

Tags in Written Complex Sentences of Selected Undergraduate Students of English for Academic Purposes: Some Pedagogical Implications

Adaje, Ambrose Ochigbo

*Department of Educational Foundations and General Studies,
Federal University of Agriculture, Makurdi, Nigeria*

and

Shehu Ibrahim Ahmad

*Department of English and Literary Studies,
Nasarawa State University, Keffi, Nigeria.*

Abstract

The study assesses the competence of some selected undergraduate students of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) in the use of question, directive, statement and exclamation tags in communication. The structural grammar model description of patterns and uses of the four tags is employed to design a proficiency assessment test instrument and to discriminate malformed tags in the students' written complex sentences. The study's subjects are fifty-nine first-year EAP students of the University of Agriculture Makurdi, Nigeria. Frequency, percentage and mean statistics are used for data analysis and the results show that the students are incompetent in the use of question, directive, statement and exclamation tags in English; this implies that, some EAP students are incapable of using tags correctly in interactive English. As a remedy to the linguistic inadequacy, tags should be included in the use of English curriculum at university level in Nigeria

Keywords: *English grammar usage, tags, patterns, EAP students, deficiencies.*

Background to the Study

A tag is a short clause which is embedded in a superordinate clause, purposely for expression of different meanings in English. Tags are used, for example, to seek confirmation (*It's the first day of July to day, isn't it?*), to elicit information (*She hasn't talked to the husband yet, has she?*), to express sympathy (*Oh, things are still really hectic, aren't they?*), to utter sarcasm (*Look, I only paid fifty dollars for this cup- it was so cheap! Oh, fifty dollars is cheap, is it?*), for invitations (*Stay another day with us, won't you?*) and to issue command (*Turn the radio off, will you?*). Students require the knowledge of the patterns and uses of tags in English. So, sentence tags are taught in Nigerian primary and secondary schools, among other grammatical items, to equip students with minimal communicative competence in their uses. However, most Nigerian students rarely use tags in both spoken and written English. Students' use of tags in English has been neglected in research. Many research works on the spoken and written English of Nigerian secondary students do not find tags among their grammatical problems (Tsakuwa, 2016; Okoro, 2017; Ogunyemi, 2019). Also, some studies on the spoken and written English of undergraduate students do not mention tags among their problematic grammatical items (Bobunde & Sotiloye, 2013; Amusegban & Tunde-Awe, 2016; Afolabi & Otemuyiwa, 2018; Ojo, 2018; Adekemi, 2021). Probably, the reason that tags are not isolated as a grammatical weakness could be that the students do not use them as they are unfamiliar with their patterns and uses in English. Yet students need to utilize tags in interactive English. It is therefore expedient to investigate students' competence in the use of tags in English. The findings of the study are beneficial to curriculum designers, course instructors, undergraduate students and researchers in English for Academic Purposes at the university level.

Aim and Objectives

The present study investigates the possible difficulties associated with the construction and use of tags in the written English of selected first-year undergraduate students of English for Academic Purposes in Federal University of Agriculture, Makurdi. A specific objective is to find out the competence of the

students in construction and use of question, directive, statement and exclamation tags in English. Another objective is to identify the tags which are problematic to the students.

Theoretical Perspective

The theoretical perspective is based on Error Analysis, as propounded by Corder (1967, 1973). Error Analysis (EA) provides a systematic procedure for the study of second language learners' productions for pedagogical purposes. EA attributes learners' difficulty with a target language (TL) to two sources, namely, the interference of the learners' mother tongue (MT) with the learning process of the target language and also the learners' difficulties with the nature of the TL. The first source causes interlingual errors while the second source induces intralingual problems (Headbloom, 1979; Brown, 1987). The present study hinges on the intralingual aspect of EA. Intralingual difficulties basically originate from the learner's improper learning of the various aspects of the target language, which manifest in forms of overgeneralization of principles, false hypothesis of concepts and ignorance of rule restrictions (Richard, 1974). Standard practice of EA research involves collection of linguistic productions of second language learners, identification of errors inherent the learners' usage, classification, description and explanation of the errors with suggestion of remedies to the errors and re-teaching strategies (Serlinker, 1972; Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005; Ellis, 2008; Bloom, 2015). The procedures are applicable to the present study and therefore, adopted. By implication, EA provides a significant linguistic guide for the assessment of students' difficulties with the patterns and uses of tags in English as undertaken here.

Conceptual Framework

The study employs the structural grammar theoretical model to provide a description of the patterns, structures and functions of tags in English (Pullum & Huddleston, 2002; Carty & McCarthy, 2006; Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech & Svartvik, 2007; Foley & Hall, 2008). The linguistic model is suitable for the study because of its detailed self-study learning and teaching approach to formations and uses of tags in English.

