

# The Syntactico–Semantic Proficiency of Written English Language for Undergraduate Students in Tanzania

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## Abstract

This paper solely investigated the status of the syntactico-semantic proficiency of written English language for the undergraduate students in Tanzania, with a particular focus on students doing linguistics. The data from which I drew the inferences were obtained from two (2) different public universities: the University of Dodoma and Mkwawa University College of Education (the Constituent College of the University of Dar es Salaam). The University of Dodoma was purposively selected because of being the institution where the researcher was working; thus, some research costs such as transport and accommodation could be cut down since the research was individually funded. Likewise, Mkwawa University College of Education was purposively selected because of the researcher's certainty of getting a reliable Assistant Researcher (AR) who helped in collecting data from the target respondents, who were fortunately his students. The AR volunteered to assist me carrying out the task; hence, I incurred only the mailing fees of the questionnaires, thereby cutting down a part of the research costs. All respondents in the study areas were randomly selected. An equal number of respondents was taken from each study area, i.e. 30 respondents from the University of Dodoma and 30 respondents from Mkwawa University College of Education. Hence, the sample size was constituted by 60 respondents. Data were gathered using syntactico-semantic questionnaires and were manually analyzed using tables. The study findings indicated that the students' syntactico-semantic proficiency of English language was relatively poor. The respondents demonstrated poor usage of tenses and punctuation marks, and most of the passages they wrote had poor grammar. This is a clear manifestation of an unimaginable deterioration of English language in Tanzania. It was finally suggested that the syntactico-semantic proficiency of written English in Tanzania could be elevated by preparing and effecting two different curricula at the secondary school level. Forms One to Four should follow a purely communicative curriculum, and Forms Five and Six should follow a structuro-communicative curriculum in which we shall have an intensive teaching of grammar, intensive and extensive reading and writing of essays, articles for the school magazine and simple story books. During assessment, whether internal or external, two modes of assessment should be done: written and oral modes.

**Keywords:** Syntactico-semantic proficiency, tenses, punctuation, concordial agreement, language of instruction.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The author is an Assistant Lecturer in Linguistics at the University of Dodoma, Tanzania. He holds Diploma in Education, Bachelor of Arts degree with Education and Master of Arts in Linguistics. He has taught at secondary and university level for a substantial period of time. He is currently pursuing Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in Bantu Linguistics at the University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. His research interest is in Bantu and Applied Linguistics.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

*"Mastery of standard written English is a requirement for many professions, and it is highly desirable in many others. But nobody comes naturally equipped with this mastery. Standard written English has to be acquired, usually by formal education. Sadly, however, in recent years schools in most English-speaking countries have pulled back from teaching this material. As a result, even university graduates with good degrees often find themselves with a command of Standard English that is at best inadequate and at worst distressing. This is not a trivial problem, since a poor command of the conventions of Standard English will often make a very bad impression on those who must read your writing."*

*(Robert Lawrence Trask, Say What You Mean!: A Troubleshooter's Guide to English Style and Usage. David R. Godine, 2005).*

Examining the above assertion quite keenly, one would imagine the status of written English in regions where it is taught as a second language and worse enough as a foreign language. In Tanzania, for example, English is a medium of instruction (MoI) for private primary schools, all secondary schools regardless of being private or public, and all universities. It was assumed by the researcher that the long route of using English as a medium of instruction, i.e. from secondary education which covers six years to university education that covers at least three years, could be a substantial period to make students demonstrate an acceptable command of Standard Written English (SWE). However, the research outputs revealed a different and heart-breaking scenario.

In connection to the preceding paragraph, it is worth-noting the fact that one of the language proficiency

aspects which does always click into people's mind is oral proficiency, and applied linguists would always like to do researches on this. They have always been putting a fading light to other aspects such as syntactico-semantic proficiency. This is a great astray because learners need to be fully acquainted with the requisite mechanics of grammar, i. e. tenses, punctuation, spelling and other linguistic technicalities such as selecting and patterning of structural elements so as to get a grammatical and meaningful expression, adherence to various mechanics of forming marked constructions for stylistic or syntactic purposes, thorough organization of topic and auxiliary sentences in a paragraph so as to achieve paragraph unity, proper coordination of paragraphs in a given text so as to achieve textual cohesion and coherence, etc. These are the tools which make someone achieve syntactico-semantic proficiency of any given natural language. In short, syntactico-semantic proficiency is a function of voluminous variables. In this paper, syntactico-semantic proficiency was solely used to refer to nothing but an unquestionable ability of the undergraduate students doing linguistics to be able to write syntactically and semantically well-formed sentences. However, it should be made clear at this juncture that SWE is of great usefulness in the world of knowledge. Students doing linguistics in universities are expected to have a full mastery of the rules of grammar, and after successful completion of their studies are supposed to join the world of knowledge. They are supposed to be potential teachers of the world through writing review/research papers, newspapers, magazines, articles in journals, and books. All these catalogues of knowledge require a well-knitted language.

