of

concord in English for their written communication to be effective and correct.

Statement of the Problem

Effective written communication, as earlier stated, requires competence in grammar, especially a good mastery of concord rules. Concord helps writers to make harmony among sentence elements for correct language use. When there is no harmony among the elements in a sentence, meaning may be impeded. As Klu (2014) observes, meaning may often be affected when the rules that govern how language is used are not adhered to. For example, when a verb does not agree with the right subject or when a pronoun does not fit with its antecedent, effective communication may be affected. To achieve effective and clear written communication, basic concord rules are, therefore, to be respected by the writer. In addition, concord is central to written communication because it is the means by which elements within a sentence in English can be effectively used to convey intended meaning. Misapplication of the rules of concord may result in the reader's misunderstanding of the written message which may lead to ineffective written communication.

It is, however, sadly observed that most senior secondary school students who have been studying English for seven years are unable to properly use the basic rules of concord in their written communication. When asked to write a short paragraph in English, they produce sentences with many violations of the rules regarding concord. Writing short paragraphs has become a challenge for them because of their inability to make all the components of a sentence match with one another.

They are unable to:

- Match verbs with their subjects in terms of person, and number;
- Make pronouns agree with their appropriate antecedents.

This results in producing ungrammatical sentences as the following:

- *My sister don't always help me.
- *He don't speak English very well.
- *The women was happy, she went home happily.
- *The children knows his right
- *She want to see you.
- *The children has come.
- *There is many people outside.
- *Everybody like her.

The above Mismatches among sentence elements as already stated seriously affect the students' performance in writing. This improper use of the basic rules of concord is very worrisome for teachers and educators. The writer believes that the problem needs investigation because one cannot expect to perform well in writing without an effective use of concord.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are to:

- Ascertain the performance of the students in the use of concord.
- Examine the easiest and most difficult aspects of concord.
- Find out the types of misuses in concord that mar the students' performance in writing.

Research Questions

- How do senior secondary school students use concord in their writings?
- Which concord aspects are easier and more difficult for the students to use?
- What types of misuses do senior secondary school students make in their writings?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The problem that learners of English experience with regard to the use of concord is a well-documented topic. One of the studies dealing with concord use by learners of English as a foreign language is that of Johansson (2012) who examined a corpus consisting of 77 essays produced by Swedish learners of English. The study aimed to find out the types of concord errors made by Swedish learners of English at Gothenburg University. The findings showed that learners have problems with subject-verb agreement. The researcher blamed the problems on intralingual factors, and the interference of Swedish language which lacks subject-verb agreement in its linguistic system.

A similar study was carried out by Muftah & Rafik-Galea (2013) who examined errors on present tense committed by adult Arab English language learners. The data of their study were sourced from a grammaticality judgment and written tasks. The findings of the study revealed that adult Arab English language learners have difficulty mastering the third person singular. The incorrect suffixations and substitutions, as reported by the researchers, are due to the first language interference.

Quagie (2014) is another relevant study in the use of concord by nonnative speakers of English. The writer employed a purposive and critical discourse analyses to analyze a corpus consisting of thirty (30) examination scripts of level 200 students from Ghana Technology University. The results revealed that concord is one of the major grammatical aspects problematic to the students. The reason of the students' inappropriate use of concord is due to the fact that teachers who do not have the requisite qualifications teach the English, resulting from the students' lack of knowledge on concord. The researcher suggested that relevant pedagogical methods including teaching grammar in context, and constant practice should be

used by teachers to stimulate learners' motivation in learning the grammar of the target language.

Klu (2014) also used purposeful and critical discourse methods to examine 200 examination scripts of Ghanaian undergraduate students. The study aimed to investigate the use of grammatical concord in the writings of the students. The findings revealed that the students were not proficient in the use of grammatical concord regarding tenses, subject-verb agreement, and pronouns with their antecedents. The study concluded that the key factor accounting for students' inability to use grammatical concord is the poor pedagogy used in teaching and learning the language. The study suggested that more useful and exciting pedagogical approaches should be used by teachers. For this, regular in-service training should be given to teachers to keep them abreast with the current ways of language teaching.

