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

SITI HAMIN STAPA
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia
sitihami@ukm.my

MOHD MUSTAFA IZAHAR
UniSel

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 participated in the study. The study examined errors in 5 types of subject-verb agreements: person, number, coordinated subject, indefinite expression of amount and also notional agreement and proximity. 2 types of written compositions (argumentative and factual) were analyzed to identify the problems in writing grammatically correct subject-verb agreement by the students. The results of the study reveal that the majority of the students commit errors in subject-verb agreement, especially in SVA of number 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 learners, 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 the audio lingual approach (ALM), errors were not tolerated at all. However, with the introduction of communicative language teaching the perception of learners' errors has changed because errors are now considered a 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 in 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 tasks, 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 students at the upper level, they probably need to be able to understand the rule of SVA in depth and discuss the grammatical problems with their teachers.

Researchers like Bhatia (1974) and Maziani (1984) as cited by Munir Shuib (1991) indicate 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 what action needs 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 teachers to decide what remedial action has to be taken in order to overcome the difficulties faced by ESL learners in using subject-verb agreement. In addition, the findings of this study may help teachers to revise and devise more suitable instructional materials and procedures to make teaching and learning of grammar more effective.

Literature review

Before a detailed 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 show how far the interference of mother tongue language is evident in the learners' writing product. The term *interlanguage* was first used by Selinker in 1972. According to Ellis (1986: 47), various alternative terms have been used by different researchers to refer to the same phenomenon. Nemser (1971) refers to *approximate systems* and Corder (1971) to *idiosyncratic dialects and transitional competence*. The terms reflect two related but different concepts. First, interlanguage refers to a structured system, which the learner constructs at any given stage in his development. Second, the term refers to the series of interlocking systems (i.e an interlanguage), which forms what Corder called the learner's built-in syllabus (i.e the interlanguage continuum).

By the late 1960s, second language learning began to be examined in much the same way that first language learning 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. By a gradual process of trial and error and hypothesis testing, learners slowly and tediously succeed in establishing closer and closer approximations to the system used by native speakers of the language.

Dorn (2000) states that the sentences created by words and phrases are the essential blocks of meaning that allow us to communicate thoughts. If these are not constructed carefully, they can make reading difficult. He further states that major basic usage and grammar slips in written English are those associated with verbs. Based on the

This is supported by Bahiyah and Basil Wijayasuria (1998) where they find that Malay learners have difficulty in the subject-verb agreement because Bahasa Malaysia does not differentiate between persons and, therefore it is not necessary for verbs to agree with the subject. In English, however, this is essential in the present tense and with the verb 'be'. Because of this, it creates confusion among learners who tend to make errors in their writing. Although the subject-verb agreement structure was introduced early to students i.e. when they were in the primary level, they still face problems in acquiring the correct form of it. Celce Murcia and Freeman (1983) as cited by Nor Arfah (1988), state that in spite of the early introduction and the superficially simple rules of the subject-verb agreement, they still pose problems for the ESL learners at all levels of proficiency. Some examples from an advanced level Malay ESL learner are as follows:

It really **make** me unhappy. Fortunately, my family especially my father **need** me to help his business. Recently, my father **want** to expand his business by selling LPG gas. It really tedious to get a license.

As the example shows, the learner failed to employ the correct rule of subject-verb agreement where a singular subject requires a singular verb. The learner's writing should be:

It really makes me unhappy. Fortunately, my family, especially my father needs me to help manage his business. Recently, my father wants to expand his business by selling LPG gas. It is really tedious to get a license.

Hughes and Heah (1989) state that some examples of the typical mistakes made by the Malaysian speakers of English are:

I cannot work anymore. My body **feel** weak. (My body feels)

Foreigners are people who **comes** from another country. (people who come)

Everybody **were** watching to see what would happen next. (Everybody was)

In addition, Munir (1991) in his research on the various types of agreement in English, claims that the subject-verb agreement (especially the number agreement) appears to be the most problematic area faced by Malaysian learners of English. Some examples are:

Their students **is** in good health.

Boarding schools **is** better than day schools.

As the examples show, the learner fails to employ the correct rule of subject-verb agreement. The learner should always remember that a singular subject requires a singular form of the verb and a plural subject requires a plural verb. Thus, the learner should write:

The students **are** in good health.

Boarding schools **are** better than day schools.

Method

The theoretical approach that is used in this study is what is known as Error Analysis (EA). Error Analysis assumes that the learners make a major element in the feedback system of the language teaching and learning process (Corder, 1967). It also assumes that errors are not 'unwanted forms,' but evidence of the learner's active contribution to

second language acquisition (Ellis 1986:54). Errors provide information which could be used to sequence items for teaching or to devise remedial lessons (Ellis 1986:51).

EA was chosen because it views errors as highly systematic, serving as ‘windows’ to learner progress in the second language. Corder (1967) as cited by Selinker (1992:150) states that errors are shown to provide insights into the child learner’s development of language. He further states that the making of errors is a strategy employed by children acquiring their mother tongue and by those learning a second language is a way the learner has of testing his hypotheses about the nature of the language he is learning. To analyze the errors made by the subject, the researchers employ Corder’s Error Analysis procedure (Corder 1974, as cited by Ellis, 1986: 51-52) which involves these steps:

- a. 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).
- b. The errors in the corpus are identified. Corder (1967) 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).
- c. The errors are classified. This involves assigning a grammatical description to each error.

- d. The errors are explained. At this stage, an attempt is made to identify the psycholinguistic cause of the errors.
- e. The errors are evaluated. This stage involves assessing the seriousness of each error in order to take principled teaching decisions.

In the present study, all the five steps above were strictly followed. After the sample was obtained, all errors related to subject-verb agreement were identified. Then, they were classified into various categories and assigned appropriate grammatical labels. This will be explained in detail later.

The respondents of the study were 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 possessed degrees in the related field and attended their postgraduate teacher training course at a teachers' training college. The respondents had 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 essays – factual and argumentative. Below are the two topics selected to represent the two modes of writing:

‘Education For Survival’ (factual essay)

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

Before asking the respondents to write, they were informed that the results will not affect their grade for the current semester. However, the results might benefit the institution later in 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

(adapted from Corder, 1974, cited in Ellis, 1986).

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 1: 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 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’, the 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.

The Errors

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

The errors 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

- a. With modern and up-to-date education, we can ensure that our people **are** equipped with good education.
- b. Human being must learn something before he or she **knows**.
- c. Now, people **are** not looking for an appropriate job but a stable one.
- d. It **helps** us to be good **citizens**.

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.

- a. Islam, itself, **emphasize** on the importance of knowledge.
- b. Knowledge **make** people to be respected.
- c. Globalisation **have** made education to be more and more essential.
- d. These changes **is** depending on the current situation.
- e. 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.

- a. In this world, money always **do** the taking.
- b. Everybody **have** their own dreams to further studies.
- c. 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 – the rule says use singular verbs. Also 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:

- a. The government **has** to fulfill their promises to ensure harmony.
- b. 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 the two most important components in constructing correct and complete sentences, students should be made aware of the importance. Thus, more

emphasis should be given to it 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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