## 2. Background to the Study

In Tanzania, subject specialization begins when students are in their third year of study (Form Three) at the secondary school level where two categories of streams are formed: Arts and Science streams. In the Arts stream, students begin thinking of the possible subject combination to take for the purpose of getting into the fifth year (Form Five), which is subject to performing better specifically in the subject combination. For those who opt for HGL – History, Geography and English language; or HKL – History, Kiswahili and English language – begin following closely the requisite mechanics of English language. Upon performing better in the final Form Four national exit examinations, they are selected to join advanced level studies for two full time years (Forms Five and Six). It is at this level where they are, to a greater extent, exposed to the ins and outs of English language. They are exposed to rigorous reading and writing thereby acquiring and mastering the syntax, semantics and morphology of English language. After the two-year period, upon performing better, some are selected for tertiary studies in different local universities. A few of these students decide to do linguistics in their degree programmes, and meet with sophisticated stuff on morphology, semantics and syntax. So, when they are in their third year (which is the final year for undergraduate studies), they are expected to demonstrate an acceptable syntactico-semantic proficiency in accordance with the canonical patterns of English language. It is this kind of proficiency which can make one communicate (in written form) effectively in various economic and socio-political domains.

However, some people have already done research in the area of language proficiency. Mlama and Materu (1978) carried out the study on English as the instructional language and the way it affected learning in Tanzanian secondary schools. The research outputs established that English proficiency was lacking, not only among students, but also among some teachers. Materu and Mlama's study does not differ significantly from the one done by Brock-Utne and Holmarsdottir (2003). In their findings, the following was noted:

...the use of English in the classrooms in both countries where our project is located is confusing with code-mixing, code-switching and full translations taking place. In the end, it is the students who pay the price when they are forced to learn in a language they are not proficient in...

In these research outputs, code-switching, code-mixing and direct translations are presupposed fundamental features for an individual to lack proficiency in the target language. Besides these researchers, other researches by Mwinshehe (2002), Criper and Dodd (1984), Roy-Campbell and Qorro (1986), Rubagumya (1991), Jones and Rubagumya (1998), Osaki (1991), and Puja (2001) all point out the question of English language proficiency in secondary schools with exception of Puja (2001) who examined the sociological use of English language in three different university campuses. One of the findings in her study was that, students in some of the classes she visited were unable to talk.

Given the situation that more studies on English language proficiency have concentrated on examining English proficiency at secondary school level, a research on syntactico-semantic proficiency of English at the tertiary level is inevitable.

## 3. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The study examined the degree of syntactico-semantic proficiency among the university students doing linguistics in Tanzania. It specifically aimed at:

- 1) Determining the proper use of tense and aspectual markers.

- 2) Examining the concordial agreement among different syntactic categories.
- 3) Assessing the use of simple mechanics of grammar, i. e. full stops, commas, semi-colon and colon).

The research was guided by the following questions:

- 1) Are tense and aspectual markers used appropriately in different syntactic contexts?
- 2) To what extent is concordial agreement achieved among different syntactic categories?
- 3) Are periods, commas, semi-colon, and colon used appropriately in accordance with the syntactic dictates of English language?

#### **4. Statement of the Problem**

A lot has been done on the status of English language proficiency for secondary school students in Tanzania and very scanty researches have been done on the English proficiency for students in higher learning institutions in Tanzania. To the best of my knowledge, no any research has specifically been conducted on the syntactico-semantic proficiency of written English for undergraduate students in higher learning institutions in Tanzania. It is on this basis that I was compelled to undertake this kind of study so as to bridge the existing knowledge gap.

#### **5. Significance of the Study**

The findings of the study would have both pedagogical and policy implications. The lack of correlation between the level of education and the syntactico-semantic proficiency among the university students doing linguistics would signal a number of things, majority of which are pedagogical and policy oriented. In case of pedagogy, the findings would alert instructors at the lower educational levels to device appropriate methods and/or techniques of making sure that pupils/students acquire the grammar of the language appropriately. On this also, the Department of Foreign Languages and Linguistics/Literature in different universities in Tanzania would be alerted to introduce a core course on English Grammar in the undergraduate curriculum in order to be taught in all years for all degree programmes, i. e. from the first year to the final year. For policy implications, the national curriculum developers/reviewers would find the necessity of revisiting the English language teaching policy in secondary schools so as to bridge the existing gap. They should work on the weaknesses of the policy which culminate in poor acquisition of grammar.

