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Concord Feud: An Analysis of Subject–Verb Agreement Errors among Undergraduate English Majors

Research Article

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Abstract

This qualitative study investigated subject-verb agreement (SVA) errors in the writings of Semester 4 English major students at the University of Eswatini (UNESWA). Guided by the Contrastive Error Analysis (CEA) framework, the study examined how first language (L1) siSwati and second language (L2) English interactions shaped grammatical performance accuracy. Data were purposively collected from student essays and reflective writings, from which 55 sentences containing SVA errors were extracted and analysed for patterns and causes. The findings revealed a hierarchy of error types: omission (most frequent) → addition (moderate) → misinformation (least frequent). These patterns were primarily attributed to interlingual and intralingual influences (overgeneralization, incomplete grammatical knowledge) and processing difficulties. Omission errors dominated due to the low salience of English inflectional morphemes, while addition and misinformation errors resulted from L1 transfer, overgeneralization, and syntactic complexity. Contributing factors included incomplete understanding of grammatical rules, test anxiety, time constraints, and inadequate editing. The study recommended supportive pedagogical interventions such as low-stakes writing tasks, time management guidance, and constructive feedback to reduce learner anxiety and improve grammatical accuracy.

Keywords: subject–verb agreement, academic writing, error analysis, Eswatini, interlingual influence, intralingual influence, language transfer,

1. Introduction

English is the global lingua franca. As such it is spoken by people from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and serves as the dominant means of international communication. In Eswatini, English is the second official language alongside siSwati and is officially used as the medium of instruction from Grade 5 through to higher education (Ministry of Education and Training, 2011, & 2018).

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theories suggest that acquiring a second language (L2) depends, in part, on the proficiency level a learner has in their first language (L1). This suggests that the higher the proficiency in the learner's L1, the more effectively an individual can acquire L2, and vice versa. Although many tertiary students who speak siSwati as their L1 demonstrate proficiency in it across all the language skills, their academic English writing often falls short. A key challenge for these students is the gap between their linguistic competence (their grammatical knowledge) and their linguistic performance (their ability to apply that knowledge in written discourse). Despite twelve years of exposure to English at the school level, many students embark on tertiary education having not reached advanced proficiency levels in English (Dlamini, 2014, Mlangeni, 2022). One of the most persistent difficulties identified among the students in Eswatini is the proper use of subject-verb agreement (SVA) in academic discourse (Dlamini, 2014; Mthethwa, 2014, 2019). Such errors undermine learners' linguistic competence and diminish the clarity and effectiveness of their discourses.

This paper analyses subject-verb agreement (SVA) errors and their potential underlying causes in written English among Semester 4 undergraduate students majoring in English at the University of Eswatini. The study attempts to answer the question: 'How do siSwati L1 speakers process and produce the English SVA as a second language, and what are the primary challenges they face in acquiring and applying the SVA rules in English?' It is guided by the hypothesis that the acquisition of English SVA by siSwati speakers is not a developmental process but is influenced by low proficiency levels in English and an incorrect understanding of L2 rules rather than L1 interference (Dlamini, 2014). Examining SVA is significant, not only in terms of linguistic theory but also in terms of practical outcomes. Addressing these errors can improve academic performance and professional communication skills later in the students' lives. By identifying patterns in the errors, this study aims to inform targeted grammar instruction and provide support strategies for improving Eswatini students' written accuracy.

1. Contemporary Debates on language pedagogy in higher education

Current debates on language teaching in tertiary institutions in Eswatini centre on several inter-linked issues. First, there is ongoing discussion about the adequacy of English proficiency among incoming university students and the extent to which tertiary institutions should filter admission on the basis of English language grades. For example, some argue that even programmes outside English should require higher English grades because most courses are taught in English and students must therefore be proficient (Mthethwa, 2014). Others counter that such requirements may unfairly disadvantage siSwati-speaking students whose English exposure has been insufficient (Faculty of Science discussion paper on University entry requirements). Second, there is critique of the dominant English-medium instruction (EMI) model in higher education — despite policy

statements promoting siSwati and bilingualism in schooling, actual practice shows English predominance and siSwati marginalisation (Dlamini & Ferreira-Meyers, 2023; Phiri, 2022). Many academics question whether the exclusive use of English as medium of instruction without adequate scaffolding for students whose home language is siSwati undermines equitable access and effective learning. Third, there is a growing call for a national language policy specific to higher education in Eswatini that acknowledges multilingual realities, supports translanguaging, and provides instructional and pedagogical frameworks appropriate for L1 siSwati speakers entering tertiary study (Phiri & Weber, 2025). Finally, debates also take in curriculum and pedagogy: how to integrate mother-tongue support, how to develop academic literacy in English while leveraging the students' L1, and how to design support programmes (such as bridging courses) for students whose English proficiency is weak (Mlangeni, 2022). In sum, the debates focus on balancing international/English medium demands with local linguistic realities, and on how best to support students' transition into the English-medium tertiary environment. It is envisaged that this study will inform those current debates on language teaching in tertiary institutions in Eswatini.

2. Background – The Linguistic Context in Eswatini

Eswatini is a bilingual nation where siSwati, spoken by approximately 90% of the population, serves as the primary language, while English is acquired as a second language. Policy documents from the Ministry of Education and Training—specifically Circular 21/73 and the Education Sector Policies (2011, 2018)—mandate first-language (L1) instruction during the early years of schooling, particularly from Grades 1 to 4. This directive is grounded in the principle of additive bilingualism, which promotes the development of proficiency in both the first and second languages (Dlamini, 2025, forthcoming). Often described as bridging bilingualism, this approach aims to enhance second language (L2) acquisition while preserving learners' linguistic and cultural heritage (Kamwangamalu, 2013; Tiwari, 2024; Ferreira-Meyers & Horne, 2017). According to the policy documents, English is to become the medium of instruction from Grade 5 onwards, in line with global educational trends. However, in practice, English is introduced as early as preschool, creating a divergence between policy and classroom reality. This early exposure to L2 instruction, while potentially beneficial for language familiarity, may also undermine the intended additive bilingualism framework, limiting opportunities for strong L1 development and contributing to the persistent challenges learners face in achieving full proficiency in English.

