



Subject-Verb Agreement Errors in ESL Students' Academic Writing: A Surface Taxonomy Approach

Correspondence: Muhammad Ramzan
<ramzanmalik122@gmail.com>

PhD Scholar English Linguistics, Department of English Linguistics, the Islamia University of Bahawalpur, Pakistan.

Publication details:

Received: April 10, 2023

Accepted: May 28, 2023

Published: June 30, 2023

Abstract

This qualitative research study aims to analyze subject-verb agreement errors made by non-native English-speaking ESL students in their writing. The researcher assigned a task to the students to write a 200-sentence paragraph on the importance of education, and their writing samples were analyzed using a surface taxonomy approach. The study used purposive sampling to select 10 students from a public university in Lahore. The results showed that omission errors were the most common type of error, followed by misformation, addition, and misordering errors. This study provides insights into the challenges that ESL students face in mastering subject-verb agreement in their writing. These findings have implications for ESL teachers in designing effective language instruction that can help students improve their writing skills and avoid common subject-verb agreement errors.

Keywords: surface taxonomy, ESL students, subject-verb agreement errors, qualitative study

1. Introduction

English has become an incredibly important language in today's world. It is the most widely spoken language in the world and has become the common language of international communication, trade, and diplomacy. In addition to being the language of instruction in many universities and schools around the world, English is also the language of international business and commerce. Knowledge of English can enhance career prospects and facilitate communication with clients and colleagues around the world. Furthermore, English is widely used in the field of technology, including computer programming and software development (Akram et al., 2021; Akram et al., 2022). English-language media, such as films, television shows, and music, have a significant influence on global culture. In short, fluency in English has become essential in today's interconnected world, providing individuals with numerous personal and professional benefits (Abdelrady & Akram, 2022).

The importance of grammar in English writing and speaking cannot be overstated. Grammar is the system of rules that governs the structure of language, including the way words are used, sentences are constructed, and ideas are expressed. Good grammar is essential for clarity, coherence, and professionalism in both written and spoken communication (Hans & Hans, 2017).

In written communication, grammar plays a vital role in ensuring that messages are conveyed clearly and effectively. It enables writers to structure sentences in a way that is easy to read and understand, and to use language that is appropriate for the intended audience (Jayanti, 2019). Correct grammar also helps to establish credibility and authority, as it demonstrates attention to detail and a level of education and expertise. While, in relation to the spoken communication, grammar is equally important. It helps speakers to convey their message accurately and with the intended meaning (Pawlak, 2020). Good grammar enables speakers to use appropriate sentence structures, word choices, and intonation to effectively communicate their ideas. Proper grammar is particularly important in professional contexts, such as job interviews, business meetings, and presentations, where communication is critical to success.

In addition to its practical benefits, grammar also has social and cultural significance. It is a fundamental aspect of English language and is an important part of English identity and culture. Knowledge of English grammar enables individuals to communicate effectively with people from different cultures and backgrounds, as well as to appreciate and understand the nuances of the language (Pawlak & Csizér, 2022). In sum, the importance of grammar in English writing and speaking cannot be overstated. Good grammar is essential for clarity, coherence, and professionalism, and it plays a crucial role in establishing credibility and authority in both written and spoken communication. It is also an important aspect of English language and culture, enabling individuals to communicate effectively with people from different backgrounds and to appreciate the richness and complexity of the language. When learning a new language, it is important for learners to have a strong grasp of the grammatical structures necessary to complete language tasks. This means not only understanding the rules of grammar but also being able to apply them in real-life situations, such as using subject-verb agreement correctly in a sentence. According to Stapa and Izahar (2010), mastering grammatical structures is a crucial component of language learning, as it allows learners to communicate effectively and accurately. For example, if a learner is unable to use subject-verb agreement correctly, their meaning may be unclear or even incorrect, leading to misunderstandings or confusion.

Subject-verb agreement is a crucial component of English grammar and plays a significant role in facilitating understanding (Jäger et al., 2020). In simple terms, subject-verb agreement refers to the agreement between the subject and the verb in a sentence. When the subject is singular, the verb must be singular, and when the subject is plural, the verb must be plural.

