

The Third Person Subject-Verb & Pronoun-Antecedent Concord in the Written English of Selected Nigerian Secondary School Students

Cecilia Folasade Ojetunde
Lagos State University of Education, Oto/Ijanikin

Abstract

This study examined the English third person subject-verb and pronoun-antecedent concord in the written English of selected Senior Secondary School students in Lagos State, with a view to determining their level of proficiency in the areas under study. The data were drawn from an essay writing exercise and a 20 item objective test, administered on 60 students from three secondary schools in Lagos State using purposive random sampling procedure. The findings revealed that out of the two areas of concord examined subject-verb concord had the higher degree of frequency rate across the three schools totaling 608, out of which 389 (63.98%) were correctly used while 219 (36.02%) were errors. For pronoun-antecedent concord, there were 130 instances, out of which 105 (80.77%) were correctly used while 25 (09.23%) were incorrectly used. Apparently, the students' application of the rules of concord was limited to simple structures of subject-verb and pronoun-antecedent concord and this accounted for the correct application of the familiar rules in the simple structure of concord while the complex structures in the third person subject-verb concord were not found in the students' texts and the right options were not selected in the objective test. The study therefore concluded that the students are yet to acquire a considerable degree of proficiency in the application of rules of concord in their written texts and that occurrence of error of concord may obscure meaning in language production. Hence, teachers of English, curriculum planners and Examination bodies are called upon to address the problem.

Keywords: Third person; subject/verb; pronoun /antecedent; concord

Introduction

The English language, being the language of formal education in Nigeria, is used for various academic activities. The language is a medium of instruction and a means of evaluating students' performance in all the subjects across the curriculum at all levels of education except the first three years of primary education. The poor performance of students in both the written and spoken forms of the language has therefore been a major concern for scholars and teachers. Scholars such as Alo (2005), Nayan (2009), Ojetunde (2010), etc. have attributed poor performance in English to such factors as ineffective methodology, insufficient number of teachers of English, use of substandard variety of English by teachers, influence of Nigerian indigenous languages and Pidgin, bilingualism and biculturalism and inevitable linguistic innovations that often give rise to errors in English language production.

As a teacher of English, it is observed that a majority of second language learners at the secondary school level has difficulty in constructing correct sentences in English. This is quite evident in their performances in internal and external examinations such as Senior Secondary School Certificate Examinations (SSSCE), General Certificate in Education (GCE), National Examination Council (NECO) etc. For students to convey their thoughts and ideas clearly and effectively, they need to master the rules of concord. Thus, this study is aimed at investigating the third person subject-verb and pronoun-antecedent concord in the written English of Nigerian secondary school students. The specific objectives of the study are to:

- i. identify the third person subject-verb and pronoun-antecedent concord as used by the students in their written texts;
- ii. find out which rules of concord within the sentence structure the students find difficult to apply, and;
- iii. make suggestions on the basis of the findings for improvements in the teaching and learning of grammar, particularly 'concord' in Nigerian Secondary Schools.

Literature Review

The major concern of this study is to examine critically and discuss the notion of concord with a view to determining the level of acquisition of the third person subject-verb and pronoun antecedent concord by Nigerian secondary school students. As Garraffa (1980) put it in Vigliocco & Nicol (1998) “the language production system has to get the details of form right”. These include details of syntax such as concord, word order and tense system. Thus, ‘concord’ is central and crucial to grammaticality and intelligibility in language production. As crucial as the subject is, we need to note that the terms ‘concord’ and ‘agreement’ have generated controversies and led to considerable debate among scholars. To some, the two words are synonymous and are used alternatively. For example, in Corbet (2003), Moravcsik (1978:333) gives “agreement (or concord) phenomena as a topic. Also Trask (1997:10) has “agreement” (also concord), Lyons (1968:239) has “concord or agreement”. Other linguists such as Bloomfield (1933:191) treat ‘agreement’ as the superordinate term. In other words, Bloomfield identifies three general terms of agreement, namely:

- i. Concord or congruence e.g. agreement of modifiers within the structure of noun phrase, and the agreement of predicate verbs
- ii. Government – *She does* her work diligently
- iii. Cross-reference – The students have resumed for 2012/2013 academic session. *They* are asked to bring *their* admission letters for registration.

In contrast to Bloomfield’s position and development from it, Greenberg (1978:50) in Corbet (2003) treats ‘concord’ as the wider term when he says;

It would be useful, then, to distinguish the wider notion of concord from agreement, the latter being a sub type in which the choice of alternative concord elements depend on the class to which the stem of

the governing item belongs, whether marked by an affix or not.

From Greenberg, matching in case within the noun phrase would count as an instance of concord, while gender would be an instance of agreement. For Bloomfield therefore, concord is a subset of agreement, while for Greenberg, agreement is a subset of concord (Corbet, 2003).