Research in second language acquisition (SLA) in Eswatini consistently indicates that although English serves as the primary medium of instruction from Grade 5 onwards, learners continue to produce a high frequency of linguistic errors even at advanced stages of learning (Mthethwa, 2014; Dlamini, 2014; Mthethwa, 2019). Given that English proficiency is a fundamental educational objective, admission to the University of Eswatini (UNESWA) requires applicants to obtain at least a C symbol in English (University of Eswatini Calendar, 2024). This requirement implies that students admitted into university programmes, particularly those enrolled in English Language courses, have demonstrated a baseline level of competence in English at the school-exit level. Nevertheless, despite satisfying this entry criterion, many students continue to experience substantial challenges in achieving proficiency in academic writing.

Tables 1 through 4 present the performance profiles of students enrolled in introductory English modules at the University of Eswatini (UNESWA).

Table 1: Marks range in ENG 111 (A Survey of English Grammar) AUGUST 2024 Examination

Symbols Obtained	BEd Secondary	BA JMC	BA HUMS
A	0	0	1
B	0	0	0
C	1	2	2
D	3	6	3
E	8	0	2
F	1	4	3
Total	**13**	**12**	**11**

Table 1 (ENG 111: A Survey of English Grammar, August 2024) shows that across the three programmes (BEd Secondary, BA JMC, and BA Humanities) only one student achieved an "A" – while ten students obtained an "E" and eight "F"s were also recorded.

Table 2: Marks range in ENG 111(Remedial Grammar) 2021 Examination

Symbols Obtained	B.Ed Sec. FT	BEd Sec IDE	BEdPri. FT	BEdPri IDE	BA JMC	BA HUMS FT	BA Hums IDE
A	0	0			0	0	0
B	1	0			0	0	0
C	4	2			2	4	0
D	10	16			12	19	9
E	10	28			33	32	15
F	13	59			30	29	36
Total	**38**	**105**			**77**	**84**	**60**

Table 2 (ENG 111 Remedial Grammar, 2021) displays a high concentration of students in the "E" and "F" grade bands (for example 10, 28, 33, 32 and 15 in "E"; 13, 59,30, 29 and 36 in "F"). The high concentrations in these grades suggest a heavy remedial load.

Table 3: Marks Range in ENG 111(A Survey of English Grammar), 2022 Examinations

Symbols Obtained	B.Ed Sec. FT	BEd Sec IDE	BEdPri. FT	BEdPri IDE	BA JMC	BA HUMS FT	BA Hums IDE
A	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
B	3	1	1	1	0	7	0
C	8	6	0	1	0	10	0
D	10	6	0	0	11	19	4
E	9	11	1	2	8	23	9
F	14	35	0	3	42	51	38
Total	**45**	**60**	**2**	**7**	**61**	**113**	**51**

Table 3 (ENG 111, 2022) again shows that the majority of the cohorts fall in "D", "E" or "F" categories rather than "A", "B" or "C".

Table 4: Marks Range in ENG 113 (Remedial Grammar) August 2024 Examination

Symbols Obtained	BEd Secondary	BA HUMS
A	0	0
B	1	0
C	1	2
D	8	5
E	3	0
F	0	0
Total	**13**	**7**

Table 4 (ENG 113 Remedial Grammar, August 2024) also reflects that very few students attain higher symbols.

The performance statistics presented in Tables 1-4 demonstrate persistent clustering in lower grade-bands across years and modules.As shown, the bulk of students in remedial or introductory English modules continue to obtain "D", "E" or "F" over the years. This suggests that poor performance is not an isolated cohort effect, but an entrenched pattern. Further, as evident in Table 2, very high numbers of students are in "E" and "F" grade bands upon entry. These numbers suggest that significant proportions of entrants to these modules are already struggling at the outset and may require remedial inputs just to reach minimum pass levels. That many still fail indicates that the remedial mechanism may be insufficient. Notably, the data align with national school-level trends for the Examinations Council of Eswatini (ECESWA) – as shown in Table 5, only around one quarter of learners (~25 %) achieve credit (symbols A–C) in English in the EGCSE exams over recent years.

Table 5: Pass/Failure rate in the EGSCE examinations

Year of Examination	Symbol A-C (Credit)	Symbol D-G
2021	25.51%	66.90%
2022	26.66%	65.10%
2023	25.17%	67.49%

Source:https://www.examscouncil.org.sz/upload-centre/subject_performance/EGCSE2023 subject_performance.txt

Table 5 demonstrates that many students arriving at tertiary institutions, UNESWA in particular, have already faced difficulties in achieving strong English credentials at school level. Because students are expected to have "credited" English (symbol C or better) yet still under-perform, this suggests that the "credit" threshold may not reliably indicate readiness for academic English discourse at tertiary level (Mlangeni, 2022).The weak transition from school exit to tertiary proficiency has implications for university-level academic writing and discourse. When large cohorts of students within English modules record low grades, this likely carries over into weaker

performance in their discipline-specific courses (which are taught in English) and may hinder progression, confidence and overall success. In other words, the module performance is symptomatic of broader academic-literacy issues. Therefore, the dataset in Tables 1-5 suggests not just poor performance but the presence of a systemic language-and-literacy bottleneck: students enter UNESWA with limited English academic proficiency despite meeting surface threshold requirements; many require remedial support; yet even with remediation their English module performance remains weak; this under-performance likely links to broader issues of language policy implementation, first-language literacy development, and the transition from school to higher education. Based on the data that point to entrenched challenges in the pathway from school-level English proficiency to tertiary Academic English performance, this study has identified subject-verb-agreement errors that dominate students' writing and investigated the underlying causal factors. This will in turn facilitate the design of targeted instructional interventions and help improve student throughput, academic success and writing accuracy.