#### **6. Literature Review**

Studies focusing solely on the written syntactico-semantic proficiency for learners of second language (henceforth L2 learners) or foreign language (henceforth FL learners) are quite scanty. Of all the reviewed empirical literature, just a few have dared to examine written proficiency. A couple of literatures have examined proficiency on a dual basis, i. e. both oral and written proficiency. Lofti (2011) carried out the study on the nature of L2 grammatical proficiency for 60 female learners of English as a foreign language (EFL). The respondents' age ranged between 19 and 30. The study examined the performance of learners at two levels of proficiency using two types of computerized Grammaticality Judgment tasks in different orders, i. e. Written Stimulus Grammaticality Judgment task and Oral Stimulus Grammaticality Judgment task. The results indicated that the performance scores of the two proficiency groups in the two grammaticality judgment tasks did not differ significantly. In short, this researcher examined both oral and written grammatical proficiency. Lofti's (ibid) study differs slightly from the one carried out by Criper and Dodd (1984) in Tanzania on the use of English in the Tanzanian educational system. One of the findings was that, majority of the Form Four students demonstrated lower oral proficiency, especially in reading. The study did not give more weight to the written grammatical proficiency.

The question of written grammatical proficiency was touched by National Examinations Council of Tanzania (henceforth NECTA) in 1993 when it carried out the qualitative and quantitative analysis of examination results of candidates' responses to the 1990 Form Four National Examinations. The analysis showed that students' answers were poorly expressed due to the lack of language proficiency. The researchers further said:

...although in some cases the responses appeared to contain correct points, they were so unintelligibly expressed that markers could not draw any meaningful messages out of them...

This shows that such students had poor syntactico-semantic proficiency in written English, which made examiners fail to make sense out of what they responded to the questions.

In connection with the preceding point on syntactico-semantic proficiency, the University of Dar es Salaam Academic Audit (UDSM, 1999) report revealed that proficiency in the language of instruction for both students and staff was low and left much to be desired. Members of the panel from which the report emanated were very much concerned about the fact that members of staff who had good English proficiency were about to

retire and the recruitment scheme of chronologically young staff was not in place. They also referred to research findings pointing to the low command of English in secondary schools. They expressed their concerns in the following words:

One can only guess what will happen when the seniors begin to exit in numbers in the next four or five years and the University is forced to recruit among the products of secondary school English language training of the 1980s and 1990s. Then the problem of English language communication among University teachers will be visible and painful....If nothing would have been done by that time, then it should be time for the University to decide going into the lingua franca (Kiswahili) – a language in which both teachers and students will be able to interact meaningfully and confidently (UDSM, 1999:72)

What was said by the writers of the report in question was not only low oral proficiency of the language, but also written proficiency. If the language training system is poor, what do you expect? The trainers themselves do not have the requisite ability to express themselves grammatically, both orally and in written form. Hence, it is quite obvious that even the products will display language deficiency; their oral and written forms will attract much attention.

The question of language proficiency was further articulated by Malecela (2005) when he carried out the study on English as a medium of instruction in post-primary education in Tanzania. The findings of the study revealed that a great number of university students faced difficulties in expressing themselves in English; their English, especially written English, was relatively poor. In short, there was a mismatch between their level of education and the kind of English they were producing. Apart from Malecela's study, Mwinsheikhe (2002) carried out the study on science and language barrier. The findings of the study showed that the problem of understanding English was severe among the majority of the secondary school students and their teachers. According to Mwinsheikhe (ibid), the English proficiency level of students and their teachers was relatively low.

Another study that investigated students' proficiency levels in English was carried out by Roy-Campbell and Qorro (1986) in Tanzanian secondary schools. The study findings revealed that the level of English among students was so low that over 90% of students could not read and comprehend the standard textbooks used in schools. These results did not deviate much from Rubagumya's (1991) study which sought to determine the way Kiswahili and English were used during the instruction in secondary schools. The findings revealed that English was, to a large extent, supplemented by Kiswahili. This means, students could hardly use English only in their studies without switching to Kiswahili. Teachers were compelled to use Kiswahili to explain some concepts because students did not understand much what was taught in English. Following these findings, Rubagumya (ibid) established that the English proficiency level of students was relatively low, and even teachers had a low command of English language.

Moreover, Jones and Rubagumya (1998) conducted the consultancy study on language of learning and teaching in Tanzania for the Ministry of Education and Culture. The study findings showed that Kiswahili was virtually used in all day-to-day activities; English was used during the English lessons only. Even during these lessons, teachers were code-switching into Kiswahili to facilitate the teaching and learning of English. Why code-switching? Either teachers themselves could not deliver the lesson using English from the start to the end of the lesson or students could hardly understand the lesson contents when English was used throughout the lesson. In short, code-switching is a clear sign that the level of language proficiency of the speaker and/or the audience is low. Linked to this study, Osaki (1991) carried out the study on factors influencing the use of environment in science teaching in Tanzanian secondary schools. In actual fact, the primary objective of the study was not to investigate the English proficiency level of students, but the matter surfaced automatically. Osaki (ibid) observed:

..in all classrooms there seemed to be a persistent problem of communication with most students silent even when persistently asked questions on everyday environmental phenomenon.....teachers readily switched to Kiswahili so as to enable students to participate in the discussion..

On the basis of Osaki's findings, it was quite clear that students had low proficiency of English language; that is why they were unable to respond to questions and participate in the discussion using English. When the medium changed, they actively participated in the discussion and in answering questions.