Our position in this study is that the two terms are synonymous and can be used interchangeably. Agreement or concord can be treated in terms of number, person, gender, tense and voice (Quirk and Greenbaum, 1973; Digga, 1990). Based on this, the present study adopts the term 'concord' (in order to avoid confusion with other technical use of 'agreement' in other disciplines) and focuses on subject-verb and pronoun-antecedent concord. Thus, concord in English relates to the form in which the different PARTS of a sentence relate to one another. This is usually expressed in terms of rules governing the relationship of various parts of a sentence (Akere, 1990). There have been many studies on concord; each dealing with different areas of concord in the sentence structure.

Dziemianko (2008) examined subject-verb concord with collective nouns or the count-mass distinction in order to determine which is more difficult for Polish learners of English and whether the degree of difficulty depends on the learner's proficiency in the foreign language. The study revealed that marking subject-verb concord in the case of collective subject nouns was as difficult for the participants as signaling the count-mass distinction by means of a definite article and zero article respectively. Similarly, Aremo (2003) worked on some uses of singular collective nouns such as, 'Congress', 'Council', 'Government', 'Management', 'Parliament' and 'Senate' in contemporary English. Palmer (1978:128) cited by Aremo (2003) maintains that the singular collective nouns in this category no longer have any need for the identify-specifying determiner (the) as there can be only one 'Parliament' for instance, in contexts where the word is used; in such an instance the item has, in effect, become a name, a proper noun. However, Palmer (1978) does

not give explanation why some other singular collective nouns such as *club*, *party* etc. do not by themselves become proper nouns even in situations where they also have unique, unambiguous reference. Aremo (2003) explained that members of a club or political party, who often use the item club or party with unique reference during discussions, would not say:

- Club } is aware of the problem
- Party }

Rather, they would say;

- The club } is aware of the problem
- The Party }

It should be noted that some singular collective nouns such as *crowd*, *family*, *gang*, *audience*, *class* etc. do normally take identify-specifying determiner (the) when making a unique or particular reference: For example:

The family has decided to sell the property. (i.e., you know the family that I am talking about.)

However, uniqueness in this sense is different from the special uses (without any determiner) where certain singular collective nouns assume the syntactic and semantic characteristics of members of the main classes of proper nouns (Quirk et al 1972 in Aremo, 2003). The present study opines that the use and omission of the definite article should be seen as a clear syntactic manifestation of different perceptions of noun referent in a given context.

Vigliocco and Nicol (1998) in their own study on concord investigated whether hierarchical relations and word order can be separated in sentence production. The two experiments used in the study were to assess whether subject-verb agreement errors such as:

“The time for fun and games are over”

require linear proximity of a so-called 'local' noun 'games', in the example, to the verb 'are'. In the first experiment, the proximity effect was found when the participants were asked to complete sentential beginnings of such expression as:

"The helicopter for the flights ..."

While in the second experiment, they were asked to produce a question such as;

"Is the helicopter for the flight safe?"

The study tried to find out whether the construction of hierarchical structure on the basis of the grammatical functions assigned to the lexical elements is separable from the linearization of these constituent phrases. This was done by looking at this effect of a local noun (proximity concord) on agreement errors. It was found that the syntactic relation between the subject noun and the local noun is the same in the two experiments, but the linear position of the local noun is different. The study thus posited that there is a stage in language production in which a syntactic structure is built prior to a stage in which words are assigned to their linear position and that concord is acquired at the first stage.

The notion of proximity concord is also applicable to compound subjects. This concerns the verb form to use when subjects are joined by *or*, *nor*, *but*, *neither/nor*, and *either/or*. Thus, when one part is singular and the other plural, the verb should agree with the nearby subject as in:

Not the child but *the parents are* to be blamed.

Not the parents but *the child is* to be blamed.

Other instances are when singular subjects are followed by the phrases *such as*, *as well as*, *with*, *together with*, *along with* etc. In Standard English, the verb form that can agree with the noun phrases in such constructions is singular as in:

The teacher, together with his students, is arrested.

It should be noted that the syntactic relation in the sentence construction should be established first in order to know the noun a verb is referring to and which form it takes.

Digga (1990) also investigated the use of concord among students in tertiary institutions. He worked on three types of concord; subject-verb concord, pronoun-antecedent concord and tense concord. The study established that concord poses problem to learners in English usage and this has pedagogical implications to students, teachers and education planners. Digga's study on concord is similar to the present study in the sense that it touched on subject-verb concord and pronoun-antecedent concord. However, the categories of learners used in the studies were different. Digga used tertiary institution students while the present work used secondary school students. Thus, this study aimed at determining the level of proficiency of secondary school students in the application of the rules of concord before they transmit to the University. The implication of this is that there is need for effective teaching and learning of English grammar at all levels of education.

Also, Nayan's (2009) study was based on subject-verb agreement in students' written production. The data were drawn from the students' term paper on a course on English for Academic Purpose. The study revealed that the students had difficulties in general and sub-rules of subject-verb agreement which could be caused by the influence of the students' L1 on the target language because there is no rule which says that a singular subject requires a single form of verb in the participants' native language in 'Bumiputra', Malaysia. Over-generalization of rules by the students based on their experience of other structures in their target language was also identified as one of the major causes of errors of agreement.

