An Analysis of Concord Errors in ESL Learners' Writing

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Abstract

Writing is a challenging skill that requires mastery over syntactic and semantic elements of a language. The aim of grammar is to describe the way the sentences in a language are constructed. Grammar is a significant aspect of language and it becomes an essential prerequisite for English major students who are expected to write error free sentences (accuracy) in their writing. On the other hand, Subject-verb agreement is the grammatical item, in which most of the ESL learners have glaring errors in their written scripts. Learners find it difficult to master the general and sub-rules of subject-verb agreement and the errors recur in their writing. In order to analyze the concord errors, a study was conducted with the tertiary level ESL learners of a rural arts and science college in Pudukkottai District. The learners' errors in subject-verb agreement were classified into five categories: person, number, coordinated subject, indefinite expression of amount and notional agreement and proximity. Further, the study investigates the causes of errors in the specified grammatical components.

Keywords: Concord, Error Analysis, Second Language Writing.
Note: Subject-verb agreement is abbreviated as SVA in this paper.

Introduction
Errors are the outcome of competence deficiency due to the incorrect storage of target language rules in the learners’ mind. Learners commit errors either because of inappropriate knowledge or false knowledge in the target language. Learners need to write correct sentences in English in order to convey their messages effectively to the readers. Sentences that consist of surface errors may affect the reader’s mind. In particular, English major students are expected to construct grammatically correct sentences to convey their ideas clearly. Dorn (2000) opines that sentences that are not constructed carefully can make the reading difficult. He further adds that most of the learners’ have problems in writing grammatically correct subject-verb agreement in their writing. In writing, subject-verb agreement is a significant aspect in grammar that takes a lead in expressing the ideas with clarity. When learners are able to write error free sentences, then it is evident that they have mastered the English grammar rules and in turn facilitate effortless reading for the readers.

Theoretical Framework
Subject-verb agreement is one of the grammatical structures that is introduced very early to the students (Nor Arfah, 1988). Though the learners have been acquainted with concord structures from their primary level, they find it difficult to learn the correct form of the structure. Celce-Murcia and Freeman (1983) state that, in spite of the early introduction and superficially learnt simple rules of the subject-verb agreement, it poses problems for ESL learners at all levels. ESL learners have to acquire the basic grammatical knowledge of SVA, in order to improve their level of proficiency in the language (Tan, 2005). Vahdatinejad (2008, cited in Darus and Subramaniam, 2009) suggests that the language teacher should explain directly the concept of singularity and plurality in nouns by pointing out directly the differences in sentences such as “The girl writes” and “The girls write”. This way of explanation would enable the learners to comprehend the concept of SVA better so that they may tend to avoid SVA errors pertaining to number.

The subject and the verb are two most important items in a sentence (Estling-Vannestal, 2007). The verb is considered to be the heart of a sentence and it has to take the same grammatical form, the subject as its controller (Woods, 2010). Corder (1974) has stated five types of subject-verb agreement errors. They are,
i) Subject-verb agreement of person  
\[ S \rightarrow V \]  
(e.g) They like eating Pizza.

ii) Subject-verb agreement of number  
\[ S \rightarrow V \]  
(e.g) Students do not participate in the group discussion eagerly.

iii) Subject-verb agreement of indefinite subject  
\[ S \rightarrow V \]  
(e.g) Nobody cares about the ozone layer depletion.

iv) Subject-verb agreement of coordinated subject  
\[ S \rightarrow V \]  
(e.g) Radha and Sudha are good friends.

v) Subject-verb agreement of notional agreement and proximity  
\[ S \rightarrow V \]  
(e.g) Fifty thousand is a lot of money.

The sources of errors can be categorized into two domains: (i) Interlingual errors and (ii) Intralingual errors. Interlingual errors occur due to the influence of mother tongue while learning a language. On the other hand, Intralingual errors are caused by the target language itself.

Literature Review

Bhatia (1974) conducted an error analysis study with second year Bachelor of Arts students at the University of New Delhi. His study showed that verb forms and tense sequence made up to 40 percent of the errors and that of SVA was 20 percent. Elliot (1983) conducted an experimental study with Singapore’s Nanyang University graduates, claimed that students had difficulty with agreement of subject and verb, especially in the third person singular present. Thagg-Fisher (1985) examined the 1960s translation and composition of Swedish learners of English and found that subject-verb agreements of coordinated subject and indefinite subject are difficult for them. She suggested that collective nouns are problematic, as they are matter of the writer’s perspective. Likewise, sentences that have pronouns such as everybody, every, none, some and each can trigger concord errors. In the same manner, Kohlmyr (2001) found that the most common problem for Swedish learners of English is Subject-verb agreements of person and number. When the subject is a personal pronoun, the learners find it difficult to choose whether the subject requires verb to take 3rd person singular –s or not. Similarly, when the subject is a noun or a noun phrase, the learners confuse among the countable nouns, non-countable nouns and collective nouns. Levin (2001) identified the subject-verb agreement errors in newspapers written by native speakers of English and revealed that when there is a long
distance between the subject and the predicate, it is difficult to remember the number of the subject. In addition, agreement errors become more frequent when personal pronouns occur in other clauses than their controllers (subjects). When a pronoun appears in another sentence than in its controller, it is more likely to produce plural concord than if the two items appeared in the same clause. Siti Hamin and Mohamad Mustafa (2010) conducted a study on subject-verb agreement based on five types of errors as proposed by corder (1974, cited in Ellis, 1994) found that majority of their respondents produced errors in subject-verb agreements of person, number, indefinite expression of amount, notional agreement and proximity and finally coordinated subjects. The above theoretical insights reinstate the fact that English language learners at tertiary level are finding it difficult in using appropriate subject-verb agreement.

