

Subject-Verb Agreement Poses Problem in The Usage of Spanish Language among Universiti Sains Malaysia Undergraduates

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Abstract

Foreign languages are vital worldwide since decades ago and they remain competitive in global workforce. Malaysian undergraduates are offered a lot of options to be enrolled in foreign language classes during their university study period. One of the foreign languages available is Spanish language subject. Malaysian undergraduates who were taking Spanish language in Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) faced problem when applying verb conjugation in their writing tasks. Thus, this study will provide an insight on why the undergraduates face such issue and also the comparison of subject-verb agreement use in Malay, Chinese and English language as well as the problems in the use of verbs conjugation in Spanish language subject by the undergraduates. For better comprehension of the language structure, it is recommended that the Malaysian undergraduates to be taught with the targeted language itself without interference of their respective mother tongue.

Keyword:

Conjugation, Spanish language, Malaysian undergraduates, interference of first language

1. Introduction

Foreign languages are languages that are not native to particular people. There are a lot of research about second language acquisition, however, it is not the same as foreign language acquisition. Foreign languages are also considered languages that are not used in the specific region. There are thousands of foreign languages in the world, however the common foreign languages in Malaysia are Korean, Japanese, Arabic, French, Spanish, German, Russian, etc. Spanish language is one of the most used languages in the world (Rankin, 2023). Learning a foreign language is not easy. In Malaysia, Chinese, English and Malay language are the principal languages. For some of the Malaysians, there are difficulties to learn a European language.

1.1 Spanish Language

Spanish language or Castilian (*castellano*) where it is called standard Spanish, is an official language of 21 countries and is widely spoken throughout the world. The majority speakers of Spanish language reside in Spain and Latin America.

Stewart (2003) notes that Spanish language serves as an official language in Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Puerto Rico, Uruguay and Venezuela. There are also some places where the Spanish language has been used as a co-official and optional language, at Belize, Philippines, United States, etc. It is estimated that more than 440 million people speak Spanish as a native language and this number is expanding.

1.2 Brief Introduction of Spanish Language Characteristics and Structure

In Spanish language, the grammar and structure of Spanish language are distinctive from other languages and it has been considered as a non-easy language in foreign language acquisition. It is because there are many rules in this language as well as there are many tenses of grammar, for instance, there are present, past, future, conditional, subjunctive, etc. Under every tense, every verb has its own conjugation.

In the book of Bruge (2006), there are interpretation of number and gender features in the usage of nouns and adjectives. The gender and number features have to have accordance with the nouns given. Also, the structure is the existence of a subject followed by a verb and an adjective or an object. For example:

The car is beautiful. (*El coche es bonito.*) [Kereta cantik] [车很美丽]

However, there are some exceptions. The example is shown as below:

The student and the student (*El estudiante y la estudiante*) [pelajar] [学生]

In this sample, the noun is neutral, and article is used to determine the gender in Spanish language while other languages do not make any difference.

Spanish language has also other features, like the demonstrative nouns.

Demonstrative Nouns			
Spanish language	English language	Malay language	Chinese language
<i>este</i>	<i>this</i>	<i>ini</i>	这个
<i>estos</i>	<i>these</i>	<i>ini</i>	这个
<i>esta</i>	<i>this</i>	<i>ini</i>	这个
<i>estas</i>	<i>these</i>	<i>ini</i>	这个
<i>ese</i>	<i>that</i>	<i>itu</i>	那个
<i>esos</i>	<i>that</i>	<i>itu</i>	那个
<i>esa</i>	<i>that</i>	<i>itu</i>	那个
<i>esas</i>	<i>that</i>	<i>itu</i>	那个
<i>aquel</i>	<i>that</i>	<i>itu</i>	那个
<i>aquellos</i>	<i>that</i>	<i>itu</i>	那个
<i>aquella</i>	<i>that</i>	<i>itu</i>	那个
<i>aquellas</i>	<i>that</i>	<i>itu</i>	那个

From the table, it can be understood that a simple meaning of “this” and “that” in English, Chinese and Malay language, there are 12 different terms to be considered in Spanish language when applying in a sentence.

According to Vasque (2007) in his article, he found out the Malaysian Chinese students’ problems in verbs conjugation, the main reasons are individual aspects or the influence of linguistic input. In the research, he stated that students have a tendency to conjugate a verb according to their instinct from their first learning experience, which is overgeneralization. For example, *yo pueno* instead of *yo pongo*, it is because the first thing that students learn is always in their memory with a clear image. However, he also mentioned that the meaning is still there even though the conjugation is wrong. At the same time, some tenses regarding the Spanish grammar have been tested on the students.

