

Analysis of errors in subject-verb agreement among Malaysian ESL learners

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Abstract

This article analyses errors on subject-verb agreement among post-graduate teacher trainees in a college in Malaysia. Twenty postgraduate (English Language Studies) students from a teachers' training college from the northern state of Malaysia has participated in the study. The study examine errors in 5 types of subject-verb agreements: subject verb agreement of person, subject verb agreement of number, agreement with coordinated subject, agreement with indefinite expression of amount and also notional agreement and proximity. The instruments used in this study are 2 types of written compositions: argumentative and factual. The compositions were analysed to identify the problems in writing grammatically correct subject-verb agreement by the students. The results of the study reveal that majority of the students have committed errors in subject-verb agreement especially in SVA of number and followed by SVA of person. The students were found to avoid using the complex sub-rules of SVA that include the agreement with coordinated subject, agreement with indefinite expressions of amount and also notional agreement and proximity.

Keywords error analysis, subject-verb-agreement, grammar in ESL, second language learner; second language teaching

Introduction

Errors in language learning have always been the centre of attention and knowledge of grammar has become one of the most actively discussed questions in language and literacy pedagogy. In the ESL context, knowledge of grammar becomes an issue of intense community interest, evident in media discussions especially by those who are

concerned with the standard of English language learning and teaching. When educators used audio lingual approach (ALM) errors were not tolerated at all. However, with the introduction on communicative language teaching the perception of learners' errors has changed because errors are now considered part and parcel of second language acquisition. Errors committed by the learners revealed the true state of second language learners' proficiency of the new language they are learning at a particular point of time. Apart from that they also revealed what the second language learners do not know and what they have internalized of the new language system.

When grammar is concerned, the knowledge occurs in different stages in a person's language development. In order to perform certain language task, some relevant grammatical structures need to be mastered by a beginner. He only needs to comprehend some rules enough to use them like the basic rules of SVA and to know how to apply the rules in forming sentences. As for upper level students, they probably need to be able to understand the rule of SVA in depth and discuss the grammatical problems with their teachers.

Researcher like Bhatia (1974) as cited by Munir Shuib (1991) indicates that agreement presents a problem to ESL learners. This is supported by Surina and Kamarulzaman (2009) when they claim that majority of the students in Malaysia still have problems with their subject-verb agreement in their writing. They continued by saying that:

In English Language, grammar rules are very important and have to be mastered by all ESL learners. In the topic of Subject-Verb Agreement,

the subject must agree with the verb. Singular subject is followed by singular verb and, plural subject takes a plural verb. This rule only applies in Simple Present Tense. On the other hand, in Simple Past Tense, the main verbs, 'was' and 'were' need reconsideration. This is the general rule for subject-verb agreement, which is also represented by its sub-rules. As a result, based on the observation, it is obvious that students made mistakes in both general and sub-general of subject-verb agreement in their writing.

(Surina & Kamaruzaman, 2009:190)

Realizing the issues mentioned above, it is important to obtain data on the problems of subject-verb agreement faced by ESL learners as it is one of the important components in grammar. and this will determine actions to be taken in the teaching and learning ESL grammar This study can contribute to the teaching and learning ESL grammar. It can be used as a guide for the teachers to decide what remedial actions to be taken in order to overcome the difficulties in using subject-verb agreement faced by the ESL learners. In addition, the findings of this study may help the teachers to revise and devise more suitable instructional materials and procedures as to make teaching and learning of grammar more effective.

Literature Review

Before a detail discussion on EA is given, it is beneficial to look at Interlanguage certainly because English is not the learners' mother tongue as the learners' first language

can either be Malay, Chinese or Tamil. It is significant for this study to look at interlanguage to evident how far the interference of mother tongue language is in the learners' writing product. Pilleux (1982) states that Error Analysis has viewed the second language learners' errors as genuine systems in their own right and has rejected the traditional stigmatizing characterization they had had in the past. Terms such as "transitional competence" (Corder, 1967), "idiosyncratic dialect" (Corder,1974), "approximative system" (Nemser, 1971) have been used to describe the second language learners' utterances in the foreign language.