There are also some comparative studies on concord such as Tortora and Dikken's (2009) study on variation on subject-verb agreement in Belfast English and Appalachian English and Garraffa's (2008) study on agreement and movement in a non fluent Italian aphasic speaker. The study focused on certain properties of the subjects' (i.e. the patients) deficit in the functional lexicon, and ascribe occurrences of non-standard use to

defective syntactic computation. The study dealt with grammaticality judgement of the different agreement conditions. It should be emphasized that grammaticality is the central focus of any study on concord. The present study is similar to other previous studies in that its central focus is to assess whether the target participants have attained competence or not in the application of the rules of concord in the communicative repertoire but different from the previous studies in that our target population is secondary school students who we believe are still in the process of learning English and its rudiments. Thus, the study is aimed at determining the level of proficiency of students in the use of concord with emphasis on the third person subject-verb and pronoun antecedent concord.

Descriptive Studies on Concord

The major works guiding the treatment of concord in this study are: Quirk and Greenbaum (1972), Akere (1990), Digga (1990), Aremo (2004), Oluikpe (2006) and Jenson (2009). Concord is defined as the relationship between the two grammatical units such that one of them plays displays a particular feature (e.g. plurality) that accords with a displayed (or semantically implicit) feature in the other (Quirk et al 1972). Quirk et al. establish that the most important type of concord in English is concord of 3rd person number between subject and verb. Thus, the grammatical units that realise the 3rd person subject in English are as follows:

A. Nouns

i. Proper nouns;

E1. *John* reads always.

E2. *Janet and Jane* are beautiful.

ii. Mass nouns;

E3. *Water* seems a problem in this town.

B. Noun phrases

E4. *The boys* look wicked.

E5. *The pot* remains hot.

C. Nominal adjectives

E6. *The poor* need the government's attention.

E7. *The wicked* are ungodly.

D. Nominal adverbs

E8. *Tomorrow* is Tuesday.

E9. *Yesterday* was Monday.

E. Personal Pronouns

E10. *She* cares for me always.

E11. *He* is one of our teachers.

E12. *They* are members of our Church.

F. Dummy it and there in cataphoric referencing

E13. *It* is impossible to get the work done before Friday.

E14. *There* is a restaurant around the corner.

G. Finite clauses

E15. *What she said* is a fact

The two concord areas treated in this study are

- i. subject-verb concord
- ii. pronoun-antecedent concord

i. Subject-Verb Concord

Subject verb concord is normally observed as follows:

A singular subject is used with a singular verb:

E16. *The girl* behaves well.

E17. She sings melodiously.

A Plural subject is used with a plural verb.

E18. *The girls* behave well.

E19. *They* are sometimes irrational.

For compound singular subjects and compound plural subjects, plural verbs are used:

E20. *The boy* and *the girl* are lazy.

E21. *Boys* and *girls* are needed to do the work.

There are, however, exceptions to the pattern above. First when and is replaced by such words as; *with*, *as well as*, *together with*, the verb becomes singular as in:

E22. The principal, *with* his staff is around.

E23. The man, as well as, his family members was at the party.

E24. Mr. George, together with, his friends is expected at the Police station.

Second, when the parts of the compound subject are joined by *and* thereby giving the impression of a unit, or are so closely connected as to express only one idea, a singular verb must be used;

E25. *Bread and butter is* good for breakfast.

E26. *Rice and beans is* ready.

E27. *Gin and tonic is* refreshing.

Third, when a compound subject is connected with correlatives such as, either__ or; neither __ nor; not only __ but also etc; the singular verb is used; Examples:

E28 Neither Olu nor *Sade is* to be blamed.

E29. Either the boy or *the girl plays* the piano.

E30. Not only Peter but also *John eats* in the midnight.

When the nouns joined by correlatives differ in number, the verb agrees in number with the nearer noun, as in:

E31. Neither the students nor *their teacher is* quite prepared for the examination.

E32. Neither the teacher nor *his students are* quite prepared for the examination.

Nominal adjectives: Generality of a particular people or things and are normally used with plural verbs;

E33. *The poor* in the country *are* assured of free housing.

E34. The afflicted *are* to be pitied.

Two or more adjectives used to describe a subject by separating them with 'and' takes a singular verb as in:

E35. The black and slender boy *was* here yesterday.

E36. The short, fat and light complexioned girl *has* married.

Two main phrases used in apposition takes a singular verb:

E37. *Mr. John, the carpenter has* won a visa lottery.

Impersonal Pronouns used as subjects take singular verbs:

E38. *Somebody has* taken my money.

E39. *No one knows* my name.

