A Linguistic Analysis of the Inconsistencies in the Meaning of Some -er Suffix Morphemes

Amina Abubakar

Abstract—English like any other language is rich by means of arbitrary, conventional, symbols which lend it to lot of inconsistencies in spelling, phonology, syntax, and morphology. The research examines the irregularities prevalent in the structure and meaning of some 'er' lexical items in English and its implication to vocabulary acquisition. It centers its investigation on the derivational suffix 'er', which changes the grammatical category of word. English language poses many challenges to Second Language Learners because of its irregularities, exceptions, and rules. One of the meaning of –er derivational suffix is someone or somebody who does something. This rule often confuses the learners when they meet with the exceptions in normal discourse. The need to investigate instances of such inconsistencies in the formation of –er words and the meanings given to such words by the students motivated this study. For this purpose, some senior secondary two (SS2) students in six randomly selected schools in the metropolis were provided a large number of alphabetically selected 'er' suffix ending words, The researcher opts for a test technique, which requires them to provide the meaning of the selected words with- er. The marking of the test was scored on the scale of 1-0, where correct formation of –er word and meaning is scored one while wrong formation and meaning is scored zero. The number of wrong and correct formations of –er words meaning were calculated using percentage. The result of this research shows that a large number of students made wrong generalization of the meaning of the selected -er ending words. This shows how enormous the inconsistencies are in English language and how are affect the learning of English. Findings from the study revealed that though students mastered the basic morphological rules but the errors are generally committed on those vocabulary items that are not frequently in use. The study arrives at this conclusion from the survey of their textbook and their spoken activities. Therefore, the researcher recommends that there should be effective reappraisal of language teaching through implementation of the designed curriculum to reflect on modern strategies of teaching language, identification, and incorporation of the exceptions in rigorous communicative activities in language teaching, language course books and tutorials, training and retraining of teachers on the strategies that conform to the new pedagogy.

Keywords—ESL, derivational morpheme, inflectional morpheme, suffixes.

I. INTRODUCTION

THE -er suffix morpheme is used in deriving new words from an existing one thus changing the grammatical category of such a word. For example, the English verb *teach* becomes the noun *teacher*, if we add the derivational morpheme-**er (**from old English-**ere)**. However, this agent and instrument relationship does not always follow in many instances. It is within the scope of this paper to investigate the extent of these inconsistencies.

A. Statement of the Problem

Observations revealed that learners of English as a second language find it difficult to use –**er**-morphemes despite the use of English as a medium of instruction and taught as a subject throughout their learning period. lack of knowledge of the rules and skill to strategically manipulate the rules cause this inability to effectively manipulate the use of –**er** suffix in English language has been caused by Therefore, the irregularities in the rules pose serious problems in the use of –**er suffix**. This implies that it makes English difficult to learn because as a rule in English, it is known that the - **er** suffix in most cases when it is attached to a word, especially in verbs, denotes something that does something or somebody who does something e.g. a writer-writes; a singer- sings etc. Similarly, in relation to this, we identify that a tongue twister is something that twists the tongue and we can equally say that a skyscraper is something that scrapes the sky. However, in contrast, it does not always follow that: an eaves dropper is somebody who drops eaves. Furthermore, If a thinker is somebody who thinks then the big question is, is a tinker somebody who tinks? Certainly, this is not so (In fact the word tinks does not seem to exist in English language). These and perhaps many other such inconsistencies,coupled with the issues of poor and inadequate mastery of English and other socio economic factors are issues that can never be totally overcome in second language learning situation.

Many researchers conducted many studies on derivational morphemes. However, most of these studies focused on the errors in the usage of morphemes while others dwell on the difficulties in the acquisition of morphemes to Nigerian learners of English as a second language. For example, [2] carried out a study on the morphological errors in the usage of English by second language learners in Nigeria. The subjects for his study consisted of 250 students in their second year in the Senior Secondary School class (SS2) drawn from schools in Osun and Ondo States. The researcher used data elicitation techniques, which included essay writing and rewriting exercises on the one hand and the observation of errors in the student, spoken English on the other. His study revealed that students' competence in English morphology is very low and the inconsistencies in the morphological rules of English, which result in misapplication of the rules as well as the interference of their mother tongue, cause the errors.

