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ANALYSIS OF ERRORS IN SUBJECT-VERB AGREEMENT AMONG BANGLADESHI TERTIARY LEVEL EFL LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses errors of agreement between subject and verb among the tertiary level EFL learners at International Islamic University Chittagong, Bangladesh. The errors are pointed out in written essays of comparison and comparison method on "Two places I have visited". The errors are classified into three categories- error of agreement between verb and singular subject, error of agreement between verb and plural subject and error of agreement between verb and relative pronoun. Thirty six learners participated in the study. The study reveals that students commit highest number of errors of agreement between verb and plural subject followed by the error of agreement between verb and singular subject. The least error is seen in case of agreement error between verb and relative pronoun.

Keywords error analysis, subject verb agreement, grammar in EFL, EFL learner, effective communication

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I. INTRODUCTION

Every language has four skills- listening, speaking, reading and writing. The last skill (writing) comes at the end of one's mastery over the other three skills. It is not an inborn skill. It must be learned and practiced in a formal instructional setting or environment. It requires cognitive faculty and linguistic faculty. This skill demands that the learner generates ideas and transfers them into text. Therefore it is a complex process and to practice this skill to produce any write up in L1 is a difficult job. While it is difficult in L1, it is more difficult in L2. The gravity of difficulty goes up, because a learner has to consider the grammar, writing convention of the target language and the like of the target language norm. Thus, grammar is a significant aspect of language that a learner has to develop mastery among all other aspects of language. Grammar plays the role of skeleton of a language. The grammar of English, which is a foreign language for Bangladeshis, deserves more focused attention. It can be easily assumed that English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners of Bangladesh must have difficulty in learning English grammar. They must have committed errors in the way of developing competence in EFL.

Error analysis (EA) is a well discussed area in the field of EFL. Analysis of errors in using grammar is a part and parcel of Second Language Acquisition (SLA). Linguists, educationists and researchers talk about knowledge of grammar as significant for developing linguistic competence. A learner needs to learn certain structure or necessary grammar to produce correct language. Whenever there is deviation from the accepted norms of language, the idea of EA comes in. EA brings a learner to a point at which a learner deviates from the accepted standard of the language (here it is English). It helps the instructor to know what the level of English of the learner is. It indicates what a learner has learned and what has not learned. Among the items what a learner has to master, subject-verb agreement deserves special consideration. Among the errors in EFL grammar, subject-verb agreement is one item. The learners commit this kind of error very regularly. International Islamic University Chittagong is a private university in Bangladesh which maintains English as the medium of instruction. The students of the department of English Language & Literature in this university have to receive instruction in English, have to answer questions in English and have to communicate also in English. For these learners, strong grammatical knowledge is strongly needed. The item of subject-verb agreement is such an item among the plethora of items of grammatical knowledge which facilitates smooth presentation as well as effective communication in English.

I.1. Statement of the problem

The error of subject-verb agreement is a common problem among the learners' community. Educators are highly critical about the error of subject-verb agreement in the learners' writings. Researcher like Bhatia (1974), as quoted by Stapa and Izahar (2010), points out the error of subject-verb agreement in the writings of ESL learners. Surina and Kamarulzaman (2009) also, as cited in Stapa and Izahar (2010), find this problem of agreement in the writings of Malaysian learners. Based on the findings of this study it can be assumed that while it poses as a problem for the ESL learners, the EFL learners too will have this problem.

Ahmad (1986), Simbwa (1987), Al-Hassan(1989), Al-Kahtybeh (1992), Hazaymeh (1996), Sun. & Shang (2009) Yahya, Azizi, et al. (2012) and Zawahreh (2012) conducted their studies in different EFL/ ESL countries like Jordan, China and Malaysia. To the best of my knowledge, no study was conducted on EFL learners in Bangladesh. Therefore, this study is an attempt to fill in this gap.

Moreover, all the studies mentioned above looked into errors of all sorts in the students' writings. Considering the study to look into errors of all sorts in the students' writings as a gigantic task, this study looks into a small scale study of looking into the problem of a single item of grammar like subject-verb agreement in the writings of Bangladeshi EFL students. Furthermore, my experience as an EFL teacher for the last 14 years has given me this notion that the students sometimes commit this kind of error of agreement between subject and verb. This study is an attempt to investigate the problem of agreement between subject and verb in the writings of Bangladeshi EFL learners.

I.II. Objective of the study

The present study takes the objective to examine the errors of subject verb agreement in the writings of Bangladeshi tertiary level EFL learners.

I.III. Research question of the study

The study forms the following research question to meet the objective of the study- What kinds of grammatical errors of subject verb agreement do the Bangladeshi tertiary level EFL learners commit?

Review of literature

Raimes (1983)⁴ gives the explanation that students commit errors in writing and students find it useful if they can understand their errors because of the following reasons: "First, it reinforces the grammatical structures, idioms and vocabulary that have been taught to students. Second, when students write, they also have a chance to be adventurous with the language. Third, when they write they necessarily become very involved with the new language".

