



## Exploring Subject-Verb Agreement Challenges in the Writing of ESL Learners: An Action Research Study in Sri Lanka

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### ABSTRACT

This study is an action research that is conducted to improve the quality of the writings of students in an international school in the Kalutara district. The students make errors related to subject-verb agreement which is an essential component in mastering the English language. They are not mistakes, instead they are errors because the students are not in a state of understanding them on their own. Further, the students are unaware of the grammar rules. Errors occur due to lack of awareness of these specific grammar rules. However, English as a second language (ESL) learners struggle immensely in mastering subject-verb agreement. This study mainly centers around three error types such as the subject is a list of two or more nouns, the subject is an indefinite pronoun, and the subject agrees with the nearest noun in paired conjunctions. The sample consists of twenty-six students from a grade 08 class of an international school in the Western province of Sri Lanka. A pretest was used to collect data. The main objective of this research is to upgrade the writing skills of grade 8 students, in terms of grammatical accuracy. The use of scaffolding exercises enables the students to understand the grammatical rules clearly and makes them apply the rules correctly. Action research itself is a research design that assists to solve the problems related to the field

of education. The problem was identified at first and the intervention was carried out accordingly. Finally, the results were obtained. The difference in mean values of the pre-test and the post-test proves the significant improvements in the writings of the students. Therefore, ESL learners require the necessary guidance and instructions through creative approaches to language learning which creates a learner-friendly environment to become competent writers of English.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

English in Sri Lanka dates back to British colonization at the beginning of the nineteenth century. In 1802, Sri Lanka, then known as Ceylon, was declared a Crown Colony with English as the official language. Although Sri Lanka gained independence from the British in 1948, English continued to function as the country's *de facto* official language until 1956, when Sinhala became the sole official language under the terms of the Official Language Act No. 33 (Mendis & Rambukwella, 2018). The language English was widely spread across South Asia after the colonization by the British. Thereafter, the use of English became significant in several domains. At first, the language was taught by Christian missionaries. The education system was mostly influenced by the British and as a result, the English language became indispensable in gaining a good education in the society. From the year 1798 to 1805 several incredible changes took place in the fields of education and politics. Hon. Fredric North was the governor during that time. Learning English language by the native speakers was given a significant priority and motivation under the educational principles developed by North, and numerous measures were taken to provide instruction in English. Later, the construction of private schools and the presence of missionaries were important factors in the dissemination of English education.

Following this, English was adopted as the primary language of teaching in government schools at that time by the Colebrooke Commission's advice. English was considered an essential requirement for climbing up the social ladder and acquiring high positions in society. The ones who did not possess good language skills got no privileges or desired positions in society. Even though the society was English dominated, soon after the independence everything got changed. Consequently, the mother tongue was considered as the best for one's education, especially at the primary level (Sanmuganathan, 2017). Due to this, the children received the opportunity of continuing their education in their most preferred mother tongue, either Sinhala or Tamil. However, as a nation, and a country, English is necessary to accomplish one's global targets in life. English is considered as the linking language of the world, irrespective of ethnicity, race, and geographical location, thus it links all the people around the globe. Even after the colonization, British power was strongly established in those colonies. Further, the English language had good regard from society. Consequently, it created a language atmosphere where English as a second language/ESL speakers emerged in large numbers though their competence in the language varied (Sanmuganathan, 2017). According to the past researches, their main focal point was the types of errors, rather than the approaches designed and implemented to solve the particular error type. The study of subject-verb agreement has been researched under different aspects by different researchers. Stapa and Izahar 2010 analyzed subject-verb agreement errors of ESL learners in Malaysia. Their difficulties associated with constructing grammatically accurate sentences, lack of exposure, and fear of language learning are described in detail through this research. Similarly, Erdogan 2005 conducted research on error analysis in foreign language teaching. Here, he has described different types of errors and those errors in the context of students' writings.

Error analysis has been analyzed extensively through these discussions. Brehm and Bock 2013 have made use of creative approaches in teaching and explaining the error types associated with subject-verb agreement. The specialty and significance are due to the innovative games utilized to present the content of the lesson. For instance, fish-flanker tasks, and picture stroop activities are incorporated into teaching the essence of these grammar lessons which are intangible.