Reference [4] investigated learners' acquisition of eight English morphemes, which they referred to as factors. The aim was to examine the correct usage of eleven grammatical words

Amina Abubakar is with the Federal College of Education, Nigeria (e-mail: amicable_fce@yahoo.com).

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and their endings. The study sampled 151 Spanish and Chinese children of ages 5-8 years who attend English-speaking schools. The authors used Bilingual Syntax Measure (BSM) as an elicitation technique to draw samples of speech from the subjects. The researcher grouped the subjects into three groups with varying levels of exposure to English language i.e. the Harlen, the Sacramento and the Ysidro groups. The analysis showed that each group exhibit consistencies in the morphological responses. Therefore, the study concludes that second language learners of English find it difficult to acquire some grammatical morphemes whatever their levels of exposure is to English. [3] Also pointed out that there are ambiguities and irregularities in use the –er suffix. They concluded that the –er which signifies a doer of an action posed a lot difficulties to the students they studied. Reference [8] studied vocabulary knowledge profiles of Chinese speaking ESL teachers from the aspects of word meaning, phonology, and morphology and sentence production and concluded that knowledge of meaning operates at a more conscious level than formal aspect of word knowledge.

Reference [12] studied forth, sixth and eight graders' knowledge of derivational suffixes. The authors administered a-paper-and-pencil tasks to 100 subjects. The result showed that the fourth graders recognize a familiar stem in derivational, while the sixth graders displaced an increase in knowledge of distributional suffixes and exhibited increase in overgeneralizations errors whereas the eighth graders showed a remarkable knowledge of syntactical properties of derivational suffix.

Despite the numerous studies in the literature, other researchers did not do exact study on the inconsistencies in the English language from the perspective of the use of -**er suffix** among ESL students in Kano state of Nigeria. The researcher hoped that the study would help to highlight the areas of difficulties in English language learning resulting from the inconsistencies in the language itself.

B. Literature Review

English Language: A Synopsis of Its Early Beginnings

No one can say exactly when English began. However, records showed that it is written about 1,300 years ago and was being spoken long before that [6]. Over the centuries, the language has gradually grown and changed along with the people who use it. The growth which is divided into old, middle and modern English brought with it many changes in pronunciation, vocabulary, spelling and meaning essentially as a result of the influences of other languages such as French, Latin, Greek, and Roman. These influences also mean changes in rules and regulations of the language. What we have today, as modern English is the product of these changes.

Issues of Inconsistency in English

The modern day English is to some extent characterized by inconsistency. With specific reference to the issue under investigation, that is the - **er** derivational suffix which is used to change the class category of some words to which they are attached, there seems to exist such inconsistency in meaning.

The issue of inconsistencies in the English language has taken a centre stage not only among Second and Foreign language learners alone but also among Native language speakers as well. Reference [13] brings out clearly and vividly these inconsistencies in an article titled a ''Barrelful of words'' when he wrote:

''We all know a farmer farms, runner runs and a baker bakes so. Why doesn't a butcher butch and an archer arch? If you crack a cracker, aren't you the cracker? Do animals get mange from a manger? Aren't you the zipper when you zip a zipper? Is a broker more broke than you? Do big numbers make you numb? Why don't grocers groce and soldiers soldi? Why don't homers hom and pliers ply? Did you ever hear a bladder blad or an udder udd? Shouldn't the customer of a barber be called a barbee? Instead of saying a plasterer plasters why not a plaster plasts? Is a peer someone who urinates? Does a butler butle or usher ush? How come a stag can stagger, but so can a staggerer stagger? Shouldn't someone attending be called an attender instead of an attendee? Why a laid piece is called a layer instead of a layee. When a finger fings won't the trigger trigs? How strange is a stranger? If a rooster roosts; shouldn't a beaver beeves, or a panther panths? Would you rather be a putter or a putterer? Why does a pest pester instead of a pester pests? What does a teller tells?''