By the late 1960s, second language learning began to be examined quite similar to that first language learning which had been studied for some time. Learners were looked on not as procedures of malformed, imperfect language replete with mistakes but as intelligent and creative beings proceeding through logical, systematic stages of acquisition, creatively acting upon their linguistic environment as they encounter its form and functions in meaningful contexts. Learners slowly and tediously succeed in establishing closer and closer approximations to the system used by native speakers of the language through a gradual process of trial and error and hypothesis testing.

Errors are commonly made by human in the process of learning a language especially a foreign language. According to Ellis (1997:35), "Errors reflect gaps in a learner's knowledge, they occur because the learner does not know what is correct." These errors in grammatical structures in written work have been further studied by some researchers as cited by Saadiyah and Kaladevi (2009). Khan (2005) in a research carried out among 30 Form Five students found that most of the students are weak in grammar.

Lim Ho Peng (1976) stated that there are several general types of recurrent errors in learners such as spelling mistakes, wrong use of preposition, confusing use of structural verbs concord and tenses. Similar to Lim Ho Peng (1976), Azimah (2005) who carried out an error analysis on 30 Form One students found that they committed a lot of errors in tenses and prepositions other than subject-verb agreement. Vahdatinejad (2008) found that students committed errors in tenses, word choice and prepositions. According to Richards and Sampson (1974) social situations and the learner's value and attitudes may influence learner-errors. Simplification is the main characteristics which results in the absence of copula and reduction of morphological and inflectional systems. The errors in this category are:

She work hard. (She works hard)

I hungry. (I am hungry)

Based on the fact that subject-verb agreement area is very important to express ideas especially in writing, where non verbal communication is absent, the students really need to master this rule in order to write effectively. As a result, they can convey their message clearly and effectively. By writing a piece of work that is error free, it shows that learners have mastered the English grammar rules and it will give a good impression to others who read their work.

Warden, Chen and Reynolds (2000) found that students in Taiwan committed common errors as they write business writing (application letter, letter of inquiry, response letter, sales letter) and offer letter as displayed in Table 1.

Table 1: Common writing errors in business writing

Application letter	Inquiry letter	Response letter	Sales Letter	Offer Letter
Spelling	Spelling	Spelling	Spelling	Spelling
Punctuation	Custom	Custom	Custom	Noun Phrase
Sentence variety	Noun Phrase	Capitalization	Noun Phrases	Sentence Variety
Custom	SVA	Noun Phrase	SVA	SVA
Noun Phrase	Verb Object	SVA	Verb form	Long sentence
Article	Punctuation	Incomplete sentence	Sentence Variety	Punctuation
Incomplete sentence	Capitalization	Verb object	Punctuation	Positive form

Saadiyah and Kaladevi (2009) also state that by investigating students' written work, it will provide a means to help Malaysian teachers to recognize the importance of errors as one of the challenging areas in teaching English. Based on their research, Saadiyah and Kaladevi(2009) have given some examples:

Table 2: Most Common Errors and Examples of Errors

Error Classification	Identification of Errors	Correct Sentences
Subject-Verb Agreement	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A large number of students is sick. 2. We need to be careful because it dealing with health. 3. The dirts always stick in the food that the students eat. <p>It causes fights because there are no chairs to sits.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A large number of students are sick. 2. We need to be careful because it deals with health. 3. The dirt always stick in the food that the students eat. 4. It causes fights because there are no chairs to sit.

