



ROLES OF SYNTAX AND ITS CONTRIBUTIONS IN DEVELOPING EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION SKILLS AMONG PRIMARY SCHOOL PUPILS IN NIGERIA

By

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Abstract

The study on roles of syntax and its contributions in developing effective communication skills among primary school pupils in Nigeria investigated 32 structural arrangements of phrases and clauses generated from the speeches of pupils from the West, East, South, North and Centre parts of the country. Anchored on the descriptive research methodology, related literature were reviewed and Chomsky's Transformational-Generative Grammar Theory and Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory were utilised as the study framework. The analysis show some syntactic inadequacies ranging from incorrect constituent ordering of words, misplacement of modifiers, incorrect verb-form selection, the use of inappropriate human-relative pronouns, unnecessary insertion of the indefinite article, incorrect combination of subordinating and coordinating conjunctions, and violation of the linguistic agreement relationship between the verb and their subjects. The findings indicate that the identified syntactic problems exist in parts of the nation with varying degree as a result of second language challenges. The article concludes that Syntax remains an essential aspect of language learning and communication development among primary school pupils in Nigeria; as a result, effective teaching of syntax should be prioritized (using leaner-centred approach) in the primary schools to improve pupils' communication skills and academic performance. Educational stakeholders should also provide adequate language learning resources and teacher training opportunities to improve syntax instruction in schools.

Key words: Challenges, communication, Primary school, Syntax, Pupils.

Introduction

The knowledge of syntax plays important role in the development of effective communication skills that help learners to construct grammatically accurate, meaningful, and coherent sentences. In the Nigerian primary school context, the low syntactic compliance among pupils across the country's diverse geopolitical regions has become a significant educational concern, largely influenced by inadequate instructional practices, limited exposure to Standard English, and other socio-cultural factors. This state underscores the need to examine how effective syntax instruction can strengthen pupils' communicative competence and improve academic performance in the English language.

Language is the principal means through which human beings communicate ideas, emotions, thoughts, experiences, and in educational settings, communication serves as the foundation

of teaching and learning. For primary school pupils in Nigeria, the acquisition of effective communication skills is essential, because it influences academic achievement, social interaction, and cognitive development. Generally, language is normally studied in the circles of phonology, morphology, syntax, in addition to meaning-relate (semantics and pragmatics), but an aspect of language that contributes significantly to communication is syntax.

Syntax is a linguistic branch that studies the arrangement of words and phrases in sentences to generate meaningful expressions. Concepts of syntax, rule sentence structure and determines how linguistic elements are combine to produce meaning. Without following syntactic rules in communication art, the communication output will become disorganized and ineffective. Pupils who understand sentence patterns are able to express themselves clearly in both speech making and graphic representation (writing).

Following grammar sequence and adequacy, words are not randomly assembled in any string of construction, but inserted according to their adequate nodes. For example, similar words are arranged severally in structures 1-7:

1. Mary came to school yesterday.
2. Yesterday, Mary came to school.
3. *Came to school yesterday Mary.
4. *To school Mary came yesterday.
5. *Mary yesterday school came.
6. *School came Mary to yesterday.
7. *Came school to Mary yesterday.

The challenges that took place in structures 1-7 has shown the importance of adequacy in sentence constructions, as sentences 1-2 are adequate and acceptable, but sentences 3-7 are marked with asterisk (*) which is a mark of ungrammaticality (showing that such structures are incorrect and unacceptable in English language grammar usage).

In Nigeria, English language is utilized as the official language and the language of education in schools. As a result, primary school pupils are expected to develop adequate syntactic competence in English in order to function effectively in classroom participation and communication. Instead, many pupils in Nigerian primary schools experience difficulties in sentence construction, grammatical accuracy and oral expression as a result of poor syntactic knowledge. These challenges negatively affect (not only) communication effectiveness, but also general academic performance.

