Full Length Research Paper

Subject-Verb Agreement Problem among English as Second Language Learners: A Case Study of One Hundred Level Undergraduates of Federal University of Technology, Minna

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Subject- verb agreement is very vital in language and consequently, in communication and depicts the extent to which a user of the language in both speaking and writing media has internalized the rule. Anyone who speaks or writes English language without errors in subject/verb agreement among others is considered as a good and an experienced speaker. However, the present day usage of English language by learners at various levels of education is bedeviled by errors in agreement between subject and verb, among others. It is in the light of this that this paper seeks to address the problem by not only drawing the attention of the public to it but also proffers solutions to it. The paper highlights four possible areas of subject/verb agreement and recorded errors found in each of the groups. The four main groups and the error frequency of each of the groups are: problem involving pronouns has more error frequencies (142) followed by tense (107), nouns (65) and errors involving intervening variables (64). Some of the recommendations include making students more sensitive to subject/verb agreement in the input that surrounds them, to enable students use English language in natural settings.

Keywords: Subject-Verb, Agreement, Error.

INTRODUCTION

The problem of subject-verb agreement among English as second language speakers is becoming more obvious and rampant cutting across various educational levels. Right from primary to the university level many students speak and write without obeying the rule of subject-verb agreement. The most worrisome dimension of the problem is that it extends beyond school level to advanced speakers of English language such as lecturers at various levels, some honourable members of state and national assemblies and in some media outfits, such as bulletins and the internet. In fact, cases of errors of subject-verb agreement were found not only in students' essays but even in writings of colleagues in universities. The writer has read and heard expressions such as "they does", I does, 'the tertiary education and national security increases the individual and personal potential', 'the vice chancellor cordially invite the university community to ....' 'the campaign on nutritional knowledge and awareness on dietary calorie intake are grossly inadequate', etc. These sentences look mature and contain clear messages but are wrong because they violate the rule of subject-verb agreement. According to Otavio (2003), if you want to assess the extent to which your students have truly internalized subject/verb agreement rules, you must test how consistently they're getting the third person's' right in spontaneous communication, across a range of verbs as isolated instances probably won't tell much.

Errors in subject-verb agreement is becoming wide

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spread and it seems as if many people are either not aware of it or they consider it as less important as it does not affect the message being conveyed. But it does violate the grammatical rule and just as in the human society, any violation of an important rule becomes a problem to the society. It should be known that one of the worst mistakes one can make in oral or written performance in English language is lack of agreement between words in the sentence and coherent writing can never fulfill its good conditions without subject-verb agreement. Anyone who speaks English language fluently and does not violate the rule of subject-verb agreement is respected as a good user of the language as one who has good control of the language. Therefore, this paper seeks to address the ugly trend of subject-verb agreement problem which spreads among English as second language learners and speakers in Nigeria. The paper addresses the keys areas where these problems emerge, present findings from the content analysis of students' essays and proffer solutions toward ameliorating the problem.

The paper hinges on the theory of error analysis of Behaviourism, which is a systematic study of learners' errors. 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 (Stapa and Izahar, 2010 n.d). Brown (2000) opines that systematic errors are errors in a text or the wrong forms committed with some significant frequency. For a wrong form (written or uttered) to be an error it must be committed with some frequency which shows that the language producer, i.e., the learner, does not know the rule governing the correct form, either because he ignores it although he has already learned it or he has not learned it and he is trying to over generalize by applying rules to the prevailing situation. Brown (2000) identifies four sources of errors:

(a) Interlingua transfer: This is where the language learner draws on the native language, i.e., the previous linguistic system.

(b) Intralingua transfer: Once a learner has acquired parts of the new system, more and more intralingua transfer, generalization within L2 would occur.
(c) Context of learning: Also called "false concepts" or "induced errors", which includes:
i. Misleading explanation from the teacher;
ii. Faulty presentation of a structure in a textbook;
iii. Improper contextualized pattern;
iv. Confused vocabulary items because of contiguous presentation;
v. Inappropriate formal forms of language – bookish language;
(d) Communication strategies: This occurs when in order to get the messages across, a learner may use some techniques like word coinage, circumlocution, false cognates, and prefabricated patterns, which can all be sources of error.