This seemingly funny analysis sums up the fact that there are inconsistencies in the meaning of some **er**-derivational suffix morphemes.

Reference [1] identified the polysystemic nature of English as one of the causes of the inconsistency given to some morphologically derived words. He cited some examples as thus:

If the plural of knife, calf, and thief are knives, calves, thieves respectively why shouldn't the plural of chief be chieves? Similarly, if the plural of box is boxes, why is oxes not the plural of ox?

This inconsistency has a serious implication in the learning of English by second language learners (ESL). For how can they master all the exceptions there are to the numerous rules that exists in English. This study is, therefore, concerned with investigating the seeming inconsistencies in the use -**er** suffix among ESL.

C. Aim and Objective of the Study

The aim of the study is to analyze the inconsistencies in the structure and meaning of some lexical items particularly-er suffix.

The objective of this study is to expose the obvious inconsistency in the meaning of -er suffix morphemes in order to establish the inconsistent nature of the English language. This inconsistency can be a source of problem to successful second language learning. Therefore, this study sets out to:

1. Test the ESL students' ability to use the –er suffix in word formation.
2. Determine the appropriateness in the use of –er suffix in word formation by the students.

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D. Research Questions

This study intends to answer the following questions:

1- What is the students' performances in the use of –er derivational suffix?
2- How appropriate is the students' use of the-er endings in the selected words?
3- What is the cause of the inappropriateness in the usage?

E. Research Design

The research design is descriptive. It seeks to analyze the inconsistencies in the structure and meaning of some lexical items particularly those of the –er derivational suffix.

F. Data Collation Technique

The researcher collated the data for the research using the simple percentile and averages. The researcher also calculated the percentage scores of correct and wrong meaning and then calculated the average scores.

The population for the study is second language learners of English at the intermediate level. The samples for the study are senior secondary two students selected from six randomly selected schools across the metropolis.

The Samples

The sample for the study comprises of the ESL students from six schools in Kano, Nigeria. In the researcher used classes of 40 students from each of the selected schools. There are therefore 240 samples.

Data Collection Technique

The researcher collated thedata using the test techniques involving the use of the questionnaire as the instrument for testing. In the questionnaire, the students were recommended to complete some words with the appropriate-er derivational suffix where necessary. This technique is preferred to others because it will enable the researcher to get a proper assessment of the student knowledge of the meaning of the given -er suffix ending words. Thereby allowing the research to get a valid data

Data Analysis Technique

The researcher analyzed the data for the study using the simple percentages. All the scores obtained from the test were collected and then percentages were calculated.

II. METHODOLOGY

A. The Sample

The sample consists of students from six schools. In each of the four schools, a class consisting of 40 students were given a set of questionnaire to test the students' abilities to use the-er ending on words.

Question 1: What are the students' performance in the use of –er derivational suffix on words?

From the test conducted using the questionnaire, the ESL students' performed as follows in the test:

Table I shows the scores obtained on the test of the use of-er derivational suffix words.

TABLE I
THE SCORES OBTAINED ON THE TEST OF THE USE OF –ER DERIVATIONAL SUFFIX WORDS

School	No. Of students	Overall scores of correct responses	Total% of correct responses	Overall scores of wrong use of –er suffix	Total % of wrong use of –er suffix
FCE Demonstration Secondary School, Kano	40	1758	59%	1202	40.1%
G SSDukawiya	40	1838	62%	1122	38%
G SS Danladi Nasidi	40	1311	44%	1649	56%
G S Jaoji	40	1012	34%	1948	66%
G S Charanchi	40	1413	48%	1547	52%
G S SZawaciki	40	1251	42%	1709	58%

TABLE II
AN ANALYSIS OF THE STUDENTS' APPROPRIATE USE OR OTHERWISE OF THE –ER ENDING WORDS

School	Total % of appropriate use of –er suffix	Total % of inappropriate use of –er suffix
FCE Demonstration School	59%	40%
G S SSDukawiya	62%	38%
G S SDanladiNasidi	44%	56%
G S Jaoji	34%	66%
G S Charanchi	48%	525
G S SZawaciki	42%	58%

