

Tense and Aspect in Texts Produced in the Nigerian ESL Situation

Roseline Abonego Adejare
Department of Language, Arts and Social Science Education
Lagos State University, Nigeria

ABSTRACT

This study describes tense and aspect in texts produced in the Nigerian ESL situation and highlights the pedagogic implications. Existing descriptions neither characterise tense and aspect in texts nor use non-English as a mother tongue data. Four lessons recorded in selected secondary schools in Lagos, Nigeria were transcribed. Some 3,069 verbal groups that constitute the data were identified. The finite forms were first identified before those marked for tense and aspect. The systemic grammatical model served as analytical tool. Results show that tense represents 71% of the data and 80% of finite whereas aspect constitutes 9% and 10% respectively. Present tense (72%) dominated past (20%) and future (8%) tenses. Single tense selection (78%) was dominant; double (21%) and triple (1%) tense forms were low. The simple present (54%) and future-in-future (0.05%) tenses were respectively the highest and lowest occurring tense forms. Twenty-four meanings of tense occurred. Perfective aspect was far more infrequent, and the progressive far less infrequent, than reported. They represent 6% and 6.3% of the data and 3% and 4% of finite respectively. The present progressive (80%) and present perfective (93%) dominated. Tense and aspectual forms were selected according to the subject matter, but each system's relative frequency should determine the pedagogic attention it attracts.

KEYWORDS: Tense, Aspect, Present Tense, Past Tense, Future Tense, Recursive Tense, Progressive Aspect, Perfective Aspect, Pedagogic Implications

1. INTRODUCTION

Tense and aspect are the most closely related of the seven systems that converge on the English verbal group because they both deal with time. But they are different because they account for time relations in different ways. Tense locates the time referred to in a text's situation to the time of the utterance, whereas aspect, as Comrie (1985) puts it, deals with the "internal temporal constituency of a situation" (p.9). Whereas tense is deictic because it explicitly or implicitly makes reference to the time of utterance relative to the time of the situation, aspect is non-deictic because it is concerned mainly with duration or distribution of time (Lyons,1968;1977). However, tense and aspect are sometimes not distinguished in existing descriptions. This is either due to their relatedness, or the conceptual and terminological confusion of the two systems, which has historical origin, or both (Comrie,1976; Lyons,1977).

Although tense and aspect are widely studied, there is no known corpus-based description aimed at their characterisation in a given text typology. There may be none still that derives data from the Nigerian, or any other non-English as a mother tongue (EMT), situation. Consequently, information on, for instance, the frequency of present tense relative to past and future tenses in a given text, is lacking. Yet, such information is important given the place of tense and aspect in English grammar and in the acquisition of English as a second language (ESL). Both systems are so significant that it becomes expedient to attempt to present facts about their pattern of occurrence in texts. A systematic, corpus-based description of tense and aspect would lead to better teaching and learning, and better grammatical usage, in the Nigerian ESL use context. It would also resolve the controversy associated with the description of tense, the confusion between tense and aspect, and users' tendency to choose aspect where tense is more appropriate.

Tense is particularly difficult for Nigerian learners and users of English (Aremo,1985; Jowitt,1991); it is unarguably the most dreaded aspect of English grammar, so much so that the fear of tense is regarded by some as the beginning of *grammatical wisdom*. Knowing the tenses and applying them correctly is often equated with good grammatical usage (There was once a joke about a prominent public figure who made grammatical errors *because he was absent from school the day tense was taught*). This paper therefore describes the manifestation of tense and aspect in texts produced in the Nigerian ESL situation with a view to characterising them in terms of form and meaning. It also highlights the implications that these might have for grammatical pedagogy in general and tense and aspect teaching in particular.

2. SOME THEORETICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE VIEWPOINTS

Tense is a linguistic category for handling time relations (Crystal,1971; Leech & Svartvik, 1975; Greenbaum,1996). It varies from language to language and languages like Chinese do not mark tense (Lyons,1977; Halliday,1978). English is one of the languages in which tense is marked, but the number of tenses is a subject of great controversy (Lyons,1968; Comrie,1985), leading to three descriptions of tense: the traditional, structural and systemic (cf. Aremo, 1985).

Traditionally, three tenses are recognised for English in line with the tripartite subdivision of time into past, present and future. The present and past tenses are inherent in the form of the verb (Hornby,1975; Nelson, 2001), while future tense is marked principally by *will* and *shall*. There are also secondary tenses, such as the present continuous tense and present perfect tense. The structural description, however, contends that English has only two tenses (present and past), based on the morphology of the verb, and that future tense does not exist, although future time may be marked using several means including *will* and *shall*. Proponents of the structural description further argue that *will* and *shall*, the traditional future tense markers, are no tense forms but modals (Jespersen,1933; Uldall, 1967; Strang,1969; Christophersen & Sandved, 1969; Quirk et al.,1985; Palmer, 1987; Greenbaum,1996).

