



SUBJECT-VERB AGREEMENT ERRORS IN THE NARRATIVE WRITING OF THE FIRST SEMESTER OF ENGLISH LITERATURE STUDENTS: A CASE STUDY

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Abstract

This study aimed at identifying the subject-verb agreement errors in 15 students' narrative writing of the first semester of English literature. Descriptive qualitative method was used in conducting this study. The data of the study were collected through the use of *The Pear Film* as the instrument. The data obtained through the instrument were analyzed by classifying the errors into rules of Subject Verb Agreement (SVA) proposed by Azar (2003). The result of data analysis showed that error on the singular subject takes singular verb was 35 sentences. It was followed by plural subject takes a plural verb 6 sentences, sometimes phrases come between a subject and a verb. These phrases do not affect the agreement of the subject and verb 3 sentences, *There + be + subject* 3 sentences and collective nouns 2 sentences.

Key words: subject verb agreement, error, narrative, writing.

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengidentifikasi kesalahan *subject-verb agreement* dalam penulisan naratif 15 mahasiswa semester pertama Sastra Inggris. Metode deskriptif kualitatif digunakan dalam melakukan penelitian ini. Data penelitian dikumpulkan dengan menggunakan *The Pear Film* sebagai instrumennya. Data yang diperoleh melalui instrumen dianalisis dengan mengklasifikasikan kesalahan ke dalam aturan *Subject Verb Agreement (SVA)* yang diajukan oleh Azar (2003). Hasil analisis data menunjukkan bahwa kesalahan pada subjek singular mengambil verba singular adalah 35 kalimat. Itu diikuti oleh subjek jamak mengambil kata kerja jamak 6 kalimat, kadang-kadang frase datang antara subjek dan kata kerja. Frasa-frasa ini tidak mempengaruhi kesepakatan subjek dan kata kerja 3 kalimat, *There + be + subject* 3 kalimat dan kata benda kolektif 2 kalimat.

Kata kunci: kesepakatan kata kerja- subjek, kesalahan, cerita, tulisan

1. Introduction

The problem of subject-verb agreement among English as second language speakers is becoming more obvious not only in the secondary level but also to the tertiary level of education or higher education. Likewise with Indonesia where English is a foreign language where the average citizen does not need English or any other foreign languages to live his daily life, social or career development (Broughton, et al. (1980), p. 6). Consequently, Indonesian students learn English as a foreign language after learning their first Indonesian language as the national language or the local languages as their mother tongue. As a result, English is difficult to learn due to the presence of big differences between the two languages. The difference almost occurs in all language aspects such as morphology, syntax, and semantics.

Those differences can influence students' ability in studying skills of the language. English as other languages consists of four skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. From the four skills writing is the most difficult skill for students because writing needs the process in which the students have to learn words, phrases, clauses, and to arrange them into a grammatically correct sentence. In producing a good writing, the students faced several language problems including poor vocabulary, many misspelled words, bad writing organization, unrelated contents and as He (2015) found that the number one issue among the four writing problems is grammatical.

Grammatical sentence means that the sentence should follow the rules of the language. For example, the verb can be changed depending on the subject because different tenses have different rules, plural nouns sometimes are not always given 'or 's at the end of the word depending on nouns/ words. Those conditions above sometimes make the students confused. For instance, the students frequently produce an error dealing with subject-verb agreement in a simple sentence like she drink a cup of coffee instead of she drinks a cup of coffee.

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. According to Turkenik (1998), there are three basic rules of subject-verb agreement. They are:

1. In simple present or past tense, the main verbs are be and have, for example: I am a graduate student; She was a news anchor; and They have two houses.

2. The verbs in the third person singular must be added –s, -es, or –ies in simple present tense, for example: Lovenia goes to her office by bus; Leo watches television three hours a day; and The airplane flies very fast.

3. Compound tenses use be or have as the first auxiliary, for example: Gregory was walking along the road; Anisa has finished her research; and Paulus has been waiting there for two hours.

In line with it, Eastwood (2002) stated that, in English grammar, subject-verb agreement is the correspondence of a verb with its subject in person (first, second, or third) and number (singular or plural) which is also called subject-verb concord. In other words, they both must be singular or they both must be plural. For instance, Subjects and verbs must agree with one another in number (singular or plural). Thus, if a subject is singular, its verb must also be singular; vice versa.

The girl [singular subject] reads [singular verb] mystery stories.

The girls [plural subject] read [plural verb] mystery stories.

Topan [singular subject] is [singular verb] asleep.

Topan and his friends [plural subject] are [plural verb] asleep.