Tags are a category of clause without a lexical verb but which relate to the verb in the matrix clause of a sentence. Tags consist of auxiliary *be*, *do*, *have*, lexical verb *be* or a modal verb and a subject, which is mostly a pronoun. Tags have polarities which are affirmative-negative tag (*You already know Joan,*

don't you?), negative-affirmative tag (*She hasn't had a baby yet, has she?*) and affirmative-affirmative tag (*She arrived this morning then, did she?*). Structural grammarians of English recognize four main categories of tag which are question, directive, statement or copy and exclamation tags (Greenbaum, 1996; Azar, 2003; Biber, Conrad & Leech, 2003; Vince, 2003).

Question tags are used to clarify information or to engage the listeners in interaction. A question tag consists of an auxiliary, a modal verb or a lexical verb and a pronoun as subject. The subject pronoun in the tag repeats the subject of the main clause that it co-refers to, and coheres with it in number, person and gender with the subject of the main clause. There are different patterns of question tags. Where the main clause has an auxiliary, a modal verb or a lexical verb *be*, it is repeated in the tag as exemplified in these sentences : *Mark's university is quite nice , isn't it; I can drive a long car, can I or can't I?; You have never travelled to London, have you?; You didn't know I was a detective, did you?; We had talked about the bankruptcy, hadn't we ?; They have worked hard for the company, haven't they?; Joan is coming to night, isn't she?*

Also, where the main clause contains no auxiliary or modal verb, the auxiliary *do, does or, did* is employed appropriately in the tag, as demonstrated in: *John said it's essentially the same, did he? Janet lives in Abuja, does she? They harvest ten bags of rice every year, do they? She delivered an intelligent speech, didn't she?*

However, main clauses with *am, may, used to, ought to* do not follow the usual pattern of obligatory repetition in the question tags; rather the typical usage is illustrated in these sentences: *I am foolish to even talk about it, aren't I? Joe may be able to assist, mightn't he? She used to trek to school, didn't she? We ought to inform her office now, shouldn't or oughtn't we?*

In main clauses with the indefinite pronouns such as *none, everybody, someone, somebody, anyone, anybody, no one, nobody, everyone*, the tag pronoun is ordinarily, *they*, as shown in: *Someone gets your snacks, don't they?; In an African village, everybody knows everybody else, don't they?*

In main clauses with *there is*, or *there are*, *there* is repeated in the tag questions as exemplified in these sentences: *There is a bakery near the palace, isn't there?* and *There were more children in the park than adults, weren't there?*

However, tag pattern in interrogatives that function as requests is *negative clause plus affirmative tag* with the rise and fall intonation pattern for the main clause and the tag, respectively, as shown in: *You*

couldn't carry that bag for me, could you? You haven't got any bread, have you?

With reporting structures, the question tag normally refers to the reporting clause: *I told you she would be there, **didn't I**; He mentioned that Jill was not well, **did he**?; I think **it's going** to be sunny today, **isn't it**; I suppose **you think** that's clever, **do you**?*

Although question tags occur after the main clause, they may occur in the clause, particularly in clauses with anticipatory *it*, for example: *It's false, **isn't**, what they said about Jane and It was perhaps your football team, **wasn't it**, that was sanctioned.*

Directive tag is understudied here, too. Affirmative imperative clauses used to issue directives may be followed by tags involving the use of *will/would/can/could you*, as illustrated in: *Stop crying, **will you**; Take this meal, **would you**; Return by four, please, **could you***; but negative imperative may be followed by *will you* as shown in: *Don't forget my laptop, **will you**.*

Also, imperative clauses can occur with the tag **won't you** so as to soften a directive and make the utterance a polite request, e.g.: *Give the baby whatever she needs, **won't you**, mum.* The first-person plural imperatives with *let's* typically have, **shall we**, as a tag, e.g. *Let's go for the lecture, **she we**?*

The study, also, examines statement tags or copy tags which are declarative clauses that are typically used to make emphatic statements commonly in evaluative contexts. They (declarative clauses) may be followed by a tag with the same polarity and subject verb word order as illustrated in: *She is kind, **she is**, and it's not very bad, **that one isn't it**.* Main clauses with *it*, may have both **it** and **that** as subjects in the tags. But main clauses with **that** normally, we have **that** as the subject of the tag: *It's about this small, **it is**.; Ah, it was good, **that was**.; **That** was the first time, **that was**.*

Exclamation tags are essentially w-exclamative clauses which may be followed by negative tags with interrogative word order as exemplified in: *How strange, **isn't it!**; What a confidence, **wasn't!** and How happy we were, **weren't we!*** This short survey of types, patterns and uses of tags is meant to provide grammatical basis and guide for the assessment of deviation from standard patterns and uses of tags in the students' written English.