2. Literature Review

SVA is a fundamental aspect of English grammar and an essential component of grammatical competence. However, research in SLA consistently indicate a high frequency of errors among non-native English speakers (Dlamini & Meyers,2023 Mthethwa,2014, 2019, Nxumalo, 2016, Magagula, 2021, Rahim & Raj, 2020; Jones & Zhang, 2021; Adekunle & Ajibola, 2016; Zimba & Nyirenda, 2018; Kasule & Tusiime, 2019). Several studies in Eswatini point to systemic factors contributing to weak English performance. For example, although policy positions both siSwati and English as official languages and envisages the use of siSwati in the early years, classroom practice often privileges English—thus marginalising the mother-tongue (Dlamini & Ferreira-Meyers, 2023; Phiri & Weber, 2022). Furthermore, teachers' use of English as the predominant medium of instruction appears to reduce the possibility of effective first-language literacy support, which in turn limits the foundation for stronger English acquisition (Mkhonta, Mkoko, & Mohammed, 2025).

Ellis (2015) defines subject-verb mismatches as errors that occur when the subject and verb in a sentence do not agree in number, person, or tense. Number Agreement Errors occur when a singular subject is paired with a plural verb or vice versa (e.g., "*Domestic workers is not adequately paid" instead of "Domestic workers are not adequately paid").Person Agreement Errors occur when the verb form does not match the subject's person (e.g., "*She fund needy students" instead of "She funds needy students"), and tense Agreement Errors occurwhen the verb tense does not align with the intended meaning or the subject's temporal context (e.g., "*She is went to the market" instead of "She went to the market").Ellis (2015) attributes these mismatches to L1 transfer, and are particularly prevalent among learners whose L1 lacked equivalent grammatical structures (Makoni & Pennycook, 2007).Learners tend to apply the grammatical rules of their first language to the second language; a practice that leads to errors. For siSwati speakers, the rules governing subject-verb agreement in English present unique challenges due to structural differences between the two languages (Mthethwa, 2014). Understanding L1 transfer is relevant to the current study as it highlights how siSwati L1 speakers might transfer siSwati grammatical rules to English, resulting in errors in SVA construction.

Several classroom-based and corpus-style studies conducted in Eswatini point to recurring problems with subject–verb agreement (SVA) in learners of English. The problems are frequently attributed to cross-linguistic influence from siSwati, limited sustained input in English prior to full medium-of-instruction and instructional/practice factors (Dlamini, 2014; Mthethwa, 2014, Nxumalo, 2016).

In her investigation of the impact of siSwati L1 on the acquisition of academic English by tertiary students in Eswatini Dlamini (2014) found that siSwati L1 speakers often struggled with English syntax due to interlingual transfer and limited exposure to English. Further, research on English learning difficulties in Eswatini (Mthethwa, 2014; Nxumalo, 2016) similarly documented how siSwati-English bilinguals often overgeneralized siSwati concord rules, and thus produced systematic SVA errors that fossilized without targeted grammatical instruction. Mthethwa (2019) who analysed university students' writing to identify patterns of morphosyntactic interference from siSwati, reported frequent verb-form errors and mismatches in subject–verb concord, which he attributed to structural transfer from siSwati 'a language that marks agreement through prefixes' to English, where agreement is marked through suffixes. More recent investigations focus on related grammatical domains such as noun-phrase agreement and clause structure. Magagula (2021) found that students' challenges with SVA frequently co-occurred with errors in determiner–noun agreement and tense–aspect forms. This suggests that subject-verb agreement difficulties in Eswatini learners do not occur in isolation but reflect broader interlanguage development patterns.

The literature reviewed in the Eswatini context parallel that of other regions that describe how L1 morphosyntactic structures influence learners' acquisition of English grammar. Kasule and Tusiime (2019) who investigated SVA errors in the written English of Ugandan ESL learners at secondary school level identified common mistakes, such as incorrect agreement with collective nouns, confusion between singular and plural subjects, and errors in complex or embedded sentences. These were attributed to interference from learners' native languages (Luganda and Runyankore) and the challenges of learning English in a non-dominant language environment. Their study proposed practical teaching strategies, including grammar drills and interactive grammar instruction, to address these issues. Likewise, Adekunle and Ajibola (2016) identified common SVA errors among Nigerian ESL learners, such as confusion between singular and plural subjects, difficulties with third-person singular verb forms, and challenges with agreement in complex sentences. They attributed these errors to the influence of learners' first languages (Yoruba and Hausa) and inadequate grammar instruction. Their study recommended enhanced grammar teaching strategies tailored to address these issues in Nigerian schools and universities. Equally, Zimba and Nyirenda (2018) who examined SVA errors in the written English of Zambian secondary school students found that limited exposure to English outside the classroom and insufficient focus on grammar instruction in schools were major contributors to frequent SVA errors. The researchers suggested targeted interventions such as grammar workshops and peer correction activities to improve learners' grammatical accuracy.

At university level, Wahyudi (2012) who examined SVA errors in the writing of first-semester English students at Maulana Malik Ibrahim State Islamic University in Indonesia found that the most frequent errors included omissions, additions, and misinformation. These errors stemmed from both interlingual influences (from the learners' L1) and intralingual factors (within the L2 itself). Also Rahim and Raj (2020) who used a corpus of written essays identified recurring SVA

errors among tertiary-level ESL learners. These included confusion between singular and plural subjects, agreement with collective nouns, and misuse of auxiliary verbs. They recommended targeted grammar exercises and explicit instruction to mitigate these challenges. Further, a longitudinal study by Jones and Zhang (2021) that tracked the development of SVA skills among ESL learners over one year uncovered that despite improvements in overall proficiency, learners continued to struggle with third-person singular forms, irregular verbs, and agreement in embedded clauses, indicating that these issues persist even with increased exposure and instruction.