Ahmad (1986), Simbwa (1987), Al-Hassan (1989), Al- Kahtybeh (1992), Hazaymeh (1996), (all are as cited in Zawahreh (2012)), Yahya, Azizi, et al. (2012), Sun and Shang (2009), Zawahreh (2012) and Stapa and Izahar (2010) analyzed different aspects of grammar in the writings of different levels of students from different countries. Secondary students' writings – descriptive, argumentative and narrative- got more focus

from the researchers for analyzing errors. Syntactic errors were looked into specifically. WH questions, passive construction and verb usage were examined to a little extent. Only Stapa and Izahar (2010) examined the errors of agreement between subject and verb in ESL context.

Ahmad (1986) examined 150 secondary school students' errors in formulating WH questions. Simbwa (1987) looked into the causes of syntactic errors in the English essays written by 94 male and 14 female secondary school students in Uganda. Al-Hassan (1989) made a study about the errors in passive sentence construction committed by 90 Jordanian secondary male students. The sample was taken from 3 grades- 1st, 2nd and 3rd – amounting at 90 students in total. Al- Kahtybeh (1992) investigated the syntactic errors in the essays of 243 male and female tenth grade students from 8 schools in Irbid district. Hazaymeh (1996) did a study to find out the secondary students' errors in learning English verb tenses. The sample included male and female students. Of them 587 were from public schools and 172 students were from private schools. Yahya, Azizi, et al. (2012) did a study into 30 lower secondary school students' errors in two types of essay writings- descriptive and narrative- in Malaysian setting. Sun. & Shang (2009) conducted a study into English Majors' writings of argumentative essays of Ludong University in China. The study was carried out to find out the errors of the first semester students of and their causes. Zawahreh (2012) examined the written English errors of 350 tenth grade students in their writing of a narrative essay- "A Journey to the Ancient City of Jerash in Jordan". Stapa and Izahar (2010) analyze errors of subject-verb agreement found in 40 written compositions –argumentative and factual- among 20 post graduate teacher trainees in a teachers' training college in Malaysia.

II. Methodology

III.I. Population of the study

The population of the study consisted of all students who registered for the course ENG-1212 (Writing –I) in International Islamic University Chittagong, Bangladesh. All the students are put into five groups. One group is for male students and the other four groups are female students. The total population stands at 165.

III.II. The Sample

The researchers taught one group of female students in which the number of students is 40. Out of these forty students 36 students participated in the study. All the students were in the second semester of their study and they had read English as a compulsory course for 12 years and English is their first language. From this point of view, the participants of this study are homogeneous.

III.III. Data Collection

The study examined the errors of agreement in an essay of comparison and contrast on the topic- Two Places I have visited. The students were asked to write an essay on the given topic following the method of comparison and contrast. They were allocated 40 minutes for writing the essay. The participants were informed that the essay would not affect their result. The essay would be examined to find out the errors of subject verb agreement only to help them overcome this type of error in the after time.

Data analysis

The study followed the procedure suggested by S. P. Corder (1967) for the analysis of errors in agreement between subject and verb. The procedure of S. P. Corder (1967) suggests five steps which are given below-

- a. Collection of write ups of language learners
- b. identification of errors in their written languages
- c. description of errors
- d. explanation of errors and
- e. evaluation of errors.

Following the five steps as mentioned above the write ups of all the participants were examined to find out the errors of subject verb agreement. Stapa and Izahar (2010) mentioned five kinds of errors in terms of subject verb agreement. The present study looked into the errors of agreement without any classification. The current study considered the errors of agreement as one type because in our instructional settings classification of errors as done by Stapa and Izahar (2010) is not maintained. However, this study categorizes

the errors of subject verb agreement under three heads - firstly, whether the singular subject agrees with a singular subject, secondly- whether the plural subject takes plural verb, thirdly- whether a relative pronoun which is to take verb according to its antecedent. The sentences or parts of sentences which fall under the above mentioned first head have been put in the following table 1. The sentences have been chosen in such a way that no repetition lies there. That is, if the same kind of error is found in the writings of same learner or another learner, the example sentence or example part of sentence is not mentioned.

Table 1.

Singular subject		
	Written sentences	Correct sentences
1	Cox's bazaar have a longest sea beach	Cox's bazaar has -----
2	Shadinata park have many -----	Shadinata park has many ----
3	---- the zoo where the animal are ----	---- the zoo where the animal is -
4	It give us joy -----	It gives us joy -----
5	When any one ask about -----	When any one asks about -----
6	This animal are very -----	This animal is very -----
7	It grow our knowledge.	It grows our knowledge
8	In the moon lit night the sea look very beautiful.	In the moon lit night the sea looks very beautiful.
9	Enjoyment are-----	Enjoyment is-----
10	Every gallery have----	Every gallery has----
11	The sea beach help our --	The sea beach helps our --
12	Our economic condition are increasing.	Our economic condition is increasing.
13	The natural beauty of the two places are different.	The natural beauty of the two places is different.
14	It have many beautiful--	It has many beautiful--
15	It also have many historical places.	It also has many historical places.
16	It have many kinds of temples.	It has many kinds of temples.
17	The weather of both the beaches were-	The weather of both the beaches was-
18	This were the place -----	This was the place -----

In the above Table 1, 18 examples have been mentioned. In all these sentences, the subject is either singular proper noun or abstract noun or singular pronoun, therefore the verb that follows the subject must be in singular form.

