

Investigating Subject-Verb Agreement Errors among Iraqi Secondary School Students in Malaysia

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Abstract

Grammatical errors are one of the major difficulties faced by second language learners. Among the most common types of grammatical errors are subject-verb agreement errors. This study aimed at investigating the frequency of such subject-verb agreement errors among thirty (30) Iraqi secondary school students. It also aimed at investigating the prevalent type of errors and the causes off such errors. Adopted task and questionnaire served as the instrument of the study. it was found that subject-verb agreement errors are frequent among the participants. The verb be was found to be the most contributor to subject-verb agreement errors. Interlingual and intralingual transfer were the main causes of such errors.

Keywords: subject-verb agreement; errors; Iraqi students; intralingual transfer; interlingual transfer

1. Introduction

1.1 Background to the Study

So far discrepancies exist between any two languages, in particular, when languages belong to different language families. One example of languages that have such discrepancies is English and Arabic; Arabic is a Semitic language, while English is an Indo-European language. Thus, there is much discrepancy and contrast between the two languages in respect to syntax, morphology and phonology (Na'ama, 2011). This poses difficulty for Arab EFL learners to learn or master the English grammatical system.

Arabic, unlike English does not have a rule for the arrangement of the subject and verb. In Arabic, there are two basic sentence types that can determine syntax: nominal and verbal, whereby in the nominal type, sentences may not contain a verb at all or contains a verb after the subject. However, in the verbal sentence type the verb precedes the subject (El-Shishiny, 1990).

Moreover, L2 writing can be seen as the final product of a learner's command of grammatical and lexical knowledge (Hyland, 2003). Thus, writing in one's L2 is comparatively more challenging than writing in L1 because a learner's linguistic knowledge and writing strategies in the second language are less well-developed (Rogers, 2003). L2 learners, on the other hand, need to go through the process of learning to write and learning English simultaneously. Therefore, L2 learners face many difficulties in learning English, especially in terms of grammar.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

One of the most grammatical problems for Arab EFL learners of English is subject-verb agreement. So far many studies have been conducted to investigate such kind of problem. For example, Marzuki and Zainal (2004) investigated the common errors produced by Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) students in report writing. They analyzed the errors of writing reports in an examination situation and found that the most frequent error was subject-verb agreement with 95.5% occurrence. Similarly, Kambel (1980) in his study of the Sudanese freshmen university students found that subject verb agreement as one of the common errors which students make. Khuwaileh and Shoumalia (2000), likewise, found that tense errors are among the common errors made by Jordanian students.

Students need to clearly write what they want to convey in order to transmit their messages effectively to the receiver (Nayan & Jusoff, 2009). However, grammatical errors or difficulties usually contribute to lack of competent or effective communication, either verbally or written. One of the common problems among Arab students, as discussed above, is the subject verb agreement. Thus, such kind of problem necessitates a call for understanding the problem, and the likely causes behind it. Iraqi students who live in Malaysia are hypothesized to have wider exposure to English through their practice of English in Malaysia with their non-Arabic-speaking friends, and they are expected to have less subject verb agreement errors. Therefore, this study attempts to investigate the of subject verb agreement errors among the Iraq secondary school students.

1.3 Research Objectives

This study aims to explore one of the grammatical aspects of problems in written English among Iraqi secondary school students. This study, specifically, aims to:

1. Identify the frequency of subject verb agreement errors among the Iraqi secondary school students in Malaysia
2. Identify the most common type of the subject verb agreement errors among the Iraqi secondary school students in Malaysia
3. identify causes of subject verb agreement errors among the Iraqi secondary school students in Malaysia

1.4 Research Questions:

Based on the on the objective mentioned above, the following questions were formulated:

1. How frequent are subject verb agreement errors among the Iraqi secondary school students in Malaysia.
2. What is the prevalent type (s) of subject verb agreement errors among the Iraqi secondary school students?
3. What are the causes of subject verb agreement errors among the Iraqi secondary school students in Malaysia

2. Literature Review

2.1 Importance of English

English writing is an important language in the educational setting of higher education institutions due to its being the medium of instruction (Al-Khuwaileh & Shoumali, 2000). English is the most widely spoken language in the world by native and nonnative speakers (Fatemi, 2008). English is the language widely used in diplomacy, news and the different fields of information and knowledge

2.2 Tense and Aspect in English

English represents a verb in its own systematic way. For example, a finite verb carries both tense and aspect, whereby the tense indicates the time an action occurs in, i.e., present, past, or future. An example of tense is the present tense of the verb *to eat*, which is *eat*, while the past tense is *ate*, and the future tense is *will eat*. As for the aspect, it shows whether an action happens habitually, continuously, or repeatedly (Longman Group, 1995). Put clearly, there are four aspects in English, that is, simple (or zero aspect), progressive, perfect, and their combination, perfect progressive (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999, p. 110).