Over time, studies have shown that language proficiency contributes greatly to classroom interaction and educational success in general (Segun, 2022). As a result, effective communication (writing) skills among pupils are influenced by the quality of language instruction they receive in schools (Ebizie et al., 2020). Therefore, understanding the role of syntax in developing communication competence among primary school pupils is highly important. To achieve this, the following objectives are utilized to guide the study:

- i. Examine the concept of syntax and effective communication skills.
- ii. Identify the roles of syntax in language development among primary school pupils.
- iii. Discuss the contributions of syntax to effective communication skills in Nigerian primary schools.
- iv. Examine challenges affecting the teaching and learning of syntax in Nigeria.
- v. Suggest strategies for improving syntactic competence among primary school pupils.

Methodology

As it were, this study utilizes a descriptive and qualitative research methodology based on direct observation from the selected primary schools used for this research and review of related literature. Relevant textbooks, journal articles, conference papers, and scholarly publications on syntax, primary education communication skills and language learning were consulted. The study also examined recent publications on language education and communication

development among primary school pupils in Nigerian schools.

The researchers generated five sentences from the statement of pupils from Central School 1, located at Ogui Road, Enugu North LGA, Enugu State, established in 1954 with a current population of 1,200 registered pupils, representing Eastern Nigeria; Government Primary School (Garki), located at Ahmadu Bello Way, Garki, Kano Municipal, Kano State, established in 1929 with a population of 1,500 registered pupils, representing Northern Nigeria; Government Primary School, Marian, located at Marian Road, Calabar Municipality, Cross River State, established in 1965 with a current population of 870 registered pupils, representing Southern Nigeria; Methodist Primary School, Oke-Ado, located at Oke-Ado, Ibadan South-West LGA, Oyo State, established in 1953 with a registered number of 900 pupils, representing Western Nigeria and LEA Primary School, Garki, located at Area 10, Garki District, Abuja, established in 1985 with a registered number of 1,000 pupils, representing the centre of the country.

The total of 5,470 pupils from the five schools selected from the different locations mentioned, represents the total primary schools in Nigeria and the syntactic shortfalls of the generated sentences, represents the entire pupils' syntactic competency in language use. The descriptive approach was considered appropriate, because it allows the researcher to analyze existing theories, empirical findings relating to syntax, concepts and communication skills among primary school pupils.

Review of Related Literature

This review shall concentrate on concepts of syntax, effective communication skills and roles of syntax in language development. Syntax is the branch of linguistics concerned with sentence structure and the grammatical arrangement of words in a language. According to Chomsky (1957), syntax explains how sentences are generated following linguistic rules and transformations. Syntax in the opinion of Ndimele (1999), Nwala (2015) and Gilbert (2023) determines the grammatical relationship between sentence elements such as nouns, adjectives, verbs and adverbs.

Crystal (2008) defines syntax as the study of principles guiding sentence formation in human language. Ndiribe (2018) and Nwankwegu (2022) opined that syntax allows language users to combine words meaningfully and communicate effectively. For pupils in the primary school, syntactic competence has to do with the ability to form grammatically acceptable sentences in oral and written communication by the orderly combination of words. Effective communication relates to the ability of a communicator to convey information clearly, accurately and meaningfully, in order that the intended message is understood by the audience. From the words of Gilbert and Emenalom (2026), communication skills include speaking, listening, reading and writing abilities.

In the context of education, communication skills enables pupils participate actively in classroom discussions, ask questions, understand instructions and express ideas confidently. As a finding from (Ebizie et al., 2020), teachers' communication competence has a way of influencing pupils' learning outcomes. It follows that effective communication is vital for successful teaching and learning processes. Notably, the understanding of syntax contributes greatly to language acquisition and communication development among children. It assists pupils to organize thoughts logically and express ideas coherently. Through the knowledge of syntax, pupils learn sentence patterns, grammatical relationships and appropriate language structures.