Jensen (2009) notes that the principle of grammatical concord is purely formally based on the sense that it is the number-person form of the subject that determines the number-person form of the verb. It is, however, observed that there are some cases where it is the meaning, rather than the form of the subject that determines the form of the verb, creating what seems to be a clash in concord between the verb and the subject. This is called notional concord. Notional concord is found in relation to collective nouns. A collective noun is a noun that refers to a group, unit or collective people such as family, church, choir etc. In relation to collective nouns, one can use both singular and plural verb forms when the noun is in the singular form, but there will be a slight difference in meaning;

E40 *The choir is* singing melodiously. (the choir as a unit)

E41 *The choir are* singing melodiously. (the choir as consisting of many people – i.e. individuals that constitute the choir)

Notional concord also applies to titles of books, films, journals etc. In this case, the verb is typically in the 3rd person singular form, regardless of the number-person form of the title, film or book because each of these is referred to as a single unit. Examples:

E42. *Tortoise and cat* is in the market.

(*Title of a book*)

E43. *His and Hers* is a new album by Tonny.

Other cases of notional concord that take singular verbs are units of measurements.

- Sum of money;
E44. *N500, 000* is a lot of money in Nigerian currency.
- Distance;
E45. *1000 kilometres* is nothing when travelling by air.
- A period of time;
E46. *Twenty five minutes* is not enough for the exercise.

It should also be noted that a collective noun followed by *of* and a plural noun takes a singular verb in the standard written English:

E47. A collection of paintings }
 A case of instruments } is needed for the occasion.
 A team of athletes }
 A flock of sheep }

Similarly, the use of *one of* plus a plural noun takes a singular verb:

E48. One of the boys }
 students }
 children } lives in my father's house
 lecturers }

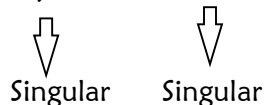
2. Pronoun-Antecedent Concord

The rule of pronoun-antecedent concord states that a pronoun must agree in number, gender and case with its antecedent (Oluikpe, 2006).

A. Possessive Pronoun-Antecedent Concord

A pronoun replacing a noun must have the same number as the noun it replaces:

E58. Nigeria expects *everyone* to do *his* civic responsibility



Singular Singular

It should be noted that the use of the 3rd person possessive pronoun in the example above to refer to its antecedent *everyone* is sexism in nature. There have been studies (Yusuf, 1998; Yusuf and Olateju, 2004) on the use of singular *they* with its counterparts: them, their and themselves to refer to a person of unspecified sex. Thus, E58 could be read thus:

E59. Nigeria expects everyone to do *their* civic duties.

E60. *The kind and the wicked* have *their* place in Hell.



Plural



Plural

E61. *The jury* has given *its* verdict.



Singular



Singular

B. Pronouns in Cross Referencing

i. Case:

E62. *All men* are created equally. *They* are endowed by God.



Plural



Plural

E63. *Some people* are feeble minded. *They* are never decisive.



Subj. plural



subj. plural

E64 I met *the man* and I gave *him* the letter.



Object Singular



Object singular

ii. Gender:

E65. John loves *his father*. *He* is good to him.



Masculine singular



E66. *My sister* is nice, therefore, everyone loves *her*.



Feminine singular



Feminine singular

E67. Since *the car* is faulty, I will sell *it*.



Neuter



Neuter

C. Reflexive Pronoun Antecedent Concord

The following 3rd person reflexive pronouns must agree in person, number and gender with their antecedents: *himself*, *herself*, *themselves*, *itself*.

E68. *She* injured *herself*.



3rd person singl. femn.

E69. *He* cautioned *himself*.



3rd person singl. Masc.

E70. *They* cheat *themselves* by their dubious acts.



3rd person pl. common

E71. *The cat* hurt *itself*.

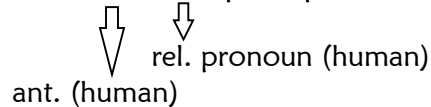


3rd person singl. neuter

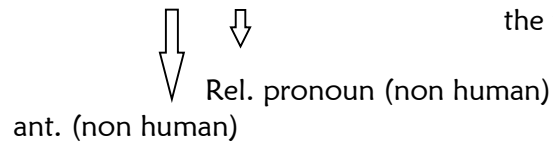
D. Relative Pronoun Antecedent Concord

The relative pronoun should be correctly selected to agree with its antecedent in number and person. The relative pronouns: *who*, *whom* and *that* refer to antecedents which are human; while *which* and *that* refer to antecedents which are non-human. *Whose* can be used with either animate or inanimate antecedent.

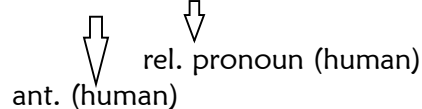
E72. He was one of *those who* participated in the crisis.



E73. That is *the house whose* windows were broken by the thieves.



E74. I have seen *the man whose* child was beaten up.



In Standard English, the concept of concord and its rules are universal across scholars. Any discrepancy could be in terms of terminology which may not affect the application of the rules and the meaning intended. It is, therefore, observed that concord is essential in producing Standard English sentences. Based on this, it is paramount for learners to learn how to apply the rules of concord consistently.