The role of subject-verb agreement in English understanding is twofold. Firstly, subject-verb agreement ensures that sentences are grammatically correct, which is essential for clear communication. When subjects and verbs do not agree, it can result in confusion and ambiguity, making it difficult for the reader or listener to understand the intended meaning.

Secondly, subject-verb agreement helps to convey the intended meaning of the sentence. By using the correct verb form, writers and speakers can accurately convey whether the subject is performing the action or whether it is the recipient of the action (Bozorgian & Azadmanesh, 2015). For example, consider the sentence "The dog chases the cat." Here, the subject "dog" is performing the action of "chasing" the object "cat." If we change the verb to "chase," as in "The dog chase the cat," the sentence becomes grammatically incorrect and the meaning is unclear.



In addition to these benefits, subject-verb agreement also plays an important role in developing effective communication skills in English. By understanding and applying the rules of subject-verb agreement, individuals can enhance their writing and speaking skills, making them more confident and competent communicators (Kurniawan & Seprizanna, 2016).

At the same time, English has a wide range of rules and exceptions that can be difficult for non-native speakers to grasp. Additionally, subject-verb agreement rules can be particularly tricky, as they require an understanding of verb tenses, auxiliary verbs, and the grammatical number of nouns. Another factor that contributes to the difficulty of subject-verb agreement for English as a secondary language (ESL) students is the influence of their native language. Many languages have different rules for verb agreement and may not use auxiliary verbs in the same way that English does. This can lead to errors in the application of subject-verb agreement rules, particularly when students try to transfer the rules of their native language to English. For example, unlike English, Urdu does not use the same allomorph for nouns and verbs, which means that learners must memorize different patterns for different parts of speech. This can be particularly challenging for those who are used to languages with more consistent rules for word formation.

Furthermore, ESL students may not receive sufficient instruction on subject-verb agreement in their language classes. Many teachers may not emphasize the importance of this aspect of English grammar, or may not have the resources and training to effectively teach it. Nawaz (2020) et al. have suggested that invariably the wrong placement of lexical stress in English words in Pakistan by Urdu speakers who have Urdu as L1 because they either place the stress on the syllable preceding the actual syllable or following it. Finally, it is suggested to follow the native speaker's tone as a final remedy. So, the lack of instruction and practice can lead to a poor understanding of pronunciation and subject-verb agreement and subsequent errors in written and spoken English.

As language teachers, it is essential to have a strong understanding of subject-verb agreement rules in order to teach them effectively to students. By prioritizing the mastery of grammatical structures and being responsive to their students' needs, language teachers can help their learners achieve success in language acquisition and beyond. Subject-verb agreement refers to the proper matching of a subject with its corresponding verb form, taking into account factors such as tense, number, and person. When subject-verb agreement errors occur, the meaning of the sentence may be unclear or even confusing.

To teach subject-verb agreement effectively, teachers must first understand the rules themselves. This includes knowing when to use singular or plural verb forms depending on the number of the subject, as well as understanding how to properly match the verb form to the tense of the sentence. Teachers should also be aware of common errors that students may make when attempting to use subject-verb agreement. For example, students may mistakenly use a plural verb form when the subject is singular, or vice versa. Teachers should be prepared to correct these errors and provide feedback to help students improve their language skills.

One effective way for teachers to teach subject-verb agreement is through explicit instruction, which involves breaking down the rules and providing clear examples to illustrate them. Teachers can also provide practice activities that allow students to apply their knowledge of subject-verb agreement in context, such as completing sentence stems or rewriting sentences with correct subject-verb agreement. In addition to teaching subject-verb agreement explicitly, teachers should also incorporate opportunities for students to use the structure in authentic communicative activities. This can include group discussions, debates, and role-plays, which allow students to practice using subject-verb agreement in meaningful and relevant ways.

Overall, teachers play a critical role in helping students master the rules of subject-verb agreement. By understanding the rules, themselves and providing clear instruction and feedback, teachers can support their students in achieving success in language acquisition and beyond. To address this issue, this study aims to assess the effectiveness of teaching strategies for subject-verb agreement among ESL learners at university level in Pakistan. Specifically, the researcher aims to analyze the struggling areas of ESL learners in terms of subject-verb agreement, their causes, and what good strategies to be used in elevating the teaching-learning process.