Osaki's (ibid) study deviated a little bit from Puja's (2001) study in terms of objectives and scope, but both had some common elements, i.e. they uncovered the language proficiency problem among students. According to Puja (ibid), most of the university students were not competent in either spoken or written English; and in the classes she visited, she noted that most students (male and female) did not speak in class (where the medium of instruction was English) but as soon as the class was over, both teachers and students switched to Kiswahili and communicated effectively. What does this imply? In simple terms, students' English proficiency level was low and teachers were not comfortable to communicate freely with students using English. Even the teachers' English proficiency level was questionable.

On the basis of the reviewed literature, I am quite certain that majority of the researchers in Applied Linguistics have been paying much attention to English proficiency levels of secondary school students. Very scanty researches on English proficiency have been done for students in higher learning institutions in Tanzania. However, no any study has specifically been done on the syntactico-semantic proficiency of written English language for undergraduate students in Tanzania. Hence, this study was an attempt to bridge this gap.

## **7. Methodology**

### **7.1 Target Population, Sample and Sampling Techniques**

The study targeted all undergraduate students doing linguistics in Tanzanian universities. However, not all targeted linguistics students in Tanzanian universities could be studied. Hence, two universities were purposively selected for the study, viz. the University of Dodoma and Mkwawa University College of Education (a Constituent College of the University of Dar es Salaam). The University of Dodoma was selected because of being my working institution. Hence, I could cut down the research costs given the fact that the research was individually funded. Along the same vein, Mkwawa University College of Education was selected because there was my friend who helped me with data collection. He voluntarily carried out the task; hence, I saved some funds for the same reason that the research was individually funded.

Initially, the researcher expected to have 80 respondents, but at the end this was not the reality. Majority of the respondents were busy preparing themselves for the Semester Examinations; hence, just a few could spare their time to respond to the questionnaires, and these few were randomly picked. The original sample size was therefore reduced to 60 respondents.

### **7.2 Instrumentation**

Data were collected using structured questionnaire. I administered the questionnaires to 30 respondents at the University of Dodoma and were fully supervised to ensure that each respondent provided his/her own information. The same technique was applied by my friend to 30 respondents at Mkwawa University College of Education. This was done so as to get real data that could reflect the actual situation of syntactico-semantic proficiency of university students doing linguistics. I could not opt for other tools of data collection because of their irrelevance in accordance with the dictates of the research itself.

### **7.3 Data Analysis Plan**

On the questionnaire, there were three (3) categories which aimed at eliciting authentic data from the respondents: tense and aspect, punctuation, and concordial agreement among syntactic categories with particular reference to subject-verb concord and subject-object concord. In category one, the respondents were supposed to provide data under the following instructional headings:

- Fill in the blank spaces with the correct tense of the verbs in brackets. A variety of tenses were tested here. The results of this question were presented in a table showing the number and percentage of respondents who scored a particular tense right or wrong.
- Put the following syntactic constructions in the past perfect continuous form.
- Fill in the blanks with a clausal fragment which is in the future perfect tense.
- Put the following sentences in the present perfect continuous form.
- Put the following sentences in the future continuous form.
- Put the following sentences in the present perfect continuous form.
- Write three sentences in simple present form and three sentences in simple past form.

All data gathered under the above instructional headings were tabulated showing the number and percentages of respondents who scored a particular target tense and/or aspect right or wrong.

In category two, the respondents were supposed to provide data under the following instructional heading: insert FULL STOPS, COMMAS, SEMI-COLONS and COLONS, wherever necessary, in the following sentences. The results of this category were tabulated showing the number and percentage of respondents who inserted each punctuation marker correctly or incorrectly.

In category three, the respondents were supposed to write a five-paragraph essay on the subject: CAUSES AND EFFECTS OF THE WORST 2012 FORM FOUR NATIONAL EXAMINATION RESULTS. I expected to get data pertaining to the correct association of meaningful syntactic categories. The results were presented and analyzed qualitatively.

## **8. Data Presentation and Analysis**

In line with the specific objectives of the study, the following sub-sections were established: usage of tenses and aspectual markers, usage of simple mechanics of grammar (full stops, commas, semi-colon and colon), and concordial agreement among different syntactic categories.