The literature consistently demonstrated that SVA errors were pervasive among ESL learners, from secondary to tertiary levels. Studies in Nigeria, Zambia, and Uganda identified key contributing factors such as L1 interference, limited exposure to English, and insufficient grammar instruction. Bamgbose (2000) highlighted that sociolinguistic and educational factors, including instructional methods and limited exposure to Standard English exacerbated grammatical challenges in African contexts. The same sentiments were shared by Dlamini (2014) who writing on the impact of siSwati L1 on Academic English, Dlamini (2014) provided a local context for understanding how siSwati L1 influences English acquisition. Dlamini argued that while L1 transfer explained some challenges, it did not fully account for learners' difficulties in achieving grammatical competence. Other factors, such as early educational environments that failed to foster bilingualism, inadequate resources, and peripheral pedagogical practices, also played a significant role. This review underscored the widespread nature of SVA errors among non-native English speakers and their multifaceted causes. By building on this research, the current study adds depth to the discussion of L1 influence in Eswatini and highlights the need for context-specific teaching strategies.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach and employs Contrastive Error Analysis (CEA) as its theoretical framework. CEA is used to systematically identify and explain the differences between the siSwati and English concordial agreement systems that may hinder siSwati L1 tertiary students' acquisition of English subject–verb agreement (SVA). The approach follows the principle that errors can reveal underlying interlanguage processes and L1 transfer (Corder, 1967; James, 1998).

The data were collected from the University of Eswatini (UNESWA), where siSwati is the students' first language and English is the primary medium of instruction. The institution was chosen through purposive sampling, a strategy suitable for qualitative research because it allows the researcher to select information-rich cases relevant to the study's objectives (Patton, 2015). The choice of this institution was also informed by accessibility and established professional networks that facilitated data collection. I administered a short written test and collected student essays, ensuring an efficient and ethical process.

From the collected essays and reflective writings, 55 sentences containing subject–verb agreement errors were extracted and analyzed. This sample size was deemed sufficient because qualitative analysis seeks depth rather than breadth (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The 55 sentences represented all the instances of identifiable SVA errors within the collected scripts, thus providing a complete dataset for this focused inquiry. Since these sentences were deliberately selected for containing

errors, they offered a purpose-built corpus for examining recurrent error patterns and the influence of siSwati syntactic structures on English subject–verb agreement.

Each of the 55 sentences was analyzed to identify the specific type of subject–verb agreement error, such as mismatches in number, person, or tense. Errors were then grouped based on recurring linguistic patterns. To ensure reliability, a second rater—a linguist trained in English grammar and error analysis—independently reviewed the error categorizations. Inter-rater reliability was enhanced through discussion and consensus on any discrepancies (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014). This collaborative process strengthened the consistency and credibility of the analysis.

Ethical standards were observed throughout the research process. Institutional permission was sought and granted prior to data collection. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study, and their participation was voluntary. All student writings were anonymised to safeguard confidentiality, and no identifying information appears in the report.

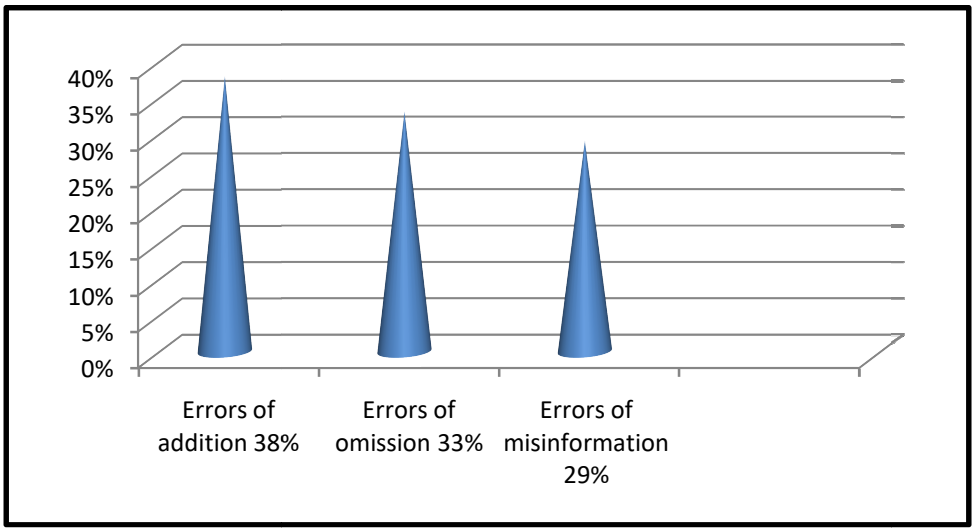
4. Findings

The ENG 214 students were asked either to narrate their views of and experiences regarding the courses that are offered in the English Department or reflect on the academic year 2023/2024. The majority of the reflections expressed frustrations with both the English courses and the academic year. Out of 174 students who sat the test, fifty-five (55) (32%) instances of subject-verb agreement error were identified in the students' writings. The errors revealed three types: errors of addition, omission and misinformation.

6.1 Frequency of errors

Errors of omission were the most frequent as they accounted for 21errors (38%). They were followed by 18 errors of addition (33%) and 16 (29%) misformation errors. These frequencies suggested that while some errors may stem from carelessness or time pressure, others reflect systematic linguistic transfer from siSwati to English (Selinker, 1972). Figure 1 illustrates these proportions.

