Use of Grammatical Morphemes -ed and -s in the Spoken English of Secondary School Students

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Abstract

This study examined the use of the grammatical morphemes –ed and –s in the spoken English of secondary school students. The study involved 52 senior secondary school students in North-Eastern Nigeria. Data of the study were collected through reading tasks and structured interviews. The findings show that majority of the participants have problems in the use of the grammatical morphemes –ed and –s. They either do not pronounce the morphemes at all or pronounce them wrongly. The findings further reveal factors that contributed to the participants' wrong realisations of the morphemes. For instance, many of the participants are not aware that the morphemes are phonologically conditioned. Finally, the study concludes with some suggestions and recommendations on how to improve the students' realisations of the morphemes in their spoken English.

Keywords: grammatical morphemes, Nigerian students, spoken English

Introduction

Grammar has been described as an important aspect of language that needs to be acquired for effective communication. In second language learning, a substantial number of studies have been carried out to examine students' grammatical problems in written English (Abushihab, 2014; Nassaji, 2011; Owu-Ewie & Lomotey, 2016) [1, 13, 14]. However, studies conducted in spoken are fewer compared to those in written English (Marcellino, 2012) [12]. One of the aspects of grammar that has been widely studied in written English rather than spoken is grammatical morphemes.

Grammatical morphemes are morphemes that indicate grammatical categories of a language such as tense, number gender and aspect. Thus, –ed and –s are grammatical morphemes. The grammatical morpheme –ed indicates simple past tense as in *Musa killed a snake* and perfect aspect as in *Amina has entered the room*. On the other hand, the –s morpheme marks plurality as in *the boys are here*. It also marks third person singular present tense as in *she eats slowly*. Finally, -s morpheme indicates possession as in *this is Khadija's toy*.

In spoken English, these grammatical morphemes change their pronunciation due to the influence of nearby sounds. In other words, the morphemes have various realisations which are determined by the environment they occur. The variations are mostly not reflected in the spellings of the morphemes. The different forms of pronunciations of the morphemes are known as allomorphs. The morpheme–ed has three allomorphs /d/, /t/ and /id/. Table 1 presents the environments where each of the allomorphs occurs with examples.

Table 1: Allomorphs of –ed morpheme

Allomorph	Environment	Example
/d/	when preceded by a voiced sound	played, lazed
/t/	when preceded by a voiceless sound	kissed, glanced
/id/	when preceded by /t/ or /d/ sound	stated, headed

On the other hand, the morpheme –s also has three allomorphs /z/, /s/ and /iz/. The table presents each of the allomorphs with examples (see Carstairs-McCarthy, 2002; Yule, 2010 for more details on morphemes and allomorphs) [7, 17].

Table 2: Allomorphs of –s morpheme

Allomorph	Environment	Example
/z/	when preceded by a voiced sound	boys, girls
/s/	when preceded by a voiceless sound	books, parents
/iz/	when preceded by sibilants	classes, houses

Many studies have been carried out to investigate the use of grammatical morphemes in written English of secondary school students. The findings show that the students have a poor mastery of the use of English past participle, possessive inflection, past tense inflection and plural inflection (Akande, 2001: 2003) [2, 3] which some scholars attributed to the inconsistencies of English language in the area of morphology (Babalola & Akande, 2002) [6]. Specifically, Akande (2003) [3] investigated the use of eight inflectional morphemes of English in the writing of secondary school students in Nigeria. He observed various types of misuse of the morphemes in the students' writing. Al-Badawi (2012) [5] also examined morphological errors made by undergraduates in Saudi Arabia. He discovered that the students made various errors which include the misuse of the plural marker –s and the past tense marker –ed. Darus and Subramaniam (2009) [10] studied the errors made by Malaysian secondary school students in their writing. They identified various forms of errors in the writing composition of the students which include singular/plural form, verb tense and subject-verb agreement.