The knowledge on the utilization of syntax also enhances reading comprehension, because it guides pupils to understand sentence organisation and meaning relationships. Previous researches from Edu et al. (2025), Tafida et al. (2024), Nwokocho et al. (2024) and Humble et al. (2024) on Nigerian primary schools indicate that language competence supports reading development and literacy acquisition. Pupils with good syntactic knowledge and skills are more likely to read and understand texts effectively and communicate accurately. Furthermore, the understanding of syntax enables oral communication by helping pupils produce clear and grammatically acceptable utterances, because oral English instruction at any level of education (including primary schools) depends to a great extent on pupils' mastery of sentence structures studied under syntax (Urujzian, 2024). Apart from orals, syntax equally contributes to writing development, as pupils use grammatical structures to construct essays, summaries and compositions.

From the works of the authorities cited in this research, our review has shown that syntax contributes to effective communication skills in several ways, such as development of speaking skills, improvement of writing skills, enhancement of reading comprehension, promotion of classroom interaction, development of cognitive skills and improvement of academic performance. Subsequently, syntax also has its challenges in Nigerian Primary Schools' teaching and learning despite its importance. Challenges affecting the teaching and learning of syntax in Nigerian primary schools include multilingual interference, inadequate instructional materials, poor teacher competence, limited reading culture and overcrowded classrooms. Obviously, large class sizes make individualized language teaching and learning difficult and reduce opportunities for practical communication activities.

Although Jegede (2025) and other recent studies emphasize the importance of supportive language strategies such as translanguaging and code-switching in improving language learning outcomes among Nigerian pupils, but no study has been done specifically on roles of syntax and its contributions in developing effective communication skills among primary school pupils in Nigeria which has prompted this study.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Chomsky's Transformational-Generative Grammar Theory and Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory. Noam Chomsky's Transformational-Generative Grammar Theory (TGG) was proposed in 1957. TGG explains that human beings possess innate grammatical competence that enables them to generate and understand language structure. Furthermore, **Gilbert (2024)** refers to transformational Generative grammar as generativism in language design and argues that it provides a useful framework for illumination on how speakers construct diverse sentence structures from underlying representations. He held that TGG remains useful for clarifying linguistic creativity.

Earlier on, Nwankwegu (2022) said that generative grammar is an important development in syntactic analysis because of its importance on underlying structures. As a universal concept in language study, TGG has been helpful in the study of both English and indigenous languages in Nigeria. Ndiribe (2018) utilised the TGG as a framework for the study of Igbo serial verb constructions, Ishima (2018) used transformational principles to study NP-movement in Tiv language, while John and Daniel (2022) demonstrated the importance of transformational analysis to Agatu and English nominal structures. The theory emphasizes the importance of syntactic knowledge in language acquisition and communication development among primary school pupils.

Lev Vygotsky held that language learning occurs through social interaction and communication. Vygotsky (1978) explains that children develop language competence through interaction with teachers, peers and their environment. In addition, Komariah et al. (2025) and Hedges (2021) argue that children's language aptitudes are usually influenced by their social and cultural environments. Holding that children's participation, inquiry and knowledge-building is through interaction. Sociocultural theory supports the view that classroom communication and guided instruction contribute significantly to pupils' syntactic and communicative development.

It follows that the use of TGG and sociocultural theory for this study is suitable as they will guide the development of grammatically acceptable structures and explain how syntax contributes to effective communication skills among primary school pupils in Nigeria.

Data Analysis

The analysis utilised collated sentence structures from the statements of the primary school pupils of Central School 1, Ogui Road, Enugu, Government Primary School, Garki, Kano Municipal, Government Primary School, Marian Road, Calabar, Methodist Primary School, Oke-Ado, Ibadan and LEA Primary School, Garki, Abuja representing the geographical zones in Nigeria and the Federal Capital Territory.

A. Central School 1, Ogui Road, Enugu

8. *The boy playing football is every afternoon.