But tense needs not be morphologically marked. Moreover, being modals is not the only formal attribute of *will* and *shall*. For instance, Coates (1983) refers to *will* and *shall* as “future tense” modals, and notes that “tense and modality overlap where there is reference to the future”(p. 233). Comrie (1985) particularly demonstrates grammatically distinct future tense and modal

uses of *will*, but concludes that the examples suggest, rather than prove, the existence of future tense. It is in apparent recognition of these grammatical facts that Palmer (1990) acknowledges that there is a future tense system marked by *will*, *shall* and BE GOING TO.

The systemic description recognises three tenses in English in line with the traditional description of tense. It argues that the mechanism for producing future tense is quite different from that of present and past and that languages exhibit such morphological irregularities (Halliday, 1976; Aremo, 1985). Future tense is thus marked by *will* and *shall*, in addition to *going to*. Not all systemists support this argument, though. Scott et al. (1968) and Nixon (1979), for instance, insist on a two-term tense system for English.

The argument for a two-term tense system for English appears to be a model-imposed one, not backed by existing grammatical facts. Quirk et al. (1985) reveal this much:

It remains only to mention that present and past are also interpreted on a grammatical level, in reference to tense. Here, however, the threefold opposition is reduced to two, since morphologically English has no future form of the verb in addition to present and past forms. Some grammarians have argued for a third, ‘future tense’, maintaining that English realizes this tense by the use of an auxiliary verb construction (such as *will* + infinitive): *but we prefer to follow those grammarians who have treated tense strictly as a category realized by verb inflection. In this grammar, then, we do not talk about the FUTURE as a formal category: what we do say is that certain grammatical constructions are capable of expressing the semantic category FUTURE TIME.* (p. 176) (Emphasis added)

Uniquely the systemic description argues that tense is recursive; it is marked more than once in a two- or multiple- element verbal group (Halliday, 1976; Aremo, 1985; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). For example, two tenses, past-in-past, are selected in “had taken”. The structural description is strongly opposed to recursiveness, maintaining that tense selection is made only once in a given verbal group. Confronted once again with grammatical reality, Palmer (1987) agrees that a complex verbal group may indeed mark tense twice, such as “a sequence of present-past and past-future” in “*John seems to have seen Mary yesterday*” and “*John intended to come tomorrow*” respectively. However, while he recognises the “possibility of double time marking” in “*John was coming tomorrow*”, he curiously fails to do so in “*John has come*” and “*John is coming*” (p.30). This raises the question whether Palmer’s notion of recursive tense does not extend fully to the structurally compound verbal group. Like future tense, it would appear that the argument against recursive tense is a question of model preference; it is not supported by natural language data.

The systemic description of tense is adopted for this work because it is more in line with the linguistic realities of English and can therefore account for all naturally occurring tense forms. So, there shall be three tenses (present, past, and future) and there shall be recursive tense. Each tense form is associated with special meanings and functions, such as the use of the present to

make reference to the past and future, in addition to present time (Quirk et al., 1985; Leech 1987).

Like tense, aspect deals with time, although in a different way. Strang (1969) states that aspect is concerned with “the manner in which the ‘action’ denoted by the verb is considered as being carried out” (p.143) (cf.Greenbaum,1996). For Quirk et al.(1985), it “reflects the way in which the verb action *is regarded or experienced* with respect to time”; it does not relate “the time of the situation to any other time-point” (p.188).

There are two terms in the system of aspect: *perfective* and *progressive*. The perfective, marked by auxiliary HAVE and the x+n form, refers to *completeness* of the verbal action, while the progressive, marked by auxiliary BE and the x+g form, refers to *incompleteness* of the verbal action. According to Comrie (1976), the past perfective (pluperfect) expresses “a relation between a past state and an even earlier situation” (p. 53). It makes reference to the anteriority of the time of event denoted, relative to the time of orientation of the speech event in the past. Quirk et al. (1985) report that “approximately ten per cent of finite verb phrases are perfective”, “less than 5 per cent of verb phrases are progressive” (pp.190,198), and that the progressive is more frequent in conversation than in scientific discourse. Their description of aspectual forms and meanings is adopted for this work.

Existing reports show that aspect is syntactically marked in Yoruba (Comrie,1976) and that Nigerians tend to use static verbs progressively, fail to distinguish the progressive and perfective (Odumuh,1987), and get confused with the past perfective (Tench,1987). In an earlier study based on the same data used for the current one, Adejare (2010b) reports that errors of tense and aspect respectively represent 14% and 4% and that the choice of aspect where tense is more appropriate, typified by the use of the progressive instead of the x+s simple present tense form, is the most recurring error involving the wrong choice of system.