Figure 1: Statistical representation of Subject-Verb Agreement Errors in an ENG 214 Assessment



6.2 Discussion of results

The distribution of errors indicated that siSwati L1 speakers experienced challenges with morphological marking in English verbs, particularly in contexts where English demanded overt inflectional endings to indicate agreement. Since siSwati uses prefixal concords rather than suffixal inflections (Doke, 1954; Dlamini, 2014; Mthethwa, 2014), learners tended to either omit or overgeneralize the English morpheme /–s/. Thus, error frequency corresponded to the degree of contrast between siSwati and English grammatical systems—a typical case of negative transfer (Lado, 1957). The nature of errors identified is discussed below.

6.2.1 Errors of Addition

This study found that errors of addition were the most prevalent and systematic in the writings of students as they accounted for 38% of all SVA errors. An addition is a type of error "which is characterized by the presence of an item which must not appear in a well-formed utterance" (Dulay, Burt and Krashen, 1982, p. 156). Students committed two types of the errors of addition.

6.2.1.1 Errors of addition with compound and complex subjects Noun Phrases

Students' writing exhibited errors of addition in instances where the subject was a compound or complex noun phrase (NP). Although compound and complex subject NPs coordinated by the conjunction /and/ occasion singular concordial verbs (Greenbaum & Quirk, 1990), students produced sentences such as:

(i) a) *The opening and closure of the institution make<u>s</u> the academic year to drag longer.
b)* Hard-work and dedication, and mainly belief in God ha<u>s</u> guided me through.

The errors in (i) (a) and (b) are systematic and involve compound and complex subject NPs synchronized with third person singular verbs. In both instances the NPs refer to different entities. Greenbaum and Quirk (1990. p. 216) stressed that coordinated NPs require a plural verb even if each conjoin is singular. However, the findings revealed that students interpreted the compound subject as a singular noun phrases and committed agreement issues. It appeared that students

misapplied the rule of proximity and enforced agreement on the NP closest to it thus causing error. The misapplication of the proximity rule indicated a lack of familiarity with subject NPs compound/complex syntactic structure.

Other edition errors were evident in

ii) a) *The essays in English requires a certain structure and style of writing.

b)*They say dreams are seeds of greatness that propels us to greater heights.

The head word (HW) of the subject NP in sentence (ii) (a) is 'essay' and is modified by a prepositional phrase (PP) 'ín English'. The NP éssays in English' comprises two nouns; the head word 'essays' and the object of a preposition 'English'. While the proximity principle states that a verb must agree with the NP that precedes it or closest to it (Greenbaum & Quirk, 1990), the NP /English/ is a prepositional complement thus cannot be the one to occasion concordial agreement. Therefore, since the head noun /essays/ is in the plural form, a plural verb /require/ is requisite to agree with it. And adding the morpheme /-s/ to the verb incorrectly follows the proximity principle. Therefore the errors in (iii) suggested that learners relied on the proximity principle (Greenbaum & Quirk, 1990). The frequency of such errors thus reflected syntactic processing difficulty - when the subject is long or interrupted by clauses, students' working memory failed to track the true agreement trigger. From a contrastive perspective, this overgeneralization also stemmed from siSwati's prefixal concordial system, in which agreement markers are consistently affixed to verbs regardless of subject complexity (Taljaard et al., 1991). Students therefore assumed that morphological marking was obligatory and produced addition errors even in plural contexts.

6.2.1.2 Errors of addition with NPs in the Plural form

Students produced sentences where the subject was plural in structure as evidenced in sentences such as:

(ii) a) * Modules helps us to teach ourselves.
b) *The opening and closure of the institution makes the academic year to drag longer.

The entire subject NPs in example (ii) are in their plural forms and require corresponding verbs in their plural forms. Students synchronized the subject NPs with third person singular verbs thus causing grammatical errors. The systematic nature of the errors of addition reflected learners' tendency to overgeneralize the rule of adding /–s/ to mark agreement. The students recognized that English verbs often required a /–s/ ending but failed to restrict its use to third-person singular contexts. Their reliance on surface analogy demonstrated hypercorrection which itself revealed partial learning rather than random guessing (Corder, 1967).

6.1.2 Errors with complex sentences

Errors of addition were also prominent in complex sentence structures. Complex sentence structures are those that involve intervening clauses that use the relative pronouns 'which' or 'that'. Greenbaum and Quirk (1990) stress that these relative clauses should be followed by verbs those agree with their antecedents. The intervening clauses in the students writing led to

unnecessary /-s/ additions thus creating incorrect subject-verb agreement. For instance, the sentence "They say dreams are seeds of greatness that propels us to greater heights" has a complex object. The relative clause is introduced by the relative pronoun /that/ which refers to its antecedent "dreams" which requires a plural verb. However, the students have incorrectly suffixed the morpheme /-s/ to the base form of the verb in the dependent clause to mark singularity. Similarly, the sentences in (iii)(a-e) below are complex sentences and they all consist of NPs in the intervening (relative) clauses that demand a singular or plural verb if the head noun is in the singular or plural form respectively.

(iii) a) *English has been my favourite subject which I mostly prefers over other subject.
b) *This would result with me saying wrong or putting together words that doesn't express a complete idea.
c) *English courses are challenging because of the word classes which requires classification.
d) I tend to write incorrect vocabulary which then make^ the lecturers to underscore all my assignments.
e) It (English) is a course which require^ a deeper understanding.

The examples in (iii) above show that students seemed confused about which NP the verb should agree with. In (iii) (a), the students had to choose between synchronizing /English/ (3rd person) or /I/ (1st person) with the verb /prefer/. Influenced by the rule of proximity, the student chose /English/. The choice of /English/ indicates a lack of familiarity with syntactic structure involving intervening clauses.