A simple analysis of sentence '8' shows a syntactic error involving the verb phrase. In the structure '**The boy + playing football + is every afternoon**':

- i. "**playing football**" is a participial phrase utilized as a modifier of *the boy*, without a suitable **main verb** to show what the boy does every afternoon.
- ii. there is a noticeable incorrect use of the verb "**is**" (a form of the verb **be**), which requires a complement or a progressive construction.

iii. since the intention is to say that the boy has the habit of playing football every afternoon, the correct sentence would be '**The boy plays football every afternoon**', indicating that 'sentence 8' has problems of 'An incorrect verb phrase / missing appropriate finite main verb' resulting from internalized native language structure.

9. *She to school goes every morning.

Syntactically, 'sentence 9' contains an **incorrect word order** of:

Subject + Verb + Complement/Adverbial

The internal structure of the sentence is:

- **She** = Subject
- **to school** = Adverbial/Prepositional phrase
- **goes** = Verb
- **every morning** = Adverbial of time

The analysis shows that the verb "**goes**" has been wrongly inserted after "**to school**".

As a result, the grammatical adequacy would be represented as:

S → NP + VP

- NP (Subject): She
- VP (Predicate): goes to school every morning

The challenge here is 'Incorrect constituent ordering (word-order error)' which could be as a result of L1 influence as some indigenous languages in Nigeria could allow structures, resembling "She to school goes...", while Standard English allows the Subject-Verb-Complement order in a declarative sentence.

10. *We enjoyed very much the party.

Going by the Subject + Verb + Object arrangement of the English language, We + enjoyed + the party is appropriate, but when "**very much**" is used to modify *enjoyed*, it is appropriately inserted **after the object**, not between the verb and its object, in order to get:

'We enjoyed the party very much'.

The syntactic error in sentence 10 could be described as an adverb placement error or misplacement of an adverbial modifier. This type of error emerges in language use as a result of language transfer, mainly if the learner's first language permits adverbial elements to occur between a verb and its object.

11. James washed his hands before eating.

12. The birds are flying in the sky.

From the going, it is clear that sentences 11 and 12 maintain the English standard structures, while the three sentence structural errors identified from the five sentences collated from Central School 1, Ogui Road, Enugu has shown that incorrect verb phrase/missing appropriate finite main verb, word-order error and misplacement of an adverbial modifier are all traceable to second language learning challenges.

B. Government Primary School, Garki, Kano Municipal

13. *She has went to school already.

Sentence 13 "She has went to school already" has a syntactic error of failure of grammatical agreement between the auxiliary '*has*' and the required past participle '*gone*'. As it is in English language, the auxiliary verb '*has*' needs the past participle form of the main verb in the present perfect tense. For example,

- **has** = auxiliary verb
- **go** = base form
- **went** = simple past form
- **gone** = past participle

The structure of the present perfect is:

Subject + has/have + past participle

Therefore, the sentence should read: She + has + gone + to school already. The syntactic error here is 'incorrect verb-form selection in a perfect-tense construction.'

This verb form variation is usually caused by internalised L1 influence from native languages that have entangled tense arrangement.

14. *The boy which lives next door is a doctor.

Sentence 14 contains a syntactic error involving the choice of the relative pronoun. The word "**which**" inserted in the sentence is not adequate as it refers to "**the boy**", which is a human being. For example:

- ☐ **The boy which lives next door is a doctor.**
- ☐ **The boy who lives next door is a doctor.**
- ☐ **The boy that lives next door is a doctor.**

As a rule in English language, '**who**' is normally used for people, while '**which**' is normally used for things and animals, as a result, the relative clause should be: '**who lives next door,**' in order to realize '**The boy who lives next door is a doctor.**'

This error occurs because the speaker/writer has selected "**which**" instead of the appropriate human-relative pronoun "**who**" due to linguistic background that may not have provision to distinguish human-relative pronoun from animals and things.

15. *We are going yesterday to the museum.