### 8.1 Usage of Tenses and Aspectual Markers

Tenses and aspects do generally indicate the time when a certain event takes/took place. If tense is not used appropriately, miscommunication or vague communication is likely to occur. In Table 1, for example, Question One was on present perfect tense but 18(30%) respondents did not score it correctly. Some responses did even diverge from the intended target structure. The instructional statement was: *Fill in the blank spaces with the correct tense of the verbs in brackets, and the question was framed as follows: Have you ever \_\_\_\_\_ (present) any paper before your class?* Those who deviated from the intended structure filled in the blank with these answers: *see, seen, do, doing, etc.*; and those who did not diverge provided answers such as *present, presenting, etc.* It should be borne in mind that majority of the respondents were Third Years doing linguistics who were expected to become “qualified teachers” of English language. On the same note, Question Three was grossly scored, with 49(81.7%) respondents getting it wrong. The question was framed, with the same instructional statement, as follows: *By this time tomorrow, I \_\_\_\_\_ (harvest) all maize.* You can imagine the way a question of this nature was poorly scored by the graduates-to-be. The second, fourth and fifth questions read as follows: *If I \_\_\_\_\_ (be) you, I could beat him; I was harvesting maize and she \_\_\_\_\_ (cook) in the kitchen; and I failed this course, but I \_\_\_\_\_ (not fail) next time.* According to the findings in Table 1, for Question Two, 22 (36.7%) respondents got it wrong; for Question Four, 11(18.3%) got it wrong; and for Question Five, 13(21.7%) got it wrong. This situation, as for other findings in other tables, calls for something bigger to be done so as to revive the <sup>1</sup>English of the past.

**Table 1: Miscellaneous Tenses (N = 60)**

No. of questions	Respondents who scored correctly	Percentage (%)	Respondents who scored incorrectly	Percentage (%)
1	42	70	18	30
2	38	63.3	22	36.7
3	11	18.3	49	81.7
4	49	81.7	11	18.3
5	47	78.3	13	21.7

In Table 2, the findings are even worse when compared with those in Table 1. About half of the respondents did not demonstrate appropriate mastery of the use of past perfect continuous tense; hence, the constructions which were produced were extremely vague, and they showed a very serious problem inherent in their grammar of English language. For example, the respondents were instructed to put the construction *I saw him* into the past perfect continuous form, and the following were some of the responses: *\*I was see him; \*I was seen; \*I have seen him; \*I had being seeing him; \*I was seen him; etc.* These ill-formed outputs, in essence, were expected to be produced by beginners of the grammar of English language, but university students managed to tamper with the language. If this is what appears in the written form where one produces the language keenly with too much thinking, how about the oral linguistic outputs? The situation might undoubtedly be too worse.

**Table 2: Past Perfect Continuous Form (N = 60)**

No. of questions	Respondents who scored correctly	Percentage (%)	Respondents who scored incorrectly	Percentage (%)
1	29	48.3	31	51.7
2	25	41.7	35	58.3
3	28	46.7	32	53.3

The findings in Table 2 differ significantly from the findings in Table 3 where the respondents were supposed to show the appropriate usage of future present perfect tense. In the questionnaire, the respondents were provided with two leading clausal fragments of the tense in question, and the respondents were supposed to fill in the blanks with the remaining clausal fragments containing the requisite structures and/format of future present perfect tense. In each question, 42(70%) respondents failed to provide the correct response. For example, Question One was framed thus: *In three minutes time, she \_\_\_\_\_*, and the following were the sample responses:

- *\*In three minutes time, she would have to come this morning.*
- *\*In three minutes time, she will have been written a letter.*
- *\*In three minutes time, she will finish up her task.*

In the ill-formed outputs, there is no temporal correlation between the two clausal fragments marked off by a comma. We expect the event to have taken place or to have attained its end or to have been finished when the time recommended or spoken of elapses. For example, the respondent could have said: *In three minutes time, she will have boarded the train; or in three minutes time, she will have finished writing the exam; or in three minutes time, she will have settled the matter.* The core component structures of the future present perfect tense

<sup>1</sup> The colonial and post colonial English in Tanzania up to the early 1980s.

are -----NP+ WILL/SHALL + HAVE + PAST PARTICIPLE-----

**Table 3: Future Perfect Tense (N = 60)**

No. of questions	Respondents who scored correctly	Percentage (%)	Respondents who scored incorrectly	Percentage (%)
1	18	30	42	70
2	18	30	42	70

In Table 4, Question Three was poorly performed in relation to others, where 24(40%) respondents scored it correctly and 36(60%) scored it wrongly. The respondents were supposed to put the sentence: *They have already solved the matter* into the present perfect continuous form, and the following were the sample responses:

- *\*They have already solving the matter.*
- *\*They are solving the matter.*
- *\*They are going to solve the matter.*
- *\*They have already been solving the matter.*

What confused the respondents was the structure *already*, which is an actual indicator of the present/past perfect tense. For example: *I have already done the test* (PRES. PT); *She has already fetched some water* (PRES. PT); *They had already dressed the table when the matter erupted* (PPT). So, they were supposed to erase the structure when changing the original construction into the present perfect continuous tense by adhering to the following core principle: NP + HAS/HAVE + BEEN + -ING------. Hence, this was expected of the respondents: *They have been solving the matter*.

However, it is not true that the remaining responses to other questions in Table 4 were tallying with the educational level of the respondents. Generally, the performance was satisfactory; more than a quarter of the respondents failed in each question, and this signals that the tense in question was problematic to the respondents.