Karim *et al.* (2015), is another investigation on concord use. They examined subject-verb agreement errors in the writings of Bangladeshi EFL learners at the International Islamic University, Chittagong. The findings showed that the students committed three types of errors in subject verb agreement. The errors consisted of disagreement between verbs and singular subjects, disagreement between verbs and relative pronouns and disagreement between verbs and plural subjects. The study also indicated that errors of disagreement between verbs and plural subjects were the highest. They were followed by the errors of disagreement between verbs and singular subjects, while errors of disagreement between verbs and relative pronouns appeared to be the least.

In 2015, Hassan, Azmi & Atek also performed a study that attempted to analyze concord errors committed by Nigerian newspaper writers in their written communications. Error Analysis was used to analyze twenty (20) newspaper articles purposefully selected. The analysis revealed some concord errors in Nigerian newspapers, especially, in subject-verb concord; pronoun concord, and verb tense concord. The subject- verb concord was found the most common type of concord errors. The researchers suggested that second language journalists' writings should undergo pre-writing process. This would enable them to communicate with a wide audience and perform their role effectively.

Another study worthy of review with regard to concord use is Jafar (2016) who performed a study on errors in concord made by diploma students in Jigawa state. His purpose was to identify, analyze and compare concord errors found in the writings of the students. An essay test and a structured test were used to collect data from 155 students who participated in the study. The findings revealed that Jigawa state college of education students committed more concord errors than the

polytechnic students in both tests; the written essay and the fill-in-the blank tests. The committed errors included misuse of subject-verb, disagreement between pronouns and their antecedents, and inconsistencies in the use of tenses.

Tafida & Okunade (2016) also explored the problem of subject-verb agreement faced by undergraduate students of the Federal University of Technology in Minna. A sample of 120 students participated in the study. An essay test was used to collect the data. The analysis revealed that the students had problems in subject-verb agreement. It was also observed that errors in subject- verb agreement involving pronouns were the highest. They were followed by errors in tenses, those related to nouns, and errors involving intervening variables. The study recommended that students should intensively be taught subject-verb agreement rules at all levels of education. Teachers should also make learners be more sensitive to subject-verb agreement when writing or speaking English.

Another study on concord is Ndwamato (2017) who examined concord errors that Grade 12 South African students commit in their writing. The study sought to identify the types of concord errors and determine their possible causes. A non-probability sampling method was used to select the 72 students who participated in the study. A questionnaire and a multiple choice test were both used to collect data. The results revealed that concord is a real challenge to the majority of the participants. Furthermore, the results showed that the use of collective nouns was one of the most difficult aspects of concord for the students. On the other hand, the singular indefinite pronoun use was identified to be the easiest. Subject-verb concord was also found to have been hard to the students. Based on the findings, the researcher suggested that teaching grammar should be intensified.

Agbo *et al.* (2018) also conducted a study to assess problems areas in secondary school students' use of the English concord. They intended to identify, classify and analyze the concord rules violations and deviances in the writings of the students. A total of one hundred (100) students randomly selected participated in the study. They were drawn from twenty three (23) government and private secondary schools of Nsukka Education Zone. To collect the data, the researchers used a forty (40) items objective test they administered to the students. Statistical measures including mode, median and mean were used to analyze the data. The study findings revealed that the students had difficulty in the various types of English concord. It was also observed that the students' results were worst with regard to the grammatical concord, while good results were found in the notional and proximity concords.

Two groups of fifty (50) participants from Usman Danfodio University and the Federal University Gusau in North-western Nigeria were studied by Abdulmumini & Musa (2018). The study sought to investigate concord errors by 200 level students from the two universities in view to find out some solutions. The data were collected through the examination answer booklets written by students during the first semester 2017 examination. The collected data were analyzed using Error Analysis. The results indicated that concord errors were the most committed errors found in the analyzed booklets. It was shown that out of 200 errors made by the students, more than 100 were on concord. The study suggested that teachers of English and the students should make necessary efforts to avoid such mistakes as English majors.