Need for the Study
In the globalized scenario, English has become a necessary prerequisite in academic and occupational zone. Especially, at the tertiary level the learners of English major are expected to be proficient in English and are supposed to express their thoughts and subject content in error free sentence structures. But in the context of rural Arts and Science Colleges in Tamilnadu, most of the students are incompetent in using their target language. Though they learn English as second language till their higher secondary level of education, their ability to write grammatically correct sentences in English remains to be a question. Apart from this, most of the students aspire to become a teacher after completing B.A English Literature course, as is evident from the questionnaire administered to them. So they are required to master subject-verb agreement rules to speak and write error free sentence structure in the course of their study.

Research Questions
1) What type of subject-verb agreement errors are committed by the learners?
2) What are the causes for SVA errors in learners’ writing?

Participants
The study was conducted with 58 second year B.A English Literature students of Sri Bharathi Arts and Science College for women, Pudukkottai. It is essential for B.A English Literature students to employ the language proficiently in their academic career. All the students have Tamil as their mother tongue except one student (Telugu). The students are from both rural and urban backgrounds.
All of them have studied English as a subject for more than ten years in school and they have taken up three semester examinations in English during their first and second year of study. In addition, these students have a paper on grammar in their fourth semester and concord is one of the grammatical components tested for their end semester exam.

**Methodology**

This study attempts to look at the difficulties faced by learners in comprehending subject-verb agreement. It is believed that the findings of this study will highlight the participants’ constraints in learning SVA and this will enable language teachers to take an initiative and follow explicit approach in teaching this grammatical component. The data for this study was collected by administering a test to the second year English major students. A questionnaire was administered to find the learners’ perspective regarding the constraints in learning grammatical items. The participants were asked to write a paragraph in about 150 words on the topic “A Memorable Day in My Life”. Errors on SVA in the learners’ writing were identified and grouped based on five different types of SVA errors proposed by corder (1974, cited in Ellis, 1994) in terms of person, number, indefinite subject, coordinated subjects and notional agreement and proximity. The sources of errors are classified into two domains: Interlingual and Intralingual errors.

**Results and Discussion**

The first research question sought the types of errors in SVA produced by the English major students in their paragraph writing.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S.No</th>
<th>Types of Subject-Verb Errors</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Subject-verb agreement of person</td>
<td>265</td>
<td>68.83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Subject-verb agreement of number</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>12.73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Subject-verb agreement of indefinite subject</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Subject-verb agreement of coordinated subject</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2.34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Subject-verb agreement of notional agreement and proximity</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>16.10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>285</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The results in Table 1 demonstrate the types of errors committed by the learners. The result indicates that students commit errors in four categories of SVA i.e., subject-verb agreements of person, number, coordinated subject and notional agreement and proximity; while no error was recorded in the category of subject-verb agreement of indefinite subject. Table 1 highlights the fact that SVA errors pertaining to person is substantially higher than the other categories. Some samples of learners’ writing are stated to illustrate the categories of SVA errors.

Table 2. Types of Subject-Verb Errors in Learners’ Writing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S.No</th>
<th>Types of Subject-Verb Errors</th>
<th>Learner’s Error Sentences</th>
<th>Correct Sentences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Subject-verb agreement of person</td>
<td>We has enjoyed the day.</td>
<td>We have enjoyed the day.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Subject-verb agreement of number</td>
<td>Most of the friends was crying in sorrow.</td>
<td>Most of the friends were crying in sorrow.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Subject-verb agreement of coordinated subject</td>
<td>Brothers and sisters has gifted me.</td>
<td>Brothers and sisters have gifted me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Subject-verb agreement of notional agreement and proximity</td>
<td>My friends on those days was more affectionate to me.</td>
<td>My friends on those days were more affectionate to me.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Causes of Errors

The second research question aimed at identifying the cause that makes the learners to commit SVA errors in their writing. While analysing the learners’ writing it is observed that mother tongue interference (interlingual errors) had little impact in their writing. In Tamil language, the SVA is inflected at the end of the sentence; the inflection is based on the person and number of the subject. So, the learners are accustomed to use SVA according to the person and number. But then the learners have limited knowledge in using appropriate SVA within the target language. It causes Intralingual errors. The learners’ writing in Table 2 shows that the learners’ have neither omitted nor misformed the SVA, instead they have used it inappropriately. The learners have overgeneralized the target language rules. It is evident from the study that learners have committed SVA errors as they
are not successful in learning how to use it as stated by Richards (1971, cited in Heydari & Baghari, 2012).

**Conclusion**

The subject and the verb have to agree grammatically and that phenomenon is called Subject-verb agreement. Errors in SVA are more glaringly pointed out in writing. This study shows that the English major students also misuse the appropriate SVA in their writing. It is evident that they did not commit any error in agreement of indefinite subject and SVA relating to person is considerably high. Regarding the difficulty in subject-verb agreements of person and number, verb must agree in number with the grammatical form of the subject but students are not able to identify subject phrase as a holistic entity and errors recur in their writing. Collective nouns are another problem for learners but then Levin (2001) points out that it is a problem for native speakers of English itself. Apart from these, the learners have to master the SVA rules to produce error free sentences in English. This study has revealed that intralingual errors are the major cause of SVA errors in learners’ writing.

**References**