3.3 Copula in English

Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) consider the verb “be” main task is serving as the copula in English, whereby it links the subject of a sentence with a predicate, which can be a noun or an adjective (p. 54). For example, in a sentence such as “He is a teacher”. The verb *be* links the subject with the noun. The verb “be” has many representations and forms in English, i.e., *am*, *is*, *are*, *was*, *were*, *be*, *being*, and *been*. Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) add that the verb *be* is the most frequent verb in English, and it has more distinct forms in regards to person, number, and tense than any other verb in English (p. 54). One major difference between the grammatical system of English and Arabic is that Arabic has a pro-drop, whereas English does not have such a characteristics. For example, in Arabic, a verb may be dropped from a sentence without distorting the meaning. In English, we say “Ahmed is clever”. However, its Arabic counterpart is “Ahmad clever”.

2.4 Causes of Writing Errors

It is established that writing is one of the most difficult skills in writing, even writing in one’s first language. Thus, writing in an L2 is more challenging, and is not likely to be achieved unless great effort is exerted. There many factors which contribute to boosting such a problem. One of the prominent problems which aggravate the difficulty in writing is lack of mastery of English grammatical rules. These difficulties in grammar or in writing, in general, are caused by many factors. James (1998) identified three causes of errors in relation to L2. These categories of errors are interlingual, intralingual, and induced errors.

Interlingual errors are one main cause of problems in writing (Cedar, 2004; Chen & Huang, 2003; Collins, 2002; Jarvis, 2000; Jiang, 1995; Liu, 1998). Such interference of mother tongue is what is termed as ‘interlingual’ errors. Sometimes, learners commit errors due to generalizations established in the mind of a learner due to the effect of L1, and due to insufficient exposure to the target language (Richards, 1971). Put differently, learners may try to derive rules which are beyond to the information or knowledge they were exposed to; these rules are likely not to belong to a learner’s L1 or L2 (Richards, 1971). For example, they may produce deviant or ill- formed sentences by erroneously applying their knowledge of TL rules and structures to new situations. There are five types of interlingual transfer. They are transfer of training, transfer of strategies of second language

learning, transfer of strategies of second language communication, and overgeneralization of TL linguistic material (Selinker, 1974). However, Corder (1974) identified three sources of errors, that is, language transfer, overgeneralization or analogy, & methods or materials used in the teaching (teaching-induced error)

Intralingual errors are errors which occur due to basically two types of errors. The first type is “learning strategy based errors”, while the second type is “communication-strategy-based errors”. Learning strategy errors include errors such as false analogy, misanalysis, incomplete rule application, exploiting redundancy, overlooking co-occurrence restrictions, hypercorrection (monitor overuse), and overgeneralization or system simplification (James, 1998). As for communication strategy-based errors, they result from holistic strategies: e.g. approximation and language switch, and analytic strategies such as circumlocution (expressing the concept indirectly, by allusion rather than by direct reference). In short, intralingual errors mostly result from faulty or partial learning of the target language rather than language transfer (Keshavarz, 2003, p. 62; Fang & Jiang , 2007, p. 11)

The third type or cause of error as mentioned by James (1998) is induced errors. Induced errors occur as a result of classroom situation. They include material induced errors, teacher-talk induced errors, exercise-based induced errors, errors induced by pedagogical priorities, and look-up errors. As it is clear, this type of error is basically due to incorrect strategies used in classroom.

Similarly Brown (2000) argues that there are two main causes of errors, that is, interlingual errors and intralingual errors. Interlingual errors are those errors that are traceable to first language interference; they are attributable to negative interlingual transfer. Kavaliauskiene (2009) argues that interlingual transfer or transfer of errors may occur due to lack of L2 knowledge on the part of a learner, or due to shortage in the attentional capacity that is required to activate the appropriate second language areas of knowledge.

Having discussed the negative transfer, it is noteworthy to mention that transfer can be either positive and negative . Positive transfer occurs when the structure of the two languages is similar, whereas negative transfer mostly occurs when the structure of the two languages is different (Wilkins, 1972, p. 199).

All in all grammatical errors in L2 are systematic and occur to effect or interference of L1, or to other factors. Understanding these errors, and the contexts in which they occur, can be helpful to grammar checking systems (Lee & Sneff, 2008).

Corder (1967) classifies errors into two types: performance errors and competence errors. The performance errors are made when learners are tired or hurried, and thus they are not serious because they are not inherent. The competence errors are more serious because they result from improper learning..

One of the characteristics that are shared by English and Arabic is overgeneralization. Overgeneralization mostly occurs when a speaker has acquired rules about morphology, without being informed about the exceptions to those rules. The inflection of verbs also suffers from such problem of overgeneralization. For example, to change from the infinitive to past tense in English, the morpheme *ed* is added to the verb; however, there are exceptions, i.e. the past tense of irregular

verbs (Fromkin et al., 2011). Differently, in Arabic, the morpheme ا , [a] is added to an infinitive at the beginning of the word to change it to first person present tense. However, there are Arabic words that already begin with [a] and are thus inflected by changing the vowel segment in the middle of the word (Al-Baldawi & Saidat, 2011).

2.5 Previous Studies

So far many studies investigated the grammatical errors among nonnative speakers of English, mostly without a focus on one type of errors. For example, Sawalmeh (2013)

examined the errors in a corpus of 32 essays written by 32 Arabic-speaking Saudi learners of English. He conducted his study on thirty-two students from Preparatory Year Program at University of Ha'il. The findings of the study revealed that students committed ten common errors, namely, verb tense, word order, subject/verb agreement, pronouns, spellings, capitalization, prepositions, articles, double negatives and sentence fragments. This study also revealed that there is interference from the mother tongue, which caused the errors to occur. However, his study did not highlight the most common error.

Similarly, Al-Buainain (2002) analyzed the errors that existed in 40 exam scripts of the first Writing Course in Qatar University. She found that students committed systematic and classifiable errors. She, similar to Sawalmeh (2013) found that students made errors in relation to tense, subject verb agreement, articles, modifiers, and prepositions.

Tan (2008) conducted a study on 95 second year non-English majors of Kun Shan University. The error analysis of the study showed that the top four most commonly made errors were word choice, verb form, missing subject and verb tense. According to Tan, these errors were due to limited vocabulary size, poor grammar knowledge and interference from first language. Subject verb agreement errors made up 4.3 %.

Maros et al. (2007) conducted a study on Form one students from different six schools to investigate the factors which may contribute to inhibition of acquiring English as a second language. The findings of the study showed that students suffer from serious grammatical incompetence. There are many errors in their writings. Among the common grammatical errors were found are article, subject verb agreement and the use of copula.

In his study on Palestinian EFL learners, Mourtaga (2010) found that lack of practice was the main cause of the poor writing of the students.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study is a quantitative study. A quantitative design is deemed proper for studies which seek to identify statistical numbers. This study is a quantitative study because it explains phenomena by collecting numerical data that are analyzed using mathematically based methods. Creswell (2007) identify quantitative research as the type that requires statistical numbers.

3.2 Subjects

Thirty (30) students from the Iraqi Secondary School in Kuala Lumpur constitute the sampling of the current study. This size of sampling was selected based on Creswell's (2007) recommendation that a sample size should not be less than thirty units in a quantitative study.

3.3 Instruments

Subject verb agreement task adopted from Khudhayer (2010), and a questionnaire adopted from Hourani (2008) were used as instruments for the study.

An adopted questionnaire was used to test students' knowledge of the subject verb agreement. The questionnaire basically tests the verbs "be", and "have", and present simple tense. Internal validity for the questionnaire was checked.

3.4 Data Collection Procedures

The data were collected in Iraqi Secondary School in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The researchers had the students sign consent forms, and told all the students that the participation was voluntary. In addition, the researcher told all the participants that their answers will be kept private and that these answers will only be used for this research purpose. After, that the researcher administered the questionnaires and gave students enough time to answer the questionnaire items. At the end, the questionnaires were collected and the participants were thanked for their participation.

3.4 Data Analysis

SPSS software will be used to test the frequency of errors.

4. Findings

This section provides an analysis of the data collected using a subject verb agreement task and students' perception of the difficulties faced in writing questionnaire. The SPSS was used to analyze data.

4.1. The Subject Verb Agreement Task Analysis

4.1.1 Frequency of Errors

The first research question aimed at addressing the frequency of subject verb agreement errors among the Iraqi secondary school students in Malaysia. Descriptive statistics using SPSS was conducted to address such question. The following table illustrates the result.

Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Subject verb errors	30	8	17	12.97	2.157
Valid (listwise)	N 30				

As seen from the table, the mean value and standard deviation are ($M= 12.97$, $Std= 2.157$). This indicates high frequency of subject verb agreement errors. These findings are in line with the previous literature. A total of 487 errors were found among the participants, which is close from 50% of the total items required to be answered by the whole participants. For example, Al-Buainain (2002) found that grammatical errors are frequent among Qatari students. Among the grammatical errors found by Al- Buainain (2002) are the subject verb agreement errors. Students, in the current study, made many subject-verb agreement errors which will be discussed soon.

4.1.2 Prevalent Errors

The second research question was about the prevalent type (s) of subject verb agreement errors among the Iraqi secondary school students. Based on manual data analysis, it was found that the verb be agreement errors contributed to the highest number of values (N=283), whereas present simple tense agreement errors was the next in frequency (N=109). As for the verb have agreement errors, they constituted 95 occurrences. Thus, it seems that the verb be and the present simple tense are the most prevalent types of errors among the Iraqi secondary school students.