Sentence 15 contains a syntactic error involving the placement and compatibility of the verb phrase with the time adverbial. In grammar analysis, the auxiliary verb "**are**" is a present-tense form of the '**be**' verb, usually followed by a present

participle: 'We **are going** to the museum.' As a result, the use of the present progressive '**are going**' is incompatible with the past tense '**yesterday**' in the intended meaning, because '**yesterday**' refers to a completed time. The syntactic challenge here can be described as **tense-time incompatibility within the verb phrase and its temporal adverbial**. The construction '**are going**' and '**yesterday**' gives birth to a mismatch between a **present progressive verb phrase** and a **past-time adverbial**, resulting to the error of **tense/aspect and temporal-adverbial incompatibility**.

16. The cat is resting under the table.

17. We learn in a beautiful class.

From Government Primary School, Garki, Kano Municipal, the five sentences gathered for analysis during the research contain error in failure of grammatical agreement between the auxiliary and the required past participle in sentence 13, sentence 14 contains a syntactic error involving the choice of the relative pronoun, sentence 15 has the error of tense/aspect and temporal-adverbial incompatibility while sentences 16 and 17 are grammatically acceptable in English language.

C. Government Primary School, Marian Road, Calabar

18. *Mary and Peter is my friends.

Sentence number 18 in this study contains a **number agreement error** and a **subject-verb agreement error**. The possessive structure "**my friends**" is plural and requires a plural verb '**are**' at the maximal node for convergence. Again, "**Mary and Peter**" as a compound subject requires the plural verb '**are**', not the singular verb '**is**' as seen in the structure under consideration. As a result, the principal syntactic error is **subject-verb disagreement** studied under '**concord**.'

19. *He does not likes milk.

The syntactic error in sentence 10 occurs because "**does**" is already the auxiliary verb carrying the tense and in agreement with the third-person singular subject "**He**". As a syntactic rule, when **do/does/did** is inserted at the auxiliary node in a negative construction, the main verb has to be in its base form. It follows that the sentence contains a syntactic error involving subject-auxiliary-verb agreement and verb form **resulting from incorrect subject-auxiliary-main verb agreement**. In a more clarified manner, in the do-support rule: once **does** is used as the finite auxiliary, the lexical verb must occur in its **base form**.

Rule: Does + base form of verb, not does + -s form. Hence, the sentence should be '**He does not like milk**.' It follows that the insertion of '-s' at the base of the verb 'like' is purely a misplacement of verb polarization process.

20. *Father drives to the work every morning.

Sentence 20 contains a syntactic error involving the use of the definite article '**the**' before "work." Contextually, the word "**work**" is an **uncountable noun referring to a person's regular place of job activity**. When **work** has this semantic representation, it usually occurs without an article. The challenge of this structure is classified as an **article/determiner error (incorrect use of the definite**

article). In grammar, when work refers to one's place or activity of employment, we say:

- i. She goes **to work** at 8 a.m.
- ii. He drives **to work** every morning.

The unnecessary insertion of the indefinite article (the) before "work" is the error in this sentence under investigation.

21. I have two pencils in my bag.

22. The baby is crying loudly.

This research at Government Primary School, Marian Road, Calabar exposed principal syntactic errors in subject-verb disagreement, incorrect subject-auxiliary-main verb agreement and incorrect use of the definite article. However, sentences 21 and 22 were grammatically acceptable in the English language domain.

Methodist Primary School, Oke-Ado, Ibadan

23. *Because he was tired, so he went to bed.

Sentence 23 contains a syntactic error involving the incorrect combination of subordinating and coordinating conjunctions. The double conjunction in the use of "because" and "so" together is not usually acceptable since both words express a cause-and-effect relationship and perform different grammatical functions.

- i. **Because** is a **subordinating conjunction**. It introduces a dependent (subordinate) clause.
- ii. **So** is a **coordinating conjunction** (a coordinator) that can link two independent clauses to show a result.