3. METHODOLOGY

Four lessons on Christian Religious Knowledge (R), Geography (G), Physics (P), and Chemistry (C) were tape recorded in selected senior secondary schools in Lagos State, Nigeria. The topics taught were respectively *The Mission of the Church*, *The Drainage System*, *Electric Field*, and *Nitrogen*. Each text was orthographically transcribed, and the clauses and verbal groups therein were identified and marked. They respectively yielded 780, 668, 757 and 864 verbal groups. These give a total of 3,069 verbal groups, which constitutes the data for the study. Each text was separately examined to identify the finite verbal groups. These were 732(94%), 615(92%), 597(79%) and 795 (92%) for Christian Religious Knowledge, Geography, Physics and Chemistry respectively. Altogether, there were 2,739 finite verbal groups or 89% of the corpus. Each finite verbal group was examined in the context of its clause to determine whether or not it was marked for tense. The present, past and future tense forms were subsequently identified and accounted for. The same was done for aspect. The texts were further examined to determine each system’s semantic manifestations. The scale-and-category version of the systemic grammatical model, complemented by simple percentages, served as analytical tool.

4. ANALYSIS OF DATA

In the analysis of data presented below, examples illustrating each form are listed, with the verbal group’s number, preceded by the source text’s code. Because of limited space, contextual examples are provided only in respect of the meanings and functions associated with tense and aspect. Each excerpt is preceded by the source text’s code, the letter K for clause and the clause’s number, with the item illustrated marked. Where applicable, the frequency of each form under focus is enclosed in brackets. The presentation begins with tense.

4.1 Tense

There were 2,183 verbal groups marked for tense. This represents 71% of the data and 80% of finite. In Chemistry, Christian Religious Knowledge, Geography, and Physics tense marking represents 74, 76, 76 and 58 per cent of the data and 81, 81, 83 and 74 per cent of finite, with 640, 593, 507, and 443 verbal groups respectively. Tense marking was lowest in Physics, where non-finite verbal group occurrence was highest (21%). Present tense was dominant (1,566 or 72%); past (440 or 20%) and future (177 or 8%) tenses were low occurring. Table 1 below shows the general pattern of tense marking.

TENSE FORMS	R	G	P	C	TOTAL
Present tense	213	458	368	527	1,566
(%)	36	90	83	83	72
Past tense	361	18	26	35	440
(%)	61	4	6	6	20
Future tense	19	31	49	78	177
(%)	3	6	11	12	8
TOTAL	593	507	443	640	2,183
% of data	76	76	58	74	71
% of finite	81	83	74	81	80

Table 1 General pattern of tense marking

Single tense marking was dominant (1,706 or 78%); double (456 or 21%) and triple (21 or 1%) tense forms were low. No quadruple tense selection was made. Table 2 below displays these facts.

RECURSIVENESS	R	G	P	C	TOTAL
Single tense	451	345	387	523	1,706
(%)	76	68	88	82	78
Double tense	135	151	56	114	456
(%)	23	30	12	18	21
Triple tense	7	11	0	3	21

(%)	1	2	0	0.1	1
TOTAL	593	507	443	640	2,183
% of data	76	76	58	74	71
% of finite	81	83	74	81	80

Table 2 Recursive tense selection

Verbal groups marked for present tense represent 51% of the data and 57% of finite. Present tense was highest in Geography (458 or 90%) and lowest in Christian Religious Knowledge (213 or 36%); it represents 83% of tense marking in both Physics (368) and Chemistry(527). Single present tense marking was again dominant (1,177 or 75%), as present tense was selected twice in 372 (24%), and thrice in 18 (1%), verbal groups respectively. Details are shown in Table 3 below.

PRESENT TENSE FORMS	R	G	P	C	TOTAL
Single present tense (%)	146	299	317	415	1,177
	69	65	86	79	75
Double present tense (%)	63	148	51	109	371
	30	33	14	21	24
Triple present tense (%)	4	11	0	3	18
	2	2	0	1	1
TOTAL (%)	213	458	368	527	1,566
	36	90	83	83	72
Recursive total (%)	67	159	51	112	389
	31	35	14	21	25

Table 3 Present tense selection

Present tense accounted for 81% (384) of recursive tenses in the data. The single present tense form (that is, the traditional simple present tense) manifested as H-Type (1,144 or 97%) and particled HQ-Type (33 or 3%) verbal groups, with the x+s form (668) more recurring than the x+o base form (450). Examples are *thankR32*, *comes uponR292*, *flowsG9*, *haveG223*, *experiencesP4*, *combineP17*, *isC3*, and *rememberC108*.

The double present tense form featured syntactically as MH-Type, catenated HQ-Type, and particled MHQ-Type verbal groups. There were three variants thus: present-in-present (255), past-in-present (78), and future-in-present(39). The present-in-present tense form is exemplified by *doesn't reactC446*, *don't knowG488*, *do thinkR318*, *do understandP118*, *are joiningG39*, *are distillingC415*, *is pushingP713*, *are not writingR510*, *is taking inC52*, and *start solvingP246*.

Examples of the past-in-present tense form are *has not collected*G170, *'s read*R113, *has shifted*P541, and *have talked about*C584, while those of the future-in-present tense form are *wants to receive*R179, *tries to circumvent*G149, *want to manufacture*C267, and *need to find*P317.

