ABSTRACT

This study analyses the common errors regarding the agreement between the subject and verb in the writings of the EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners at the tertiary level. To conduct the study, the researchers followed the qualitative method. The data was collected from the write ups of 50 students at the tertiary level from a renowned private university of Bangladesh. In addition, five teachers and scholars were interviewed to collect some data for the research and triangulate it. Through an error analysis process, the researchers have found out in the study three most common errors regarding Subject-Verb Agreement (SVA) the students make while writing a paragraph. The researchers observed that most of the students have the errors in the use of subjects that are supposed to agree with the verbs, especially, in the use of third person singular and plural numbers in their sentences. At the end of the article, some useful techniques have been suggested for the academicians to help the EFL learners to overcome their errors.

Key Words: Tertiary level, SVA, EFL learners, common errors, EAP, error analysis

1. INTRODUCTION

The errors related to subject-verb agreement are very common in the written work of the students, even in the work of the tertiary level students. “Error” refers to a kind of mistake that takes place for the lack of right information or knowledge, especially, in grammar. While analyzing the kinds of mistakes students make in written work, it was apparent that most of the students make similar types of errors in the uses of subject-verb agreement.

To say precisely, the term “Subject-Verb Agreement” (SVA) refers to the rules of grammar in English language where the subject usually agrees or matches with the verb/s used in a sentence. According to this rule of grammar, if the subject is singular, the verb used in that sentence should be singular to agree with it; for the plural subjects, similarly the plural verbs are generally used considering the number of the subject. The current study is the output of the fact findings on this specific kind of errors that the students make with possible solutions for ELT practitioners.

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The study was conducted with specific purposes as the following:

- To examine the types of errors undergraduate learners make in their academic writings, especially, in the area of subject-verb agreement
- To come up with some useful activities and suggestions to overcome those problems

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

From the long teaching experience of the researchers, it has been observed that the EFL learners make lots of grammatical errors while speaking and writing in English. The most common errors among those are the use of subject-verb agreement. These errors are apparent mostly in their writings, even at the tertiary level. The students hardly notice this, especially, the errors they are frequently making regarding SVA. Truly speaking, it creates a negative impression about their knowledge of English grammar and the quality of writing (Khan, 2008).

The researchers have, therefore, tried to find out the reasons behind making these specific types of errors. More specifically, they have conducted the study with the assistance of both students and teachers to find out their problems in the use of SVA.

The learning theory of constructivism also influenced the researchers to conduct the research. As Bruner (1961) has explained that the constructivist learning is an approach where explorative learning takes place and the learning environment helps to stimulate learner’s learning which involves solving problems actively and acquiring knowledge through experiencing individually. In addition, a teacher plays the role of a coach or trainer in this approach and learning process could be supported externally where collaborative learning would be done to make the learning student-centered. Hence, it is expected that this study will assist the practitioners of ELT to find out some solutions to these errors along with some other facts related to the problems of students of present time.

METHODOLOGY

In this study, the researchers applied the qualitative research method to collect the data. One of the features of this method is using text as empirical material which helps to get authentic data. This method also helps to know the participants’ perspectives and their diversity (Flick, 2009).
In this study the researcher collected a write up from the student-participants and interviewed teachers and experts in ELT from two different universities. Truly speaking, interviews were very effective tools to collect primary data from the participants, because interviews generally help to bring out in depth information which may not come out through questionnaire (Flick, 2009; DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). In this study, the researchers followed focused interview which was developed by Merton and Kendall in 1946 (Flick, 2009) to collect the in depth information regarding errors in SVA. In addition, the researchers went through different online sources to collect information useful for the study. In order to collect the primary data from the student-participants at tertiary level, they visited a renowned private university to collect write ups from the target EFL learners who belonged to a course titled English for Academic Purposes (EAP). The researchers also interviewed some teachers and language experts from two universities. To make the primary data collection process easier, the researchers followed two steps:

- Collecting data from students’ write-ups
- Interviewing some teachers and language experts

PROCEDURE AND INSTRUMENTATION

The target EFL learners were given a topic (very much relevant to their culture and activities) on which they wrote a paragraph in the beginning of the semester. The learners were from three different sections of three different language courses i.e. EAP 009, 101 & 102. These language courses are offered to students of three semesters step by step to develop their language proficiency and cope up with other academic courses.