In spoken English, few studies have been conducted to investigate students' use of grammar, especially morpheme. For example, Ting, Mahadhir and Chang (2010) [16] examine the grammatical errors in spoken English of university students in Malaysia. Among the errors, the students commit are in the areas of the plural form of nouns, subject-verb agreement and tense. The morphemes –ed and –s have rarely been studies in the spoken English of secondary students, particularly in Nigeria.

Thus, there is the need to conduct a study to investigate the use of the morphemes in the spoken English of secondary school students.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to examine the use of the grammatical morphemes –ed and –s in the spoken English of secondary school students in Nigeria.

Research Questions

The following questions are formulated to guide the study:
1. How do Nigerian secondary school students pronounce the grammatical morpheme –ed?
2. How do Nigerian secondary school students pronounce the grammatical morpheme –s?
3. What are the causes of wrong pronunciation of the grammatical morphemes –ed and –s by Nigerian secondary school students?

Materials and Methods
Participants

Fifty-two (52) students, ages ranged from 16-18 years old, were selected to participate in the study. They were drawn from the senior secondary school students 2 (SS2) in North-Eastern Nigeria. Random sampling technique was used where all the members were given equal chance of being selected. All the participants are female as the study was conducted in a Girl's College.

Instruments

Two instruments were employed for the data collection process, a reading task and structured interviews. The reading task involved two short stories. The first story of 169 words was to capture the use of the morpheme -ed. The story contained 40 words with the -ed morpheme. The second story of 105 words captured the /-s/ morpheme. Thirty words with the morpheme –s were identified from the story. The stories were given to the participants to read individually in a quiet environment. Their readings were recorded using Sony digital audio voice recorder. After recordings all the participants' readings, structured interviews were conducted with each of the participants. The interviews were to help the researcher to answer the third research question and draw a conclusion from the study. Also, the interviews allowed the researcher make some recommendations on how to improve the use of the morphemes in spoken English.

Procedures for the Data Collection

Procedures suggested by Corder (1967) [8] were followed in this study. These include a collection of data (the language used by the participants), identification of errors in the usage, description, explanation and evaluation of errors. In this study, the participants' use of the grammatical morphemes –ed and –s were collected through audio-recordings. Errors from their usage were identified and described. From the interviews, some causes of the errors were identified. Finally, suggestions were offered on how to remedy the errors to improve the usage of the grammatical morphemes in the participants' spoken English.

Results and Discussion

Two experienced English teachers listened to the audio-recordings of the participants' readings

in order to rate the participants' use of the morphemes –ed and –s. All the words identified with the morphemes –ed and –s were written in a table. Three columns were drawn on the table. The raters were asked to check (√) for correct realisation, (*) for incorrect realisations. In the third column, the raters were asked to describe the incorrect realisation. All the realisations were analysed descriptively using frequency count and percentage.

To answer the first research question which is to identify how the participants use the morpheme –ed in their spoken English, all the words with the morphemes were identified. The words were classified into three groups based on the environment in which the –ed occurred, after voiced sounds, voiceless sounds, and after /t/ or /d/ sounds.

In the first group where –ed occurs after /t/ or /d/ sounds, nine words were identified (see the Appendix). Each of the words was pronounced by every participant. The results show that the morpheme was pronounced correctly as [id] in only two cases which are less than one percent of the total realisations. It was realised wrongly in most cases. Over 88 % of the participants pronounced it wrongly as [ed] instead of [id]. For instance, *decided* was pronounced as [disaided] instead of [disaidid], *rested* as [rested] instead of [restid]. In 54 cases, the morpheme was not pronounced at all. Table 3 presents the summary of the results.

Table 3: Summary of the realisations "–ed" after /t/ and /d/ sounds

Variables	Frequency	Percentage %
Total Words	468	100
Correct Realisation as /id/	2	0.43
Incorrect Realisation as /ed/	412	88.03
Zero Realisation	54	11.54

As for the second group where –ed comes after voiceless sounds, 11 words were identified. The participants mispronounced it as /d / or /ed/ instead of /t/. The results show that out of the 572 instances, the morpheme was pronounced correctly as /t/ in 17 cases which are less than 4% of the total cases. It was incorrectly realised as /ed/ and /d/ in 20 and 115 cases respectively. The majority of the cases, 73.42% were zero realisation, that the participants read the words without pronouncing the –ed morpheme. Table 4 summarises the results.