The most dominant source of SVA error is interlingua transfer (Brown, 2000; David, 2005; Law, 2005; Maros et al., 2007), Stapha and Izaha, n.d 2010, among others. A number of studies (Otavio, 2013; Moses, Joseph and Moses, 2007) have also added that SVA error could be attributed to the fact students acquire L2 morphemes in a fairly predictable fashion, regardless of language background and age. The third person 'S' is internalized relatively late – after, ing auxiliary be, articles and irregular past forms.

Review of Related Literature

The problem of SVA cuts across many English as second language users and was investigated by different researchers. Studies by Noorizah and Mustapha (1998) listed SVA as one of the several types of grammatical errors among Malay students. Maros et al. (2007) studied written essays of form one students in six schools in Malaysia with 20 students from each school. The findings showed that the learners had difficulties using correct grammar and SVS constituted 47% of the errors recorded.

Stapa and Izaha (n.d) 2010 opine that Malaysian ESL learners face problems in subject-verb agreement because in their L1 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. In their study of Twenty postgraduate (English Language Studies) students from a teachers' training college from the northern state of Malaysia Stapa and Izaha (n.d) 2010, examined 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. They conclude that even at the level of postgraduate studies (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.

Law (2005) studied the acquisition of English SVA by ten ESL learners consisting of five form two students and five form five students and discovered that SVA was the most serious grammatical difficulty among them. This problem was linked to the influence of the L1, which was Cantonese.

Moses et al. (2007) addressed the issues and challenges associated with the teaching and learning of English language in tertiary institutions with particular attention on Kogi State College of Education Technical), Kabba in Nigeria. Ebira or Igala L1 speakers, whose language's agreement features are less elaborate may find the acquisition of the agreement features of English a daunting task, and feature of Ebira or Igalamay interfere with those of English in language usage. According to them verbs in most Nigerian languages are invariant whenever they occur with different NPs in different persons and as such the phenomenon of subject- verb agreement does not exist. For instance, in Nupe language in Niger state of Nigeria, the same verb form is used for all kinds of subjects as seen in the sentences below.
I play football every day.
He play football every day.
They play football every day.
Everybody play football every day
Aliyu play football every day.

Stapa and Izaha n.d (2010) analysed 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 five 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 analyzed 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.

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.

Darus and Subramaniam (2009) examined errors in 72 essays of students consisting of 37 males and 32 females studying in a secondary school in Malaysia. All the participants came from non-English speaking background and they hardly communicated in English outside the school. They found that SVA was among the six most common errors made by the subjects who included singular/plural form, verb tense, word choice, preposition and word order.

Raad (2009) studied the English texts written by advanced Iraqi learners and discovered the misuse of the verb tense involving sentences such as; they is in the garden" and the dropping of the third person singular,-s in sentences like she study English" and Muna go to school every day. Raad (2009) attributed the errors to the impact of the Arabic language on the Arab FFL learners.

David (2005) adds that errors may be assessed according to the degree to which they interfere with communication: global errors make an utterance difficult to understand as in I wish I went my mother's house last year and local errors which do not, as In the example, "I angry" , where the meaning is apparent. Errors involving subject–verb agreement can be classified under local error as it does not affect the message being of communication. Nevertheless, the students really need to master the rule of SVA in order to write effectively and to convey their messages 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).

Rodrigue (2015) states that the use of singular versus, plural verbs and correct subject-verb agreement are more abstract concepts and require more detailed explanations. Correct use of singular and plural verbs also depends on the writer's ability to correctly identify the subject of the sentence and to determine if the subject is singular or plural. Therefore, this paper investigates the problem of subject-verb agreement (SVA) among one hundred level students of Federal University of Technology, Minna.

