



INVESTIGATING FRESH NCE STUDENTS' USE OF CONTRACTED VERB FORMS IN ALVAN IKOKU FEDERAL COLLEGE OF EDUCATION, OWERRI

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Abstract

The misuse of the English contracted verb forms in spoken and written English of the literate in the Nigerian contemporary society is worrisome. The ESL user has internalized these errors that they are now considered 'standard forms'. Some 'role models' from the media and the academia worsen the situation. This paper focuses on identifying the errors in the use of contracted verb forms, causes and solutions to the problem. Three research questions were designed to test three objectives formulated for this study. Seventy (70) out of one hundred and sixty-four (164) fresh NCE students of the School of Arts and Social Sciences of the Alvan Ikoku Federal College of Education, Owerri in the 2020/2021 academic session were purposively sampled for the study. 64% of the sample size indicated poor knowledge of the use of contracted forms, hence the misuse. 23% had a good knowledge of the contractions while 13% were neutral. The behaviourist theory of learning guided the study. The findings show that the students had poor knowledge of contractions and this was caused by their wrong pronunciation and poor teaching at the O'levels. The paper recommends adequate teaching and exercises to be introduced within the five semesters of the study of General English of the NCE programme and regular spontaneous quizzes, to check the menace. It suggests that other studies be carried out on English contractions, particularly in the two semesters of teaching of Use of English at the degree undergraduate level.

Key words: Contracted Verb Forms, Causes and Solutions

Introduction

Speaking and writing skills are among the four language communication skills taught in our tertiary institutions. Students come from different economic and social backgrounds which affect their studies. Lack of proficiency in English language accounts for students' poor academic performance at all levels. Grammatical errors distort intended meanings



conveyed by the speaker or writer. Unfortunately, English contractions and verbs generally account largely for grammatical errors and are major constraints militating against the ESL user's proficiency. There are five semesters for the teaching of General English (GSE 111 - General English I, GSE 121 - General English II, GSE 211 - General English III, GSE 221 - General English IV and GSE 321 - General English V) at the NCE programme which are enough for zealous teachers to handle the deficiency in English.

The main objective of this paper was to identify errors of the contracted verb forms and specifically identify the causes and proffer solutions to them. Three research questions were formulated for the study. They are: 1. What are English contracted verb forms? 2. What are the causes of the misuse of contracted verb forms? 3. What teaching strategies can be employed to check and eliminate the errors? The scope of the study was limited to fresh NCE students of Alvan Ikoku Federal College of Education, Owerri of 2020/2021 academic session. It was aimed at identifying their knowledge of the contracted verb forms on admission into the College to enable teachers develop and utilize teaching strategies that would help curb the deficiencies. Some students already use forms like 'am' and 'is' erroneously in place of 'I'm' and 'it's' in both spoken and written English. The behaviourists theory of learning with emphasis on repetition and reward guided this study.

Contractions are serious errors which distort speakers' and writers' original meanings yet considered insignificant. Obuasi (2011; p. 153) decries the danger posed by the 'shortcuts' in textism observing that it is more worrisome as the society sees it as insignificant. She calls on teachers of English to rise to the challenge and raise a generation able to handle essay writing effectively and creatively.

Ngulube (2015; p. 59) defines contractions as 'the merging of two forms at morpheme or word boundary.... the elision of sounds in a connected speech.' Some examples are I'm, I've, he's, you'd, we'll and more. Contracted verb forms can be further defined as the agreement or decision to have two different words, a noun or a pronoun (commonly a pronoun) and a verb brought together by a combination such that some letters of both words are removed by the use of the apostrophe to form one word that expresses same meaning as expressed by the two original words of the combination. The essence of the apostrophe in the combination is to represent the missing letters of the two words. The contractions are most commonly done with verbs, auxiliaries or modals attached to nouns or pronouns. Another definition of contraction, though meaning the same, is 'a type of elision, simplifying pronunciation through reducing, dropping and shortening sounds occurring to a word group.' In subject-auxiliary inversion, the contracted negative forms behave as if they are they were auxiliaries themselves, changing place with the subject. For instance,



the interrogative form of He won't go is Won't he go? The form without contraction is Will he not go? In the construction the negative 'not' follows the subject 'he'. It is vital to note here that the errors of contracted verb forms sought in this study are those with pronouns or nouns in affirmative forms only and not those in isolation of the pronouns, the negative expressions.

