

16th ICLICE 2019 Istanbul 001-001 Fatima Yusuf

**ATTITUDES OF STUDENTS TOWARDS ENGLISH LANGUAGE GRAMMAR  
AND USAGE**

Fatima Yusuf  
Federal University, Gashua, Nigeria  
fareeksaeem@gmail.com

**ABSTRACT**

The purist attitude predominant in eighteenth-century, England was the manifestation of an attitude toward language. Doubtless, there are and have been purists—persons who believe in an absolute and unwavering standard of “correctness” in even the most undeveloped societies, for purism is a matter of temperament rather than of culture. Although very dear to American purists, the “rules” supposed to govern English usage originated not in America, but in the mother country. The Englishmen who formulated them were as ill-informed and as inconsistent as their slightly later American counterparts. Present-day notions of “correctness” are to a large extent based on the notion, prominent in the eighteenth century, that language is of divine origin and hence was perfect in its beginnings but is constantly in danger of corruption and decay unless it is diligently kept in line by wise people who are able to get themselves accepted as authorities, such as those who write dictionaries and grammars. With such properness, the study examined the attitude of students towards using grammar (syntax). The study used interview-questionnaire adapted in an attempt to elicit the attitudes and usage of grammar. Thirty-one (31) participants responded, the data were collected by face to face interaction and their responses were analyzed based on percentage showing their behaviour in terms of attitude towards the use of grammar. Findings demonstrate that the percentage of Nigerian students who make use of English syntax in their day-to-day interactions is obviously advantageous despite the fact that it is not considerable enough. It was recommended that future research should involve as many participants as possible from different ages and educational backgrounds to come out with a strong claim that could be made.

*Keywords:* attitude of students, English syntax, use of grammar

**Introduction**

The most influential of the eighteenth-century advocates of prescriptive grammar, who aimed at bringing English into a Latin-like state of perfection, was Robert Lowth (1710). In the preface to his Short Introduction to English Grammar (1762), Lowth followed the footsteps of Dean Swift’s charge, made in 1712 in his Proposal for Correcting, Improving, and Ascertaining [that is, fixing or making certain] the English Tongue, that “our language is extremely imperfect,” “that it offends against every part of grammar,” and that most of the “best authors of our age” commit “many gross improprieties, which...ought to be discarded.” Lowth was able to find many egregious blunders in the works of our most eminent writers; his footnotes are filled with them. In any case, Lowth set out in all earnestness in the midst of a busy life to do something constructive about the deplorable English written by the masters of English literature. Like most men of his time, he believed in universal grammar. Consequently, he believed that English was “easily reducible to a System of rules.” Among many other achievements, he promulgated the rules for shall and will that had been formulated by John Wallis in his

## ATTITUDES OF STUDENTS TOWARDS ENGLISH LANGUAGE

*Grammatica Linguae Anglicanae*. Those rules, which continue to be cited by prescriptivists, were never accurate and are irrelevant for most speakers today. One of the most influential of the late eighteenth-century grammarians was Lindley Murray, a Philadelphia-born Quaker who returned to England after the American Revolution and wrote an English Grammar for use in Quaker girls' schools. He was motivated by a wish to foster the study of the native language, as opposed to Latin, and by his religious piety, which "predisposed him to regard linguistic matters in terms of right and wrong. His highly moralistic outlook perforce carried over into his attitude toward usage".

Similarly, George Campbell (1776), *Philosophy of Rhetoric*, went so far as to call the language "purely a species of fashion," Priestley recognized the superior force of usage. He also shared Campbell's belief that there was a need to control language in some way other than by custom. Being children of the Age of Reason, both had recourse to the principle of analogy to settle questions of divided usage, though admitting that it was not always possible to do so. All these men were indeed typical of their time, in most respects a good time; and they were honest men according to their lights, which in other respects were quite bright indeed. We cannot blame them for not having information that was unavailable in their day or for holding attitudes that were universal in their time. Present-day purists cannot claim such a justification. Despite the tremendous advances of linguistics since the eighteenth century, popular attitudes toward language have changed very little since Bishop Lowth and Lindley Murray were laying down the law. Their precepts were largely based on what they supposed to be logic and reason, for they believed that the laws of language were rooted in the natural order, and this was of course "reasonable." To cite an example, eighteenth-century grammarians outlawed the emphatic double negative construction for the reason stated by Lowth, that "two Negatives in English destroy one another, or are equivalent to an Affirmative," just as they do in mathematics, though the analogy is quite false. Many very reasonable people of earlier times produced sentences with two or even more negatives, as many today still do. The double negative is not part of formal Standard English today because people who use formal Standard English do not use it—not because it is unreasonable. Modern linguistics has made very little headway in convincing those who have not studied the subject that language is a living, hence changing, thing, rather than an ideal toward which we should all hopelessly aspire. The study investigated the attitude of students towards syntax rule on the English language in Nigerian universities.