Theoretical Framework

The model adopted for this study is the context-sensitive rule of Chomsky's Transformational Grammar (1965) which specifies the contexts in which a verb can occur in the English sentence. Context-sensitive rule is described by two other rules known as selection restriction rule and strict-sub categorization rule (Olanrewaju, 2000). Selectional rule indicates which words can

collocate with what type of words, strict – sub categorization rule is meant to show what verbs can collocate in what sentence patterns. These rules are quite relevant to the present study on concord (third person subject-verb and pronoun-antecedent) based on the fact that a third person subject can only collocate with a singular verb and a plural subject with a plural verb. Likewise, a third person pronoun selects its antecedent.

Thus, subject-verb concord operates in the following manner: if the subject is third person singular (*he, she, it, someone*, or a noun phrase with a singular noun as head), the verb is third person, singular. Similarly, if the subject is not third person, singular, and the verb is the unmarked form:

He sweeps the room always. (Marked)

They sweep the room always. (Unmarked)

Also, third person pronouns select their antecedent:

The children are happy because their parents are not at home.

Thus, the context sensitive rule of Chomsky is quite relevant to this study and is believed to be able to account for the sentences generated in this study.

Methodology

The data used for this study were drawn from three (3) senior secondary schools in Lagos state, Nigeria. The schools are:

- (a) Odo-Obara Senior High School, Epe, Lagos (SCHOOL A)
- (b) Birch Freeman Senior High School, Surulere, Lagos (SCHOOL B)
- (c) Central Senior High School, Okota, Lagos (SCHOOL C)

The schools were drawn from three out of five zones in Lagos state. Sixty students were randomly selected using purposive random sampling technique: 20 students from each school. The

sixty students were senior secondary school II (SS II) students. The population was taken to represent other students in this category.

Two elicitation instruments were used to draw data from the study:

- (a) An essay writing exercise was given to the students on the following topic: “*My State Governor, his cabinet and their Democratic Governance*”. The students were asked to write an expository essay on the topic in not more than 350 words for forty minutes.
- (b) The second elicitation instrument was a discourse completion exercise (objective type) comprising twenty questions. The questions covered the following areas of concord in sentence constructions:
 - (i) Subject-verb concord
 - (ii) Pronoun-antecedent concord

Ten questions were drawn on each area of concord. The two instruments were used to test the productive and receptive abilities of the students in the use of subject-verb and pronoun-antecedent concord. To achieve the desired result, the tests were administered with the help of the teachers of English in the schools used. The students were given verbal instructions in addition to the instructions on their question papers.

Data Analysis and Discussion

In keeping with the focus of this study, the scripts of the students were analysed for occurrences of the two areas of concord in the students’ texts. This was done to discover which areas the students have problems with. The data were analysed using descriptive statistics of simple percentages and the problem areas were identified and discussed for improvement in the teaching and learning of English concord.

Table 1: Subject/Verb-Pronoun Antecedent concord in the Essay writing across the selected Secondary schools

School	Subject/Verb Concord			Pronoun/Antecedent Concord		
	Total No of Occurrences	Correctly Used Items	Incorrectly Used Items	Total no of Occurrences	Correctly Used Items	Incorrectly Used Items
School A	210	86 (40.95%)	124 (59.05%)	25	15 (60%)	10 (40%)
School B	211	134 (63.51%)	77 (36.49%)	49	40 (81.63%)	09 (18.37%)
School C	187	169 (90.37%)	18 (9.63%)	56	50 (89.29%)	6(10.71%)
Total No of Occurrences across the Schools	608	389 (63.98%)	219 (36.02%)	130	105 (80.77%)	25 (19.23%)

As it is observable in the Table above, 608 instances of subject-verb concord *were* used by the participants across the three secondary schools. Out of these, 389 (63.98%) were correctly used while 219 (36.025%) were instances of errors. For pronoun-antecedent concord, a total of 130 occurrences were recorded, out of which 105 (80.77%) were correctly used while 25 (19.23%) were incorrectly used.

To further examine in closer details, in School A, it is shown that a total occurrences of 210 subject-verb concord were used. Of these, 86 (40.95%) were correctly used while 124 (59.05%) were incorrectly used. For pronoun-antecedent concord, 25 instances were recorded; out of these 15 (60%) were correctly used while 10 (40%) were instances of errors. In School B, a total of 211 subject-verb concord were recorded, out of which 134 (63.51%) were correctly used while 77 (36.49%) were incorrectly used. For pronoun-antecedent concord, we had a total occurrence of 49 out of these, 40 (81.63%) were correctly used while 09 (18.37%) were instances of errors.

In School C, there were 187 instances of subject-verb concord. Out of these, 169 (90.37%) were correctly used while

18 (9.63%) were incorrectly used. For pronoun-antecedent concord, 56 instances were recorded, out of which 50 (89.29%) were correctly used while 6 (10.71%) were incorrectly used.