Mobile phones are a contributory factor to the problem posed by the errors of contracted verb forms. Obuasi (2011; p. 155) observed that 'most mobile phones around have about one hundred and sixty (160) characters per message'. This observation explains the craze for the SMS – Short Message System – offered by the cell phones more so as it saves costs for the user. Obuasi (2011; p. 157) graded four hundred and one (401) scripts from five departments in the Enugu campus of the University of Nigeria Nsukka (UNN) in the 2008/2009 academic session. Forty-eight representing 12% of the population 'had obvious influences of text messaging shortcuts'. Among the shortened words recorded is I've erroneously used for I've. She further observed that though the number of shortened words found in the scripts was insignificant it was a regrettable and unforgettable error in essay writing. In her conclusion and recommendation she asserts that the presence of textism is 'obvious and ruining our English language essay'; and recommends that 'all English language teachers put hands together to fight the language of text massaging'. Though this paper is not on the language of text messaging it agrees with Obuasi's findings and recommendations because the spoken and written English deteriorates not only in essay writing but in English language generally in an ESL environment.

Writing on the registers and styles as observed in language variation across situations Finegan (2012; p' 356) observes that Truman's speech in an interview presented phonological verb contractions. Such forms as 'who had' or 'who would' were often contracted as who'd. Contracted verb forms noted included don't, doesn't, isn't, hasn't, he's, he'd, that's and it's. In fig 10.4 Finegan (2011; p. 345) presents a number of contractions per 1000 words in different registers citing Biber (1988) as source of the data. The contractions cited above were exhibited in different speech situations. Moving from telephone conversations with friends to those with strangers, interviews, broadcasts, romantic fictions, press and academic journals it was observed that contractions reduced as formality increased. (Finegan (2012). This study agrees with Finegan's observation and points out the fact that contracted verb forms are for informal speech and informal writing only.

On morphemes Akmajian, A, Demers R. A, Farmer A K and Harnish (2012; p. 21) note that 'not all bound morphemes are affixes or bound bases' citing examples with contracted

forms of verbs. They affirm that ‘the word *will* can occur either as *will* in sentences as in ‘*They will go*’ or in a contracted form, spelled ‘*ll*’ in sentences such as ‘*They’ll go*’. They went further to present other contractions in English: ‘*s*’, ‘*ve*’, ‘*d*’ as in ‘*The old car’s not running anymore.*’, ‘*They’ve gone jogging.*’ On contractions in casual spoken English Akmajian et al (2012; p. 102) present tables on phonetic forms of contractions of the verb to be with personal pronouns in American English: Bisyllabic and monosyllabic forms in formal written, formal spoken and casual spoken forms showing the phonetic patterns /ʃi:z/ and /aiəm/ or /aim/, for instance, which characterize single words. This assertion is made possible by the reduction of vowels through elision to bring two words together as one without changing the speaker’s original meaning. They conclude that ‘complex words consist of two or more morphemes in combination.’ and those contractions appear only in informal spoken English. This study agrees with Akamajian et al (2012) and notes that the British informal spoken and informal written English only accepts the contractions too and it is vital for the phonetic aspect of contractions to be properly handled in an ESL class.

Ogbedeagu, P. E. and Diala, E. L. (2019; p. 540) observe that ‘phonology presents a problem to the L₂ users of English ... (and) the inconsistency in the pattern of responses’ in the pluralization of English nouns.’ The role of phonology extends to all aspects of the language including contractions. The case of contractions is simpler as there is a fixed pattern for the elision and so presents no inconsistency in its formation.

Methodology

The research design employed in this study was the descriptive research design. The research instruments for data collection were designed by the researchers. The instruments were validated by two experts in Measurement and Evaluation and the researchers who are experts in the field of study. Test items structured in form of a questionnaire were administered on a face to face contact with the subjects specifically to elicit the desired information. The contact afforded the researchers the opportunity to have oral interviews with the subjects through conversations. Seventy (70) scripts out of one hundred and sixty - four (164) scripts selected purposively across the ten departments; seven from each, were used for the study. The purposive sampling technique was employed to have every department in the school represented and for the elimination of bias. Direct observations were employed in dialogues and conversations among the subjects and with the researchers in addition to the tests designed for this study. The desired information elicited from both the structured oral interview and the questionnaire formed the data. Contracted verb forms such as I’m, you’re, he’s, we’d, for instance, were presented to produce such contractions:

(to be) I’m, he’s, we’re

have - 've – I've, we've, you've, they've
has – 's – he's, she's, it's
would – 'd – I'd, he'd, she'd, it'd, we'd, you'd, they'd
will – 'll – I'll, he'll, she'll, it'll, we'll, you'll, they'll

The questionnaire was structured to elicit information on the above contracted verb forms. The structured oral interview, dialogues and conversations among the subjects and with the researchers produced other contractions not captured on the questionnaire.