### Methodology

#### Instrumentation and Data Collection

In this study, the researcher used the interview-questionnaire adapted in an attempt to elicit the attitudes and usage of the informant to grammar. Regarding this set, the participants responded by one or two words to describe their attitude. The data were collected by face to face interaction. The informant's attitude to usage and grammar were gathered from the responses they have towards the language. Then, their responses calculated in percentages showing their behavior in terms of attitude towards the usage of grammar.

#### Sample size and selected candidates

Thirty one (31) Nigerian undergraduate students who're their average age are between 25-32 years old have been selected to participate in this study. All the participants are students from the Federal University, Gashua, which serves as the setting for this work. Although the students have been selected randomly from different disciplines, the

sample selection technique used in this study is purposive sampling where the subjects have been stratified according to sex (16 males and 15 females).

### Literature Review

The role of grammar in teaching English as a foreign language has been a debated issue over the years. Grammar is generally thought of as one of the basic elements to help learners communicate in the target language. However, in the 80s, Krashen (1982) claimed that grammar is a phenomenon that can be acquired naturally with meaningful input, and rejected designing grammar-based language curricula. This claim created a great impact among scholars and practitioners. But in time the accuracy of language that learners use to communicate has been a concern and grammar has gained value again (Hedge, 2000). Lightbrown (1991) indicated that grammar works as a 'hook' for learners, and they use it as a basis to build up their proficiency in the target language. Similarly, it was mentioned that grammar teaching is effective and reaches its target although students are not ready to learn certain grammatical forms (Spada & Light brown, 1999). If the learners are given enough chance to practice, it was believed that the grammatical forms which are taught could be used automatically in written and spoken communication (Ur, 1996). Hedge (2000) indicated that focusing on grammar and teaching grammatical forms explicitly accelerates the acquisition of grammar. According to Ellis (2006), teaching grammar explicitly helps to develop an implicit knowledge and supports language development.

Many studies have been conducted on grammar teaching and learning in the process of language learning; however, the learners' attitudes and perceptions on this issue have been mostly ignored. The reason of it is mostly the beliefs of educators and administrators that the learners cannot know exactly what they need (Zhou, 2009), however, students' beliefs and attitudes play an effective role on many issues such as class activities that teachers use, student motivation, anxiety, the use of learning strategies, and proficiency (Borg, 2003). Students' attitudes towards grammar in the language learning process have been the topic of a limited number of studies (İncecay & Dollar, 2011; Loewen et al., 2009; Schulz, 2001; Zhou, 2009). In the study conducted with 607 Colombian and 824 FL students, Schulz (2001) found that both Colombian and American students considered the formal study of grammar is essential to master a foreign language. In the study conducted by Loewen et al. (2009), most of the participants mentioned that grammar is a basis on which they can build up the information they learn about the language, and it helps them to develop their writing, reading and speaking skills. Zhou (2009) revealed that participants in the study were very motivated to develop their grammar, and they especially needed learning grammar to avoid making mistakes while writing. Similarly, İncecay and Dollar (2011) found that students consider grammar as an important aspect of language learning but they thought that it should be taught more communicatively.

### Findings

In this section, data analysis is presented. The types of agreeing/disagree questions concerning the students' attitude to grammar which reflected in the questionnaire distributed to the respondents as well as their responses are treated in table 1 below. However, responses to questions that demand more than agrees/disagree answers are treated separately for the sake of clarity.