2. Theoretical framework

Verb agreement errors are a common challenge faced by language learners, particularly those who are non-native speakers of English. These errors occur when there is a mismatch between the subject and the verb in a sentence, often resulting in grammatically incorrect constructions.

Sompong (2014) identified four types of verb agreement errors in the surface taxonomy approach, which include omission, addition, misformation, and misordering (see figure 1). Omission errors occur when a subject or verb is left out of a sentence, leaving it incomplete or fragmented. For example, "He going to school" is an incomplete sentence due to the missing auxiliary verb "is" before "going". Addition errors, on the other hand, occur when an extra word is added to a sentence, causing it to become ungrammatical. For instance, "He is goes to school" is an example of an addition error because "is" and "goes" cannot both appear in the same verb phrase.

Misformation errors occur when the verb form used in a sentence does not match the subject or tense. For example, "The team were playing well" is a misformation error because the plural subject "team" requires the plural verb form "were", not the singular "was". Misordering errors occur when the subject and verb in a sentence are in the wrong order, resulting in a sentence that is difficult to understand or nonsensical. For instance, "To the park he walks" is a misordering error because the subject and verb are reversed (Fauziati, 2009).

Being aware of these types of verb agreement errors is essential for language learners who wish to improve their grammatical accuracy in English. By understanding the different types of errors that can occur, learners can develop strategies to identify and correct them. Additionally, language teachers need to be aware of these errors and provide targeted instruction and feedback to help learners improve their language proficiency. By addressing these errors, learners can develop a strong foundation in English grammar, which is crucial for effective communication in both spoken and written forms.

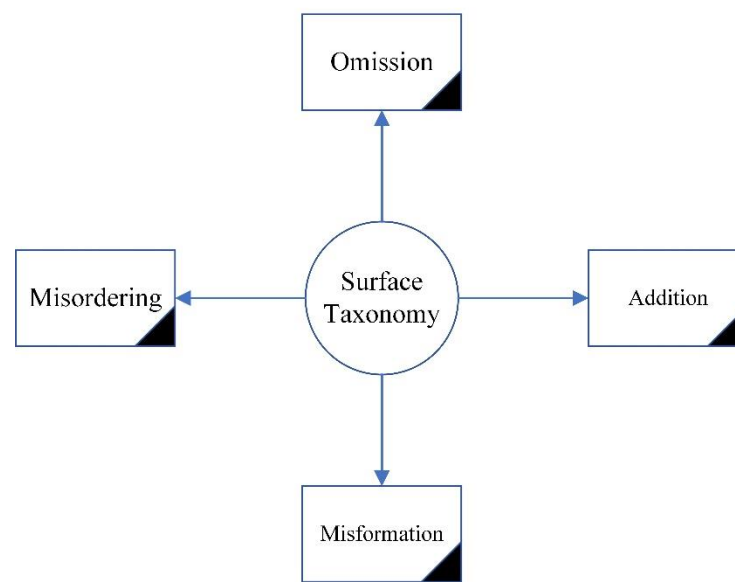


Figure 1. Surface Taxonomy Approach

3. Methodology

In this qualitative research design, the researcher aimed to analyze the subject-verb agreement errors made by ESL students in their writing. To achieve this, the researcher assigned a task to the students in which they were required to write a 200-sentence paragraph on the importance of education. The students' writing samples were then analyzed using a surface taxonomy approach to identify the subject-verb agreement errors made by the students.

Surface taxonomy is an approach used to classify errors in a way that focuses on the surface-level features of the language, such as grammar and syntax (Sompong, 2014). This approach is particularly useful in identifying errors related to subject-verb agreement, which is a common area of difficulty for ESL students. By using this approach, the researcher was able to identify and analyze the specific types of subject-verb agreement errors made by the students in their writing (see table 1).