METHODOLOGY

This study is a mixed methods research (MMR). The mixed methods research is a method of conducting research that uses both qualitative and quantitative approaches (Brown, 2015). Using both approaches can help to explain quantitative results looking at them qualitatively.

Population and Sample

The population of this study consisted of senior secondary schools students in Maradi municipality. The sample for this study consists of three hundred and seventy (370) students. This number is drawn from four (4) senior secondary schools among the ten (10) public senior secondary schools within the two (2) Zones in Maradi municipality as shown in table 1.

Table 1. Sample Distribution

Schools	Population	Percentage	Proportion
CES Bourja	455	23	85
CES Jinguile	256	13	48
CES Bagalam	351	18	65
LDB	923	46	172
Total	1985	100	370

Instrument

The instrument used to collect data for the purpose of this study is an essay test. It consists of six (4) distinct topics.

- Your country is holding its presidential elections. Describe the type of president you want to elect for the development of your country.
- ‘Describe the man or woman you admire the most? Why do you admire him/her?’
- ‘Describe the most interesting place (s) you visited last vacation’.
- ‘Describe the most exciting film you watched one day’.

These topics can be used to appropriately assess the students’ performance in the use of the three aspects of concord: agreement between the verb and subject in terms of number, person and agreement between pronouns and their antecedents.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research Question 1

How do senior secondary school students in Maradi use concord in their writings?

This research question is answered using the students’ scores with regard to their use of concord in English. Table 2 below presents the mean scores and standard deviations obtained by each school in the use of concord in English.

Table 2. Mean Scores and Standard Deviations of the Students in the Use of Concord

No	Schools	N	Mean	SD
1	BOURJA	85	42.32	12.21
2	BAGALAM	65	41.94	11.69
3	JINGUILE	48	41.93	11.80
4	LDB	170	41.73	12.14

The results as displayed in table 2 above show a mean score of 42.32 and a standard deviation of 12.21 for Bourja, followed by Bagalam with a mean score of 41.94 and a standard deviation of 11.69. Jinguile followed Bagalam with a mean score of 41.93 and a standard deviation of 11.80. LDB was last in the use of concord with a score of 41.73 and a standard deviation of 12.14. Based on the above results, none of the schools obtained the expected average score of 50. This indicates that the students inaccurately use concord in English when writing in English.

Research Question 2

What are the Easiest and Most Difficult Aspects of Concord for the Students?

This question is answered by means of the data collected on the appropriate use of concord by the participants, as shown in table 3 below.

Table 3. Mean Scores and Standard Deviations in the Three Aspects of Concord

Rank	Variables	Mean	SD
1	Pr/Antecedent	43.23	17.66
2	Number	41.67	14.76
3	Person	39.61	18.64

The table above summarizes the different mean scores and standard deviations of the students in their use of concord. Based on the results, the participants’ mean score on pronoun/antecedent is 43.23. In concord in number they obtained a mean of 41.67, and 39.61 in concord in person. This suggests that the performance

of the students in using pronouns with their antecedents was better than their performance in the use of concord in number, and the use of concord in number is itself better than the use of concord in person. This is an indication that the use of pronouns with their antecedents is easier for the students, while concord in person appeared to be the most difficult aspect of concord to use for the students.

With regard to the standard deviations, the lowest was on concord in number (14.76) meaning that the participants' scores were not so much spread further away from the mean. On the other hand, the highest standard deviations in concord in person which is 18.64, and in pronoun/antecedent (17.66) show that the results are more spread and, therefore, tended to be far away from the average scores compared to concord in number. Notwithstanding the differences in the means and standard deviations, it can be concluded that the three concord aspects have been difficult for the students.