Results

Table 1: Respondents' use of Contracted Verb Forms

S/N	Items	No. of Respondents	Correct		Incorrect		Neutral	
			No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
1.	(be) I'm, he's, we're	70	13	19	47	67	10	14
2.	(have) I've, we've, you've, they've	70	20	29	42	60	08	11
3.	(has) he's, she's, it's	70	18	26	41	59	11	16
4.	(would) I'd, he'd, she'd, it'd, we'd, you'd, they'd	70	09	13	52	74	09	13
5.	(will) I'll, he'll, she'll, it'll, we'll, you'll, they'll	70	21	30	42	60	07	10

The table presents the number and percentage scores of responses from respondents on their knowledge of contracted verb forms. The contractions tested are the verb to be, have, has, would and will. Item one: indicates that 13 respondents represented by 19% correctly used the contracted verb forms of the verb to be, 47 respondents represented by 67% and ten respondents represented by 14% incorrectly used the contracted verbs and were neutral respectively. For the auxiliary verb have in item two 20 respondents were correct indicative of 29%, 42 respondents represented by 59% were wrong while 11 respondents represented by 16% were neutral. Item three has results for the auxiliary verb has in this order: 26% representing 18 respondents, 59% representing 41 respondents correctly and incorrectly responded to the questions while 16% representing 11 respondents were neutral. 9 respondents were correct indicating 13%, another 9 respondents again represented by 13% were neutral while 52 respondents represented by 74% wrongly used the forms in item four. Item five indicates that 21 respondents represented by 30% correctly used the contracted verb forms of the verb will, 42 respondents represented by 60% and 7 respondents represented by 10% incorrectly used the contracted verbs and were neutral respectively.

Table II: Respondents' Pronunciation of Contracted Verb Forms

S/N	Items	No. of Respondents	Correct		Incorrect		Neutral	
			No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
1.	(be) I'm, he's, we're	70	10	14	60	86	00	00
2.	(have) I've, we've, you've, they've	70	08	11	62	89	00	00
3.	(has) he's, she's, it's	70	06	09	64	91	00	00
4.	(would) I'd, he'd, she'd, it'd, we'd, you'd, they'd	70	07	10	63	90	00	00
5.	(will) I'll, he'll, she'll, it'll, we'll, you'll, they'll	70	12	17	58	83	00	00

Table two is the result of the subjects' pronunciations of the contracted verb forms tested. Item one shows that 10 subjects represented by 14% correctly pronounced the contracted verb forms of the verb to be, 60 subjects represented by 86% pronounced them wrongly while none was neutral. For the auxiliary verb have in item two indicates that 08 subjects represented by 11% correctly pronounced the contracted verb forms of the verb have, 62 subjects represented by 89% pronounced them wrongly while none was neutral in pronouncing them. Item three has results for the auxiliary verb has in this order: 09% representing 06 subjects correctly pronounced the contractions, 91% representing 64 subjects incorrectly pronounced them while none was neutral. In item four all the subjects attempted the pronunciation as in the earlier items though only 7 were correct indicating 10% while 63 subjects represented by 90% were correct in their pronunciations and none neutral. Item five indicates that no subject shied away from the pronunciation, however only 12 representing 17% were correct while 58 subjects representing 83% were wrong.



Table III: The extent to which the media and Academia Influence Subjects' Spoken and Written Contracted Verb Forms.