The researchers had to go to the three sections to collect the write ups from which they extracted the qualitative data. They examined all the write-ups carefully and found out three most common errors that the students made regarding SVA. This process was followed because identifying errors (any kind of error to deal with) plays a significant role to deal with those errors effectively (Ellis, 1997; Mohsin, 2007; Barker, 2008). In the write-up collection process, the course teachers helped the researchers. Later on, the researchers interviewed some teachers and language experts in the relevant field of the research following the focused interviews.

PARTICIPANTS

50 students of EAP course of the university participated in the research work. The participants of the study belonged to seven departments such as Business Studies, Sociology, Film, Television and Digital Media, Law, Computer Science and
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Engineering, Textile Engineering and finally, Electrical & Electronic Engineering department of that university. It is also noteworthy that 32% participants of the study were female while 68% was male. Five teachers and language experts from two different universities were interviewed to collect the data. Among the five teachers and experts, three of them were from the same university from where the students’ write ups were collected and two of them were from another renowned university.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the education system of Bangladesh, English is taught as a compulsory subject up to the higher secondary level and given priority from the very beginning of the primary level. The proficiency of EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners are mainly evaluated by assessing their writing skills in the main stream examinations. Other skills like speaking, reading and listening are not much assessed in different examinations or are less focused upon. Though the EFL learners of the country have been focusing on the writing skills, they still struggle at the tertiary level while attempting academic writing.

In the EFL context, students’ performance and achievement in learning the English language are affected seriously due to the students’ Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA). According to Tran, Baldaufand, Moni (2013), FLA has both positive and negative effects on learning the language. Half of the students in their study had a negative view of FLA which was beyond their control, therefore, causing more negative effects than positive on their learning.

In addition, Golda (2015) argued in his article that anxiety hampers the learning process of students which affects their writing quality (Younas, Subhani, Arshad, Akram, Sohail, Hamid, & Farzeen, 2014) and ultimately their intension is diverted to pass in their examination rather than learning the language. Khan (2008) also showed by a study that students of undergraduate level make mistakes frequently regarding the use of words and sentence-formation and in paragraph writing. He further added that the types of errors made by EFL learners at tertiary level really reduce the quality of their writing. Hence, it seems that teaching the writing skills is not helping them or there are some gaps due to different errors made by those students at this level. In this regard, Khan and Akter (2011) expressed their deep concern regarding the achievement of basic objectives of teaching and learning writing skills.

However, errors are the part of natural process in learning a language (Harmer, 2007) and play a crucial role for the learners to uncover the rules of target
language by the feedback they get on the errors (Corder as cited in Ellis and Barkui-zen, 2005, p. 51; Chaudhury as cited in Rahman, 2015, p. 222). Since the EFL learners at tertiary level, studying foundation English course, belong to different disciplines, their errors could be analyzed at the very beginning of the course in order to assist them based on their needs for systematic improvement. Therefore, Ellis (1997) has rightly opined that it is also important to identify the errors because it helps a teacher to deal with those errors with the students (Barker, 2008; Mohsin, 2007). Subsequently, students can go for self-corrections and avoid those errors gradually.

To be more specific, the researchers tried to find out the errors related to subject-verb agreement (SVA) that the tertiary level students make while attending the aforementioned course. The study of Karim, Fathemaz and Hakim (2015) showed that the EFL learners from the tertiary level make the errors of subject-verb agreement mostly in their written work. In addition, these errors may lead to miscommunication. They have also added that analysis of subject-verb agreement rules may help the students to develop their sentence structure and arraying skills in sentence construction.