Research Question 3

What types of misuses in concord do senior secondary students in Maradi make, preventing them from writing well?

This question sought to identify the type of misuses in concord that the students make, affecting their performance in writing. In line with Larsen-Freeman & Long (2014) who state that learner errors are part of their performance, the researcher went through the students' individual essays again, focusing on the errors that prevent the students from performing better in writing. This has helped him to identify various types of misuses both in concord which have made some of the participants perform poorly in their writings.

The examination of the students' essays with focus on what they did not get right on concord includes:

- Disagreement between verbs in their subjects in person
- Disagreement between verbs in their subjects in number, and
- Disagreement between pronouns and their referents

The major types identified were disagreement between verbs and their subjects in person and in number. A review of the essays of the students shows many disagreements in number between the subjects and the verbs.

Misuses with Concord in Number

The following sentences are samples of concord misuses in number found in the writing of the students.

- *Money are very important in the people. (Money is very important for people/ in people's life.)
- *Jos were a best city because it were so sweet for me. (Jos is a good city because it is a so sweet city for me.)
- *Every intellectual or leader of Nigeria are need to get her job in Abuja. (Every intellectual or leader in Nigeria wants to get a job in Abuja.)
- *Everybody are happy about this important ceremony. (Everybody was happy about that important ceremony.)
- *There is exam, quiz and so on. (There are exams, quizzes, etc.)
- *In this university there is so much rooms and so much teachers. (In that university there are so many rooms, and teachers.)
- *At 7:00 the Imam and the village's people was there. (At 7:00 the 'Imam' and the people in the village were there.)
- *I gave the breakfast to people who was there. (I served breakfast to people who were there.)
- *Their children was very educated. (Their children were very educated.)
- *These places is Katsina and Kano in Nigeria. (These places are Katsina and Kano in Nigeria.)

An analysis of the above sentences reveals many disagreements between the verbs and their subjects. Many students were not aware that the verb must agree with its subject in number, for a construction to be grammatical. For this, they mistakenly used a plural verb form with a singular subject as shown in sentences 1, and 2. They also seemed to ignore that indefinite pronouns such as everybody, anybody, etc. are normally used with singular verbs. Examples 3, 4, and 5 illustrate that some of the students were not aware of this rule. Sentences involving 'there', where the verb comes before the subject, were also problematic to the students. The students had obviously poor knowledge of constructions involving 'there'. This consequently results in gross violations of the rules of concord in number. This is illustrated in the students' sentences 5 and 6 above. Irregular plural such as 'people' and 'children' also seemed to be difficult for the students to use. With such types of nouns, the students tended to use singular verbs instead of the required plural ones, which resulted in mismatches between the verbs and their subjects as sentences 7, and 8 show it. The analysis of the above sentences implies that the students seemed to have great difficulties in using concord in number resulting in producing sentences where verbs which do not fit the subjects.

Misuses with Concord in Person

Other types of misuses common in the writings of the students were related to concord in person. This type of concord is characterized by some morphological changes in the form of the verb to show harmony between the subject of the verb, usually a pronoun, and the form of the verb. Several instances where the

students mistakenly used a singular pronoun with a plural verb or a plural pronoun with a singular verb were identified in the students' essays.

- *I were a cameraman in these places to take photos. (I was the cameraman in those places to take some photos.)
- *I was not informed so I were at school. (I was not informed because I was at school.)
- It were so sweet for me. (It was so sweet for me.)
- *He like helping people. (He likes to help people.)
- *Then, she take care of my young brothers. (Then, she takes care of my young brothers.)
- *He help his mother to cook. (He helps his mother to cook.)
- *In the night she call me to his house. (At night, she invites me to her house.)
- *It have upstairs and downstairs. It has rooms upstairs and some downstairs.)
- *Even if she don't them. (Even if she doesn't have them.)
- *I admire the girl because she make me happy. (I admire the girl because she makes me happy.)