However, a comparison with the siSwati counterparts reveals that the students' sentences are grammatical in their L1. In siSwati both the subject and object NPs have a definitive relationship with the verb(s) in a sentence as evidenced by the subject and object concords that are affixed to the verb stem (Taljaard, et al., 1991, p. 26). Compared with their L1 counterparts, some of the errors of addition reflect a generalization from their native language regarding the formation of SVA with subject NPs. Analogous to English, verbs in siSwati typically agree with the subject in person and number, there is no distinction in the verb in terms of person. Instead the agreement is determined by the prefix of the class of the subject or the object NPs (Doke, 1954; Dlamini, 2014). Doke (1954, p. 47) stresses this distinction when he says; "there is no distinction in the verb in terms of person in siSwati. For instance, if a noun phrase of a particular class begins with a particular prefix, the concord takes the form of the noun prefix" as shown in example (iv) below:

(iv) Ba-ntfwanaba-tsandz-a ema-swidi
CL2- child SC2-like- fv-a CL6- sweet
Children they like sweets.
"Children like sweets'

In example (iv) above, /ba/ is the prefix for class 2 nouns and the /ba/ preceding the verb stem /-tsandz-a/ is the subject concord. Both the prefix and the subject concord are identical in form/structure. In the error of addition, it is evident that students generalize this morpho-syntactic rule to English. Since the plural form of nouns in English generally marked by the plural marker /-s/, students generalize that the plural concord form of the verb should also be marked by the final morpheme /-s/, hence structures such as those in (i), (ii) and (iii). This error suggests that students have formed a false hypothesis that since the morpheme /-s/ is a marker of plurality in noun

phrases; it is also a concordial marker in SVA. Therefore since in siSwati, the subject-verb agreement operates differently, the error of addition can be traced back to the students' first language. According to the Transfer Hypothesis errors occur when learners apply rules from their native language to their second language (Coder, 1957). In this case, subject-verb agreement errors in English arise from L1 interference as "all pronouns, qualifying words, and predicates relating to a noun assume a prefixal element in agreement with that noun, and related in form to its prefix…" (Doke, 1954, p. 47). Therefore, the concordial system in siSwati and the literal translation of the students' examples suggest that the errors of omission and addition can be attributed to some extent to the concordial agreement of NPs and their verbs in siSwati. SiSwati L1 learners fail to adjust verbs for singular/plural subjects in English. This finding means that the students have generalized from their native language regarding the formation of SVA with subject NPs.

6.2 Errors of Omission

Errors of omission were the second most common as they accounted for 33% of the SVA errors in the students' writings and they primarily involved the students' failure to mark the /–s/ on singular verbs. Dulay, Burt and Krashen (1982, p.154) describe an error of omission as one "which is characterized by the absence of an item that must appear in a well-formed utterance." Students committed two types of errors of omission which are common in subjects that are singular.

6.2.1 Errors with lexical verbs

Students tended to omit the morpheme /-s/ marking third person singular in lexical verb stems and paired singular subjects with plural verbs as shown in example (i) (a-c) below:

(v) a) *One wish^ like he was accepted in a different university.
b) *English language need^ more practice.
c) *I was introduced to phonetics, a discipline that study^ the internal structure of letters.

In examples (v) (a-c) above, the base forms of the verbs have a missing singular marker /-s/. All the subjects are in the singular form but have been made to induce lexical verbs that are in their plural forms. The omission of the morpheme /-s/ that is affixed to the base form of a verb to mark singular concordial agreement has thus resulted in error.

6.2.2 Errors with auxiliary verbs

Students also tended to omit the auxiliary verbs that mark singularity before the lexical verb stems as shown in example (vi) below:

(vi) *a) *It ^ very challenging to be an English major at Uneswa* (missing verb "is").

b) *Whatever ^ happening in here* (missing auxiliary "is").

c) *I ^ doing level 2 this year (missing auxiliary "am")

The auxiliary verbs to mark singular concordial agreement with the subject NPs in examples (vi) (a-b) above have been omitted.

The patterns in (v) a-c) and (vi) a-b reflect interlanguage simplification (Selinker, 1972) and morphological under-specification (Ellis, 2008). Learners may omit inflections when they do not carry communicative weight, especially under time constraints (as this was a timed test). The high frequency of omission suggested that morphological marking in English was not yet automatized among ESL learners – a fact consistent with Krashen's (1982) claim that learned grammatical rules often failed to surface in spontaneous writing.

Another factor may be L1 interference: siSwati does not mark person or number on verbs through inflectional suffixes. Hence, English /–s/ marking is not part of their linguistic intuition. Learners therefore perceive it as optional, leading to systematic omission.

6.3 Errors of Misinformation

The Errors of misinformation had the least frequency of occurrence as they accounted for 29% of the SVA errors. Misinformation is an instance where the wrong form of the morpheme or incorrect form of a structure (verb in this case) has been used and renders the sentence faulty (Dulay, Burt and Krashen, 1982, p.158). Misinformation errors involved the incorrect use of auxiliary or lexical verb forms.

6.3.1 Errors with the auxiliary verb /be/

In the sentence /* Following the turbulent events and challenges that <u>was</u> presented by the university academic year.../ students used the incorrect morphological form of the auxiliary /be/ in discourse. In this sentence, the compound NP /the turbulent events and challenges / are modified by the subordinate clause /that <u>was</u> presented by the university academic year / and all together occasion a plural auxiliary verb. However, the student used /was/ instead of /were/ thus committing an error. Since the antecedents are in the plural form, a plural verb was required. It appeared that because of the complexity of the NP, students tempted to treat the antecedents as a single subject and connect it with a singular verb. This means that in more complicated sentences (complex sentences), there are many places where concordial agreement gets confusing.

6.3.2 Errors with the auxiliary verb /have/

As shown in (iv) (a-c) below, students used the wrong form and tense of the verb /have/ in writing.

(a) *My confidence and motivation <u>has</u> always been my major challenges.
(b) *Uneswa FM responsibilities <u>has</u> been competing with my studies.
(c) *The government <u>have</u> promise to sponsor only one intake.