## ATTITUDES OF STUDENTS TOWARDS ENGLISH LANGUAGE

Table 1

*Indicated the responses of the attitude of students towards using grammar (syntax) in their speaking or writing*

Questions	Agree	Disagree
Do you use syntax (rules that govern how word are combined to form sentence)	45%	55%
Do you use materials written in English syntax	90%	10%
Should syntax be used to conduct meetings	90%	10%
Is syntax rules be considered as sending and receiving message from parties	60%	40%
Do you think syntax it is a way of expression	35%	65%
Should syntax be adopted and used in the Universities in Nigeria?	100%	0%
Does syntax have the capacity to express all our thought during exams	35%	65%

Source: Designed by Author

Indicated the responses to agree/disagree questions on the attitude of Table above illustrates that 45% of the students said that they used syntax while 55% of the respondents disagreed with the using syntax. From the data, it can be seen that the percentage of students who use grammar or syntax is less compared to those who do not. Furthermore, since the genuineness of a language can also be enhanced by the availability of literature in it, it was sought to find out if the students read materials written in grammar. The result shows 90% of the students indicated the agreed position to reading materials in syntax while only 10% disagree with students towards using grammar (syntax) in their speaking or writing.

As shown in the above table, 90% of the respondents agree that grammar should be used whenever there is Nigerian students' meeting in the Universities, while only 10% disagree with the opinion, and that Standard English should be used. Regarding the agreed percentage, it can be concluded that most Nigerian undergraduate students are willing to encourage the use of syntax among them. On whether syntax rules be considered a way of expressing or receiving message 60% of the respondents considered syntax while 20% did not agree with it. Similarly, 90% of the respondents agree in a variety of English while only 65% say otherwise. In addition, only 35% of the respondents believe that grammar should be taught as a subject in schools while 65% say it should not be taught since could still be learned easily. 100% of the respondents say syntax is fit to be a medium of communication among all Nigerian students in Nigerian Universities because it is easy and also we will still maintain the mode of communication that is used by the majority of the population in our country. On adoption of grammar is an official language, 65% of the respondents say YES while only 35% say NO because we need to learn the standard English that is used all over the world for better communication with the international countries. Finally, on the capacity of syntax to express all our thoughts during exams, 35% respondents agree while 65% disagree has been used to communicate in all aspects of social life. The responses of the participants on the questions that require more than agree or disagree are represented on the tables below.

## ATTITUDES OF STUDENTS TOWARDS ENGLISH LANGUAGE

**Table 2:** *When did you start learning Grammar?*

Categories	Percentage
Childhood	35%
Primary school	26%
Secondary School	43%
University	1%

Source: Designed by Author

Table 2 presents statistical results related to commencement time of syntax use of the respondents. The result reveals that the duo of childhood and primary school (at their younger ages) have 35% and 26% respectively. This signifies that majority of them acquired syntax at their younger ages and by implication, as a foreign language there is every possibility for students to face the problem of fossilization when using syntax English language at their older ages and considered the rules.

**Table 3:** *How often do you speak and considering the syntax rules?*

Categories	Percentage
Often	19%
Occasionally	70%
Seldom	10%
Rarely	1%

Source: Designed by Author

Table 3 above shows that the 19% of the of the participants frequently use syntax rules in most of their communication which justifies that use of English syntax is still on the lower side among students. The alarming rate of use of English rules can have an implication which shows that syntax as variety will still survive considering Occasionally used with 70%, although not having native speakers, but it is free from facing endangerment as shown above.

**Table 4:** *Where do you normally use syntax?*

Categories	Percentage
University	50%
Social gathering	25%
Home	5%
All of the above	20%

Source: Designed by Author

Considering the table 4 above, it can be deduced that since only in the classroom of universities and social gatherings the participants use syntax English minimally, and the fact that the duration students spend in these areas are quite limited compared to home, hence it signifies that syntax English may interrupt if not dominate or overtake the use of Standard English language.

**Table 5:** *What category of people do you think speak syntax?*

Categories	Percentage
Literates	20%
Semi-literates	5%
University students	10%
All categories of people above	65%

Source: Designed by Author

Table 5, considering the perception of the users of syntax indicates literacy has 20% and all categories of people stated 65% consider the university students 10% and semi-literates 5%