From the analysis above, it is shown that School C had the highest percentages of correct usage i.e (90.37%; 89.29%) followed by School B (63.51%; 81.63%) and lastly School C (40.95%; 60%) for subject/-verb and pronoun-antecedent concord respectively. A possible explanation for this order of performance could be due to the fact that Schools C and B are domicile in an urban environment where English is majorly the means of communication among the different ethnic groups resident in that part of Lagos State. The students may therefore have unconsciously acquired some rules of concord in their day-to-day interactional/interpersonal communications.

In spite of their average performance, complex structures in subject-verb concord were not used at all: as this will really enable us determine whether the participants have actually attained competence in the use of concord. For instance, the structures that have the following patterns in subject-verb concord were not used at all:

- i. When a compound subject is connected with correlatives and is followed by a singular verb e.g.
Neither the Governor nor the legislators were present at the occasion.
- ii. When a singular subject with attached phrases introduced by *with*, *like* or *as well as* is followed by a singular verb e.g.
The Chairman, with several others, was at the meeting.
- iii. When two or more nouns are used as a compound name of one thing, and takes a singular verb e.g.
Bribery and corruption is a common practice in this nation.
- iv. When a singular subject in apposition agrees with a singular verb e.g.
Mr. George, the Chairman has completed the project.
- v. When a singular general pronoun agrees with a singular verb e.g.

Nobody is ready to bear the brunt.

It should be noted that most of the errors recorded were found in the use of subject-verb concord i.e. number concord. Pronoun-antecedent concord items were sparingly used by the students. This could be as a result of the fact that they used simple expressions. Some of the inconsistencies in the use of number concord as identified in the students' texts are listed below;

- Ext 1* The Governor and his cabinet *does* a lot of good work for the people by providing good roads for the people who elected them.
- Ext 2* The Governor and his cabinet *owns* the responsibilities of providing social amenities needed by the citizens to make life more comfortable for the people of Lagos state.
- Ext 3* This programme has helped our youths a lot to the extent that some people that dislike education even *comes* back to school to further their education.
- Ext 4* The Lagos state Governor and his cabinet *has* really done well.
- Ext 5* They *has* also reduced the crime rate in the community by the provision of job opportunities.
- Ext 6* They *has* not done anything so far.
- Ext 7* The districts they have tried for *is* Agege, Alimosho and Ifakojoye.
- Ext 8* The modern basic amenities provided by the Lagos State Government *has* really improved the state up to the extent that Lagos state is now being regarded as a megacity.
- Ext 9* The BRT buses provided by Fashola administration *is* meant to be for free.
- Ext 10* The Chairman of each Local Government has been able to involve himself in the rehabilitation of houses in order to provide

accommodation for those who *does* not have anywhere to live.

It should be noted that the first rule of concord states that a verb should agree in number with its subject. This implies that a singular subject must be followed by a singular verb while a plural subject is followed by a plural verb. It is however, observed in the instances above that the students were not acquainted with the rule which states that a plural subject can only be followed by a singular verb. In Extracts 1-10 above, the plural subjects do not agree with the italicized verbs which are singular in form. Hence, this misapplication of the rule resulted in the ungrammatical sentences as we have above.

Also, the rule of singular subject/singular verb concord was also broken by the students in the following extracts;

Ext 11*The need for Lagos state Governor to perform remarkably *involve* him to carry out the functions mentioned above in order to raise Lagos state to greater height.

Ext 12*He *make* Lagos state look beautiful.

Ext 13*He *construct* the bad road.

Ext 14*He *provide* textbooks for students.

Ext 15*He *assist* the schools with chairs and tables.

In Extracts 11-15, the rule which states that a singular subject must agree with a singular verb has not been mastered by the students and this is obvious in the ungrammatical sentences identified above. It should be noted that the instances of singular collective nouns identified in the students' texts cannot really be counted as errors. For instance, in the extracts:

Ext 16*The Government *have* provided us with the chance to earn more money through our jobs by making the cost of goods and services brought into the state reduce.

Ext 17*If the Government provide jobs for the people they won't go about stealing and partaking in other illegal activities.

The singular collective noun 'Government' may agree with singular or plural verb depending on the meaning intended. However, if 'Government' is used by itself (without any determiner) as subject, it is in singular concord with the verb and is used with a singular pronoun substitute where necessary. Thus, it is possible to have Extracts 16 and 17 as being grammatical if the students considered "the government" as a group denoting a collection of individual entities.

Similar to this is the pronoun-antecedent concord in the plural subject and its substitute as shown in the Extract below:

Ext 18*Democratic governance can be defined as the act of governing a state through a way by which people of the state vote them in as their representatives.

In Extract 18 above *them* does not have any antecedent. To be more meaningful, the expression can be restructured thus:

Democratic governance can be defined as the act of governing a state through which *people* of the state vote in *their* representatives.