In addition, Malaysian ESL learners face problems in subject-verb agreement because in their L1 (generally a person's mother tongue or the language acquired first) which is Bahasa Malaysia, there is no such rule regarding subject-verb agreement. In Bahasa Malaysia all subjects either singular or plural require the same form of verb. Surina and Kamaruzaman have given the following as examples:

Abu <i>pergi</i> ke kedai.	Abu - singular subject
Abu <i>goes</i> to the shop	
(subject) (verb) (expansion)	
Abu dan Amin <i>pergi</i> ke kedai.	Abu and Amin - plural
subjects	
Abu and Amin <i>go</i> to the shop.	
(subject) (verb) (expansion)	

Method

This study employed a theory termed as Error Analysis which is developed from S.P.Corder's theoretical framework. Corder (1967) states that Error Analysis assumes that learners make major elements in the feedback system of language teaching and learning process. Corder (1981) confirms that this temporary and changing grammatical system, Interlanguage, which is constructed by the learner, approximates the grammatical system of the target language. In the process of L2 acquisition, Interlanguage continually evolves into an ever-closer approximation of the target language, and ideally should advance gradually until it becomes equivalent or nearly equivalent to the target language.

Therefore, the selection of Error Analysis is valid and proper in the attempt to analyse errors made by respondents. The process strictly follows Corder's Error Analysis procedure (Corder 1974, as cited by Surina, 2002:72-73);

- i. A corpus of language is selected. This involves deciding on the size of the sample, the medium and the homogeneity of the sample (with regard to the learners' ages, LI background, stage of development etc).
- ii. The errors in the corpus are identified. Corder (1971) points out the need to distinguish 'lapses' (i.e. deviant sentences that are the result of processing limitations rather than lack of competence). He also points out that the sentences can be 'overtly idiosyncratic' (i.e. they are ill-formed in terms of target language rules) and 'covertly idiosyncratic' (i.e. sentences that are superficially ungrammatical).
- iii. The errors are classified. This involves assigning a grammatical description to each error.
- iv. The errors are explained. At this stage, an attempt is made to identify the psycholinguistic cause of the errors.
- v. The errors are evaluated. This stage involves assessing the seriousness of each error in order to take principled teaching decisions.

The five steps of Corder's Error Analysis Procedures were looked at intensively where respondents' samples were analysed and errors were placed according to their categories, related to the classes of subject-verb agreement.

The respondents of the study are 20 teacher-trainees from the postgraduate teaching course majoring in English Language Studies. They are from a teacher's training college in a northern state of Malaysia. The trainees have possessed degrees in the related field and attending their postgraduate teacher training course at a teachers' training college. The respondents would have at least 16 years of experience in learning English language (from kindergarten to primary to secondary and tertiary level). English is considered as the second language of the respondents.

The instruments used for data collection are two types of essay writing – factual and argumentative. Below are the two topics selected to represent the two modes of writings:

‘Education For Survival’ (factual essay)

‘College is better than school. Discuss’ (argumentative essay).

Before asking the respondents to write they were informed that the result will not affect their grade for the current semester. However, the results might benefit the institution later in the terms of teaching and learning English grammar. The respondents were asked to write the essays in two different sessions. They were given 40 minutes to complete each essay. The essays were later analysed and classified into five categories. The essays were marked by an expert in the field of TESL with 15 years of experience. The errors were categorized into

The subject-verb agreement of person

The subject-verb agreement of number

The subject-verb agreement of subject

The agreement with coordinated subject

The notional agreement and proximity

These five categories of subject-verb agreement are used as the basis for error analysis. Moreover, these five categories include the general rule and also the sub-rules of subject-verb agreement. The frequency of errors in each category was then calculated and compared in terms of percentages.

Results and Discussion

After analyzing the errors produced by the respondents, it is found that they had errors in all 5 subject-verb agreement categories investigated in both topics. The result of the use of subject-verb agreement by the respondents is displayed in the table below.