Table 4: Realisations –ed after voiceless sounds

Variables	Frequency	Percentage %
Total Words	572	100
Correct Realisation as /t/	17	2.97
Incorrect Realisation as /ed/	20	3.51
Incorrect Realisation as /d/	115	20.10
Zero Realisation	420	73.42

As for the third group, where the –ed comes after voiced sounds, 20 words were identified. The results show that out of the 1040 cases, the morpheme was pronounced correctly as /d/ in only 300 cases, which is about 29%. Almost half of the cases, 48% are zero realisations, that is, the morpheme was not pronounced. In other 23 %, it was pronounced as /ed/ such as *screamed* as [skrimed] instead of [skrimd] and *gazed* as [gezed] instead of [geizd]. The summary of the result is presented below.

Table 5: Realisations –ed after voiced sounds

Variables	Frequency	Percentage %
Total words	1040	100
Correct Realisation as /d/	300	28.85
Incorrect Realisation as /ed/	240	23.08
Zero Realisation	500	48.08

From the results presented so far, it could be concluded that the students do not know that the past tense marker -*ed* is phonologically conditioned. This is because when compared the results of instances where -ed follows voiceless sounds on table 2, and where it follows voiced sound, it could be seen that the morpheme was pronounced correctly as /t/ only in 17 instances. Also, where it follows /t/ and /d/ sounds, it was realised correctly as /id/ in only two cases which are less than 1 percent. This shows that it is easier for them to realise it as /d/ or /ed/ due to the spelling than /t/ or /id/.

To answer the second research question that is, to examine how the participants use the morpheme –s in their spoken English, all the words with the morphemes were identified. The words were grouped into three based on the phonological environment in which the morpheme occurred, after voiced sounds, after sibilants and after voiceless sounds. The results of each of the groups are presented below.

For the environment where the morpheme follows voiced sounds, 11 words were identified. The results reveal mispronunciations of morpheme by the participants. In 422 cases, about 74 % the participants pronounced the morpheme as [s] instead of [z]. For instance, boys as [bɔis] instead of [bɔiz], birds as [ba:ds] instead of [b3:dz] and enemies as [enemis] instead of [enəmiz].The table below presents the summary of the results.

Table 6: Realisations of "–s" after voiced sounds

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Total Words	572	100
Correct Realisation as /z/	43	7.51
Incorrect Realisation as /s/	422	73.77
Zero Realisation	107	18.71

As for the second group where the morpheme is preceded by sibilants, 10 words were identified. The results show that the participants mostly pronounced it incorrectly as /is/, /s/ or do not pronounce it at all. The table below presents the summary of the results.

Table 7: Summary of the realisations of "–s" after sibilants

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Total Words	520	100
Correct Realisation as /iz/	27	5.19
Incorrect Realisation as /is/	370	71.15
Zero Realisation	123	23.65

For the third category where the morpheme is preceded by voiceless sounds, nine words were identified. The results show that the participants pronounced the morpheme correctly as /s/ in 307 cases, representing more than 65% while the remaining 34% are zero realisations. For example, they pronounced *schools* as *school [skul] instead of [skulz], *books* as *book [buk] instead of [buks]. The higher percentage of the correct realisation shows that the morphemes were easier for the participants to pronounce

the morpheme as spelt when compared with the results of the other allomorphs (z and iz). The summary of the result is presented in table 8.