After analyzing the errors, it would be easy for a teacher to help the EFL learners overcome those errors. Once the problems are identified, it would be easy to provide a guideline and a solution. In their study, Mutema and Mariko (2012) stated that the teachers should make the learners do the corrections based on the nature of the errors in a suitable way. They further added that the teacher should not mark too many errors in a script as it may affect the students’ interest. To make the learning more interesting, the teacher may go for different activities which may help the learners to be more focused to overcome their errors and help them to strengthen their learning.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

From the students’ write-up, the researchers tried to sort out the errors related to subject-verb agreement and traced out three major errors, such as-

i. Common errors regarding third person singular number in agreement with verb
ii. Common errors regarding third person plural number in agreement with verb
iii. Common errors related to disagreement of verbs with compound subjects

It will be convenient to understand the errors if we look at some of the sentences the students used in their write-ups based on the categories mentioned above.
i. Common errors regarding third person singular number in agreement with verb:
This type of errors was noticeable in the write-ups of most of the students. For examples, the students wrote:
• A student always attend classes.
• A varsity student have many problems in life; also have lots of fun.
• He have a common concern and also have a good feeling.
• When one student admit in a university, he show his capacity at various disciplines.
• So, the life of an undergrad student are well-organized.
From these instances, it is apparent that the students hardly noticed the subjects while using verbs in the sentences. That’s why they did not use ‘s’ or ‘es’ with the singular subject. Sometimes, some used verbs without noticing the number of subjects, for example, third person like ‘student’, ‘he’, ‘she’, ‘it’, ‘life’ and thus failed to use verbs that agree with those. As a result, the errors of SVA were found in most of the scripts of the students who hardly noticed the matter. Some other selective examples of errors related to third person singular number in putative agreement with verb have been culled and presented below from the write-ups of the students:
• He always try to get better result, again spend some valuable time with insignificant activities.
• Generally, when a student study in a university level, he pass a very important part of life.
• An undergrad student wake up very early in the morning, have to make his food, have to join his regular class, have to spend morning to afternoon in his campus.
• In the evening, he usually gossip with his friends, again he have to study hard.
It is possible that the students might have overlooked the common errors in grammar while writing free hand since those writings are not assessed or graded all time. The errors related to SVA, therefore, are frequently noticed even in their simple write-ups.

ii. Common errors regarding third person plural number in agreement with the verb:
From the write-ups of the students, it is also apparent that a few students wrongly used singular verb with plural subjects. They hardly noticed the number of the subject i.e. the third person plural number. As a matter of fact, some students rarely noticed the subjects while using the verbs in the sentences. The examples of their mistakes have been presented below:
• All student has a dream to study in a good university.
• Undergrad students means the students who continue their study in the varsity.
Some students go to different places with their friends.
The library works are also available in all universities which helps everyone to concentrate.

It is possible that the participating students forgot the basic rules of SVA in which the “headword” of the subject should be traced first to agree with the verb/s. The number of the headword, as a matter of fact, is dominant to determine the singular or plural verb in a sentence - the students seem not to be aware about this rule of grammar, especially, in SVA. For example, in the 4th sentence (instance) mentioned above, the student used a complex sentence where he failed to notice the headword ‘works’ as plural and thus wrote the singular verb ‘helps’ in the subordinate clause. When they use plural subjects, they sometimes also do not add ‘s’ with words like ‘All student’, ‘some student’ etc. Similar types of mistakes are found in the following sentences collected from their write-ups:

- We learn many things from our teachers.
- They enjoy a lot of freedom.
- Private university student are free from the political issues.

### iii. Common errors related to disagreement of verbs with compound subjects:

Like the problems of common errors related to third person Singular and Plural number in agreement with verb, some students failed to match the verb with compound subjects in some of the sentences of their write-ups as the following:

- The success and failure of life depends on the use of this period.
- Campus and student life is dedicated to assist students.
- Bengali drama and Hindi serial is a common TV program in our South Asia.

In fact, very few students used compound subjects in their writing. It might give a message that the students are not eager to write long sentences using compound subjects much.