Table 3: Total Number and Percentage of SVA Errors

Total no of subjects	A	B	C	D	E	Total errors (SVA)	Total no of all errors	% of errors
20 (TOPIC 1)	21	12	0	2	1	36	4018	36/4018
%	58.3%	33.3%	0%	5.6%	2.8%	100		0.9%
20 (TOPIC 2)	22	12	1	2	1	38	4063	38/4063
%	57.9%	31.6%	2.6%	5.3%	2.6%	100		0.9%

- A – Subject-Verb Agreement of Person
- B - Subject-Verb Agreement of Number
- C - Agreement with Coordinated Subject
- D - Agreement with Indefinite Expression of Amount
- E – Notional Agreement and Proximity

Table 1 indicates the findings of errors produced by the respondents. The findings show that the respondents have produced almost the same amount of errors with regards to the first category: Subject-Verb Agreement of Person. In topic 1, a factual essay entitled ‘Education for Survival’, majority of the students produced more errors in this category (58%). The same goes to the second topic ‘College is better than school. Discuss’ which is an argumentative essay. 57.9% errors were committed by the respondents. Below are some of the sentences formed by the respondents.

- i. With modern and up-to-date education, we can ensure that our people **is** equipped with good education.
- ii. Human being must learn something before he or she **know**.
- iii. Now, people **is** not looking for appropriate job but a stable one.
- iv. It **help** us to be good citizen.

The errors above committed by the respondents are errors of subject-verb agreement of person. The respondents are still confused with the use of matching the plural noun or subject with plural verb and to associate the singular noun or subject with the singular verb.

The Correct Version

- i. With modern and up-to-date education, we can ensure that our people **are** equipped with good education.
- ii. Human being must learn something before he or she **knows**.
- iii. Now, people **are** not looking for an appropriate job but a stable one.

iv. It **helps** us to be good.

Table 1 also indicates that the respondents have problems with subject-verb agreement of number. 33% errors were committed in the first mode of writing (factual) and 31.6% in the second mode of writing (argumentative). This category is the second most committed errors found in the essays written by the respondents. In subject verb agreement of number verb may change forms depending on whether its subject is **singular** or **plural**. For example, a **singular**, first-person subject requires a different form of the verb, *to be*, than does a **plural**, first person subject.

Examples: I **am** from Guatemala. (First-person, **singular**)

We **are** from Guatemala. (First-person, **plural**).

Below are examples of the errors constructed by the respondents.

- i. Islam, itself, **emphasize** on the importance of knowledge.
- ii. Knowledge **make** people to be respected.
- iii. Globalisation **have** made education to be more and more essential.
- iv. These changes **is** depending on the current situation.
- v. Doctor will be able to overcome daily problems and **have** a better life than a clerk.

The examples above show that respondents have misused the verb 'have' in sentence 3 and 5. In sentences 1 and 2, the regular plural verbs are used instead of singular verbs as the subjects (Islam and Knowledge) are in singular forms. The 4th

sentence indicates the wrong use of ‘be’ verb ‘is’ instead of ‘are’ because the subject ‘changes’ is a plural subject.

Next we will discuss the errors committed by the respondents on subject-verb agreement with indefinite expression of amount. Under this category, the respondents were found to make 5.6% errors while writing the first topic and 5.3% in the second topic. Some examples of the errors are as below.

- i. In this world, money always **do** the taking.
- ii. Everybody **have** their own dreams to further studies.
- iii. Each individual **need** education in creating their life.

Expressions of time, money and distance usually take a singular verb. For example:

Ten dollars **is** a great deal of money to a child.

Ten kilometres **is** too far to walk.

Six weeks **is** not long enough.

Expressions using the phrase *number of* depend on the meaning of the phrase:

They take a singular verb when referring to a **single quantity**:

The number of *students registered in the class* **is** 20.

They take plural verbs when they are used as **indefinite quantifiers** (see rule 1 above):

A number of *students* **were** late.