Table 8: Summary of the realisations "–s" after voiceless sounds

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Total Words	468	100
Correct Realisation as /s/	307	65.60
Zero Realisation	161	34.40

From the results presented so far, the major problems identified in the participants' pronunciation include zero realisation of the grammatical morphemes –ed and –s where they simply omitted the morphemes in their pronunciation. The problems also include mispronunciation of the morphemes based on their spellings, for example, –ed as /ed/ instead /d/, /id/ or /d/ -s and /s/ instead of /z/, /is/ instead of /iz/. This finding is in line with the findings of Akande (2003) [3] where he found the omission of the past tense marker and third person concord marker in students' writing. He also observed the wrong insertion of past tense marker in students writing. The findings are also in agreement with the findings of Al-Badawi (2012) [5] which found that large percentages of the students failed to use the plural (-s/es) in certain noun phrases and the third-person singular (s/es) to indicative verbs. He also found out erroneous used of the past tense marker (-ed) by students.

To answer the third research question which is to identify the causes of wrong pronunciation of the grammatical morphemes –ed and –s by Nigerian secondary school students, the interview responses were analysed. From the analysis, the following themes were identified as the causes of the participants' misuse of the grammatical morphemes –ed and –s in their spoken English.

Leisure Time Entertainments
The participants were asked to identify what they usually read or listen at their leisure time. Listening English programmes/songs or reading English materials might help the participant to improve their pronunciation of the morphemes –ed and –s. However, the majority of them, about 80% revealed that they read Islamic related texts and Hausa written materials. Also, they listen to Islamic programmes and Hausa songs at their leisure time. Only a few, less than 20% of the participant read English texts or listen to English programmes/songs at their leisure time. The participants added that they were not interested in reading English text or listening to English related programme. This agrees with the findings of Gardner (2001) [11] that attitudes and motivation towards language determine the linguistic performance of learners. This may be due to their lack of exposure to English at early stages of their educational lives as their native language was mostly used for instructions and communication. Another factor which might be contributing to the participants' lack of exposure to English is that most of them were from rural areas and low-income families. As such, they had no opportunity of attending schools where English is used throughout.

Lack of Awareness and Teaching Model
Awareness that the grammatical morphemes –ed and –s are phonologically conditioned would help to reduce the participants' pronunciation problems. However, from the

interview, the majority of the participants revealed that they were not aware of the various realisations of the morphemes. They revealed that they were not taught the pronunciations of the morphemes and their allomorphs in their school.

Lack of Practice and Extracurricular Activities
Using English in daily life would allow the participants to practice what they were taught in classrooms. However, in the interview, the participants revealed that they rarely use English to communicate in their daily lives. They added that there was no rule enforcing the use of English for communication either in the classes or in the hostels in the school. From the interviews, the participants lamented that their teachers did not use to organise extracurricular activities such as English debate or quiz. Further, the participants mentioned that it was easier to communicate in their native language than using English to communicate among themselves.

From the findings of the study, it could be summarised that leisure time entertainments, students' interest, teaching methods adopted by teachers and extracurricular activities are the major contributing factors to the participants' poor realisations of the grammatical morphemes –ed and –s in their spoken English. The findings agree with the assertions made by Richard (1971) [15] that ignorance of rule restrictions, incomplete application of rules, are some of the major causes of learners' errors.

Conclusion
The study discovered that Nigerian secondary school students mispronounced the grammatical morphemes –ed and –s. The study further revealed some factors that contribute to the students' poor realisation of the morphemes. The findings of the study are useful to teachers and instructors as their attentions would be drawn on how to improve their students' realisations of the grammatical morphemes in spoken English. Based on the findings, the study suggests that students should be taught the various realisations (allomorphs) of the morphemes. They should also be encouraged to speak English frequently in their daily live such as in classes and in their hostels. Extracurricular activities such as debate or quiz should be organised between classes and schools. This would give students opportunity to improve their pronunciation skills. There is need to review the content of English language textbook to include these items to enable teachers to teach effectively. There is a need for further studies in this area as this study is limited to the examination of the use of the morphemes by senior secondary school students in North-Eastern Nigeria. Future studies should be conducted to provide teachers and instructors with better ways to help their students to improve their spoken English.

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