### FINDINGS FROM THE INTERVIEW OF TEACHERS AND LANGUAGE EXPERTS

The researchers discussed the issues of common errors of SVA with the teachers of several disciplines including Science, Arts and Business Studies. Some senior faculty members opined that the students of Science need not care about these factors related to common errors of grammar. The students studying in engineering rather focus on facts and figures and for them grammatical errors in written scripts should get less priority. Some teachers mentioned the lack of writing practices as an important factor for higher rates of errors in sentences, even in a simple written work nowadays. Most of the teachers also agreed with the points that passing the examination at any cost and obtaining higher grades are the major concerns of maximum students of English Language courses.
The uses of latest technologies and short hands like ‘u’, ‘r8’, ‘nw’, ‘hw r u’ in sms, social media communications, mails etc. are also making less scope of writing longer sentences today. The language teachers expressed their concern over the students’ lack of writing practices in their personal life. The unprofessional attitude of some of the teachers can also be a factor for intensifying this issue of common errors in grammar, more specifically, in SVA. Some teachers are reluctant to check scripts thoroughly and also do not give constructive feedback to the students for rectifying their mistakes. It is also observed that to avoid the hassle of checking bulk of copies, scripts i.e. written works, some teachers give less written activities in the class and sometimes avoid the SVA issue altogether.

One senior faculty member of a university argued that auto correction option in MS Word program and other popular computer applications also make the learners unaware about the types of errors they are making frequently in their written work. The students using technologies are now more dependent on the uses of different interesting symbols like “smiles”, images of anger, love, sorrow etc. to express their emotions and feelings rather than using complete sentences and varieties of words, similes and metaphors. It is also observed by teachers that the tendency of using random copy-cut-paste option using different computer applications while writing or composing a simple application, assignment, project work and report are common barriers to exercise proper grammatical rules like SVA.

Regarding the errors of SVA, an educationist expressed his concern that most students of Bangladesh hardly learn the proper rules of English grammar at the primary and secondary education for the lack of professional and trained English teachers, adequate and interesting materials like books, audio-visual systems etc. Generally, the students learn the structures of English grammar just to appear in the examination and pass instead of acquiring knowledge. They are dependent on memorization rather than learning the rules of grammar properly. From the beginning of their educational life, students have less interest in writing long paragraphs, letters, essays etc. in their own words for the fear of making mistakes and lack of English vocabulary and proper English environment.

USEFUL TECHNIQUES TO BE APPLIED BASED ON THE STUDY

In order to write correct sentences in English, the researchers have come up with ideas that can be useful for students, prospective academicians and researchers. The teachers can remind the students at tertiary level about the negative impression of wrong uses of grammar in sentences. Though errors of SVA are common, it is not acceptable in the professional and academic writings. So, both the students and teachers can consider this issue seriously following the steps mentioned in this paper:
Role of Teachers

The learners of English Language at tertiary level can be motivated by their mentors to write correct sentences, especially in formal documents starting from writing application to the course teacher, administrative personnel for logistic support etc. Uses of short hand, chatting words can be strongly discouraged while writing sentences in formal write ups like paragraphs, essays, reports etc. Teachers from all disciplines could be sincere in assigning more written works and at the same time encourage students to write more in the form of complete sentences. Since teaching is a noble profession, teachers at all levels usually should have the integrity and accountability in checking scripts of the students properly, even in the simple class activities along with checking major exam scripts. The teachers can also guide their students regarding the negative impression of a document full of errors while preparing for professional purposes like CVs, Resumes etc. Moreover, the academicians can guide their students who have weaknesses in language to create awareness from the very beginning of education life. Finally, more classes can be conducted and arranged on ‘Common errors in English writing’ followed by monitoring their progress.

USEFUL ACTIVITIES TO APPLY TO OVERCOME SVA PROBLEMS

Arranging essay and story writing competitions

Since the issue of SVA is related to writing mostly as has been discussed in this study, different competitions on writing can be arranged every semester for tertiary level students. Nowadays, we usually observe many special days in a year. On these special occasions, essay, story writing and likewise composition competitions can be popularized for the students at tertiary level.

It can be very encouraging for students to practice writing that will ultimately make them aware about many common grammatical issues including subject-verb agreement. The educational institutions can include these types of programs in their academic calendar and reward the successful participants in the competitions with attractive prizes. In fact, this type of initiative motivates the students to work harder and improve their own capabilities after finding shortcomings.