3.1 Sampling and Study Participants

Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling technique that involves selecting participants based on specific characteristics or criteria that are relevant to the research question. In the case of this study, the researcher chose to use purposive sampling to select 10 students from a public university in Lahore who were non-native English speakers and studying English as a foreign language. Using purposive sampling allowed the researcher to select participants who were likely to exhibit subject-verb agreement errors, which was the focus of the study. By selecting participants in this way, the researcher was able to gather data that was relevant to the research question and provided insight into the challenges that non-native English speakers face when learning subject-verb agreement.

Table 1. An examination of the students' errors of subject and verb agreement

Occurrence	Types of errors	Correct forms
Student 1		
1. Education is the foundation of progress any society.	Omission	progress in any society...
2. It is an essential tool in economic growth and development.	Misformation	for...
3. It play a vital role in shaping the careers of individuals.	Omission	plays...
Student 2		
1. Education help individuals to gain knowledge.	Omission	helps...
2. It support in developing critical thinking skills.	Omission	supports...
3. It has the main source of making innovative inventions.	Misformation	It is the main source..
4. It also foster creativity among individuals.	Omission	fosters...
Student 3		
1. The most important benefit of education is that, it provides necessary knowledge to individuals.	Omission	provides...
2. It provide opportunities to pursue their goals.	Omission	provides...
3. Investing in education are not difficult.	Misformation	is not difficult....
Student 4		
1. It allow people to gain professional growth and advancement.	Omission	allows...

2. It also help people to build self-confidence, which can lead to greater success.	Omission	also helps people..
3. For economic growth Education is also essential.	misordering	Education is also essential for economic growth
Student 5		
1. This fact are recognized by people all around the world.	Misformation	is recognized by...
2. Almost everything come from education.	Omission	comes..
3. Knowledge and wisdom can only are attained via education.	Misformation	only be attained...
Student 6		
1. A person who doesn't goes to school misses out on a lot of chances of learning.	Misformation	doesn't go...
2. Reading and writing are two skills that are can be gained through formal education.	Addition	that can be gained...
Student 7		
1. He will have everything he need in this world.	Omission	he needs in this..
2. A child's early years are critical years to begin in their educational journey.	Addition	to begin their...
3. An individual's health greatly depend on their level of education.	Omission	greatly depends on..
Student 8		
1. An educated know how to get out of tough situations.	Omission	educated knows how...
2. Many people adore and respect those with higher levels of education.	Addition	Many...
3. With the help of education, people has invented several medicines.	Misformation	have....
Student 9		
1. Our personalities and characters are the shaped by our education.	Addition	are shaped by...
2. The schooling of children is very important that's why should not be ignored.	Omission	that's why it should not...
Student 10		
1. Everyone have the same right to receive an education.	Misformation	everyone has the....
2. Without proper education, there are no way to achieve anything.	Misformation	there is no way.....
3. For this reason, it is important to youngsters to prioritize their academic activities.	Misformation	important for youngsters..

Table 2. Summary of student subject-verb agreement problems

	Misformation	Omission	Addition	Misordering
Student 1	1	2		
Student 2	1	3		
Student 3	1	2		
Student 4		2		1
Student 5	2	1		
Student 6	1		1	
Student 7		2	1	
Student 8	1	1	1	
Student 9		1	1	
Student 10	3			
Total	10	14	4	1

4. Discussion

Based on the findings of the study, the most common subject-verb agreement errors made by the students were categorized in Omission errors (see table 2). This means that the students omitted or left out certain words or parts of the sentence that are necessary for proper

subject-verb agreement. This finding is consistent with the findings of Yusuf et al. (2021), who found that omission errors were the most common type of error made by students, accounting for 61.04% of all errors made. To address this issue, teachers should focus on teaching the proper use of articles and prepositions, and provide opportunities for students to practice using them in context.

Misformation errors are caused by a lack of understanding of the rules governing the use of verbs and their different forms. ESL learners may struggle with the complex grammar rules in English, leading to errors in the use of helping verbs and the formation of verb tenses. Suraprajit (2021) conducted a study on subject-verb agreement errors among Thai undergraduate students and found that Misformation was the second most common type of error made by the students, accounting for 21.5% of all errors made. The study also revealed that the most common Misformation error was the incorrect use of the present participle form of the verb, which resulted in a disagreement between the subject and verb in the sentence. This finding is consistent with the results of the present study, which found that Misformation was the second most common category of errors. Therefore, it is essential for language teachers to provide explicit instruction on the proper use of verbs and their different forms to help students avoid Misformation errors in their writing.