Methodology

This study uses qualitative and quantitative methods of analysis. This expo-factor study was conducted among all first-year students who had registered for English for Academic Purposes, tagged

Communication in English in University of Agriculture, Makurdi, during the 2019/20 academic session. The sample size consisted of fifty-nine students randomly selected from an EAP lecture group. The research instrument is a proficiency test called, *Uses of Tags in English* which was administered to the students at the close of the session as a continuous assessment test by the lead researcher who was the course lecturer of the EAP lecture group used for the study. Frequency, percentage and mean statistical tools were used to analyze the data. The decision-criterion mean score is 0.5: a score less than the mean in an item is evidence of deficiency while a score above the mean, (that is, 0.5-1.0) is a proof of competence. All malformed tags in the students' written expressions are labelled with asterisk mark (*).

Data Analysis and Presentation

The competence of the students in constructing and using question, directive, statement and exclamation tags are shown on the two tables below. The first table focuses on the construction of seven patterns and uses of questions tags while table 2 concentrates on construction and uses of directive, statement and exclamation tags

Table 1: Competence of some EAP students in Patterns and Uses of Question Tags

S/N	Host Matrix Clauses	The Required Tags	Students' competence Ratings	
			X	Mean
Tags with Repeated Auxiliary				
1.	Mark's university is quite nice,	isn't it?	33	0.559
2.	I can drive a lorry,	can't I?	22	0.372
3.	You have never travelled to London	have you?	26	0.440
4.	He didn't know I was a detective,	did he	27	0.457
5.	We had talked about the bankruptcy,	hadn't we?	9	0.152
6.	They have worked hard for the company,	haven't they?	18	0.305
7.	Joan is coming tonight	isn't she?	6	0.271
Questions Tags with added Auxiliary Verb				
8.	She delivered an intelligent speech	didn't she?	24	0.406
9.	Jane said it's essentially the same,	did she?	0	0.016

10. Janet lives in Abuja,	doesn't she?	4	0.064
11. They harvest ten bags of rice every year	do they?	7	0.118

Question Tags with am, may, used to, ought to,

12. I am foolish to even talk about it	aren't I?	5	0.084
13. Joe may be able to assist	mightn't he?	0	0000
14. She used to trek to school	did she?	1	0.001
15. We ought to inform her Office now	shouldn't/ oughtn't we?	2	0.033

Question Tags for Main Clauses with Indefinite Pronouns

16. Someone gets your breakfast,	don't they?	5	0.084
17. In an African village, everybody knows everybody,	don't they	10	0.169
18. No one queried the discrepancy,	did they	9	0.152

Question Tags for Main Clauses with *there is* or *there are*

19. There is a bakery near the palace,	isn't there?	00	0000
20. There are more children in the park than adults,	weren't there?	2	0.033

Question Tags for Request Clauses

21. You couldn't carry that bag for me,	could you?	16	0.271
22. You haven't got any bread,	have you?	24	0.406

Question Tags with Reporting Structures

23. I told you she would be there,	didn't I	12	0.203
24. He mentioned that Jill was not well,	didn't she?	8	0.135
26. I suppose that you think, that is clever,	do you?	1	0.001
27. I think it's going to be sunny today,	isn't it?	18	0.305

Questions Tags in non-final Position in Main Clauses

27. It's fake,... what they said about Jane	is it,	2	0.033
28. It was perhaps your football Team... that was sanctioned	wasn't it,	6	0.101

Using the decision-criterion mean score of 0.5, the table shows weakness in all the different patterns and uses of question tags understudied. In all the 28 proficiency assessment tasks on question tags, the students failed all except one, which is item 1. Item 1 is the only item in which the students exhibit mastery out of the seven items in the first category of question tag understudied. The implication is that the students have insufficient knowledge of the various patterns and uses of question tags in English.

Table 2. Competence level of EAP Students in Patterns and Uses of Directive, Statement and Exclamation Tags.