METHOD

The essays of one hundred and twenty sampled students of Federal University of Technology, Minna who

registered for GST 110 for the 2014/2015 academic session, were content analyzed and problems of SVA were identified. All the students offered GST 110 as a compulsory course and were mandated to write an essay on the topic, the different sources of information for ensuring success in examinations. They were given 40 minutes to complete the essay. The essays were later analyzed and classified into four categories based on the identified areas of SVA problems. These areas are: nouns, pronoun, tense, and intervening expressions discussed as follows:

1. Nouns: Agreement in this sense means that there should be a form of correspondence in person, number, gender, tense and case among the different components of the sentence. According to Nordquist 2016, SVA usually causes more problems when the subject of the verb is a noun, particularly the following types of noun.

1a. Invariable nouns ending in -s: According to Mills (2015) certain common and proper nouns ending in -s or -ics (e.g. news, measles, politics, physics, billiards, mathematics, phonetics, mumps, linguistics, dartsand kinetics.) are singular and take a singular verbal. The news is good. (b) Phonetics is a branch of phonology (c) Is mumps caused by a virus?

1b. Summation plurals: Nordquist (2016) observe that tools and articles of dress consisting of two equal parts which are joined constitute summation plurals. Some of these nouns are bellows, scissors, tongs, glasses, tights, pants, trousers, shorts, spectacles etc. These subjects refer to one thing, but take plural verbs.

1c. Collective nouns: Mills (2015) observe that collective nouns are "notionally plural but grammatically singular. A collective noun when used as a subject takes verbs that vacillate according to the intention of the writer or notion of number implied. Examples are army, jury, crowd, herd, flock, gang, minority, majority, government, the Arab league, the United Nations.
a. The audience were enjoying every minute of it.
b. The audience was enjoying every minute of it.
a. The committee has met and is considering the proposal.
b. The committee have met and are considering the proposal.

The difference between sentences 'a' and 'b' above reflects a difference in attitude: the singular stresses the non-personal collectivity of the group and the plural the personal individuality within the group.

2. Pronouns: subject-verb agreement problems have been identified in the use of the following pronouns.

2a. Personal pronouns: personal pronoun agreement refers to the syntactic features of an NP with which verbs in the sentence must agree. In this sense, an NP (especially pronouns) can be in the first, second or third person forms. The first person refers to the speaker; the second, the person being addressed and

the third, the person or thing being discussed. When NP's occur in any of these forms in English, the verb (whether auxiliary or main) agrees with it. (Mills, 2015; Nordquist, 2016).

However, many people deviate from the norms in their spoken and written English. Also, although all verbs follow the same principle of agreement, certain verbs seem to be a little more troublesome than others. In particular, many agreement errors result from the misuse of the common verbs have, do, and be.

The verb to be, present (past)

Person: Singular	Plural
First I am (was)	we are (were)
Second you are (were)	you are (were)
Third he, she, it is (was)	they are (were)

The verb to have, present (past)

Person: Singular	Plural
First I have (had)	we have (had)
Second you have (had)	you have (had)
Third he, she, it has (had)	they have (had)

Regular verbs, e.g. to work, present (past)

Person: Singular	Plural
First I work (worked)	we work (worked)
Second you work (worked)	you work (worked)
Third he, she, it works (worked)	they work (worked

2b Demonstrate pronouns: the demonstrative pronouns include 'this' and 'that' for singular near reference and 'these' and 'those' for plural distant reference. Examples are:
This book is mine.
These books are mine.
This/that girl is Mary.
This/that)
Those boys are my sons. Problem emerges if the singular demonstrative is used with plural verb and vice versa.

2c. Indefinite Pronouns: the following indefinite pronouns are always singular and should be paired with a singular verb:
a. One (anyone, everyone, no one, someone)
b. Anybody (everybody, somebody, nobody)
c. Anything (everything, something, nothing)
d. Each, either, neither

In the following sentences, each subject is an indefinite pronoun and each verb ends in -s:
a. Nobody claims to be perfect.
b. Everybody plays the fool sometimes.
c. Each of the divers has an oxygen tank.
d. None of the marbles has rolled out of the circle.