As a result, the use of both in the same sentence is ungrammatical because it produces a linguistic form called a **double conjunction** or **redundant conjunction**. The alternative becomes the elision of either of the conjunctions to allow one, in order to realize:

- iii. **Because he was tired** = subordinate adverbial clause
- iv. **he went to bed** = main/independent clause
- v. **He was tired, so he went to bed.**

In summary, when '**because**' introduces the subordinate clause, the main clause does not need '**so**'. In order to make use of '**so**,' **because** can be completely removed and **so** can connect two independent clauses as seen in sentence 'V' above.

24. The children were playing happily in the field yesterday.

The children → Subject (noun phrase)

were playing → Verb phrase (past continuous tense)

happily → Adverbial modifying *playing*

in the playground → Prepositional phrase functioning as an adverbial of place

yesterday → Adverbial of time

25. Peter likes playing football.

26. The girls are singing a song.

27. The pupils are listening to their teacher.

Sentences 24, 25, 26 and 17 converge with English language structure. However, among the sentences generated from the research in Methodist Primary School, Oke-Ado, Ibadan, only sentence 23 raised redundant conjunction issues.

LEA Primary School, Garki, Abuja

28. *There is many books on the table.

Sentence 28 contains a syntactic error of subject–verb concord (subject–verb agreement). In subject–verb agreement, singular subjects accept singular verbs, while plural subjects take plural verbs for convergence. In what is available in sentence 28, error occurs because “many books” is plural, and the verb “is” is singular. Linguistically, the sentence violates the agreement relationship between the verb and its plural subject.

29. *The students their homework have finished.

Sentence 29 contains a syntactic of position of the object and the auxiliary/main verb structure.

The sentence presents: **The students | their homework |have finished Subject |Object| Verb**

Ordinarily, the structure should be: **S + Auxiliary + Main Verb + Object** (in English language), but it turned to **subject + Object + Verb** due to the placement of “their homework” between the subject and the verb phrase. This structural change moved the usual word order from **Subject + Verb + Object** to another structure of **subject + Object + Verb**.

This violates the normal **SVO (Subject–Verb–Object)** word order of English. This **word-order/sentence-structure error (SVO violation)** is usually caused by a previous knowledge of another language that possibly has a different structure such as subject + Object + Verb.

30. The boy is reading a book.

31. Mary goes to school every day.

32. The teacher is writing on the board.

This scholarly study of the roles of syntax through recorded speech literacy studies conducted in Nigerian primary schools reveal that language structure and syntactic awareness support comprehension and academic achievement.

Similarly, studies on oral English instruction reveal that mastery of sentence structure improves oral communication and classroom participation among pupils (Urujian, 2024).

Findings

The study made the following findings:

1. Syntax plays a crucial role in developing effective communication skills among primary school pupils in understanding the workings of the internal structure of language.
2. Pupils with adequate syntactic knowledge, communicate more clearly and confidently, because they understand the use of linguistic items according to English grammar rules.
3. Syntax enhances speaking, writing, reading comprehension in addition to listening skills.
4. Challenges such as multilingual interference, inadequate teaching materials, level of

environmental civilisation and poor teacher preparation affect syntactic learning percentage in Nigerian schools, leading to less effective competence of pupils’ performances in language use.

5. As a result, effective syntax instruction is highly recommended for primary school classes in Nigeria as the knowledge of syntax will contribute positively to academic performance and classroom participation of the pupils.
6. In addition, interactive teaching methods and language-supportive strategies will assist to improve pupils’ communication competence.

Conclusion

Syntax remains an essential aspect of language learning and communication development among primary school pupils in Nigeria. Through syntactic competence, pupils acquire the ability to organize ideas, construct meaningful sentences, and communicate effectively in both oral and written forms. Effective communication skills are necessary for academic success, social interaction, and personal development.

The study concludes that proper teaching of syntax should receive greater attention in Nigerian primary schools during language pedagogy. Teachers should adopt learner-centered instructional methods that encourage active communication and grammatical practice. Government and educational stakeholders should also provide adequate language learning resources and teacher training opportunities to improve syntax instruction in schools.

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