**Table 4: Present Perfect Continuous Form (N = 60)**

No. of questions	Respondents who scored correctly	Percentage (%)	Respondents who scored incorrectly	Percentage (%)
1	37	61.7	23	38.3
2	33	55	27	45
3	24	40	36	60
4	30	50	30	50
5	32	53.3	28	46.7
6	31	51.7	29	48.3

Apart from the findings in Table 4, the findings in Table 5 are generally good in the sense that more than half of the respondents scored correctly in the raised questions. However, Question One was scored highly [by 40(66.7%) respondents] in relation to the remaining questions, which were scored at the same rate [by 36(60%) respondents in each case]. Taking an example of Question Two, the respondents were supposed to put the sentence: *She planned to vacate the area* into the future present continuous form, and the following was a sample of ill-formed responses:

- *\*She is planning to vacate the area.*
- *\*She is going to plan to vacate the area.*
- *\*She will planning to vacate the area.*
- *\*She has been planning to vacate the area.*

The all sampled ill-formed constructions did not include the central component structures of future present continuous tense, viz. NP + WILL/SHALL + BE + -ING-----, and the correct response in accordance with the leading principle could be: *she will be planning to vacate the area*.

**Table 5: Future Continuous Form (N = 60)**

No. of questions	Respondents who scored correctly	Percentage (%)	Respondents who scored incorrectly	Percentage (%)
1	40	66.7	20	33.3
2	36	60	24	40
3	36	60	24	40

In Tables 6 and 7, the respondents were supposed to write three sentences of their own on simple present tense and simple past tense respectively. The researcher took for granted that at least every respondent could have written correct sentences given the fact that such tenses are primarily for lower primary school classes. Majority of the respondents managed to write correct responses; a few of them went astray, and the researcher could not believe if such constructions were produced by people who had been in the formal schooling, where English was a medium of instruction, for more than six years. Some of the presupposed simple present tense constructions were:

- *She is playing football.*

- *Juma is watching the TV.*
- *Juma is playing football.*

The same patterns were used in forming simple past tense constructions. The respondents generalized the matter and took for granted that they were supposed to produce any form of present tense. In actual fact, the sampled sentences showed present tense, but not simple present tense. In simple present tense, the leading principle is: NP + a verb inflected with an S or a bare verb------. Hence, the presupposed outputs could be in the following form: *She plays football everyday*; and *Juma watches the TV every Sunday*. It can also be argued that the respondents had the problem of finding a dichotomy between tense and aspect. The question of tense and aspect is primary and secondary stuff in accordance with the educational system of Tanzania.

**Table 6: Simple Present Tense (N = 60)**

No. of sentences	Respondents who wrote correctly	Percentage (%)	Respondents who wrote incorrectly	Percentage (%)
Sentence 1	52	86.7	8	13.3
Sentence 2	53	88.3	7	11.7
Sentence 3	48	80	12	20

**Table 7: Simple Past Tense (N = 60)**

No. of sentences	Respondents who wrote correctly	Percentage (%)	Respondents who wrote incorrectly	Percentage (%)
Sentence 1	51	85	9	15
Sentence 2	48	80	12	20
Sentence 3	48	80	12	20

### 8.2 The Usage of Simple Mechanics of Grammar (full stops, commas, semi-colon, and colon)

Under this section, the findings of the study in Table 8 revealed that the respondents had critical problems with the use of commas, semi-colon and colon. For example:

- In Question Three, 45(75%) respondents failed to use commas appropriately.
- In Questions Four, Nine and Ten, 56(93.3%) respondents in questions four and nine, and 50(83.3%) respondents in question ten did not use semi-colon appropriately. Moreover, 40(66.7%) and 46(76.7%) respondents in questions four and nine failed to use commas effectively.
- In Question Seven, 36(60%) respondents did not use colon appropriately.

If a good number of respondents were unable to apply the punctuation marks appropriately, the implication behind is that they were in a danger of producing constructions or passages of less clarity. It should be borne in mind that punctuation is the correct use of the various stops or marks in writing so as to make the meaning of a sentence or passage clear. Hence, on the basis of the findings in Table 8, it seems that the question of punctuation was quite critical and the respondents were supposed to be re-taught the correct use of such marks especially commas, semi-colon and colon. The question arises: when and how should they be re-taught such punctuation marks? This question is well addressed in section 10.



**Table 8: Punctuation (N = 60)**

No. of questions	Target Punctuation marks	Respondents who inserted correctly	Percentage (%)	Respondents who inserted incorrectly	Percentage (%)
1	comma	41	68.3	19	31.7
	full stop	60	100	0	0
2	comma	38	63.3	22	36.7
	full stop	60	100	60	100
3	comma	15	25	45	75
	full stop	60	100	60	100
4	semi-colon	4	6.7	56	93.3
	comma	20	33.3	40	66.7
5	full stop	54	90	6	10
	comma	43	71.7	17	28.3
	full stop	58	96.7	2	3.3
6	comma	26	43.3	34	56.7
	full stop	57	95	3	5
7	colon	24	40	36	60
	comma	52	86.7	8	13.3
	full stop	58	96.7	2	3.3
8	comma	37	61.7	23	38.3
	full stop	55	91.7	5	8.3
9	semi-colon	4	6.7	56	93.3
	comma	14	23.3	46	76.7
	full stop	58	96.7	2	3.3
10	semi-colon	10	16.7	50	83.3
	full stop	56	93.3	4	6.7