According to Husain (2011), he has compared the conjugation of verbs in Spanish language and Malay language. *Ser* and *estar* are a problem for the students. He has applied translation method to execute the research. From the study of Vasque (2007) and Husain (2011), there is a same problem resulting in their research, which is the students tend to apply the conjugation of verb in first person singular for every pronoun.

Compared to Malay, English, Chinese, Spanish language is known as grammatical gender. Grammatical gender is categorising that noun doesn’t naturally match up sometime, because the use of gender in Spanish language is prominent for non-living things. There is no standard classification for nouns and genders. At the same time, the conjugation demands a lot of memorisations.

1.3 Brief Introduction of Spanish Language Grammar: Subject-Verb Agreement / Verb Conjugation

Conjugation of verbs in Spanish is a variation of forms in a verb. It is a process of changing verbs according to the subjects. A guide to learn conjugation for -AR, -ER and -IR.

Verbs/Pronouns	<i>estudiar</i>	<i>aprender</i>	<i>abrir</i>
<i>yo</i>	<i>estudio</i>	<i>aprendo</i>	<i>abro</i>
<i>tú</i>	<i>estudias</i>	<i>aprendes</i>	<i>abres</i>
<i>él / ella / usted</i>	<i>estudia</i>	<i>aprende</i>	<i>abre</i>
<i>nosotros/-as</i>	<i>estudiamos</i>	<i>aprendemos</i>	<i>abrimos</i>
<i>vosotros/-as</i>	<i>estudiáis</i>	<i>aprendéis</i>	<i>abrís</i>
<i>ellos / ellas / ustedes</i>	<i>estudian</i>	<i>aprenden</i>	<i>abren</i>

2. Problem Statement

Malaysian undergraduates taking Spanish language as a foreign language in Universiti Sains Malaysia face verbs conjugation as major problem in their task. They do not understand the meaning and the usage of accurate application of verbs conjugation in different contexts. Thus, they tend to guess the answer and randomly write. Once the verbs conjugation is not clear, it leads to inaccurate sentence formation, in which the problem will pose a major issue in the writing tasks.

3. Research Objective

Given the problem of Spanish language verbs conjugation, Malaysian undergraduates have difficulty in acquiring the accurate grammatical structure of the Spanish language in their foreign language subject.

This study aims:

- a) To explore the reasons why Malaysian undergraduates face problems in verbs conjugation aspects in their Spanish language subject

4. Research Question

In particular, the study attempts to answer this research question.

- a) Why do the Malaysian undergraduates face problems in verbs conjugation aspects in their Spanish language subject?

5. Literature Review

Foreign languages are popular in the days of 2023 due to the demand of students' eagerness to learn as well as the evolution of era from traditional to digital. One of the foreign languages is Spanish language, which is considered as the second most spoken language in the world. Learning Spanish language is not easy, particularly in grammatical structure, most precisely is the subject-verb agreement. In Malaysia, there are limited sources focusing on the reasons behind subject-verb agreement.

In the study of White (1941), she stated the structures and grammatical functions in several European languages, which were Spanish, English, German and French. In the study, the minority of grammar in English, Spanish, German and French has a similarity in subject-verb agreement, which is also known as conjugation. English language has less problems in subject-verb agreement comparing to Spanish language because there are only maximum 3 conjugations for every verb.

Bhela (1999) mentioned in the research about acquisition process of a foreign language was actually transferred from the learners' native language. This kind of process posts errors to the targeted learning language and certain habits were found to be associated in their language learning process. Thus, after transferring, new habit was formed, although it is not wrong but it is not accurate. Speaking of transferring knowledge from learners' native language to targeted language learning, there are several research focusing on the same problem, such as the research from Derakhshan and Karimi (2015) where they linked with the background knowledge of the learners as well as the convenience of communication problem since the speakers have lack of time to process about the grammatical structures of certain language. Furthermore, Vasquez (2014) has mentioned as well in the research saying the result revealed that the errors students made in subject-verb agreement were not related to the number of languages the students speak but was influenced by aspects such as linguistic input and individual differences.

Beside these, in the research of Nor and Mansor (2020), their research is based on Malaysian undergraduates focusing on several errors in the production of sentences, however, one of the most common errors is the subject-verb agreement, with comparison in Malay language. Although there was not clear insight on the reasons why such problem occurred, but it could be seen that while completing a task in Spanish language, the students had been considering the feature of Malay language in finishing the task. In 2022, Mansor, the research of Aziz, Olmedo and Nor has conducted a research based on learning difficulties of Spanish language. There were 3 linguistic elements and one of the elements focused on complexity of grammatical structure of Spanish language, which is subject-verb agreement or conjugation. The researchers concluded that difference of Malay language and Spanish language has been a main obstacle for students to learn a foreign language due to the influence of students' native language. To wrap up, this grammatical structure, precisely subject-verb agreement has been persisting since 1941.