Triple present tense marking featured as future-in-present-in-present(6, e.g., *don't want to be teaching*C845), past-in-past-in-present(8, e.g., *has been rejuvenated*G558), and present-in-past-in-present(4, e.g., *have been discussing*R565) forms. As the examples show, the verbal groups are either catenated MHQ-Type or double auxiliary modifier MH-Type structural variants.

Past tense marking represents 14% of the data and 16% of the finite verbal groups. It was highest in Christian Religious Knowledge (361 or 81%), where it constitutes 61% of total tense marking, due to the remoteness in time of the Biblical stories that formed the topic taught. In contrast, past tense was infrequently chosen in Geography (18 or 4%), Physics (26 or 6%) and Chemistry (35 or 6%). Only 19% (83) of verbal groups marked for past tense was recursive, with triple past tense accounting for an insignificant 1% (3) and occurring in Christian Religious Knowledge only. There were 80 verbal groups in which past tense selection was made twice. The traditional simple past tense form (single past tense) was therefore dominant (357 or 81%). Table 4 below shows the pattern of past tense marking in the texts.

PAST TENSE FORMS	R	G	P	C	TOTAL
Single past tense	287	16	23	31	357
(%)	79	89	89	89	81
Double past tense	71	2	3	4	80
(%)	20	11	12	11	18
Triple past tense	3	0	0	0	3
(%)	1	0		0	1
TOTAL	361	18	26	35	440
(%)	61	4	6	5.44	20
Recursive tense	74	2	3	4	83
(%)	81	11	4	5	19

Table 4 Past tense selection

The single past tense form featured as H-Type (332) and particled HQ-Type (25) verbal groups. Some examples are *was*R27, *happened*R150, *said*C259, *noticed*P649, *gave*G220, *came upon*R55, and *looked at*C681. Double past tense occurred essentially as present-in-past (65, e.g., *was preaching*R145, *was going on*R446, *started preaching*R139, *did baptise*R190, and *did get*P56), past-in-past (6, e.g., *had believed*R201), and future-in-past (9, e.g., *wanted to minister*R382). Triple past tense marking occurred as present-in-past-in-past (1: *had been demonstrating*R166) and future-in-present-in-past (2: *did stay on to do*R430, 431) only.

Future tense marking represents 6% of the data and 7% of finite. In Chemistry, Physics, Geography, and Christian Religious Knowledge future tense selection represents 13, 11, 6 and 3 per cent respectively of total tense marking. It was highest in Chemistry (78 or 44%) and lowest in Christian Religious Knowledge (19 or 11%); Geography and Physics respectively featured 31 (17%) and 50 (27%) forms. Five markers of future tense were identified as follows: *will* (121), *BE GOING TO* (49), *BE TO* (9), *BE ABOUT TO* (3), and *shall* (1). Single future tense marking was dominant (172 or 95%). Examples can be listed thus: *will be*C23, *will get*P370, *will happen* G384, *won't believe*R770, *'m going to explain*C361, *are going to add*P20, *are to tell*R603, *was about to do*R689, and *shall...*G334. Double future tense form accounted for 5%, and it occurred as present-in-future (4, e.g., *will be passing*R653) and future-in-future (1: *will decide to complain* G431) only. As Table 5 below shows, no triple future tense form occurred.

FUTURE TENSE FORMS	R	G	P	C	TOTAL
Single tense	18	30	47	77	172
(Percentage)	90	97	96	99	95
Double tense	1	1	2	1	5
(%)	10	3	4	1	6
Triple tense	0	0	0	0	0
(%)	0	0	0	0	0
TOTAL	19	31	49	78	177
(%)	3	6	13	15	8
Recursive total	1	1	2	1	5
(%)	10	3	6	1	3

Table 5 Future tense selection

There were thus sixteen different tense forms. These are listed in descending order as follows: simple present (1,177 or 54%), simple past (357 or 16%), present-in-present (254 or 12%), simple future (172 or 8%), past-in-present (78 or 4%), present-in-past (65 or 3%), future-in-present (39 or 2%), future-in-past (9 or 0.41%), past-in-past-in-present (8 or 0.4%), future-in-present-in-present (6 or 0.3%), past-in-past (6 or 0.3%), present-in-future (4 or 0.18%), present-in-past-in-present (4 or 0.18), future-in-past-in-past (2 or 0.09%), present-in-past-in-past (1 or 0.05%), and future-in-future (1 or 0.05%). All the sixteen tense forms were present in Christian Religious Knowledge (except future-in-future); there were eleven in Geography, nine in Geography and eight in Physics. Single tense marking was dominant, and so was present tense selection. No complex tense form exceeding three was found. The texts were thus characterised by relative simplicity, tense-wise.

Twenty-four meanings and functions of tense were identified. Present tense indicated ten as follows: reference to present time, instantaneous present (demonstrative), instantaneous present

(performative), habitual, state, hypothetical, historic past, situational use of the present tense, reference to future time, and eternal truths. (The event meaning of the present tense did not manifest because events were described only in Christian Religious Knowledge where the past tense form was dominant.) These are respectively illustrated as [1] to [10] below.