## 2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study was conducted as an action research. Thus, this study design was used to solve a problem in the field of education and English language. First, the problem was identified during the first week of teaching. The problem was that the students could not distinguish between singular and plural subjects, and as a result they made errors in writing the appropriate verb according to the subject given. In addition, when an indefinite pronoun is given as the subject, still they lack the knowledge of placing the accurate verb accordingly.

Their writings reflected major errors related to subject-verb agreement. Thus, this can be supported with the theoretical framework which was put forward by Stephen Krashen. It is the affective filter hypothesis along with Noam Chomsky's Language Acquisition Device (LAD). According to the theories mentioned, first the students should be provided with a safe and a stress-free classroom environment in order for them to digest the subject verb agreement clearly and perform better. If this environment is not provided, their performance would not be satisfactory at all. The competence errors are a result of not comprehending the basics of English language. When the techniques and approaches are not

effective, the learner's learning process gets obstructed. Consequently, the LAD of the child

will not be properly established with the basic principles of the target language. Therefore, effective and efficient teaching approaches will enable the learner to study basic grammar structures such as subject-verb agreement productively while making the learning atmosphere with less anxiety.

Hence, the inadequate performances of the students were identified using the pre-test method. It was a collection of questions which tests whether the students can identify the correct subject-verb agreement. Fill in the blank's exercises, converting the sentences into plural form and matching exercises according to the subjects were incorporated to the worksheet which was given as the pre-test. After collecting the necessary data on the problem through a pre-test, they were analyzed and interpreted. Thereafter, a plan was developed to overcome those identified errors by the researcher through scaffolding exercises. As scaffolding, model passages were given to the students to get an idea about sentence construction and simple comprehension types of exercises were based on them. Thus, this intervention process would give the students more exposure and practice to internalize the rules of subject-verb agreement and upgrade their level of grammar knowledge. After that, the results were evaluated through a post-test. Then, both the mean values of the pre-test and post-test were evaluated and compared to arrive at the conclusion of the process at the end. Finally, the weaknesses or errors related to the subject-verb agreement of the students were eliminated to a certain extent through the approach of scaffolding exercises. The data was collected by giving a pre-test and a post-test to the target population. Their marks were compared and calculated to indicate the improvements of the students after the intervention process. This question paper consisted of twenty questions. There were three main sections. This paper was given to the students in two stages. The first

section of the question paper determines whether the student can correctly identify the form of the verb which should be written according to the number of the subject. Next, the second section evaluates the student’s knowledge of different sentence structures, prioritizing subject +verb+ object structure which is the fundamental form in the English language. On the other hand, subject +verb +adverb, and subject +object +verb structures are also evaluated. This was done to make the students distinguish between each sentence structure. The third section of the paper assists the students to figure out the error and correct them accordingly. The action research conducted has validity and reliability. This research study is accurate because it evaluates only the writing skill of the students, in terms of grammatical accuracy in the sentences which they write in daily life. Their genuine answers to the question paper were collected and evaluated. Further, this collected data is reliable because the same test paper was given to the students after a month and the marks increased or it was the same. Simply, there were no significant mismatches between the pre-test and post-test marks of the students.

**3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

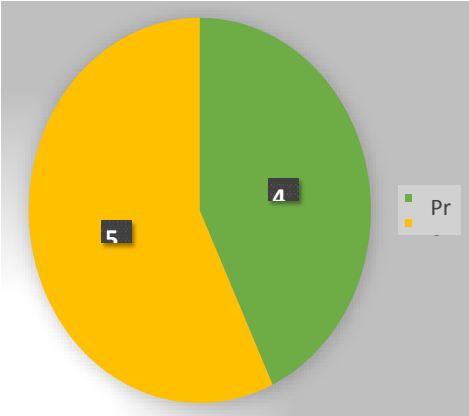


Figure 1: Difference in Improvement between Pre-Test and Post-Test

The above pie chart represents the difference in progress between the pre-test and post- test in detail. 43% indicates the pre-test total marks of

the students, while 57% represents the post-test total marks.