Addition errors were the third most frequent type of error, which resulted from adding extra words or using the wrong articles or prepositions in a sentence. The study of Nurjanah (2017) also demonstrated addition category at third. Addition errors are common among ESL learners due to several reasons. One of the reasons is the influence of their native language. For example, in some languages, the use of articles is not required, and this can lead to confusion when learning English. Additionally, some students may not be aware of the rules governing the use of articles and prepositions, and may use them incorrectly or omit them altogether.

Another reason for addition errors is a lack of understanding of the context in which the sentence is used. Students may not be familiar with the correct prepositions or articles to use in specific situations, and may make mistakes as a result. This highlights the importance of providing students with ample opportunities to practice using articles and prepositions in context, so they can gain a better understanding of their proper usage.

Moreover, the study of Sari (2022) suggests that lack of exposure to the English language can also contribute to addition errors. ESL learners may not have enough exposure to the language outside of the classroom, and this can hinder their ability to develop a strong grasp of English grammar and syntax.

In particular, the study found that the students struggled with using proper verbal sentences in the present tense, which is a common error in the Omission category. For example, students may have left out the "s" at the end of a verb to indicate a singular subject, or they may have forgotten to use the correct helping verb to form a question or negative statement. In the Misformation category, errors were often caused by using the wrong form of a verb or using the wrong helping word, such as "has" instead of "have", "to" instead of "for", and "are" instead of "is."

In conclusion, understanding the different types of subject-verb agreement errors is crucial for language teachers to identify and correct their students' mistakes effectively. By focusing on the most common errors, such as Omission and Misformation, teachers can provide targeted instruction and practice to help students improve their grammar skills and ultimately communicate more clearly and effectively in English.

5. Recommendations

Based on the findings that the most frequent subject-verb agreement errors made by the students are in the Omission category, it is recommended that language teachers focus on providing explicit instruction and practice exercises related to the use of verbs in present tense. This could include activities such as filling in the blanks with the correct form of the verb, identifying the subject and verb in sentences, and creating sentences using proper verb agreement. In addition, it is important for teachers to provide feedback to students on their written and spoken language production, specifically targeting subject-verb agreement errors. This can be done through error correction activities or individualized feedback on written assignments. It is also recommended that teachers incorporate authentic language use in the classroom, such as using English in context through reading and listening activities.

For Misformation errors, teachers should emphasize the proper use of helping verbs, and provide examples and practice exercises to help students understand when to use them correctly. This could include activities such as identifying the appropriate helping verb to use in different tenses, constructing sentences with modal verbs to express different levels of certainty or ability, and using linking verbs to show a connection between the subject and complement.

To address Addition errors, language teachers should focus on explicitly teaching the rules of article and preposition usage in English, and providing examples of correct usage in context. Teachers can also provide opportunities for students to practice using articles and prepositions in a variety of contexts, such as in writing assignments or role-playing activities. In addition, teachers can also provide feedback on students' written work and oral presentations, highlighting any errors related to article or preposition usage and providing corrective feedback. This can help students to become more aware of their errors and learn how to use articles and prepositions correctly in their future writing and speaking.

It is also important for teachers to be aware of common errors related to article and preposition usage in their students' first language, and to address these issues in their instruction. By doing so, teachers can help students to overcome the challenges of transferring language skills between different languages and improve their overall English proficiency.

In addition, teachers should provide ongoing feedback and correction to students when they make subject-verb agreement errors, and encourage them to practice using the correct forms in both spoken and written communication. It is also important for teachers to create a supportive and positive learning environment, where students feel comfortable asking questions and making mistakes in their language acquisition journey. Overall, it is important for both language teachers and learners to understand the significance of subject-verb agreement in effective communication in English. By focusing on explicit instruction, targeted feedback, and authentic language use, learners can improve their mastery of subject-verb agreement and enhance their overall English language proficiency.