- [1] PK349 I *think* (379) we have discovered the mistake.
- [2] GK 219 Let me demonstrate in a simple form. K220 Come here. K222 Meanwhile, these *are* (254) my children, the tributaries. K223 I *am* (255) the main river...K224 As I *am moving* (256)...
- [3] PK584 I *disagree* (643) with that. K585 *Thank* (644) you.
- [4] RK180 The average Jew *sees* (231) himself as somebody that is better than every other person. K181 They *see* (233) themselves as a superior race.
- [5] CK15 Nitrogen *has* (19) an atomic number.
- [6] RK623 So you can confidently write on this if it *comes out* (780) in the exam. (R: Yes, Ma.)
- [7] RK357 Which other ways did the Holy Spirit manifest himself in Samaria?...K387 We have conversion of sinners. K388 That's the most important one to them anyway. K389 Every other thing *comes* (494) to them as a bonus.
- [8] GK529 *Are you talking* (575) to me?
- [9] RK104 Who *is reading* (133) for us?...K415 So that is all about the activities of Philip in Samaria, K461 which *takes* (526) us , K417 *takes* (527) us on to something else.
- [10] CK 286 Air *is* (316) a mixture of gases (cf. RK 436 It 's (548) in Africa).

The past tense form expressed eight meanings thus: reference to past time, hypothetical, situational use of the past tense, state, event, habitual, anaphoric reference, and cataphoric reference. These are illustrated accordingly in [11] to [18] below. The use of the past tense to refer to present and future time did not occur, and no instance of attitudinal past or indirect speech was found. The excerpts are as follows.

- [11] CK2 How *was* (1) yesterday?
- [12] PK590 Now if you *noticed* (649) what I did...
- [13] RK119 What happened? (R: Inaudible) K120 *Did you hear* (153) my question? K121 because you don't know what to answer (cf. PK43 *Did you get* (50) the question?)
- [14] GK436 When you *were* (487) in SS1,
- [15] RK302 And immediately they came down from the chariot K603 and Philip *baptised* (757) him.
- [16] RK559 Even as a sheep he *did not complain* (696).
- [17] RK108 But when he went on, on to Samaria, K109 he *started preaching* (139). (The anaphoric reference is to *went on* (138).)
- [18] PK618 These three charges are arranged on a straight line, K619 unlike the question we *solved* (680) earlier (The cataphoric reference is to *earlier*.)

Six semantic functions were associated with the future tense. These are reference to future time, fulfilled future arrangement in the past, fulfilled future intention in the present or past, future expectation, future prediction, and hypothetical. These are illustrated as [19] to [24] respectively.

- [19] GK419 I'll use (467) the map that I'll give (468) you.
- [20] RK27 To go into the world, K28 which means that the gospel was now to go (35) beyond the regions of the Jews (The gospel did spread to other places; so, it was fulfilled).
- [21] RK93 We are going to read (123) a little... K556 and that was what Jesus was about to do (689). K557 He was about to die (690) for the world.
(Both intentions were fulfilled. The Bible reading session did take place and Jesus did willingly die, according to the Holy Bible.)
- [22] RK487 You listened when she was reading. K486 You are to tell (603) me what you've just enjoyed.
- [23] PK258 The sum of the square of the two charge (s) will give (274) us the resultant. K259 That means f_3 will be (276) equal to f_1 bracket squared plus f_2 bracket squared.
 $f_3 = (f_1)^2 + (f_2)^2$
- [24] GK73... if your energy is compared with mine, K74 if we are to run (75) to the gate...

In addition to the various meanings illustrated above, the tenses also served textual functions in the spoken instructional texts analysed. Since these functions have been elaborately discussed and illustrated together with those of other verbal groups (Adejare, 2012), it is only sufficient to identify them here. Verbal groups marked for present tense served to introduce the lesson, transit from one lesson's segment to another, state facts, enumerate points, ask questions, describe entities, define terms and concepts, declare intention, state and affirm positions, make tentative assumptions, rationalise, infer, establish relationships, and maintain class control. These functions tend to underscore its dominance in the texts. In Christian Religious Knowledge where it was dominant, the past tense was most effectively used in the narration of the Biblical stories told. Its use in description, commentary, interrogation, recapitulation, enumeration of points, and recalling past processes were noteworthy. The future tense was used to predict results of mathematical operations and chemical reactions in Physics and Chemistry respectively. Its use in declaring intention facilitated comprehension by providing clearly defined goals for listening.

4.2 Aspect

A total of 270 verbal groups representing 9% of the data and 10% of finite were marked for aspect. In Geography, Christian Religious Knowledge, Physics and Chemistry, verbal groups marked for aspect represent 19% and 20%, 8% and 9%, 5% and 6%, and 5% and 6% respectively of the data and its finite forms with 125, 69, 38 and 44 occurrences. The progressive (173 or 64%) was 1.8 times more recurring than the perfective (97 or 36%); it represents 6% of the data and 6.3% of finite. This sharply contrasts with the perfective's 3% and 4% respectively. Thus the progressive was far less infrequent, and the perfective far more infrequent, than the reported less than 5% of verbal groups and 10% of finite respectively. Only in Physics (4.2%) was the estimated less than 5% reflected; it was far exceeded in Geography where it accounted for 12% of the data and 13% of finite.