The subject NPs in examples (iv) (a) to (c) are in the plural forms and thus require plural verb forms. However, there has been a mismatch in the use of the auxiliary verbs. In (iv) (a) and (b) /have/ was supposed to precede /always been/ and /been competing/ respectively instead of /has/. In (iv)(c) /has/ synchronizes with the subject NP instead of /have/. Notably these errors are incorrect even in the students' L1 and thus cannot be traced back to it. This means that students' lack of proficiency is consequent to their non-mastery of SVA morphosyntacic rules regarding the use of auxiliary and head verbs in verb phrases. In structures where main verbs are

preceded by auxiliary verbs, the SVA principle requires that the subject NP agrees with the helping verb and the main/head verb converts to the perfect tense (Greenbaum & Quirk, 1990).

6.3.3 Errors with abstract or indefinite subjects

The results show that students have challenges aligning abstract nouns and indefinite pronouns with appropriate concords. The sentences in (v) below illustrate this challenge.

(vii) (a) *This usually make^ me to be unable to grasp all the information.
(b) *This challenge result to another challenge."
(c) *The Department of English have proven to be highly qualified.

The sentences in (v) show that the students struggled to determine whether the abstract subject is singular or plural. For (v) (a) students could not differentiate between the demonstratives /this/ and /these/ hence the error. In (v)(b), /challenge/ is an abstract noun and in (v)(c), /The Department of English/ is indefinite as it does not refer to any person in particular. The students' failure to determine whether the abstract subject is singular or plural reflects the complexity of interpreting abstract or indefinite subjects in English.

The systemic errors identified above reflect students' confusion about the syntactic hierarchy between auxiliaries and main verbs. While siSwati uses a consistent concordial prefix, English separates agreement marking from the auxiliary and redistributes it across the verb phrase. Additionally, misinformation errors with abstract or indefinite subjects (e.g.,*The Department of English have proven to be highly qualified) reveal semantic interference. Students interpret collective or abstract nouns as plural entities, leading to mismatch between grammatical and notional agreement (Biber et al., 1999). However, on a positive note, the relatively lower frequency of misinformation errors suggests that students partially understand auxiliary use but fail to apply tense and agreement rules simultaneously.

6.5 Summary Findings

Overall, the pattern of SVA errors suggests the following hierarchy of difficulty: Omission (most frequent) → Addition (moderate) → Misinformation (least frequent). This hierarchy corresponds to the learners' developmental stages and to contrasts between siSwati and English morphology. Omission errors dominate because they involve non-salient morphemes, which second-language learners typically acquire last (Dulay, Burt & Krashen, 1982). Addition errors arise from overgeneralization and L1 transfer, while misinformation reflects syntactic complexityand confusion over auxiliary structures. In summary, siSwati-speaking learners' subject–verb agreement challenges stem from (i) L1 transfer, (ii) limited automatization of English inflectional morphology, and (iii) processing constraints during complex sentence construction.

7. Factors responsible for Subject-Verb Agreement errors

This study identified five (5) interrelated factors responsible for SVA errors- interlingual transfer, intralingual factors (including overgeneralization and incomplete rule application), incomplete understanding of grammatical rules, test anxiety and time constraints, and carelessness. These

factors collectively explain the persistence of omission, addition, and misinformation errors in students' writing.

7.1 Interlingual Transfer

Students' writing exhibited interlingual errors - the influence of a learner's first language (L1) on their production of the target language (L2).This study found strong evidence of interference from siSwati in the students' English writing. In siSwati, subject–verb agreement is governed by a prefixal concord system that marks agreement through noun-class prefixes attached to verbs (Doke, 1954; Taljaard et al., 1991).

For example, in the siSwati sentence:

Ba-ntfwanaba-tsandz-a ema-swidi

CL2-child SC2-like-fv CL6- sweet

Children like sweets

the subject and verb are linked through identical class prefixes (ba-), rather than inflectional suffixes as in English.

Therefore, students appeared to transfer this structural pattern to English, overgeneralizing the use of inflectional markers like /–s/ or omitting them altogether, depending on whether they perceived the concord as prefixal or suffixal. Consequently, they produce errors such as: /*The essays in English requires a certain structure and style of writing./ Wang (2010) made a similar finding among Mandarin L1 learners of English. He found that Mandarin L1 learners of English transferred forms from Mandarin to English.

Wang and findings of this study highlight how L1 transfer can lead to errors in SVA construction and align with the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (Lado, 1957) and the Transfer Hypothesis (Selinker, 1972), which posit that differences between L1 and L2 structures predict areas of difficulty. The influence of siSwati's concordial morphology thus explains many of the systematic addition and omission errors observed.

7.2 Intralingual Influences

Students' writing exhibited intralingual errors. While interlingual transfer accounted for many errors, others originated within the target language itself, reflecting intralingual rather than cross-linguistic factors. Intralingual errors arise when learners overgeneralize rules, apply them incompletely, or form false hypotheses about L2 grammar (Richards, 1971; Ellis, 2008).

For instance, the sentence: *Geography have a course that deals with information systems reveals overgeneralization of plural verb forms and incomplete mastery of irregular verbs. Students internalize that plural subjects require plural verbs but fail to differentiate between lexical regularity and agreement morphology. This misunderstanding stems from partial exposure to English grammar rules without deep metalinguistic awareness.

Moreover, false hypotheses emerge when students assume that structural features of one rule extend to others (Dulay, Burt & Krashen, 1982). For example, after learning that nouns add /–s/ for plurality, students falsely conclude that verbs should also consistently take /–s/ to mark plural subjects. Such intralingual misapplications are evidence of a developing interlanguage system—a dynamic linguistic stage where learners formulate evolving grammatical rules that diverge from both L1 and L2 norms (Selinker, 1972).