S/N	Host matrix Clauses	The Required Tags	Students' Competence Ratings
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			X	Mean
Directive Tags				
1.	Stop crying,	will you	3	0.050
2.	Take this meal,	would you	2	0.033
3.	Return by four, please	could you	2	0.033
4.	Don't forget my laptop,	will you	5	0.084
5.	Give the baby whatever she needs...mum	won't you,	3	0.050
6.	Let's go for the lecture,	shall we	3	0.050
Statement Tags				
1.	He is kind,	he is	0	0.000
2.	It's not very bad, That one, that one	isn't	1	0.001
3.	It's about this small,	it is	0	0.000
4.	That was the first time,	that was	0	0.000
Exclamation Tags				
1.	How strange it is,	isn't it!	8	0.135
2.	What a confidence it was,	wasn't it!	2	0.033
3.	How happy we were,	weren't we!	7	0.118

Using the decision-criteria mean score of 0.5, the table clearly reveals that the students are quite poor in construction and use of directive, statement and exclamation tags. In all the items in the three types of tag, the scores range from 0.000 to 0.118; the range is less than 0.5 which is the least evidence of mastery. It is clear that the students are deficient in the construction and use of directive, statement and exclamative tags in English.

Discussion of findings

The finding of the study is that some students of English for Academic Purposes at the university level are deficient in uses of question, directive, statement and exclamation tags.

The students demonstrate inadequate knowledge in construction of question tags with repeated auxiliary for the matrix clause that has an auxiliary or a modal verb or lexical verb. For example Tasks 2-6 on Table 2 show that students have difficulty in their responses which are exemplified below:

Except 1.

2. *I can drive a lorry, no, I can't?**

3. *He didn't know I was a detective, **didn't he?** **
4. *You have never travelled to London, **hadn't I?** **
5. *We had talked about the bankruptcy, **had we?** **
6. *They have worked hard for the company, **have they?** **
7. *Joan is coming tonight, **is he?** **

The asterisked question tags are incorrect; the correct question tags are in bold italics here: *I can drive a lorry, **can I?***; *you have never travelled, **have you?***; *He didn't know I was a detective, **did he?***; *They have worked hard for the company, **haven't they?*** and *Joan is coming tonight, **isn't she?***

Also, the construction of question tags which require added auxiliary seems to be difficult to the students, as shown below by their responses to items 8-12 on Table 1:

Except 2.

8. *She delivered an intelligent speech, ***isn't?***
9. *John said it's essentially the same, ***is he?***
10. *Janet lives in Abuja, ***didn't she?***
11. *They harvest ten bags of rice every year, ***they?***

All the asterisked tags are inappropriate in the different main clause contexts. The standard question tags are: *She delivered an intelligent speech, **didn't she?***; *John said it's essentially the same, **didn't he?*** and *They harvest ten bags of rice every year, **don't they?***

Again, the students show deficient knowledge in the construction of question tags with *am*, *may*, *used to* and *ought to*, as shown below in their responses to items 12-15 on Table 1:

Except 3.

12. *I am foolish to even talk about it, *** am I?***
13. *Joe may be able to assist, *** will he?***
14. *She used to trek to school, *** does she?***
15. *We ought to inform her office now, *** did we?***

The questions tags which the students have generated for the items are wrong. The correct tags are: *I am foolish to even talk about it, **aren't I?***; *Joe may be able to assist, **mightn't he?***; *She used to trek to school, **didn't she?*** and *We ought to inform her office now, **shouldn't we** or **oughtn't we?***

The students have inadequate knowledge of the construction of question tags for matrix clauses with

indefinite pronoun; their responses below reveal the deficiency.

Excerpt 4

16. *Someone sets your breakfast, * isn't it?*

17. *In an African village, everybody knows everybody. * aren't they?*

18. *No one queried the discrepancy, * doesn't they?*

The correct question tags for the clauses are: *Someone gets your breakfast, **don't they?*** *In an African village, everybody knows everybody, **don't they?*** *No one queried the discrepancy, **did they?***

The students also have difficulties in generating questions tags for main clauses which contain, *there is* or *there are*, as demonstrated by their tag constructions below;

Excerpt 5

19. *There is a bakery near the palace, * is it?*

20. *There are were children in the park than adults, isn't it?*

The standard questions tags are in bold in the italicized sentences below: *There is a bakery near the palace, **isn't there?*** and *There are more children in the park than adults, **weren't they?***

Also, the students are deficient in constructing question tags for request clauses as revealed in their wrong productions except 6 below:

Excerpt 6

21. *You couldn't carry that bag for me, * isn't it?*

22. *You haven't got any bread, * haven't you?*

The acceptable questions tags for items 21 and 22 are: *You couldn't carry that bag for me, **could you?*** *You haven't got any bread, **have you?***

Constructing question tags with reporting structures is a problem to the students, as their responses are shown in excerpt 7 below:

Excerpt 7:

23. *I told you she would be there, * doesn't you?*

24. *He mentioned that Jill was not well, * was he?*

25. *I think it's going to be sunny today, * am I right?*

26. *I suppose that you think that is clever, * won't?*

The tags generated for the statements above are inappropriate. The standard tags for the sentences are: *I*

told you she would be there, **didn't I?**; He mentioned that Jill was not well, **didn't she?**; I think it's going to be sunny, **isn't it?** I suppose that you think that is clever, **do you?**

Construction of question tags in non-final position in main clauses is also problematic to the students:

Excerpt 8:

27. *It's false... what they said about Jane. *it isn't?*

28. *It was perhaps your football team....., that was sanctioned. * isn't it?*

The students' written tags are unacceptable and inappropriate in the contexts. The standard tags are: *It's false, **is it**, what they said about Jane; It was perhaps your football team, **wasn't it**, that was sanctioned.*

In addition to the students' adequate knowledge in generating the patterns and uses of the various question tags examined, they have difficulty generating directive tags, as exemplified in excerpt 9 below:

Excerpt 9

1. *Stop crying, * can't you?*

2. *Take this meal, * can't you?*

3. *Return by four, please* can you?*

4. *Don't forget my laptop* won't you?*

5. *Give the baby whatever she needs, * would you?*

6. *Let's go for the lecture, * won't you?*

The appropriate directive tags are these: *Stop crying, **will you**; Take this meal, **would you**; Return by four, please, **could you**; Don't forget my laptop, **will you**; Give the baby whatever she needs, **won't you**, mum; Let's go for the lecture, **shall we**.*

Also, the students have insufficient knowledge in the construction of directive tags. Their inadequacies are displayed below in the extracts from their responses, shown in excerpt 10 below:

Excerpt 10:

1. *He is kind, * isn't it?*

2. *It's not very bad, that one, * isn't it?*

3. *It's about this small, * is this?*

4. *That was the first, * isn't it?*

The correct tags are in bold here: *She is kind, **she is**; It's not very bad, , that **one isn't** ; It's about this*

small, it is ; That was the first time, that was

Finally, the students have insufficient linguistic base for the construction of exclamation tags as demonstrated excerpt 11 below:

Excerpt 11:

1. *How strange it is, * aren't it?*
2. *What a confidence it was, * isn't it?*
3. *How happy we were, * aren't we?*

The correct exclamation tags are in bold italics here: *How strange it is, **isn't it!** What a coincidence it was, **wasn't it!** How happy we were, **weren't we!***

For the directive, statement and exclamation tags, the question mark is not required but the students used it. This implies that the students may have only been taught question tags, which they, however, are still unable to construct and use in English.

The study has proved that some EAP students are still deficient in the use of tags in English; they can neither construct question, directive, statement and exclamative tags acceptably nor use them correctly in English. The cause of the linguistic deficiency may probably be due to improper learning of the patterns, structures and uses of tags which may have been also induced by poor teaching, uncondusive learning environment and inadequate study materials.

Pedagogical Implications

The findings of the study have implications for the teaching and learning of English for Academic Purposes at university level in Nigeria; the study proves clearly that beginners of university education lack basic grammatical knowledge in the use of tags in interaction. So the teaching curriculum should include tags. This implicates the expansion of the curriculum to cover more basic grammatical elements that are known to be problematic to written English. Also, EAP students may have to be subjected to sentence construction drills in elementary English grammar items, including tags. Again, more lecturers may be required for efficiency and to reduce large EAP class to a manageable size, where large class size is a problem, as it is the situation in the university where the study was conducted. The suggested remedies would make language instruction and grammar drill exercises easy in EAP class.

Conclusion

The main objective of the study is to investigate the students' competence in the use of tags in English based on the structural grammar model description of the patterns, structures and functions of question, directive, statement and exclamation tags in English. The linguistic model is used to assess the students' proficiency in the construction and use of tags. The findings are that the students have inadequate grammatical knowledge required for construction and use of question, directive, statement and exclamation tags in interactive English. Also, the students treat directive, statement and exclamation tags as question tags as they use question marks in all the tags. Impliedly, the students find all the tags problematic.

Recommendations

To remedy the grammatical problem found in the study, EAP students should be taught patterns and use of tags in English. By implication tags and other structural items which are difficult to the students should be included in the EAP course syllabus; this step, if taken, would equip students with some basic grammatical competence which is instrumental to communicative competence in English. Also, more EAP lecturers should be recruited to match the overcrowded size of EAP students in most Nigerian universities; it would, consequently, reduce EAP class size to a manageable level that can facilitate comprehensive language instruction and exercises. Simple self-explanatory EAP course materials could be provided for the students to improve their use of tags in speech and writing.

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