Lyon's (1977) assertion that 'aspect is ontogenetically more basic than tense' (p.705) could explain this trend. Jowitt's (1991) suggestion that Nigerian learners of English are more comfortable with the progressive can also not be ignored. There is the pedagogic dimension too.

With the probable exception of BE (*am* and *is*), the Nigerian learner encounters the English verb first in its x+g progressive aspect form and as presented in popular English books. Taiwo et al. (1990) give examples such as “*She is sewing a dress*” (pp. 32-33). Indeed, the sequence of introducing the lexical verb is x+g, x+o, x+d, x+s, and x+n (Adejare, 2010b). This is instructive when attempting to explain users’ difficulty with tense and aspectual forms generally.

The present progressive (139 or 80%) was far more recurring than the past progressive (34 or 20%). The present perfective (90 or 93%) similarly dominated its past perfective counterpart (7 or 7% of finite), which occurred exclusively in Christian Religious Knowledge. Sample present progressive forms are *is moving*G133, *are trying to cool*C462, *is being pulled*P712, and *are not writing*R513. An example of the past progressive is *was reading* (619). The present perfective featured examples like *have learnt*R45, *has matured*G176, *have removed*P511, and *have talked about*C584 while the past perfective had *had done* (R362), among others. The present progressive and the present perfective aspect were generally far more recurring than their past form counterparts due to the nature of the topics taught. The pattern of occurrence of aspectual forms is displayed in Table 6 below.

ASPECTUAL FORMS	R	G	P	C	TOTAL
Progressive	38	78	25	32	173
Present	6	77	25	31	139
Past	32	1	0	1	34
Perfective	25	47	13	12	97
Present	18	47	13	12	90
Past	7	0	0	0	7
TOTAL	63	125	38	44	270
% of data	8	19	5	5	9
% of finite	9	20	6	6	10

Table 6 Aspectual forms

The three basic meanings of state, event and habit (absent in Christian Religious Knowledge) associated with aspect were found and are respectively illustrated in [25] to [27] below.

[25] PK501 The decimal place *has shifted* (541). K502 So you are wrong.

[26] RK498 What *was he doing* (616)? ... K501 What *was he reading* (619)?

[27] CK146 Another hydrogen ion *is joining* (165).

Aspectual forms were associated with far fewer textual functions than tense forms. Although these functions—enumerating points, asking questions, and describing entities (actions)—have also

been illustrated (Adejare, 2012), it is useful to demonstrate how aspectual forms functioned to make meaning and achieve pedagogic goals in two specific contexts. The first is the combined progressive-perfective occurrence in the differentiation of the stages of the river in Geography.

[28] GK86 So stage one characteristic features...K91 One, the river flow(s) swiftly ... K102 Secondly ... K103 the river now *is eating* (110) deeply into the soil through a process called corrosive erosion...K105 that is, when the river now *is moving* (113) ... K107 It's *eating* (116) the soil deeply, vertically...K143 Now when we talk about vertical erosion... K145 the valley is narrow...K147 It *has not collected* (170) enough river or water from the tributaries or distributaries that will make it widen. K148 Now, we move to the middle course of the river or stage two of the river. K149 That is, a stage that the river *has matured* (175) ...K152 It is old age ...K156 There are certain features that stage two is likely, eh likely to have. K157 One, ...erosion is pronounced ...K162 It is lateral erosion ...K182b because the volume of water *has increased* (207)...K190 The tributaries *are now joining* (215)...K210a The water that the tributaries and distributaries *are collecting* (238) now *are having* (239), *are getting* (240) to the main stream...

As [28] shows, *is eating* (110) describes an on-going, continuous event at the upper course of the river (stage one); *has not collected* (170) explains the reason for the corrosive action; and, *has matured* (175) appropriately describes stage two (resulting state with current relevance). Thus the middle course of the river will continue to be associated with maturity because the volume of water *has increased* (207). The cause of the increase is explained using *are collecting* (238), a form that, despite its semantic opposition with *has increased* (207), is considered contextually appropriate because the waters of the tributaries and distributaries would keep getting emptied into the main river. This is the sense in which all the progressive forms in this particular context indicate *permanence* and not *temporariness*; it is also for the same reason that the perfective forms would have current relevance. However, in view of the river as a single entity, *temporariness* and *completion* would be valid meaning interpretations. The distinction between the upper and middle courses of the river is thus perfectly made.

The second excerpt illustrates two points about the past perfective (past-in-past tense) form: its effective use in narration and users' apparent difficulty with it.

[29] RK156 He was a magician. K156 Many people *had believed* (201) him for a long time. K162 So he *had carried* (208) them (along) for a long time. K163 and they believe (d) that he had great power...K166 Then, when he saw something superior to what he *had been demonstrating* (214), K167 he also bowed...K240 Knowing he *had been* (308) a magician...K323 After everything *has* (had) *taken place* (422), K324 this man repented...K326 He *had seen* (425) the superiority of the word of God and the power of God over what he *was* (had been) *demonstrating* (426) (On Simon).

5. DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

This study reveals that there are three (not two) primary tenses in English (present, past and future) and that tense selection is made more than once in a compound or complex verbal group. Thus there is future tense and there is recursive tense. Single tense marking was dominant and

double tense selection was low. Triple tense selection was almost insignificant and no quadruple tense form occurred. This indicates a general semantic simplicity. It equally suggests that the texts did not require the use of complex tense forms or that the teachers could not effectively handle them.

The analysis also confirms the meanings and functions generally associated with the tenses, though not everyone of those identified occurred in every text. For example, habitual past and historic past occurred only in Christian Religious Knowledge, whereas state present was absent in that text. While hypothetical future featured only in Geography, Chemistry was the only text in which hypothetical past did not manifest as meaning. The use of the present tense to express eternal truth and the situational use of the past tense did not occur in Geography. Similarly, the situational use of the present tense failed to manifest in Chemistry. Anaphoric and cataphoric references (past tense) were found in Christian Religious Knowledge and Physics only, probably because the situational context for their use was absent in Geography and Chemistry.

Some meanings were common to all the four texts, namely the use of the three tenses to refer to present, past and future time respectively, instantaneous present (performative), instantaneous present(demonstrative: except Christian Religious Knowledge), habitual present, state past, event past, and hypothetical present. Other universal meanings and functions are present tense in reference to future time, fulfilled future intention, and future prediction. The use of the past tense in indirect speech and attitudinal past did not manifest.

Contrary to Quirk et al.'s(1985) suggestion, all three occurrences of BE ABOUT TO indicated fulfilment. This is one advantage of corpus data.

A correlation between high non-finite verbal group occurrence and low tense marking was found. Tense was least selected in Physics, where non-finite verbal group occurrence was highest, largely because of the presence of *raised* (80), *squared* (33) and *divided*(4), three morphologically invariant Mathematics passives that accounted for 73% of non-finite and 16% of total verbal group manifestation in that text. The topic taught required working problems for its explication, and four such problems were worked. This explains the high occurrence of the mathematical passives.

The percentage of aspect relative to both the data and its finite forms contrasts sharply with that of tense, despite their relatedness. Aspect accounted for 9% and 10% of the data and finite verbal groups whereas the proportion of tense was 71% and 80% respectively. This means that tense selection was made eight times more often than aspect. Since both select finite from the system of finiteness, it follows that in the corpus of finite verbal groups used the ratio of tense to aspect was 8:1.

Some explanations can be offered for the wide gap between tense forms and aspectual forms. First, only recursive tense forms may also manifest as aspect, and these constitute just 22% of tense marking whereas the single tense form accounted for 78%. Second, some double and triple tense forms lack the obligatory BE and HAVE auxiliary markers of aspect (e.g., *doesn't react* C446, *need to find* P317, *are going to read* P20, *will decide to complain* G431, and *was about to*

doR689) and so cannot manifest as aspect as well. Third, aspect's inherent semantic attributes of *completeness* and *incompleteness* restrict its scope of use to certain situational contexts. For instance, in the texts analysed the present perfective was suitable for enumerating mainly points already covered.

The numerical superiority of tense tends to support Quirk et al.'s (1985) finding that the progressive and perfective forms (aspect) are more infrequently used than their non-progressive and non-perfective counterparts (tense). However, the findings that less than 5% of verbal groups are progressive and approximately 10% of finite forms are perfective were reversed in our data. The progressive was far less infrequent (6%), and the perfective far more infrequent (4%), than the reported findings. The past perfective was rarer still. In general, the past progressive and the past perfective were far less recurring than the present progressive and present perfective. As with tense, it could be the case that the texts did not require the past aspectual forms beyond what was found. It is also not improbable that users' perceived difficulty with the past perfective, which was evident in the data, led to its avoidance.

Another thing that emerged from the analysis was that tense and aspectual choices (particularly the choice of the present as opposed to the past form) was dictated by the nature of the topics taught. Although the tenses were more evenly distributed in Christian Religious Knowledge than in Geography, Chemistry and Physics where there was a heavy slanting towards the present, 61% of past tense selection was made in Christian Religious Knowledge. Similarly, 94% of the past progressive (present-in-past tense), and all the past perfective (past-in-past tense) forms, occurred in that text. The historical nature of the subject matter explains this. In contrast, present tense, present progressive aspect (present-in-present tense), and present perfective aspect (past-in-present tense) were dominant in Geography, Chemistry and Physics because of the currency of the actions, processes, states and other features described.

6. CONCLUSION

This final section highlights the implications of the findings for the teaching of tense and aspect as concluding remarks. The grammatical model chosen for the study enabled an accurate and objective account of tense and aspect to be made. This should be consolidated, beginning with separate descriptions for tense and aspect to remove the confusion arising from the continued presentation of both systems in school grammars as just tense. Tense and aspect would thus be presented to learners more systematically and more accurately, with greatly enhanced recognisability, comprehensibility and usability. Simplicity that characterises school grammars generally should be the guiding principle, but this should not be at the expense of accurate grammatical knowledge.