Table 2.

In the table 2, there are the examples of errors in terms of agreement between subject and verb.

Plural subject		
	Written sentences	Correct sentences
1	<i>Both places was very beautiful.</i>	<i>Both places were very beautiful.</i>
2	<i>Both places was very peaceful.</i>	<i>Both places were very peaceful.</i>
3	<i>Children likes most</i>	<i>Children like most</i>
4	<i>Two memorable visit was -----</i>	<i>Two memorable visits were -----</i>
5	<i>-- they both attracts me most.</i>	<i>-- they both attract me most.</i>
6	<i>But two visited places is very ----</i>	<i>But two visited places are very --</i>
7	<i>--- most of the beautiful places is --</i>	<i>--- most of the beautiful places are --</i>
8	<i>There are many tourist place in----</i>	<i>There are many tourist places in--</i>
9	<i>The people of Cox's bazaar likes ----</i>	<i>The people of Cox's bazaar like--</i>
10	<i>The people of Jhinaidah likes ----</i>	<i>The people of Jhinaidah like ----</i>
11	<i>The people of Jhinaidah eats ---</i>	<i>The people of Jhinaidah eat ---</i>

12	<i>The people of Jhinaidah mainly depends on -</i>	<i>The people of Jhinaidah mainly depend on -----</i>
13	<i>Many people comes-----</i>	<i>Many people come -----</i>
14	<i>In Dhaka there is many kinds of places-</i>	<i>In Dhaka there are many kinds of places-</i>
15	<i>Two places was very wonderful--</i>	<i>Two places were very wonderful-</i>
16	<i>There was many similarities--</i>	<i>There were many similarities--</i>
17	<i>Both sea beaches is nice---</i>	<i>Both sea beaches are nice---</i>
18	<i>Comilla and Cox's bazaar is ----</i>	<i>Comilla and Cox's bazaar are ----</i>
19	<i>The temples is -----</i>	<i>The temples are -----</i>
20	<i>Many expensive hotels or restaurants is ----</i>	<i>Many expensive hotels or restaurants are ----</i>
21	<i>There are hotel in -----</i>	<i>There are hotels in -----</i>
22	<i>Both the beaches belongs to ----</i>	<i>Both the beaches belong to ----</i>

In the above mentioned table we find that the subjects contain two proper nouns, expressions like both, many, people, children and most which indicate the plurality of the subjects. But, the examples mentioned in the above table show that the verbs that follow the subjects do not agree with the subjects in case of number.

In the following table, there are the examples of sentences with errors in case of subject verb agreement, but the subject is a relative pronoun which may take singular or plural verbs according to its antecedent. To put it elaborately, the relative pronouns like – who, which, that can be used for singular antecedents as well as plural antecedents. The verbs that will come after these pronouns must follow the antecedents. The verbs must agree with the antecedents.

Table 3

Pronoun as subject with corresponding verb		
	Written sentences	Correct sentences
1	<i>----two places which is very beautiful.</i>	<i>Two places which are very beautiful.</i>
2	<i>Shahid minar, Ahsan Manjil, Suna Masjid etc. which is -----</i>	<i>Shahid minar, Ahsan Manjil, Suna Masjid etc. which are----</i>
3	<i>-- hand made things which charms us</i>	<i>-- hand made things which charm us</i>
4	<i>---- things which is very important</i>	<i>Things which are very</i>
5	<i>---- many things which is ----</i>	<i>---- many things which are ----</i>
6	<i>--many historical things which attracts-</i>	<i>-many historical things which attract-</i>
7	<i>Many hotels, markets, stalls--- which helps people-</i>	<i>Many hotels, markets, stalls--- which help people----</i>

In all these sentences it is seen that the relative pronoun – which- is used for plural antecedents. According to the rule of English grammar, plural verbs should be used. The above mentioned sentences in Table -3 show that errors have occurred because of placing verb forms which are used for plural subjects.

Implications of the study

The study shows that the tertiary level learners are committing errors of subject verb agreement. Therefore, they should be made aware of the importance of this item of grammar. Errors of this nature may lead to miscommunication. In addition to this, the learners should be kept engaged in discussing the grammatical items of the texts they are reading as the part of their course. Textual analysis may include the rules of subject verb agreement. Furthermore, attention should be given to the analysis of mother tongue influence whether it causes errors of subject verb agreement.

Conclusion

The current study shows that the tertiary level students of Bangladesh are committing the errors of subject verb agreement. They have learnt English for more than 12 years. Despite that they are having this kind of error. They should have textual analysis and feedback based on their write-ups. They should be motivated to get involved in peer group discussion of the necessary rules including the rule of subject verb agreement. Thus, awareness, analysis, practice and feedback should be regular part of academic activities.

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