6. Methodology

Many researchers have shown particular interest in problems of learners during the learning of Spanish language because the concept highlights the differences and relevance of the Spanish language with other languages.

In this study, the respondents are students from USM. They are a group of Malaysians who are learning Spanish as foreign language where there are 20 male students and 64 female students.

In the study, a test on short descriptive essay on the description of a neighbourhood was provided. It was a 20 mins exercise; students were asked to complete an 80 words short description on a topic

from the Spanish text syllabus. Furthermore, the corpus of study is the mistake of subject-verb agreement or verbs conjugation from descriptive essay. The essays were marked manually. Thus, comparative analysis will be used.

7. Result

From the study, it has been found that 47% of students have problems in subject-verb agreement or verbs conjugation. As the result of the study, some problems and difficulties of conjugation have been found out in students' learning process. According to the observation of given writing exercises, there is a similar problem in most of the students, that is the verbs conjugation when they are creating and making short phrases, long sentences, etc.

In this study, there are some mistakes made by students regarding the conjugation. The examples shown below are from different students who are having the same problem in subject-verb agreement or verb conjugation.

Example 1:

...“Los habitantes aquí es muy simpático y amable...”

From the first example, the meaning is, the citizens here are very friendly and nice. The sentence has grammatical mistake, in Spanish language, the verbs are conjugated according to the subjects. The example “los habitantes” is a plural subject, this the verb should follow by “son” instead of “es”. For the sentence correction, it should be “los habitantes son muy simpáticos y amables...”. It is because “es” is used together with singular subject.

Example 2:

...“Tom y yo van a el parque...”

From this example, the same conjugation problem has been found. As mentioned earlier, there are 6 different conjugations for a verb itself and the conjugation is depending on the subject pronouns. This example showed that the student did not understand the usage of conjugation. “Tom y yo van a el parque” literally brings out the meaning of “Tom and I they go to the park.” Therefore, it should be written as “Tom y yo vamos al parque” where the meaning is “Tom and I go to the park.”

Example 3:

...“Yo estudiar en la universidad...”
... “Mario, Celia y Laura es simpática...”

The intention of this third example was to express “I study in the university”, thus the student did not think much on the conjugation by forming “Yo estudiar en la universidad”, the literal meaning of this sentence is “I to study in the university.” Which has no meaning in Spanish language

although the meaning could be predicted. Therefore, the correction is “Yo estudio en la universidad.” The correction of another example is “Mario, Celia y Laura son simpáticos...”. In the second example, the student mixed the usage of “es” and “son”.

Example 4:

...“Yo montar en bici...”
...“Yo estudia en la biblioteca...”

In the following example, the meaning of the sentence is “I ride bicycle”. However, “montar” is the infinitive/original word of the verb. In most of the cases, a verb must be conjugated to align with the subject. “Yo montar” brings out the meaning of “I to ride”, the correction is “yo monto en bici...”.

The second sentence is showing that the student is confused with the different conjugation. The student has written the conjugation for third-person “estudia” instead of the first-person conjugation, “estudio”. The correction is “Yo estudio en la biblioteca...” and the meaning is “I study in the library.”

Example 5:

...“la gente en mi barrio comen paella...”

This example is interesting because students were confused about the literal meaning of the word and the real meaning of the world. “La gente” means “the people”. This word is a singular noun as well as singular subject although the real meaning of the word consists of a multitude of people. However, the usage in this language is still singular. Thus, the correct version of this sentence should be written as “la gente en mi barrio come paella”. In Spanish language, there are certain words that only could be used in singular form.

Example 6:

...“la gente aquí comen paella con salchicas...”

This student from example 6 has the same problem as the previous example. In English language, the people are considered as plural noun where we cannot use it as singular noun. Regardless of the meaning, in Spanish language, “la gente” (the people) is a singular noun and must be always used in singular form. Therefore, it should be corrected as “la gente aquí come paella con salchicas...”.

Example 7:

...“la gente de la ciudad son simpáticas...”
...“la gente de la ciudad comen pasta, fresas...”

From this last example given by another student, the student has the exact same problem as in example 5 and example 6. The correction should be “*la gente de la ciudad es simpática*” and “*la gente de la ciudad come pasta, fresas*”. It is because “es” and “come” are the verb conjugation used for singular nouns.