These findings are consistent with some of literature that discusses such kind of problems among nonnatives. For example, Maros (2007) found that the use of the verb be is among the common problems among Malaysian students. This also highlights the problem of the verb “have” and the present simple tense errors problem.

4.1.3 Causes of Errors

Two main causes were identified as sources of errors, which are interlingual and intralingual errors. As discussed earlier and based on Selinker (1974: 120), there are five different strategies that are adopted by learners. These five strategies result from interlanguage sources of errors.

4.1.3.1 Interlingual Transfer

In relation to the current research, interlingual transfer errors occur due to the effect of L1. Although, these errors are assumed to exist at the beginning of second language learning, it appeared in among the secondary school students. Another kind of errors is a result of overgeneralization of TL rules and semantic features. For example students think that since “s” is added to mark the plural noun, it can also mark the plural verb. Thus, they add “s” to the verb when the subject is plural, whereas they omit such “s” when the subject is singular. For example, many of the participants made errors such as: no one except his own supporters *agrees* with him.

4.1.3.2 Intralingual Transfer

Another cause and source of errors is intralingual transfer. Such a kind of errors result from the language system of the target language. Learner may derive rules which neither belongs to their mother tongue nor the target language (Richards, 1971, p. 6). An example of such a kind of error is: A large number of people *has* applied for the job. Such kind of use of “has” instead of “have” suggest an interlingual transfer, whereby learners relate the final inherent “s” of the verb to the “s” added to the present simple ending in the case of the third person singular.

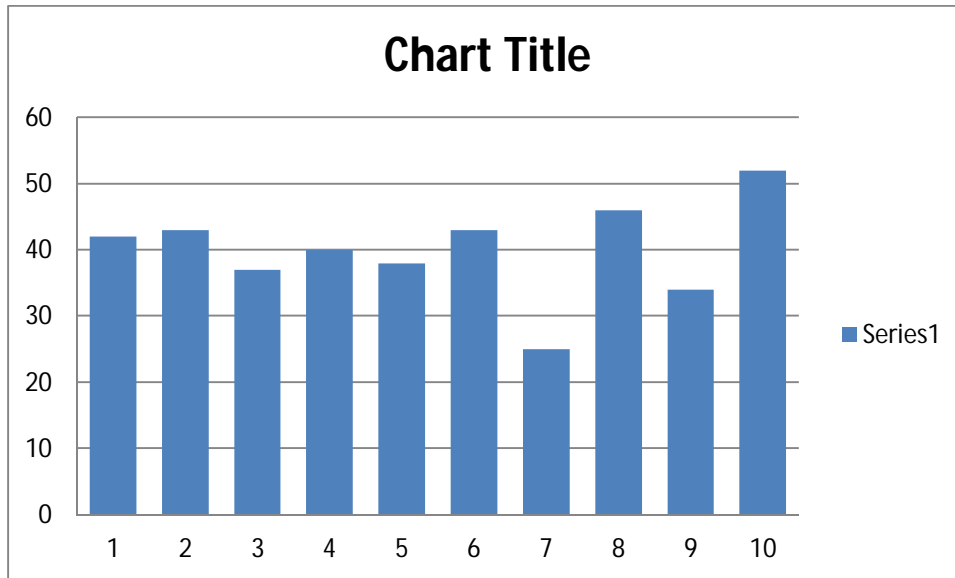
4.2 Students' Perception of their Writing Difficulties

A self-reporting questionnaire was used to understand how students relate their writing problems in general. The questionnaire asked the students to rate the cause of difficulty from never to always. The items which were rated in the interview are:

1. The teaching methods in writing
2. The text book
3. Lack of writing activities and homework.
4. The incomprehensibility of grammar rules
5. The incomprehensibility of mechanics of writing
6. Mother tongue interference
7. Lack of motivation

8. Lack of vocabulary
9. Teacher's presentation of grammar is NOT clear or understandable
10. Teachers are not aware of the problem of subject verb agreement among students, and not always offer help their students

The following graph indicates the results.



As seen from the graph, teachers' unawareness of the problem of subject verb agreement among students, and not always offering help to their students was found to be the most difficulty reason for students' perception of writing problems. The second reason was lack of vocabulary, as students reported that lack of vocabulary is one of the reasons of difficulty in writing. The text book was found to be the third reason of difficulty among students in writing.

5. Conclusion

There are many grammatical problems that Iraqi secondary school students face. Among these grammatical problem is subject verb agreement. Subject verb agreement was found to be one of the major problems among the Iraqi students. Most errors occur to interlingual or intralingual errors. Future studies are recommended to investigate other grammatical problems, and provide models that can serve as solution for such problems.

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