The numerical superiority of tense means that its teaching deserves a greater attention than it is probably getting at the moment. This should be all encompassing (from selecting curriculum content for English, producing course books and textbooks for English, training teachers and their trainers, to actual classroom delivery). The relative significance and difficulty of each form should be taken into consideration at all times. For instance, the complex tense form (which is often avoided even when it is contextually imperative), the x+s present tense form (often

substituted with the present-in-present tense / present progressive aspect), and the past perfective aspectual/past-in-past tense form (often replaced with the x+d simple past tense / past-in-present tense / present perfective aspect/ present perfective progressive form), deserve a special focus.

Like every other aspect of grammar, tense and aspect should be presented in the tradition of the sociologically based language teaching approaches for meaningfulness and relevance. Contextualisation should be both the guiding principle and technique. The item approach, which treats grammatical form as discrete items devoid of meaning, should be deemphasised. Carefully chosen passages for comprehension can be used to illustrate how a given form behaves in context. Oral and written composition, language games, dialogue, and story-telling sessions can similarly be adapted to provide further practice in the recognition and use of tense and aspectual forms. An approach to tense and aspect that is predicated on meaning as an underlying descriptive and pedagogic goal would resolve the issues identified in a most profound way.

REFERENCES

- Adejare, R.A.(2010a). The English verbal group in spoken instructional texts: A grammatical study of English as a second language in Nigeria. A Ph. D thesis, University of Lagos.
- Adejare, R.A.(2010b). Teachers' competence in the language of instruction. In A. Onifade, A.O. Badejo, O. A. Akeredolu, S. Aina, R. A. Adejare, and T. Owolabi (Eds.), *Education: A communication channel for national development*. A book of readings in honour of Prof. Bashir Babatunde Oderinde (pp. 20-29). Lagos: Faculty of Education, Lagos State University.
- Adejare, R.A. (2012). Textual functions of the English verbal group. *English Linguistics Research*,1(2),153-164.
- Aremo, W.(1985).Three descriptions of tense system. *The Nigerian Language Teacher*, 6 (2), 41-49.
- Christophersen, P. & Sandved, A. O.(1969). *An advanced English grammar*. London: Macmillan.
- Coates, J. (1983). *The semantics of the modal auxiliaries*. London: Croom Helm.
- Comrie, B. (1976). *Aspect*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Comrie, B. (1985). *Tense*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Crystal, D.(1971). *Linguistics*. Middlesex: Penguin Books.
- Greenbaum, S. (1996).*The Oxford English grammar*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Halliday, M. A. K (1976). The English verbal group. In G.R. Kress (Ed.), *Halliday: System and function in language—Selected papers* (pp.136-158). London: Oxford University Press.
- Halliday, M. A. K. (1978). *Language as social semiotics*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Halliday, M. A. K. & Matthiessen, C.M.I.M. (2004). *An introduction to functional grammar*. (3rd Ed.). London: Hodder Arnold.
- Hornby, A. S.(1975).*Guide to patterns and usage in English*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Jespersen, O.(1933). *Essentials of English grammar*. London: George Allen & Unwin,
- Jowitt, D. (1991). *Nigerian English usage: An introduction*. Ikeja: Longman.
- Leech, G. N. & Svartvik, J.(1975). *A communicative grammar of English*. London: Longman.
- Lyons, J. (1968). *An introduction to theoretical linguistics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Lyons, J.(1977). *Semantics* (2Vols). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nelson, G.(2001). *English: An essential grammar*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Nixon, G.(1979). *Aspects of English structure*. Sheffield: Department of English, University of Sheffield.
- Odumuh, A. E.(1987). *Nigerian English*. Zaria: Ahmadu Bello University Press.
- Palmer, F. R. (1987). *The English verb* (2nd Ed.). London and New York: Longman.
- Palmer, F. R. (1990). *Modality and the English modals*. (2nd Ed.). London and New York: Longman.
- Quirk, R., Greenbaum, S., Leech, G. & Svartvik, J. (1985). *A comprehensive grammar of the English language*. London: Longman.
- Scott, F. S., Bowley, C. C., Brockett, C. S., Brown, J. G. & Goddard, P. R.(1968). *English grammar: A linguistic study of its classes and structures*. London: Heinemann.
- Strang, B. M. H.(1969). *Modern English structure*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Taiwo, O., Longe, L. & Ubahakwe, E.(1990). *Macmillan primary English course: Pupil's book 1*(2nd Ed.). Lagos: Macmillan Publishers Ltd.
- Tench, P.(1987). Rediscover grammar with David Crystal (Book Review). *Journal of English as Second Language*. 4, 154-158 .
- Uldall, H. J. (1967). Notes on the English tenses. In W.R. Lee (Ed.). *English Language Teaching Selections* (pp. 71-84). London: Oxford University Press.