### 8.3 Concordial Agreement among Different Syntactic Categories

The findings under this section revealed a very terrible situation. The passages which were written by a good number of the respondents did not demonstrate any convincing element of syntactico-semantic proficiency expected of the university students. To prove this, take a look at the following sample paragraphs in different passages:

#### ***Paragraph One in Passage One***

*Form four examination is ordinary last level of students to expect to join with advanced level after the form four results to show him/her with qualifications of continuing with advanced level studies---*

#### ***Paragraph Two in Passage Two***

*Another cause is strike of the teachers, It is known that in this year it happen many strike of the teachers due to low salaries paid by the government and their disvaluable in this nation, so many teachers promise to show the government their value in this country as they stop intering the class though when they enter they did not taught as what they supposed to teach.*

#### ***Paragraph Three in Passage Three***

*One of the cause may be that, teachers loss the morale of teaching when they teach. This is because their demands to be ignored by the government. So even the morale of teaching lead to be losen.*

On the basis of the sampled ill-constructed paragraphs, it is vivid that there was no concordial agreement among different syntactic categories, which led to ill-production of phrases and sentences in such paragraphs. Take an example of the underlined strings of words in paragraph two above. In the first instance, the subject is not in concord with the verb; and in the second instance, the pre-nominal modifier is not in concord with the noun. In a wider sense, concordial agreement may mean the lack of syntactic or semantic relationship between one word

and another; between one phrase and other; or between a clause and a clause, etc. Hence, most of the passages which were produced by the respondents showed many concordial agreement errors, which made most of the sentence meanings vague. Finally, I am tempted to say that the syntactico-semantic proficiency of the respondents, on the basis of the findings in section 8.3, was very poor and if a linguistic push<sup>1</sup> is not thought of earlier, English in Tanzania will be to the extreme end of foreign language, i. e. will not be regarded as a foreign language, but a language between foreign language and something else.

## 9. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study did not differ significantly from the findings of the earlier studies on English proficiency or the decline of the standard of English in Tanzania. For example, Mlama and Matteru (1978) carried out the study and found that the standards of English education were falling and that students were performing much better under the medium of Swahili. An essay exam given through Swahili yielded thoughtful and concise responses, but disjointed and nearly unintelligible responses to the same questions by the same students when asked to use English (Roy-Campbell et al, 1997). The implication here is that, students could better express themselves in Swahili than in English. That is why their English essays had broken English structures which could not communicate anything. In short, their syntactico-semantic proficiency was relatively poor. This is in line with what was found for the university students in this study when they were asked to write a five-paragraph essay on the causes and effects of the worst 2012 national form four examination results. Some of the essays were completely not reflecting the educational level of the students. Have a look at the following paragraphs from a sample essay:

*....some students due to that result led to suicide themselves. Most of these student may be those who well studied and depended to pass on their exams but when the results out, they detected failure. So the only solution they saw is suicide.*

*.....apart from those worstness of the result and those deaths that happen, led to the government to command the remark of the exams. So the papers remarked and the result released. For some student is helpful but others is still painful*

If one goes through the syntactico-semantic deformed paragraphs above, he/she can be tempted to conclude that they were written by a Form One student in ordinary secondary schools. An essay with such ill-formed paragraphs was written by a Third Year student doing linguistics, who was expected to teach English language in secondary schools. With that English, if he/she teaches English language to the Form One students, what would be their proficiency status at the end of the year? In fact, the situation would be terrible.

The terrible written production of English language was also witnessed by Malecela (2005) when he carried out the study on English as a medium of instruction in post-primary education in Tanzania. To his surprise, most students in the university found it difficult to express themselves in English. The following was a part of the essay which was written by a Fourth Year (finalist) student in March, 2002 at the University of Dar es Salaam:

*The school inspectors, then call the teacher after teaching and tell him/her that where is important point to emphasis as sometimes the teaching aids is not ptofer students to understand well the subjects. So you must improve for that. In doing so the education or quality of education increases and thus mantan the our education.*

Malecela's findings are concurring with the findings of this study. The respondents in Malecela's study demonstrated a lack of syntactico-semantic proficiency in written English language. What they were writing were just sentences with a little syntactic taste, and most of them were semantically void. If these are to be teachers, which syntactico-semantic elements will they impart to their students? They will be creating and perpetuating the so called *vicious circle of crippled English language*. If this trend of passing on ill-structured English language will not be checked forthwith, some three to four next generations will come up with their own language closer to an advanced pidgin.