When fractions and percentages modify mass noun – use singular verbs. Use plural verbs when they modify plural nouns and either singular or plural verbs can be used when they modify collective nouns. Therefore, in sentence 1 ‘money’ functions as a singular noun and thus, needs to be followed by a singular verb – ‘does’. When

indefinite words with a singular meaning such as ‘each’, ‘every’ and ‘any’ are the subject word and when they precede the subject word, they take a singular verb. This applies to sentence 2 and 3 where ‘each individual’ in sentence 2 acts as a singular subject and needs a singular verb with the inflection of ‘s’ – ‘needs’. As for sentence 3, ‘everybody’ indicates a singular subject and should be followed by a singular verb – ‘has’.

Finally we will discuss errors in subject-verb agreement of notional agreement and proximity produced by the respondents. Table 1 show that this is the least error committed by the respondents, 2.8% in the first topic and 2.6% in the second. Below are the examples of errors:

- i. The government **has** to fulfill their promises to ensure harmony.
- ii. The government **have** provided enough facilities to ensure **its** citizens satisfied.

According to Quirk and Greenbaum (1990), notional concord is agreement according to the idea of number rather than the presence of grammatical marker for that idea. In British English, for example, collective nouns such as government are often treated as plural.

The government **have** broken all their promises.

Sentence 1, the verb ‘has’ is used to refer to ‘the government’ and this is not accepted based on the explanations given by Quirk and Greenbaum (1990). While sentence 2 has the right plural marker ‘have’ but later in the sentence the writer has changed the marker to singular ‘its’.

Implications of the study

From the findings discussed earlier, general remedial actions should be recommended. Since the subject and verb are two most important components in constructing correct and complete sentences, students should be made aware of the importance. Thus, more emphasis should be given in the teaching and learning ESL grammar. This is especially crucial as the respondents of this particular study are postgraduate teacher trainees majoring in English Language. They need to equip themselves with good grammar of English in order to teach the language when they graduate.

As grammar is usually not included in the syllabus at higher level of education, students should be exposed to online learning where they can access websites on English grammar anytime outside the class. Websites like English MediaLab (<http://www.englishmedialab.com>) offers quizzes in grammar for all proficiency level from beginners to advance learners. The famous Dave ESL café (<http://www.eslcafe.com>) managed by Dave Sperling is a site full of grammar lessons which include idioms, phrasal verbs and vocabulary. English Club is also an interesting website for learning and teaching English. The website offers fun English lessons that include games, quizzes, projects and chats. The learners should be encouraged to use all available websites which are free of charge to learn more about English grammar in a more interactive manner.

Students should also be introduced to text analysis as one of the classroom activities. In developing linguistic resources, ESL/EFL learners can benefit greatly from

learning how various grammatical features and grammatical systems are used in authentic written texts (Frodessen, 2001). According to Frodessen (2001), analysis of such texts can help learners who are already familiar with prescriptive grammar rules but who still have problems understanding and appropriately using grammatical appositions such as definite and indefinite articles and present-perfect and past-perfect verb forms. Text analysis can also benefit learners with mostly implicit knowledge of grammar rather than explicit rule-based knowledge.

The subject-verb agreement errors committed by the respondents are related to interlingual errors caused by the interference of the learner's mother tongue. It is recommended that the teachers should include the differences between grammar rules in the students' L1 and L2 so that they are aware that there are such differences and later they will avoid making such errors.

Conclusion

The findings of the study reveal that even at the level of postgraduate studies (majoring in English) learners still face difficulties in subject-verb agreement. They were found to make mistakes in all five categories of subject-verb agreements namely: the subject-verb agreement of person, the subject-verb agreement of number, the subject-verb agreement of subject, the agreement with coordinated subject and the notional agreement and proximity. It is thus important for remedial actions be taken to curb this problem. Students should be encouraged to use online learning by completing the quizzes and exercises available on English grammar. They should also be made aware of the

differences between their mother tongue's and English grammar so that they will not transfer their L1 grammar to the L2.

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