However, based on the principle of proximity, the verb agrees with the noun which closely precedes it. As in
a. Neither John nor the girls were at the party.

b. Neither the girls nor John was at the party.
c. Either my sister or my brothers are going to do it.
d. Either the teacher or the students like the new timetable.

Furthermore, when the subject is followed by as well as, together with, apart from, in conjunction with, accompany by, with, the verb agrees with the first noun or pronoun as in

a. The girl together with the boys lives in Ibadan.
b. Aminu as well as his wife, is praying.
c. The king together with his wife is in the palace.

2d. Quantitative Pronouns: the following Quantitative pronouns are always plural and should be paired with a plural verb: few, many

a. Few of the children are here today.
b. Only few of the eggs were broken
c. Many of the books have been stolen
d. Many of the Boko Haram terrorists have surrendered.

However, some quantitative pronouns (some, all, none) depend on the item that the pronoun refers to. Examples are:

a. Some of the students have resumed for studies
b. All the students have registered for the examination

3. Tense: tense is a very strong determinant as far as SVA is concerned. The base form of a verb is the form from which singular and plural forms of the verb are derived. The base form of any verb can be changed into a singular or plural, past tense, present tense or future tense verb by adding different endings such as -ed, -s, -es and -ing. The type of tense most affected by SVA is simple present tense. The Simple Present is not really about the present, and it's actually not all that simple. Much of the time, it's used to talk about a fact.

For example, consider the two sentences below:
He has a house.
They have a house.

These are both statements of fact. This is one typical use of the Simple Present—to state a fact or to say something that is "always" true, at all times (in the Past, Present, or Future). In this case, most regular verbs are changed from singular to plural simply adding -s or -es to the end of the base word, as in sings, gives, requires, etc. Some verbs ending in (-ch, -s, -sh, -x, or -z) form their third-person singular by adding —esto the base as in (watches, misses, rushes, mixes, buzzes). Verbs ending in a consonant + y (such as try) form the third-person singular by changing the y to i and adding -es (tries).

4. Intervening Expressions: David (2015) opined that many grammars embrace the principle that a singular subject requires a singular verb form regardless of all plural forms in intervening prepositional phrases, appositives and participle phrases. Examples are:
a. This box of ornaments belongs to me.
b. Five miles is a long way to walk.

c. The number of units has been reported to be 50.
d. In some areas 60%of the workforce is unemployed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

After analyzing the errors produced by the respondents, it is found that they had errors in all the four subject-verb agreement categories investigated in the essays. The result of the use of subject-verb agreement by the respondents is displayed in the table 1 to 4 below.

CONCLUSION

The study shows that students have problems with subject- verb agreement as can be seen from samples of errors presented in the tables. It is also clear that subject-verb agreement involving pronouns has more error frequencies (142) followed by tense (107), nouns (65) and errors involving intervening variables (64). The finding of this study is a picture of what obtains in other classrooms and sometimes among many literate speakers of English as second language.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations can be made:
1. Teachers should make students more sensitive to subject/verb agreement in the input that surrounds them. The more they notice and re-notice the third person 'S' outside the classroom, the more likely they are to restructure their interlanguage.
2. Students should be encouraged to monitor their speech which might contribute to long-term overall accuracy.
3. Teachers should ensure intensive language teaching right from the lower level so as to instill in the students the correct use of subject/verb agreement.
4. Texts should be carefully selected by the teachers to ensure strong language base for learners
5. Communicative language teaching should be encouraged to enable students use English language in natural settings.
6. Teachers should monitor students' written and oral expressions to offer the needed assistance when situation demands as well as carry out on the spot correction or re-teach areas where students have problems.
7. Language training activities such as debate, quiz, drama, group discussions, and tutorials should be organized to familiarize students with correct use of English language.