Peer tutoring

It can be a very effective technique to support the learners for overcoming their deficiency. The language teacher, especially, in the writing class can select
some mentors who are good in writing and tag them with small sub groups to facilitate peer tutoring in or out of the class. The teacher will train the mentors to facilitate peer tutoring. In the training or discussion session with the mentors, teachers will inform them regarding the specific errors that the majority of the students have committed in their first write-up so that they can tutor their peers in overcoming those errors along with other issues.

Teachers will encourage them to work in the same group in and outside the class regarding any assignment or class activity. This will help them to share their weakness in the group spontaneously and gradually they will be able to help each other overcoming those weaknesses. A teacher can apply the technique in two ways:
* The good students from the same section can be assigned to assist peers
* The seniors can be appointed to mentor the junior students

**Reading text analysis**

Reading is a part and parcel of learning a language and its applications properly. The language teachers can include some reading texts in class activities and help students to analyse sentences in it. If the selected text is interesting, the students will be motivated to work with vocabulary, different subjects and their headwords and numbers, nouns, uses of verbs etc. The text selected for reading can be news, short reports, articles, even fictions related to the same culture and context. When the students will analyse the part of grammar from the reading text, they can be easily taught the uses of SVA and its classification. In fact, they can remember the rules of SVA by engaging themselves in reading and analyzing.

**Dialogue journal**

One of the most common and effective activities can be using dialogue journal to overcome the errors of SVA. A study by Chowdhury and Islam (2011)\(^9\) proved that the practice of writing dialogue journals help the students improve writing skills including grammatical accuracy. In their study, it was found that more than eighty five percent participants claimed improvements in grammatical accuracy. It can also be followed to overcome the deficiencies in SVA.

In the activity, a topic will be given on which students will write freely every week. Next, the teacher will read it and give another topic which can be selected from the elaboration of previous write-up. Initially, the teacher will not correct much in the write-up. The teacher will only encourage the students to write spontaneously. When the teacher finds that the students have confidence in writing freely,
at that point the teacher may go for correcting their errors in the write up, but only for one specific type of error and only for a few writes-up. In this way, the activity can go on throughout the whole semester. The researchers have found that this activity is very effective for the students to correct their errors.

CONCLUSION

In the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) setting of Bangladesh, a student gets twelve years to study English language as a compulsory subject before enrolling into tertiary level. Therefore, most common errors like Subject Verb Agreement (SVA), to some extent, is unexpected from the students at the tertiary level. The errors in the written documents can be corrected since the quality of academic writing has been degrading day by day. Teacher-student conferencing, using inductive reasoning in grammar sessions on common errors, peer tutoring, freehand writing on interesting topics, reviewing the drafts of students’ write-ups several times, etc. can be very useful to overcome the common errors (Mahmud, 2009; Mahmud, 2008; Maniruzzaman, 2003). It is also worth mentioning here that the teacher’s attitude towards error should be very flexible and the teacher should give positive feedback on the errors (Siddique, 2007). In addition, the errors can be corrected gradually over the period of time. Otherwise, students will be hesitant to write freely.

After analyzing the data from the students’ write up and the interviews of the teachers and experts, the researchers have summed up that it is important to identify the errors related to SVA, correct those regularly and choose some constructive activities for the students so that they can overcome those errors easily. Hence, the steps mentioned in the recommendation part of the study can be effective for the students to reduce the rate of SVA related errors in their written document. Finally, the researchers believe that the learners’ mode of self correction10 (Siddique, 2007) and the great effort of teachers will help the university students to produce polished writing.

Endnotes:

1. EFL stands for English as a Foreign Language; in Bangladesh English language is treated as a foreign language.
4. English for Academic Purposes (EAP)- It refers to an English course which is offered to the university students to develop the students’ English language competency.

5. The interviews were focused, face to face and very interactive; the interviews helped the researchers to get into the depth of the reasons behind the errors related to SVA.


8. Students are fond of using short form of language which is the result of their mobile and facebook messaging where they use short form of words, like they use ‘u’ instead of ‘you’.


10. In her article, Siddique emphasizes on the self correction to overcome students’ errors.

References:


