

## A STUDY OF SUBJECT-VERB AGREEMENT: CONCEPT AND PERSPECTIVES

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**Abstract.** *The aims of this study is to describe the approach used by the teacher in teaching subject-verb agreement, the students' ability in using subject-verb agreement and the error occur made by the students in using subject-verb agreement. The research found that the teacher was used deductive approach and grammar practice in raising the students' consciousness on Students' Ability in Using Subject-Verb Agreement.*

**Keywords:** *students' ability, subject-verb agreement, source of error occur.*

Subject-verb agreement is a grammatical rule that states that the verb in a sentence must agree with the subject in terms of number and person. This means that a singular subject should be paired with a singular verb, and a plural subject should be paired with a plural verb. In other words subject-verb agreement is a grammatical concept that refers to the correct matching of the subject and the verb in a sentence. It means that the verb must agree with the subject in terms of number (singular or plural). Many teachers of English claim that subject-verb agreement is a very common mistake for students of ESL (see for example Cunningham 2013, 11). How common these errors are or in what language conditions most errors are elicited is, however, not as clear. The aim of this study is therefore to find out more about how well students in upper-secondary school can be seen to master the use of subject-verb agreement and under what conditions errors are produced (see Section 3). Such a study has the potential to inform our understanding of how to address this problem area, particularly if the results show clear error patterns

The essential point of the subject-verb agreement rule, hereafter SVA, in English is that the finite verb must agree with the head noun of the noun phrase, which can be in either singular or plural. In actual language production SVA means that the verb changes form depending on the subject's number and person. When the subject is in the third person singular, the verb takes a morpheme -s in the present tense: "The dog needs a walk" (Estling Vannestål 2015). Should the subject be in the plural, or in first/second person singular, the verb follows in plural without any additional morphemes: "The dogs need a walk", or "I/You need a walk". However, there are verbs that do not simply take a morpheme -s in the singular form, as is the case with auxiliary verbs. The primary three auxiliary verbs are: Be, do and have (Estling Vannestål 2015). These verbs have completely different forms depending on whether the subject is in singular or plural form. For example, the verb "be" has three forms: I am (first person singular); he/she/it is (third person singular); you/we/they are (second person singular/plural and first/third person plural). The verb "be" also has different forms depending on the subject in past tense, which is shown in the following example: "I was at home, while you were grocery shopping and they were at the gym." Looking at these examples, the grammatical rules seem fairly straightforward to apply. However, the difficulty is that even if the rule is learned by heart, that does not necessarily mean it will be applied correctly in language production.

The essential point of the subject-verb agreement rule is to ensure that the subject and the verb in a sentence are in harmony in terms of number. This means that a singular subject should be paired with a singular verb, and a plural subject should be paired with a plural verb.

Maintaining subject-verb agreement is crucial because it helps to convey information clearly and accurately. When there is a mismatch between the subject and the verb, it can lead to confusion or ambiguity in the meaning of the sentence.

By following the subject-verb agreement rule, speakers and writers can ensure that their sentences are grammatically correct and effectively communicate their intended message. It's worth noting that while subject-verb agreement is a fundamental grammatical concept, there can be some exceptions and complexities in certain cases. However, understanding and applying the basic principles of subject-verb agreement will greatly enhance the clarity and coherence of your writing and speech.

When the subject is in the third person singular, the verb takes a morpheme -s in the present tense: "The dog needs a walk" Should the subject be in the plural, or in first/second person singular, the verb follows in plural without any additional morphemes: "The dogs need a walk", or "I/You need a walk". However, there are verbs that do not simply take a morpheme -s in the singular form, as is the case with auxiliary verbs. The primary three auxiliary verbs are: Be, do and have.

To use subject-verb agreement correctly, it is essential for learners to be able to identify the head noun of a noun phrase and understand the distinction between singular and plural forms of both nouns and verbs.

The head noun is the main noun that governs the agreement with the verb. In a noun phrase, other words such as determiners, adjectives, and modifiers may appear before the head noun. However, it is the head noun that determines the number (singular or plural) of the subject.

**For example:**

**"The cat" is sleeping.**

In this sentence, "cat" is the head noun, and it is singular. Therefore, the verb "is" agrees with the singular subject.

**"The cats" are sleeping.**

Here, "cats" is the head noun, and it is plural. Consequently, the verb "are" agrees with the plural subject.

Learners must also be able to recognize whether a noun is singular or plural. This involves understanding the formation of plural nouns (e.g., adding "-s" or "-es") and irregular nouns with unique plural forms.

Furthermore, learners need to know the corresponding singular and plural forms of verbs. Typically, adding an "-s" or "-es" to a verb indicates a third-person singular form.

It is essential to classify errors based on the types because various errors may be found in learners' writing production. The purpose is to make the researchers able to analyze the errors found in learners' writing production easier. Based on Surface Structure Taxonomy, errors can be categorized into four types, namely omission, addition, misinformation, and ordering incorrectly (Dulay (1982) as cited in Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005). Researchers and linguists have thought about possible causes of errors made by language learners. According to Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005), in order to be able to explain errors, people essentially need to ask what processes learners invoke when they do not understand the target language form. In addition, they mention that traditionally, there are two major processes are identified: distinguishing interlingual errors and intralingual

errors. Besides interlanguage errors and intralingual errors, there are other possible causes of errors made by learners. Those are carelessness, translation and error as a part of language creativity (Norrish, 1983) and context of learning (Brown, 1980).

By mastering these skills and being able to distinguish between singular and plural forms of nouns and verbs, learners can correctly apply subject-verb agreement in their writing and speech. When it comes to subject-verb agreement, learners can make several common mistakes. Here are some of them:

Failure to match singular and plural subjects with their corresponding verbs:

**Mistake:** "The dog barks loudly." (Incorrect - subject "dog" is singular, but the verb "barks" is plural.)

**Correction:** "The dog barks loudly." (Correct - the verb "barks" agrees with the singular subject "dog.")

Mistakenly using the plural verb form with collective nouns:

**Mistake:** "The team are playing well." (Incorrect - the verb "are" is plural, but the collective noun "team" is singular.)

**Correction:** "The team is playing well." (Correct - the verb "is" agrees with the singular collective noun "team.")

Overlooking subject-verb agreement in sentences with compound subjects:

**Mistake:** "Tom and Jerry is friends." (Incorrect - the verb "is" is singular, but the compound subject "Tom and Jerry" is plural.)

**Correction:** "Tom and Jerry are friends." (Correct - the verb "are" agrees with the plural compound subject "Tom and Jerry.")

Ignoring subject-verb agreement with indefinite pronouns:

**Mistake:** "Everybody have their own opinions." (Incorrect - the verb "have" is plural, but the indefinite pronoun "everybody" is singular.)

**Correction:** "Everybody has their own opinions." (Correct - the verb "has" agrees with the singular indefinite pronoun "everybody.")

Confusing subject-verb agreement in sentences with "either/or" and "neither/nor":

**Mistake:** "Neither John nor his brothers is going to the party." (Incorrect - the verb "is" is singular, but the closer subject "brothers" is plural.)

**Correction:** "Neither John nor his brothers are going to the party." (Correct - the verb "are" agrees with the plural subject "brothers.")

These are just a few examples of common mistakes learners make with subject-verb agreement. It's important to pay attention to these areas and practice applying the rules to improve accuracy in writing and speaking.

Although the subject-verb agreement structure was introduced early to students i.e. when they were in the primary level, they still face problem in acquiring the correct form of it. Murcia & 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 or proficiency. Some examples from an advanced level 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 & Heah (1989) state that some examples of the typical mistakes made by the 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, finds out that the subject-verb agreement (especially the number agreement) appears to be the most problematic area faced by 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 again failed to employ the correct rule of subject-verb agreement.

Writing involves constructing sentences correctly. Therefore, in English for students to effectively communicate their ideas well in writing, they must be able to construct meaningful sentences that have correct grammar. Dorn (2000) states that the sentences created by words and phrases are the essential blocks of meaning that allow us to communicate thoughts. If there 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 fact that subject-verb agreement area is very important to express ideas especially in writing, where nonverbal 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.

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