Ext 19*The Government should try more on *their* effort so that *they* will be able to accomplish *their* goals.

In Extract 19, it is assumed that 'the government' is a plural subject and should be used with a plural noun substitute(s) *their*, *they* as we have in the extract. If however, the writer had a singular notion of "the Government", the sentence will read thus:

The Government should try more on *its* effort so that it will be able to accomplish *its* goals.

For the Relative pronoun-antecedent concord, some of the instances of ungrammatical expressions are as follows;

Ext 20* In Lagos state, we have the Deputy Governor and other commissioners *which* support the Governor in all governmental activities.

Ext 21*The names of some of his cabinet are: Mrs. Olayinka Oladunjoye *which* is the Commissioner for Education, Lagos state and Mrs. Adejoke Adefulire *which* is the Deputy Governor of Lagos state.

In the extracts above, the relative pronoun *who* should be used to refer to the referents in each of the expressions above based on the fact that *which* is used for inanimate referents while *who* is used for animate referents.

Analysis also revealed that some students had problems with spelling of some words, particularly verbs as can be seen in the following extracts.

Ext22*It *as being* a great achievement for Lagos state citizens to have elected him to his present post..... (has, been).

Ext23*Mr. Lanre Odubote has tried for *is* District. (his)

Ext24*Our Governorship *his* doing well in Lagos state (is).

Ext25*A governor *his* a person who *his* in charge of a state or *his* a person who controls and manages a state (is).

It should be noted that the analysis above has provided an evidence of how far learners of English as a second language have been able to acquire the rules of concord and apply them: in other words, what they have mastered and what remains to be mastered.

Students' Performance on Discourse Completion Exercise

As the essay writing was to test the students' productive ability, a 20-item objective test administered on the students was to test their receptive ability with the third person subject-verb and pronoun-antecedent concord. The table below shows the performance of the students from the 3 secondary schools for the study.

Table 2: Students' performance on discourse completion Exercise Across the schools

School	Subject-Verb Concord			Pronoun-Antecedent Concord		
	Marks School	Obtainable 200	Per	Marks School	Obtainable 200	Per
	Correct Selection	Incorrect Selection		Correct Selection	Incorrect Selection	
School A	116 (58%)	84 (42%)		133 (66.5%)	67 (33.5%)	
School B	125 (62.5%)	75 (37.5%)		157 (78.5%)	43 (21.5%)	
School C	112 (56%)	88 (44%)		154 (77%)	46 (23%)	
Total	353 (58.83%)	247 (41.17%)		444 (74%)	156 (26%)	
					797 (66.42%)	403 (33.58%)

Table 2 above presents the students' performance on discourse completion exercise. Out of the 1,200(i.e 20 items x 60 students) marks obtainable for the three schools, 797(66.42%) were correctly selected while 403(33.58%) responses were incorrectly selected. The implication of this is that they performed a little bit above average.

In School A, out of the 200 responses required for subject-verb concord 116(58%) were correctly selected while 84(42%) were incorrectly selected. For pronoun-antecedent concord, out of 200 responses, 33(66.55%) were correct responses while

67(33.5%) were incorrect responses. For School B, out of the 200 responses for subject-verb concord 125(62.5%) were correct while 75(37.5%) were incorrect; for pronoun-antecedent concord, we had 200 responses out of which 157 (78.50%) were correct while 43 (21.50%) were incorrect. For School C, out of 200 responses for subject-verb concord, there were 112(56%) correct responses and 88(44%) incorrect responses. For pronoun-antecedent concord, out of 200 responses 154(77%) were correctly selected while 46(23%) were incorrectly selected.

As we had in the essay writing exercise, the students' overall performance also varied from school to school. School B had the highest percentage (i.e. 70.5%) of correct selections, followed by School C (i.e. 66.50%) and lastly School A (i.e. 62.25%). We need to note that most of the incorrect selections were also from the complex structures of the subject-verb concord as identified earlier.

Conclusion

This study has revealed that Nigerian Senior Secondary School learners of English need to acquire adequate mastery of the third person subject-verb and pronoun-antecedent concord if they must communicate effectively in the language. It is evident from this study that the students' mastery of these areas of concord was limited to simple structure of number concord while complex structures were not used at all in their written texts and the right options in the complex structures were not picked in the course completion exercise. This implies that the students did not have adequate knowledge of the exceptions to the rules of concord. Their knowledge was only limited to the basic rule of a singular subject agreeing in number with a singular verb and a plural subject with a plural verb.