Table 1. Selected Subject-Verb Agreement Errors (Nouns)

Agreement errors	Number of occurrence	Corrected forms
Textbooks contains a lot of information	15	Textbooks contain a lot of information.
Students derives information from printed materials	7	Students derive information printed materials.
Some Lecturers teaches very well.	8	Some Lecturers teach very well.
Radio news are important source of information for students.	8	Radio news is an important source of information for students.
Class lectures is mainly for students.	7	Class lectures are mainly for students.
Journal is publications made at regular interval	5	Journals are publications made at regular interval.
The internet present another source of information	11	The internet presents another source of information.
Intensive reading require patience.	4	Intensive reading requires patience.
TOTAL FREQUENCY OF OCCURRENCE	65	

Table 2. Selected Subject-Verb-Agreement Errors (Pronouns)

Agreement errors	Number of occurrence	Corrected forms
This are materials/books needed for reading success.	55	These are materials/books needed for reading success.
This enable the student to learn very well.	5	This enables the student to learn very well.
This help to ensure success in examinations.	15	This helps to ensure success in examinations.
This involve reading from several sources.	11	This involves reading from several sources.
This lead to examination fever.	3	This leads to examination fever.
This types of books are scarce	7	These types of books are scarce.
This play vital role in one's life	4	This plays vital role in one's life.
This lecturers are committed to work.	5	These lecturers are committed to work.
This include materials such as...	9	This includes materials such as.....
This consist of a lot information.	2	This consists of a lot of information.
This bring joy to the student.	5	This brings joy to the student
These is important for students' progress.	9	These are important for students' progress
They consists a lot of authors ideas and explanations	12	They consist of a lot of author's ideas and explanations.
TOTAL FREQUENCY OF OCCURRENCE	142	

Table 3. Selected Subject-Verb Agreement Errors (Tense)

Agreement errors	Number of occurrence	Corrected forms
The way the lecturers teaches	5	The way the lecturer teaches
That require	9	That requires
It consist	11	It consists
The books contains	4	The books contain
Radio and television provides	4	Radio and television provide
Electronic media provides	6	Electronic media provide
Excursion are educational visits	3	Excursion is an educational visit
They helps to	10	They help to
Reading mean	2	Reading means
Group discussion play	6	Group discussion plays
Internet facilities provides	3	Internet facilities provide
Textbooks: this is materials written on.....	5	Textbooks: these are materials written on.....
Lecturer enhance student understanding	19	Lecturer enhances students' understanding
It make you perform well in examination	12	It makes you perform well in examination
This article are publications....	8	These articles are publications....
TOTAL FREQUENCY OF OCCURRENCE	107	

Table 4. Some Agreement Errors involving Intervening Expressions between Subject and Verb

Agreement errors	Number of occurrence	Corrected forms
I usually employs the followings and strategies to prepare my exams	5	I usually employ the following strategies to prepare for my examinations
I make sure that I attends all my lectures and takes key points....	2	I make sure that I attend all my lectures and take key points....
Radio is an audio aspect of information that the audience listen to	4	Radio is an audio information that audience listens to
We can prepare for exams by reading the materials which the lecturers has prescribed	9	We can prepare for exams by reading the materials which the lecturers have prescribed
These are electronic devices that passes information to people.	17	These are electronic devices that pass information to people.
This is the visit students pay to areas of study that requires there lecturers and teachers explaining features and important aspect about the place they have visited.	8	This is the visit students pay to areas of study that require lecturers' or teachers' explanation of features and important aspects of the topics they have treated.
Public speeches is another medium which student are been exposed to so many things.	12	Public speech is another medium where students are being exposed to so many things.
Students who needs to succeed in examination has to visits journals	4	Students who need to succeed in examination have to consult journals
It contain chronological records that entails....	3	It contains chronological records that entail.....
TOTAL FREQUENCY OF OCCURRENCE	64	

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