7.3 Incomplete Understanding of Grammatical Rules

The findings further revealed that students demonstrated limited grammatical awareness of SVA rules. They often memorize patterns mechanically without understanding their underlying logic. This results in inconsistent application such as using correct forms in simple contexts but committing errors in complex or compound constructions.

As Krashen (1982) observes, conscious knowledge of grammar (learned competence) must be accompanied by subconscious acquisition (acquired competence) for learners to apply rules accurately in spontaneous production. Similarly, Razman et al. (2023) emphasize that a solid grasp of grammar enhances both communicative efficiency and syntactic precision. Students who merely "learn" grammatical forms without internalizing them fail to generalize them appropriately in discourse, resulting in addition or misinformation errors. According to the Processability Theory (Pienemann, 1998), the acquisition of syntactic structures in L2 is developmental. However, the results have challenged this theory by showing that siSwati L1 speakers struggle with the English subject-verb agreement across all educational levels, and suggest that external factors like teaching quality and proficiency levels play a more significant role. This connection underscores the need for targeted interventions in English grammar instruction.

7.4 Test Anxiety and Time Constraints

Another key factor identified was test anxiety and the pressure of timed writing conditions. During assessments, students frequently wrote under stress and limited time, which compromised their ability to proofread and monitor grammatical accuracy. Omission errors such as:

viii) a) *I ^ doing level 2 this year (missing 'am')
b) *It ^ very challenging to be an English major at UNESWA (missing 'is')

are likely performance errors rather than competence gaps (Corder, 1967).

Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) show that foreign language anxiety correlates strongly with reduced accuracy and fluency. Similarly, MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) found that anxiety impairs working memory and inhibits linguistic retrieval, leading to omission of grammatical markers during production. Further, evidence by Tóth (2010) and Rashidi and Hosseini (2011) confirm that test-induced stress causes "monitor failure," where learners skip morphological inflections even if they know the rules.

Similarly, student feedback in this study also suggested that some respondents felt "rushed" during the test and "did not have time to check grammar." These claims support the interpretation that many SVA errors were unintentional and situational induced.

7.5 Carelessness and Editing Negligence

A smaller proportion of errors resulted from carelessness and failure to revise written work. Students often left their drafts unedited, leading to avoidable errors of omission or misformation. As Richards (1971) notes, not all errors are linguistic - some reflect attitudinal factors such as motivation and attention to detail. Since the students felt rushed, they did not find time to edit their work. Thus, encouraging reflective writing and revision habits could therefore reduce such incidental errors.

8. Strategies to Address SVA Errors in Students' Writing

Given the identified error sources, a multi-dimensional pedagogical approach is required to strengthen students' SVA competence and reduce fossilized error patterns.

8.1 Targeted Grammar Instruction

Lecturers should design focused grammar lessonsthat explicitly teach subject–verb agreement patterns, including irregular verbs and exceptions. Interactive activities—such as sentence editing, error-spotting, and mini-quizzes can promote engagement and reinforce learning (Ellis, 2008). Lecturers could structure feedback sessions that address specific student errors are crucial for noticing, a key process in L2 development (Schmidt, 1990).

8.2 Contextual Writing Practice

Students could be encouraged to write regularly within authentic academic tasks. This could help them apply SVA rules meaningfully. Integrating process writing approaches such as planning, drafting, revising, and peer review fosters metalinguistic reflection and sustained accuracy. Collaborative peer editing allows students to identify and correct SVA errors collectively, promoting output-based learning (Swain, 1985).

8.3 Incorporating L1 Awareness

Lecturers can leverage students' L1 linguistic knowledge by comparing siSwati and English SVA systems explicitly. Contrastive analysis activities—such as translating siSwati sentences into English—can help students recognize where interference occurs and how to avoid it. Raising L1 awareness supports cross-linguistic metalinguistic consciousness, which aids rule internalization (Odlin, 1989).

8.4 Error Analysis and Self-Monitoring Exercises

Using error analysis tasksin class enables students to identify and understand their recurring mistakes. Encouraging learners to classify their own errors (addition, omission, and misinformation) promotes self-regulation and long-term accuracy (James, 1998). Such reflective activities align with constructivist pedagogy, where learners become active participants in their language development.

8.5 Exposure to Standard English Input

Given that the University of Eswatini currently lacks native English-speaking lecturers, students' exposure to authentic grammatical models is limited. According to Blommaert (2010), this results in reliance on peripheral English norms, which may not align with standard SVA usage. To mitigate this, students should be encouraged to read authentic English materials (academic texts, novels, reputable news outlets) and listen to native English content (podcasts, lectures, documentaries). This exposure reinforces natural syntactic patterns and enhances intuitive grasp of agreement structures.

8.6 Addressing Test Anxiety

Finally, to reduce performance-induced errors, educators should help students manage test anxiety through supportive classroom practices such as low-stakes writing tasks, time management training, and constructive feedback rather than punitive grading. Research shows that a low-anxiety environment enhances linguistic performance and accuracy (Krashen, 1982; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994).

9. Conclusion and Implications

This study examined subject-verb agreement (SVA) errors in the writings of Semester 4 English majors at the University of Eswatini. It revealed that errors of addition, omission, and misinformation were prevalent, with errors of addition being the most systematic, reflecting significant L1 interference from siSwati. While factors such as limited exposure to Standard English, incomplete grammatical knowledge, and test-related pressures contributed to errors, the primary source of difficulty was learners' overgeneralization of siSwati concordial rules to English, particularly in pluralisation and complex sentence structures. These findings contribute to ESL research by illustrating how L1 transfer shapes persistent error patterns in African tertiary contexts and by reinforcing the need for context-sensitive teaching strategies. Practically, the results suggest that improving grammatical accuracy requires a multi-faceted approach, combining targeted grammar instruction, writing exercises that incorporate L1 awareness, structured error analysis, and consistent exposure to authentic English texts, thereby enhancing both SVA competence and overall academic writing proficiency.

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Bio-note:

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