Funding: This study was not funded in any shape or form by any party.

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Bio-note:

Muhammad Ramzan is a distinguished PhD Scholar specializing in English Linguistics within the esteemed Department of English Linguistics at the Islamia University of Bahawalpur, Pakistan. With an unwavering commitment to academic excellence, his research focus revolves around the dynamic domains of second language learning, testing and evaluation, and research methodology. His scholarly pursuits reflect his profound dedication to unraveling the intricacies of language acquisition, assessment, and the robust methodologies that underpin rigorous academic investigation. As he continues to make strides in his academic journey, he remains an ardent contributor to the scholarly discourse in his areas of expertise.

References

- Abdelrady, A. H., & Akram, H. (2022). An empirical study of ClassPoint tool application in enhancing EFL students' online learning satisfaction. *Systems*, 10(5), 154.
- Akram, H., Abdelrady, A. H., Al-Adwan, A. S., & Ramzan, M. (2022). Teachers' Perceptions of Technology Integration in Teaching-Learning Practices: A Systematic Review. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, 920317-920317.
- Akram, H., Yingxiu, Y., Al-Adwan, A. S., & Alkhalifah, A. (2021). Technology integration in higher education during COVID-19: An assessment of online teaching competencies through technological pedagogical content knowledge model. *Frontiers in psychology*, 12, 736522.
- Bozorgian, M., & Azadmanesh, N. (2015). A survey on the subject-verb agreement in Google machine translation. *International Journal of Research Studies in Educational Technology*, 4(1).
- Fauziati, E. (2009). *Readings on Applied Linguistics: A Handbook for Language Teachers and Teacher Researchers*. Surakarta; Era Pustaka.
- Hans, A., & Hans, E. (2017). Role of grammar in communication-writing skills. *International Journal of English Language, Literature and Humanities*, 5(1), 39-50.
- Jäger, L. A., Mertzen, D., Van Dyke, J. A., & Vasisht, S. (2020). Interference patterns in subject-verb agreement and reflexives revisited: A large-sample study. *Journal of Memory and Language*, 111, 104063.
- Jayanti, A. D. (2019). Students' writing ability on english descriptive text at grade viii in smpn 33 padang. *ENGLISH FRANCA: Academic Journal of English Language and Education*, 3(1), 72-94.
- Kurniawan, I., & Seprizanna, S. (2016). An Analysis of Students' Ability in Using Subject-Verb Agreement. *English Education: Jurnal Tadris Bahasa Inggris*, 9(2), 327-343.
- Nawaz, S. et al (2020). A Study on Urdu Speakers' Use of English Stress Patterns: Phonological Variation from Native Speakers. - *Elementary Education Online*, 2020; Vol 19 (Issue 4): pp. 6215-6235 <http://ilkogretim-online.org> doi: 10.17051/ilkonline.2020.04.765028
- Nurjanah, S. (2017). An Analysis of Subject-Verb Agreement Errors on Students' writing. *ELT Echo: The Journal of English Language Teaching in Foreign Language Context*, 2(1), 13-25.
- Pawlak, M. (2020). 17 Grammar and Good Language Teachers. *Lessons from good language teachers*, 219.
- Pawlak, M., & Csizér, K. (2022). Investigating the use of grammar learning strategies in Hungary and Poland: A comparative study. *Applied Linguistics*, amac038.
- Sari, E. A., Gustiani, S., Yusri, Y., & Simanjuntak, T. (2022, February). An Error Analysis of English Sentence Construction in Writing Subject. In *5th FIRST T3 2021 International Conference (FIRST-T3 2021)* (pp. 20-27). Atlantis Press.
- Sompong, M. (2014). *Error Analysis*. Language Institute; Thammasat University.
- Suraprajit, P. (2021). An analysis of errors in English essays written by thai non-english major students. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 11(1), 12-19.
- Yusuf, Y. Q., Mustafa, F., & Iqbal, R. M. (2021). An inquiry into grammatical errors in writing committed by high achieving EFL students. *International journal of language studies*, 15(2).