S/N	Items	No. of Respondents	Very high Extent		High Extent		Low Extent	
			No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
1.	Regular user of the social media	70	61	87	09	13	00	00
2.	Fan of the Nollywood	70	56	80	14	20	00	00
3.	Listen to the radio always	70	20	29	50	71	00	00
4.	Watch the television always	70	70	100	00	00	00	00
5.	Lecturers and the literate use contractions correctly	70	70	100	00	00	00	00

Table three presents the result of the subjects' responses to questions on the extent to which the media and academia influence their use of the contracted verb forms tested. Item one shows that 61 respondents represented by 87% use the social media to a very high extent, 09 respondents represented by 13% use it to a high extent while none uses it to a low extent. For the question whether or not they are fans of the Nollywood in item two 56 respondents represented by 80% claim to be fans of the Nollywood to a very high extent, 14 respondents represented by 20% use it to a high extent while none uses it to a low extent. Item three has results for the question eliciting information on the extent to which they listen to the radio 29% representing 20 respondents listen to the radio to a very high extent, 71% representing 50 respondents use it to a high extent while none uses to a low extent. In item four all the respondents overwhelmingly claimed to watch the television thus indicating 100% positive response. Item five indicates that all the respondents overwhelmingly also claimed that lecturers and the literate in the society use the contractions correctly. This is a 100% affirmative response indicating in favour of lecturers and the literates.

Discussion

Research question one was tested with the cluster of questions on table one. It sought to identify the contracted verb forms known to fresh NCE students of the School of Arts and Social Sciences, Alvan Ikoku Federal College of Education, Owerri and being correctly used on admission into the College. Unfortunately, 67% (47 respondents) of the respondents failed the contractions of the verb to be with pronouns and nouns. Responses from the scripts indicate that the contractions I'm, he's and we're were presented as am, his and were or where respectively. Only 19% (13 respondents) got them right while 14% (10 respondents) did not answer the questions. For I've, we've, you've and they've on item

two of table one 60% (42 respondents) failed. Only 29% (20 respondents) passed the test while 11% (10 respondents) did not attempt the questions. The responses recorded were I'v/ve/av, we'v/wev, you'v/yuv and their'v/there'v/they'v. For item three 59% (41 respondents) failed. Only 26% (18 respondents) passed the test while 16% (10 respondents) did not attempt the questions the question which sought to identify the contractions - he's, she's and it's. The responses got were his, she/her and is/its. Responses for item four are I'd/I wd, he'd/he'wud, she'd/she'wd, it/it'd/it wud, we'd/we wud/wuld and they'd/they'wud rather than I'd, he'd, she'd, it'd, we'd and they'd respectively. Lastly for research question one item five recorded these responses – I we/I'l, he/he'l, shel/she'l, itl/ti'l, we/we'l/ you'l/you'l and they'l/there'll/their'll respectively for I'll, he'll, she'll, it'll, we'll, you'll and they'll. Note that only the wrong responses are discussed here. It was observed that the right responses came from students of either good academic background having attended schools with dedicated staff who functioned as good role models or homes of high academic standards.

Table two tested research question two which sought the influence of phonology in contractions. 88% representing 62 subjects wrongly pronounced the contractions hence the failure in getting them correctly written. Students write the contractions as they pronounce regrettably erroneous as they may be. This calls for intensified efforts on phonology. The pronoun I is often omitted in the pronunciation of I'm /aim/ hence they pronounce only the verb am and write it as the contraction of I am. It is the same explanation for it's, often pronounced as is, for instance is me for it's me as commonly used.

An average of 79% representing 55 respondents positively claimed that they use the social media regularly, are fans of the Nollywood, listen often to the radio, watch the television and affirm that staff and the literate correctly use the contractions. In fact, the response for the fourth and fifth items on the cluster for table three had an overwhelming 100% affirmation for always watching the television and having staff and the literate who correctly use the contractions. However, a correction was made in another session with the students with some oral drills and they realized they had been wrong in believing they had good role models among the media and academic staff as well as the literate.

Interacting teaching strategies such as prediction and think-pair-share are best suited for teaching contractions with regular dictation class exercises. Prediction, as defined by Izuagba and Nwigwe (2013) is an interactive activity which enables learners learn to think as they learn thus engaging in reflective thinking.



Conclusion

This study investigates fresh students' knowledge and use of contracted verb forms on admission into the College. Three research questions tested the objectives of the study. The findings indicate that students misuse the contractions, pronounce them wrongly and write them wrongly as pronounced. They also lack good models as some media staff and some academia misuse the contractions. This study therefore here suggests, in agreement with Obuasi (2011), that all hands must be on deck to correct these errors. There should be regular oral drills, dictation class exercises and quizzes to check this embarrassing phenomenon. Media houses should organize regular staff workshops and drills involving experts in English phonology and morphology as resource persons.

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