The examples above show disagreements between pronouns, subjects of the sentences and the verbs. This is an indication that some of the students do not have adequate knowledge of the basic rules governing the use of grammatical concord regarding pronouns. This suggests that the students had poor understanding of concord in number resulting in their inability to correctly pair the verbs with the right pronouns as the subjects in the sentences.

Misuses with Pronoun and their Referents

Disagreements between pronouns and their referents within sentences were also identified as the most frequent types of concord misuses. Most of the participants have found it difficult to correctly match pronouns with their referents as highlighted in the following examples:

- *Ghana is a country who speak English. (Ghana is a country in where English is spoken.)
- *I know many things who is in this country. (I know many things which are in this country.)
- *Abuja is a big city who has the most interesting places. (Abuja is a big city which has/with the most interesting places.)
- *It was a place who everybody can access. (It was a place in where everybody has access.)
- *The most important man which I admire is my father. (The most important person whom I admire is my father.)
- *My mother like to have a girl which can help her to cook.(My mother likes to have a girl who can help her to cook.)
- *Abuja is a good place because he is the first city in Africa. (Abuja is a good place because it is the biggest city in Africa.)

- *This day of ceremony is a day of enjoy for me and she will be good for me during my life.) (That ceremony day was a day of joy for me and it will be a memorable day for me.)
- *He said to me, the love is very dangerous she killed many children. (She said to me 'love is dangerous it has caused the death of many young people'.)
- I help her going to the bush. (I help her going to the bush.)

These sentences show several mismatches between pronouns and their antecedents. Most students were unable to appropriately use the correct relative pronouns. They selected the pronoun 'who' to replace things, while 'which' used for people, as exemplified in sentences 21 to 26 above. Disagreement between pronouns and their antecedents were also common as shown in sentences 27, 28 and 29. In these examples, some students were unable to match pronouns with their right antecedent which results in gross violations of concord rules regarding pronouns and their antecedents. Considering the above results it can be deduced that the students were unable to accurately match pronouns with their referents within sentences due to their ignorance of grammatical concord dealing with pronouns in English.

The analysis of the students' sentences in this section clearly revealed that many students did not have adequate knowledge of the rules of grammatical concord. This has resulted in disagreements between verbs and their subjects in number and in person. Furthermore, the results indicated that some students were unable to accurately use pronouns that are compatible with their referents when expressing their ideas in English.

CONCLUSION

In the light of the above results, it can be concluded that:

- Writing in English is very challenging for senior secondary school students in Maradi. Their low performance indicated that writing is a very difficult skill for senior secondary school students in Niger learning English as a foreign language. The use of English concord is very chaotic in the writings of the students. All the three aspects of concord have been problematic for the students. Nevertheless, the analysis has shown that pronoun/antecedent concord was easier for the students to use, while concord in person appeared to be more complicated for them. In their use of concord, the students have made mistakes of various types involving disagreement between verbs and their subjects both in person and in number, as well as mismatches between pronouns with their referents.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

- The study indicated dissatisfaction among senior secondary school students regarding their written productions. In order to improve the students writing performance, it is recommended that English language teachers should provide students with extensive writing practice because writing is acknowledged to be difficult even for native speakers. Moreover, it needs constant practice and techniques.
- The results of the study revealed that the students were unable to use grammatical concord appropriately in their writings. It is suggested that teachers explicitly introduce the rules and forms of grammar to the students to help them overcome some misunderstandings and avoid confusions in their use.
- Some concord aspects were shown very difficult for the students to use, while others seemed less complicated. For this, teachers are advised to introduce the less difficult grammatical aspects to the students before the more problematic ones.
- It is also suggested that teachers of English focus and work on the rules predicted to be difficult for EFL students to understand. This could help minimizing the improper use of certain features of grammatical concord by the students.
- It is then, suggested that the Ministry of Education organize seminars, and workshops to equip teachers with modern teaching techniques in EFL classes because some inappropriate misuses of concord were clearly revealed to be sourced from the way the rules of concord are introduced to the students.

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