Moreover, there is a close link between the findings of this study and the findings of Mutoro (1997) when he was external-examining archeology. In his report, he wrote:

*Something needs to be done about the candidates written English. They have the facts but they cannot communicate properly. A course on communication skills in English may be necessary in the final analysis.*

Mutoro (ibid) concluded that:

*The weak students had problems with communication. English is not their mother tongue but it is unfortunately the language of instruction and communication. Examinations are about our ability to express our views properly so that our examiners can appreciate our answers. If we cannot, then something needs to be done about it.*

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<sup>1</sup> *Linguistic push* in this context refers to the deliberate measures of teaching English language in Tanzania.

According to Mutoro, the failure of students in archeology was largely attributed to the poor syntactico-semantic proficiency of English language. Examiners could hardly make sense out of what was written by the candidates. Nowadays, in many Universities in Tanzania, there is a big cry that many students are failing in their tests, assignments and semester exams. “Supplementaries” and “Carry-overs” are considerably increasing, and one cannot believe that in an exam weighting 60%, a candidate scores below 10%. But when you go through the papers of these candidates, you find that they did not communicate their facts properly.

We need, therefore, to articulate the fact that language is embodied with some economic entities. If it is tampered with, people are likely to miss some vital opportunities. This is supported by Sa (n. d) in her paper on language policy for education and development in Tanzania when she says:

Competence in English can be regarded as a form of human capital<sup>1</sup> useful to them in seeking employment, where the return on investment in English is a wage premium (or perhaps access to higher paying job categories that require knowledge of English).

What Sa (ibid) has put across is the fact that people should sacrifice by investing in language. If one masters language well, in this context English language, he/she is likely to earn a good living. In the Tanzanian context, the country did not take deliberate efforts to invest in English language as an economic tool. Most of the school products today do not have an acceptable command of English language, whether oral or written, and this has made them miss good paying jobs. Most of the foreign companies in Tanzania are employing graduates from the neighboring countries such as Kenya, Zambia, Botswana, Malawi, Uganda and Zimbabwe because of their impeccability of English language. Worse enough, the employability of the Tanzanian graduates in the local schools in Tanzania is still a riddle. Most of the English medium schools in Tanzania are recruiting teachers from Uganda, Kenya, Malawi and Zambia. The allegations leveled by the owners of the schools against the non-employment of the native staff are quite obvious: they simply say that the level of English of the native graduates is quite low, and if they are employed, the schools will not get enough reputation. The arguments of these educational stakeholders contain significant elements of truth. According to the findings of this study (cf. Tables 1 to 8 and section 8.3), no any employer can employ a person who fails to demonstrate a mastery of simple issues of grammar (tenses and punctuation). To this end, it can be said that the poor language-in-education policy of Tanzania has created an economic grave<sup>2</sup> for the school products.

## 10. SUMMARY AND THE WAY FORWARD

The study investigated the syntactico-semantic proficiency of written English for undergraduate students doing linguistics in Tanzanian universities. It mainly examined if students were in position to use tenses and punctuation markers (full stop, comma, semi-colon and colon) appropriately in written discourses. Further, the study explored the extent to which students could select and pattern compatible syntactic elements so as to yield meaningful expressions. The questionnaire was employed so as to capture these realities. The findings of the study revealed that a greater number of the respondents had severe problems in using tenses/aspects and punctuation marks (cf. Tables 1 to 8), and they could hardly produce exemplary English passages. Given this ever-deteriorating situation of English language proficiency in Tanzania, what should be done in order to contain the situation? Two routes should be thought of and be implemented:

The first route is to launch a special language programme for all teachers at different levels of education. These programmes can be run in Teachers Resource Centers where in-service teachers can be taught simple mechanics of grammar using a structuro-communicative approach. Those who seem to master the language effectively should be teachers of English language for lower levels, i.e. kindergarten and classes one to three in primary schools. It is believed that there is a one-to-one association between tender age and requisite acquisition of grammar. If children acquire faulty grammar in their early years of cognitive development, they are likely to face difficulties in acquiring the proper grammar in future; and majority will continue believing in the faulty language they are producing.

The second route is to over-haul the entire system of English language teaching. The educational planners should know that language is a business by itself and that tampering with it means tampering with the economy of people and of the country as a whole. Hence, serious and deliberate investment in the language should be given an upper hand. For that matter, there should be dual English language curricula: Forms One to Four should follow a purely communicative curriculum, and Forms Five and Six should follow a structuro-communicative curriculum in which there should be an intensive teaching of grammar through intensive and extensive reading of well designed story books, as well as other communicative topics. Moreover, there should be intensive writing and speaking on various topics: students should be encouraged to write essays; articles in school magazines; and simple books, some of which can be published locally or internationally. Moreover, they

<sup>1</sup> In economics, “human capital” refers to the set of skills a person has acquired through education and training, which allow him/her to be more productive and receive greater compensation in the labor market.

<sup>2</sup> The situation in which the graduates miss some good employment opportunities because of language barrier.

should practice the language in different contexts of situations through debates, role plays and other linguistic apparatus that can promote oral language proficiency. The overall aim is to inculcate into students the ability to produce impeccable or near impeccable oral and written English language. During assessment, whether internal or external, two modes of assessment should be done: written and oral modes.

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