There are many researches previously conducted on the term of SVA. Marzuki and Zainal (2004) investigated the common errors produced by Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) students in report writing and found that the most frequent error was subject-verb agreement with 95.5% occurrence. Nayan Surina (2009) found that students have more tendency to make errors in the general rule of subject verb agreement. Anitha Thalib Mbau ,et all (2014) found that the highest error made by the second semester students of English Department at Tadulako University dealing with subject-verb agreement was on the basic subject-verb agreement (70.75%) and it was influenced by six sources of errors.

The present writer focused on the subject verb agreement rules proposed by Azar (2003) covering final –s/ -es: use, basic subject-verb agreement, subject-verb agreement: using expressions of quantity, subject-verb agreement: using there + be, and subject-verb agreement collective noun as shown in the table below.

Table 1. Subject Verb Agreement Rules

Rules	Example
1. A singular subject takes a singular verb.	The <i>sun shines</i> .

2. A plural subject takes a plural verb.	<i>Bids sing.</i>
3. Two subjects connected by and take a plural verb.	<i>My brother and sister live in Jakarta.</i>
4. Sometimes phrases come between a subject and a verb. These phrases do not affect the agreement of the subject and verb.	a). The <i>glasses</i> over there under the window by the sink are clean. b). The <i>information</i> in those magazines about Vietnamese culture and customs is very interesting.
5. There + be + subject expresses that something exists in a particular place. The verb agrees with the noun that follows be.	a). There <i>is a book</i> on the desk. b). There <i>are some books</i> on the desk.
6. Every is a singular word. It is used with a singular, not plural, noun. INCORRECT: Every students.... Subjects with every take singular verbs	a). <i>Every student is</i> sitting down. b). <i>Everybody/Everyone hopes</i> for peace.
7. People is a plural noun and takes a plural verb (collective noun).	<i>People in my country are</i> friendly.

Adapted from Azar (2003, p. 165)

In relation to the background mentioned previously, this study attempted to answer the following research questions: What is the prevalent type (s) of subject verb agreement errors among the first semester students of English Literature Study Program of Universitas Kristen Indonesia?

This study was conducted with specific purposes as the following to examine the types of errors undergraduate learners make in their narrative writings, especially, in the area of subject-verb agreement errors among the first semester students of English Literature. Hopefully, this study bring some significance not only to the students because this study can help students to master subject-verb agreement, but also to the teachers of English since this study is expected to give information about the effective method for students in order to master subject-verb agreement.

2. Research Methodology

The design of this study was descriptive qualitative which was conducted through analyzing errors in students' narrative writing. The Participants engaged in this research are 15 students in the first semester of English Literature (FS-UKI). The data of this study was 15 narrative paragraphs of the first semester students. The writer used The Pear Film as the instrument of this study. The students watched The Pear Film. After watching the film, students were asked to write a narrative paragraph retelling the film. After doing data collection process, the

researcher analyzed the result of the narrative paragraphs by using analytically descriptive method. The researcher identified students' errors from the result of the participants' narrative paragraphs, especially whether the subjects agree the verbs or not. The data analysis was taken by means of table to represents the types, frequency and rate of correct and incorrect answers.

3. Findings and Discussion

First of all, the researcher would like to present the types of the students' errors based on the result of the narrative paragraph as follow:

Table 2. Types of Subject Verb Agreement

No	Types of Error	Number of Errors in Sentence
1	Rule 1. A singular subject takes a singular verb.	35
2	Rule 2. A plural subject takes a plural verb.	6
3	Rule 4. Sometimes phrases come between a subject and a verb. These phrases do not affect the agreement of the subject and verb.	3
4	Rule 5. There + be + subject expresses that something exists in a particular place. The verb agrees with the noun that follows be.	3
5	Rule 7. People is a plural noun and takes a plural verb (collective noun).	2
	Total	49

Table 2 showed the number of the errors did by the students. It indicated that the students did the errors mostly in rule no 1. A singular subject takes a singular verb, the second number was in rule no 2. A Plural subject takes a plural verbs. While in rule 3 and 4, the students only made three errors, and the least errors occur was in rule no.7 concerning collective nouns as the subjects. The errors in the students' incorrect answers were presented as follow:

1. Final -s/-es (Rule no 1. A singular subject takes a singular verb)

Table 2 showed that there were 35 incorrect sentences dealing with omission -s/-es at the end of the verbs for the subject of the third person singular. The errors were shown from the students' writings as follow:

1. He stop and get off from his bycicle.

2. The sheep want eat the pear but owner don't will give the pear.
3. After that the child go faster and crash a stone and fall on ground.
4. He just walk and don't do anything.

The subjects in all the sentences above are the third singular persons (he, the sheep, the child, and he). Those subjects need singular verbs. Consequently, the verb in the first subject should be “stops and gets off”, in the second subject the verb should be “wants”, in the third sentence, the verb should be “goes” and “crashes” and in the last sentence, the verb should be “walks” and the negative form should be “doesn't (does not) do”

2. A plural subject takes a plural verb.

Table 2 showed that there are 6 sentences dealing with a plural subject takes a plural verb subject-verb agreement rule as taken from the students' errors below:

1. While them eats the pears them walk get trough the owner of the pears.
2. The pears was stolen by a boy
3. I thought they want to bully the “thief boy” but they doesn't.