### Discussion

In a general note, the finding demonstrates that the percentage of Nigerians students who use syntax English in their day-to-day interactions is advantageous despite the fact is not considerable enough. More significantly, the attitude of Nigerian undergraduate students in University regarding syntax English is considered positive. This may have resulted from the fact that syntax does not belong to any particular region among various regions in Nigeria, which facilitates its acceptability as a lingua franca of all. Hence, this empowers stand unity among Nigerians regardless of where you come from as a region (Nigerian students). Considering the result illustrated in the tables above, it can be concluded that syntax is not only peculiar to non-literate individuals but also practicable by the educated elite who want to be considered. The finding is incongruent with the view of Hedge, (2000). Lightbrown (1991) as grammar works as a hook of learners. Therefore, undergraduate students as literates are not excluded as the result reveals that use of grammar has been an alarming rate despite students interact with their lecturers and the national students who come from a different linguistic background, and the medium of communication is native or standard English language, they still maintain their romance to syntax English. Predictably, in the next few tears, Nigerian students with the level of enthusiasm syntax, English will be used in various domains of communication such as student meetings, interaction with each other in campus and other social gatherings as (1982) claimed that grammar is a phenomenon. Conversely, the finding contradicts Akinmade & Oladipo (2010) who theirs reveal a negative attitude toward Nigerian students’ syntax rules. This is not far away from the fact that the setting of the study may influence the finding. Virtually all the past and present regimes of Nigeria did not encourage the development of syntax English, especially at home. It is not recognized at home but as people consider it fashion and way to uplift your status becomes a parameter. Such a study is conducted in Nigeria mostly as self-study amid a negative attitude on English syntax from the community itself. Perhaps, it is hypothesized that the lack of frequent use of syntax English rules would corrupt the learning of Standard English which is considered the government’s priority.

### Limitations and Recommendations

The main limitation of this study lies in the small number of participants selected. Only 31 undergraduate students may limit the generalization of the findings. For further studies, it can be recommended that such future research should involve as many participants as possible from different ages and educational backgrounds. By doing so, a strong claim could be made, and generalization can also be drawn based on the findings of the study.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, the students' preference for Nigerian English rules as a lingua franca among Nigerian students is related to its simplicity, easement, acceptability and indeed unity facilitation among Nigerians studying in early stages in universities. Despite its challenges as not native language status, students' attitudes towards English rules remain positive. It is also noticeable that Nigerian English syntax is not only favored by literate individuals but also serves as a medium of communication among learners and literates in the globe.

### Reference

- Borg, S. (2003). Teacher cognition in language teaching: A review of research on what language teachers think, know, believe, and do. *Language teaching*, 36(2), 81-109.
- Campbell, G. (1851). *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (London, 1776). *New Edition, New York: Harper*, 388.
- Cripps, R. S. (1953). Two British interpreters of the Old Testament: Robert Lowth (1710-1778) and Samuel Lee (1783-1853). *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, 35(2), 385-404.
- Graham, M., Ward, B., Munro, G., Snow, P., & Ellis, J. (2006). Rural parents, teenagers and alcohol: What are parents thinking?. *Rural and remote health*, 6(383), 1-14.
- Hedge, P., & Kriwoken, L. K. (2000). Evidence for effects of *Spartina anglica* invasion on benthic macrofauna in Little Swanport estuary, Tasmania. *Austral Ecology*, 25(2), 150-159.
- Incecay, V., & Dollar, Y. K. (2011). Foreign language learners' beliefs about grammar instruction and error correction. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 15, 3394-3398.
- Keith, V. M., & Herring, C. (1991). Skin tone and stratification in the Black community. *American journal of sociology*, 97(3), 760-778.
- Krashen, S. D. (1982). *Principles and practice in second language acquisition*. Hedge, 2000
- Li, J. R., Kuppler, R. J., & Zhou, H. C. (2009). Selective gas adsorption and separation in metal-organic frameworks. *Chemical Society Reviews*, 38(5), 1477-1504.
- Lightbown, P. M., Spada, N., Ranta, L., & Rand, J. (1999). *How languages are learned* (Vol. 2). Oxford: Oxford university press.
- Loewen, S., Li, S., Fei, F., Thompson, A., Nakatsukasa, K., Ahn, S., & Chen, X. (2009). Second language learners' beliefs about grammar instruction and error correction. *The Modern Language Journal*, 93(1), 91-104.
- Moher, D., Schulz, K. F., & Altman, D. G. (2001). The CONSORT statement: revised recommendations for improving the quality of reports of parallel group randomized trials. *BMC medical research methodology*, 1(1), 2.
- Wang, H. G., Rapp, U. R., & Reed, J. C. (1996). Bcl-2 targets the protein kinase Raf-1 to mitochondria. *Cell*, 87(4), 629-638.