This result poses a big challenge to teachers of English, textbook writers, educational administrators and examination bodies as this will spur them to take a number of steps to remedy this deficiency in the use of English. These steps include the following;

- Teachers of English should endeavor to help learners transit from incompetence to competence by painstakingly identifying the areas of deficiency, letting learners know why a particular expression is an error, teaching them the correct/acceptable form and giving them enough opportunity to express themselves.
- Conferences, Seminars and Workshops should be organized by educational stakeholders at the Local, State and Federal Government levels to familiarize, upgrade and update teachers' knowledge in English Language grammar and methodology.
- English textbooks writers should focus on areas that pose problems to learners, particularly 'concord'.
- Examination bodies such as West African Examination Council (WAEC), National Examination Council (NECO), General Certificate of Education (GCE) etc. should make teachers of English aware of students' deficiencies in the public examinations, so as to help them develop appropriate tools and strategies for English Language teaching in the country.
- Researchers should examine other areas of concord in terms of tense, as it involves inconsistency occasioned by shifts from one tense to the other and voice, as it applies to shifts from active to passive voice, to as well determine learners' level of proficiency in these areas of concord.

It is hoped that the insights provided by this study will contribute immensely to English Language pedagogy in Nigeria and other non-native environments where English is used.

References

- Akere, F. (1990). *English across disciplines*. Abeokuta; Pumark.
- Alo, M.A. (2005). Revisiting issues in English use in usage in Nigeria. *Journal of the Nigeria English Studies Association* Vol.11 (1) 114-130.
- Aremo, W.B. (2003). On some uses of the singular collective nouns – Congress, Council, Government, Management, Parliament and Senate in Contemporary English in Oyeleye, L and Olateju, M (Eds.) *Reading in Language and Literature*. (pp. 67-74), Ife: ObafemiAwolowo University Press Ltd..
- Aremo, W.B. (2004). *An introduction to English sentences I & II*. Ibadan: SCRIBO Publications Ltd.
- Chomsky, N. (1965) *Aspect of the theory of syntax*. Cambridge: Mass MIT Press.
- Corbett, G. G. (2003). Agreement: Terms and boundaries. Retrieved July 9, 2013 from [epubs.surrey.ac.uk/1063/1/full text pdf](http://epubs.surrey.ac.uk/1063/1/full%20text%20pdf).
- Dziemianko, A. (2008). Subject – verb concord with collective nouns or the count – Mass distinction” Which is more difficult for Polish learners in English: Retrieved July 9, 2012 from [www.academia.edu/subject - verb - concord - with – collective nouns](http://www.academia.edu/subject-verb-concord-with-collective-nouns).
- Jensen, K. E. (2009). *Lecture notes on concord*. Retrieved July 9, 2013 from [www.lum.aau.dk~kim/Grammar_09 /gram 26.pdf](http://www.lum.aau.dk/~kim/Grammar_09/_grammar_26.pdf)
- Garraffa, M. (2008). Minimal structures in Aphasia: A study on agreement and movement in a non-fluent Aphasic speaker. Retrieved July 9, 2013 from [www.cisc.unisc.it/doc-pub/girraff 98.pdf](http://www.cisc.unisc.it/doc-pub/girraffa98.pdf)
- Nayan, S. (2009). A study of subject-verb agreement from novice writers to expert writers. Retrieved July 9, 2013 from [www.ccsc net.org/journal/index/php/ies/article download/3347](http://www.ccscnet.org/journal/index.php/ies/article/download/3347).
- Olukpe, B.O.A. (2006). *The use of English for higher education*. Onitsha; Africana First Publishers Plc.

- Digga, J.S. (1990). Use of concord among students of tertiary institutions in Kaduna State. Unpublished M.A thesis, Ahmadu Bello University. Zaria, Nigeria.
- Ojetunde, C.F. (2010). *The usage of English adverbials by students in selected tertiary institutions in South Western Nigeria*. Unpublished Ph.D. thesis ObafemiAwolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria.
- Olarewaju, D.O (2000). The transformational generative approach” in Babajide, A.O. (Ed.) *Studies in English Language*. (pp. 25-42) Ibadan; Enicrownfit Publishers
- Quirk, R. & Greenbaun, S. (1972). *A University Grammar of English* UK: Longman Group Ltd.
- Tortora, C. & Dikken, M. den. (2009) Subject agreement variation: Support for the configuration approach. Retrieved July 9, 2013 from www.gc.cuny.edu/cuwu-gc/media/cuNY/lingua-proofs.pdf
- Vigloicco, G. & Nicol J. (1998). Separating hierarchical relations and word order in language production. Is proximity concord syntactic or linear? Retrieved July 9, 2013 [ling.umd.edu/Ellen law course /ling440/Vigliocco-1998.pdf](http://ling.umd.edu/Ellen%20law%20course%20/ling440/Vigliocco-1998.pdf)
- Yusuf, Y.K. & Olateju, M.A. (2004). Singular *they* and Nigerian examiners of School Certificate English in Owolabi, K. and Dasylva, A (Eds) *Forms and Functions of English and Indigenous Languages in Nigeria* (pp. 148 – 174), Ibadan; Group Publishers.
- Yusuf, Y.K. (2005). Gender – related singular *they*: Perceptions of its correctness in Nigeria English, *Journal of the Nigeria English Studies Association*. Vol. 11 No.1 pp. 131 -148