Table I shows the performance of students in the use of the –er suffix on words. Students from FCE Demonstration made 1758 correct use of the –er suffix while they made 1202 wrong use of the –er suffix.1838 correct use of the –er suffix was made by Dukawiya students as against 1122 wrong use. Students of G S S Danladi Nasidi scored 1311 correct use and 1649 wrong use of the suffix. Whereas G S Jaoji students scored 1012 correct use and 1948 wrong use of the –er suffix,

the G S Chiranci scored 1413 correct use and 1547 wrong use of the –er suffix. Finally G S SZawaciki scored 1251 correct use and 1709 wrong use of the –er suffix.

Table II shows the percentage of appropriate as well as the inappropriate use of the –er suffix manifested in the test. FCE Demonstration students scored 59% appropriate use against 40% inappropriate use. G S Dukawuya made 62% appropriate use and 38% inappropriate use. The students scored 56%

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appropriate attempt and 44%inappropriate attempts. In addition, the students from Jaoji G S S. scored 66% appropriate use and 34% inappropriate use. While G S S. Chiranci appropriately use -er suffix at the rate of 52% and 48% inappropriately, the student of Zawaciki G S S. scored 58% appropriate use and 42% inappropriate use.

In Tables I, II, it is clearly indicated that the students performed above average in the use of –er suffix in word structure. The researcher concludes that from the scores it shows that the subjects performed well in their use of –er suffix. The difference between the correct responses and the wrong ones, which is not so wide, is clear evidence. The implication is that the only challenge rest with overgeneralization of the rules.

TABLEIII
THE OVERALL TOTAL SCORES OBTAINED ON TEST OF WORD FORMATION USING –ER SUFFIX FOR ALL THE SCHOOLS

School	No. of correct formation of word	% of correct formation of words	No. of wrong formation of word	% of wrong formation of words
FCE Demonstration School	1758	**59%**	1202	**40%**
G S S. Dukawiya	1838	**62%**	1122	**38%**
G S SDanladiNasidi	1311	**44%**	1649	**56%**
G S S. Jaoji	1012	**34%**	1948	**66%**
G S S. Charanchi	1413	**48%**	1547	**525**
G S SZawaciki	1251	**42%**	1709	**58%**
Overall total	*8583*	*48%*	*9177*	*52%*

III. DISCUSSIONS

From Table III, the students scored an overall total of 8583 equivalent to 48% of correct responses and 9177 equivalent to 52% wrong responses respectfully. The total scores depicted in the overall schools indicate that there are inconsistencies. Despite the inconsistencies, which is manifested in the total number of correct responses and wrong responses the students; performance is quite impressive. This goes to show that there are not morphological inconsistencies but there are errors because of the frequencies with which such words occur. Reference [10] confirms that the frequency with which words are used determine one's ability to comprehend, produce and retain the words.

IV. FINDINGS

The findings show that there are no morphological inconsistencies but there are errors because the words are with what [nine] refers to as surface frequency words. The study concludes that the inconsistencies are not so significant because it shows that most of the students mastered the basic morphological rule. The errors committed are because of unfamiliarity with the words and their effort to over generalize the rule of word formation.

V. CONCLUSION

Reference [5] maintained that how often they are used words retained it in memory. The researcher recommends the teachers to teach the students the morphological structures adequately. Real life use of the morphemes needs to be communicative. This will increase the frequency in the use of the words with surface frequency. The study also recommends that English reader should incorporate rigorous and meaningful exercises on morphological structure. The significance of this is evident in the findings of [11], which revealed that suffix frequency play major role in children awareness of the stress placement. This implies that the easiest way to increase the frequency of suffix occurrence is to create numerous and thought provoking exercises on morphological structure in the students English Readers. Furthermore, teachers need to reinvigorate varying morphological structures into the teaching and learning process. This will familiarize the students with the morphological structures, thereby making them to retain the learnt words and arrest the problem of overgeneralizations. [7] Prove this who said that suffix frequencies affect the rate of learning the suffixes and their rules.

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