In the above sentences, the subjects are the plural nouns (‘them’ correcte to be ‘they’, it is becoming interesting since from the first sentence it is shown that the student does not know the use of subject pronoun (they) . The subject for the second sentence is the pears and they as the subject of the third sentence. Based on the rule, the plural subjects take plural verbs, so the corret verbs for those sentences are “eat”, “were” and “don't”.

3. Sometimes phrases come between a subject and a verb. These phrases do not affect the agreement of the subject and verb.

In Table 2, it was found that there are three erroneous sentences made by the students regarding this rule. They are:

1. Next, a boy who is ride a bicycle pass through and he stole a basket.
2. When he already fill two basket, a man with his goat walk in front of the pear tree.
3. When the kid with the bicycle run away from the old man, he meet a beautiful girl who riding a bicycle too.

In the first sentence, there occurs two errors simultaneously. The first error is the student seems to be confused with the form of either simple present tense or present progressive tense. The second error is when determining the verb after the phrase “a boy who is riding a bicycle” and the choice of verb “pass”. In line with the rule above, the phrase should not affect the agreement of the subject and verb. The subject in the first sentence is “a boy” which is singular noun in which the verb should take the singular form “passes” or “passed” since this sentence joined by the conjunction “and” where after the conjunction, the student applied past tense irregular verb “stole”. In the second sentence, the subject is “a man” which is singular noun followed by the noun phrase “with his goat” the verb following the subject should be singular verb “walks” to agree with the subject. The subject of the last sentence above is “the kid” which is the singular pronoun followed by the noun phrase “with the bicycle”, the verb should be in singular verb “runs away” and “meets”.

4. There + be + subject expresses that something exists in a particular place. The verb agrees with the noun that follows be.

From Table 2. It is shown that there are three sentences violate this rule. They are shown below:

1. When he fell down and the pear spill out, there is three child and help the boy.
2. Than there’s 3 boys who help him and take off fallen hat.
3. There is a boy with bicycle go through the fruit.

In the first and second sentence, the subjects of the sentences are “three children” and “3 boys” (plural form) as the noun after the “be”, so the auxiliary verb should be in the plural form “are” to agree with the subjects. The third sentence the subject is “a boy” which is singular, the verb should be in the singular form also “goes”.

5. People is a plural noun and takes a plural verb (collective noun).

According to Nordquist (2016), SVA usually causes more problems when the subject of the verb is a noun, particularly the collective types of noun. Mills (2015) observed 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. For examples: army, jury, crowd, herd, flock, gang, minority, majority, government, the Arab league, and the United Nations. There are two sentences in Table 2 violating the rule as shown below:

1. Suddenly, a group of boy come and help him out.

This sentence is correct in the context that the writer means to show the plural personal individuality of the group (the boy as a group).

2. One of the boy group members run into him.

In the second sentence, the writer made an error concerning the use of “one of” which is singular so the verb should be in singular verb “runs” eventhough there is a word “group” which signify collectivity. The singular stresses the non-personal collectivity of the group

6. Some students constructed sentences with no verbs as follow:

1. Because his too busy, he don't know there a child coming to steal his fruit in the basket which use a bicycle

2. The boy so grateful and give him three pears

3. Where my fruits?

4. Where the pears?

Every sentences needs at least one subject and one verb whether auxiliary verbs (be, have, and do) and/or ordinary verbs (make, borrowed, come etc). From the above examples, the students omit the verbs in their sentences. The researcher can say that the sentences have no verbs. In sentence 1) the subject should be “he” and the verb should be “is”. The second verb should be “doesn't know”. After “there” should be followed by singular verb “is” since the noun is in singular “a child”. Sentence 2). The subject is “the boy” which is singular so the verb should be in singular form “is”. In sentence 3 and 4, they should have auxiliary verbs “are” since the subjects are plural “my fruits” and “the pears”.

4. Conclusion

There is evidence that students still possess problems in the usage of their subject verb agreement in their writing. Majority of the students have problems in their general rule than sub-rules. Students have problems in subject-verb agreement because they don't have this kind of rule in their L1. This study also indicated that students had difficulties in memorizing the different rules of subject verb. The students probably could not remember subject verb agreement rules, they could not differentiate the subject verb agreement rules, they did not know subject verb agreement rules and there were too many subject verb agreement rules to learn. It can be surmised from the findings that students committed subject verb agreement

errors as they are not successful in learning how to use the subject verb agreement rules as stated by Richards, (1971, cited in Heydari & Bagheri, 2012).

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