**Mean Calculation**

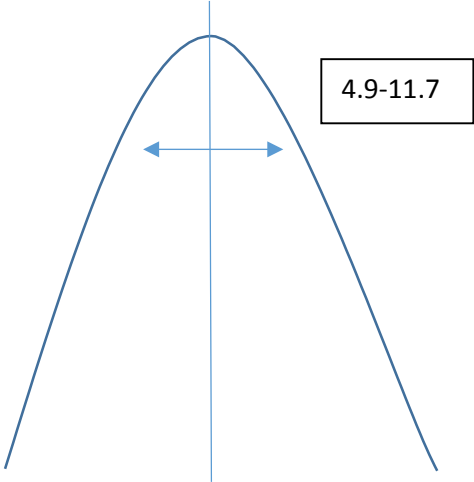
|        |          | Mean    | N  |
|--------|----------|---------|----|
| Pair 1 | pretest  | 8.2692  | 26 |
|        | posttest | 10.9615 | 26 |

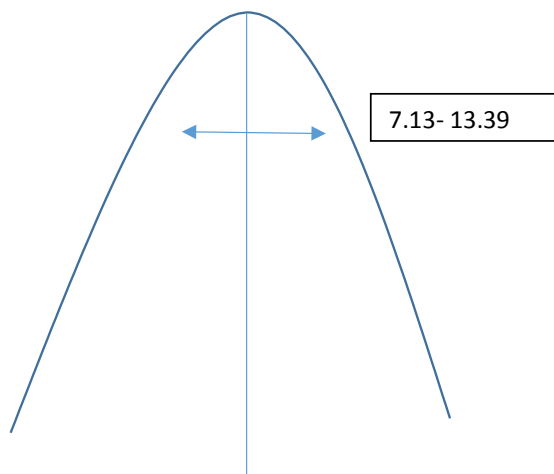
The above table indicates the mean values which have been calculated to prove the progress of the students concerning the pre-test and post-test results. The mean value of the pre-test is

8.26 and the mean value of the post-test is 10.96 which manifests a significant improvement after the intervention process. The students performed well during the post- test as they were guided properly and were given sufficient exercises to practice the subject-verb agreement.

The standard deviation of the pre-test marks of the majority of the students lies between 4.9 to 11.7. On the other hand, according to the standard deviation of the post- test, marks of the majority of the students lie between 7.13 to 13.39. Hence, this signifies an improvement in the performance of the students.

**Figure 3: Standard Deviation of Pre-Test**





**Figure 4: Standard Deviation of Post-Test**

The test papers of the students further reveal the other error types such as omission errors, substitution errors, and addition errors. Most of the students have the problem of recognizing the subject of the sentence, especially the number whether it is singular or plural. This lack of awareness has resulted in omission errors and addition errors quite often. The students add “S” to the end of all the verbs in which their subject is “I”. This ‘addition error’ is fossilized in the students because even though they are taught that “I” is exceptional in the English language; the students find it hard to overcome the error.

| Addition Errors                                | Omission Errors                          | Substitution Errors  |
|--|--|--|
| I prepares breakfast every day for my parents* | It really make me happy*                 | She always doing her work well* The simple present form of the verb has been substituted with the present continuous form. |
| They works hard during the daytime*            | Smoking cause a lot of negative effects* | Nobody careless about my sickness*. The verb has been substituted with an adjective.                                       |

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Subject-verb errors often arise as common challenges for ESL learners embarking on their second language journey. If left unaddressed, these errors can have widespread implications in language learning, impacting the speaker’s confidence, message accuracy, communication effectiveness, overall proficiency in writing and speaking, and even the academic and professional quality of the learner. It is crucial to implement innovative methods that help ESL learners recognize and rectify these errors.

The research conducted here employs the scaffolding method, demonstrating a notable enhancement in the subject-verb usage of learners. This suggests that action research proves to be a highly effective research approach, offering practical alternatives to address various issues within the realm of education.

The research problem was related to the students’ awareness on the basic grammar structure in the English language, that is subject-verb agreement. The researcher could successfully identify this problem within the first week of the teaching practicum. This error was quite prominent among the grade eight students. Hence, this was analyzed and discussed in detail through the pre-test and post-test scores of the students. According to the scores of the pre-test, the students had poor knowledge of the subject-verb agreement. They were not in a state of figuring out the singular subjects and plural subjects. As a result, erroneous verb forms were selected by the participants. The progress of the target group is sufficient because learning assistance was provided within a limited time frame. Thus, the teaching approaches and techniques were strategic and productive in uncovering the language potential of the target group of students. This research can be conducted with larger groups as well.

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