8. Discussion

In the study, 47% of students tend to make a mistake in subject-verb agreement while constructing sentences. The observation of students making this kind of mistake is because of the knowledge they possess in their native language. During short and casual interviews, students were expressing that subject-verb agreement is the most difficult part while starting to learn Spanish language and they mentioned that in their native language, such rule doesn't exist. Thus, Spanish language and other languages are compared.

It was found that during the researcher's teaching approach, while asking about conjugation in the first class, students were not aware of the existence until the explanation was given by the lecturer explaining the rule is the same as English language verbs. Although there is a similar model for students to follow if comparing with English language, students tend to make mistakes due to their knowledge of their native language.

	<i>Spanish</i>	<i>Malay</i>	<i>English</i>	<i>Chinese</i>
<i>verbs/pronouns</i>	<i>comer</i>	<i>makan</i>	<i>eat</i>	吃
<i>yo</i>	<i>como</i>	<i>makan</i>	<i>eat</i>	吃
<i>tú</i>	<i>comes</i>	<i>makan</i>	<i>eat</i>	吃
<i>él / ella / usted</i>	<i>come</i>	<i>makan</i>	<i>eats</i>	吃
<i>nosotros</i>	<i>comemos</i>	<i>makan</i>	<i>eat</i>	吃
<i>vosotros</i>	<i>coméis</i>	<i>makan</i>	<i>eat</i>	吃
<i>ellos / ellas / ustedes</i>	<i>comen</i>	<i>makan</i>	<i>eat</i>	吃

The data collected has shown that the undergraduates referred to apply Google Translate and Spanish Dictionary Application to help them in their learning process. However, referring to Google Translate, is not genuinely suitable for students as the application generally poses problems to conjugation, especially in the conjugation of “you”, it is due to the understanding of Google Translate, the usage of “you” in singular or plural form is not able to be captured by the application. Thus, it will always pose a problem. In conclusion, Google Translate is a helpful tool but it is not smart enough to determine the intention of students.

Due to the prior knowledge of native languages, conjugation has been a problem in the foreign language learning process since 1941.

9. Pedagogical Implication

This is the worksheet that was given to the students. The students were asked to complete the conjugation in 5 – 8 minutes. This exercise aims to strengthen the memory in subject-verb agreement or verbs conjugation of students while doing the worksheet. In this type of exercise, it is believed that if the students could complete it without making mistakes, they are ready for next step.

<i>verbs / pronouns</i>	<i>yo</i>	<i>tú</i>	<i>él / ella / usted</i>	<i>nosotros</i>	<i>vosotros</i>	<i>ellos / ellas / ustedes</i>
<i>bailar</i>						
<i>trabajar</i>						
<i>aprender</i>						
<i>leer</i>						
<i>subir</i>						
<i>recibir</i>						

For example, English is considered second official language in Malaysia, all of the samples have the same background. When these targets learn a new foreign language, they are having an influence in the target language with their own mother tongue. Most of the students like to compare their target language with their native language due to the convenience of communication without thinking too much of the rules.

Besides those mentioned, verbs conjugation is a persisting problem among Malaysian undergraduates. Verbs conjugation in Spanish language is traditionally presented in textbooks, like a grammatical term for pattern. A sentence has to include a conjugated verb according to pronouns which is divided into first, second or third person, as well as singular and plural. To solve or to reduce the problem of conjugation, memorisation is the most important factor. It was suggested by the researcher and the respondents somehow agree to the approach. However, it was not proven, thus future study is needed.

10. Conclusion

In conclusion, the purpose of the study has been found. It is believed that the knowledge of native language is actually affecting foreign language learners in Malaysia.

In the beginning of this study, the focus was on difficulties and problems in learning a foreign language. Along with it, a serious problem has been discovered, which is subject-verb agreement or verbs conjugation. The findings that the researcher has presented suggest that most of the undergraduates tend to refer to their native language during the acquisition of Spanish language. This is important for future learners and teachers as a guide because 1) the learners may try not to

refer back to their own native language after looking at this paper when they are learning a new foreign language; 2) the lectures would have a guide on how to effectively give lessons on subject-verb agreement, for example worksheets and games and; 3) the lecturers should try to strengthen students' memorisation ability. Therefore, this research is important for the teaching strategy and learning acquisition of students.

This study raises important approach about subject-verb agreement for learners. As a result of conducting this study, worksheet exercises and games can actually help to influence the students in a very positive way when they are learning a new foreign language.

This study is limited to resources because there are not many studies regarding to this topic based in Malaysia and targeted Malaysian local students. However, it would be fruitful to pursue further research study about the ways to teach subject-verb agreement effectively.

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